

January 2015

## Wrestling with Angels: Postsecular Contemporary American Poetry

Paul T. Corrigan  
*University of South Florida*, [ptcorrigan@gmail.com](mailto:ptcorrigan@gmail.com)

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Wrestling with Angels:  
Postsecular Contemporary American Poetry

by

Paul T. Corrigan

A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the degree of  
Doctor of Philosophy  
Department of English  
College of Arts and Sciences  
University of South Florida

Major Professor: Hunt Hawkins, Ph.D.  
Laura L. Runge, Ph.D.  
John A. McClure, Ph.D.  
Tova Cooper, Ph.D.

Date of Approval:  
May 1, 2015

Keywords: religion, spirituality, secularism, postmodernism, exile, pilgrimage

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DEDICATION

To Christine, Elea, and Sara

## EPIGRAPH

And Jacob was left alone, and a man wrestled with him until the break of dawn. And he saw that he had not won against him and he touched his hip-socket and Jacob's hip-socket was wrenched as he wrestled with him. And he said, "Let me go, for dawn is breaking." And he said, "I will not let you go unless you bless me." And he said to him, "What is your name?" And he said, "Jacob." And he said, "Not Jacob shall your name hence be said but Israel, for you have striven with God and men, and won out." And Jacob asked and said, "Tell me your name, pray." And he said, "Why should you ask my name?" and there he blessed him. And Jacob called the name of the place Peniel, meaning, "I have seen God face to face and I came out alive." And the sun rose upon him as he passed Peniel and he was limping on his hip.

—Genesis 32:25-32 (Alter 179-81)

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

My journey toward writing this dissertation began with growing up in a family where books were read and the sacred revered.

Along the way, I have been inspired and helped by many teachers, especially Pat Neems, Rickey Cotton, Deborah Hooker, and Laura Runge. I am deeply grateful to Rickey and Anna Cotton for all they have taught me about poetry, spirituality, and many other things. My committee members, Hunt Hawkins, Laura Runge, Tova Cooper, and John McClure, have my enduring appreciation for guiding me through this process.

Colleagues and students at Southeastern University have supported me emotionally and practically. These past years would have been harder, sadder without them.

Li-Young Lee and Naomi Shihab Nye allowed me to interview them for this project. They and the other poets discussed in these pages call us all toward more luminous and just ways of being and seeing. This world would be harder, sadder without them.

My spouse, Christine, made many sacrifices for me to do this work. Our daughters, Elea and Sara, brought me great joy during this time.

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## ABSTRACT

In the current “secular age,” more and more people find beliefs and behaviors associated with traditional religion intellectually and ethically untenable. At the same time, many “postsecular” writers, both believers and nonbelievers, continue to write with religious or religiously-inflected forms, themes, and purposes. In the United States, postsecular poets “wrestle with angels” by engaging constructively and deconstructively with matters traditionally considered the domain of religion and spirituality. While the recent work of Jürgen Habermas, Charles Taylor, John McClure and others puts the concept of the postsecular at the cutting edge of various fields of study, including religion, sociology, and literature, this dissertation presents the first study of contemporary postsecular poetry. The central question is, how should we define and describe contemporary postsecular poetry in the United States and how should we understand its religious and literary significance? To answer this question, this dissertation presents a broad survey of postsecular contemporary American poetry, offers extended analyses of the work of two preeminent postsecular poets—Li-Young Lee and Scott Cairns—and probes the implications for readers of the poetic forms found in such texts.



PART I: RELIGION WITH A DIFFERENCE

## Chapter One: Wrestling with Angels

### **The New Postsecular Landscape**

Religion does not look like it used to in contemporary literature, observes Paul Elie in a recent essay in *The New York Times Sunday Book Review*. Religious belief has become “bewildering,” “a mystery,” “part of the matrix,” “a reminder of last things,” and “a social matter rather than an individual one” (“Has Fiction Lost Its Faith?”). It “acts obscurely and inconclusively.” He counts these qualities losses. By “mystery,” he does not mean The Unknown so much as an unknown. By “part of the matrix,” he means merely part. By “a reminder of last things,” he means “reduced to” that. Though Elie begins with the rather specific claim that no contemporary novelists write about Christianity the way that Flannery O’Connor, Walker Percy, and others did in the middle of the twentieth century, before long he slides into a more expansive obituary for “religion” and “belief” in literature altogether. “Today,” he writes, “the United States is a vast Home Depot of ‘do-it-yourself religion.’ But you wouldn’t know it from the stories we tell.” As one example, he suggests that even though he finds Don DeLillo’s fiction “shot through with a mystical sense that ‘everything is connected in the end,’” “the religious belief” in such work strikes him as “finally unreal.” Readers might wonder what more Elie wants. To answer just that question, he holds up Flannery O’Connor: “The religious encounter of the kind O’Connor described forces a person to ask how belief figures into his or her own life and how to decide just what is true in it, what is worth acting on.” He likewise affirms O’Connor’s famous, poignant comment about how she approached religion in her writing: “To the hard of hearing you shout . . .” In Elie’s view, writers no longer shout about faith.

Gregory Wolfe sees the same changes but understands them differently. Responding to Elie with an essay in *The Wall Street Journal*, he calls the idea of the demise of serious faith-infused literature part of a “ritual lament” that is “misguided.” As counterexamples, he points to such figures as Annie Dillard, Elie Wiesel, Christian Wiman, Marilynne Robinson, Mark Helprin, Franz Wright, Mary Karr, Robert Clark, Christopher R. Beha, Alice McDermott, Nathan Englander, and Jonathan Safran Foer, serious writers who engage faith in serious ways. But for Wolfe the “deeper matter” has to do not with whether one can list examples but rather with how one conceptualizes faith and literature in the first place. While he agrees with Elie that faith may be “obscure” and “mysterious” in contemporary literature, he sees these as positive characteristics that have “ancient” roots and that, just as importantly, speak meaningfully in our postmodern culture. As cultures change, “faith takes on different tones and dimensions.” Whereas O’Connor’s approach “made sense” in her time, other approaches make sense now. In support of this idea, Wolfe quotes the contemporary writer Doris Betts’s reversal of O’Connor’s shouting comment. In her own fiction, Betts feels compelled “to convey faith in whispers rather than shouts.” Wolfe concludes: “Today the faith found in literature is more whispered than shouted.” To hear it, we may need to listen “more closely to the still, small voice that is all around us.”

What has changed regarding religion in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries that would bring about such changes in expressions of the religious, and in the significance of those expressions, in contemporary literature? In the past two centuries, many intellectuals in the West were convinced that science and reason would supplant faith and that religion would “gradually fade” from public life and, for more and more people, from private life as well (Norris

and Inglehart 3). This was to be a process that Max Weber famously named the “disenchantment of the world” (155). Jeffrey K. Hadden paraphrases this understanding as follows:

Once the world was filled with the sacred—in thought, practice, and institutional form. After the Reformation and the Renaissance, the forces of modernization swept across the globe and secularization, a corollary historical process, loosened the dominance of the sacred. In due course, the sacred shall disappear altogether except, possibly, in the private realm. (598)

Given that Hadden has the benefit of looking back from the end of the twentieth century, we might hear a bit of parody in his description. The point is that in retrospect this sweeping narrative of secularization has clearly not played out—at least not in such simple terms. The world remains “as furiously religious as it ever was, and in some places more so” (Berger 2). Recent years even seem “marked by a return or revival of religion” around the world (Merlini 117). Charles Taylor goes so far as to propose, “we are just at the beginning of a new age of religious searching” (*Secular Age*, 535).

In *The Restructuring of American Religion*, Robert Wuthnow documents how cultural, social, and political changes of the past half century have had enormous impacts on religion in the United States (322). To be sure, it is the case that “rationality, natural science, and the social sciences have all exercised a negative effect on traditional religious beliefs and practices” (301). But the key word here is “traditional.” Wuthnow writes that “highly diverse religious movements and countermovements . . . have characterized the nation since the 1950s” (315). Charles Taylor observes the same changes. True, “it is obvious that a decline in belief and practice has occurred” to a certain degree and among certain demographics. But he argues that the more fundamental change has not been in *how many* but in *how* people do or do not remain religious (*A Secular*

*Age*, 530). While belief has not gone away, “the conditions of belief” have undergone a fundamental shift: we have gone “from a society in which it was virtually impossible not to believe in God, to one in which faith . . . is one human possibility among others” and where, as a result, traditional ways of being religious are no longer “the default option” (3, 12). It is this pluralism and its effects that have created the “new spiritual landscape” in which we now live (513).

While it is true, both globally and in the United States, that traditional expressions of religion are on the decline and that more and more people identify as atheist, agnostic, or “nothing in particular” (Pew, *Nones*, 1), it is also true that both religious fundamentalism and religious progressivism are growing and innovating as well (Jones et al., 2013; Marty, 1998). More and more people identify as “spiritual but not religious” (Wuthnow, *After Heaven*, 2). Moreover, “the gamut of intermediate positions greatly widens” between belief and unbelief as those terms are usually understood (Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 513). For example, Taylor explains, “many people drop out of active practice while still declaring themselves as belonging to some confession, or believing in God.” Similarly, “more and more people adopt what would earlier have been seen as untenable positions, e.g., they consider themselves Catholic while not accepting many crucial dogmas, or they combine Christianity with Buddhism, or they pray while not being certain they believe” (*A Secular Age*, 513). Reflecting on surveys showing increasing religious unaffiliation, Amelia Thomson-Deveaux suggests, “We’re hurtling toward a new moment in the American religious experience—one in which, for many, belief and nonbelief will exist side by side.” This recent shift enables a situation that would have been difficult to conceive in previous decades: “the unaffiliated are blurring [even] the line between religion and atheism.”

What happened? Did secularization come and go? Did it never, or not yet, arrive? Might it have already taken place, just differently than expected? While secularization has not displaced religion, it has certainly shaken it up. In response, Charles Taylor, Jürgen Habermas, Jose Casanova, Talal Asad, William Connolly, Jacques Derrida (“Faith and Knowledge”), and other theorists have begun to develop new ways of looking at the relationship between the religious and the secular. Of particular importance have been ideas of the *postsecular*.

For Jürgen Habermas, discussions of the postsecular begin with “the impression of a worldwide ‘resurgence of religion’” (“Notes”). The use of the word *impression* has significance. Where there have been plenty of events that might suggest such a resurgence—what come to mind for many people are the rise of Christian Right in the United States, the establishment of the Taliban in Afghanistan and Pakistan, the Islamic Revolution in Iran, the growth of ultra-Orthodox Judaism in Israel, the tensions over the hijab in France and other places, and, most critically, the Jihadist attacks on September 11—it appears just as likely that these prominent clashes do not reflect any actual increase in religion but that they have caused many people who had not been paying attention to religion to start paying attention. When it comes to the United States, Rhonda Hustedt Jacobsen and Douglas Jacobsen take the latter stance: “To say our age is postsecular is, in some sense, simply to point out that America remains the religion-soaked nation that it has always been” (13). But whether it is a resurgence or a realization, the postsecular moment offers not just challenges but also opportunities. In his frequently-cited essay, “Notes on a Post-Secular Society,” Habermas proposes that a “complementary learning process” between secular and religious people would lead to a more just and inclusive postsecular society. In *An Awareness of What Is Missing*, Habermas offers that religious people can contribute to a postsecular society the sort of “semantic resources” “becoming depleted” in

secular society, namely, those very “resources of meaning, solidarity, and justice” that religious communities have long cultivated (“A Reply,” 76-77).

The very word *postsecular* gives occasion for confusion and disagreement, which have not been cleared up in the conflicting theories of the postsecular that have emerged to date.<sup>1</sup> I propose that the term *postsecular* remains useful even though it is contested because it creates space for discussing aspects of contemporary thought and experience that the terms *religious* and *secular* as commonly understood do not quite capture and may, in fact, obscure. But I quickly add the caveat that using the term requires describing what one means by it, even if the description intentionally comes out a bit hazy.

At first glance, the term postsecular might sound positioned *against* the secular. Perhaps postsecular suggests de-secularization, a reversal of the historical process of secularization, a reversal of the process of society becoming less and less traditionally religious. Perhaps it suggests anti-secularism, a rejection of the philosophical idea of secularism, a rejection of the idea that the public sphere should be kept neutral with respect to religion. However, very few theorists use the term in either of these ways. It seems that for most the postsecular does not cancel out secularism or secularization, so much as it qualifies or expands them. Gregor McLennan makes this point when he argues that certain ideas described as postsecular—the idea

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<sup>1</sup>As with so many *post-* terms (poststructural, postmodern, postcolonial, etc.), what postsecular means stands sharply contested. Five related questions emerge. Scholars want to know what should be made of the different and sometimes contradictory ways the term “postsecular” is used (Dalferth; Beckford; Žižek [“Human”]; Stoeckl; Diamond); whether the postsecular points to something new happening in the world or to a new assessment of what has been happening all along (Habermas [“Notes”]; Gorski et al.; Graham; Jacobsen and Jacobsen); how the postsecular relates to the secular (Rosati and Stoeckl; Stoeckl; McLennan; King; Kyrlezhev); how the secular and the religious relate to each other within the postsecular (Graham; Rosati and Stoeckl; Stoeckl; Morozov; Habermas [“Notes”]; Dalferth; Kyrlezhev; King ; Gorski et al.; Taylor [A *Secular Age*]; Smith); and, finally, what positive contribution the postsecular makes (see Kyrlezhev; Reder and Schmidt; Habermas [“Notes”]; Kyrlezhev; Graham; Braidotti; Charles Taylor [“Disenchantment—Reenchantment”]).

that religion can continue to exist in an otherwise secular society and the idea that religion should be able to come to voice in the public sphere—already fall within more generous understandings of secularization and secularism (11). He suggests, “it is more appropriate to regard postsecular reflexive enquiries as intra-secularist rather than anti-secularist; that is to say, they form part of the intellectual process that has been dubbed the ‘secularization of secularism’ itself” (4). In other words, since secularism calls for pluralism, excluding religion from the public sphere because of its history of exclusion only partially fulfills the vision of pluralism. The secularization of secularism means fulfilling that vision more fully, welcoming religion into (or back into) the public sphere. Whereas secularism pushes back on exclusion *by* the religious, the postsecular understanding (or inflection) of secularism pushes back on the exclusion *of* the religious. Just as a Christian majority has no right to push its beliefs on Muslims, Buddhists, or atheists, so an agnostic majority has no right to exclude Jews, Pagans, or Hindus. In its postsecular inflection, secularism does not mean the exclusion of the religious in favor of the secular but neutrality toward both the religious and the secular.

So the postsecular has a lot to do with the religious and the secular existing side by side in society. One implication of a pluralist postsecular society, Jürgen Habermas argues, is that both sides must learn how to get along more peacefully than in the past and that they might do so by learning from one another (“Notes”). Another implication of pluralist postsecular society is that *other positions* will emerge, positions that do not fit within the usual understandings of the secular or the religious, that combine elements of both. Whereas the twentieth-century philosopher Mircea Eliade posits sacred and profane views of the world as fundamentally “*the opposite*” of each other (9), Philip S. Gorski, David Kyuman Kim, John Torpey, and Jonathan VanAntwerpen point out that common definitions of secular and religious actually overlap: “an



expansive definition of religion . . . will find religion everywhere, even in putatively secular and mundane activities, such as professional sports or solitary walks” and “an expansive definition of secularity . . . will find secularity everywhere, even in churches and synagogues.” In light of this, they consider the postsecular to occupy “the liminal space between the religious and the secular” (7). Aleksandr Kyrlezhev takes this notion a step further: “The world can no longer be divided into religious and nonreligious. Both spheres now coincide,” he writes. “They mutually penetrate each other to the degree that they are indistinguishable. Today, nothing is intrinsically secular or religious. Everything can be sacred and everything can be profane” (26). The postsecular creates diversity among people and their beliefs and practices—and within people and their beliefs and practices.

The postsecular offers a way of considering the diversity of positions in and between the secular and the religious. It also offers a way of considering the *continuity* of positions in and between the secular and the religious. This continuity can be understood best by focusing not on the differences between what religious and secular people believe but on the similarities of the “lived experience” they share (Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 13). James K. A. Smith uses the postsecular to call into question the widely held “‘intellectualist’ understanding of religion,” which identifies “‘religion’ with particular beliefs and doctrines, especially beliefs and doctrines concerning gods and transcendence” (177). The traditional distinction between secular and religious has relied upon distinctions among intellectual categories, that is, “the propositional: thoughts, beliefs, ideas, doctrines” (168). But if religion has less to do with such categories than with deeper, precognitive impulses and faculties shared by all people, religious and secular, then the distinction makes less sense. If we can understand “that religion is an embodied, material, liturgical phenomenon that shapes our desire and imagination before it yields doctrines and

beliefs,” then we can find it “where we don’t usually see it” (161). When we focus not on what people think but on how people live their lives, their experiences, longings, impulses, habits, etc., the lines between religious and secular seem a lot more blurry.

In a similar vein, Charles Taylor writes, religious and nonreligious people alike can inhabit a reenchanted world. This is not like the originally enchanted world, wherein there lived a host of beings and forces and powers, good as well as evil, but rather a newly reenchanted world marked by such capacities as wonder—including wonder at evolution for some—along with awe, mystery, and some degree of faith as pertains to the unknown. More basic still, this enchantment has to do with living in a world imbued with meaning, not meaning of the narrow linguistic sort but of the larger sense of which we speak when we speak of life or a relationship or experience as “meaningful” (“Disenchantment—Reenchantment,” 66-69). Taylor sees that all people, religious or not, have in a common “moral/spiritual life.” We all understand ourselves living in relation to some source of profound “fullness” that we cannot fully attain, for which reason we also all experience profound “emptiness” until we arrive at “a kind of stabilized middle condition” wherein we aim to live “well” and aspire “beyond” where we are presently. The difference between believers and unbelievers is largely their understanding of where the source of fullness, goodness, and human flourishing resides, whether “within” people or in some transcendent reality (*A Secular Age*, 5-8).

In an equally postsecular move from the other direction, Pierre Hadot seeks to recover not religion but philosophy from the same sort of intellectualist understanding. For the ancient Greek philosophers, he writes, “philosophy did not consist in teaching an abstract theory—much less in the exegesis of texts—but rather in the art of living. . . . The philosophical act is not situated merely on the cognitive level, but on that of the self and of being. It is a process which

causes us to *be* more fully, and makes us better” (83). Like religion, philosophy, even if entirely material and secular, seeks “a profound transformation of the individual’s mode of seeing and being” (83). Such a view of philosophy and such a view of religion do not reduce them to different names for the same experiences. But these perspectives are close enough to each other and far enough from our usual notions of the secular and the religious that we have an occasion to find language that can bridge the gap and account for the overlap, which is precisely what the term postsecular provides. It is the case that the ways in which many contemporary believers and nonbelievers are seeing and being have much in common with which each other and much to distinguish them from usual understandings of their respective categories.

If the meaning of the postsecular feels only partially pinned down, that’s the point. The postsecular includes a whole spectrum between the religious and the secular as those terms are typically understood. The term postsecular refers to a way of looking at things beyond the traditional categories of religious and secular, to societies that are religiously and secularly pluralist, and to the experiences and works of art made by individual people who have been shaped or who are informed by a religious and secular pluralism. Steven M. Wasserstrom writes of “*religion after religion*” (51). That would do just fine to describe the postsecular, even if in some cases *secularism after secularism* might fit better. Most simply and broadly, we might say that the postsecular involves *religion with a difference*.

### **Wrestling with Angels**

The postsecular landscape has shaped contemporary literature in important ways. While more and more contemporary writers find aspects of traditional religion intellectually and morally untenable—particularly the patriarchy, homophobia, and antiscience that often come with it—many contemporary writers, both religious and nonreligious, are doing imaginative and

increasingly important work with forms and themes typically thought of as religious. Postsecular literature includes late modern and postmodern texts that engage constructively and deconstructively with matters that have traditionally been considered the domain of religion and spirituality.<sup>2</sup> In postsecular literature the religious, the spiritual, and the secular converge and diverge and are transformed around questions of meaning and meaninglessness, faith and doubt, joy and pain, wonder and fear, hope and despair, matter and spirit, justice and compassion, love and death, and the reality and unreality of life in the twentieth- and twenty-first-century world. Though much on other topics have been written about the work of the poets whose poems are marked with the imprint of the postsecular, this dissertation begins the conversation about postsecular contemporary American poetry *as* postsecular. For that reason, I pose as my overarching inquiry a foundational question: *What does “postsecular poetry” mean in this context? In other words, how should we define and describe contemporary postsecular poetry in the United States and how should we understand the religious and literary significance thereof?*

One operative word in my question is *mean*. More narrowly, we can talk about what postsecular poetry “means” in terms of defining that phrase as a literary term, describing its parameters as a historical movement or phenomenon. I will certainly take on this definitional work. But more broadly and more importantly, we can talk about what postsecular poetry “means” in terms of what its implications, significance, and import are for writers and readers as human beings in this present, postsecular moment. It is here that I think my most meaningful

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<sup>2</sup>Sandra Schneiders defines “religion” in the usual terms of tradition, institution, and creed and “spirituality” in terms of an “attempt to relate, in a positive way, oneself as a personal whole to reality as a cosmic whole” (163-169). Mary Frohlich similarly writes that “spirituality is concerned with ‘The living and concrete human person in dynamic transformation toward the fullness of life’” (78). William James defines religion in much the same way as Schneiders and Frohlich define spirituality: “*the feelings, acts, and experiences of individual men [sic] in their solitude, so far as they apprehend themselves to stand in relation to whatever they consider the divine*” (36).

contribution will be. This study takes on the “meaning” of postsecular poetry with respect to both aspects, the narrow and broad, the definitional and the humanistic, the thematic, formal, and cultural and the personal, the critical as well as the contemplative. To be more specific, I will take on the overarching inquiry I’ve posed by looking into the following questions:

- What themes, forms, and purposes distinguish postsecular poetry?
- Who are the major postsecular poets?
- How does postsecular poetry engage with that which has traditionally been considered the domain of religion and spirituality?
- What can postsecular poetry contribute toward the “flourishing of all”?

I will investigate what postsecular poetry means in the definitional sense through proposing terms for a critical definition, surveying the field of postsecular poetry, and providing formal and thematic close readings of the work of two major postsecular poets whose work exemplifies major postsecular topoi. What postsecular poetry means in the humanistic sense will hopefully be revealed between the lines, along the way, in and through this work of interpretation, though I will return to the question explicitly in this dissertation’s coda.

I argue that one of the primary ways poetry and religion interact in the work of postsecular contemporary poets in the United States is through the poets’ formal, thematic, and rhetorical process of “wrestling with angels.” To unpack what that means, it will help to reflect on the biblical story that phrase alludes to, Jacob wrestling with the angel in the Book of Genesis. That the story comes from the Hebrew Bible gives it a special place in a wide range of religious traditions. That the story has also earned a place in the canon of Western literature gives it still further cultural weight. The story takes place at night, at the Jabbok ford, a tributary

of the Jordan River, the night before Jacob is to meet his brother Esau whom he has betrayed and to whom he would like to be reconciled:

And Jacob was left alone, and a man wrestled with him until the break of dawn. And he saw that he had not won against him and he touched his hip-socket and Jacob's hip-socket was wrenched as he wrestled with him. And he said, "Let me go, for dawn is breaking." And he said, "I will not let you go unless you bless me." And he said to him, "What is your name?" And he said, "Jacob." And he said, "Not Jacob shall your name hence be said but Israel, for you have striven with God and men, and won out." And Jacob asked and said, "Tell me your name, pray." And he said, "Why should you ask my name?" and there he blessed him. And Jacob called the name of the place Peniel, meaning, "I have seen God face to face and I came out alive." And the sun rose upon him as he passed Penuel and he was limping on his hip. (Genesis 32:25-32; Alter 179-81)

In the most common reading of the text, the wrestling match represents the struggle of the human with God. In another common appropriation of the story, it represents the struggle of the poet with words. Taking both perspectives together, the story serves as the perfect image for understanding poetry that undertakes the double struggle with the sacred and with language. Poets often turn to this story to talk about either the spiritual struggle, the artistic struggle, or both. This very scene shows up in a striking number of poems, including poems by Emily Dickinson, Herman Melville, Rainer Maria Rilke, and Scott Cairns. It also shows up often when poets and critics discuss poetry, including with Li-Young Lee.<sup>3</sup> Because it has become so

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<sup>3</sup>Bea Opengart uses this same story to consider the "postmodern" "God-wrestling" of several contemporary American poets who find "value, even holiness, in the very act of questioning" (24). Their poetry "not only wrestles with God but it also indicts God" (28).

ubiquitous, one might suspect that the use of this story to talk about poetry, even if it began as a striking metaphor, has now become a cliché. But I suggest that tending to the layers of the story itself will reveal not only how well it can continue to speak about spiritual and artistic struggles—how its complexity has not yet been exhausted—but also how particularly apt it is as a mythic framework for understanding postsecular contemporary poetry in the United States. Though few immediately imagine bodies pulling and pushing each other when one speaks of “wrestling” with something—which might suggest the image has become a dead metaphor—the archetype that is the biblical story still has the richness, with a little push, to serve as a critical category.

The story has a lot to unpack that speaks to contemporary postsecular poetry. That it beings in solitude (“Jacob was left alone”) speaks to the condition in which many poets work, find that they need to work, alone with the pen and the page. That the wrestling is a struggle speaks to the struggle that so many poets face with their craft, the struggle to use words and discover meaning. That the wrestling carries on all night long speaks to the hours it takes many poets to write even a few lines. The play between specific elements (night as a specific time of day, Jabbok and Jordan as specific places, Jacob and Esau as specific people, the hip as a specific wound) and universal elements (night invoking darkness, the ford invoking crossing, wrestling as an image of struggle, and the opponent as a mysterious being) speak to the way that poets so often use the particular to get at the universal. Closely related to that, that the wrestling in the scene is so pointedly physical even while the encounter also so pointedly has sacred significance speaks to the way that poets often use the physical to get at the spiritual. That the story takes place in a life or death context—Jacob fears his brother will kill him—speaks to the way in

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Opengart suggests that postmodernism may have paradoxically “facilitated the re-examination and transformation of [religious] tradition by allowing doubts to be voiced” (36).

which many poets consider poetry to be a matter of life and death, literally so in the case of poets who attest that poetry had saved their lives (such as Jimmy Santiago Baca who became a poet in prison). That the wrestling itself includes pushing and pulling and that it can be seen as either playful or combative (or both) speaks to the way that poets often engage with the religious with a mix of affirmation and antithesis. That Jacob receives both a blessing and a curse speaks to what poets gain and what they lose or suffer by engaging with poetry and spirituality, which may include the wound of beauty and the wound of knowledge. That Jacob wrestles for himself but also for his family (to save them from Esau as well) and that he demands a blessing for himself (“bless me”) but receives a blessing for a people (he is no longer just himself, Jacob, but a whole people, Israel) speaks to the way in which so many poets write for themselves and by themselves but, in the process, obtain a blessing for their readers as well. That Jacob names the place where the encounter happened and attributes spiritual significance the encounter, mirrors the way that the act of writing poetry can often be an act of interpretation of what the poet encounters in the inner and outer worlds. The word Penuel can be understood as a one-word poem, with Jacob as the poet, speaking in imagery and metaphor, trying to make sense of his experience, saying without truly knowing it to be so, “I have seen God face to face and I came out alive.”

In these many ways, the story of Jacob wrestling with the angel speaks to and provides a framework for understanding contemporary postsecular poetry. But the aspect of the story that does this most significantly is obscured by the traditional way of naming this story. Indeed, the text does not say that Jacob wrestled with an angel but in fact makes precisely who or what Jacob wrestled with a pointed mystery. While many readers assume Jacob’s opponent to be an angel, a messenger of God, or actually God, Robert Alter, esteemed translator of the Hebrew Bible, explains that the being’s concern about the morning coming (“Let me go, for dawn is breaking”)



shows that he is “certainly not God and probably not an angel in the ordinary sense” (180). This detail about the morning hints at a tradition common in folklore “of a night spirit that loses its power or is not permitted to go about in daylight.” Alter points out that there is a tradition of interpretation that holds the being as a daemon or the guardian spirit of Esau and that one scholar suggests it might even be a demon (180). The narrative voice begins the story by calling this being “a man,” which Alter suggests conveys Jacob’s initial impression (179). The being seems to hint at its own identity when in renaming Jacob, it says, “you have striven with God and men, and won out.” While this line certainly speaks to Jacob’s larger life struggles outside of the present passage, it also suggests that the present wrestling match involves or stands in for Jacob’s striving with God. Jacob himself interprets the wrestling match that way, but more definitely. He revises the being’s words and makes them clearly refer to this specific encounter by naming the specific place: “I have seen God face to face and I came out alive.” But these hints offered in the words of the being and of Jacob do not solve the mystery, even while they make it clear that the mystery is a sacred one. In both cases, the term translated as *God* is the Hebrew *elohim*. Alter calls this very word “a high concentration point of lexical ambiguity that serves the enigmatic character of the story very well.” It does not mean angel or “divine messenger.” It can mean “something like ‘princes’ or ‘judges.’” It “can refer to diving beings.” It can mean “God.” It can also even mean “gods” (“in some contexts—could this be one?”) (181). Alter writes that “the real point” of the text is that the being “resists identification” (180). Indeed, the being pointedly refuses to identify itself and appears incredulous at the notion that he would (“Why would you ask . . .?”). Both the ambiguity of who or what Jacob wrestles with and the certainty of some divine connotation or association serve to underscore the mysterious nature of the divine itself—and the mystery of a metaphorically and materially mediated encounter with the divine that,

nonetheless, poetically could be considered immediate or “face to face.” This mystery in the text speaks to the mystery that is reality, a deep and abiding concern of many postsecular poets who insist that they do not yet know the unknown, a stance that has its roots not only in the skepticism of the secular but in the apophaticism of many religious traditions. While I will continue following tradition in referring to this story as the story of Jacob wrestling with the angel, that should be understood as shorthand for wrestling with the sacred, wrestling with the unknown, wrestling with that which is beyond what we can name for sure, even if we sometimes use names as temporary and partial metaphors.

In sum, in this dissertation I argue that, like the biblical Jacob who obtains a blessing and a broken hip from wrestling an unknown but sacred being which tradition has come to call an angel, so contemporary postsecular poets, in a process that includes both affirmation and antithesis, play and struggle with themes, forms, and purposes that have traditionally been considered religious or spiritual. These poets seek to recover and create ways of “being and seeing” in the world that are both luminous and just. And they invite readers to participate in the same sort of wrestling, recovering, and creating through the act of reading and responding.

### **Postsecular Literary Studies**

Habermas affirms that in a postsecular society religion can offer “semantic resources”—particularly “resources of meaning, solidarity, and justice” that have the potential benefit not just those who are religious but everyone (“A Reply,” 76-77). These resources can be found nowhere more abundantly than in contemporary literature, which both reflects and contributes to the new religious landscape. Even as the postsecular remains as contested a term within literary studies as it is elsewhere, several crucial insights emerge from recent work on postsecular literature and

related work on religion and contemporary literature.<sup>4</sup> First, postsecular literature holds onto the religious in the contemporary moment. Second, postsecular literature practices religious revision. Third, postsecular literature troubles the divide between secular and religious. And, finally, postsecular literature engages the religious through literary form more than through theological or spiritual content. These characteristics are what make contemporary postsecular literature postsecular. But these attributes that are most distinctive in postsecular literature are not unique to contemporary literature at all. While the postsecular engages with contemporary culture, much of the work that postsecular literature does is as old as literature itself. While postsecular literature represents a rupture, with common ways of looking at the religious and the secular, for instance, it even more strongly represents a continuity, with older ways of practicing literature and of practicing that which might be called the religious. The postsecular within contemporary literature should be understood as the present shape of a long tradition.

Many literary scholars—including John A. McClure, Amy Hungerford, Norman Finkelstein, Justin Neuman, Manav Ratti, Mark Jarman, Arielle Greenberg, and others—have demonstrated the continuing presence and significance of religious dynamics in contemporary literature, particularly in the United States. In his landmark work, *Partial Faiths: Postsecular Fiction in the Age of Pynchon and Morrison*, McClure proposes that postsecular literature offers

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<sup>4</sup>The debates over the term postsecular in postsecular theory in general extend into literary studies, though the questions shift somewhat. Literary scholars want to know what the relationship between the religious and the secular is in postsecular literature (see Ludwig; McClure; Faber; Ratti; Kaufmann; Norman W. Jones; Mączyńska; Bloom; Donoghue; Abrams); where, or when, postsecular literature should be located with respect to literary history (see Michael Symmons Roberts; Bradley, Carruthers, and Tate; Johnston; Mączyńska; Kaufmann; Dunn; Morrissey; Mohamed; Ziser); how the postsecular represents a methodology for reading literature (see Morrissey; Mączyńska; Kaufmann; Ludwig; Huggan); what the relationship is between the postsecular and literary form (see Levitt; Hungerford; McClure; Carruthers and Tate, ed.; Norman W. Jones; Faber; Ludwig; Mączyńska; Ladin; Johnston; Roberts); and what positive contribution postsecular literature makes (see Bradley, Carruthers, and Tate; McClure; Mączyńska; Ratti).

“new forms of religiously inflected seeing and being,” which are “dramatically partial and open-ended” and involve “‘limited gift[s]’ of the spirit” (ix, 6). Even among those writers most informed by and committed to pluralism, rationality, and other secular ideals, Finkelstein writes, many continue to engage with “agencies of desire, meaning, truth, and yes, ‘Spirit, with that troublesome, rebarbative capital letter’” (139, 141). This writing “participate[s] in . . . ‘the symposium of the whole’” (5). Jarman writes that “the religious impulse in poetry today moves many poets who would not call themselves religious” and that, at the same time, “the religious poem of a believer has a quality of conviction that still resonates with extraordinary power” (76-77). Ratti celebrates “[t]he postsecular affirmative values [of] . . . love, friendship, community, art, literature, music, nature, the migrant’s eye-view, hybridity, and ‘newness,’” along with “[f]aith, awe, wonder, and transcendence,” what he calls “the irresistible dimensions of the human experience, infusing everyday life with richness, imagination, and inspiration.” While he acknowledges that these values “might not seem . . . ‘new,’” he explains that they are made new in postsecular literature when “writers write through religion by invoking its great signifiers and great ethics, and then translate and secularize them within the contingency—and urgency—of material and historical circumstance” (xxiii, 17-18).

Like religion in the broader postsecular society, religion in postsecular contemporary literature has not just persisted but also has been transformed. Though some contemporary writers do identify as belonging to one or another religious tradition, most do not. But “religious innovation” (McClure ix) and “religious revisionism” (Finkelstein 1) mark the work of believers and unbelievers alike. Finkelstein writes that many contemporary writers undertake “cultural work” that is “derived from or in dialogue with what may be broadly understood as practices of faith and spiritual experience.” In some cases, “they address (or revise) specific religious

doctrines or beliefs.” In other cases, they engage with that which could be considered religious or spiritual more broadly (5). This process of derivation and dialogue results in writing that is “heterodox, syncretic, and revisionary” (7). While religious revision is distinctive to postsecular literature, Harold Bloom considers it integral to all great poetry: “All strong poets . . . must ruin the sacred truths,” he writes. “Every sacred truth not one’s own becomes a fable, an old song that requires corrective revision” (125). Bloom lists Dante, Virgil, Milton, and Blake as his chief examples of poets who engage in religious revision, but also, rightly, notes that literature in the present continues this practice. While many contemporary poets may not be bogged down in the solipsism inherent in Bloom’s theory of the anxiety of influence, which drives the process of innovation in his view, the phrases “ruin the sacred truths” and “corrective revision” do ring true in describing postsecular literature.

The way that M. H. Abrams describes religious revision in the work of the British Romantic poets is likewise relevant. His description of Wordsworth, Blake, Coleridge, and others applies so well to the postsecular poetry in the present—once one adjusts for the specifics of historical context—that it bears quoting at length. Abrams writes that “after the rationalism and decorum of the Enlightenment,” the Romantic poets often returned

to the stark drama and suprarational mysteries of the Christian story and doctrines and to the violent conflicts and abrupt reversals of the Christian inner life . . . .

But since they lived, inescapably, after the Enlightenment, Romantic writers revived these ancient matters *with a difference*: they undertook to save [aspects] of their religious heritage, by reconstituting them in a way that would make them intellectually acceptable, as well as emotionally pertinent, for the time being. (66, emphasis added)

The “resolve” of these poets was “to give up what one was convinced one had to give up of the dogmatic understructure of Christianity, yet to save what one could save of its experiential relevance and values” (68). Like Bloom, though Abrams writes primarily of poets of another time, he too connects his analysis of the earlier poetry to later poetry by observing that “the Romantic endeavor to salvage traditional experience and values by accommodating them to premises tenable to a later age has continued to be a prime concern of post-Romantic poets,” among whom he names T. S. Eliot, Wallace Stevens, Allen Ginsberg, and Sylvia Plath (69, 420-25). Where the Romantics revised Christianity with respect to the Enlightenment, postsecular writers revise more religions with respect to the earthshaking moments and movements that have followed the Enlightenment, including but not limited to modernism, postmodernism, pluralism, secularism, contemporary science, and globalization. In this ongoing practice of religious revision, contemporary postsecular writing continues in an older tradition with which it shares many characteristics.

The revisions that postsecular writers make often involve reshaping the secular in light of the religious or reshaping the religious in light of the secular—or troubling the boundaries between the two. McClure observes that many otherwise secular writers feel pulled toward that which might be called religious, even while many religious people feel inversely compelled let go of certain traditional aspects of religion, and that postsecular writing emerges from the tensions inherent in such hybrid positions (8-10). For him, postsecular names that impulse to “reconcile important secular and religious intuitions” that he sees in the work of many contemporary writers (6). Scott Cairns observes a similar “transformation” in American poetry in recent years. After modernism taught us “to be skeptical of anything we couldn’t see,” postmodernism taught us “to be skeptical of everything we saw as well.” He proposes that this

had the effect of giving “equal legitimacy” or “illegitimacy” “both to things seen and things unseen” (“The Body Breathing Again,” 61-62). This has had implications for “poets of continuing faith” and for “poets of lapsed or latent or previously unacknowledged faith.” The former “have learned to adapt certain secular sophistications to their own purposes, have learned, in short, to trust God, to trust their vocations, and to trust their developing facilities with language to lead them into speaking discovered matter, rather than spouting familiar, safe, and therefore reductive, soul-crippling clichés,” while the latter “seem to have discovered a way home; the postmodern turn has availed for them a glimpse of endless possibility and permutation, and once they’d gotten over the initial queasiness of that vision, they’ve detected at its heart a delicious vertigo, a swoon of unknowing; in the place of what may have seemed at first an abysmal emptiness of meaning, they have come to suspect an abysmal fullness” (“The Body Breathing Again,” 62). These changes brought on by the postsecular moment result in writing that enacts a more open religiousness, a more open secularity, and open spaces between those poles.

Such troubling of the secular/religious divide marks the postsecular in general. But literature specifically appears to be a privileged site for this kind of work. Proposing that “imaginative literature” resists “the categories of sacred and secular,” Harold Bloom simply rejects the notion “that some authentic literary art is more sacred or secular than some other” (4). For David Harrington Watt, postsecular literature highlights the “capacious, quirky, malleable, and unstable” nature of the religious and the secular, inviting us to realize “that nothing is essentially religious or secular” (124-25). Magdalena Mączyńska sees postsecular literature “leveling . . . the sacred and the profane, bringing to light their common purposes and patterns” (80). Arthur Bradley, Jo Carruthers, and Andrew Tate write “the ‘cracks’ into which religious

impulses flow in a world without religion are nothing other than the space of literature itself: literature is neither an alternative to, nor a substitute for religion, but a way in which religious experience can happen” (5). They contend that “literature constitutes a privileged space in which the return of the religious can take place. Literature, like religion, has always implied a challenge to strict boundaries—between fantasy and fact, transcendence and immanence, the spiritual and the material” (3).

Believers and nonbelievers in the West often think of religion residing primarily in the *content* of religious beliefs. To the extent that that is the case, postsecular literature can be analyzed for both religious and nonreligious content. But religion can no more be limited to content than literature can. Like literature, religion entails both content and form. Informed readers of literature know to look for a relationship between form and content. Indeed, often enough, matters of form take priority over matters of content in literary studies. So it is with religion. While Western Christianity often presents itself as more or less synonymous with the content of its religious doctrine, other traditions and other branches within that tradition tend to put more stress on the form of their religious practices, feelings, and ways of living. On this very point, Louis Althusser paraphrases Pascal, “Kneel down, move your lips in prayer, and you will believe” (114). To this Slavoj Žižek adds, “kneel down and *you shall believe that you knelt down because of your belief*” (*Mapping*, 12).

Laura Levitt ascribes the common overemphasis on content and neglect of other and often more central aspects of religion to “the ‘invisible hand’ of Protestantism” in the study of religion (107). She points out that “a kind of hegemonic notion of normative religion that is deeply inflected by Protestantism” will often foreground theological content, leaving out “other traditions” that foreground other elements of religion (108, 110). She considers a “move away



from religion as faith . . . to ritual” a better “way of thinking through what constitutes the religious” with respect to postsecular literature, since “within rabbinic forms of Judaism, in Islam, and among many forms of Buddhism, practice is much more important than belief” (116). She goes on to note that “belief in God is simply not as salient an issue for those engaged in these other traditions” (116). In literature, ritual and practice manifest as form.

Amy Hungerford advocates the same way of thinking about religion and literature, taking up the question of how certain “writers turn to religion to imagine the purely formal elements of language in transcendent terms” (xiii). She argues that many contemporary writers practice “belief without meaning” or “belief in meaninglessness,” which she defines as a sort of “belief that does not emphasize the content of doctrine” but nonetheless counts as belief through formal means (xiii, xv). The key semantic distinction is between *beliefs* as mental assent to specific theological doctrines and *belief* as religious practice, feeling, forms, and a way of living. Like Levitt, Hungerford points out that the “very notion that beliefs are at the heart of religion” is largely a Western Christian idea, whereas other traditions often put greater emphasis on other dynamics of religion, such as experience, practice, ritual, behavior, and communal participation, “often independent of theological beliefs” (21). Even for believers for whom theological content is important, it is still the case that it is not the content of the content but the experience of the content that proves to be most salient. But form and content do interact, often through “tension” (25). For Hungerford, the fullness of belief in contemporary literature falls between content and form.

To date, work on postsecular literature has overwhelmingly focused on writing in one particular form, the contemporary novel. Most prominently, McClure describes how “religious innovation” works in the novels of Thomas Pynchon, Don DeLillo, Toni Morrison, N. Scott

Momaday, Leslie Marmon Silko, Louise Erdrich, and Michael Ondaatje. Studies by Hungerford, Neuman, Ratti, Mączyńska, Carruthers and Tate, Norman W. Jones, and Alyda Faber also locate the postsecular within contemporary fiction. But since the religious is as present in contemporary poetry as it is in contemporary fiction, postsecular poetry constitutes a large and invaluable archive of texts for understanding the postsecular. Also, since poetry is often considered a more purely or overtly formal mode of writing than narrative, studying postsecular poetry can help us move forward current understandings of the significance of form in relation to postsecular literature.

Readers who are unable to accept the content of traditional religion but who nonetheless long for the sustenance that traditional religious forms provide may well turn to poetry. Helen Vendler connects her experience reading contemporary poetry as an adult to her experience singing Psalms as a child. She calls lyric “the voice of the soul itself” (3). In both the ancient psalms and recent poems, she hears “form revealing the inner life” (6). Nick Halpern describes how the meditative, mystic, visionary, and prophetic voices, associated with religious voice, operate in contemporary poetry alongside the human, ordinary, and everyday voice, bringing together the sacred and the mundane on the level of poetic form. This mixing of voices continues something already to be found in religious writing, since “the two discourses were, of course, mixed by the Bible” and by such poets as Dante and George Herbert (30-31). He concludes that “postreligious poets” will have to look to the past to learn how “to use a human voice *and* a more-than-human voice” well (32).

In a tangle of citations, Finkelstein spells out a radical vision of poetic form, which he uses to explain why he reads as sacred poems that would not immediately strike many readers that way. Finkelstein quotes the poet Michael Palmer quoting the philosopher E. M. Cioran

discussing the Christian mystic and accused heretic Meister Eckhart to the following effect: Eckhart, whose sermons contain a kind of poetry, was accused of heresy not for *what* he said but for *how* he said it. Eckhart “sinned on the side of form,” says Cioran. The poetic *how* of his sermons pointed beyond the semantic *what* of all language. Poetry works the same way, comments Palmer. The very “act of *poesis*” counts as heresy, adds Finkelstein. Poetic form “challenges all types of orthodox discourse.” Indeed, poetic form “charges ordinary language with powers beyond itself” (138-39). William Franke presents just as intense a vision of the religious function of poetic form when he discusses “apocalypse”—a religious term meaning *revelation* in New Testament Greek. “If apocalypse really takes place,” he writes, “then, it does so not in language at all. Apocalypse is the moment when language at its limits shatters and all beings are speechlessly present and open to one another, the moment when all articulable differences are surpassed.” Franke has the “conviction” that such a “moment outside of and before speech” pushes back against our world’s imperialistic tendencies. But “such a speechless openness cannot be engineered by any logical process or protocol, but rather can be induced through the agency of poetry that bears language to its point of rupture.” Therefore, “we need to see how poetry by *its* nature opens toward what lies beyond the grasp of our language.” For Franke, the religious power of poetic form, beyond words and concepts and content, pushes us toward what can basically be described as a postsecular vision, a place where “understanding and tolerance among human beings committed to radically disparate belief systems can be fostered” (x-xi).

Although much has been written about religion and poetry, including contemporary poetry, very little has been said about contemporary poetry specifically as postsecular or in relation to the postsecular. Indeed, at the time of this writing, only a single essay can readily be

found. In “Poetry in a Post-Secular Age,” Michael Symmons Roberts describes what he perceives as the “thinning” out of language by the loss of religious connotations as a concern for all interested in maintaining a rich language, not just religious believers. But he finds the terms “religious,” “sacred,” “spiritual” and “metaphysical” inadequate terms for the poetry needed in the present. “The opportunity is there to find new terms, new metaphors,” he writes (70-71). Though he settles on “post-secular” as a working label, he makes sure to describe what he means. He seeks poetry grounded in the empirical world but also willing and able “to risk a greater reach.” He seeks, to use Christian terms, poetry that works in the mode of Incarnation but also in the mode of Ascension (73). Perceiving the thinning of language by the weakening of religious connotations, on one hand, and the continuing thick experiences people have in the world that poets need to write about, on the other hand, Roberts points to postsecular poetry as a way “to explore what we used to call ‘religious’ ideas, beliefs and experiences” and to explore the relationship between “poetry and religion,” which “have a lot in common” (75). Like Finkelstein and Franke, Roberts focuses on the function of poetic form:

Poems are ritualistic, not read like most prose to follow a story or glean information; poetry is incantatory, thrives on repetition, is best learnt by heart. If, in this sense, poems too are liturgies, or parts of greater liturgies, then they can be liturgies of risk and profundity, reaching for truth and meaning . . . (74-75)

The rich work within literary studies that has already been completed on the postsecular and, separately, on poetry and religion establish these areas as valuable, even pressing areas of inquiry in the present moment. Within that work, the emphasis on form with respect to postsecular literature and the scarcity of attention to postsecular poetry invite this inaugural study of postsecular contemporary poetry in the United States.

## Defining Postsecular Poetry

Several writers have attempted to pin down the postsecular with precision. But more have allowed it to remain nebulous. There appears in the work on the postsecular in general and in the work on postsecular literature specifically a tendency to intentionally and pointedly be not overly specific about the meaning of the term or, in cases where the term itself is not used but the same subject discussed, about the nature of that subject. Thus Habermas invokes “an awareness of what is missing, of what cries out to heaven” without saying what that *what* is (“An Awareness,” 19), while Derrida paradoxically conjures “a nondogmatic doublet of dogma . . . the possibility of religion without religion” (*Gift*, 49). Similarly, Bradley, Carruthers, and Tate take on that which “can only be described as theological” (3), while Ludwig refers to “what may be called religious concerns” (84). Ratti offers us “that which might be resistant to representation—such as a kind of ‘postsecular belief’ for which there might not be an easy creative or critical vocabulary mediating between the secular and the religious” (18). The insistence on the ambiguous language of “that which might be,” “can only be described as,” and “what may be called” reflects the divergence of perspectives on what the postsecular does or should refer to. It also reflects a certain convergence of perspectives on the idea that what it refers to is something that, as part of its definition, cannot be easily defined with the traditional language of religion and nonreligion but that also cannot be defined without reference to said language.

Given that the nature of poetry itself already shares such a resistance to clear cut definitions, it seems wise to preserve something of this rhetorical obfuscating in the present study when referring to the postsecular or religious dimensions of the texts in question. My preferred formulations in this respect include the phrases “that which might be considered religious” and “that which has traditionally been considered the domain of the religious or

spiritual.” At the same time, without some greater precision, it becomes impossible to explain the parameters of the study, to distinguish between which texts and poets are to be focused on and which are not. The middle route I have chosen is to create a working definition by listing specific characteristics of contemporary postsecular poetry in the United States but to clarify that these characteristics constitute a prototypical definition rather than a categorical one (J. R. Taylor). Whereas definitions often establish criteria that must be met for something to be included in the given category, creating definitional boundaries in relation to which things must fall either inside of or outside of, a prototypical definition establishes “a graded category in which some examples are more easily and certainly recognized than others” (Eubanks and Schaeffer 376-77). Whereas we draw up a “checklist” for a categorical definition, we describe a “center of gravity” for a prototypical one (374, 384). With respect to this present study, rather than having to say whether certain poets and poems are or are not categorically postsecular based on whether they have all of the necessary characteristics, we can describe them as more or less prototypically postsecular based on how many of the typical characteristics they have. With this method in mind, I propose that contemporary postsecular poetry in the United States typically (that is, prototypically)

1. is written in the late 20th century or early 21st century;
2. takes on that which might be considered religious or spiritual but does so “with a difference”—such as through critical embrace, measured rejection, adoption with a twist, revision, etc.;
3. uses traditional religious language in some way—such as using religious imagery, referencing a religious figure, borrowing a liturgical form, etc.;
4. foregrounds traditional religious thematic concerns—such as empathy, transcendence, immanence, illumination, union, wholeness, suffering, etc.;

5. employs literary forms that suggest what might traditionally be called religious or spiritual rhetorical purposes—such as metaphor to point toward the ineffable, narrative to invite empathy, or fragmentation to create an experience of meaninglessness; and
6. adopts an ecumenical, nonsectarian, interreligious, or transreligious stance—addressing religiously and non-religiously diverse audiences.

### **Overview of Chapters**

This inquiry on the *meaning* of postsecular poetry in contemporary American poetry calls for a broad genealogy and survey of postsecular poetry in the United States, a sustained analysis of several of its preeminent poets, and a consideration of its themes, forms, and the implications thereof for readers. The remainder of Part I of this dissertation (Chapter 2) provides a genealogy and survey, beginning with Whitman and Dickinson and moving quickly to poets who are writing today. Part II (Chapters 3, 4, and 5) takes up the postsecular topos of *exile* through the writing of Li-Young Lee, considering in his work the postsecular phenomenon of leaving a religious tradition while continuing to wrestle with it from outside. The varieties of exile in Lee's poetry—cultural exile, religious exile, and spiritual exile—intersect and add up to a distinctively postsecular poetics. Part III (Chapters 6, 7, and 8) takes on the writing of Scott Cairns in terms of the postsecular topos of *pilgrimage*, considering in his work the postsecular phenomenon of journeying more deeply into a religious tradition while continuing to wrestle with it from within. Cairns's poetry of pilgrimage both reaffirms and revises orthodox conceptions of religious tradition and, thereby, also constitutes another distinctive postsecular poetics. Though they may initially appear as movements in opposite directions, into and out of religious tradition, exile and pilgrimage share much in common. They are complementary, rather than contradictory, ways of journeying with respect to the resources of religious tradition and with respect to the spiritual

journey that is life. Turning at last to a direct discussion of matters of form and function that are implicit elsewhere in the study, Part IV (Coda) probes the implications of postsecular poetry for readers, particularly its invitation to readers to practice ways of reading that are simultaneously critical and contemplative and thereby to undertake inner work.



## Chapter Two: Survey of Postsecular Poetry

### Genealogy of Postsecular Poetry

A remarkable number of poets and poems in the United States share more than one of what I've described as the characteristics of postsecular poetry. While tracing a genealogy of postsecular poetry up to the present amplifies the difficulties of defining it in the first place, we can name a few of the most prominent precursors as a way of drawing a brief historical sketch.<sup>5</sup> The great grandparents of postsecular American poetry are the great grandparents of all American poetry, Walt Whitman and Emily Dickinson. In section 43 of *Song of Myself*, Whitman embraces all religions in the same way that he famously embraces all people and all of the earth: "I do not despise you priests, all time, the world over, / My faith is the greatest of faiths and the least of faiths, / Enclosing worship ancient and modern" (118). To specify, in one of his encompassing lists, he references and affirms a wide range of faiths, the religions of the ancient oracles and gods, sun religions, fertility religions, indigenous American religions, Shintoism, Buddhism, Hinduism, Islam, and Christianity. His faith is both "the greatest" because he believes so strongly and so voraciously and "the least" because he does not believe in the way

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<sup>5</sup>Lawrence Buell suggests that "American literature is and has for centuries been imbued with spiritual striving," "striving that mostly expresses itself in wilfully idiosyncratic forms" ("American Literature and / as Spiritual Inquiry," 56-57). Finkelstein draws within American poetry a similar genealogy of the "conflict between poetry and the sacred" that runs through Emerson, Whitman, and Dickinson for whom "poetry brings forth religion" and through Arnold, Eliot, and Stevens for whom "poetry replaces religion" (1, 8, 15). In this "vexed tradition," he writes, "the sacred always adheres itself to what may appear to be even the most resolutely secular poems" (1). Arielle Greenberg observes that "there is plenty of American poetry being written about the spiritual here at the dawn of the 21st century." She names five particular ways in which poems engage the spiritual: "(1) as silent prayer, gratitude, contemplative practice, or solitary ritual; (2) as agent of change, a rallying cry for justice and peace; (3) as identity politics, or autobiographical narrative landscape; (4) as questioning, heresy, blasphemy and interpretation; and (5) as magic, mystery or mysticism" (39).

that these faiths would traditionally have him believe. In another poem, “In vain were nails driven through my hands,” Whitman specifically revises Christianity, figuring himself as the risen Jesus returned to earth:

I am alive in New York and San Francisco,  
Again I tread the streets after two thousand years.  
Not all the traditions can put vitality in churches  
They are not alive, they are cold mortar and brick,  
I can easily build as good, and so can you:—  
Books are not men— (115)

These playful lines criticize what Whitman sees as the dead tradition of Christianity, marked by lifeless building and books. He wishes to pull forward into the present time and place that life and that spirit which originally animated the religion, while casting off the layers of accreted tradition that have been built over what he sees as what is alive and life-giving about the religion. But Whitman betrays himself (gleefully, I’m sure). In the very act of dismissing religious texts and religious tradition, he writes a religious text that draws its power from traditional religious imagery and language, especially with the image of Jesus crucified, resurrected, and come again. In what would become a characteristically postsecular move, Whitman takes in all of the tradition but then revises it into a text he can find tenable and that offers something he finds to be spiritually sustaining.

Writing with an incredibly different tone, Dickinson makes strikingly similar moves. In one of her shortest poems, she revises the Trinitarian Christian formula, replacing Father, Son, and Holy Spirit with ecological entities: “In the name of the Bee - / And of the Butterfly - And of the Breeze - Amen!” (28). This poem playfully engages with traditional religion in a way that revises but does not, technically, contradict it (as Christianity too traditionally affirms the goodness of the earth). At the same time, the lines flirt with blasphemy by suggesting so close a correspondence between nature and the divine. In another poem, Dickinson makes the choice of

nature over religion even clearer when she describes going outdoors instead of “going to Church.” She chooses nature *as* religion, using traditional Christian imagery to describe how: trees form the church building, birds serve as the church choir and church bells, and, best of all from Dickinson’s perspective,

God preaches, a noted Clergyman -  
And the sermon is never long,  
So instead of getting to Heaven, at last -  
I’m going, all along. (106)

In poems like this one, Dickinson sets aside the institutional trappings of religion in order to better get at something at the spiritual heart of religion and using traditional religious imagery to try to express what that something is—moves that are to become characteristically postsecular. At the same time, even while Dickinson pointedly does not identify with Christianity in its church context, she does on occasion engage with church positively. In another poem, she recounts a spiritual experience in church: “I’ve heard an Organ talk, sometimes / In a Cathedral Aisle, / And understood no word it said - / Yet held my breath, the while.” She was certainly moved but concludes that she “know[s] not what was done to me” (97). In this poem, Dickinson affirms aspects of church tradition, its sacred spaces and its arts, while also pushing back on that tradition by emphasizing the quality of *unknowing* in her final line. She recovers both the beauty and mystery of religious architecture and religious music, which can affect people spiritually in ways beyond what they can “know,” an experience which is, paradoxically, both at the heart of the Christian spiritual tradition and often forgotten.

From Whitman and Dickinson, we would turn, immediately or eventually, to T. S. Eliot and Wallace Stevens. One might question the presence of T. S. Eliot and Wallace Stevens in a postsecular genealogy, given their well-known respective belief and nonbelief, which may appear like fairly traditional Christianity and fairly traditional atheism. But their poetry, being

poetry, pulls both of them beyond the boundaries of those categories. Given that they diverge so much as poets and in their personal beliefs, it is all the more notable how they converge on a particular point, an unknowing that is in some way sacred. In *Four Quartets*, Eliot writes, “I said to my soul, be still, and let the dark come upon you / Which shall be the darkness of God” (27). He likewise tells his soul to “wait without hope” or “love” or “thought,” because he would be hoping for and loving and thinking “the wrong thing” (28). But even with this stripping away, he maintains, “there is yet faith” (28). Eliot is revising—nearly reversing—words from the New Testament. Though the King James Bible reads, “And now abideth faith, hope, charity, these three; but the greatest of these is charity” (1 Cor. 13:13), Eliot holds onto only one of the three, not even the greatest. Eliot remains traditionally religious even while overturning religious tradition because he does so within the Christian tradition of the *via negativa*. This unknowing has a sacred quality to it. In a poem like “The Snow Man,” Wallace Stevens comes close to the same place from the opposite direction. Upon describing a winter scene, trees covered in ice and snow, wind blowing, the sun reflecting on the frozen water, he states that “[o]ne must have a mind of winter” in order to see and hear such a scene and “not to think / Of any misery,” which is to say, not to imbue the scene with meaning beyond itself. The person who can do that has become “nothing himself” and “beholds / Nothing that is not there and the nothing that is” (7). In seeing “Nothing that is not there,” Stevens affirms the stoic vision of the skeptic and the empiricist. He allows for no God or gods, no otherworldly explanation of this world. At the same time, the poem also retains a sort of faith, different from but no less faith-ful than Eliot’s. Revealed in the final line, the faith Wallace expresses does not culminate with an intellectual acceptance of the idea that there is not anything other than what can be seen but instead with an experiential encounter with “the nothing that is”—which is to say, an encounter with *that sacred*

*nothingness* that exists and that can be beheld. Certainly, Steven's "nothing" is not the same as Eliot's "darkness of God." But both express an experiential unknowing empty of signification while full of significance. In how they converge toward each other and diverge from more typical expressions of their respective religious and nonreligious positions, Eliot and Stevens prefigure aspects of the postsecular in contemporary poetry.

The Beat poets come shortly after Eliot and Stevens in this lineage. Jack Kerouac, the once and future Catholic, mixes poetry, Jazz and religion in *Mexico City Blues*. In the 239th chorus, he writes "Charlie Parker looked like Buddha . . . as calm, beautiful and profound / As the image of the Buddha" (53-54). In the 241st chorus, he adds, "Charlie Parker, forgive me—" and "Charlie Parker, pray for me— / Pray for me and everybody" (55). He similarly writes a haiku including references to West African religion and Zen: "Juju beads on / Zen Manual— / My knees are cold" (*Haikus*, 7). This short poem, displaying the voracious spiritual and religious experimentation the Beats are known for, is simultaneously reverent and irreverent toward the religious traditions it references. Through using the form of the haiku, Kerouac frames the beads and the book in a way that highlights their dignity and sacredness, paying homage to the physical matter with which they are comprised and to the religious traditions from which they come. But the one line of implied commentary, the comment that the poet's "knees are cold," adds an irreverent twist, shifting the focus from the objects and purpose at hand to a bit of humor about the difficulty of using the objects and pursuing those purposes. In writings like this haiku, Kerouac takes religion not at all seriously because he takes it with the utmost seriousness, a seriousness of the sort that requires play. In "Howl" and "Footnote to Howl," Allen Ginsberg uses biblical and religious language for both critique and affirmation, first chanting "Moloch! Moloch! Nightmare of Moloch!" to condemn the violence and the obsession with money that

runs American society but then declaring everything “Holy! Holy! Holy! Holy! Holy!” up to and including “the supernatural extra brilliant intelligent kindness of the soul!” (*Howl*, 27, 28). In “The Sunflower Sutra,” the affirmation continues, taking up a particular emphasis on the downtrodden, though this time the religious language of sutra comes from Hinduism and Buddhism. The poem ends with a “sermon to my soul, and Jack’s soul too, and anyone who’ll listen”: “We’re not our skin of grime, we’re not dread bleak dusty imageless locomotives, we’re golden sunflowers inside” (38). In “Kaddish,” the religious language continues but the critique and affirmation both turn to mourning. Ginsberg creates his own version of the Jewish hymn to grieve the painful life and death of his mother, Naomi Ginsberg (*Kaddish*). The work of Kerouac, Ginsberg, and other beat poets anticipates and leads to the religious experimentation, pluralism, syncretism, and revision, the willingness to look to any tradition for something useful in the spiritual journey and to take it and adapt it to one’s own use, tendencies characteristic of later postsecular writers.

Poets like Elizabeth Bishop and Czesław Miłosz follow the Beats in spiritual purpose if not in poetic style. In one of her letters, Elizabeth Bishop presents herself suspended between being religious and being secular: “I also wish I could go back to being a Baptist!—not that I ever was one—but I believe now that complete agnosticism and straddling the fence on everything is my natural position—although I wish it weren’t” (qtd. in Cheryl Walker 17). She is on the outside wanting to get in, sort of. In contrast, Czesław Miłosz writes in “Prayer,” “What sort of adorer of Majesty am I, / If I consider religion good only for the weak like myself?” and “I admired unbelievers for their simple persistence” (742). He is on the inside wanting to get out, sort of. We might say that Bishop would be religious but cannot quite manage it and that Miłosz would be secular but cannot quite get there. While Bishop’s position results in a poetry bursting

with a spiritual intensity that it only sometimes acknowledges, Miłosz's results in a poetry that is deeply religious but continually self-deprecating about that fact. Still, we shouldn't be fooled by either of their complaints. Moments of religious language and what could be considered religious or spiritual purpose show up throughout Bishop's writing. In "Letter to N.Y." the poem's subject takes "cabs in the middle of the night, / driving as if to save your soul" (*Poems*, 91). In "In the Waiting Room," Bishop narrates an moment when as a child she had a sudden realization that she was connected to all people, which led to what can only be described as a spiritual experience, though a terrifying one, "the sensation of falling off / the round, turning world / into cold blue-black space" (*Geography*, 5-6). In "Chemin de Fer," an old, dirty, monk-like hermit, living by a pond past the train tracks, fires a shotgun, screaming, "Love should be put into action!" An echo tries and tries "to confirm it" (*Poems*, 8). In the final line of "The Filling Station," seeing a plant living in a filthy gas station, the poet concludes that "Somebody loves us all" (*Poems*, 128). Many of Bishop's poems have religious inflections like these ones. For his part, Miłosz writes "Prayer" as a man "[a]pproaching ninety" who has a sincerely held faith in and deeply felt affection for "You / Who nourished me with honey and wormwood" (742). He ends that poem by asking, "In the hour of the agony of death, help me with Your suffering / Which cannot save the world from pain" (743). Even while he believes, his belief has limits that enrich it. Bishop's and Miłosz's conflicted positions allow them each to engage with the resources of the religious and of the secular in ways that they can find spiritually and intellectually tenable—a stance that is characteristically postsecular.

Though not a comprehensive list by any means, Whitman, Dickinson, Eliot, Stevens, Kerouac, Ginsberg, Bishop, and Miłosz represent points of particular intensity and brightness (or darkness as the case may be) along a long path of poetry in the United States that engages with

religion in ways that are postsecular or that anticipate the postsecular. This line up shows that the concerns occupying contemporary postsecular poetry can be, first, traced back to the beginnings of American poetry and, second, found prominently at the heart of that literary tradition, in the work of these indispensable poets in the canon of American poetry. The closer one gets to the time of the poets dealt with most closely in this study—those writing at the end of the twentieth century and beginning of the twenty-first century—one can find more and more poets to list in this family tree. I do not have a desire, or the ability, to draw a hard line in this genealogy to say where the postsecular starts and their precursors end. Bishop and Miłosz, for instance, are certainly older cousins of the postsecular poets writing today. But should they be considered postsecular poets themselves? To a significant degree, yes, though not as prototypically so as those who follow them, if only because the earlier poets are writing in (and in response to) a slightly different social milieu, in which the characteristics of the new postsecular landscape appear not to have been as pronounced or visible as in the present. At any rate, this rough genealogy has now brought us up to the present, where contemporary poetry that engages with that which might be considered religious or spiritual in some way can be found in abundance. Whether this abundance marks an increase from earlier periods is more of an empirical question than an interpretive one. What is clear is that it does add up to an abundance.

### **Postsecular Poetry in the Present**

One way to get a sense of the scope and breadth of the religious and the religiously-inflected in contemporary poetry is to consult the many recent anthologies that have been collected around the subject, including *American Religious Poems* edited by Harold Bloom and Jesse Zuba, *Before the Door of God: An Anthology of Devotional Poetry* edited by Jay Hopler and Kimberly Johnson, *A God in the House: Poets Talk about Faith* edited by Ilya Kaminsky



and Katherine Towler, *Poems of Devotion: An Anthology of Recent Poets* edited by Luke Hankins, and others.<sup>6</sup> What Zuba writes in an introductory note in *American Religious Poems*, a collection that spans hundreds of years but includes many contemporary poems, applies just as well to poems of these other collections: “the poems collected here are rarely unambiguous in their professions of either faith or doubt. In this they reflect both the nature of poetry—where the play of figures and emphases makes it difficult to think of a poem’s meaning as inert and easily pinned down—and that notion of the inscrutability of the divine that informs most religious traditions” (lvi). This description highlights not just the religious but also the postsecular

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<sup>6</sup>Still other collections include: *The Sacred Place: Witnessing the Holy in the Physical World*, edited by W. Scott Olsen and Scott Cairns, an anthology of contemporary writing that is both environmentally and spiritually attuned; *A Syllable of Water: Twenty Writers of Faith Reflect on Their Art*, edited by Emilie Griffin, a collection of essays on various intersections between faith and the craft of writing; *Upholding Mystery: An Anthology of Contemporary Christian Poetry*, edited by David Impastato; a recent special issue of *Rattle* literary magazine, edited by Alan Fox, featuring “poets of faith”; a recent symposium within the scholarly journal *Spiritus*, edited by Mark S. Burrows; *Bearing the Mystery: Twenty Years of IMAGE*, edited by Gregory Wolfe, an anthology of poetry and other writing selected from two decades years of *Image* literary magazine; *Imago Dei: Poems from Christianity and Literature*, edited by Jill Peláez Baumgaertner, an anthology of poetry published in that scholarly journal over sixty years; and the annual *Best Spiritual Writing* series edited by Philip Zaleski. One might suspect that many religious or religiously inflected poets are not well-known outside of religious circles. As an indicator of the extent to which this is not always the case, more than half of the 70 poets included in the most recent edition of A. Poulin and Michael Waters’s anthology of *Contemporary American Poetry* also appear in Harold Bloom and Jessie Zuba’s recent anthology of *American Religious Poems*. Poulin and Waters select a fairly standard roster of notable contemporary poets from the United States. Bloom selects poets who can be considered “religious” in some way, though most, especially in the contemporary section of the book, are not religious in a traditional way. If one more or less accepts Bloom’s designations of certain poems as religious and Poulin and Waters’ designations of certain poets as key figures, then the overlap between the volumes is striking.

Yet one more sign of the pervasive presence of the religious in contemporary writing is the proliferation of creative and contemporary translations—often billed as “versions” because of their loose rendering—of ancient sacred texts from a wide range of traditions, including the Tao Te Ching, Bhagavad Gita, Psalms, and Book of Job by Stephen Mitchell; Rumi by Colman Barks; Hafiz by Daniel J. Ladinsky; Basho, Buson, and Issa by Robert Hass; the Cold Mountain Poems by Gary Snyder (poems he describes as “Taoist, Buddhist, Zen” [35]); the early Suras of the Quran by Michael Sells; and the Bible by Eugene Peterson. These books, both literary and intensely popular, are read for study, aesthetic appreciation, and spiritual use.

characteristics of this body of poetry. Many notable poets appear in these volumes, with some of the same poets appearing in anthology after anthology. Based on these collections, we can say that the roll call of postsecular contemporary American poetry would begin (but certainly not end) with the following names: Denise Levertov, William Stafford, A. R. Ammons, Robert Duncan, Richard Wilbur, Anthony Hecht, Galway Kinnell, Anne Sexton, Gary Snyder, Sylvia Plath, Wendell Berry, N. Scott Momaday, Mary Oliver, Jay Wright, Lucille Clifton, Alicia Ostriker, Charles Simić, Robert Hass, Louise Glück, Annie Dillard, Leslie Marmon Silko, Agha Shahid Ali, Robert Cording, Carolyn Forché, Jorie Graham, Joy Harjo, Andrew Hudgins, Mark Jarman, Naomi Shihab Nye, Rita Dove, Jane Hirshfield, Louise Erdrich, Scott Cairns, Alice Walker, Li-Young Lee, Dunya Mikhail, Christian Wiman, Kazim Ali, Kathleen Norris, and Jericho Brown.

Such a large body of texts including such diversity of poets will obviously cover a lot of ground and address many different concerns.<sup>7</sup> Some degree of religious syncretism is nearly ubiquitous, as many poets draw from whatever religious traditions they find useful. Justice is regularly a driving concern, both justice from religious oppression and justice as a religious mandate. The supernatural makes occasional appearances. Silence suffuses many of these poems. Dignity and identity are also common themes. On some level, hope may be the subject—or the

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<sup>7</sup>The diversity does have some limits. In his preface *Before the Door of God: An Anthology of Devotional Poetry*, Jay Hopler notes that the preponderance of poems from Christianity in that anthology do not represent “an editorial bias” but represent the historical conditions of the Western cultures in which that form of writing developed which have been primarily Christian, with increased diversity emerging in more recent years (xxii). The poets and poetry considered in this present study likewise reflect both the historical dominance of Christianity in the United States and the more recent increasing diversity. While the poets considered in this study are impacted by or connected to a wide range of traditions—including Judaism, Islam, Taoism, Buddhism, Hinduism, indigenous religions from the Americas and from Africa, and atheist and agnostic spirituality—Christianity comes to bear more often than the other traditions, which reflects its historical (and present) cultural dominance in the United States. Even the poets who do not belong to the Christian traditions often find themselves wrestling with it.

object—of most of these poems, except, perhaps, for poems of despair. The interconnectedness of everyone and everything is another common theme. As with poetry in general, love and death also preoccupy this body of poetry specifically. Sin and forgiveness appear as well. Many of these poems focus their attention on God, whatever these poets may mean by that word. Spiritual practices like meditation and prayer come up, along with the texts and objects and symbols of various religious traditions. Wonder and awe are abiding themes. So are the related themes of mystery and unknowing. Many of these poems take up the conditions of brokenness and the experience of being made whole—or, as the case may be, of not being made whole.

In and through all of these reoccurring elements of postsecular poetry, I propose two topoi in particular are the most prominent and most useful for understanding this body of work. While postsecular poets often meet on grounds that are important to both religious and secular people alike—such as *earth* or *compassion*, which are prominent enough that they have to figure into any survey of postsecular contemporary poetry—the two particular topoi in this body of poetry that most prototypically reflect the postsecular are *exile* and *pilgrimage*. These two topoi engage with religious language and imagery most openly and overtly, which allows us a particularly clear view into postsecular themes, forms, and purposes in contemporary poetry. While the survey in this chapter will consider poets who engage earth, compassion, exile, and pilgrimage in order to adequately establish the larger context of this study, the body of the dissertation itself will focus specifically on exile and pilgrimage.

## **Earth**

There are streams in all religions and in secularism that venerate the earth, whether as a god, as a work of God, or as the next best thing in lieu of God or gods. It makes sense that the earth is an important concern within contemporary postsecular poetry, given that increasing

numbers of people do not feel at home in the monotheisms of their upbringings, or seek out the indigenous religions of their cultural heritage, or though otherwise completely secular find something “sacred” in the earth, or simply wake up to the peril life as we know it faces on earth. Many examples of poetry that engages with that which has traditionally been considered religious or spiritual through the locus of earth can be found in postsecular contemporary poetry, including in the work of Chrystos, Robert Hass, Louise Glück, A. R. Ammons, and Joy Harjo.

The poet Chrystos offers a spiritual response to ecological destruction in a way that resonates with her Mamaceqtaw (Menominee) religious heritage. In “No Rock Scorns Me as Whore,” the final piece in the landmark feminist women of color anthology *This Bridge Called My Back*, Chrystos presents the beauty of the ecological world side by side with the destruction caused by humans. She represents the latter with a devastating evocation of nuclear destruction: “The holocaust has already occurred What follows is only the burning brush . . . I will be screaming no no no more destruction in that last blinding light” (245). The play on time, past (“already occurred”), present (“is”), and future (“I will be”), suggests that the possibility of literal nuclear destruction is both a present pressing concern and that it stands as a synecdoche for the broader destruction already taking place. Whether she can stop the destruction or not, she will protest it until the last moment, the rightness of the protest in itself having a sort of spiritual value beyond its outcome. But protest against the destruction of the earth is not the whole of her environmental or spiritual vision. The other side of it, which is both the deeper motivation for protesting the destruction and the means by which the destruction may be survived, is the sacredness of the earth. In the same poem, she writes, “To survive we must begin to know sacredness . . . Gradually, I am taught how to behave by new teachers By leaves, by flowers, by

fruits & rhythms of rain . . . I am still in love with the mystery of shadows, wind, bird song” (244).

In “State of the Planet,” Robert Hass also pairs the beauty of the earth with the damage people inflict upon the earth. But his recourse to sacredness comes into play more obliquely than Chrystos’s. He presents a thoroughly material view of the planet and the larger cosmos in which it turns, the poem overflowing with science: troposphere, DNA, fossils, genes, carbon dioxide, bacteria, atoms, chlorofluorocarbons, and so on. It also overflows with praise, beauty, and imagination. It is as if Hass feels that the earth must be explained scientifically but that it cannot be explained only scientifically, so he also uses history, poetry, and, religious language: “Most of the ancient groves are gone, sacred to Kuan Yin / And Artemis, sacred to the gods and goddesses / In every picture book the child is apt to read” (*Time*, 50). It is important to note both that the ancient groves are sacred and that that sacredness resides in picture books for children. Even while the religious language is qualified carefully, it is nonetheless evoked. The most clearly postsecular moment in the poem evokes religion and secularism simultaneously. In a complex affirmation of the sacred and the scientific, he writes,

It must be a gift of evolution that humans  
Can’t sustain wonder. We’d never have gotten up  
From our knees if we could. (51)

These lines play with the tension between scientific understandings of evolution and religious creationist explanations of the world. Hass suggests that the “gift” of evolution—the biological phenomenon and the science of it—may come with a cost worth pausing over. We would not survive if we were permanently stunned by the wonder of creation. But as our loss of wonder has, at least in part, led to our destruction of the world, we may also not survive if we do not, occasionally, feel pushed to praise.

While Hass spans the planet, Louise Glück stays with a single garden in *The Wild Iris*. She uses religious language to evoke the sacredness of earth in a more sustained and intimate way, though, in the end, just as ambiguously. The book proceeds through a series of poems set in a garden, speaking in different voices, including the voices of the flowers, the seasons, the gardener, and God. The different voices address different entities as well, though who is being addressed at any given moment is not always clear, whether the flowers, the seasons, the gardener, or God. The poems progress through the seasons of the year from winter to fall and through the times of day from “Matins”—morning prayer, the title of seven of the poems—to “Vespers—evening prayer, the title of ten of the poems, one of which is also subtitled “Parousia,” the ancient Greek word for *arrival*, used in Christian theology to refer to the doctrine of the Second Coming of Christ. The first poem evokes the Resurrection, applying the Christian story to the ecological cycle that perennial flowers go through of dormancy during winter followed by blooming during its season. In the poem, “The White Iris” speaks: “that which you call death / I remember” (1). The flower relates that the experience was “terrible” but that it ended with a rebirth, that is, another blooming. What the flower learned and shares with readers is that “whatever / returns from oblivion returns / to find a voice.” In the final poem, “The White Lilies” speak of their approaching death:

Hush, beloved. It doesn't matter to me  
how many summers I live to return:  
this one summer we have entered eternity.  
I felt your two hands  
bury me to release its splendor. (63)

If the possibility of resurrection represents one spiritual insight, the acceptance of death represents another. Having lived fully, the flowers are prepared to die, whether just for the winter or forever. In these and other poems in the book, Glück works among overlapping layers of meaning. She uses the religious to speak about the ecological. She uses the ecological to speak



of the momentarily everlasting, the air about  
him sacrosanct (32)

Such moments when time pauses and the immensity and sacredness of reality of the world becomes apparent are one of the shared experiences of mystics and poets. Though the garbage may be spiritual for Ammons, it is spiritual in a way that is deeply material. Garbage reminds us not only of our materialism but also of our own materiality.

Joy Harjo envisions and enacts an earthy spirituality that draws on her Muscogee (Creek) religious heritage. In “Faith” she contrasts Christianity, a tradition she finds often too rigid and too definite—“The spires of churches / Fit the skyline exactly”—with her own “faith,” which she describes as “a limp thing . . . Strung together / With cold rains” (182). Her faith is less definite, more tentative, but also more flexible, more open to account with the enormity of “the question” that is this life we live. She writes, “the question / Is too large to fit / One city, one church, / Or one country” (182). She does not want to “miss / The feet of god / Disguised as trees” (183). Indeed, for her, it is not just that the natural environment has a quality of sacredness to it or a sacred aura, so to speak. The connection is much more literal. “In Praise of Earth” declares that “this Earth keeps faithfully to her journey, carrying us / around the Sun” (175). In a note to the poem, Harjo explains that “*Earth* and *Sun* are capitalized as they are entities with spirit and soul and are known by many proper names” (232). In “Eagle Poem,” she describes both her cosmology and the spiritual practice that derive from it. She writes, “To pray you open your whole self / To sky, to earth, to sun, to moon / To one whole voice that is you” (85). Each person is so intimately connected to everything else that the whole itself can be considered the one. One learns this, Harjo continues, by observing the eagle flying in “Circles of motion.” One likewise learns from the eagle that “we must take the utmost care / And kindness in all things.” The



poems ends with an encouragement to breathe, to know that one is connected to the earth, to accept the circles of mortality, and to aspire to beauty:

Breathe in, knowing we are made of  
All this, and breathe, knowing  
We are truly blessed because we  
Were born, and die soon within a  
True circle of motion,  
Like eagle rounding out the morning  
Inside us.  
We pray that it will be done  
In beauty.  
In beauty. (85)

The lines “We pray that it will be done” suggests a subtle revision of The Lord’s Prayer. Instead of “Thy will be done,” *it* will be done. While this does not need to be read as a critique of Christian theology, it is certainly an adjustment and a departure. The idea is not that a distant God wills things and that we ought to will the same. The idea is that life and death will take place as part of the natural, sacred processes of the earth and that we ought to will that they take place well, that they take place “In beauty.”

### **Compassion**

No ethical practice has a more central role in secular, religious, and spiritual ethical traditions than the practice of seeing and feeling things from another’s perspective, the practice of empathy. It is no wonder that empathy and compassion hold central places in postsecular literature. Many examples of this topos can be found in postsecular contemporary poetry, including in the work of Galway Kinnell, Agha Shahid Ali, Lucille Clifton, and Naomi Shihab Nye.

In “Saint Francis and the Sow,” Galway Kinnell presents a poetry of compassion through religious imagery. He writes, “sometimes it is necessary / to reteach a thing its loveliness.” In the poem, he uses Saint Francis, a saint closely associated with the environment and the poor, and a

sow nursing her young, an animal that is not only despised by many people but that is even an representative embodiment of the religious concept of uncleanness in several religious traditions. He uses the saint and the sow as a way to represent both the intimacy and ultimacy of the act of tenderness toward those, including animals, who need tenderness. Kinnell writes, “Saint Francis / put his hand on the creased forehead / of the sow, and told her in words and in touch / blessings of earth on the sow, and the sow / began remembering . . . the long, perfect loveliness of sow” (94). Animals already have a “long perfect loveliness” but often require tender touch and kind words to remember or realize that about themselves. Kinnell uses the sow in this poem to indicate the scope, beyond just humans, to which compassion must be shown. As we can gather from Kinnell’s activist work, including for the Congress for Racial Equality during the Civil Rights movement of the 1960s, the human animal is certainly included in Kinnell’s vision, particularly those who, like the sow, have been despised and taught to despise themselves. Though not religious himself, in this poem, Kinnell draws not on political imagery or language but the religious figure of a saint and the religious language of love (adapted as loveliness) to powerfully communicate a message of compassion.

While Kinnell presents compassion explicitly, Agha Shahid Ali presents it implicitly, enacting it in attention paid to the lives and feelings of otherwise overlooked persons. This attention can be seen in “At the Museum,” where the poet reflects on a sculpture from 2,500 B.C. from Harappa, now in eastern Pakistan. The poem begins with the poet wondering “who”—since “No one keeps records / of soldiers and slaves”—“cast in bronze a servant girl?” At least one sculptor did: “polishing the ache // off her fingers stiff” from the work she was made to do (217). Ali writes that he is “grateful she smiled / at the sculptor,” just as she still smiles at him now through the sculpture. The poem attends to this person, so far in the past, marginalized by age,

gender, and economic status, and it attends to the way that some other artist, so far in the past, attended to her as well. It is not a sort of compassion that could, in this case, lead to any act of kindness or goodness to the person long dead. But it is the act of attention so central to all acts of kindness or goodness. That this form of attention to persons as compassion has a religious background for Ali can be seen in a poem like “Prayer Rug,” where Ali gives his attention to his grandmother on pilgrimage to Mecca: “she weeps // as the stone is unveiled / she weeps holding on/ to the pillars.” But even here, the heart of the poem lies not in the religious content of the scene described but in the religiously inflected attention given. Ali pays the same sort of attention again to his grandmother in “The Dacca Gauzes,” which puts the grandmother in the context of the brutal British colonization of Bangladesh. He connects the losses of her life with the still more visibly violent losses of the generations before her. The poem describes the muslins that Dacca had been famous for, woven so finely they were “known as woven air, running / water, evening dew” and “pulled . . . through a ring” to be shown of genuine quality. Because the trade of this cloth from Dacca competed with British cotton trade, the colonial power violently suppressed it: “the hands / of weavers were amputated, / the looms of Bengal silenced.” The existing cloths became rare and then all but lost. His grandmother remembers “what it was to wear / or touch that cloth,” having “once” worn “an heirloom sari” (42). Now, says his grandmother, only

in autumn, should one wake up  
at dawn to pray, can one  
feel the same texture again.

One morning, she says, the air  
was dew-starched: she pulled  
it absently through her ring. (43)

These lines recount an encounter of his grandmother’s that is both spiritual and material, a moment of the realization of the sacred, perhaps healing in its connection to the lost cultural past,

in the very morning air. But what is just as spiritual about these lines, once again, is the attention that Ali pays to the subtle but profound losses and encounters that his grandmother faces. It is that attention that enacts, whatever it happens to be describing at the time, a poetics of compassion.

In her poetry, Lucille Clifton also practices and promotes compassion for the marginalized but forwards the political implications of compassion much more directly, made clear through her sharp critiques of racism and sexism. While justice is obviously an aim of the writing, she levies the critiques not toward retributive justice but restorative justice. The end—and the means—of her poetry is compassion. She achieves a stunning balance of harshness and tenderness, wherein the harshest of subjects and the harshest of criticisms are subsumed, rather consumed, by the enduring and overcoming spiritual perspective that we would treat one another rightly if we could understand one another as we understand ourselves. Some of her poems enact compassion through feeling with and feeling for the victims of history, as she does in “sorrow song,” which begins, “for the eyes of the children,” and lists, by atrocity, the children whose eyes have witnessed and whose bodies have suffered “the extraordinary evil in / ordinary men.” These include not only “the eyes of the children / of middle passage” but also those of Buchenwald, Vietnam, Johannesburg, Nagasaki, Cherokee, Ethiopia, Russia, and the United States (263). While the poem invites rage against the evil done to children in so many times and places, it even more strongly invites sorrow and remembrance, which here are elements of compassion. Clifton does the same regarding the middle passage in “slaveships,” describing slaves’ experiences being “loaded like spoons / into the belly of” and “chained to the heart of” slave ships, “where we lay for weeks for months / in the sweat and stink / of our own breathing” (503). In this poem, she also uses religious language to expose the religious hypocrisy of the Christian

slavers. She does not in fact write into the belly of and chained to the heart of *slave ships* but “of Jesus” and “of the Angel.” The slave ships have Christian names that contradict their use. Religion is not found in this poem as an image for compassion but as an image for hypocrisy so great that hundreds of years later it still demands and deserves readers’ anger, indignation, grieving, and compassion, the latter stressed by Clifton’s use of “we” which makes the poem an act of imagining another’s pain as one’s own.

In “poem for my uterus” and “poem in praise of menstruation,” Clifton shows compassion for herself and for all women who experience life in the way that she does because of physical pains unique to the female body and, even more so, because of the values that society has attributed to female body parts and bodily processes. In the former poem, Clifton mourns her upcoming hysterectomy, writing, “where can i go / barefoot / without you / where can you go / without me,” naming a socially unacknowledged grief, and giving herself and others the means to acknowledge and accept this grief as grief (380). In the latter poem, she does not grieve but celebrates the monthly process of the cleansing and renewing of the uterine lining. She declares menstruation “beautiful and faithful and ancient / and female and brave” (357). This is a political statement because it boldly contradicts the also-ancient denigration of women’s bodies. But it is a spiritual statement because, in an act of compassion, it gives herself and others who have suffered under that denigration the means to embrace their own bodies as good and beautiful. Finally, in still other poems, Clifton takes up the task of teaching compassion to those who need to learn it. She does this nowhere more profoundly than in her poem “wishes for sons,” an indictment of patriarchy that is both utterly radical and utterly tender, wishing for men, not just men but sons, men related and loved, to experience for themselves what it is like to live in a woman’s body. The poem asks for empathy toward those with female bodies, while

simultaneously reversing the social understanding that considers it a negative and pitiable thing to be a woman. The poem might be read as if the poet wishes negative things upon sons, beginning with “i wish them cramps. / i wish them a strange town / and the last tampon” (382). But, in wishing upon sons these and other experiences that would be painful—but more or less painful depending on the responses of the world to those experiencing these things—she also wishes for a new world. The poem ends, “then bring them to gynecologists / not unlike themselves.” These last words turn everything around. If gynecologists have had or are sympathetic to these pains, that would be a better world to live in. If they do not and are not, it would not. Whether the wishes are positive or negative depends entirely upon what sort of people the sons will be. The call for experiences that would enable empathy and compassion shows that *those qualities* define the sort of sons Clifton wishes for.

Compassion lies at the heart of Naomi Shihab Nye’s poetry. The daughter of a Palestinian American father and a white American mother, she grew up in Jerusalem and San Antonio. Drawing on her Arab Muslim and Western Christian heritages, she writes to create understanding and empathy among people of different religions, cultures, and ethnicities. Religion and spirituality sometimes come up overtly in Shihab Nye’s writing. In *Habibi*, Shihab Nye tells the story of Liyana, a fictional version of her teenage self. In the novel, Nye describes Liyana listening in on her father and mother discussing religion late at night. They are Muslim and Christian respectively, though neither are, as her mother puts it, “*traditionally religious*” (*Habibi*, 175). Hearing them discuss a more universal faith than the faith that historically has been represented by either of those traditions, Liyana thinks to herself, “Their words made sense. Why would any God want to be only large enough to fit inside a certain group of hearts? God was a Big God.” When someone later asks Liyana, “What religion are you?” she answers, “Big

God” (*Habibi*, 182). It is compassion, supported by the idea of a Big God, that forms the center of Shihab Nye’s poetry and spirituality. While she deals with a lot of pain for her Palestinian people, her poetry always returns to the central concern of compassion, even when, on occasion, it also has a pointed political edge to it. In “Letters My Prez Is Not Sending,” written during the years of President George Bush II but applicable during any of the recent wars between the United States and people of the Middle East, Shihab Nye offers a series of beginnings of letters, each suddenly cut off with ellipses, leaving the worst parts to the imagination: “Dear Fawziya, You know, I have a mom too so I can imagine what you . . .” (*Tender*, 153). While the implied political critique is scathing—the president has overseen something horrible done to someone’s mother—the point of the poem is the empathy and compassion that are absent but that could be present and that could lead to a different outcome. If only the president and other politicians did consider the mothers of the victims of war, think their own mothers, and write letters of understanding, wars would be harder to carry out. In “Kindness,” Shihab Nye writes,

Before you know kindness as the deepest thing inside,  
you must know sorrow as the other deepest thing.  
You must wake up with sorrow.  
You must speak to it till your voice  
catches the thread of all sorrows  
and you see the size of the cloth.

Then it is only kindness that makes sense anymore (*Tender*, 25)

Kindness, the practical expression of compassion, comes from knowing one’s own sorrow and knowing that sorrow as part of the shared sorrow of the world. In the introduction of a volume of poems from the Middle East that Shihab Nye edited, part of her work in trying to get people to understand each other, she observes that in the wake of attacks on September 11 people often say that “*Everything has changed.*” But she proposes that among the things that “will never change” is “Our need to know one another and to care about other people’s lives” (*Flag*, iv).

## **Exile**

I use the term exile to name the postsecular topos related to leaving or rejecting a religious tradition while continuing to engage with it in some way. Many poets find the traditions in or around which they grew up untenable, but nonetheless find themselves compelled to continue wrestling with their images, their impact on them and on others around them, and what they take to be their truths or lies. It is one thing to leave a religion because one does not find it compelling, intellectually, morally, or spiritually. It is another thing to leave a religion even when one does find it compelling. Some poets find themselves in religious exile as a way of being faithful to aspects at the heart of the tradition they are leaving. Many examples of this topos in postsecular contemporary poetry can be found, including in the work of Jay Wright, Stan Apps, Anne Sexton, Jericho Brown, and Li-Young Lee.

In “Baptism in the Lead Avenue Ditch,” Jay Wright, a poet who makes use of a wide range of religious traditions, particularly including ones from Africa, recalls the Christianity of his upbringing. The poem moves back and forth in time from the scene of his late baptism as a child, at twelve years old, to the scene of his return to that same ditch as an adult. The poem’s intensity signals that the poet takes seriously the power the religious community has to give the baptized a sense of belonging and to orient them toward a particular place and purpose in the world, through the ritual of baptism. At the same time, the sense of loss and anger that also shape the poem signal that the poet likewise takes seriously the damage the religious community can inflict on the very people it ostensibly means to help. The poet’s experience in the community as a child continues to haunt him, ambiguously, as an adult. The final lines of the poem include both scenes, the baptism and the return, set at the ditch in the present with the past evoked in memory. Addressing an unnamed “you” from his childhood, Wright writes,



I lean down now  
and push the thick mud away  
to look for your footstep,  
and think, with the first touch of rage,  
that you may even be buried there.  
I move, and return  
to this city stripped of movement,  
remembering that I entered its holiness,  
by your side,  
my fingers already filled with its death. (*Transfigurations*, 123)

The poem leaves many gaps. But several things are evident. Whatever “holiness” the poet found in Christianity—the word should not be taken as sarcasm, even though it certainly includes a painful irony along with its sincerity—he also found a kind of “death.” The poem never clarifies what specific loss or death the poet has experienced in or because of the religious community, but it nods toward the coerced conformity that is often the price of belonging in a religious community and the loss of that belonging experience by many who come to find they are unable or unwilling to confirm. Whatever the specific case, the poet’s experiences in the tradition left him with a longing and a loss. Years later, he finds himself distinctly outside of that tradition but still wrestling with both in his poetry.

Raised as a Branch Davidian but no longer one, Stan Apps also finds himself wrestling with a religious tradition from the outside. But Apps’s tone is as playful as Wright’s is serious, beginning with the title *God’s Livestock Policy*. With a wink, he writes it is the “weak” like himself “who need and love God” (4). Many of his poems in the book offer religious satire. In one poem he observes, “It was America, so God would come / in the form / of a labor- / saving device” (15). In another he declares, “God is Love. God wants War. Love wants War. The largest mega-church agreeing” (13). Mocking the militarism and consumerism of Christianity in the United States, these lines invert common Christian phrases, contrasting the distance between the meanings stated and the meanings lived. American Christians believe that God will come but

they live and buy as if that coming means stuff, a contradiction played with in the shift of the meaning of the word “come” at the line break. American churches declare the love of God but demand war. But in “To Oscar Romero,” Aps celebrates a different understanding of religion. While many believers act as if “God is a subordinate from Europe,” other, like the martyred Archbishop of San Salvador to whom the poem is addressed, reject that religion should serve imperialist and capitalist ends: “there are men of God here who do not know God’s place. / There are men of God who talk about God’s Earthly Kingdom, / A world where treasure is human life, a good life” (49). In another poem, Aps contrasts negative Christian understandings and practices with the positive example of Jesus in the New Testament, writing that “sins generally involve being nice to the wrong people” and that “Jesus was a great sinner, of course” (77). Finally, near the end of the book, Aps comes around this, in earnest: “God is a poultice, God is healing aloe” (73). What we see in the contrast between the affirming poems and the antithetical poems is the process of wrestling with religion and with the concept of God. Aps cannot accept the religious understandings handed down to him by the community of his childhood and by the interpretations of the Bible to which they hold. But he also cannot entirely let go of those understandings and that text either. So he wrestles and revises:

The saint was tired of the holy text,  
so sick and tired of reciting it,  
so he added some flourishes of his own (22)

Whatever else these playful lines might also mean, they speak to the position the poet takes in this book. Aps add his own flourishes, these poems, to the holy text.

Jericho Brown faces another sort of religious exile. It is not so much that he can no longer allow himself to belong to the religious tradition that he grew up in but that that tradition will no

longer have him.<sup>8</sup> In an interview, Brown shares that while he believes in God, it is not “the God that was illustrated for me as the one and only God when I was growing up.” More specifically, he explains that it was not the God illustrated to him through his relationship with his own father, which was marked by his desire to please his father, by his fear of failing to do so, by his father’s love for him, and by his father’s physical abuse of him. “I love the church,” Brown explains, but will “usually find an excuse not to go” when invited “because I am afraid that someone behind the pulpit will at any moment attempt to erase or degrade my existence as a gay man” (“Possibility,” 83, 84). In “Romans 12:1,” Brown takes up the biblical passage that, in the King James translation, speaks of “present[ing] your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable unto God.” Brown applies the passage to his own intimate relationship with a man. The poem is both one of affirmation of his own gay body in religious terms—he writes that he belongs to a people who are “whole, holy / And acceptable” and that his body is a “Dear dying sacrifice, desirous”—and one of grief at the rejection he faces by many in the community of his Christian upbringing: “they will not call me / Brother.” The exile from that tradition that the poem enacts is not voluntary. He would belong if he were accepted. In fact, he does belong to a certain degree even though he is not accepted, which adds an additional layer of complexity and pain to his postsecular position of exile.

Anne Sexton writes poems of religious exile as well. She finds beauty in the Catholic tradition, in its stories, images, and ideas, but simply cannot believe. In “With Mercy for the Greedy,” she emphatically rejects her friend’s requests that she go to confession. But even as she adamantly maintains an atheist stance, Sexton reveals her obsession with Christ in this poem.

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<sup>8</sup>In “Coming Out on Matters of Faith,” Shara Lessley names Brown among a substantial number of contemporary gay poets who are reclaiming and reworking the sacred traditions from which they have so often been excluded. Her list includes Robert Duncan, Carl Phillips, C. Dale Young, Bruce Snider, D.A. Powell, Henri Cole, James Allen Hall, Spencer Reece, and Kazim Ali.

She wears the crucifix that her friend sends her. She calls the Jesus on it “beautiful,” “pray[s] to its shadow,” and touches it “desperately.” She writes, “I detest my sins and I try to believe . . . But I can’t. Need is not quite belief” (63). Since she cannot go to confession, she ends the poem by offering her poetry as her confession: “My friend, my friend, I was born / doing reference work in sin, and born / confessing it. This is what poems are” (64). The religious affection and desire in the poem are not so much in contrast with Sexton’s ultimate rejection of religion; rather, they fuel it. She cannot adopt the faith falsely. In this way, the confessions of her confessional poetry are not “confessions” coincidentally, in a legal or personal sense that happens to use a word that also has religious meaning in other contexts. Instead, her confessions are confessions in a pointedly religious sense. Her atheism is honest atheism, to be sure, but that honesty is honestly engaged with a religious impulse it cannot follow all the way to religion, which leaves her, with many contemporary postsecular poets, in a place of religious exile.

### **Pilgrimage**

If the postsecular moment occasions poetry written from the outside of any religious tradition engaging things that would be traditionally considered religious, it also occasions poetry written from *inside* of religious traditions. I use the term pilgrimage to name the postsecular topos related to the whole range of conversions and embraces of traditional religious beliefs, practices, and traditions when those take place in ways that are inflected with secular or postsecular characteristics. It is one thing to be a religious believer. It is another to believe in religion with a difference. Some poets find themselves converting into a religious tradition or revising a tradition from within, or combining multiple religious traditions, in ways informed by contemporary understandings of science, ethics, philosophy, etc. Many examples of this topos

can be found in postsecular contemporary poetry, including in the work of Gary Snyder, Luke Hankins, Christian Wiman, Mary Oliver, and Scott Cairns.

Initially renowned as a Beat Poet and later widely described as the “poet laureate of Deep Ecology,” Gary Snyder enacts a postsecular pilgrimage into a religious tradition in his life and poetry. In his twenties, he traveled to Japan and lived and studied in a Buddhist monastery for several years before returning to the United States as a Buddhist. In “The Great Bell of the Gion,” a loosely formulated haibun, the Japanese literary form which includes a short prose passage followed by a haiku, Snyder presents a scene of a Buddhist temple. The content and the form of this poem convey a spirituality of simplicity and presence, aided by nature, art, and Buddhist religious imagery. The text begins with a quote from *The Tale of the Heike*, a classical Japanese text, which establishes the spiritual and religious content and context of the poem by noting that the bell of the poem’s title at the Gion Shrine “reverberates into every human heart to awake us to the fact that all is impermanent and fleeting” and by pointing out that the “withered flowers of the sâla trees” reinforce that Buddhist lesson” (*Peaks*, 97). The narrative portion of the haibun recounts Snyder’s experience bringing a lit wick (“sacred fire”) home from the temple and hearing the “huge bell still ringing in the new year,” a sound that is both “soft” and “loud.” The short poem that follows, in place of the haiku in a traditional haibun, notes the river and valley and recounts the ringing of the bell: “it’s a dark whisper / echoing in your liver, / mending your / fragile heart” (97). The lines seek to clear a space, in much the way that the bell itself does, for presence and healing, which are to take place in, through, and in the context of the beauty of nature and the darkness of Buddhist nothingness. Snyder has journeyed into and inside of a religious tradition, bringing Buddhism with him to the United States. He applies and adapts

Buddhism to his own context and to the pressing need for presence and attention to the environment in the age of ecological disaster.

Another poet whose poetry enacts a journey into a historical religious tradition is Luke Hankins. Where Snyder journeys into a new tradition, Hankins journeys into a new relationship with the tradition of his upbringing. In the title poem of his book *Weak Devotions*, Hankins admits that “*Religion is a Crutch*” but goes on to insist that before it is a crutch it is the “diagnosis,” “medication,” “scalpel,” and “the surgeon’s hand.” Religion “is the crutch by which one heals / and learns to walk and love all over again.” He adds with a smile, “you say *Crutch* as if it were an easy thing” (42). One might feel that the religion in these lines is religion without much of a difference, that it does not deviate from historical Christianity, even as its images offer a fresh presentation of traditional Christian image (i.e. Christ as physician). It is so that the poems in this volume do follow historical Christianity. But they also remind readers that historical Christianity itself deviates from the Christianity most well known in the United States. Hankins revises the more recent tradition by reviving certain historical roots of the longer tradition. In an interview, he offers that this poem “chronicles” his “evolution away from traditional religious belief toward—what?—a deeper acknowledgment of mystery and uncertainty” (*Poems of Devotion*, 174). One sees such an acknowledgment in the poem as Hankins confesses to the “doubts” and “questions” he has. One sees it also in the answer he finds to those doubts and questions, not a propositional answer but an experiential one. The questions and doubts are not solved but stilled “when they feel the wind of Your passing” (*Weak Devotions*, 43). If the traditional religious belief that Hankins describes being raised in emphasized certainty, the place he has come to emphasizes uncertainty, for humans and for God.

He writes, “Our holiest act is to enter mystery, / just as God’s holiest act was to enter / into mortal flesh, into death— / the only mystery available to Him” (45).

Mary Oliver also journeys into the faith of her childhood culture by way of mystery. But she does this only after a long journey, also by way of mystery, outside of that tradition. For almost fifty years, Mary Oliver has reflected on the earth in way that is spiritual but apart from any religious tradition. In her early poem “The Fawn,” she specifically chooses “the woods” over “the church”: “Sunday morning and mellow as precious metal / the church bells rang, but I went / to the woods instead” (*Moons*, 13). More recently, with her book *Thirst*, Oliver makes her way to church, following the death of her beloved partner of forty years. Though she still insists as always that “My work is loving the world,” she now undertakes that work with the help of traditional religious references and imagery (*Thirst*, 1). The book opens with an epigraph from *The Sayings of the Desert Fathers*; moves on to present prayers, churches, altars, candles, and scriptures; and contains many instances of “Christ,” “Lord,” and “God.” In a poem titled “More Beautiful than the Honey Locust Tree Are the Words of the Lord,” Oliver tells the reader, “The Lord forgives many things, / so I have heard” (31). A few pages later, she declares that she wants “Christ to be as close as the cross I wear” (33). She sees no conflict between the earth and Christianity, writing, quite the opposite, that “He or she, who loves God, will look most deeply into His works” (7). One does not give up physicality for spirituality. In “Six Recognitions of the Lord,” she affirms both the material world and the “other world”: “we maintain our . . . physicality, even as we begin to / apprehend the other world” (27). Oliver finds the spiritual journey that is also a religious journey to be sustaining. In the same poem, she writes of this journey:

Slowly we  
make our appreciative response.

Slowly appreciation swells to  
astonishment. And we enter the dialogue  
Of our lives that is beyond all under-  
standing or conclusion. It is mystery.  
It is the love of God. It is obedience. (27)

The word “obedience” here could suggest a sort of rigid, dogmatic faith. But the obedience that Oliver writes about is not the obedience of the religious follower to a God in heaven issuing orders. It is obedience that can only be understood in terms of “dialogue,” “mystery” and “love,” which is certainly obedience of a very different kind than what the most common connotation of the word suggest. It is obedience to the astonishing totality of everything, the earth and the other world which can be found both within and, somehow, beyond the earth. While Oliver has always sought to engage these dynamics, her recent religious journey brings her to a place where she uses traditional religious language to do so.

Like Oliver, Christian Wiman, editor of *Poetry* magazine from 2003 to 2013, turned away from religion for a time but eventually made his way back. He grew up “in a culture and family so saturated with religion that it never occurred to me there was any alternative until I left.” When he went to college, religion “all just evaporated in the blast of modernism and secularism” (“Between,” 48). More accurately, he clarifies, “religious feeling went underground in me for a couple of decades,” even if it occasionally surfaced in poems from time to time. Two things woke him back up to the religious. He fell in love and was diagnosed with cancer. These experiences led him to the place where he could “assent to the faith that had long been latent within me.” It became clear “*that* I believed” but not “*what* I believed.” He also came to realize that the “*what*” was less important than the “*how*.” While his writing remains “full of anguish and even unbelief,” he describes it as also more open to “joy” and “hope.” He now sees “Abundance and destitution” both as “aspects of our experience of God.” In his writing, as he began wrestling with this new place he found himself in, he discovered that he was far from



alone. There are many people “starved for new ways of feeling and articulating their experiences of God.” He explains, “I want the kind of revelation that precedes all doctrine and dogma, is the *reason* for all doctrine and dogma.” He asks, “How do you answer that burn of being that drives you both deeper into, and utterly out of, yourself? What might it mean for your life—and for your death—to acknowledge the insistent, persistent call of God?” Such a question lies at the heart of Wiman’s book *My Bright Abyss: Meditation of a Modern Believer*, in which he both tells about his journey into, back into, or deeper into the faith of his youth and in which he wrestles with what that can mean for him and how he might have a faith that is both spiritually sustaining and intellectually sustainable. In a characteristically postsecular way, he suggests, “Sometimes God calls a person to unbelief in order that faith may take new forms” (61). He goes on to define his Christian faith in a new way: “To have faith is to acknowledge the absolute materiality of existence while acknowledging at the same time the compulsion toward transfiguring order that seems not outside of things but within them, and within you” (77).

Though primarily prose, the book begins and ends with (and contains at moments throughout) Wiman’s poetry. The first chapter starts with these four lines, which cut off after the colon, unfinished:

My God my bright abyss  
into which all my longing will not go  
once more I come to the edge of all I know  
and believing nothing believe in this:

After presenting these lines, Wiman writes about how he could not manage to continue. He did not know what to put next. He could not say quite *what* he believed. The poem “ends” there. It “fails” there (3). At the very end of the book, Wiman returns to these lines and does finish them, by making one small change, which he does not explain directly but the weight of which is immediately apparent. He changes the colon to a period. With a colon, the final word *this* would

have pointed forward to a statement, yet to be written, of *what* the poet believes. But with the period, the word *this* now points backward to the stanza itself, which becomes a statement *that* he believes and a description of *how* he believes, which is in and through experiences of longing, coming to the edge of an abyss, and not knowing what specifically to believe. Just before changing that punctuation, Wiman describes his understanding of “grace” and “faith,” which he collapses into one in a way that further indicates not what but how he believes. Grace/faith is “the fearful and hopeful state in which my wife and I lay the first night I was home from the hospital after the transplant [part of the cancer treatment], feeling like a holy fever that bright defiance of, not death exactly, and not suffering, but meaningless death and suffering” (178). We can understand that the added period does not indicate an absoluteness of belief so much as a letting go of the need to specify what he believes beyond what he has already evoked in these lines. He believes in that which—though he calls it God according to the language of his religious tradition—he cannot know. He believes in that which lies beyond “the edge of all I know,” the sacred, bright abyss.

## **Conclusion**

The poets and poems considered above bring Part I of this study to a close by showing something of the background and scope of contemporary postsecular poetry in the United States. A great number of serious, recognized poets writing today engage with that which could be considered religious or spiritual. What connect these poets who otherwise come from disparate backgrounds and write in varying styles are both their concern for the luminous and possibly numinous and their use and revision of the received forms, ideas, and images traditionally associated with the luminous and possibly numinous. Some of these poets do this work primarily on grounds that are central to both most religious traditions and to secular, spiritual ways of

being and seeing in the world, concerns such as earth and compassion. Others of these poets do this work primarily through a direct engagement with religious tradition by way of exile or pilgrimage. Those poets who engage with religious tradition most overtly are not necessarily more *deeply* postsecular than those whose primary concerns are with religiously-inflected ways of relating to others and to the planet, but not with religious language or images per se. However, those poets and poems that make use of religious images and language are more *prototypically* postsecular according to the definition of postsecular poetry I have proposed, which makes the postsecular dynamics of that work more visible.

In Part II and Part III, we move from breadth to depth, from brief consideration of several dozen poets to extended analyses of the work of two—Li-Young Lee and Scott Cairns—whose writings respectively embody exile and pilgrimage, topoi which including the many forms of coming and going with respect to the religious and which most prototypically reflect the push and pull of the “wrestling with angels” that is postsecular poetry.

## PART II: EXILE—LI-YOUNG LEE

Someone tell the Lord to leave me alone.  
I've had enough of his love  
that feels like burning and flight and running away.

—Li-Young Lee (*City*, 35)

In the contemporary United States, many people leave a religious tradition without making a clean break of it, a distinctively postsecular phenomenon. In contemporary American poetry, Li-Young Lee represents and enacts this messy break more poignantly and in a more sustained manner than any other writer. To adequately understand Lee's poetry and the postsecular topos of exile, we need to consider the following question: *How do the varieties of exile in Lee's poetry—cultural exile, religious exile, and spiritual exile—intersect and add up to a postsecular poetics?* This question takes readers to the heart of Lee's poetry and to the heart of postsecular exile.

In the postsecular topos of exile, poets “wrestle with angels” through leaving a particular religious tradition and continuing to engage with that tradition from the outside. The poetry of Li-Young Lee exemplifies the topos of religious exile through drawing on its parallels with cultural exile and its connection with spiritual exile. In his poetry and interviews, Lee explains and enacts a postsecular poetics and spirituality of and in and after exile, articulating his debt to and his “quarrel with” the religious tradition of his youth and, in particular, of his father, Christianity, and presenting the postsecular spirituality that now guides his writing and his life, a spirituality distinctly outside of and yet distinctly still engaged with that tradition. In some poems, Lee actively wrestles with the figure of his father and with the religious tradition his

father represents. In others, that tradition fades to the background as Lee builds a new “spiritual home” outside of religious tradition but in continued conversation with it.

In Part II of this dissertation, I analyze both the breaking with tradition, marked by a strong continued engagement with it, and the construction of something outside of the tradition, marked by a subtle continued engagement with it. In Chapter 3, “Varieties of Exile,” I argue for the aptness of “religious exile” as a category for understanding the postsecular aspects of Lee’s work, taking into account the tradition of the literature of exile, existing scholarship on Lee’s work, Lee’s interviews, and a range of his poems. In Chapter 4, “Wrestling with Father/God,” I argue that his prose poem memoir, *The Winged Seed*, and other of his poems enact entering into religious exile, breaking away from Christianity while continuing to engage with it. In Chapter 5, “The Intangible in the Tangible,” I argue that “Persimmons,” “The Cleaving,” and “Virtues of a Boring Husband” enact living within religious exile, creating a new spiritual home after Christianity while still continuing to engage with it.

## Chapter Three: Varieties of Exile

### The Literature of Exile

In an early poem, “Visions and Interpretations,” Li-Young Lee uses religious language to testify to how the experience of exile has permanently shaped and shaded his view of the world: “all of my visions and interpretations / depend on what I see, // and between my eyes is always / the rain, the migrant rain” (*Rose*, 69). The way he sees and understands the world is clouded, dampened, by what he has been through. But it is also nourished, watered, by that as well. In a more recent poem, “After the Pyre,” he describes the experiences of exile more specifically, presenting a list of traumatic images: a child fleeing with parents, leaving behind a city “on fire,” slipping past “mobs,” moving “among . . . the numb, the haunted, the maimed, the barely alive,” and, finally, arriving in “a country at war, / with itself and anyone / who looks like you . . .” (*Behind*, 66-67). These details come from his and his family’s firsthand experience of exile: his parents leaving China just before the Cultural Revolution, then escaping Indonesia, where he was born, during Sukarno’s rule, and finally arriving in the United States as refugees in the middle of the Vietnam War. At six years old, he was “an Asian come to a country at war with Asia” (*Winged*, 12). “After the Pyre” testifies to the historical reality of exile, documenting and protesting injustices of the global twentieth century. It also interprets that experience. “It turns out,” writes Lee, that “what keeps you alive” while fleeing into exile eventually “keeps you from living” while in exile. Both of these poems show how exile is double sided and double edged. It takes place externally, with bodies moved from place to place. But it also takes place internally, shaping one’s way of seeing and being in the world. It keeps one physically alive. But it also

keeps one from fully and truly living. Despite or because of these tensions, as these poems demonstrate, the experience of exile may lead to new artistic—even spiritual—possibilities.

In writing these and many other poems, Li-Young Lee contributes to the long and diverse tradition of exile literature, an ancient mode of writing that has grown exponentially in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. In *The Oxford Book of Exile*, John Simpson documents something of the depth and breadth of the literature of exile through the range and variety of texts he presents. He begins with the exile of Adam and Eve from the Garden of Eden, with selections from both Genesis and Milton's rendition thereof in *Paradise Lost*. He then presents the passage in the *Aeneid* where Aeneas, urged by the ghost of his wife, leaves fallen Troy, carrying his father and leading a great number of other refugees into "long exile" (1, 3, 5) and then the passage in Josephus' history of *The Jewish Wars* that describes the fall of Jerusalem in 70 CE, the beginning of Jewish diaspora. Historically, the texts stretch from antiquity to the twentieth century; geographically, from East to West and North to South. Formally, they range from poetry and fiction to memoir, journalism, and speech. Eventually, Simpson includes the exiles of Ovid from Rome, Muhammad from Mecca, Puritans from England, Native Americans from tribal lands, slaves from Africa, Tibetans from Tibet, dissidents from the Soviet Union, Jews from Nazi Germany, Palestinians from their homes, and Latin Americans from regions torn by war. The writings Simpson covers are by and about diverse groups of people whose exiles vary drastically: those driven from their homes for reasons of politics, religion, economics, or war, those fallen from power, those seeking escape from boredom, those who form communities while in exile, those facing exile within their own countries and even in their own minds, those

relieved by the experience of exile and those distraught by it, those whose exile ends in death, and those who eventually arrive home.<sup>9</sup>

Claudio Guillén proposes that the poetry of exile performs two distinct, but often related, tasks. Sometimes the poetry of exile operates solely or primarily in “the direct expression of the sorrow” of exile, while other times the poetry of exile “learns from it” (272). Most of the time, he suggests, the literature of exile moves from the one function to the other (278). Both tasks make sense. Exile writers certainly count, protest, and mourn injustices and losses suffered. But, when they can, they also tend to make something new or renewed out of their experiences, writing words of beauty and healing. In “Reflections on Exile,” Edward Said affirms the same two movements. He is adamant that we not romanticize exile. He feels that treatments of exile in literature (and in religion) too often “obscure” the historical fact that exile “has torn millions of people from the nourishment of tradition, family and geography” (174). He even asserts that anything accomplished in exile is “permanently undermined by the loss of something left behind for ever” (173). Still, he concedes, “there are things to be learned” in exile (184). Indeed, the experience of exile can allow people to see the world from a new perspective. “The exile knows,” Said writes, “that . . . homes are always provisional. Borders and barriers, which enclose us within the safety of familiar territory, can also become prisons, and are often defended beyond

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<sup>9</sup>The topos of exile has been a constant and increasing focus within the study of literature, particularly the study of postcolonial and multicultural literature in the United States. Recent work on exile and literature deals with the ubiquity and resulting variety of the theme and experience of exile in literature across culture and history (e.g. Simpson; Ingleheart; Bevan; Rosenfeld; Lagos-Pope; Gutthy; Robert Edwards; Bolaño; Glad), the particular role that exile plays in twentieth century literature (e.g. Said; Bevan; Englund and Olsson; Damgaard; Lagos-Pope; Glad), the particular role that exile plays in Jewish literature (e.g. Rosenfeld; Berg), and the distinction and relationship between inner and outer experiences of exile (e.g. Simpson; Lagos-Pope; Gutthy; Boldor; Robert Edwards). Of particular interest has been the way in which the experience of exile can, to put it crudely, show up in writing as a blessing and curse, causing suffering but also leading to new ways of thinking (e.g. Said; Bevan; Englund and Olsson; Rosenfeld; Guillén; Robert Edwards; Glad).



reason or necessity. Exiles cross borders, break barriers of thought and experience” (185). For Said, exile also contains connotations of “solitude and spirituality” (181). To elaborate on these connotations, he quotes at length the twelfth-century monk Hugo of St. Victor on the blessedness of having no attachments. Hugo writes, “he is perfect to whom the entire world is as a foreign land.” Said responds that such a stance “makes possible originality of vision” (186). One becomes free “not by rejecting” but “by *working through* attachments” (185). Loss has its meaning only in the context of “love” (185). To lose that which one does not love means little, if anything. But to let go of that which one loves, to relinquish “attachment”—which indicates a sort of clutching and clinging in Hugo’s spiritual tradition—in and through love and in order to move to still greater love, that means quite a bit.

### **Exile and Spirituality**

Most literary scholars who have written about Li-Young Lee’s poetry have taken up the theme of exile and the attendant themes of ethnicity, immigration, assimilation, cultural memory, racism, language, and biculturalism. Of particular interest has been the question of how Lee negotiates between his Chinese and American identities, a complicated situation created by Lee’s experience as an exile. Tim Engles reads one of Lee’s most well-known poems, “Persimmons,” as a successful effort to “recover specific values from his fading heritage,” which is to say, from his Chinese heritage fading as a result of his assimilation into American culture (191). In contrast, Steven G. Yao argues that the same poem reaches “only an incomplete synthesis” of Chinese and American culture (“Precision,” 7). At most, Yao insists, it represents “a grafting of some Chinese elements into a predominantly American poem” (20). More generously, Xiaojing Zhou proposes that Lee’s “experience as a refugee and immigrant” and his immersion in Western culture shape his poetry as much as “his Chinese ethnicity” does (“Inheritance,” 115, 113).

Instead of interpreting the poems ethnocentrically—as if they do or mean to present an essentialist identity—readers should look for how they “enact and embody the processes of poetic innovation and identity invention beyond the boundaries of any single cultural heritage or ethnic identity” (131). Likewise, Timothy Yu sees “identity” in Lee’s work as “multifaceted” and “fluid” (440-42).<sup>10</sup>

This common focus on ethnicity and exile accounts for two important aspects of Lee’s poetry but leaves out a third that figures just as prominently in Lee’s poetry and that Lee calls “absolutely critical” for him, namely, the religious or spiritual aspect (*Alabaster*, 46). Though the religious elements are oddly overlooked by quite a few readers, Wenying Xu and Marc Malandra each connect spirituality with exile in Lee’s poetry, noting, in particular, the influence of the Christian tradition.<sup>11</sup> Xu specifically notes the Christian understanding of exile at work in Lee’s poetry. For Lee, she writes, exile “is not a uniquely ethnic condition; rather it is a human condition, a view derived from Genesis in which human history begins in dual exile from the Garden of Eden and the presence of God” (*Eating*, 110). Malandra similarly notes an “attention to Christian spirituality” in Lee’s writing that can be seen through “Christian imagery and

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<sup>10</sup>Other work on how Lee negotiates identity, ethnicity, and exile and on the related question of his relation to the American literary tradition includes Basford, Jenkins, Malandra (“Exile”), Partridge (“Politics”; *Chinatown*), Slowik, and Zhou (*Alterity*). On the same question, Lee himself has said, “I’ve had people tell me, ‘These poems are too Chinese.’ And I’ve had other people say, ‘These poems aren’t Chinese enough’” (“Poetry Month”). One wonders whether some writers hang too close or even cross over the line between describing identity and prescribing it—as if one *could* be “too” or “not enough” Chinese or American.

<sup>11</sup>Like Xu, I find it odd that few scholars have paid attention to the spiritual (she uses the terms metaphysical, transcendental, and mystical) elements of Lee’s work that Lee himself considers primary (*Eating*, 108-11). But a few scholars have attended to these dynamics. In addition to the Xu and Malandra discussed above, King-Kok Cheung notes that “Christian faith and universal love” motivate the art and compassion of Lee’s father in *The Winged Seed* (273), Walter A. Hesford explicates the way that Lee engages his Christian “religious inheritance” as he rewrites the biblical *Song of Songs* in *The City in Which I Love You* (42), and Jacqueline Kolosov argues that “displacement” is “as much spiritual as physical” for Lee (55). Also, Lee himself considers all of his poetry as religious or spiritual (Personal interview).

associations” and “biblical” references (“Sacred,” 21). Both writers understand Lee reworking elements of, rather than adhering to, the Christian tradition. However, they each see Lee moving in apparently opposite directions. Xu argues that Lee *works through* his Chinese ethnicity to arrive at a transcendent position (much in the sense that Said proposes all attachments to home might be worked through) (125). While “his ethnic self and the transcendental self are not mutually exclusive,” Xu suggests that Lee seeks to fill up with but then to “empty out ethnicity” (*Eating*, 95, 119). More specifically, when Lee faces rejection and discrimination in American culture, he receives “love and tenderness” from his Chinese parents. That love and tenderness and the family that provides them represent his connection with his Chinese ethnicity, which serves, in turn, not as a destination but as a way to “bring him closer to God or the universe mind” (117). In contrast, Malandra sees Lee moving not through ethnicity/family to the spiritual but rather through the spiritual to family. Malandra proposes that in the poem “My Father’s House,” Lee depicts “the company of loved ones” as like “the sacred bonds between Christ and his followers.” This “metaphorically brings the Christological reference *down into* Lee’s earthly home” and “rais[es] the connections between siblings to sacred level” (“Sacred,” 23, emphasis added).

We might say that Xu sees Lee using this world—his family, his culture, his ethnicity, even materiality itself—to get to the otherworldly—universality, transcendence, mysticism—while Malandra sees Lee using the otherworldly—the sacred, the spiritual—to get to this world—his family, his past. I propose that both readings reveal part of the bigger picture. To understand the role of the religious and the spiritual in Lee’s poetry—that is, to understand Lee’s poetry—one must understand both transcendence and immanence. Lee understands the material world to be so deeply embedded in the spiritual world and the spiritual world to be so deeply

embedded in the material world that making distinctions between spiritual and material only make sense in a manner of speaking, as shorthand for talking about what we do not adequately understand and cannot adequately articulate. The spiritual vision that Lee presents is one of immanent transcendence or transcendent immanence—the same paradox present in the Christian tradition in the “eucharistic elements” that Malandra and Xu both identify in his poetry (Malandra, “Sacred,” 22; Xu, *Eating*, 105).

Lee has spoken often about how central religion and spirituality are to his poetry and to his life. Some writers connect Lee’s work primarily to the transcendentalism of the American literary tradition (e.g. Partridge), and, indeed, Lee does acknowledge an important relationship and debt to Emerson (“The Cleaving,” 2787-88). But the two traditions in which he is most firmly anchored are Christianity and Taoism, the former more overt in his writing, the later more implicit. He received both from his father, who appears as a central figure in his writing. His father “raised us doing Taoist meditation and Taoist practices.” His brother, Li-Lin Lee, described the religion of their upbringing as “Christianity through Taoism” (Li-Young Lee, *Alabaster*, 59). To this day, poetry, prayer, meditation remain daily practices for him (Personal interview). He also recalls his father teaching him and his siblings English “by reading the King James Bible to us.” As a result, he notes, “The consciousness of the Bible stays with me.” When he sits to write, he says that he asks, like the kings of the Hebrew Bible asked the prophets, “Is there a word from the Lord?” (*Alabaster*, 149). He also often invokes “the ancients” frequently, the classical spiritual masters from East and West, often broadly, in reference to the collective wisdom that has been passed down. When he names writers who are important to him, Rainer Maria Rilke, Emily Dickinson, Walt Whitman, Meister Eckhart, Li Po, and Tu Fu come up. He

also stresses the importance of the Bible for him, particularly Exodus, Song of Songs, and the sayings of Jesus.

Calling poetry “a yoga,” Lee glosses the Sanskrit *yoga* and the Latin *religio* as both meaning “yoked, bondedness.” For him, poetry is religious—it is a yoga—because “reminds us of our original condition”: “Our embeddedness in God.” For Lee everything exists in “concentric circles of embeddedness.” These circles descend “from the mind of God to the cosmos to the psyche to the poem.” The “knowledge” and “practice” of the “condition of our deep embeddedness in a cosmic context” instills “fearlessness, trust, love, openness, generosity, a more comprehensive, fuller human being.” He further elaborates: “Everything is packed or saturated with God. . . . The saturation of meaning and being in a poem . . . mirrors the saturation of meaning and being in the cosmos and the world around us. And I can only explain that kind of saturation of being and presence and meaning in everything from my body from everything, everything, as a condition of embeddedness in God.” He describes his love for God as “an objectless love,” “not a love for a being” but “an intelligence,” which “includes the world” but also “goes beyond the world,” which is “why I say ‘God’” (Personal interview). But he also calls himself “a materialist,” explaining that he uses “words like soul, spirit, and God as conveniences.” But adds, “I just don’t think material is as material as we think. It’s more ineffable . . .” (“Distinguished”).

These religious and spiritual commitments connect with exile in several ways. One is that experience as an exile and as an immigrant give Lee increased access and exposure to multiple religious and cultural traditions, Taoism, Christianity, Transcendentalism, and the work of the poets and writers noted above. Another way is that exile itself often takes on spiritual connotations within the larger literature of exile (as we can see in the way that the “original”

exile from Eden serves as the archetype, the way that Aeneas goes into exile at the word of a ghost, the way that Said turns to a twelfth-century monk to talk about exile, and so on). In this sense, exile is as inherently spiritual as, say, childbirth or death. The connection that Lee himself stresses, though, goes deeper. Asked about his and his family's experience as refugees, Lee responds, "In a way, I feel as if our experience may be no more than an outward manifestation of a homelessness that people in general feel. It seems to me that anybody who thinks about our position in the universe cannot help but feel a little disconnected and homeless, so I don't think we're special. We refugees might simply express outwardly what all people feel inwardly" (*Alabaster*, 31-32). Elsewhere, he takes this one step farther: "I'm not alienated by my race. I'm alienated by transcendence . . . walking through the world like a weirdo, seeing God in everything" ("Distinguished").

Such comments might lead some readers to feel that Lee wants to sideline or dismiss or, to phrase it more positively, transcend his ethnicity and cultural background altogether, to leave these historical aspects behind for a timeless reality. Xu feels this way, for instance. She observes that "his poetics derives largely from his ontological condition as an exile," which "has proved to be immensely productive of emotional intensity and imagination." But she suggests that the relationship is one of negation, not integration, "driven by the desire to transcend time and space by appealing to the metaphysical *at the exclusion of* the cultural and material" (*Eating*, 94, emphasis added). While such an assessment makes a certain amount of sense in light of the immediate comments of Lee's at hand, which downplay literal exile and ethnicity in favor of a spiritual understanding, it doesn't adequately account for the degree to which materiality, ethnicity, and literal exile appear in Lee's poetry. It is better to account for this "downplaying" in context of Lee's comments on how deeply and inseparably *embedded* this world is in the

spiritual world. The universalizing appeal to the spirit does not erase his Chineseness or his Americanness. Rather, it relativizes them. One exists and only exists, simultaneously, in the utter universality of spirit and in the utter particularity of these materially, historically, ethnically, and otherwise situated bodies. Lee does not leave everything behind for God. Instead, Lee finds God *in* everything. Thus we can see how, for Lee, both cultural and spiritual exile are central concerns, with the former being a specific manifestation of the latter.

### **Religious Exile**

Li-Young Lee writes, “I think a deep sense of order permeates all phenomena. Call this order God, or Tao, or the vast hand of Buddha, or whatever your Jewish mother or Chinese father called it. I believe poetry is grounded in this order” (“Silence,” 126). The eclectic, syncretic, and universalizing religious sampling on display in this statement and elsewhere in his work would be enough to qualify Lee as a postsecular poet. But what makes the postsecular in Lee’s work particularly compelling is the dynamic of *religious exile*. However else one might describe Lee’s religious sensibility, it is one that he arrived at by leaving behind his previous religious tradition. To understand Lee’s poetry, one needs to grasp the intersecting roles of cultural exile, spiritual exile, and religious exile.

I am distinguishing spiritual exile from religious exile by denoting the spiritual as that which relates to what one considers the sacred or divine realities of the universe and the religious as that which relates to specific, historical religious traditions. While the two overlap to the degree that religious traditions do seek to encounter and understand the sacred or divine, one may be spiritual but not religious, religious but not spiritual, both spiritual and religious, or neither religious nor spiritual. The condition of spiritual exile, then, is the condition of being separated from the sacred or divine, “homeless” in an existential sense, cut off from full

connection with God, the earth, our true selves, our neighbors, authentic community, etc. This is the probably-universal condition of humanity invoked by the story of the exile from Eden. I define religious exile as the condition of being separated from a religious tradition to which one had been connected in a formative way while experiencing a continued longing for, sorrow about, engagement with, or quarrel with that tradition. Religious exile is taxonomically different from spiritual exile. But it can be related or not related to spiritual exile in all the ways that the religious can be related or not related to the spiritual, that is, integrally, phenomenologically, metaphorically, tangentially, not at all, etc. Leaving a religious tradition might occasion an inner crisis. Inversely, progress in an inner journey might lead one to leave a religious tradition. Religious exile does not include everyone who leaves a tradition. Many who leave traditions do so without looking back. Those who drift away, grow apart from (or grow out of) a tradition, those who find a new tradition, and those who give up on religion altogether while feeling no particular connection to or engagement with the tradition they have left—no lingering sorrow, no strong and staying sense of debt or gratitude, no ongoing quarrel—would more accurately be described as religious expatriates than religious exiles. It is one thing to apostatize. It is another to do so as a way of being faithful to aspects at the heart of the tradition one is leaving.

Though religious exile has not been adequately articulated or analyzed, it appears to be a significant and, in recent decades, increasingly common phenomenon in United States culture—one of the marks of a postsecular society. The Pew Research Center recently reported that nearly twenty percent of adults in the United States belong to no religious tradition, describing themselves as atheists, agnostics, or “nothing in particular” (2.4%, 3.3%, and 13.9% respectively) (*Nones*, 13). What makes this particularly interesting is that only eight percent grew up in households that were already not religiously affiliated, which means that millions of people



in the United States have personally left a religious tradition (16). The report also points out that many of these people remain “religious or spiritual in some way,” whether by believing in God, feeling deeply connected with nature, or praying regularly. Many of them call themselves “‘spiritual’ but not ‘religious’” (9-10). Out of so many people who have left a religious tradition but still feel or act religious or spiritual or both in some way, there are certainly some—perhaps a great many people—who would fit under the rubric of religious exile, making consideration of treatments of religious exile in literature all the more relevant.

The possible reasons for religious exile are many, particularly from traditions that are more closed to heterodoxy or to divergent beliefs and ways of life. It is not uncommon for people who believe in evolution or hold too liberal political views to be pushed out of certain conservative religious groups or to be made so uncomfortable that they have little choice but to leave, even though they may otherwise prefer to remain. Stories also abound of people who face exclusion not on the basis of differing beliefs but on the basis of differing bodies (Morris). The Pew Research Center reports that though twenty percent of LGBT adults in the United States say that “religion is very important in their lives,” almost thirty percent say that “they personally have ‘been made to feel unwelcome at a place of worship or religious organization’” (*LGBT*, 91). While most instances of religious exile probably happen quietly and privately, several recent examples of religious exile have been public and dramatic. In an instance of “self-imposed” religious exile, former president Jimmy Carter publicly announced that he was severing ties with the Southern Baptist denomination, to which he belonged for decades, not because he did not want to belong anymore but because of the church’s discrimination against women. Still more dramatically, the writer Anne Rice parted ways with Christianity altogether, making it very clear that her motivation was to be faithful to Christ. She announced: “In the name of Christ, I quit

Christianity and being Christian. Amen.” She could no longer abide by certain actions and doctrines, particularly those that discriminated against women and LGBT persons. Other public instances of religious exile have been less than voluntary. The Mormon church recently and quite publicly excommunicated Kate Kelly for her activism for equal rights for women within the church. In her own words, Kelly was “forcibly evicted from [her] forever family” (Ravitz).

Edward Said proposes a broad understanding of exile: “anyone prevented from returning home is an exile.” But he also suggests that we should make “distinctions” between distinct experiences of and reasons for exile, between, say, “refugees, expatriates, and émigrés” (181). The experience of religious exile is admittedly distinct from the experience of fleeing one country and ending up in another. Obviously, the literal exile generally has more serious material consequences, including the loss of property, danger to health and body, complete and utter displacement from one’s physical place in the world. Nonetheless, important interior and material parallels exist between literal or cultural exile and religious exile, which make using the term “exile” fitting. In both sorts of exile, former places, persons, objects, and meanings are left behind. Absences replace presences. Like exile proper, religious exile has inner and out dynamics, with the inner dynamics being the defining ones (i.e. one can leave a country without experiencing exile and one can experience exile without leaving a country). The inner turmoil that may attend both kinds of exile has a lot in common, the sudden questioning of and need to redefine one’s identity, a sense of loss or sorrow, a sense of not knowing one’s place in the world, and so on. Like exile proper, religious exile may be chosen or forced upon one, or somewhere in between (i.e. a “forced choice” because of circumstances beyond one’s control). Both sorts of exile have material implications as well. One who leaves a religious tradition—much like one who leaves a country—no longer attends the same place of worship, nor has the

same relationships with the same people, nor uses the same symbols, nor speaks the same language, and so forth. In some cases, religious exiles are judged, harassed, or ostracized. Upon leaving some religious traditions, one's own family may no longer speak to one. Finally, like exile from a country, exile from a religion may also, paradoxically, lead to creativity, productivity, a new perspective, a new identity, new relationships, new meanings, and growth.

### **Religious Exile as Wrestling with Angels**

Religious exile is an exit from and a mode of being outside of a religious tradition with which one continues to wrestle. It is that wrestling that makes religious exile distinctively postsecular. And it the sustained, complex, and beautiful way that Lee practices that wrestling that makes his writing an important landmark in postsecular contemporary American poetry. While it is important to distinguish between religious exile and spiritual exile conceptually, it is much harder to pull them apart in practice. When poets wrestle with a specific, historical, religious tradition, it turns out more often than not that they do so in part to come to terms with those cultural elements in and of themselves and in part to come to terms with that which (indeed, That Which) the elements simultaneously reveal and conceal. Thus the same metaphors, the same images, the same allusions, the same phrases may take on religious and spiritual exile simultaneously. This is certainly the case in Lee's poetry. Lee wrestles first and foremost with the spiritual, trying to come to terms with, to understand and relate to, that which is sacred and divine in the universe. But that spiritual struggle and quest comes deeply entwined in a religious struggle as well, which includes his engagements with the world's poets and religious traditions generally and with the Christianity of his father specifically, often in the form of struggling with the figure of his father as a representative of that religious tradition and even as a stand in for God as understood by that religious tradition. So while his aims are not specifically Christian, he

engages continually with language and images from the Christian tradition. The functioning of religious exile in the poetry of Li-Young Lee offers an important and quintessential instance of a postsecular “wrestling with angels.” The evocation and negation represent a push and pull, an affirmation and antithesis. The traces remain, not just as traces but alive and active. And Lee engages them as such. There is not angst about religion, as one might expect under such conditions. But there is continued earnest struggle.

Walter Hesford uncovers some of this wrestling with respect to *The City in Which I Love You*. Hesford proposes that Lee’s sustained use of the biblical Song of Songs amounts to rewriting the text, creating another “rendition” of it. Hesford presents this rewriting not as a “critique” but as a “resinging.” Lee’s rendition “restores” to the text “its erotic, soulful, tribal qualities,” which have historically been “often lost or ignored” by those Christian readers who interpret its material elements spiritually, seeing the celebration of sexual love in the text strictly as an allegory for God’s love (56, 38). In that way, Lee both pushes and pulls on Christian tradition, drawing sustenance from a text central to the tradition while revising its interpretation of that text. For Hesford, though, the balance leans far more toward push than toward pull. In one poem, he sees Lee writing “a naturalistic, ironic version of the gospel” (47). In another poem, he sees him “co-opt the sacred imagery (‘mystery’) and ritual (‘morning prayer’) of his absent father's religion to express his profane devotion to his love’s body” (48). I am afraid that phrases “co-opt” and “ironic version” might suggest a more superficial engagement with the Christian tradition than are justified, more robbery or mocking than wrestling. However that may be, Hesford demonstrates something of how Lee wrestles with the Christian tradition in his poetry writing.

Lee himself also has much to say about this element of wrestling in his work. In an early interview with Bill Moyers, Li-Young Lee explains his relationship with poetry, religion, and spirituality in terms of wrestling, drawing specifically on the story of Jacob wrestling the angel. He states that he “read[s] the story of Jacob and the Angel as a good metaphor for poetry, that somehow it’s the struggle between the longing for heaven and the longing to stay on earth” (*Alabaster*, 39). Years later, he adds that the wrestling might also be “dancing,” “depending on the distance.” The “Western version” of poetry “has a lot of violence,” whereas the Eastern version, as appears in Taoism, has a lot more to do with yielding, surrendering. It is “yin beckoning to yang.” But whether dancing or wrestling, the process involves push and pull, give and take, affirmation and antithesis. Who does the poet meet in the ring? Himself? His own competing desires? His daemon? God? As a metaphor for poetry and for spirituality, the referent varies for Lee. But it remains for him, as in the text of that story, some manifestation of the unknown, whether that unknown merely be not known or the Unknown (“Poetry Month”).

Though Lee often finds himself wrestling with religion qua religion, time and again he shows how entwined—or entangled—the religious and the spiritual are for him. In the same interview with Moyers, immediately after claiming the story of Jacob as a metaphor for poetry and for spirituality, he turns to religion, to the Bible and the Christian understanding of God. “I discover that there’s a great longing in me to believe,” he says. “I wouldn’t say I believe, but I want to believe. I want badly to believe in a God, in a palpable God. I don’t sense a palpable God, but as I’m reading the Bible, *that’s* what I want” (*Alabaster*, 39). Clearly, Lee puts himself outside of belief, that is, outside of believing in “a palpable God” as described in the Bible. But he also, just as clearly, puts himself in relation to that text and that understanding of God through desire and even through doubt. “In a way,” he offers, “I guess I’m affirming God by my doubt”

(*Alabaster*, 40). Doubt is a greater degree of connection than disinterest or dismissal, as doubt suggests a certain proximity to belief. Lee articulates the religious and spiritual wrestling he undertakes no more succinctly and poignantly than in recalling the faith and the suffering of his own father. He recalls that his father “gave his whole life to this *God*,”—the God of Christian understanding—“and the God was one who chewed us up and spit us back out and asked us to love him.” Thus, in his poetry, Lee has “a quarrel with the demands of that God, and somehow a participation” (*Alabaster*, 45). On one hand, he has a “quarrel with that God.” On the other hand, that quarrel is simultaneously “somehow a participation.” These two phrases capture the way that religious exile enacts a wrestling with religious tradition in Lee’s poetry.

At one point, Lee suggests, “The purpose of art is to realize the authentic body, which is not this body. The East calls it Buddha mind; the West calls it Christ mind. That’s too small. It’s universe mind” (*Alabaster*, 98). In other words, that which is real and sacred cannot be located, named, and addressed. Thus, he writes, “my definition of what is God is very wide” (“Silence,” 130) and says, still more radically, “I have no idea what I mean by that word, G-O-D” (“Distinguished”). But, elsewhere, he concedes, “I have to locate that sacredness. I guess at some point I just gave up and began addressing the God I grew up with” (*Alabaster*, 46). Traditions give us ways of talking about things. Religious traditions give us ways of talking about spiritual things. Lee finds the Christian religious tradition spiritually and poetically enabling in its best aspects and disabling in its worst. For him, true religion is religion that has poetry at its core. It is active and alive. But true religion is not always or even usually the kind available through religious traditions. Over time, traditions may cease being active and alive.

Lee describes two opposing potentialities for religion. Religion can foster poetry and, thus, spirituality or it can fossilize it. In regards fostering potential, Lee recalls how “[g]rowing

up in church made for a rich symbolic life.” For this, he credits “the loaves and fishes, all the stories of the Bible, and communion” and “[t]he church itself . . . especially when it was empty” (“Silence,” 127). After reading the Bible, he explains, “I felt the injunction that each of us is supposed to write a current testament, a gospel. The injunction isn’t just to study the Old and New Testaments; you’ve got to write your own. . . . I wanted to write a sacred text” (*Alabaster*, 107). At its best, religion is poetic, mysterious, freeing, and inspiring. It leads the poet to make “for himself or herself fresh religious images” (“Silence,” 127). But, in regards to the fossilizing potential, Lee notes that he does not “attend church now because it’s not pregnant for me anymore.” He now “see[s] formal religion as taking calcified poetic images and worshipping them for two thousand years” (“Silence,” 127). He faults the Christian church for having “no poetry” and “no mystery” anymore: “It’s all dogma and law. And without mystery there’s no poetry; without poetry there’s no religion. Religion now is fossilized poetry . . .” (*Alabaster*, 80). To drive home the difference between religion as it has become and as it can be, Lee offers as a metaphor lava flowing “hot, red” from the mouth of a volcano and then sliding into the ocean which cools and hardens it: “I’m looking at that and thinking, Well, that lava thing, that’s art. When the lava hardens into these patterns, that’s religion. They’re worshipping patterns that were once living. When you look at it, it’s a record of something that was living. Art, for me, is the practice of that living—the mouth itself, what’s really coming out” (*Alabaster*, 81). For Lee, “Poetry provides a very deep, immediate service, like a church service. It is proof of contact with God, proof that contact with God is possible, and not through a middleman” (“Silence,” 127). It is because religion sometimes offers that service and other times impedes it that Lee continues to wrestle not only with God but with the traditions that have given ultimate reality that name.

Of course, Christianity is not the only tradition Lee wrestles with, even if it is the most explicit. He engages broadly with the world's religious and spiritual resources. Asked about whether there was for him a conflict between religious traditions, he explained that he does see a "tension" between the interiority of Eastern religion and the exteriority Western religion. He offers that "both seem to speak truths": "I do experience a huge, supreme intelligence working out there at the same time I experience it in here." But "trying to see both" "sometimes wipes me out." He "experience[s] deep bewilderment" when he cannot tell whether he is "projecting from the inside out or the outside in." But, he concludes, "That whole wrestling is what it's about for me. It's not about bliss or peace, but resolving tension" ("An Interview").

### **Postsecular Push and Pull**

The elements of religious exile and postsecular wrestling with religious tradition can be found throughout all of Li-Young Lee's writing. In the first poem of the first book Lee published, *Rose*, he lays a foundation for the sort of postsecular wrestling with religion and the sort of religious exile that he undertakes in many poems thereafter. The poem first invokes religious experience, religious wisdom, and religious language, then renounces any knowledge of those things, then embraces them again but in a qualified manner. Like most of the books in the New Testament, this poem is an "Epistle," its title tells us. But it is an epistle of a more tentative sort. Lee begins, "Of wisdom, splendid columns of light / waking sweet foreheads, / I know nothing // but what I've glimpsed in my most hopeful of daydreams" (*Rose*, 13). First, Lee invokes "wisdom" and "columns of light," clear signifiers of religious experience, framed positively as "sweet" and associated with awakening. Then, he plainly says that he knows nothing about these. Then, after the pause of not only a line break but a stanza break as well, he qualifies that disclaimer, admitting that he has, at least, some small experience, glimpses in



daydreams. In the following lines, he repeats the pattern, writing, “Of a world without end, / amen, // I know nothing, / but what I sang of once with others, / all of us standing in the vaulted room.” Here, Lee quotes from an ancient Christian hymn. But the placement of the stanza break is shifted slightly, in such a way as to make the initial affirmation of what that hymn speaks to stand a moment longer before being disavowed and the disavowing a moment shorter before being qualified. After these two sets of affirming, disavowing, and qualifying statements, Lee goes on to make another claim. If he knows but does not know but sort of knows the religious wisdom of the Christian tradition, he knows more fully and surely another kind of wisdom, gained from direct experience. “But there is wisdom,” he writes, “in the hour in which a boy / sits in his room listening / to the sound of weeping / coming from some other room / of his father’s house.” This is the wisdom, a spiritual sort born from the experience and observation and reflection of suffering, in the context of but not the direct result of religion, that will comprise his spiritual writing. He adds, in concluding the poem, that this wisdom is neither “heavenly” nor “sweet” “but it is what I know, / and so am able to tell” (14). Thus, with this first poem, Lee presents a writing of religious exile, a writing that presents a spiritual vision that exists outside of religious tradition while simultaneously being informed by and articulated in relation to religious tradition.

In later poems in *Rose*, the religious themes continue, sometimes implicitly and other times explicitly. Lee describes his father’s voice as “a well / of dark water, a prayer” (15) and pine trees “swaying all night like . . . hymns” (26). He includes an indigo flower blossoming “like a saint dying upside down” (31) and an iris praying (32). Even when used in an apparently incidental way, these incidents of religious language are not accidental. They remind readers of the underlying religious and spiritual purpose and struggle that runs through the book.

Lee continues to wrestle with religious language and imagery in his second and third books, *The City in Which I Love You* and *Book of My Nights*. In these books, he begins particularly to talk about God, always present and always absent. In his famous poem, “This Room and Everything in It,” he writes, “The sun on the face / of the wall / is God” (*City*, 50). But then, in another poem, he writes that “of all the rooms in my childhood, / God was the largest / and most empty” (*Book*, 61). In two more poems, he finds himself looking for God. He ends the one asking, “And my God. / What have I done with my God?” (*Book*, 14). In the other, as if in answer, he suggests, “If it isn’t you, God, it must be me” (*Book*, 50). Lee continues the pattern of using religious images and then stepping back from them in another famous poem, “Furious Visions.” In one section of the poem, he springs on readers an astonishing scene. Upon leaving his front door one morning, the poet steps “into an explosion of wings, / thudding and flapping, heavenly blows.” The noise and movement blind him. His religious training tells him what must be happening: “I knew the day / of fierce judgement and rapture / had come” (*City*, 20-21). “So,” the poet recalls, he “stood, terrified, at the beginning / of a new and beloved era” (*City*, 21). But what overtook and overwhelmed him as a supernatural event of eternal significance turns out to be a natural event of daily occurrence: “It was pigeons, only pigeons / I’d startled from the porch rafters.” It was “the dread and hope . . . like lead and wings” that he carries that “let me believe otherwise.” That which was internal had primed him to see that which was eternal even though the latter was not actually there. So he concludes, “True, none of this / has to do with heaven.” The reason it did not have to do with heaven was that “those heavy birds flying away / reminded me / not so much of what’s to come / as of what passes / away,” among which he lists objects and experiences from childhood that he has lost as result of his family’s exile (*City*, 20-21). One reading of this poem, the reading the poem itself suggests,

would see the nonreligious interpretation of events pointedly replacing the religious interpretation of them. He thought God or angels had come upon him. But he was wrong. It was “only” birds. But one would be remiss to miss the religious significance of the poem that remains. It is true that the actuality of the birds qualifies the religious sense of the scene. But just as much, the spiritual vision of that moment in the poem has the effect of imbuing the birds with a spiritual significance that continues to linger. That hope and dread within the poet predisposed him to see things spiritually does not mean that things are not really spiritual. It means that they *are*, at least to the degree that hope and dread are both spiritual. Lee’s claim that “none of this / has to do with heaven” rings only partially true. It has not to do with heaven by-and-by, perhaps, but with the religious and spiritual experiences here-and-now.

In Lee’s most recent book of poems to date, *Behind My Eyes*, the religious wrestling persists. On one hand, Lee continues to back against or push away from traditional religious notions. In one poem, “Self-Help for Fellow Refugees,” he declares, “The kingdom of heaven is good. / But heaven on earth is better” (18). In another poem, he suggests, “Maybe this is a dream God is having / and somebody should wake Him” (20). Such lines overtly indicate a rejection of the Bible and of the Christian understanding of heaven and God. At the same time, they implicitly undermine or at least qualify that rejection. The persistent occupation with God and with religious language, even while negating it, carries traces of the opposite of that negation. Even more significantly, “heaven on earth” is precisely what Jesus teaches his followers to pray for in The Lord’s Prayer: “thy kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven.” Even in offering an antithesis “But,” he slips in an affirmation. There’s no doubt that Lee’s poetry displays an ongoing engagement with the spiritual and the religious, and the spiritual through the religious. In another poem, “the wind / turns and asks, in my father’s voice, / Have you prayed?”

(23). In still another, Lee confesses: “Still talking to God and thinking the snow / falling is the sound of God listening” (26).

## Chapter Four: Wrestling with Father/God

### **Ba andBa**

Describing lifting his elderly, naked father out of the bathtub, Lee writes in *The Winged Seed*, “I’m practically wrestling him” (*Winged*, 158). In the memoir, it is a touching moment, full of pathos. It demonstrates a keen awareness of the frailty of the human body, the bawdiness of the body, so to speak, which is to say the obscene way it breaks down when it decides to break down. And, in the middle of that, it demonstrates human kindness. Such complexity marks Lee’s relationship with his father in all of his writing. The phrase used in this scene speaks beyond the scene. In quite a few poems and in passage after passage of *The Winged Seed*, Lee is indeed “practically wrestling” his father, though over the religious rather than the physical. He mentions in passing that he would sometimes “argue emphatically about this or that aspect of God with my father” (75). Those literal arguments certainly comprise part of the wrestling match between them. But in most rounds, the two go head to head inside Lee’s head or inside his poetry. Indeed, he says, “In a way I am always quarreling with [my father]. He would find my views very heretical . . .” (“An Interview”). Indeed, Lee does not accept Christianity in its own historically established terms. He does not accept Christianity’s version of creation, sin, salvation, the divinity of Jesus, or the Bible as literally true. And yet its language, its stories, its insights still speak to him. So much so that Lee contends less with his actual father than with the *figure* of the father who often stands in for God, so closely in certain passages that it may be difficult to pull them apart. When Lee wrestles with his father, he wrestles with God and particularly with the Father God of Christian understanding.

In talking about the process of writing his memoir, Lee describes the text as a prose poem and explains that his desire was explicitly to write a sacred text (“Distinguished”). Moving back and forth between passages of poetry and passages of narrative, the memoir offers a backdrop for understanding the spiritual and religious qualities of his other writing. But the text should be read as more than background for the poetry. It is poetry in its own right. In several of its most beautiful and painful passages, the text enacts the postsecular wrestling which his upbringing and his attempts in his writing to come to terms with that upbringing entail. While the memoir recalls many aspects of Lee’s childhood, his mother’s childhood, his time in Indonesia, his journey to the United States, and his growing up in the United States as an outsider, the text’s primary focus is Lee’s father and his complicated relationship to his father, a relationship marked simultaneously by fear, awe, admiration and love. In addition to literally being his father, his father becomes a myth or symbol for Lee. In this status, he represents elements important to Lee’s postsecular position. First, his father represents Christianity and the Christian understanding of God. Second, the spirituality of his father was one of constant struggle and suffering. Furthermore, his father is also a central figure of exile. The convergence of these elements, the religion, the spirituality, and the exile, in the towering figure of his father make Lee’s writing about his father particularly important for understanding these elements in Lee’s poetry.

One moment in *The Winged Seed* highlights particularly well the association for Lee between his father and God. During his childhood years in Indonesia, while his father was a political prisoner of Sukarno—already under “suspicion” because he was Chinese, he was accused of being a spy and of “spreading discontent by preaching ideas from the West” (107)—Lee’s mother would gather her children nightly to pray for their father. In keeping with Christian

tradition, to which Lee's father converted while in prison after an experience in which he understood himself to have died and miraculously been brought back to life, they would address God as father. They would pray, "*Dear Ba. Help Ba. We love Ba. Amen.*" Lee observes, "Without our realizing it, the subject of our prayers, Ba, had gradually become the object of our prayers as well, so that we were praying *to* him as well as *for* him" (64). This small moment of childhood confusion, rooted in absence and in linguistic ambiguity, painful in the separated family it represents, illustrates a long-standing tension for Lee with regards to these two "fathers." He calls his own father "The Absent One." His absence became an "immense" presence, as the family's life "revolved around his not being there" (63). Not unlike God, "his absence had begun to feel like a permanence we simply lived with, never doubting it, reliable as gravity, or True North" (63). In just that manner, in his writing, Lee's wrestling with his father always stands in for (or has as a backdrop or an additional possible meaning) Lee's wrestling with God, both God in a universal sense and God as specifically understood within the tradition of Lee's father.

One gets a glimpse into Lee's complicated relationship with his father in a number of his poems. Particularly haunting are the ones that combine tenderness, violence, and God. In one early poem, Lee writes, "God was lonely. So he made me. / My father loved me. So he spanked me. / It hurt him to do so. He did it daily" (*Rose*, 66). In "The Gift," one of Lee's most stunning early poems, he recalls his father gently removing a splinter from his son's hand, while telling a story to distract and comfort the son. The poem is one of care and affection. But it contains, in a brief reference, acknowledgment of the harsher side of his father. Lee writes, "I recall his hands, / two measures of tenderness / he laid against my face, / the flames of discipline / he raised above

my head” (*Rose*, 15). Lee makes sure, though, to put his father’s anger and violence in the context of his father’s own pain. In another poem, he describes his father as “one I love”:

exiled from one republic and daily defeated in another,  
who was shunned by brothers and stunned by God,  
who couldn’t sleep because of voices,  
who raised his voice, then his hand  
against his children . . . (*Rose*, 41)

Here, his conflicted relationship with his children can be seen in light of his painful relationship to China, the United States, and God. But as much as such compelling glimpses in Lee’s poems tell us about the importance of the figure of his father in considering exile, religion, and spirituality in his writing, none tell us more than *The Winged Seed*.

Once out of prison, after what Lee’s father considered a miraculous escape, Lee’s father continued to be for Lee the source and focus of the Christian religion. Lee’s father established the practice of Christianity as the bedrock of their household. Their journeys as refugees throughout Asia before ending up in the United States are marked, for Lee, by his father’s project of building a replica of the Temple of Solomon (*Winged*, 37). He recalls his father being a famous preacher in Hong Kong (where the family “simply left” after his father had “an argument out with somebody”) (*Winged*, 73; *Alabaster*, 31). Once in the United States, his father attended seminary and then became an Evangelical minister, pastoring a small church in Pennsylvania (*Winged*, 130). The simultaneously conflicted and connected character of Lee’s relationship with his father and his relationship to his father’s religion can be seen in scenes during these times where Lee describes his religious training during childhood, in scenes of prayer, a description of the Bible, a description of Lee helping his father write and memorize his sermons, and in several discussions of conflict between them.

His religious training as a child was characterized by ascetic prayers, the presence of the Bible, and his father’s ministry. Lee writes that during childhood he and his brother would rise



“earlier than sparrows” to pray but “never earlier than our father” (43). Dressed only in underwear, they would kneel beside each other, “hands and heads to the cold wood floor” (45). First they would pray for ten minutes, then for “the full meaning of an hour,” then for hours. They “began waking earlier, then earlier, moving deeper backward into dark and the previous night, both of us urging ourselves and each other, striving past the first hour, and then the second, and then beyond” (45). If prayer hurt the body, all the better: “its end was pain, our delicious affliction. Its end was the strain and numbness our almost naked bodies could endure in long periods of static genuflection, summer and winter” (44). The purpose of these prayers was to “fashion our souls to fit the grip of God” (43). He writes, “We devoted ourselves to the progress of one another’s souls” (44). Lee’s father presented himself as the model toward which his sons should strive but to which they would not likely attain: “Sons”—it was implied—“can only hope to be so used, pray to be so terribly singled out as that one who came before us” (43). At the root of this striving, in body and spirit, was love. Lee writes, “It was, then, for love, that we got on with it; for love of him who was remote and feared, that we fashioned ourselves, we hoped, into vessels fit for the Holy Spirit to inhabit” (44). He continues by noting that “our sincerest wish was, I know now, too late, not, in fact, to be acknowledged by God, but to be seen, truly seen, seen once and forever, by our father, Ba” (44). And if it was this way with prayer, so it was with the Bible: “There were a lot of books in that house. But there was ever only one book: the one my father used to teach me to read. Called by him *The World . . .* the book which, I believed, had no author other than a three-bodied God, a monster in my eyes” (58-59). Passages like these make it clear that Lee does not see his father without seeing religion and does not see religion without seeing his father.

Lee also served as “secretary” for his father, beginning shortly after he became a teenager, helping him write and memorize his sermons. On Fridays, he wrote down what his father “thought out loud.” On Saturdays he helped his father memorize it, going over and over it with him; “I followed my father from room to room, from the study to the screened-in porch, helping him commit his words to his memory, and, inevitably, to mine,” to the point where he would dream of his father every Saturday night, having gone to sleep with “his words writing in my head” (59). On Sundays, he would be able to tell if his father messed up during the delivery of the sermon to the congregation (59).

If *The Winged Seed* provides background in how deeply Lee’s father immersed him in religion, it also provides background for Lee’s response, his willingness to push back against Christianity and against his father, and his ultimate exit from Christianity. One scene that stresses these elements takes place one Sunday while his father was preaching. While growing up, Lee was not allowed to look into his father’s eyes. But during one particular sermon, he does so unintentionally and their eyes lock. A struggle ensues between them. On one hand, Lee writes, “I wanted nothing more than to look away, to avoid his penetration.” On the other hand, “I wanted nothing more than to look. I wanted nothing more than for him to look away. I would penetrate him, I thought.” He “looked. And looked” (60). Meanwhile, he knew, “I would lose. I had to. I could not sustain it.” And he did. Try as he might, his eyes, “betrayers,” “deserters,” “looked down.” He felt his “face burning with . . . what? Shame? Anger? Fear?” He describes his father’s face as having “sternness” but also “more than sternness.” It had “something predatory about it, though it went beyond anything merely animal. It was my father possessed” (66). The word “predatory” certainly puts the father in a negative light. But the word “possessed” shows where that light shines from. The predatory look he sees in his father is the predatory look of his

father's God. The act of staring his father down, even if only so long, was an early move in the wrestling match between the three of them—Lee, his father, and the Christian understanding of God.

In his memoir, Lee recalls a particular moment when everything his parents had told him, including, presumably, everything they had told him about God, was suddenly called into question. One of his brothers died in childhood in Indonesia. For years, his mother lied to him about how and why he died. She said that he had died from playing a rusted harmonica, when he actually died from meningitis. The reasons for the lie remain unclear, but Lee suggests that, “[h]aving found life at that moment unmanageable, she created a manageable little story.” But the impact of finding out the truth years later seems to have shaped Lee in an important way. Finding out that he had been lied to introduced a “suspicion that much of what I’d lived by, much of what I’d lived believing, might have been the fabrications of adults who didn’t recognize me enough to tell me the truth . . .” On one level, this is certainly enough to call into question the truth of all of the Christian doctrine he had been taught. On another level, however, it gave Lee a more complex and profound understanding of the concept and experience of truth. About this, he writes, “For while I suddenly began to feel hollow and insubstantial without the gravity of truth, I also began to feel more grounded, as though behind everything I’d called my life . . . lay Life, drastic and real . . .” (172). In short, there is more to truth than propositions and literalness. That which is life and which is real lies *behind* what we can see or say.

### **R’s Becoming**

In another passage in *The Winged Seed*, a very different kind of wrestling occurs. In contrast to the staring contest, the setup is more beautiful and the conflict more gentle. The struggle takes place not directly between Lee and his father but in the form of questions Lee asks

himself about his father's work. Lee tells of the trips he would take with his father on certain Sunday afternoons to administer communion to "shut ins" (68). These days, which stretched late into the evening, were a "trial" for Lee, because of the length of the travel and the difficulty, as an adolescent, of seeing the sick, elderly, and otherwise demobilized. But through the scene, what stand out in the midst of the difficulties, and all the more because of the difficulties, are the kindness shown by Lee's father to those most in need and the gentle companionship that passes between Lee and his father. He writes that his "favorite time was in the car on the road" (68). To emphasize the beauty of this time, Lee makes sure to note the rural natural scenery they passed by along the way, hills pastures, snow, trees, creeks, deer, the sky (68). As they drove, he was "sleepy and bored, but happy to be sitting next to my silent father. Some silences between us were tense, perennial tests. But my father's silences on Sunday afternoons, after the morning of preaching and public prayer, were relaxed and easy on both of us" (69). Given the tensions between them described at length in other parts of the memoir, this relaxedness, sweetness, stands out as remarkable, showing something truly positive that Lee was gifted by his father—and, indeed, that he gifted back. After describing the travel itself, Lee describes one visit in particular, to give communion to a woman named Ethel Black, which illustrates the kindness of his father and the beauty of the central Christian sacrament.

It is interesting to note also the *disinterested* tone that Lee the poet ascribes to Lee the adolescent. When his father says, "One more visit, in town, after this, then we'll have done a little good," he notes, "A glum fourteen, I was not cheered" (70). At least indirectly, contrasting his father's desire to do good with his own past disinterest seems an indictment of Lee's by himself and, thus, a gesture of affirmation toward his father. Lee describes the actual visit to

Ethel Black at length, with details focusing on what poverty and illness have done to her house and to her body. Everything is dirty, cheaply constructed, falling apart, and unattended to:

Toothless, gape-mouthed, and bug-eyed, her head was thrown back and she stared at the ceiling as if at God, and you couldn't tell she wasn't a corpse until you heard her wheeze or she smacked her lips to wet them. Mrs. Ethel Black was in this condition for as long as I knew her. Sometimes she spit up sour-smelling water, on bad days she mumbled, "Help me. Help me. Help me," until you were ready to cry or scream, unless you learned to not listen. There was no other way but the latter if I would follow my father through house after house of similar suffering, room after room of a dying congregation. Looking at her, I heard my father's voice say, "Our god is surely an ironic god," though I knew it was all in my head, what I wished he would sometimes say, so I wouldn't be the only one thinking it. (71-72)

On one level, the scene is utterly devastating, the raw and ugly reality that the woman lives through, topped off by the adolescent's inability to come to grips with it, his need to distance himself from it, "to not listen." On another level, the scene is stunningly beautiful in that Lee's father voluntarily goes into the place of suffering to administer the only blessing he can, the sacrament. Despite the claim that the adolescent Lee has learned to not listen, the fact that the adult poet describes the scene in such penetrating detail shows that he in fact was and still is listening to the cries for help. Further, he was listening internally, for the meaning of the otherwise senseless suffering, to the point where "in his head" he "heard" his father give it an interpretation. Moreover, still more reflection follows the description. He did not actually hear his father say "Our god is surely an ironic god." He also, he adds, never heard his father say to

him, "Faith is all peril, every hour." Still, he insists, "I knew he thought it, what he'd never admit to me." Lee works as a poet to interpret the human, religious, and spiritual significance of the scene, to understand how his father must have interpreted it and to come to his own, different, interpretation. He writes,

And I see now his faith in his God was learning to winter-out those Pennsylvania winters and those hard communions. But if those communions were difficult, were they empty? was my continual question. Was my father wasting his time? Was he wasting his life? How was I supposed to feel about it? Even now, I feel either communion happened in that room, or my memories are crushed chalk to my tongue. (73)

These reflections show the depth and complexity of Lee's wrestling with his father. He questions continually the worth of the religious sacrament and, by extension, the entire religion and entire life of his father. He presents the questions with no answer, leaving them unresolved. He offers two possible partial answers, declining to select one definitely. The options are either that "communion happened in that room" or that Lee's "memories are crushed chalk to my tongue." In other words, either the religious sacrament did indeed enact something true and sacred and good or Lee is left with something meaningless (crushed chalk cannot write, i.e. it cannot convey meaning) and unpleasant. It seems the weight of the narrative leans toward the former, even while the open-endedness of the reflection maintains the possibility of the latter. In this way, the wrestling here, as elsewhere, includes affirmation and antithesis. This scene is marked by undeniable beauty and by undeniable struggle, beauty in the compassion shown to those at the utter margins of society and struggle in the adolescent Lee's efforts to come to terms with mortality, his father's perceived efforts to have and hold his faith, and the poet Lee's efforts to

sort through and make sense of these experiences and his memories of them. The role of communion—“the blood and fresh corpse of The Resurrected Man, as my father was fond of calling the one whose body we’d been swallowing all afternoon” (70)—highlights the religious and spiritual nature at the heart of this scene.

At one moment in *The Winged Seed*, Lee introduces the Chinese character for sun, which is commonly transliterated as *rì*, but which Lee simply transliterates as the letter *r*: “I write a lintel, and make the upper and lower signs, and three times draw the character for sun . . . and repeat, *r, r, r!* the sun! the sun! the sun!” (149). Then, in long stretches of lyrical passages, as he often does with his central symbols, he turns this character over and over, teasing out different connections, different associations, and, as a result, different meanings, among them, “the Great Navel! *R* for the sun, pouring mouth, unquenchable lion, blank gate, wheel” (149). The one meaning that he keeps returning to is that *R* (the letter quickly becomes and remains capitalized) stands for God. We may suspect that that for Lee is actually the only meaning, even in and through all the other meanings. The proliferation of meanings serves a poetic purpose, allowing for a proliferation of images, words, metaphors, associations, connections, all to be brought together with a literary coherence achieved by a unifying term. The same proliferation of meanings serves a theological purpose as well, first, making the point that everything has a spiritual reality behind the reality we see, that everything is connected in God, and, second, calling into question the very meaning of the word *God* as a signifier, which, once again, Lee has said he uses as “convenience” (“Distinguished”). When one must pass through an English letter to a Chinese character to the sun the character immediately represents to the many possible meanings the sun may represent by association in Lee’s text to arrive, ultimately, at a symbol for

God, then one must wonder what one really knows about “God.” Thus the use of *R* highlights the mystery of the sacred.

It is the mystery of the sacred that Lee invokes to wrestle with the physical process and spiritual meaning of his father dying. In the passage that culminates his use of *R*, Lee writes the following:

R was being revealed to me in the sore-infested body, the slack skin, and bulged, swollen joints of dying Ba, in the ribs and their grinning. R resided in the shadows gnawing Ba’s face to strangeness. R was at rest in Ba’s decaying flesh. R grinned in his ribs. Naturally, I began to believe that if I was to reveal R, as Ba said I must, if I was to be an instrument of a greatest disclosure, it would necessarily mean my getting erased. I wasn’t sure if I could pay such a price. . . . Ba’s vanishing was R’s becoming, heralded by Ba’s own becoming entirely. (159)

The terror of the process of slowly dying is one and the same as the terror of encountering God (“revealing” God and becoming “an instrument of a greatest disclosure” of God). In this passage, it is clear that God is *terrible*. What is unclear is which meaning terrible takes on, whether the sense of very bad or very great, or, as the very ambiguity of the word allows, both. These competing interpretations and the frightening possibility that both may be true are what Lee wrestles with in this passage. The passage is disturbing because of the physical details of Lee’s father’s deterioration (the sores, the loose skin, the swollen joints, the distorted face, the visible outline of ribs) and the pain and the loss of dignity they imply. More unsettling than these, though, which are, after all, the inevitabilities of mortality, is the way in which *R* rests and revels in the broken part of the body, particularly “grinn[ing] in his ribs.” What kind of God, one might ask, takes delight in suffering with no meaning? Only a sadistic God, one would have to



conclude. But then, the suffering is not presented as meaningless at all. It has one immediate and immense purpose: “a greatest disclosure.” Ba’s body becomes the revelation, the residence, the resting place of God, in both Lee and his father’s understanding. But then, the question becomes, what kind of God needs erase people? Not a sadistic but a selfish one. Still, however, that is not a satisfactory reading. It is not for God’s sake alone that Ba dies. It is for Ba’s sake. If “Ba’s vanishing was R’s becoming,” then R’s becoming is “heralded by *Ba’s own becoming entirely*” (emphasis added). What kind of God is this, then? Indeed, that is the question the passage asks. That god is the God that Is. Whatever that may mean, it must remain a mystery (as the use of *R*, rather than “God,” quietly but continually insists). But whatever that mystery is, it must also include the diminishing of everything that is mortal, the body, yes, but the ego too, that sense of being an autonomous self unto oneself. At a certain level, both Christianity and Taoism are present in the scene, in the use of the Chinese character and the Christian father. At a certain level, in both Christianity and Taoism, one becomes by becoming not. It is little wonder Lee wrestles with whether he can “pay such a price.”

### **The Church Is the Size of a Walnut**

In two passages, which bookend his account of the staring contest, Lee describes a “recurring dream” that speaks to his relationship with his father and with his father’s religion. In the first half of the dream, Lee finds himself approaching his father’s church, hurrying because he is late. The church building shrinks before him, getting smaller and smaller the closer he gets to it. He writes, “By the time I reach its red double doors, the church is the size of a walnut, and I have to crawl on my hands and knees to enter.” His father, hugging his legs to his chest, meets him inside the tiny church and “smiles, welcoming me.” It is a joint effort to arrange their bodies so that they both fit. Lee twists and tucks his limbs “this way and that,” while his father, “to

make room for me, closes like a fist, pulls himself into a tight fetus.” Eventually, they sit “face to face, bony knee to bony knee, burning forehead to wrinkled forehead, sucking the used air.”

What to make of this tight space and of the struggle for them both to occupy it? In one sense, the figurative church is barely big enough for the two of them, which speaks to a sense that his father’s religion is not big enough for both of them, that their differences require them to seek different ways of being and seeing in the world. It is, after all, not *the* church but *his father’s* church. Indeed, in the dream, Lee looks away from his father’s eyes. But the tight space does not need to be read merely in terms of scarcity. It also speaks of intimacy. The father makes room for the son, welcomes him, smiles, and even moves into a fetal position for him. They both extend significant effort to come “face to face.” Indeed, this dream church is a beautiful and sacred place: “Light from the stained-glass windows, broken up and translated into a various spectrum, falls sallow on our faces” (60). The presence of art (the stained-glass windows) and the diversity of colors they cast seem significant in this regard. Also, that the church is compared to a walnut speaks to the potential for life and growth. At any rate, the dream poignantly captures that there is a struggle for Lee and his father to come face to face in the context of the sacred and captures that that struggle may prove ambiguous.

The second half of the dream picks up right where the first half leaves off. The two still cramped together in “the little church,” his father

cups his hands, as though he’s gathered something to show me. I lean forward and look down into his hands. Two trees. He shows me two bonsai trees. It is some sort of miracle, and I am moved to the beginnings of terror by the intensity, the reality, of what I’m seeing: a miniature tree growing out of each of his palms, and encircling the base of each trunk is a slim ring of blood. The branches of the trees

are tangled, the gnarled thorny limbs of the left-hand tree braided with the black, flower-laden branches of the right-hand tree. It is so real, I say, and suddenly have the sensation that something has been revealed to me, that what he shows me explains everything between us. He speaks, or I hear the words out of nowhere: According to how you sow, for thorn or flower . . . then the voice falters, and I wake, but not before I notice we are wearing the same shoes. (66)

Astounding in its density of meaning, this passage presents another “revelation.” So much can be said about this passage. But, ultimately, the passage speaks to what cannot be said. It is important that the dream bookmarks a scene of struggle between the father and the son, the staring context, which, significantly, takes place in a church as well. The church and the conflict establish the context in which this dream should be interpreted. Like the others considered, this passage is about the religious wrestling that takes place between Lee and his father, even if, primarily, in poetry and in dreams. Whereas Lee’s father stares him down with a “predatory” look a few moments before, here he offers the son his open hands, a gesture of welcome. He also offers him, in the trees growing out of his palms, a metaphor, a symbol, an image that, somehow, has explanatory power. This gift mirrors the gift of religion more broadly, the rich symbolic life that Lee elsewhere attests growing up in church made for (“Silence,” 127). As for the meaning of these specific metaphors, one should consider that trees are organic, living, and growing. Also, they grow from seeds, with the church, compared to a walnut, being like a seed itself. Elsewhere, Lee suggests that “the paradigm for a poem is like DNA,” which has “so much code in a tiny little strand.” A poem should have “as much information as possible, written into as little space as possible. . . . I mean . . . spiritual information.” The DNA-bearing trees and walnut can thus

both be seen to speak to and enact the “saturation of meaning and being” in the world (Personal interview).

If trees generally represent life, the two trees, one in each palm, represent two very different aspects of life, the thorns, of course, indicating pain and suffering and the flowers, beauty. The potential biblical allusions are manifold. The thorns suggesting the thorns with which Christ was wounded during the crucifixion, the bleeding palms suggesting the piercing of his hands, the two trees hinting at the cross (often called a “tree”) and the tree of life in heaven or else the tree of the knowledge of good and evil in the garden. Departing from biblical allusion, in some ways, the two hands do not offer two choices to Lee, as if he could select one tree or the other. The branches of the trees are “tangled” and “braided” together, as the pleasant and the painful are in life. But the metaphor is not just one for life but one, much more specifically, for the relationship between the father and the son, for “everything between us.” Their relationship has been filled with thorns as well as flowers and the thorns and the flowers, while distinct, are braided together. In some way, this has been the result of what they both have sown, the outcome of their actions and attitudes toward one another. For this to be said, by his father or by “words out of nowhere,” is not for a judgment to be passed but for an explanation to be given. The final moment of the dream underscores how much the father and the son share, how much they are alike. Even in their differences, even with the flowers and thorns, even with their struggles to come face to face, they “are wearing the same shoes.” It takes this dream, though, for Lee to “notice” that.

What we see in this dream sequence is a more open side of Lee’s father, a side that may be obscured by the passages of physical discipline, religious discipline, the staring contest, and Lee’s being lied to about his brother’s death. Lee has chosen to focus mostly on the aspects of

struggle. But in one interview, he says more about his father's generosity toward his son and toward the differences between them, aspects hinted at in the image of the father extending open hands in the dream. We need to remember that the father never gets to tell his side of the story. In every scene, in the dream sequence no more than in any more literal passages, we are still dealing with a poetic presentation, one in which Lee does not mean to present his father as he "really was" historically but to come to terms with, that is, to wrestle with, the figure of his father that remains for him a figure of God. This is not to say that Lee is being dishonest or unfair to his father but to say that he is writing poetry in which he focuses on specific things for specific effects. Knowing how some of the emphases in the memoir might be told differently does not lessen the value of the telling that was chosen but gives it context, highlights it as a telling that was, in fact, chosen, for the purpose of working through certain truths that could be worked through no other way. A different portrait of his father would, perhaps, allow poet and readers to wrestle with other truths.

In view of the often harsh presentation of his father in these texts, Lee was asked about how his parents felt, particularly his father, when he moved away from their religious tradition. Was this a problem? His answer had several layers. In one place, Lee admits that his father "would find my views very heretical" ("An Interview"). In another, though, he suggests that his divergent views were not taken all that seriously, rendering it a non-issue. He explains, "No, they always thought it was just me being me, being weird and strange and dreamy" (Personal interview). But Lee also shares several things that his father taught him that had the definite effect of *encouraging* Lee to find his own spiritual path. For one, he explains that his father was "very clear about" about how a religious institution may enforce its own orthodoxy in order "to perpetuate its own institution. . . . And he was really convinced that if you actually met Jesus,

Jesus would try to free you from your church, from your family, from your ego, in order to become this massive love.” For another, he explains a Chinese tradition that teaches that “the best teacher points the student not toward the teacher but toward the depth of his own mind and his relationship to his own soul. And the judge of the success of that teacher is whether or not . . . that student can find his own path in the world.” The worst teachers give students “one more chain”—“Be like me”—whereas the best teachers “free the student of even the teacher and . . . teach the student to completely rely on his relationship with—if we can use that word—God.” To this, he adds, “my father was my teacher; he was a good teacher, a profound teacher, a hard teacher.” Finally, when Lee asked his father about experiences he had in the world where he felt like the world was sacred—“What do these experiences have to do with God?”—his father gave him advice that would benefit any would-be, soon-to-be, or already religious exile: “He always just said, ‘Keep practicing, keep praying, keep meditating, don’t cling to those feelings but don’t push them away.’ So he really allowed me to be really open. But he also said, ‘These stories from the Bible are deeply teaching. They teach a lot so keep reading them’” (Personal interview). These aspects of his father that he shares in several interviews are not hidden in his poetic writing, so to speak, but they are submerged. Indeed, he stresses on more than one occasion, the compassion his father had for those who are suffering and for his own children. But passages like these ones from these interviews, which stress not just compassion but understanding and letting go, help illuminate passages like the dream of the church the size of a walnut, the open hands “explaining” what has passed between father and son.

Lee has suggested that as time has passed, he has “been able to understand [his father] more.” The result has been both that tension between them has “gotten more intense” and that “[t]he love has grown too.” Lee notes a deepening sense that “he has all this tradition behind him

. . . all of Taoism and Judeo-Christian religion,” whereas he is “just one person trying to write a poem” and create a way of seeing the world that diverges from how all of those people have understood God (“An Interview”). The more Lee understands and explains his father, the more open and generous he becomes. And yet, the wrestling between them remains intense, focused on the things of the spirit, and contested on grounds of religious tradition and religious exile. That is to say, Lee continues to wrestle with his father, and, in and through that, with the Father God of “Judeo-Christian religion.”

## Chapter Five: The Intangible in the Tangible

### **God Haunting the World**

One may have cause to wrestle with a religious tradition for various reasons. Many do so because they find contradictions in its teachings, between its teachings and its practices, or between its teachings and science. One motivating factor for Lee seems to have been a contradiction between who he was in society and for whom the religion appeared to exist. In the United States, Christianity is the religion of insiders. There was a time, he notes, when he “really began to rebel against Christianity,” until he “realized that it began as a slave religion and that Christ was an outsider,” at which point the tradition “began to make more sense to me” (*Alabaster*, 39-40). Still one more reason Lee began wrestling with the religion was that he felt a contradiction between what he understood about Christianity and the Bible and what he himself experienced in the world. The seeds of his discontent eventually grew into the pillars of the spiritual home he seeks and builds after Christianity.

Since childhood, he explains, he has what he describes as “spiritual experiences.” Whether in Indonesia’s jungles, Hong Kong’s ocean, or Pennsylvania’s forests, “I always felt that the world was haunted . . . by God. . . . I had this feeling that the world was saturated.” This was an experience, not a belief. He describes it as “beyond” and “deeper than” belief. As he learned Christianity and the Bible from his father, he wondered what God as described in that tradition had to do with what he experienced in the world. For a time, he concluded that they were separate, different. For a time, he thought that the Bible “must be about God” but his experience in the world about something else. But as he got older, he says he realized, “my



experience of the world had been experiencing God all the time. I just never gave it that name. I felt embedded in a larger intelligence than my own.” When he took “long walks in the woods,” he says that “[t]he whole world, the forest, felt to me like ‘aaah.’ I just felt everything about it, the danger of being in the woods, the beauty of it.” He quotes the forty-third Psalm to explain it: “‘Be still and know that I am God.’ . . . That’s what I felt walking around the world. I just thought, ‘Be still. There’s something bigger going on. This bigger intelligence. Moving around you. Be still’” (Personal interview). Notwithstanding his use of this scriptural reference to describe it, his experience did not match with the Christianity as he understood it.

Once outside of the Christian tradition, the spiritual and poetic task the postsecular exile poet faces is to seek or build a new home, as it were. For Lee, the central tenet with which and upon which he builds a home is precisely this understanding of the world’s deep and utter embeddedness in God. This understanding comes to him both from his own experience and from the testimony of mystics of the world’s religious traditions, including, he eventually realizes, Christianity. Like he realized that Christianity began as a slave religion, he also realized that there were ancient strands of Christianity that did speak to his experiences. Eventually, he discovered that his experience did, in fact, match with “the mystical Christian idea of God,” such as “the view of Meister Eckhart.” Such a view, he explains, seems “truer” to him than the non-mystical varieties of Christianity most commonly known. In fact, upon reading the Christian mystics, he recalls, he thought to himself, “That’s how I experience God” (Personal interview). So his ongoing wrestling with the Christian tradition includes elements of moving outside of that tradition as well as elements of reaching deeper into that tradition as he discovers its mystical aspects. Thus Lee continues to engage with Christianity, to wrestle with it, while living in

religious exile outside of that religious tradition, if more subtly than in *The Winged Seed* and the other poems considered so far.

The postsecular spirituality and poetics that Lee has come to practice begins with a foundational understanding of cosmic, sacred embeddedness. For Lee, this leads to several practices, which are evident in his poetry: the practice of the *awareness* of God in everything, the practice of *love* for God in and through love for everyone, the practice of *mystery* when it comes to understanding God and others, and the practice of *poetry* as a way of developing all of the other practices. He wants the circle of inclusion to extend to all people (Personal interview) and, ultimately, to all species (“Distinguished”). He offers that, “Poetry is the locally inflected voice of the all” (“Distinguished”). But, so far, his poetry has, understandably, given particular attention to the everyday world in which he lives and to those who have been “othered” in society, starting with himself, with his family, and with other immigrants. He says he experiences “the intangible . . . in the tangible” (“Distinguished”). Thus, when he writes about food, family, sex, or immigration, he is simultaneously exploring the sacred. His love for the tangible and for the intangible are enacted in and through each other, as analyses of three of his most significant poems will show, “Persimmons,” “The Cleaving,” and “Virtues of a Boring Husband.”

### **Every Persimmon Has a Sun Inside**

In “Persimmons,” Li-Young Lee portrays both the losses that attend exile and his search for a sense of home even in exile. The poem deals with cultural exile most directly, with the theme of spiritual exile strongly implicit, breaking through the surface at key moments in the poem. Knowing that the poem has as a background religious exile gives additional significance to the role that family and particularly Lee’s father play in the poem. The poem begins by

documenting the losses that attend exile. The first layer of loss includes the loss of dignity and safety, results of the discrimination, insults, exclusion, and physical violence with which the United States often greets immigrants, particularly when they are set apart from the dominant culture by different physical appearance, different language, and different food. Lee begins the poem by describing a specific incident where his grade school teacher, apparently a white woman, slaps him in the head and sends him to the corner “for not knowing the difference / between *persimmon* and *precision*” (Rose, 17). That he actually knows quite well the difference (“How to choose // persimmons. This is precision”) but just has trouble pronouncing the words almost seems beside the point, since the teacher’s actions would be no more or less justified either way. But the teacher’s assumptions about what Lee knows and does not know and her ignorance about his linguistic difference serve to “other” Lee no less than her striking and excluding him physically. Later in the poem, when she feeds the class an unripe persimmon, calling the not-yet-sweet fruit “a *Chinese apple*,” her ignorance continues to other Lee, setting him apart in a negative way, at least implicitly, by misrepresenting this food connected with his Chinese ethnicity (18).

Sadly, the exclusion does not begin and end with the teacher. If the authority figure did not welcome Lee, neither did some of the other students. At least, that is what the poem implies when Lee shares that he also had “trouble” pronouncing the words “*fight* and *fright*” but no trouble at all understanding them: “Fight was what I did when I was frightened, / fright was what I felt when I was fighting” (17). In documenting these experiences, Lee bears witness to the injustices that he and others like himself have faced. But documenting these injustices simply for the sake of documenting them is far from Lee’s purpose. Lee makes it clear that he sees acts of violence and exclusion merely as “symptoms” of a larger and prior disorder, that is, a spiritual

one. He invokes these symptoms, then, as a way to look beyond the symptoms to the causes and, then, beyond the causes to the solution, the understanding that we are all part of “only one body,” which poetry, practiced for that purpose, can help us understand (*Alabaster*, 92).

When Lee moves on in the poem to consider other of the losses of exile, they become more personal, internal, and, eventually, undefinable. One of these losses is the loss of cultural memory, for which the loss of language serves as metonym. In one section, Lee lists Chinese words he’s lost: “Dew: I’ve forgotten. / Naked: I’ve forgotten” (*Rose*, 17). Another loss is the growing divide between Lee and his parents, a divide that is simultaneously cultural and generational, a common experience for immigrant families whose children acclimate or assimilate more quickly or fully than their parents. Lee deals with this loss less directly, hinting at it while also, through it, hinting at some other, related loss that cannot easily be put into words. Toward the end of the poem, Lee describes a scene where he is “looking / for something I lost” in his parents’ basement. The words *something* and *lost* stand out, suggesting the loss attending exile and the often indeterminate nature of that loss (“something”), wherein those who experience exile cannot always exactly put their thumb on what has been lost. It is also significant to note that the scene takes place not only in a basement, a place where objects from the past pile up, but specifically in his parents’ basement, details that highlight the historical and cultural aspects of what has been lost.

While the poet digs through boxes in the basement, his father sits by, attending to his son’s search. Lee writes that his father is “so happy that I’ve come home.” He asks his father “how his eyes are, a stupid question.” His father tells him what he already knew, another loss: “*All gone.*” This quiet, brief exchange has a haunting quality about it, the pain in them subtle and all the more moving in its subtlety. On one level, eyes and blindness speak volumes as symbols,

rich with possible allusions to Greek myth, the father, perhaps, figuring as a sort of blind prophet. If the poet has come home looking for something, then perhaps what is suggested here is that that something is a sort of wisdom only to be found through loss. More immediately and profoundly, though, the conversation has less to do with conveying a literary meaning than with enacting a familial meaning. The brevity of the conversation leaves much to be inferred. The notion that the poet has “come home” suggests that he has been away from home for some length of time, at least in the father’s perspective, one of the details hinting at a distance between them. The simple details of the father attending to the son in the basement and being “so happy” also contribute to sense of distance and absence, since, if such a visit from the poet were entirely routine, it would not necessarily occasion such a response from the father. The asking of a “stupid question” likewise reinforces the idea of distance between father and son. It is small talk about something that the poet already knew but apparently didn’t feel close enough to his father to presume to be part of the shared knowledge between them. It may be as if he knew his father was blind but was unsure if his father knew he knew. Whether that or something similar, an awkwardness between them is evident, a discomfort and distance. Finally, for the poet to say that his father is “so happy that I’ve come home” but to not say anything about how he himself feels about being there suggests, at the least, that the feeling isn’t entirely mutual. Perhaps the poet isn’t *as* happy; perhaps he doesn’t consider the house to be “home.” Subtly and ambiguously, these lines convey that the father and, perhaps, the son want a relationship that they do not have. As much as they actually and deeply know each other, they are not terribly close. It seems safe to guess that the quiet distance between them has its roots in their shared experience as exiles and in their long, conflicted personal history with each other (as recounted in *The Winged Seed*)

which itself has played out in the context of and, certainly at least in part, as a result of that exile experience.

The poem begins with the losses of exile—the discrimination faced, the cultural memory lost, the family relationships damaged. But it does not end with these losses. They are not even the primary focus of the poem. Instead, Lee focuses more on the search for home, so to speak, for ways of recovering or replacing that which has been lost. If the causes of suffering (the reasons people hurt other people) are spiritual, then so are the sources of healing. For Lee, though, the spiritual exists—it manifests—within the material. One’s spiritual home does not exist on some other plane than one’s cultural home, though the spiritual cannot be reduced to the cultural. One’s spiritual healing, therefore, may come through such dynamics, generally associated with culture and ethnicity, as family, art, and food. In at least two instances, all three these elements come together poignantly and profoundly. At the end of the poem, in the basement, the poet finds “paintings by my father” (19). One of them features “persimmons, so full they want to drop from the cloth.” While these paintings are not necessarily the “something” the poet was looking for, they do seem to be what he needed to find. Invoking art (the painting itself), food (the image of the persimmons), and family (the father who painted it), they represent an aspect of homecoming, healing, and wisdom, which are reversals, however partial, of the losses of exile. The passage of the poem stresses both the materiality of these elements and the more-than-material meaning with which they are imbued. His father takes the painting of persimmons in hand, touching the cloth, recalls the feel of the bush on the cloth and the movements of the wrist. He tells his son that he had painted persimmons “*hundreds of times / eyes closed*” and that, in fact, he painted this particular painting after he had already gone

“blind.” Commenting indirectly on the material and spiritual significance of this artistic feat, his father gets the final words of the poem:

*Some things never leave a person:  
scent of the hair of one you love,  
the texture of persimmons,  
in your palm, the ripe weight. (19)*

The closing scene of the poem and these final lines especially represent a dance between universal, transcendent ideals and cultural, material specifics. On one hand, the poem speaks to love, memory, family, food, meditation, art—those great themes common to the experience and literature of all recorded human cultures. On the other hand, the poem speaks about love in the time of particular historical circumstances, cultural memory of a certain order, not just food in general but persimmons specifically, not just art but Chinese brush painting. The indeterminate “something” used earlier in the poem—the poet is looking for “something” in the basement—has been replaced here with “some things,” two things to be precise, clearly specified. On one hand, those two things are food and family. On the other hand, they are the bodies of a particular fruit and a particular person, not merely abstractions but rather things to be known and remembered in their full materiality, as the words “scent,” “texture,” and “weight” emphasize. I suggest that the father’s artistic practice, painting the image enough times to be able to do it while literally blind, can best be understood as meditation, as a spiritual practice. On one hand, such a practice connects easily with all other spiritual practices involving repetition, discipline, a closing of the eyes, and the use of art. Indeed, the father’s painting finds echoes even in the son’s poetry. On the other hand, in recalling the practice, the father stresses those material aspects which indicate the cultural specificity of the art form, from the material of the brush (“wolftail”) to the material of the canvass (“silk”) to the style of strokes (“the strength, the tense / precision in the wrists”). This is, the poem leaves no doubt, specifically Chinese brush painting, one of the world’s oldest

continually practiced specific art forms. One might find a tension or even a conflict between opposing sets of impulses, between the desire to find and connect with cultural roots and the desire to transcend cultural roots and, in analogous fashion, between the material and the spiritual. But I suggest that the accomplishment of this poem is that these elements are not in conflict but in concert. One does not become universally human by ceasing to be a Chinese American. One does not reach spirit by sloughing off matter. One does not love except by loving specific people. One does not eat anything other than particular foods. Lee seeks to be able to have both and to be able to see and recognize both in each other, the intangible in the tangible, the universal in the cultural, the spiritual in the material—and, in every respect, vice versa.

One more part of the poem, two adjacent sections from the center of the text, enacts the same dance—the simultaneous recovering and transcending of culture, the mutual embeddedness of spirit and matter—but all the more overtly. This time Lee recounts something his mother says to him:

My mother said every persimmon has a sun  
inside, something golden, glowing,  
warm as my face.

Once, in the cellar, I found two wrapped in newspaper,  
forgotten and not yet ripe.  
I took them and set both on my bedroom windowsill,  
where each morning a cardinal  
sang, *The sun, the sun.* (18)

The parallels between this scene in the center poem and the scene at the ends of the poem suggest that they should be understood in light of each other. In both scenes, the poet recalls finding a pair of persimmons in the basement, painted persimmons in one, actual persimmons in the other. In both scenes, Lee recalls the speech of one of his parents. His father and his mother each say something about persimmons but also, through talking about persimmons, say something more. In the father's painting, the persimmons were already ripe. In the lines



following the mother's saying, they are "not yet ripe" but Lee wraps them in newspaper and sets them in sunlight so that they will become so. In the former instance, they are ripe by memory and by imagination. In the latter, they will become ripe by human action in concert with natural law. Finally, both scenes also involve art. Whereas the father puts brush to silk, the mother crafts words. The words "every persimmon has a sun / inside" should be understood, I suggest, as a wisdom saying, a parable, a koan, or a poem. Taken together, these various parallels reinforce central themes of the poem. Lee presents art, food, family as resources for home and healing within exile. Art includes the use memory and imagination. Food includes the larger natural world to which it belongs. Family includes everyone one loves.

To be sure, Lee wraps all of these elements in the cultural specificity with which he has experienced them, the specific experiences of being exiles, immigrants, Chinese Americans. But, at the center of the poem, he demonstrates how in and through this cultural specificity something universal, transcendent, and sacred emerges. The image of the sun is particularly important. One could read the image as an allusion, taking into account both how many cultures have associated the sun with the divine and how Lee in *The Winged Seed* uses the Chinese character for sun to refer to the divine.<sup>12</sup> But one does not need to look to other texts in this way to see how the image invokes the sacred. The lines "every persimmon has a sun / inside" and "each morning a cardinal / sang, *The sun, the sun*" speak volumes. These lines present two miracles, an astronomical impossibility and an ornithological impossibility, small fruit containing celestial bodies of intense heat and light and small birds bearing witness to such through birdsong that does not just mimicking but actually communicating through human speech.

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<sup>12</sup>One might go so far as to draw a connection between Lee's use of that Chinese character which he transliterates as *R* and which is commonly transliterated as *rì* and the Egyptian deity Ra, also known as Re. But, even without relying on such a specific allusion, there is certainly literary, religious, and historical precedence for an association between the sun and the divine.

Recalling that Lee has said that there is “only one body” (*Alabaster*, 92), we might interpret these lines as follows: The sun inside the mother teaches the sun inside the son how the sun lives inside the persimmon. And then, taught how to care and how to listen, the sun inside the son recognizes how the sun inside the bird responds to the sun inside the persimmon. But what, then, is the sun? In the mother’s saying, the sun is not defined but rather described merely as “something golden, glowing, / warm as my face.” The use, again, of the indeterminate “something” allows, on one hand, for readers to infer what they like and, on the other hand, guides the inference toward a particular range of difficult-to-say meanings, that is, meanings that are ineffable. Whatever it is, it is good, “golden,” “glowing,” “warm,” and associated with the “face” of one who is loved. The son is *R*. The sun is God. The sun is the cosmos. The sun is the son—both the son who is Lee and the son who, in the religion of Lee’s father, is begotten of God and who is God. The sun is the sacred, the spiritual, the true, the real, the good, the unnameable. In short, what Lee is proposing, what he learned from his mother and father, is that the ordinary world in which we live is deeply embedded with and constantly brimming over with a cosmic moreness, which goes beyond what we can see and hear with our literal eyes and ears, but to which nature itself bears witness, and toward the understanding of which we can reach through poetry and through love. In “Persimmons,” Lee finds the answer to the problem of spiritual homelessness of which, say, racism is merely a result, an instance, a manifestation, in a sort of spiritual homemaking of which his Chinese ethnicity and Chinese American identity—the art, food, and love of his Chinese family and the bonds forged among them through shared experience of immigration to the United States—is an instance, a resource, a particular way of embodying the universal spirit.

## The Violence of Exile, Bodies, and Transcendence

The postsecular vision of “Persimmons” expands in “The Cleaving.” And as it expands, it explodes. Lee does not just hold fast to the mutual embeddedness of the spiritual and material but pushes that vision further. The tenor of the poetry changes, along with its imagery and its scale. Savoring gives way to devouring. The sweet, tender fruit of the earlier poem gives way to meat on a butcher’s chopping block, animal bodies split open with a cleaver, steaming in their juices. The intimate family of exiles—father, mother, son—expands in an instant to include the whole vast family of exiles—all immigrants, all minorities, all other “others.” The ethnic and linguistic insensitivity of the schoolteacher in the earlier poem finds a larger context, blatant racism at the heart of the American literary tradition. “The Cleaving” concerns itself with exile and immigration, with the materiality of bodies and ethnicities, and with the sacred and transcendent that flows in and beyond all things. The poem takes up these concerns voraciously and, in several respects, violently. Lee confesses that he found the poem “a little terrifying to write” because of its violence (*Alabaster*, 54). The poem’s title signals both the destructive violence and the constructive violence within the poem. While to cleave most often means to “part or divide by a cutting blow,” it may also mean to “stick fast or adhere” (“cleave,” *OED*). Additionally, the ambiguity in the word also leaves space between these two meanings for the morally neutral violence that is simply part of living in a body among other bodies.

One layer of violence that the poem exposes is the violence of exile, particularly the violence so often associated with immigration. Lee documents and laments instances of this sort of violence, which include attacks on dignity and identity as well as threats to the body. Demonstrating the former, Lee quotes from Ralph Waldo Emerson’s journals a comment that the Chinese had “*managed to preserve to a hair / for three or four thousand years / the ugliest*

*features in the world*” (*City*, 83). Such a central figure in the literary history of the United States saying something so aggressively racist illustrates, through synecdoche, how assaults on dignity and identity inform and shape Lee’s and others’ experiences as immigrants to the United States. Lee explains elsewhere that “living in America is a violent experience, especially if you do feel like the other.” Likewise, “assimilation is a *violent* experience” (*Alabaster*, 54). The threats to the body that exile and immigration often involve include, ultimately, death. When Lee ponders the butchered animals waiting to be eaten, he cannot help but also think broadly of the “murders” of the twentieth century, including those that sent his family into exile, and specifically “the death-far-from-home, the death- / in-a strange-land, these Chinatown / deaths, these American deaths” (*City*, 79, 83). America itself becomes associated with death. When immigrants die, even peacefully of old age, they die far from home. More than that, many immigrants to the United States suffer increased risks to health and life, particularly when set off from the rest of society, denied adequate access to education, medical care, and healthy foods, and left with the most dangerous jobs. Finally, there are the constant wars of the United States, central to the global context of exile.

The world is violent because we treat one another violently. But that is not the only reason it is violent. It is also—and in the largest contexts perhaps more so—violent naturally, inherently, inescapably, without regard for our best or worst intentions or actions. This is another layer of violence Lee addresses in the poem, a violence we are implicated in simply by breathing and eating. In Lee’s words, “As we eat we’re eaten” (85). While this is true most literally for those who eat meat, everyone, by living, dies and, by dying, lives and, in the process, becomes entangled in the living and dying of others. To begin with, we are born in and through violence. “I tore my mother open,” writes Lee (*City*, 79). This sort of violence is simply part of living and

dying in these mortal, material bodies. As Lee insists, the body “always” moves toward death, “empty,” and “nothing” (84). On this point, he writes:

What I thought were the arms  
aching *cleave*, were the knees trembling *leave*.  
What I thought were the muscles  
insisting *resist, persist, exist*,  
were the pores  
hissing *mist* and *waste*.  
What I thought was the body humming *reside, reside*,  
was the body sighing *revise, revise*. (85)

Our very bodies undo themselves. If we think they say otherwise, we are mishearing.

In “The Cleaving,” the violence of exile and the violence of our mortal bodies are deeply connected to yet another kind of violence, the violence of transcendence. That the poem is concerned with the sacred becomes clear in its use of religious language. Lee speaks over and over of “the soul” (80-83, 86), discusses “our true prayers” (85), declares that “God is the text” of which “the soul” “is a debasement” (81), and, finally, calls the butcher a “diviner / of holy texts” (86-87). Moreover, Lee himself describes the poem as one dealing with transcendence (*Alabaster*, 54). But in the poem, Lee deals with transcendence in such a way that complicates and even contradicts usual understandings of transcendence and of the relationship between transcendence, materiality, and violence. In stressing the role of transcendence in the poem, Xu goes so far as to argue that Lee works through “materiality and cultural/ethnic identification” in order “to cancel [them] out . . . in favor of transcendentalism.” In her view, “The references of eating, being eaten, and dying configure to voice his metaphysics that materials fade away and only the pure consciousness of the universe mind lasts” (*Eating*, 124). Certainly, the material and the spiritual are deeply entwined in the text. Certainly, Lee works through the material to get to the spiritual. But the idea that Lee, finally, leaves the material behind altogether in favor of the

spiritual does not seem quite right. Instead, I argue that Walter Hesford lands closer to the mark when he writes that Lee “elevates the profane body *as* sacred host” (55, emphasis added).

What Lee does in “The Cleaving” is refigure the material in light of the spiritual and refigure the spiritual in light of the material. Of the poem, he says, “I don’t think it was transcendent in the way one normally thinks of transcendence.” Instead, he describes its transcendence paradoxically as a sort that “comes through a kind of immanence.” It has nothing to do with leaving this world behind but rather is “a way of becoming attached to humanity.” Of course, attending to immanence means attending to all that this material world entails, including the mortality of these bodies, including exile. Lee discovers that transcendence cannot be understood apart from those things. He says, “I used to think of transcendence as easy, light, full of wings . . . . I realized there’s only one kind of transcendence, a kind of violence.” To that, he adds, “One of violence’s names is change” (*Alabaster*, 54).<sup>13</sup> For one, the violence of exile can change us. Thus, Lee writes that “terror spirits / my change” (*City*, 86). The violence of mortality also plays an important role. For example, even while eating in order to live, we are in the process of dying, which makes eating “but another / shape of going, my immaculate expiration” (84). If the soul is intimately connected to the body, then the bodily death participates in the spiritual life. Thus the poet offers that “our true prayers” can be heard in the processes of eating and dying (85). And he calls the “dying” of the body as “arduous as martyrs . . . and as glorious”

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<sup>13</sup>Lee observes that the “Western version” of poetry—represented by the story of Jacob and the angel—“has a lot of violence” in it (whereas the Eastern version, such as appears in Taoism, has a lot more to do with yielding, surrendering: “yin beckoning to yang”). Lee paraphrases the blessing that the angel gives to Jacob as follows: “you are no longer a person; you represent a multitude.” He adds that Jacob’s consciousness becomes “bigger” as he “surrenders” his ego (“Distinguished”). (Elsewhere, he says that “Poetry accounts for the many-ness of who we are” [“An Interview”].) Lee offers Emily Dickinson as another example. The “shattering of syntax” in Dickinson’s poetry “is parallel to Jacob’s shattering”: “she encountered something so big she couldn’t handle it. She shattered” (“Distinguished”).

(84). The transcendence that Lee seeks requires being completely present to the materiality of life and death.

Lee directly announces the intertwining of immanence and transcendence several times in the poem. In one passage, he writes that “the body meets / the soul over the soul's ocean and penumbra” (80). The body and the soul are not one and the same per se, but they do meet at the soul’s deepest and darkest parts. They overlap intimately. In a related passage, he writes that he had “thought the soul an airy thing” but discovered otherwise (86). The soul is instead something we meet and engage with solidly. Thus a particular fish head he will eat is “but one more / articulation of a single nothing / severally manifested” (84). In these passages, we can continue to see Lee’s theology of embeddedness, wherein the whole cosmos, as he has said, is “saturated” with God (Personal interview). In one more passage, we can see how the divine saturation of the cosmos extends to the bodies and souls of people. Writing of his immediate family, gathered around a “redwood” dinner table eating, but including, by extension, the larger human family, Lee writes:

Brothers and sisters by blood and design,  
who sit in separate bodies of varied shapes,  
we constitute a many-membered  
body of love.

.....

The soul too  
is a debasement  
of a text, but, thus, it  
acquires salience, although a  
human salience, but  
inimitable, and, hence, memorable.  
God is the text. (80)

If God is embedded in this world and this world in God so deeply that our “separate bodies of varied shapes . . . constitute a many-membered body of love,” then it is in and through this world that we encounter God. Though here Lee says *debasement*, elsewhere he says *descendant*

(Personal interview). Either way, since we come from God, we manifest God. We are mnemonics for God (“hence, memorable”), so to speak. It is not by leaving behind the utter and “inimitable” particularity of this world, including our particular “human salience,” but by diving into it that we can seek and find God.

Material violence and spiritual violence collide, as metaphor, as metonym, and as catalyst. Lee explains spiritual violence by analogy to material violence—and as, somehow, actually connected to it. Of the Chinese butcher, Lee writes, “In the trade of my soul's shaping / he traffics in hews and hacks” (*City*, 86). To be transformed, we must be changed. In our changing, destruction and creation are caught up together:

. . . the soul  
is cleaved so that the soul might be restored.  
.....  
No easy thing, violence.  
One of its names? Change. Change  
resides in the embrace  
of the effaced and the effacer  
in the covenant of the opened and the opener;  
the axe accomplishes it on the soul's axis. (86)

The violence of the poem points to an inner turmoil, tearing, breaking that, the poem suggests, one must endure to become whole. To deny our interconnectedness with our neighbor and with the cosmos is to commit spiritual violence that, too often, manifests in physical violence, from wars to the destruction of the planet. But to acknowledge that interconnectedness also requires a kind of inner violence, the rending of everything within ourselves that would separate us from others, including the very illusion of a separate self. About this, Lee says, “in order to see everybody in myself and to see myself in everyone else I had to do violence to myself” (*Alabaster*, 54). The nature of spiritual transformation is difficult to put into words. The experience of it, Lee suggests, may be akin to being cut up and eaten. The result of it is a



profound understanding of immanence and of our interconnection with everyone and an utter acceptance of life and death and all that lies between.

With so much violence, one might expect “The Cleaving” to be a dark and angry poem. It certainly has elements of darkness and perhaps even anger. However, the poem is primarily one of celebration. The poem opens with the poet standing “in the Hon Kee Grocery,” enthralled by the Chinese butcher and by the many Chinese foods on display (*City*, 77). The poet celebrates this Chinese man and, by extension, all Chinese and all immigrants, including himself, describing the man with awe and attention, his physical features, mannerisms, the skill and speed with which he wields his cleaver. In this way, the poem explodes with exuberance, not vehemence. At no point does Lee suggest that anyone should practice violence toward others. He does not condone or excuse the violence of racism. He never even suggests violent resistance to racism. Those sorts of violence, to which we have reduced all understanding of violence, are barely noted, subsumed in a larger picture. Lee seeks to redeem violence or at least to put it in a larger light. We hurt one another, yes, and we should not. But beyond that, more important than that, prior to that, we are all falling apart in our bodies. And the way to be whole, we will not like hearing, will involve a certain kind of falling apart inside as well. We have to *cleave off* those parts of our ego that separate us from others, that allow us to hurt others, so that we can *cleave to* all that is, to our true selves, to one another, to the cosmos, to God. Indeed, the postsecular genius of the poem is its unrelenting acceptance of everything that is—or, if not everything, then much more than he would be expected to be able to accept. Against the odds, he accepts himself, his ethnicity, all other immigrants and exiles, his mortality, all who are likewise dying, even those who have rejected him.

Lee's acceptance begins with those who have so often not been accepted, particularly other ethnic minorities and immigrants in the United States. From the start of the poem, Lee celebrates the Chinese American butcher, while offering affirmations of familial connection and affinity, describing the man as "like my grandmother" (77), "could be my brother," "could be my grandfather" (78), "my sister" (86), and, eventually, as himself, "this immigrant, / this man with my own face" (87). Lee also describes the man in terms of regional Chinese features. To Lee, his facial features seem Northern Chinese ("warlike"), while his handwriting and demeanor seem Southern ("suited for scholarship"). These details highlight the careful attention Lee pays to the person as a person. The regional differentiation stands in the face of the racist tendency in United States society to lump all Chinese and even all Asians into one category, a sign that they are not accepted for who they are by the majority (78). Similarly, Lee's careful and awe-filled description of the butcher at work—noting the method, speed, and precision of his knife work on the meat—scribes to him the status of an artist (78). Finally, Lee renders him godlike, pronouncing him "the wielder" of the axe that works on the soul, whose knife Lee would kiss (86). At the end of the poem, the final lines, the affection, affirmation, and acceptance Lee shows this one man expands to all other "others." Lee's description of the butcher morphs surreally. The one Chinese man also becomes woman, African, Jew, Middle Eastern, and, finally, Lee himself:

. . . the sorrow of his Shang  
 dynasty face,  
 African face with slit eyes. He is  
 my sister, this  
 beautiful Bedouin, this Shulamit  
 keeper of sabbaths, diviner  
 of holy texts, this dark  
 dancer, this Jew, this Asian, this one  
 with the Cambodian face, Vietnamese face, this Chinese  
 I daily face,

this immigrant,  
    this man with my own face. (86-87)

In accepting, embracing, celebrating as beautiful all of these people, Lee pushes back against racism, ethnocentrism, and anti-immigrant sentiment. In particular, Lee's embrace of diversity directly and starkly contrasts with Emerson's racist statement that Lee quotes earlier in the poem. What Emerson calls ugly, Lee calls beautiful: "All are beautiful by variety" (81). What Emerson rejects, Lee accepts, "every hair" (83). Of his immediate family, he writes, "These / are the faces I love, the bodies / and scents of bodies / for which I long" (80). In accepting other "others," Lee comes to accept himself. He even comes to recognize "the world's love for me" (82), a powerful statement of overcoming any lingering self-loathing resulting from being ostracized and insulted and not accepted by the dominant culture in the United States.

The indiscriminate acceptance does not end there. To communicate the voraciousness of his acceptance, Lee uses the metaphor of eating. Writing that he feels compelled to "devour the world to utter it," Lee declares that he "would eat" not only the fish he takes as a sign of the world's love for him but also (as eating becomes a metaphor) the person who caught that fish, the butcher who cleaned it, the way that that butcher works, the death of the fish, the deaths of all Chinese and all immigrants in America, the entire Chinese "race," its history included along with every physical feature, and even Emerson, his insults along with his soul (82-83). I am proposing that eating signals acceptance. But this is not an obvious interpretation, particularly when it comes to the more unsavory items on his menu. Also, without further clarification, it is a rather ambiguous interpretation. Acceptance could convey simple affirmation, or haggard resignation, or giving up, or letting slide, or something else. Eating indicates a voracious acceptance but acceptance of a particular sort, which may be ascertained through considering more carefully what the metaphor of eating entails.

Jeffrey F. L. Partridge proposes that eating has multiple and even simultaneous meanings, among which are both destructive and constructive meanings; i.e., eating may signal “attacking” and “embracing” (“Politics,” 108). For instance, eating fish may serve as “a sign of cultural communion with other Chinese immigrants,” whereas eating Emerson may serve as “an aggressive weapon against racism in American society and American literature” (107-08). But such a neat distinction between the two functions of eating does not completely fit with the details of the poem, since Lee makes no distinction between his eating of fish and his eating of Emerson. In fact, just the opposite, he overtly connects and even blurs the two. Accordingly, Partridge moves to a more complex interpretation. He proposes that “the analogy of eating” has the same sort of double meaning as “cleave.” While cleave may mean to join and to separate, the poem does not indicate that it means the one in certain passages and the other in other passages. Instead, both meanings are at least potentially operative in any line. It may be likewise with eating. Along these lines, Partridge writes, “we attack by cutting, biting, chewing, swallowing, and digesting, but through this attack we also absorb the nutrients of what we eat . . . What we eat, in this sense, becomes a part of us” (114). The negative aspects of Emerson are devoured in the sense that they are rejected, while the positive aspects are devoured in the sense that they are absorbed. The multiple phases in the act of eating allows this sorting out, this digestion. Such a reading makes sense, as far as it goes. But it does not fully account for the gusto with which Lee swallows Emerson whole or the lack of distinction on Lee’s part between eating Emerson and eating what else he eats, the good and the bad. It seems that Lee is proposing something in addition to and more radical than rejecting the bad and accepting the good. Accordingly, Partridge proposes one more reading: “positive ‘change’ requires, as in expanding the horizon of consciousness and the reader’s horizon of expectation, an ‘embrace’ and a ‘covenant’ between

the racialized self and the racist Other” (114). This final reading makes the most sense to me. With it, Partridge approaches describing the sort of acceptance I argue that eating represents in the poem.

When one eats something, both that thing and one’s self are changed. The eating symbolizes an incorporation of that which is not the self into the self, into one’s very body. This indiscriminate eating does not imply the lack of critique but rather puts critique on a lower level. Critique comes earlier or later, at another time at any rate. Thus, while distinctions, responses, rejections, critiques may be and should be formed in other contexts (and are even by Lee), the spiritual imperative of the present moment and purpose call for something even more radical than those. Something bigger is happening. I am proposing that eating signals radical acceptance, a spiritual posture. When Lee writes that he wants to eat the world, he explains that his “eating” entails “a kind of reading.” Moreover, his response to reading will be “love-in-answer” (*City*, 82). The acceptance the poem enacts is of a certain kind. It is not passive but active embracing, swallowing, ingesting, digesting, understanding (82). On the deepest level, then, Lee approaches the violence of exile, the violence of mortality, the violence of transcendence in the same way that he approaches the joys of his family, his food, his ethnicity, namely, through an acceptance that is another word for love, not an easy acceptance or an flighty love, but one grounded in a transcendence that is immanent and an immanence that is transcendence. In “The Cleaving,” Lee strives to love the intangible in the tangible, whatever joys and pains may come.

### **Human Love as an Instance of Divine Love**

I have proposed understanding Lee’s poetry in terms of cultural exile, marked by the experience of being a refugee and immigrant; spiritual exile, marked by a sense of existential homelessness; and religious exile, marked by an exit from but continued engagement with a

religious tradition. But documenting exile is no end in and of itself for Lee. He wants to make something in (or out of) the homelessness he encounters and experiences. In particular, he seeks to find or create a spiritual home, while drawing on elements of culture and religion to do so. The central pillar of this home, so to speak, involves seeing the intangible in the tangible. In “Persimmons,” Lee finds this immanent transcendence—or transcendent immanence—in the practices of food, family, and art. In “The Cleaving,” he finds it in the practice of being present to and accepting in a radical and spiritual way the varieties of violence that attend mortality, racism, and the interconnection of all people. In “Virtues of a Boring Husband,” a more recent poem, Lee brings the task of seeking and building home to a place that is at once more domestic than “Persimmons” and more cosmic than “The Cleaving.” In “Virtues of a Boring Husband,” Lee commits an ordinary act of kindness toward his wife and, through that act and through reflecting and speculating on that act, comes to see himself participating not only in the love of God but also in the very origins of the cosmos.

The poem weaves two strands together, the poet’s theological and cosmic speculations wrapped in a quiet, domestic narrative of the relationship between Lee and his wife, content framed by context. Presented as spoken dialogue in the narrative, the speculations are introduced with a series of *maybes* (fourteen in all), which announce the speculations as speculations and which serve as a formal device to structure them. As the speculations unfold, they expand in depth and scope. Lee begins with an image of lovers meeting in “a garden” or “a house by the sea” (*Behind*, 93). But then he suggests that perhaps lovers do not meet in such places but create them through their relating to one another, “that such spaces emerge / out of the listening / their speaking to each other engenders.” In other words, the love between lovers is both prior to and the cause of those places in which their love manifests. Then, he wonders, if that is so, perhaps

the love of lovers is itself caused by something still prior which it in turn manifests. “Maybe,” he says, “the face-to-face true lovers enact / manifests a prior coincidence / of heaven and earth, say, or body and soul” (94). Then, he wonders, perhaps even that “prior coincidence” emerges from yet a still prior coincidence: “the liaison between / God and Mind” (95). From there, Lee ponders what that liaison might look like. Maybe God “says *I love you!* and the whole / universe” emerges from the “pronouncement” of those words or just “*I love!*” and “a *You* / arises as echo.” In either case, “*I love!*” (“an expression of God’s first nature”) rings out, “engendering all of space, every quadrant” (95). Having reached all the way back to the origins of the universe in the love of God, Lee returns his speculation to human love. If “the union of lovers is an instance / of a primary simultaneity,” then that prior reality ought to come to bear in the relationship of the lovers (94). Perhaps it comes to bear, Lee speculates, quite practically:

Maybe we learn

to love a person, say, first as object,  
and then as presence, and then as essence,  
and then as disclosure of the divine,

or maybe all at the same time,  
or discovering over time  
each deeper aspect to be true.

And maybe our seeing it in another  
proves that face inside ourselves. (97)

In these lines, Lee gives his own version of Plato’s “ladder of love.” People are both “object[s]” and “disclosure[s] of the divine.” They have bodies, cultures, histories. But they are simultaneously more than that. They are instances of, manifestations of, results of the love of God which “saturates” the cosmos. When we love one another, we enact the original “*I love*” of God. We might be able to realize this reality in an instant. We might need to uncover it step by

step. We might see it all at once on a superficial level but then “over time” come to better understand it more deeply.

In the speculative portions of this poem, Lee articulates a theology or cosmology behind the realities he has been enacting and discussing all along: the mutual embeddedness of the spiritual and the material, the immanence of transcendence, and the place of the intangible in the tangible. The root of all of this is the love of, for lack of better word, God. He uses the word God as a “convenience,” he has said, not knowing what he really means by it. But that particular convenience and that not knowing are both examples of Lee’s continued engagement with the religious tradition he has left behind. Whenever he uses language like “the love of God,” we are reminded of his religious exile from Christianity and we see that he still finds some of the resources of that tradition meaningful, useful, or otherwise compelling and thus continues to “wrestle” with them. But he also “wrestles” with other traditions. In this poem, for instance, he uses and revises the “ladder” from Plato’s *Symposium* (Plato 55). In introducing the idea of “ladder of love” in the poem, Lee confesses, “I don’t know if I’m remembering it right,” allowing himself room to revise the content and number of the steps, while retaining more than a little of Plato’s original idea. This parallels and adds to Lee’s engagement with other traditions, even as he seeks to build his own sense of home, spiritually speaking.

These speculations appear in “Virtues of a Boring Husband” as spoken dialogue in a narrative. The full significance of the poem emerges from the relationship between the speculation and the narrative, between the abstractions about God and love and the enacting of the truths to which those abstractions point in the concrete setting of daily life. The poem opens with the narrative. “Whenever I talk, my wife falls asleep,” he explains. “So, now, when she can’t sleep, I talk” (92). Then he proceeds to tell of an instance when his wife hasn’t slept well in



a week and “lies down early” to sleep. Though “exhausted,” she does not fall asleep but “begins to toss and turn,” “claimed by rabble cares” (92). The poet “lie[s] down beside her” and begins to talk, not to be heard but to help her fall asleep. “You know, I’ve been thinking,” he says. She “calms down” right away and snuggles closer to him, asks him to stay and to keep talking. So he does, pondering aloud the theological or cosmological ideas discussed above. The poem moves back and forth from presenting his words to describing and narrating the unfolding domestic scene. A little into the discourse, his wife’s eyes get “fuzzy.” Then she closes them (92). The poet goes on talking, paying attention to his wife’s body, counting her sighs, stroking her head, watching her face, touching her hair (93, 94). The poem measures out her process of falling asleep by movements in her body. She curls into a fetal position. She breathes and sighs. Then, the poet writes, “Little twitches run the length of her, beginning / with her arms, then her legs, then her feet, as though / tensions were being fired from her body” (94). She “mumbles” something, the first part of a word (94). She sighs again, “lower, longer” (95). She is “barely listening, if at all.” Eventually her body nears and then enters sleep, “her jaw has gone slack, her fingers loose / where earlier they were clenching the edge of the blanket.” At last, the poet “kiss[es] her forehead,” waits a bit, and then leaves the bed and the room (97).

I find this narrative remarkable in several ways, not least because of how unremarkable it is. It tells a quiet, uneventful event. That almost nonevent is full of tenderness, attention to the body, awareness of the other and of the other’s anxieties and pains. The small act of helping a tired, anxious spouse fall asleep, carried out with attention and care, demonstrates a deep, calm, abiding love between two lovers who are also friends. The narrative speaks of solidness and kindness. The poet puts his self and his ideas second to the comfort of his beloved. The scene is marked by the presence of bodies, particularly the body of the wife, by anxiety expressed

through that body's struggle for sleep, and by tenderness and kindness through the poet's willingness to speak, to use the words of his honored profession, for a mundane, domestic task, to speak not for his ideas to be considered but for his voice itself, the physical presence and aural vibrations, to sooth. Finally, there's no grand finale, no grand resolution or ultimate ecstasy, no sex even, contrary to what one might expect of a love poem set in a bedroom (and contrary to what happens in other of Lee's poems, including "Persimmons," "The Cleaving," "This Room and Everything in It," "The City in Which I Love You," and "The Waiting"), just the rest of one person and the slipping off of the other to somewhere else. The narrative portion of the poem thus enacts the ideas pondered in the speculative portion. Human love is not just said to be an instance of divine love but practiced as that.

In an interview discussing spirituality, Lee stops while describing some aspect of the sacred to say, "You know . . . these aren't ideas. They're experiences" (Personal interview). It is important to Lee that the ideas are not the point, the experiences, the realities are. The ideas help us contemplate, seek, enact something bigger than ideas. Likewise, the significance of ideas pondered in the speculative parts of the poem extends only so far as the narrative part of the poem enacts them. It is not the idea that we are instances of God's love that matters most to Lee but the experience of that, the living out of that. Once again, Lee proposes that the "knowledge" and "practice" of the "condition of our deep embeddedness in a cosmic context" instills "fearlessness, trust, love, openness, generosity, a more comprehensive, fuller human being" (Personal interview). The speculations in the poem represent knowledge, however tentative. The act of kindness represents the practice. It is not that the knowledge does not matter but that it does not matter in and of itself. Knowledge matters to the extent that it leads to love. In this position, central to Lee's postsecular spiritual vision, one can hear the influence of, a quiet

ongoing conversation about, and yet still, in a sense, a wrestling match with, the religious tradition of Lee's father. To be more specific, one hears echoes of Saint Paul—that very learned writer of most of the New Testament—saying, “Knowledge puffeth up, but charity edifieth” (1 Cor. 8:1).

## Conclusion

Just as there are many reasons one might leave a religious tradition, there are also many reasons one might not make a clean break of it when doing so. One may find the tradition still has some truths. One may have family and friends who remain within that tradition. One may be so hurt by experiences in the tradition that one has trouble letting go. One may, inversely, feel an ongoing sense of gratitude for what good one received from the tradition. One may still value the resources—the wisdom, imagery, language, practices, community—that may still be gained from the tradition. These and other circumstances may create many religious exiles, a distinctively postsecular experience. The literature of religious exile speaks to this experience. Li-Young Lee's experience of cultural exile allows him the understanding, language, and sensibility to write about religious exile all the more potently. His sensitivity toward spiritual exile allows him to write about religious exile with all the more urgency and universality. In the end, Lee does not pine for Christianity or for China or Indonesia. He has come home in his exile, to a certain degree, at home on the journey in which he seeks God, a journey that has taken him far from where he began.

But if religious exile is a common and potentially enriching experience, it is not an enviable one. It is born out of existential dissatisfaction, a driving hunger for what is real and true and sacred. It requires leaving one place but not leaving it completely. It requires, in a sense, being in two places at once. It may, of course, include playfulness, dance-like qualities. But at the same time, it can be a wrestling match in which one may get bruised or broken. Thus, in the lines used as an epigraph to Part II of this dissertation, Lee writes,

Someone tell the Lord to leave me alone.  
I've had enough of his love  
that feels like burning and flight and running away. (*City*, 35)

One does not seek out religious exile. Rather following what one believes to be true, one simply (or not so simply) ends up homeless and strives to make or find a new home. Lee writes, "At this point in my life maybe there's a lot of homesickness and exile in my work because this is what is true for me. But my hope is that someday I will be a poet of blessing and praise." Indeed, he wants "to be known as a poet of reconciliation, a poet who made it back from exile." Thinking of his children, he says that his "final report" cannot be "that our true human condition is homelessness and exile." But, he adds, "if that's what I ultimately discover, that's what I'll report." He cannot settle for less than what he believes to be real and true: "I need to get there authentically. I need to find my real way home" ("Silence," 124). In the postsecular moment, for some, the only way home is the way through homelessness.

### PART III: PILGRIMAGE—SCOTT CAIRNS

Given time enough,  
the slowest pilgrim—even he—might  
register some small measure of belated  
progress.

—Scott Cairns (*Edge*, vii)

While many people in the contemporary United States are leaving religion, others are not only remaining in a religious tradition but journeying deeper into it, another distinctively postsecular phenomenon. Scott Cairns is undoubtedly one of the foremost poets of religious pilgrimage writing in the United States today. The question his writing invites is this: *How does Cairns's poetry of pilgrimage both reaffirm and revise orthodox—indeed, Greek Orthodox—conceptions of the Christian religious tradition and, thereby, constitute a postsecular poetics?* This question takes readers to the heart of Cairns's poetry and to the heart of postsecular pilgrimage.

In the postsecular topos of pilgrimage, poets “wrestle with angels” through moving deeper into a particular religious tradition while also revising aspects of that tradition from the inside. The poetry of Scott Cairns exemplifies the topos of religious pilgrimage through his re-envisioning (or recovering older meanings of) traditional religious concepts such as sin and salvation and through his rewriting and commenting on ancient religious texts. In his work, he describes and enacts a postsecular poetics and spirituality of and in pilgrimage. In some poems, he recovers ancient meanings he finds useful for the present. In others, he pushes back against aspects of ancient texts that, in the most popular or most obvious readings, he does not find

tenable for today, particularly with regards to the violence of the biblical text. In this way, Cairns is simultaneously orthodox and not so orthodox.

In Part II of this dissertation, I analyze both the affirming and recovering of aspects of tradition, marked by a gentle updating thereof, and the critical revision of other aspects of tradition, marked by a sustained and sustaining desire to find meanings for today even in the hardest parts of the texts of the past. In Chapter 6, “Varieties of Pilgrimage,” I argue for the aptness of “religious pilgrimage” as a category for understanding the postsecular aspects of Cairns’s work, contextualizing that claim within the larger tradition of the literature of pilgrimage, within existing scholarship on Cairns’s work and in light of Cairns’s interviews and nonfiction writing and a number of his poems. In Chapter 7, “On Sin and Salvation,” I argue that a range of Cairns’s poems, particularly including those in the Adventures in New Testament Greek series and the Idiot Psalms series, demonstrate Cairns’s engagement with the religious tradition through affirming appropriation of these texts, though still revising what he finds. In Chapter 8, “Wrestling with the Text,” I argue that other of Cairns’s poems, particularly those in the series titled “The Recovered Midrashim of Rabbi Sab” and the verse libretto *The Martyrdom of Saint Polycarp*, represent an engagement with the tradition that has a sharper edge, often more critical and more pointedly revisionary, though in a way that continues to find or create something valuable from the difficult passages of the ancient texts.

## Chapter Six: Varieties of Pilgrimage

### Up to the Edge

In his memoir, *Short Trip to the Edge: Where Earth Meets Heaven—A Pilgrimage*, Scott Cairns narrates his first visits to Mount Athos, the most holy site in Greek Orthodoxy, a peninsula in Northern Greece where monks have lived lives of prayer, seeking to “become prayer,” for more than seventeen hundred years (13, 155). The narrative begins with Cairns in a boat at port at the edge of the Aegean Sea, about to cross over to the Holy Mountain for the first time. From the boat, the *Áxion Estín*, itself a symbol of journey, he describes to readers how he has come to be there and what he hopes for. He has come feeling stuck, delayed in his spiritual progress. He hopes to learn something about how to pray. He hopes to turn a corner in his spiritual journey. As the memoir’s title indicates, he has come on a pilgrimage. Readers soon discover that pilgrimage is the central term in his writing and his spirituality. In “Setting Out,” the poem with which he opens the book, he writes, “In time, even the slowest pilgrim might / articulate a turn” (*Edge*, vii). That phrase “slow pilgrim” occurs regularly in his writing. In “Adventures in New Testament Greek: *Metanoia*,” he describes the “slow pilgrim” as one who turns toward the good (*Compass*, 93). In “Evening Prayer,” he observes that “the mute appearance of a grief . . . slows the pilgrim’s progress to a crawl” (*Compass*, 159). In “Slow Boat to Byzantium,” a poem on yet another trip to Mount Athos, he describes himself and his fellow travelers as “slow pilgrims” seeking “brief and random refuge” (*Psalms*, 58). In a meditation on the liturgical calendar, he directly names himself “the slowest of pilgrims” (“Advent,” 47). *Slow Pilgrim* is also the title of his volume of collected poems.



Certainly, pilgrimage describes his visits to Mount Athos. Pilgrimage also describes, as I will argue, his journey into Eastern Orthodoxy, specifically, Greek Orthodoxy. But these journeys are not necessarily the slow one. That great, slow pilgrimage is the spiritual journey. In his own definition, “a *pilgrim* is a person who, confronted by a spiritual distance to be crossed, determines to make the journey” (*Edge*, 262). Cairns understands his visits to Mount Athos and his journey into Orthodoxy as small pilgrimages that will, if not speed things up, at least keep him moving along in that larger, spiritual pilgrimage. He wants nothing less than to come at last to the “edge,” to look into the “the abyss” of reality and to glimpse its “enormity”—which is to say, in more traditionally Christian terms, he wants to abide in awareness of the presence of God everywhere and at all times and to be, thereby, transformed (*Edge*, 22).

Cairns went to Mount Athos to learn to pray and to glimpse enormity because he found his own life so far removed, spiritually speaking, from where he wanted to be. He intended that this particular place pilgrimage would help him in his larger spiritual pilgrimage, explaining that while he has “been planning this trip for most of a year,” he has “been on this journey” for most of his life (3). He paraphrases Dante to elaborate: “*when I had traveled half of our life’s way, I found myself stopped short, as within a dim forest.*” Though he has said prayers since childhood, he “started one day to the realization that—at the middling age of forty—I had not yet learned to pray” (4). Ten years before coming to Mount Athos, while walking along the beach with his beloved Labrador, he realized that he had “neglected” “the real work—the interior work” (6). He realized “how far I stood from where I’d meant to be” (7). But realizing wasn’t enough. In the decade between that beach walk and arriving at Mount Athos, he *still* hadn’t make the progress he wanted to. In particular, “harsh words” and “harsh thoughts” would habitually “undermine any accomplishment in the realms of charity and compassion” (7). He found himself, more or

less, staying put. On the basis of the Eastern Christian tradition, he had come to believe that “staying put is . . . an aberration” and to realize or at least to hope that “we *might could be* becoming . . . *always* becoming” (7). On the basis of the same tradition, he had come to see prayer as the way forward. For Cairns and other Eastern Orthodox Christians, prayer is not merely—and often not even—talking to God. It is not about penance, or petition, or praise in and of themselves. Rather, prayer has one ultimate purpose, nothing less than “to accommodate union with God—what those in the business like to call *theosis*” (15). To this end, he sets out “to be, at long last, a pilgrim on the way” (9).

In the course of the memoir, Cairns describes the travel, including the boats, the buses and the hiking; the ruins of the ancient monasteries and ongoing repairs; the food and drink, including lots of Greek coffee and not a little wine; people he meets; conversations he has with monks and with other travelers; and the liturgical and contemplative practices of the monks of the Eastern Church, including prayer at all hours, use of a prayer rope, veneration of icons and relics, the beautiful and purposeful architecture of the first church he enters, designed around an embodied notion of worship; the fear and trembling with which he takes his first communion on Mount Athos; and his developing practice of the Jesus Prayer, which he simply calls “the prayer.” In this ancient practice, one repeats continually, as one breathes, the words “*Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me, a sinner*” or, in a still shorter version, simply the name “*Jesus*” (29-30). The prayer helps those who pray it “to be increasingly aware of God’s unfailing presence” (30).

He describes his first, second, and then third visit to Mount Athos. Meanwhile, the reader waits for a grand breakthrough, a spiritual epiphany, arrival at that edge. At the beginning of the first trip, the beginning of the book, Cairns considers what lies ahead. For one, he writes that he

hopes to find a spiritual father, someone who will help him in his own prayer life. Larger than that, two words come to mind for him: “*Enormity glimpsed*” (22). He anticipates glimpsing enormity. That’s what he has journeyed here for. He writes, “I have often startled to a fleeting sense—either within a landscape or, for that matter, while pouring over a written page—that there dwells before me an excess, abysmal, roiling beyond what can be grasped” (22). This sense of abysmality or overabundance led him to “savor the language of the Bible” as a child and led him to poetry as an adult. The image of an abyss is Cairns’s way of pointing to that aspect of reality that endlessly exceeds our ability to finally and fully perceive or grasp. In other words, the abyss signifies the sacred toward which and in which he journeys. He believes that “*the real*—whatever that may eventually prove to be—will appear, inevitably, as abysmal,” not “an abysmal emptiness so much as an abysmal fullness” (22). Those who have acquired the taste for the abyssal may turn to landscape, poetry, or sacred texts—so long as, in the latter case, the texts “are poured over and pressed for unexpected and generative meaning” (23). Elsewhere, he puts it similarly: “the actual—the True—is immeasurably immense. Whatever the truth turns out to be, it is ever and ways *necessarily* far more than we can know” (*End*, 102).

But the book does not end with any great epiphany, certainly no moment of union between the poet and God. He does not even find a father to guide him. Instead, he writes, he “found many.” The last chapter of the book lists out the names of monks he encountered and what he gained from them, which amount to bits of joy, friendship, forgiveness, encouragement, wisdom, relationships, advice on praying, a better understanding of the struggle with God, first-hand experience of the life of prayer he had only read about before. There was no single illuminating experience but a series of experiences that added up to a “deep richness” (*Edge*, 255). And that is certainly part of the point. He concludes, “The journey to prayer, so far as I can

tell, comes to no conclusive end. Like theosis itself, the pilgrimage proceeds from glimpse to glimpse” (*Edge*, 254). Cairns suggests, “I feel as if, finally, I might have made a beginning” (*Edge*, 254). Specifically, he reports that prayer “has become the sustaining focus of my waking days” and “a surprising accompaniment to my nights” (257). Cairns does return to the image of the abyss in a poem that brings the book to a close and shares its title:

And then I was standing at the edge. It would surprise you  
how near to home. And the abyss? Every shade of blue,  
all of them readily confused, and, oddly, none of this  
as terrifying as I had expected, just endless.

If these lines are not quite as dramatic as the reader or the writer may have expected or hoped for, the lines that follow explain that “enormity” “prefers its more dramatic churning done / out of sight” (*Edge*, 258). The poem reminds the readers “it was so near,” and then ends, “I went home.” Purposefully, the book ends with no dramatic breakthrough. He is not utterly transformed, though he does make some progress. The book holds on to the understanding of and desire for the enormity of reality. For Cairns, religion, poetry, pilgrimage, and ordinary life are all entangled in an ongoing search for more and more of the enormity that is God.

### **The Literature of Pilgrimage**

Cairns joins a long and diverse tradition of the literature of pilgrimage, which he acknowledges in the first pages of *Short Trip to the Edge* by quoting from Bunyan, Dante, and the Russian *The Way of the Pilgrim* (4). Sacred forms of journeying show up often in world literatures because, so it appears, pilgrimage is a nearly universal religious experience. Practices of pilgrimage have been documented in Judaism, Christianity, Islam, the religions of ancient Greece and Rome, Hinduism, Buddhism, the indigenous religions of Africa and the Americas, and secular societies (Coleman and Elsner 196; Tanner 127; Davidson and Gitlitz 431; Plate 36). While Chaucer provides the most well-known example—*when April showers end March*

*drought, then folk on pilgrimage set out*—Dee Dyas traces pilgrimage in Western literature as far back as the Hebrew Bible and New Testament, with the wanderings of Adam, Abraham, and others in the Books of Genesis and Exodus and with Christians instructed to live as “strangers and pilgrims on earth” in the First Epistle of Peter. Drawing on those scriptures, she explains, the Patristic writers of the early Christian church developed pilgrimage as a metaphor for the spiritual life (3-4). In the Middle Ages, as Donald R. Howard shows, Christians who set off on pilgrimages from Europe to Jerusalem left behind hundreds of written narratives. Though mostly forgotten, these narratives directly and indirectly led to the use of pilgrimage in *The Canterbury Tales*, *The Divine Comedy*, *Paradise Lost*, and *Pilgrim’s Progress*, those most famous texts of pilgrimage, and in such texts as *The Waste Land* and *Ulysses*, which continue the motif of journeying closer to the present (4, 6, 105, 117, 124).<sup>14</sup>

Medieval writers understood pilgrimage overwhelmingly in terms of “life as pilgrimage,” explains Dyas (6). Beyond that, however, pilgrimage provided “an image” that was “familiar to all, yet capable of a wealth of differing interpretations” (3). The same appears to hold true for pilgrimage in the literature of many times and places. While pilgrimage remains widely familiar as an image for journeying through life, particularly when the destination or the journeying itself is considered sacred in some way, much else remains open for differing interpretation. Dyas describes three primary interpretations of pilgrimage in medieval writing. The first is the

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<sup>14</sup>Work on pilgrimage and literature has dealt with the presence and diversity of pilgrimage across time and religions (Philip Edwards, Simon and Elsner, Plate), the relationship between physical and the metaphorical or spiritual aspects of pilgrimage (Oberholtzer, Howard, Plate, Dyas), the transformative potential of pilgrimage (Plate, Ruf), the particular role of pilgrimage in medieval English literature (Dyas, Howard, Holloway), the particular role of pilgrimage in the literature of the Americas (Oberholtzer, Elie), secular pilgrimage (Plate, Ruf), postsecular pilgrimage (Illman), the theme of pilgrimage in individual texts and writers (Groves, Gentile), and the way in which reading and writing can themselves serve as pilgrimages (Elie). Special issues of *Religion and Literature* (35.2/3) and *Cross Currents* (59.3) have also recently demonstrated ongoing interest in pilgrimage and literature.

“*interior pilgrimage*,” which Dyas associates with the contemplative life, including “monasticism, anchoritism, meditation and mysticism.” The second is the “*moral pilgrimage*,” the name to which Dyas gives “the active life” or “a life of daily obedience to God in the place of one’s everyday calling.” The third, “*place pilgrimage*,” corresponds most closely with the use of the term pilgrimage in common parlance. It involves “journeying to saints’ shrines or other holy places to secure forgiveness for specific sins or more general indulgences, to seek healing and other material benefits, to learn and to express devotion” (6). Though perhaps competing interpretations for medieval writers, these three modes of pilgrimage come together with no contradiction in the work of someone like Cairns, who remains deeply engaged in integrating the contemplative life and active life and who, to help that effort along, also practices place pilgrimage. Though he takes regular “pilgrimages, expeditions” to Mount Athos, he has “come to understand” his life “as one continuing pilgrimage” (*End*, 32).

What is most at stake in the differing medieval interpretations of pilgrimage is the relationship between the spirit and the body, the “vexed relationship between physical and spiritual journeying” (Dyas 126). While the idea is that physical pilgrimage can help along the spiritual one, Dyas explains that, even while it was a common practice at the time, many medieval writers considered physical pilgrimage (i.e. “*place pilgrimage*”) to be a distraction from the spiritual pilgrimage (i.e. “*the pilgrimage of life*”), a dangerous substitution of the tangible for the intangible (248). Dyas suspects that the physical pilgrimage was primarily understood as “the metaphor, a miniature version of that longer, more complex journey which every soul must choose to undertake” (246). Howard likewise notes that “a tension between physical act and spiritual intent is present in the whole tradition of the pilgrimage” (15). He finds that after the Reformation, the “interiorization of religious experience”—including pilgrimage—became all

the more dominant. By the time of Milton, for instance, though pilgrimage remained as a metaphor, physical pilgrimage was by and large looked on as “a thing of the past” (104-05). He writes, “Physical things—relics, costumes, travel—were part of medieval religion to an extent no longer true anywhere by Milton’s time. But to the Protestant—and especially the Puritan—mentality, there was a special horror in the physical aspects of religion: even the metaphor of journey had to be interiorized” (105). It is clear that Cairns rejects this rejection of materiality in no uncertain terms, implicitly and, as we will see, overtly. He would be much more comfortable with the way that S. Brent Plate describes pilgrimage in the present, where the prevailing understanding has turned in quite a different direction: “pilgrimage occurs in and through the human body. In pilgrimage, the body-soul distinction becomes irrelevant; souls and soles are not just homophones.” Indeed, Plate continues, “pilgrimage . . . reveal how religion itself is vitally physical” (266). It is not that the body has replaced the spirit, necessarily, but that they are now understood by many people to be intimately connected.

Though the relationship between body and spirit stands out as particularly significant, pilgrimage involves or evokes many relationships between what may be either opposing or complimentary terms, including between community and individual, innovation and tradition, leaving home and going home, and even belief and disbelief. It may be that such tensions constitute pilgrimage. Peter Jan Margry suggests this when he writes that pilgrimage always involves the “crossing of boundaries” (27). Among the boundaries crossed, he singles out those between “ordinary life” and “the sacred.” He proposes that “for pilgrims the essence of a pilgrimage is to approach the sacred, to enter it, to experience, to draw near, to touch, to make it their own, and if possible to hold onto it for their everyday lives” (35-36). It is clear that Cairns’s fits well into the long tradition of the literature of pilgrimage. His distinctive contribution to the

tradition has to do with his relationship with his distinctively orthodox and distinctively postsecular engagement with his religious tradition, which manifests most clearly in his corporeal wrestling with ancient religious texts, a wrestling that includes both adherence and revision.

### **Pilgrimage, Exile, and the Postsecular**

Cairns's pilgrimages to Mount Athos, the most holy site in Greek Orthodoxy, are part of his larger journey into that religious tradition. Having been born and raised an Evangelical Christian, a tradition he came to find spiritually unsustaining, his embracing of and movement deeper and deeper into Orthodox Christianity as an adult play an integral role in his still larger spiritual pilgrimage toward God. In *The Life You Save May Be Your Own: An American Pilgrimage*, Paul Elie defines pilgrimage as he sees it at work in the literature and life of Flannery O'Connor and certain other American Christian writers of the twentieth century in this way: "A pilgrimage is a journey undertaken in the light of a story" (x). For Cairns, an American Christian writer of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, pilgrimage is a journey taken not only in light of a story but, in a significant sense, into a story, the story that is the religious tradition. That moving into Orthodoxy required leaving Evangelicalism invites consideration of the relationship between religious exile and religious pilgrimage in the postsecular.

Pilgrimage shares much in common with exile. In the tradition of Christian pilgrimage dating back to the early centuries, the terms have sometimes been used interchangeably. Julie B. Holloway connects pilgrimage and exile by glossing the term pilgrim as "stranger" (1). Dyas points out that the definitions for the Latin, Old English, and Middle English roots of the word *pilgrim* all include *exile* (2). While "involuntary exile" has long been understood as "punishment for disobedience" in Christian thought, "voluntary exile . . . signals a desire to achieve spiritual



restoration through total commitment to the will of God” (Dyas 71). In particular, “the monastic life”—which is “a particular expression of the pilgrimage of life”—“had been regarded as a form of exile” (Dyas 206). Howard likewise describes pilgrimage in terms of exile, explaining how neither “homecoming” nor “destination” were part of the deal for the early Christian ascetics, except for how the destination might be to come home spiritually. The fathers and mothers of the desert who “were practicing a form of spiritual recklessness, a search of the spirit in which the only destination would be union with God and eternal life.” They “called the experience an exile” (Howard 49). Exile and pilgrimage can be described in terms of each other in part because they share key formal features: an inability to (or desire not to) stay put, setting out, traveling, searching, the experience of being in a new place as outsider, and so forth. In these similarities, pilgrims and exiles—both on a journey—are more similar to each other than they are to anyone who stays put.

At the same time, the terms do indicate distinct experiences. One of the most significant difference between exile and pilgrimage is the relationship to home. While coming home was not part of the conception of pilgrimage for the early Christian ascetics, Howard explains, it certainly is in our time (48). While the exile leaves home, the pilgrim goes home or comes home. Home—whether as the spiritual destination to which one is journeying or as the place to which one returns to try to integrate the spiritual benefits of the journey in one’s ordinary life—is a defining part of pilgrimage. Another crucial difference between exile and pilgrimage is the relationship of the traveler to community and tradition. Although a tradition of exile literature has certainly developed and although exiles often form communities on the road or in the places to which they relocate, exile is by definition a rupture from community and tradition. One sets off in a hurry, forced to leave family, friends, and belongings behind. There are no guides or guidebooks. The

way and the destination are both unclear. In contrast, although pilgrims may not know where they are going and although they may travel alone, pilgrimage is by definition a way to enter more deeply into a particular tradition and the community to which it belongs. One prepares for the journey, choosing to travel light, to leave habitual comforts and relationships behind. There are guides and guidebooks. While the destination may still be defined by mystery—as indeed both exile and pilgrimage literature attest—the way toward it has been marked and mapped by previous travelers. If we are speaking about spiritual exile and spiritual pilgrimage, both journeys to the unknown, we might say that exile is the unknown way to the unknown, while pilgrimage is the known way to the unknown.

Previously, I defined postsecular exile in terms of religious exile, by which I do not necessarily mean exile from a country or place because of religious reasons (even though that may sometimes be included) but rather exile from religion: leaving a religious tradition but remaining connected to it in some way. I now define postsecular pilgrimage quite similarly, in terms of religious pilgrimage, by which I do not necessarily mean a pilgrimage taken to a place for religious reasons (although that may sometimes be included) but rather pilgrimage into a religion: entering or entering more deeply into a religious tradition but insisting on a measure of revision and innovation informed by secular or modern knowledge and values. I argue that both of these are forms of postsecular “wrestling with angels.” Though closely related, postsecular exile and postsecular pilgrimage are *inverse* journeys in relation to a typical way of believing in and practicing a religious tradition. The religious exile leaves the tradition, while the religious pilgrim goes deeper into it. Both give up what is typical because it has become untenable in some way and seek what they are looking for in the atypical, in nontraditional ways of being religious. Though it may seem odd to count returning to the ancient traditions of a religion

“nontraditional,” it is fitting because it is certainly not the usual practice for the nominal believer or for the fundamentalist, though it has always been practiced by some and though, in the postsecular moment, it is becoming more common. The pilgrim differs from the nominal believer in the seriousness and intensity with which he or she takes religion. The pilgrim differs from the fundamentalist in how she or he moves, seeks to move, from knowing into greater knowing and a greater kind of knowing by way of not knowing.

With Li-Young Lee, I was able to use the term *religious exile* to indicate exile from a religion because religious exile wasn't already commonly understood to mean something else. His family's exile proper, that is, from China and Indonesia, I referred to variously as *cultural*, *political*, or *physical exile*. I referred to his existential condition of homelessness and searching as *spiritual exile*. I am following suit here in talking about pilgrimage in very parallel terms, though in this case the terms come pre-used and require a bit of redefining for the sake of clarity. The place pilgrimages that Cairns makes to Mount Athos are cultural and physical. They are pilgrimages proper, one might say. But those very sort of pilgrimages are usually called religious pilgrimages, to distinguish them from, say, political, artistic, literary pilgrimages, etc. For the sake of clarify, I am denoting those pilgrimages that Cairns takes to the *place* of Greek Orthodoxy as a religious culture and community as *cultural* or *physical pilgrimages*. Those cultural pilgrimages are part and parcel of his *religious pilgrimage*, the term to which I give his pilgrimage into the religious tradition of Greek Orthodoxy. It is this religious pilgrimage, not to Mount Athos but into Orthodoxy, that constitutes the most characteristically postsecular dimension of his poetry and spirituality. Like Lee, Cairns is on a spiritual journey, though a pilgrimage toward God rather than an exilic search for God. Like Lee, Cairns is on a physical journey, but to a place of cultural and religious significance that will help him on his spiritual

journey rather than away from a place of cultural and religious significance that will both help and hurt him on his spiritual journey. And, finally, like Lee, Cairns has a revisionary relationship with a religious tradition, though a revisionary embrace rather than conflicted rejection which complicates his cultural journey and enriches his spiritual one.

Religious pilgrimage as I've been defining it, as a journey into a religious tradition, foregrounds several dynamics that Philip Edwards considers integral to pilgrimage itself and that bear striking resonances with the postsecular. He writes that "pilgrimage in literature . . . has insistently reasserted itself [in times when] faith and belief have inevitably ebbed away, and remains a dominating image of search for the impossible—or rather for possibility" (4). Pilgrimage, thus, offers a particularly useful image for postsecular spiritual seekers, unable to believe in a traditional way and yet still longing for "the impossible—or rather for possibility." He calls pilgrimage "a willing suspension of disbelief" (210). He writes: "The history of pilgrimage is the history of constant hope and constant doubt; the practice has no meaning for those who do not believe, and is corrupted by those who think they believe, but it is constantly re-invented in the face of constant discrediting. In the literature of pilgrimage—pilgrimage as both reality and metaphor—the pressure of both doubt and hope is co-existent and extreme" (210). Edwards positions pilgrimage between absolute belief and absolute disbelief: "In between are all the hesitations and rephrasings" (211). Certainly, the postsecular pilgrim has much to doubt about religion and yet still believes in That Which May Be. In-betweenness, hesitations, and rephrasings are the postsecular pilgrim's precise mode of traveling.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>15</sup>Regarding these hesitations in Cairns's work, Klug finds Cairns too often to be too tentative, too "apologetic" (459). He proposes that Cairns shows "frequent anxiety about leaving the reader behind," a symptom of the low regards with which serious religious discourse is considered in our society (460). Where Klug sees anxiety, Marshall sees generosity in the very same "hesitancy" of tone, not a fear about leaving the reader behind but a desire to bring the

## Pilgrimage to Orthodoxy

The most striking aspect of Cairns's journey in life and in religion is that he grew up in a fundamentalist Christianity marked by a literalist approach to the Bible, individualism, an extreme emphasis on belief as mental assent, a denial of the body, and the attendant conservative politics and religious judgmentalism, and moved from these things into the more ancient and more open way of being Christian he found in Eastern Orthodoxy. He writes, "I've come upon [the] treasures of the faith more or less piecemeal, bit by bit, along a slow and desultory path from Baptist kid to Presbyterian elder to Episcopal short-timer to being a parishioner in—as we say in the business—the 'One Holy, Orthodox, Catholic, and Apostolic Church'" (*Edge*, 255-56). Before becoming Orthodox and before setting out to learn to pray, he writes that his faith was "more or less in my head" rather than embodied and that he was living "insufficiently accompanied" rather than in "the solace of our lives together" which is "the life of the Body of Christ" (*Edge*, 257). Cairns eventually found these problems addressed through his participation in Eastern Christianity. But that "slow and desultory path" almost didn't lead him there. Cairns's story is one of a man who almost lost his faith but found it instead. What became a pilgrimage deeper into Christianity was first almost an exile out it.

Born in Tacoma, Washington, Cairns grew up attending Temple Baptist Church, part of the General Association of Regular Baptist Churches, that taught him a conservative, fundamentalist Christianity. His sharpest description and criticism of this Christianity comes in a short poem with a title that speaks volumes on its own. In "The Spiteful Jesus," he notes that the Christianity he grew up with was based on followers being "beaten to a bland consistency." His church taught him that Jesus "is angry," "just," "unspeakably / indignant," "more than a little /

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reader along (114). The hesitancy, qualifications, and on occasion an outright apology are markers of the postsecular habit of hedging bets, not getting too close to certainty.

needy,” and “quick to dish out / just deserts” (*Compass*, 92). Although this Jesus “may have died for us,” “it was not gladly.” He writes that he encountered this Jesus when he “met souls in hell” “as a boy in church.” It is a version of Christianity defined not by good deeds, love for the poor, or a welcome embrace of the outcast but by its belief that God sends people to hell and by its teaching of this belief to small children. In no uncertain terms, Cairns calls this version of Christianity “blasphemy.” Though quite “familiar” in the United States, he insists that this version of Christianity diverges from orthodox (lowercase *o*) Christianity as it has historically been understood and practiced around the world for twenty centuries. Pulling no punches, he names it “a corrupt, corrupting fiction.”

Cairns became increasingly less comfortable with this Christianity. He found he could not believe a lot of what he was taught, even while a child before he knew why. In an interview for *The Other Journal*, Cairns describes having as a child “a developing sense—beginning with some very early memories—of there being something bigger than any available explanation could account for” (“Partaking”). In “one very vivid childhood memory,” he stands outside on a cold night and looks up at the sky “full of stars” and sees his “breath” and explains out loud, “I love life.” He was aware and in awe of something for which he had no other words to describe. Indeed, he was aware and in awe of something for which there are no words to describe. The problem is that his church never taught him that—actually wasn’t able to. The United States “and its church folk” have little hunger for “the apophatic, the parabolic, the vertiginous mystery of the God in whom we live and move and have our being.” They also have very little “taste” for the “poetic,” “which is, at its heart, a way of leaning into the apophatic, the parabolic, the mystery.” In particular, the “American church” does not have much of “a taste for enormity.” What it has instead is an “addiction to narrow certainties” (“Partaking”).

The spiritual narrowness was the heart of the problem. But it was intertwined with intellectual and political narrowness as well. In a conversation with Kathleen Norris, he jokes that “when my brother and I went to college we started reading books. Not long thereafter, we were invited not to come back to church” (726). In an interview in *Image*, Cairns recalls, “I had long felt a need to wrestle with a number of unsatisfying theological, ideological, political matters offered at church when I was a boy. Frankly, I recall how certain observations made by my Baptist pastor, or a youth leader, or a choir director struck me as ridiculous, and I recall the angst of not knowing what to do about that discovery” (“Conversation,” 65). In response to this, he learned “to press the scripture for help in dealing with the dissonance, finding refuge in the ways those words could suggest other readings besides those I’d been offered” (65). In the same interview, he goes on to explain:

Over the years, I had begun to suspect—had been subconsciously denying, actually, for a couple decades—an appalling, nearly physiological, and increasing sense that Christianity, as I then understood it, was offered up as the thinnest of soups. . . . [T]he conversation of Christendom, at least its most audible expressions, rang uniformly flat, petty, selfish, and small. The willing appropriation of American religious discourse in the service of economically and politically destructive agendas—enhancing the few at the expense of the global poor—didn’t help matters. So, frankly, I found popular Christianity to be untenable. And I thought that I was the heretic, the misfit, the one who was slipping away from the truth, perhaps because I could not bear it.

(“Conversation,” 59)

He further explains that “so many highly visible interpreters of scripture today and self-appointed spokespersons for the faith are smugly pleased to” read scripture “as if it were a coded message, reducible to meager paraphrase” (59). Such a Christianity will undoubtedly, without trying, hurt people. He shares that he has “a number of beloved friends” who “share an abiding sense of alienation from the Body of Christ, as that Body is expressed in the media and in their local churches. Each has also, I daresay, survived a number of clumsy, insensitive, and, frankly, idiotic ordeals in one or more of those communities” (*Edge*, 222).

For all of these reasons, Cairns explains, he had “difficulty with ‘fitting in’ at the various churches I attended from my high school days through my early thirties.” This left him “in the same isolated boat. I went a good—or rather, a decidedly bad—ten or so years without a body; I was a severed member, languishing alone” (*End*, 77). Near the end of that time, he had one final, painful experience with this sort of Christianity. He was teaching at Old Dominion University, in Virginia, when he interviewed for a full professor position at a prestigious Christian school, Seattle Pacific University, to teach creative writing, “which, in some ways, would have been a homecoming to the evangelical community in which I was raised” (“Conversation,” *Prairie Schooner*, 46). In a scandal that received national attention within higher education, thanks in part to Kathryn Robinson’s essay on the affair in *Lingua Franca*, he was offered and accepted the position only to have the contract rescinded when the school’s administration came across an erotic poem he had just published in *The Paris Review*. This painful experience—which helped him finally move into Greek Orthodoxy (“Conversation,” *Prairie Schooner*, 46)—illustrates so much of what Cairns finds wrong in the predominant strands of Christianity in the United States, a literalist approach to text, a denigration of the body, and a willingness to reject and hurt people over theology.



With all that he finds wrong with the dominant forms of Christianity he encountered for most of his life, it would make perfect sense for Cairns to go into religious exile, to be separated from the religious tradition of his upbringing, while continuing to wrestle with it from the outside. In fact, he shares that he almost did. In a *Prairie Schooner* interview, he notes, “There was a period of two or three years when . . . I nearly pursued conversion to Judaism” (“Conversation”). He felt that “most things Christian had been fairly well subverted by what I perceived to be Hellenic/Platonic/Gnostic dichotomies of body and spirit.” But then he “discovered rabbinical texts and . . . the Hebraic disposition towards words that serves as a premise for such texts,” which were exceptionally appealing to him (4). But, he goes on, “I didn’t become Jewish primarily because I could not let go of Jesus—more likely, *He* would not let go of *me*” (49). What happened instead of leaving Christianity is remarkable. He went into religious pilgrimage, going deeper into the tradition, rather than leaving it, and thereby wrestling with it from the inside. For all that was wrong with the church of his childhood, he gained several things from it that he considers of lasting personal and spiritual value. Even though he reads the Bible now in a way diametrically opposed to how he was taught to growing up, he still credits that church for instilling in him a love for its stories. Above all else, he was loved and was taught to love. He says to Norris, “I would never want people to misunderstand that I’m not deeply grateful for the love of that community and what they taught me about love and the Bible stories” (Cairns and Norris 729). He puts it even more strongly: “Without question, my love of God, my joy in mystery, my sense of the reality of things unseen were all gifts of this upbringing” (“Conversation,” *Prairie Schooner*, 45).

He also credits the church community of his youth for his view of and, in Christian parlance, his relationship with Jesus. He is adamant about this: “Understand: I loved Jesus

Christ,” even while growing less and less comfortable with Christianity, and “never doubted him or his love for me (that much had been experientially fixed in my person)” (“Conversation,” *Image*, 59). This statement may seem to contradict what Cairns writes in “The Spiteful Jesus,” his sharp critique of what that church taught him about Jesus, overtly and implicitly. But here the distinction between religion as belief and religion as experience makes all the difference. If what his church taught him about Jesus was not loving, the way in which they allowed him to experience Jesus was all about love. Indeed, an affirmation of the experiential knowing of this love and this Jesus—“whose courtesy / and kiss unsought are nonetheless / bestowed”—turns out to be the whole point of “The Spiteful Jesus” (*Compass*, 92). As described already, Cairns pulls no punches in criticizing the “blasphemy” of an unloving Jesus. The poem ends, though, with a revelation. If the church to which his family belonged had taught him a “corrupt, corrupting fiction,” it was the love of his family that allowed him to see that for what it was. He writes that it was “when/ my own father (mortal that he was) / forgave me everything, unasked” that he came to understand that the spiteful Jesus was false (*Compass*, 92). In this way, he credits the same religious upbringing within which he can no longer abide with the understanding and experience that remains central to him, a loving, forgiving, gracious, superabundant Jesus. It was this Jesus and the discovery of a tradition that he sees as more in line with this Jesus that kept Cairns within Christianity, that sent him on a pilgrimage rather than into exile.

In conversation with Norris, he explains that, despite his break with the Christianity of his upbringing, he sees a crucial connection between that Christianity and the one he practices today. It is important to him to see himself as going deeper into the same tradition rather than as leaving one tradition and joining another. He says that he initially thought of himself as *converting* into Orthodoxy, until an Orthodox priest encouraged him to see himself as remaining within

Christianity, just getting more of it than the narrow version he had grown up with. The priest said, “Let’s not use this ‘convert.’ Let’s say embracing finally the fullness of the faith” (729). While acknowledging that sometimes in discussing with people his journey to Orthodoxy, “there’s a sense that I have turned my back on the community that I was raised in,” he says simply, “I don’t feel it that way” (729). He continues, “I really don’t want to think of it as having left my religious tradition, but rather having seen where that religious tradition comes from and sort of followed the taproot to the heart of the matter and embraced what I perceive to be the beginnings of that expression” (738). He says that he found “this deep richness” in Orthodoxy and in the early Christianity with which Orthodoxy closely aligns. He discovered with delight: “that was my tradition too” (729).

In the years leading up to that, Cairns discovered orthodoxy before discovering Orthodoxy. First, of course, his sense of enormity in the world disposed him toward a tradition which honors enormity. Second, his own practices of reading and writing primed him further. He goes so far as to say that “writing my poems led me into Orthodoxy; I’m pretty sure that my poems enacted and effected my movement away from the literalism . . . of my youth . . . into a sacramental understanding of words—that is, of *words* and of *all things*” (“Conversation,” *Prairie Schooner*, 49). This sacramental understanding of words and things (and of words as things) forms the foundation of Cairns’s poetics, as we will discuss shortly. Third, he encountered Eastern approaches to Christianity in ancient texts before happening, one day, into a contemporary Greek Orthodox Church. What he read answered not only the problems he had with the Christianity of his youth but also his open, living approach to texts and his longing for that which cannot be named. On his encounter with these texts, he shares, “When I came upon the rich lineage of apophatic theologians—Saint Denys the Areopagite, Saint Gregory of Nyssa,

Saint Maximos the Confessor, Saint Isaac of Syria, and Saint Gregory Palamas, among others—I found my heart leaping for joy, and felt an enormous sense of reprieve . . . I felt as if I’d come home” (“Conversation,” *Image*, 59). The early fathers of Christianity “maintained a genuinely Hebraic understanding of Holy Scripture.” In other words, “They knew that it contained boundless mystery . . .” Moreover, “certain of the fathers” even “wrote their meditations in verse, willingly complicating the suggestive, generative nature of words exploring the Word” (“Conversation,” *Image*, 59). He finds that “for the most part” “the contemporary Eastern Orthodox Church . . . continues to live within that living tradition,” which is “the prior tradition” compared to “the untenable expressions” of Christianity he had already “rejected” which he calls a “latter-day perversion” and “an essential perversion” (“Conversation,” *Image*, 59). Those versions resulted, he suggests, from “the loss of tradition, a lack of historical sense, and the squandering of an inheritance” (59). He “began to visit Orthodox churches” not long after the incident with Seattle Pacific University: “Immediately, I felt like I had finally made it home. I found the Divine Liturgy to be moving, powerful, beautiful, and utterly *worshipful*. I found the apophatic, mystical theology also to be moving, powerful, beautiful, and *compelling*. Within about a year and a half, I had become Orthodox” (“Conversation,” *Prairie Schooner*, 46).<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>16</sup>Though he catches himself sometimes—there’s a few interesting passages when his enthusiasm for Orthodoxy is qualified in his memoir, including when he observes that pilgrims can be “jerks” and that the same divide he sees between orthodoxy and fundamentalism also exists within orthodoxy), Cairns certainly tends to romanticize Orthodoxy. Part of this must come from his gratitude for the way in which this tradition saved his faith and enriched his life at a later stage in life. Part of it certainly comes from the inherent structure of comparison, when pointing out what about Orthodoxy drew him in and what about fundamentalism pushed him away. In addition to romanticizing Orthodoxy, he also presents what adherents to the fundamentalist traditions would likely consider “straw” arguments. Again, this is certainly because of his self-critical perspective (it was a tradition to which he belonged) and his comparisons. For the same reasons, in certain statements he makes, though this does not at all appear to be his intent, he presents the “two Christianities” as rather homogeneous, when they are, like all subcultures, internally diverse. What we should take from this isn’t a suspicion toward Cairns’s depictions—though we should definitely know that they are not the whole

It seems, he writes, that there are “two Christianities” that are “so different that one might wonder if the diverse members actually *are* of one body, or if these differences reveal separate religions practiced by people sitting or standing side by side in worship” (*Edge*, 202). While Cairns personally experienced the distinction between these Christianities in his journey from a fundamentalist church to an orthodox church and while he sharply explains the differences that led him to move from one to the other, he, in the end, does not romanticize orthodoxy. Like everyone else, the Orthodox church has its problems. Indeed, there are “*two* Orthodoxies” too (*Edge*, 202). He describes what he perceives to be the difference in the starkest of terms. On one hand, there is “the cranky faith of those who know everything already (and wish the rest of us would either catch up or disappear).” On the other hand, there is “the mystical faith of those who glimpse how little we know (and are drawn and driven by love)” (*Edge*, 202).

For Cairns, one of the crucial distinctions between these two Christianities are their respective approaches to language. The one Christianity is dominated by propositions regarding what to believe, while the other, even as it has its propositions (“in particular those propositions pronounced in the Nicene Creed and in the conciliar canons of the church”) has a very different relationship to their language (*Edge*, 202). The difference can be described in the following terms:

*How* one understands these propositions (as well as how one understands the status of the scripture from which most proposition and practice spring) pretty much sorts out the faithful into their respective camps. Some receive these propositions and paraphrases as dynamic, inexhaustible, provisional glimpses

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picture—so much as a qualification. What we get about Orthodoxy and about fundamentalism from Cairns isn’t—and isn’t intended as—objective sociological or anthropological or even theological descriptions but his own experiences, which shaped his own journey. His perspectives then, while only one take on both traditions, offer us more insight into his own poetry and spirituality than they do, necessarily, into those traditions.

along an endless path, and others retain them as static, comprehensive, and conclusive. Some would hold that these propositions enable the beginning of our journey to meaning, while others see them as fixed certainties marking the journey's end. (*Edge*, 202)

What appeals to him so strongly about Orthodoxy is the way in which the “generous” approach is more predominate. He makes sure to point out, though, that this view is not “confined to Orthodoxy,” citing, as examples, two towering figures within Protestantism, Martin Luther who “wrote of scripture that in it ‘God stammers with us as a nursemaid with a child’” and Karl Barth who “insisted that we understand scripture as the ‘witness to the Revelation,’ and that we realize that Christ Himself—in all His infinite and indefinable glory—*is* the Revelation” (*Edge*, 202-03).

While the elements that pushed him out of the church of his upbringing are those many recoil against in the secular age—literalism, judgmentalism, narrowness, and so forth—the major elements that pulled him into Orthodoxy are those things which connect directly and deeply not only with his spirituality but also with his poetry. Thus, as he says, it certainly was poetry that led him to Orthodoxy, that helped him find his faith instead of losing it.

### **Poetics of Sacrament and Midrash**

Cairns’s poetics coincides directly from his sense of what’s most valuable in orthodoxy. What Cairns treasures most about Orthodoxy and what from that tradition most informs his writing can be understood in terms of sacrament, both his understanding of *the* sacrament of Eucharist and his attendant sacramental view of the world and of words.<sup>17</sup> He articulates the

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<sup>17</sup>In an interview in *The Other Journal*, Cairns shares that though he thinks of poetry “as being like a sacrament,” he “becoming less fond of that word and more inclined to replace *Sacrament* with *Holy Mystery*, which is how Orthodox Christians prefer to speak of the Church and its relational institutions” (“Partaking”). Additionally, he’s not entirely comfortable with the word’s lesser-known “etymological history,” which “has to do with the oath of allegiance that a soldier makes to the emperor, and the relationship it therefore connotes is a contractual one.”

heart of his sacramental poetics in a key passage of his essay, “A Troubled and Troubling Mirror,” worth quoting at length:

When I was a kid, we spoke of the matter of Communion rather simply: we characterized the event as a solemn meal shared; we also emphasized its primarily retrospective activity. My own understanding of our Communion service was roughly this: once a month, we shared grape juice, which reminded us of Christ’s shed blood, and we chewed and swallowed tiny squares of hard cracker, which reminded us of Christ’s broken body.

Though both actions served as powerful signs directing the mind to a very great Mystery, neither the juice nor the cracker was, of itself, mysterious. These days, most alleged poems I come across in a given week seem to work that way too. Their words point to an event, or to a stilled moment, or to a sentiment, which, mysterious as *it* may have been, remains an occasion distinct from the “poem” and its language. In most cases, then, the poem serves as the cracker, prepared so that in receiving it we might be directed to another, more real event, an event whose import and whose agency are always, necessarily, fixed in the past.

The poetic, however, is something else: it is an occasion of immediate and observed—which is to say, present—presence; it is an occasion of ongoing and generative agency. And this is a condition suggestive of Eucharistic Communion.

The wine becomes the mystical blood of Jesus Christ and the bread becomes his

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Nonetheless, he “still use[s] the word because most folks don’t immediately think of its unfortunate etymology, and it serves our being able to communicate with each other.” Nonetheless, it is good to know that he thinks that “mystical poetics may be preferable to sacramental poetics as a name for what I’m on to.”

mystical body. We might be satisfied to say that the elements *symbolize* those realities, if only we could recover that word's ancient sense of mutual participation, if only our word *symbol* hadn't diminished over the centuries into being just another word for "sign."

At any rate, as we partake of those Mysteries, we are in the present presence of Very God of Very God dipped into our mouths on a spoon, and we partake, incrementally, in his entire and indivisible being. Moreover, we are by that agency changed, made more like him, bearing—as we now do—his creative and re-creative energies in our sanctified persons.

This is appalling, and it serves to exemplify what I would call the poetic: the presence and activity of inexhaustible, indeterminate enormity apprehended in a discreet space. ("Troubled and Troubling," 149-50)

For Cairns, sacrament involves both materiality and mystery. In terms of materiality, in the Christian tradition, sacrament not only invokes but also enacts the sacredness of the physical, material world, understood in terms of the presence of God permeating the universe, signaled and affirmed most powerfully by the incarnation of Christ. But if sacrament underscores that the material is sacred, it equally underscores that the material and the sacred are mysterious. As Cairns points out, in Eastern Orthodoxy the elements of the sacrament, the bread and the wine, and the attendant liturgy are simply called the *Holy Mystery*. For Cairns, the sacramental signals and enacts the overabundance of meaning and meanings that attend the world, the enormity of reality that exceeds our ability to grasp it. The same overabundance also attends our use of language in poetry.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>18</sup>Despite the high profile of his personal story, profiled most prominently by Kathryn Robinson in *Lingua Franca*, and his poetry—which has been widely anthologized and has been



His sacramental view of language manifests in his poetry in specific formal practices, particularly imagery, enjambment, ambiguity, and midrash. With “a well-constructed image,” a poet uses “words to implicate other, sensually apprehensible things”—“producing the illusion of seeing, tasting, feeling, and the like”—“and to suggest a range of likenesses without simply being replaced by them” (“Troubled and Troubling,” 150). He suggests that the relationship between God and human beings who are the image of God can serve as an analogy (“albeit in miniature”) for the relationship between the “sensually apprehensible things” to which words in a poetic image point and those words which are the poetic image: “Just as the human person is rightly understood to be the visible occasion partaking of (but neither exhausting nor eclipsing) the invisible enormity of the God . . . so too the imagery of a likely poem partakes of a greater scope of giddy implication” (“Troubled and Troubling,” 150-51). In both cases, “the mystery” is “the mystery of a thing bearing much more than is reducible to paraphrase” (150). In a parallel way, Cairns proposes that the play between “*the sense of syntax*” and “*the sense of the line*” offers rich possibilities. While the former generally provides a poem its “primary” (or “more transparently referential”) meaning, the latter offers “a momentary opacity” which “can suggestively extend, or complicate, or otherwise enrich the syntactical overlay of meaning.” This play between syntax and line contributes to the way in which “the poem offers a place where meaning might be made, and made again,” rather than a place where already known and intended meaning is merely expressed (“Momentary,” 56).

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reviewed in *Poetry* magazine, among other places—not very much has been written about Cairn’s work from a scholarly perspective. Oddly, very few of those writing about Cairns’s poetry have attended to pilgrimage or journeying as a key component of Cairns’s poetry (Marshall). Most focus on the presence of the sacramental in his poetry in terms of its materiality, particularly as connected to the material and spiritual aspects of the incarnation (Gundy; Rosenthal [*Jesus*]; Volck; Starnes; Robinson). At the same time, some do attend to the mystery or at least to related dynamics such as multiplicity of meanings and midrash, at least momentarily, (Jackson; Rosenthal [*“Double”*]; Walker; Wright).

Both imagery and enjambment have to do with ambiguity. Cairns writes that he has “developed a healthy taste for ambiguity,” “various flavors of uncertainty,” and “perplexity,” all of which are the literary cousins of mystery and all of which are encouraged by poetry: “a good poem insists that a reader learn to honor ambiguity, that he learn to collaborate with a poem’s suggestive possibilities, that she accept the challenge of being a comaker of meaning. That is to say, a great poem—even a pretty good one—isn’t ever *done* saying what it has to say. Ambiguity, in a literary text, then, is a helpful clue to a reader that the story doesn’t end with a single reading, and a compelling clue to the reader that she must assist in the telling and the retelling. This goes for ambiguity, in general, ambiguity in life” (*End*, 101). What contrasts poetry from other sorts of writing is that its meaning comes not through the “*transparency*” of the words but through their “*opacity*,” “the ability of the words to draw attention to their own cobbled densities, and to invite the reader to encounter his or her own reflection in their surfaces. And, that is to say, in a poem, language operates, in part, as a troubled and troubling mirror” (“Troubled and Troubling,” 146-47). He finally adds: “The only reliable indicator of poetry is an abundance of the poetic—that experience of the words drawing attention to themselves, drawing attention to their several provocative associations, and by so doing, inviting the reader to collaborate in meaning making. That’s what poems do, and that’s why we like them so much. Being unfinished, bearing inexhaustible potential, they remind us of ourselves” (“Troubled and Troubling,” 148).

Cairns writes in conversation with tradition, with the tradition of Western poetry and the tradition of early and Eastern Christianity. His writing is a kind of reading—a distinctively postsecular revisionist practice of reading.<sup>19</sup> He begins and ends his days reading. In the

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<sup>19</sup>Readers have briefly commented on the role of revisionary reading in Cairns’s work. Jeanne Murray Walker notes how the poems are set within the Orthodox tradition, how they use

mornings, he reads both recent and older poetry. In the evenings, he reads writings by and about “the saints and their hesychastic tradition” (“Reading Habits,” 50). Of the former, he says he reads “until something unexpected in the familiar text provokes an unfamiliar response. More often than not, this response becomes the beginning of my new poem, which I have come to understand as bearing a dialogic relationship to the texts of my elders and betters.” Of the latter, he desires “that their spirit will infuse my night, as well as the following morning’s work.” In this way, from sunrise to sunset, “My poems have become my side of a continuing conversation with those whose words, insights and reciprocal affection I have come to depend upon” (“Reading Habits,” 50). Through this approach, we join in “conversation”—push and a pull, give and take—with “the poets who precede us,” “both the living and the ostensibly dead” (“Troubled and Troubling,” 142). He advocates “[a]ccepting what [is] given and shaping it with care” and thereby making “something new” (“Shaping What’s Given,” 73). For Cairns, this sort of writing is not just limited to the poets who came before him. He likewise engages “difficult biblical matter” with what he calls “a critical/conversational demeanor” (“Conversation,” *Image*, 62). This idea of writing as reading and responding echoes Harold Bloom’s idea of “strong reading,” an idea that Cairns briefly mentions in an early interview (“Interview,” *Mars Hill*). Instead of the anxiety of influence that Bloom proposes, what Cairns experiences might be better described as an appreciation of influence.

A closer literary antecedent to Cairns’s practice would be T. S. Eliot’s idea of the role that individual writers play in the larger tradition. The serious writer cannot just do whatever they want without considering the larger tradition. In a real way, they have to conform to the

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humor, and how they are deeply, and overtly, intertextual, “[I]ike little midrashes” (105). J. A. Jackson calls Cairns’ poetry “both literature and exegesis” (37). Rosenthal sees Cairns painting Jesus as “the radical revisionist”—need to do a “double take,” “revise (reenvision, look at anew at)” our own views on the world (“Double Take,” 8). He gives us “a reinterpretation of Jesus’ own life and meaning” (8).

tradition if they want to join it. But the key difference between conforming to this tradition and “conforming” as we generally understand that word is that this tradition is a living one. Cairns writes that “To conform, therefore, is to revise what has been given in the same manner that those before us have revised what they had received” (“Shaping What's Given,” 80). Speaking of one of his own poetic predecessors, Cairns approvingly writes, “Coleridge did not merely repeat his tradition; he added to it; he worked it over; he *owned* it, just as it owned him” (“Shaping What's Given,” 81). One might think that religious tradition would be less open to such revision than literary tradition. And among certain religious groups that is certainly the case. But Cairns feels just the opposite. He writes that for the person with deep religious and deep artistic sensibilities the “pain” of bad religious art “comes not so much from the fact that a cherished tradition is being altered in some unacceptable way; on the contrary, the pain comes from the fact that the inheritance hasn’t been altered nearly enough, often not altered at all” (“Shaping What's Given,” 81).

While Cairns’s practice of revision echoes Eliot and Bloom, its most crucial antecedent isn’t literary but religious. He has a “long-established habit . . . of working off prior texts in the manner of rabbinic midrashim” (“On Making,” 74). He writes:

The rabbinic disposition toward sacred texts—that they are the beginning of the story, rather than the end of it—is one that has come to infuse all my creative work, my reading and my writing. It is a disposition that, on the one hand, witnesses to the generative power, the life and agency of the word, and, on the other hand, effects a level of attention, concentration, and meditation in the reader, so much so that the reader attains a collaborative relationship with those words as meaning is made. (“On Making,” 74)

Cairns contrasts what he calls the “typical Christian” or Hellenized approach to scripture where “the scripture is revered for the reality it allegedly points back to”—“The text is analyzed and explained, often in great detail, but its words are perceived as the static names for absent things”—with the older Hebraic tradition of rabbinic midrash where the text is understood to be “a live and powerful agency,” “capable of provoking endless response, endless new production that, by its nature, also partakes in the holy” (“Shaping What's Given,” 79). He holds to the “Hebraic notion of a text as *a made thing capable of further making*” (“Shaping What's Given,” 79).

Cairns finds the same approach taken up by the early fathers within Christianity: “when the fathers take up the scriptures, they are attending not only to a past (an event to which the words refer), but are attending to a present and a presence (which the words articulate into proximity for their apprehension)” (“Conversation,” *Image*, 60). This gave them a very different relationship to scripture than is familiar in the most visible traditions of Christianity today: “The scriptures, by extension, would not be understood simply as narratives of past events nor simply as exhortations to belief (though I believe they are both of these); they are also scenes into which the believer (whether patristic author or contemporary pilgrim) enters in order to make something new of them, in order to develop into something new—a new creature, say—receiving the scriptures’ empowering assistance” (“Conversation,” *Image*, 61).

Cairns’s use of this ancient practice of midrash is simultaneously traditional and postsecular. It allows him to engage with tradition fully and deeply, while giving him a way of dealing with those aspects of scripture that, in this secular or postsecular age, are not tenable for him. Whenever “working . . . on meditative verse or prose regarding one aspect or another of scriptural or theological enigma,” Cairns explains that his “purpose . . . is to press the language

into yielding further, speculative insight” (“On Making,” 95). He offers that, “In this business, gaps are good; they are, in fact, opportunities” (“On Making,” 74). In the practice of midrash, “the wise rabbis poring over their Bible scrolls” understood “perplexity . . . to be the key to subsequent revelation” (*End*, 103). In fact, “their midrashic method has been to ‘search out’ the difficult passages—the utterly perplexing ones—trusting that, if those passages appear to trouble their assumptions, it is because their assumptions needed work. Their vision was due for revision” (*End*, 103).

## Chapter Seven: On Sin and Salvation

### **Revision that Is Affirming**

So far I have shown how pilgrimage is central in Cairns's writing. His pilgrimages to Mount Athos, his pilgrimage into Greek Orthodoxy, and his journey in poetry are part and parcel of the spiritual pilgrimage that is his life. In other words, he is on a life journey away from the pettiness and destructiveness he understands sin to be and toward that immensity he calls God, and he has found the place of Mount Athos, the tradition of Greek Orthodoxy, and the practice of poetry to be useful in this journey. As Cairns understands it, his way of pilgrimaging into the tradition of Greek Orthodoxy—and Christianity more broadly—is to fulfill that tradition by revising it. It is this dynamic in his poetics and his poetry that is quintessentially postsecular and that establishes Cairns, though he is a “traditional” religious poet, as a preeminent postsecular poet. In this chapter, I want to look at the ways in which Cairns positively or affirmingly revises—how he recovers older or alternative meanings of—certain traditional religious language and concepts from Christianity. Of particular importance are the concepts of sin and salvation. It will also help to highlight the benefits Cairns finds in a range of Orthodox practices he works into his life and writing, from icons to the Jesus Prayer. In the chapter that follows this one, I want to look at the way in which, at his most postsecular, Cairns more critically, rather than affirmingly, revises problematic Biblical passages in his own creative practice of midrash. In both chapters, we see the characteristic postsecular push and pull. While this chapter foregrounds the pull or affirmation, the following will be more about the push or antithesis. Throughout his poetry, Cairns incorporates, references, uses, adopts, and adapts a great many

aspects of both broadly traditional and specifically Orthodox Christianity. He shows a great respect and appreciation, in particular, for those liturgical and mystical elements of the faith. His particular understandings of sin and salvation are chief among what Cairns values and embraces in Orthodoxy.

Many of Cairns's poems celebrate what he calls the "treasures of the faith" (*Edge*, 255). These include not only theological insights that he finds beautiful but also spiritual practices that he finds useful in his spiritual journey—particularly those most related to the contemplative, apophatic aspects of Christian tradition, those most clearly manifest in the monastic approach of the desert mothers and fathers he so often references, the monks on Mount Athos, and the whole slew of writers in between. He likewise shows a great appreciation for the related liturgical practices of Orthodoxy. In "Memento," he describes praying with icons and with relics, and to the saints whose image or body those objects are. In the "particularly aged practice of the ancient Church," the faithful are encouraged toward "actual discourse with the dead," "as if they now might hear us," "might care," and "might speak in our behalf" (*Compass*, 118). Cairns writes that in thus "visit[ing] the dead," visitors can "conceive that we too / rest among them—seated maybe, communing / certainly" (118-19). These encounters, which feel like conversations, are "enigmatic" and "irreducible / to paraphrase" (119). He also addresses the place of relics in Orthodox practice: "Every altar in our churches bears / a holy fragment—bit of bone, most often." He proposes that these relics do two things. First, they serve "as testament" to the "honor in which we hold the body—even / shattered bits of it" (119). Second, they serve as a "token both of death *and* of life's appalling // ubiquity—even there," which is to say, they remind worshipers not only of death but of the Christian belief in life even in death. Reversing the *memento mori* alluded to in the title, these bones are reminders of *life*. In "Icons," Cairns calls



the icons of orthodox worship “windows.” Being made of “stuff” (“the paint, the wood, the lucent / golden nimbi”), they affirm the goodness of materiality. Icons both “receive” the “rapt attention” of and, with “a subtle reciprocity,” look back at the one praying with them. Cairns writes, “On his knees, the pilgrim / leans into another mode / of being, leans into the stillness // at the urgent source of life” (*Compass*, 149).

In a poem like “To Himself,” Cairns describes what he learned about prayer from “[a] book I borrowed once”: that there comes a point when “The Addressed / requires nothing else be said” (*Body*, 60). This is something, he goes on to say, that he has “witnessed once,” “an emptying like that,” “a silent Other / silently regarding me.” But this silent regard was full of spiritual significance. It was “as if He / still might speak, but speak as to Himself.” The encounter is so deep and so full that, should God speak to the poet, it would be as if God were speaking to God. He says that if anyone should like to pray in the same way, they should begin with an “extreme hollowing / of the throat,” a line that, inverse of clearing one’s throat in preparation to speak, suggests an emptying of words. This is the sort of silent, contemplative, apophatic prayer that the Christian mystics teach in that book he must have borrowed, whether he borrowed that literally from a friend or figuratively from the tradition he was exploring and joining. In “Formal Brief: The Name,” he describes his own practice of the Jesus Prayer, a prayer which uses a word or a few words to create a space of inner silence. He writes that his “own rough habit” is to “invoke The Name aloud.” His prayer is an intimately physical one, as he describes the “shape” of the word in his “mouth,” and the way in which the practice of the prayer connects “breath / and tongue,” which is to say, in a sense, spirit and body. While praying, the “air” is “trembling,” a reference both to the physical way in which sound makes vibrations in air and to the sense of awe that accompanies approaching the sacred. Finally, though, sound gives

way to stillness. Through the prayer, he is able “to taste and see—and *then* to bathe in silence” (*Compass*, 115). This very prayer, central to Cairns’s own spiritual practice and to the practice of the monks on Mount Athos, is ancient within Christian mysticism. It is also one of the subjects of *The Philokalia*, the crucial collection of the writings of Orthodoxy’s hesychastic, which Cairns also used as the title for the collection in which this poem appears.

Cairns likewise celebrates this sort of silent, contemplative prayer in “Hesychasterion.” The title of this poem, which names its central image, refers to the cell or small dwelling in which monastics practicing hesychastism, the way of cultivating interior silence practiced by the desert fathers and mothers and by the Greek Orthodox monks of Mount Athos, would live and pray. It is clear that Cairns uses the image of this small, hermetic dwelling as a metaphor for how he would like to arrange his inner life, as the first line reads, “I am etching out a dwelling || in the granite of my heart” (*Psalms*, 34). He writes that he plans to “sweep out all debris” with rosemary, to put in a “vigil lamp,” “a censer” with “one || glowing coal, deep red amid / the heart’s obscurity” for burning myrrh as incense, and “an icon of the Christ.” He hopes, then, to kneel and “lean in to find || a little taste // of stillness.” He hopes to “make my way at last || to the hollow of my heart” and “to apprehend || a stilling of the crowd, / within which stillness I might dare || approach the cloud,” that is, The Cloud of Unknowing, the image used by the author of the apophatic text of that name for the presence of the imageless God. He wants to establish his inner life in such a way that he is open to that stillness that is the stillness of the biblical admonition, “Be still and know that I am God” (Psalm 46:10). But in this particular poem, the metaphor should not be taken too metaphorically. While he lives an “active” life *per se*, rather than a monastic one, that is, while he will not go into such a room to live his life literally, the concrete practices and objects used for prayer that he goes on to describe are, in fact, ones that he does

also treasure from the Orthodox tradition. The layers of literal and figurative significance in the poem echo the layers of literal and figurative significance in the practices and objects themselves. In his life, he does use these practices to seek God. In the poem, they become metaphors for inner movements and actions he undertakes to seek God. But the inner and the outer overlap, since even in the outer, these practices are physical helps for an inner journey and yet that inner journey is, here and elsewhere, understood by Cairns and the Orthodox tradition, not just figuratively, to include both physical and spiritual elements, inner and outer inseparably integrated. The caesuras in the poem, which Cairns stresses by marking them with open space in the middle of each line are a formal technique that here serve not just for balance and rhythm but to slow the readers down, asking them to pause not just at punctuation and at each line's end but also in the middle of each line, working slowness and stillness into the very fabric of the reading experience, making the poem itself an outer object that can be used to further the inner life.

That Cairns finds so much value in religious tradition—and in the most traditional aspects of tradition—certainly makes him unusual among contemporary writers, standing out even among those writers who also identify themselves squarely within a religious tradition. Cairns explains his love for tradition as tradition in several ways. There is the beauty of being part of something so much bigger and so much older than oneself. There is the consolation of being connected to so many others, not only the living but also, as he puts it, the “ostensibly dead” (“Troubled and Troubling,” 142). Beyond these things, Cairns finds what the tradition offers to be immensely valuable, the wisdom the tradition has accumulated, the treasures it passes down. While some understand tradition primarily in terms of *conforming* to the rules of the dead, rather than getting to decide what to think and say and do for oneself, that's not the only way to look at it. In fact, while dead traditions may enforce conforming, living traditions—

and Cairns certainly views both Orthodoxy and poetry as living traditions—can be understood as profoundly democratic. On this he quotes G.K. Chesterton, who calls “tradition” “only democracy extended through time. . . . Tradition means giving votes to the most obscure of all classes, our ancestors” (qtd. in *End*, 45-46). The individuals in the present get to have a say. But they are protected from being swept away in current fads and fancies by taking into account the anchoring voices from the past. And, for Cairns, it is certainly *taking into account*, not *following blindly*, and *anchoring* voices, not *binding* ones. “Every time we decide unilaterally and unduly to ‘change up’ our received traditions, we are likely to risk missing out on how those very traditions might have helped us along the way,” he writes. “That is to say, if we are too quick to reshape those traditions to suit our immediate and individual tastes, we may never know how those traditions might have reshaped us, how they might have efficaciously availed for us a more likely understanding of what we might become” (*End*, 45). The epistemology here is not one based on the authority of the authoritarian but the authority of centuries of the compiled experiences of a community. In a sense, the one who listens only to his or her own “immediate and individual tastes” is the authoritarian.

While we certainly have many advantages over “our predecessors,” it may be that they had some advantages over us. And, of course, as the saying goes, one of the main advantages we have over them is them. We have their experience and accomplishments to build on. Cairns suggests that those in the “early church” had “a more nearly adequate vocabulary” for the spiritual life. In particular, he lists “[*n*]ous, *kardiá*, *népsis*, and *théosis*” as “words that helped to keep the young body focused on the task at hand, the task of healing our shared series of rifts—within themselves, between themselves and others, and between a holy God and a race of creatures that had sorely missed the mark” (*End*, 98). He bemoans, “Three of those words—

*nous*, *népsis*, and *théosis*—have been all but lost to our contemporary conversation, and the deep significance of another, *kardiá*, which is to say ‘heart,’ has been sorely diminished.” He calls such “onetime commonplace words” “another treasure neglected over the centuries.” They were words that helped those who used them to “give their attentions to the profound complexity and promise of the human person” (*End*, 98). In many of Cairns’s poems, he works to recover such terms and other concepts and practices from early and Eastern Christianity. Putting ancient concepts and practices from the Middle East and other parts of the world into contemporary English will result in some good measure of revision, without Cairns even meaning or trying to revise, simply because of the new historical context such an act demands. The work of recovery is inevitably the work of revision. So as Cairns brings spiritual and theological material from the past and from the East into the present West and as he does so in a way that is attuned to the challenges, insights and needs of the present in the West, his work is inherently postsecular, inherently a “wrestling with angels,” wrestling with the materials of an ancient religious tradition to see what might be of use for the spiritual journey of the present.

With his *Adventures in New Testament Greek* poems he explains, “the specific terms were chosen because they were terms with which I’ve wrestled over the years, and with which I probably continue to wrestle” (“Conversation,” *Image*, 65). These poems, which I will discuss below, and others like them are quite direct not only in their engagement with tradition and with scripture but also in their revisionary aspiration. They overtly revise what Cairns presents as current, unsatisfying understandings of a term or concept, and replace it with what he presents as a recovered meaning. Carmen Popescu describes these poems as “[a] dialogically intertextual engagement” with the Christian traditions, particularly with “the ever-talking Scriptures and the eighteenth-century *Philokalia*” (205). He suggests that “prestigious intertextual echoes are

grafted on to Cairns's personal discoveries in ways that are mutually illuminating" (205). It is, in this way, a two-way exchange. However, in these particular poems, Popescu notes, in Cairns's own "personal" take is "convergent with communal understandings" from Orthodoxy (205). Popescu proposes that "he very much confirms the efficacy of his predecessors' interpretations" (205). What he is revising most strongly here are his own contemporaries' interpretations, since "Cairns's concern is that in modern times the ancient roots of the terms used in Christian anthropology have lost their force, their energy often diluted through inadequate translations" (205).

### **On Sin**

It would not be surprising if one set out to recover and revise the Christian tradition and, in the revising, left out the whole concept of sin, which—perhaps more than any other theological concept—has been used to bludgeon believers and unbelievers alike. Cairns admits, in one poem, "I suppose we might do away with words like *sin*. / They are at least archaic, not to mention rude." The word has certainly been abused by "many centuries of overuse / by corrupt clergy pointing fingers," not to mention by people wanting to control their family members (*Compass*, 74). It may be surprising, then, that Cairns finds the concept of sin, crucial to historical Christianity, not an embarrassment or inconvenience but one of the treasures that the tradition has to pass on. Of course, his conception of sin—what he takes to be the older and better conception—has little to do with the idea of sin most well-known today, the idea of individuals breaking God's rules of thought and behavior and needing to be punished for it. The New Testament Greek word translated as *sin*, *hamartia*, is an archery term used as a metaphor for the act of missing the mark, so common in archery and in life. For Cairns, the point isn't so much any particular list of marks we have been set for us or that we have set for ourselves, as it

is the missing of the mark of life, those things, whatever they are, that make us less connected, less aware, less compassionate, more isolated into ourselves and whatever selfish and destructive desires or fears we may have. In most cases, these dull our lives. In some cases, they lead to “once more the spectacle of the innocents’ blood,” which, Cairns proposes, is precisely why we cannot, as we otherwise “probably could,” “forget the idea / of *sin* altogether” (*Compass*, 75). For dramatic as well as daily reasons, Cairns finds the concept of sin to still be useful, even necessary.

In describing his pilgrimages to Mount Athos and his desire to develop a life of prayer, he writes, “Unlike, say, the Sunday school teachers of my youth, I wasn’t so much concerned with being saved from hell as I was with being saved from habit” (*Edge*, 38). For many of us, it is not hatred, violence, greed or lust that throws us off track but the more mundane “distractions” and “knickknacks” of our lives, habits, hobbies, possessions, positions, those things that take our time and attention but have no lasting value (*Edge*, vii). Volck observes that Cairns “implicates himself in whatever sin he sheds light on” (60). The specific sin Cairns personally confesses to is his temper, his quickness to “harsh words, harsh thoughts” which habitually “undermine any accomplishment in the realms of charity and compassion” (*Edge*, 7). The ones that appear in his poems have to do with the way we as a society consume to the point of distraction. He suggests that most of the suffering in the world exists either because people have caused it or failed to relieve it (*End*, 59). For Cairns, the life of prayer and the life of sin are inversely proportionate. It is not that through prayer one gains the strength to overcome the temptation to sin. It is that through prayer one gains an awareness of the presence of God, while without prayer one loses that awareness. And since sin is not just the doing of wrongs but the failure to be fully connected to God and to the world and to others, that awareness is absolutely key, the practical value of the

practice of prayer. Cairns writes that he has “a sense that, when we withdraw from prayer and move back into the flux and chatter of our dissipated lives, we are very likely to be less aware of his nearness . . . This failed apprehension of his presence is what allows us to continue in sin, and our continuing sin is what allows us to insufficiently apprehend His presence” (“Lent and Easter,” 89).

We do miss the mark, individually and collectively, and ought to have a way of talking about it. In a poem that painfully reverses the Beatitudes from the Sermon on the Mount—that, more accurately, describes the way in which we as a society have always already reversed the Beatitudes—Cairns discusses the respective fates of those Jesus called “Blesséd.” Starting with the meek being “available for all manner of insult,” things just get worse. The poor cannot protect themselves from “the blithe designs of the rich.” The merciful are left to the “brutes.” Those longing for what is right are “maligned” and then martyred. The pure go unseen or unrecognized, “which is surely to their advantage.” Finally, the peacemakers are thrown in jail, “in adjoining cells,” which is to say, they are “dismissed from any arena” of significance or influence. While one could think of specific instances in recent American history that fit these descriptions, specific sins, as it were, Cairns’s point here is that our entire society misses the mark in that it is based not on those worthy values lauded in the Beatitudes but on greed, competition, aggression, and violence. The traditional Christian language for this, which Cairns recovers, is to say that our society is sinful. It is not that these social crimes are the results of sinners sinning, in the sense that street preachers and television evangelists blame the condition of society on people not following what they understand to be the Bible’s moral code. It is that our social structures are based on values that miss the mark.



Cairns deals with the sin of consumerism in a poem aptly titled “Late Apocalypse.” The title may mean late in the sense of lately or recent and apocalypse in the sense of global catastrophe. If this is the case, the poem describes the ongoing destruction of the world. At the same time, it may indicate late in the sense of not on time and apocalypse in the sense of revelation or revealing, the literal meaning of that word. If this is the case, the poem describes the way in which it is revealed to us, not soon enough, that we are the ones who are destroying the earth and for no good reason, the greatest sin one could imagine. The poem opens with an epigraph from the first chapter of the Book of Revelation in the New Testament, also called The Apocalypse of Saint John, in the King James translation: “*And I turned to see the voice that spake with me. And being turned, I saw . . .*” (*Compass*, 142; Rev. 1:12). In the biblical text, what John describes seeing where the ellipses leave off, the beginning of what is revealed, are “seven golden candlesticks,” which represent “the seven churches” to which the biblical book is addressed as a letter. Cairns picks up on the number seven, which recurs throughout the Book of Revelation, which in Jewish numerology is understood to signify fullness or completeness and which in the Book of Revelation suggests alternately the fullness which is God and the completeness which is the envisioned destruction of earth. Cairns uses *sevens* in the poem to provide a structure and maintain an ongoing allusion to the text of the epigraph. Given how devastating John’s apocalypse is and how petty Cairns’s, the use of sevens in Cairns’s highlights a bitter irony, that we are not being destroyed by God’s fire as punishment for our sins; we are destroying ourselves by our own fire as a natural consequence of our hunger for consumption.

Cairns gives a catalog—and catalog should be understood here in both senses of the term, as a literary device for listing things and as a magazine for buying things—of items he sees, introducing each with the words, “I turned and saw before me” (*Compass*, 142-43). He names

symbols (or synecdoches) of American overconsumption: “seven bright convenience stores,” “seven Wal-Marts in a row,” and “seven rows of plasma screens.” In the middle of the list, he makes sure to insert in a symbol of the violence that underwrites that consumption: “seven military vehicles.” Cairns comments on the items, describing variously how they are implicated in acts of destruction and in the cover up thereof, so to speak, the way in which those who consume distance and isolate themselves, as best they can, from the most horrible consequences of their destruction. The convenience stores are “laden” with “sugars and oils, fuels devised by economics to obtain / the most satisfaction with the least actual good.” What our society eats, consumes so literally, is part of but also stands in for its whole relationship to the planet. The immediacy and intensity and low cost of our “satisfaction” comes before any consideration of what might be “actual[ly] good” for ourselves or others or the earth. So we eat things that not only do our bodies no good but that, in the course of their production, hurt the soil, the atmosphere, and the poor. The television screens show “distant terrors, conflagrations, sufferings” which are “thereby brought so close, and all thereby kept far away.” Those wars, riots, technological tragedies across the world that result from the United States’ military and economic intervention, protecting and forwarding its own economic interests at the plight of the global poor, are as close as ever when they are covered on network news but also as far as ever because they are set in frames which physically and narratively box them away from the daily lives of the viewers, making them an unreal (or hyperreal) spectacle for further consumption. The poem ends in a defeat. After repeatedly turning and seeing objects of consumption, he finally writes, “I did not turn.” He cannot face it anymore. But it goes on “behind” his back. He hears “a voice like a golden horn” which, in the final line of the poem, turns out to be an advertisement, “assuring” potential buyers of the “highest quality” the televisions would provide.

In this poem, Cairns calls evil evil and point fingers. He writes that “those who might direct” the world in a different direction from the one in which it is heading—those with power and influence, not just those with the power to make monetary and military decisions at a national or global level but those with the power to consume as the average American consumer consumes, namely, those who benefit from the current system—“would be the last / to jimmy up the works that keep them fed and keep / their pampered offspring buffed and quite oblivious / to the evil they perform, the evil they rely upon.” The evil here is not one of intentional hatred or spite. It is greed combined with an indifference to the consequences thereof. It wasn’t started by those who “perform” and “rely” on it. In fact, they may be “oblivious” to what they are doing. Their “blithe demeanor,” the casual, nonchalant, even happy attitude, toward what they do is one of the things that Cairns is most angry with. But it is “evil” nonetheless. Brain Volck rightly calls this poem “angry” but suggests that “an acute awareness of shared folly prevents a collapse into righteous indignation” (61). Perhaps with her tongue in her cheek, Laura Sheahen comments on this poem, “In this age of relativism, a little judgmentalism can be refreshing.” But she also observes that this judgment is tempered by the fact that Cairns is “self-incriminating.” In many poems, Cairns implicates and incriminates himself thoroughly. In this poem, he names himself among “the *remnant ineffectual*.” Even those who oppose this catastrophic consumption have been able to actually do very little about it, perhaps even, paradoxically, crippled by their own “rage” at what is happening. Thus, he suggests, he and others “fare hardly better” than those who support the present social order.

Many readers will find this strong judgment against the sins of our society justified. But this “rage” is not Cairns’s usual tone. If he wants justice *on behalf of* the wronged, he doesn’t want justice *against* the wrongdoers. Quoting Saint Isaac of Syria in “Against Justice,” he points

out that God has been “hardly just” to those who have been shown mercy rather than punishment for their wrongs, that is, anyone who might be in the position to judge. About this, he concludes, “we are grateful for His oversight” (*Compass*, 131). In popular Christianity, sin leads to judgment and punishment. For Cairns, sin does precede judgment. But the judgment isn’t imagined in terms of punishment but rather in terms of assessment, an accurate telling of our condition. On this, Cairns quotes the Nicene Creed, an early, authoritative statement of Christian belief. Of Christ, the creed says, “He will come again to judge the living and the dead.” Cairns explains this statement by saying, “I no longer think of that creedal proposition as asserting that He is coming to *mete out* life or death, but that in His coming, He will discern and will announce which of those states we have already chosen. He does not condemn us to death, but He informs us if we are dead already” (*End*, 71-72). It is not that our sins will kill us (though they certainly might) so much that our “death”—we are dead to the world in the sense of not being alive to the fullness of life that permeates the world—leads us to sin, to miss the mark. Cairns most often describes sin in terms of “a general diminishment” (*Compass*, 59). But he does not diminish its connection to destructiveness in our lives: “Cut off from life, we die. Being dead, we sin” (“Lent and Easter,” 85).

Cairns explains that he has learned from reading “the fathers and mothers of the church” “the undeniable truth that my own sin is not only about me” and “that your sin is not only about you, either” (*End*, 62). Instead, sin is that which leaves us with “ourselves alone.” Sin is any choice we make that “separates us from communion with God,” “that clouds our awareness of His presence,” and that “erodes our relationships with one another” (*End*, 62). Being alone, which is not to say being in solitude or silence for a time, but being cut off from others, is “the complete and utter antithesis of our becoming healthy human persons.” As support for this, he

points to the Holy Trinity, “in Whose image we are made,” with that idea that the interrelationships between Father, Son, and Spirit “should lead us to suspect that personhood requires relationship, that genuine personhood depends upon it” (*End*, 62). In “The Entrance of Sin,” one of his midrash poems, Cairns retells the Biblical story of Adam and Eve first sinning in the garden of Eden, making clear that his understanding of sin has nothing to do with breaking rules and everything to do with breaking away from others (*Body*, 40). He proposes that while, “Yes, there was a tree” and “fruit,” “sin had very little to do with this or with any outright prohibition.” Instead, “sin had made its entrance long before the serpent spoke” and “long before the man and the woman” ate the forbidden fruit. What happened was this: “sin had come in the midst of an evening stroll, when the woman had reached to take the man’s hand and he withheld it.” It was “this new taste for turning away” that marked “[t]he beginning of loss”: “every time some manner of beauty was offered and declined, the subsequent isolation each conceived was irresistible” (40). It is this isolation from one another and from one another’s suffering that, in the end, allows injustice to flourish, that allows us the cheap pleasures of overconsumption or any selfish and hurtful act at the expense of another’s well-being.

In two poems where Cairns prominently uses the word *sin*, he takes a more gentle approach. In “Bad Theology: A Quiz,” Cairns probes the contradiction that many Christians (and people of other faiths) are caught in. They believe in a loving and forgiving God but nonetheless feel a desire to judge and punish, or for God to judge and punish, those who do wrong. He asks, “just where / or how” would those who understand God to be “all and all” “position Hell”? He asks,

If another sins, what is that to you?  
When the sinful suffer publicly, do you

find secret comfort in their grief, or will  
you also weep? They are surely grieving;

are you weeping now? Assuming sin is sin,  
whose do you condemn? Who is judge? (*Compass*, 128).

The form of this poem—which, as Volck puts it, “offers troubling personal questions where others might resort to blanket accusation” (60-61)—contributes to its message, which is the same as the message of Jesus whenever Jesus spoke of sin: gentleness, humility, compassion, and forgiveness.

The most gracious of Cairns’s poems about sin is not actually about sin. One might say that it is about repenting from sin, except that the poem itself specifically says otherwise. In “Adventures in New Testament Greek: *Metanoia*,” Cairns describes the traditional and central Christian belief of *metanoia* as the answer to sin. He explains the subtle contrast between that word and its English translation, *repentance*. The words mean roughly the same thing but Cairns finds the difference in emphasis crucial. The English word *repent* stresses the *wrong* one has committed. One repents when one feels “contrition” or “remorse” for “the sinfulness of one’s past action” and resolves to not act that way going forward (“repent,” *OED*). One shortcoming with this understanding is that, with its focus on the wrong, it may not work very well. It is “likely to oblige / sheepish repetition,” that is to say, “recurrent screw-up.” In Cairns’s understanding, the biblical Greek cousin to repentance puts the stress elsewhere: “The heart’s *metanoia* . . . turns / without regret, turns not / so much away, as toward” (*Compass*, 93). Instead of turning away from sin, one turns toward that which is good. While this semantic distinction may well prove to be personally and psychologically a more effective way to change, the literary and religious significance in this poem has to do with the generosity of the vision. Elsewhere, Cairns explains the specifically Christian import of these lines: “Actual repentance—a turning that serves—is seldom obtained by simply *turning away*. Instead, we find our strength and our

victory in turning *toward*—most specifically in *turning toward* and *leaning into* a very loving, very much present Christ” (“Lent and Easter,” 89). The poem on metanoia ends with a redefinition of sin. The shift from repentance to metanoia takes place in such a way “as if the slow pilgrim / has been surprised to find / that sin is not so bad / as it is a waste of time” (*Compass*, 93). One imagines that Cairns has in mind personal shortcomings rather than social injustices he rages against earlier, which he would no doubt still insist are “bad.” But, even still, one participates in social injustices often in part because of personal shortcomings, so too hard a distinction between various sins may not ultimately hold. It is also significant to note the way that Cairns qualifies this redefinition; it is not so *out right* but so “as if.” And it is not that sin is not bad but that it’s not “so bad as it is” something else. Even so, by pointing the emphasis elsewhere, this qualified redefinition runs against the understanding common in most strands of Christianity while running toward those values, forgiveness, generosity, love, that are the ostensible heart of the tradition.

### **On Salvation**

Of all of the changes that he underwent during his journey from fundamentalism to Orthodoxy, Cairns writes, “I suppose that it is my sense of salvation itself that has undergone the most dramatic revision” (“Lives Together,” 39). J. A. Jackson presents diverging understandings of salvation as one of the crucial differences between Cairns’s Eastern Orthodox Christianity and the “modern” and “Western” Christianity that most of Cairns’s readers will be most familiar with (33, 38). To illustrate the two different understandings of salvation, Jackson explains two different takes on the biblical story of Adam and Eve eating the forbidden fruit in the Garden of Eden. In the story in the third chapter of the Book of Genesis, the serpent tells Eve that if she and Adam eat the fruit that God has told them not to eat, they will become *like God*, knowing good

and evil. So, the two eat the fruit. Thus, they sin and are in need of salvation, which, Christians believe, comes much later through Jesus. Where Eastern and Western Christians differ, Jackson explains, is in their respective understandings of the nature of the sin and, thus, the nature of the salvation. In the West, the sin is that Adam and Eve desire to be like God. Salvation, then, means salvation from the punishment they are due for that blasphemous affront. In the East, the sin isn't that they want to be like God but rather that they were not yet ready to be like God, not ready to fulfill what is a good and godly desire. In this version, then, salvation means not reprieve from punishment due but healing from wounds suffered—and *being made ready*. In short, the difference is that in Eastern Orthodoxy, God becomes human not to pay the penalty for the human sin of wanting to become divine but rather to enable humans to fulfill that divine desire (34). The Orthodox understanding of salvation, Jackson proposes, is not based on a legalistic demand for punishment for sins but on the concept of theosis, “a participation in the life of the Divine Energies” (38).

Of course, to attribute these two readings of salvation too strictly to Western Christianity and Eastern Christianity is, as Jackson confesses, a historical oversimplification. But it is useful for illustrating in shorthand Cairns's own changing understanding. Indeed, asked to summarize the gospel in six words or less, Cairns points precisely to the Orthodox understanding of theosis: “Christ's humanity occasions our divinity” (“Divinity,” 24). In explaining his summary, he draws support from Christian tradition, quoting from Irenaeus, Athanasius, Clement, Cyril, and Gregory of Nazianzus to conclude, “The consensus of the church fathers and mothers is that the purpose of Christ's coming is to endow us with life, divine life, endlessly becoming. Good journey!” (“Divinity,” 24). In his memoir, Cairns writes that “over the years since I left home for college, salvation itself has come to mean something larger to me, fuller, more substantial, and



more immediate than, say, the commonplace version of a personal, late-hour reprieve from execution, or dodging a stint in Gehenna [i.e. hell]. For the Orthodox, salvation, or ‘being saved,’ indicates a process rather than a moment. It is a process of being redeemed from separation from God, both now and later. It has very little to do with the popular notion of ‘going to heaven’” (*Edge*, 221). Instead, it “has far more to do with finally living. It has to do with our entering the kingdom of God, here and now” (“Lives Together,” 40). (In one poem, he writes, “*Gehenna* is empty, and tenders // these days an empty threat. Remember that” [*Compass*, 119].) To be more specific, he continues, “For me, in any case, salvation has come to mean deliverance, and now, from the death-in-life routine for which we often settle—the somnambulate life for which *I* have often settled” (*Edge*, 221). Elsewhere, he adds that “the essence of salvation lies in our *leaning into* that eternal divine life, and our thereby being in position to derive endless life from our mystical—but nonetheless palpable—connection with the God Who Is” (*End*, 73). Salvation is about waking up into the enormity that already is, the “excess, abysmal, roiling beyond what can be grasped” (*Edge*, 22).

In an early poem, “The Holy Ghost,” Cairns describes a moment in his boyhood, rowing a small boat across a bay, something he had done “many times” (*Compass*, 51). What happened on this particular occasion “happened only once.” As he stops rowing to take a break, while floating in the middle of the body of water, he writes,

the breeze also stops, and a calm  
settles upon those waters so suddenly I worry

for my breath, and I can hardly take it in. And I am struck  
by a fear so complete it seems a pleasure,  
and I know if I were to look about—though I know better  
than to try—I would find the circle of shoreline gone,

and myself adrift in an expanse of stillest waters. (52)

Then, just as suddenly, the wind picks back up, the beach and the beach goers come back into view or consciousness, and the moment passes. Such moments marked by expansiveness and stillness, that is, by awe, are certainly common in the accounts of those, poets and others, who experience a sense of the sacred in nature. The title of this poem leaves no question that Cairns understands his experience in terms of his Christian faith. He is overwhelmed by the presence of God in the person of the Holy Ghost. What he describes in this poem is what, after becoming Orthodox, he might call a moment of salvation, a moment on the spiritual journey when one becomes awake to and overwhelmed by the condition of being utterly surrounded by the real, by that enormity which Cairns calls God.

Cairns's idea of the process of salvation has a lot to do with the healing of the human *nous*, the concept of which, he points out, has been lost to most of contemporary Christianity. This is a word usually translated as *mind*, for instance, in the New Testament passage that in the King James Bible reads, "be ye transformed by the renewing of your mind" (Romans 12:2). In "Adventures in New Testament Greek: *Nous*," Cairns explains why he finds this translation inadequate and describes what he considers a better, and simultaneously a more Orthodox, understanding. First, the common understanding of the mind has been reduced to the intellect or the reasoning part of the brain, what Cairns in this poem calls "our rightly designated / nervous system" (*Compass*, 104). This definition is too "narrow" for Cairns, particularly when our society gives the mind "excessive esteem." He writes that "some presume the mind itself both part / and parcel of the person," an idea that manifests in our culture in very divergent ways. On one hand, popular Christianity equates belief with mental assent (making the mind "the very seat of soul"), while on the other hand, modern neurobiology accounts for "most / of our habits and for our affections"—that is, accounts for what makes us who we are as people—through

scientifically explaining the mind in terms of its being a “crucible for a host // of chemical incentives” (104). If these are the common ways of understanding mind, then *mind* fails as a translation of *nous*. In “A Pilgrim’s Glossary,” Cairns writes, “the nous is the faculty of the human person that apprehends God’s presence and intuits God’s will” (*Edge*, 262). The problem is that most of us suffer from “[a] clouded nous, a distracted nous, a fragmented nous.” This condition causes “imbalances of perception,” for instance, being “unduly enamored of the flesh,” on one hand, or being “unduly disrespecting of the body,” on the other. But, he concludes, “A purified nous allows one to see and to honor God, who is All in all” (262). The concept includes both the spiritual and the material, the spiritual in the material.

One might crudely describe nous in terms of mind and heart. In “Adventures in New Testament Greek: *Nous*,” Cairns simply calls it “the heart’s intellective aptitude” (*Compass*, 104). The nous has to do with our aptitude to perceive reality, to perceive enormity, that is, to see God. We sin because we cannot see this way. And we cannot see this way because we sin. We would not fall short if we walked around always with a full awareness of the sacred reality permeating ourselves, our neighbors, and the very world itself. The process of salvation, then, necessarily includes un-clouding and un-fragmenting the nous. The aptitude of our nous, he writes, “grows dim, / unless you find a way to wake it” (104). He concludes the poem by describing, in a way that overtly invites the reader into the process of experiencing, not just understanding, what the nous is and can do, a practice of contemplative reading, as a way to do that waking:

let’s try something, even now. Even as  
you tend these lines, attend for a moment  
to your breath as you draw it in: regard

the breath’s cool descent, a stream from mouth  
to throat to the furnace of the heart.

Observe that queer, cool confluence of breath  
and blood, and do your thinking there. (104-05)

While Cairns would never claim that anyone but God could do this work, he would also adamantly insist that people can do their part in preparing themselves for God to work, particularly through the practice of the spiritual practices, most centrally the practice of prayer, most centrally the practice of *the* prayer, which aims to bring about an inner stillness by putting the name of Jesus always on one's breath. But there are other, related, practices too, the practice of the liturgy, the sacraments, *the* sacrament of the Eucharist, the use of a prayer rope, the practice of place pilgrimages, spending time in nature, reading, and so forth, which can all put one in a place to be healed.

Nous shows up briefly but crucially in another poem that deals with the process of salvation and that revises a current meaning by recovering an older meaning. He begins "Adventures in New Testament Greek: *Mysterion*" by noting that we have "a somewhat meager view of mystery" (*Compass*, 113). Our common understandings of the word mystery, the translation of *mysterion*, do not adequately convey "the palpable / proximity of dense noetic pressure." In other words, our common understandings of mystery leave off the touchability, closeness, thickness, activeness of that which the nous and only the nous can perceive. In this poem, he writes about mystery as an orientation toward the holy in general and mystery as manifest in the Sacrament of the Eucharist specifically. For Cairns, this loss of meaning in mystery is precipitated by "the loss of the body." In *the Holy Mystery*, the Eucharist, the loss can be seen in the way that "the sacrament" can be "pared" down from its full significance as a body (that is, as *the body*) and made into a "postcard" or a symbol, which is to say, a sign merely referring to something else rather than an active and acting presence. Cairns calls this diminishment "familiar, glib, and gnostic bullshit," a reference to the early Christian gnostic

heresy that discounted the material world, the implications of which, Cairns implies, hang on in the continued denial of the body in Western Christianity.

To explain the fuller significance of mystery or *mysterion* as it manifests in the Eucharist, he contrasts it with metaphor as metaphor is often understood. He writes, “The problem at the heart / of metaphor is how neatly it breaks down / to *this* and *that*.” If metaphor can be broken down “neatly” to tenor and vehicle, to one thing standing in for another thing, then it is inadequate. Of course, that’s not the only way to understand metaphor. Few poets probably do, even if it may be taught that way in some classrooms and defined that way in some student handbooks. It is not metaphor that Cairns is critiquing so much as an inadequate understanding of metaphor, the understanding at work should someone call the Eucharist *just a metaphor*. So Cairns asks the readers to “Imagine” a metaphor “that held // entirely across the play of image / and its likenesses.” If one has a metaphor that cannot be broken down to one thing standing in for another thing but that rather has one thing pointing to a whole range of possible meanings at once, then one approaches *mysterion*. It is enormity that poetry evokes, through metaphor at its fullest. It is enormity also, then, that the Eucharist enacts: “*Mysterion* is . . . enormous enough to span the reach of what we see / and what we don’t.” The practicing of taking the Eucharist engages and even trains our nous, enabling us to “apprehend how near / the Holy abides,” in the very matter of the elements and in the matter of our own bodies. But to say that enormity resides within us and within the elements is not the same as saying that it can be reduced to those things. Immediately upon observing that the Eucharistic mystery allows one to “apprehend how near / the Holy abides,” Cairns concludes the poem, “You cannot know how far.” The true mystery of reality—of God, of that which is enacted in the Eucharist, of that which the nous and only the

nous can perceive—is in Cairns’s Orthodox understanding both immeasurably close to us and outright utterly immeasurable.

That immeasurable quality of mystery and of the holy has another crucial implication for salvation for Cairns, one that he teases out (and teases is the right word) in “Adventures in New Testament Greek: *Apocatastasis*.” In this poem, Cairns does not revise the current understanding of a term which he finds has diminished in its full significance but rather recovers a widely-forgotten term with which he wrestles. *Apocatastasis* appears only once in the New Testament in a passage that was debated early in Christian history. In the Book of Acts, Saint Peter heals a crippled man and preaches to the astonished crowd that gathers. For the most part, he offers a conventional Christian sermon, not unlike what one might hear in many churches today, calling the people to repent of their sins and to put their faith in Jesus. But near the end of his sermon, he briefly mentions the “restitution of all things” that is to come (Acts 3:21). In the King James Bible, *restitution* is the translation of *apocatastasis*. The theological controversy has to do not with that word but with the phrase following it, “restitution *of all things*.” In Christian history, the term *apocatastasis* has become shorthand for an interpretation of that phrase to mean what it actually says, which is, that *all things* will be restored, that salvation is for *all* people and for *all* the world. This interpretation was officially considered heretical by the early church. In this poem, Cairns introduces it as the “dearest” “[a]mong obscurer heresies” (*Compass*, 117). In the context of that particular sermon, it is an unlikely reading of Saint Peter’s intention. Cairns describes the belief in the *apocatastasis* of all things as “one giddy, largely Syriac belief that all / and everyone will be redeemed—or, more nearly, / *have been* redeemed, always, have only to notice.” With the phrase “have only to notice,” Cairns reiterates his understanding of salvation as a process, a process which includes healing and noticing the fullness that already is (117). The

belief that redemption applies to *all* is considered heretical because it contrasts with that traditional Christian understanding that limits redemption, that is, salvation to those who repent of their sins and put their faith in Jesus, as Peter in the rest of his sermon and other writers in the New Testament elsewhere suggest.

It is notable that Cairns does not specifically adopt this heresy as his own position. But he certainly puts in a good word for it. To begin with, he calls it “refreshing.” More than that, he offers support for it by connecting it to another old idea, “the numbing vision” of the sixteenth-century Jewish Rabbi Isaac Luria: “everything / we know as well as everything we don’t in all / creation came to be in that brief, abysmal // vacuum The Holy One first opened in Himself” (117). While the specifics may change from articulation to articulation, this vision associating God with that abysmal enormity that Cairns speaks of and that connects the creation of the universe to an overflowing thereof has many parallels and precedents in Christian tradition. If one understands God and creation in such terms, Cairns suggests, then it certainly would be no great leap to believe that God might likewise redeem *all* of creation in the same way. Cairns puts it this way, in the final lines of the poem:

So it’s not so far a stretch from *that* Divine Excess [i.e. of creation]  
to advocate the sacred possibility  
that in some final, graceful *metanoia* He

will mend that ancient wound completely, and for all. (*Compass*, 117)

In these final lines, he affirms not as a necessity but as a “sacred possibility” that God could and very well may save everyone and everything, in an act of divine repentance—that word *metanoia* again—not in a turn away from some wrong doing but toward some greater, redemptive good. In other words, all may be saved.

While Cairns admits that believing that all things *will* be restored is heresy, he insists that the hope that all things, at least all people, *might* be restored is completely Orthodox. Speaking

of what he has learned in visiting Mount Athos and reading the early monastic and contemplative writings of Christianity, he writes, “The monks and their Orthodox traditions have insisted—from the earliest writings on the matter—that . . . salvation is offered to all of humankind, not just to those relatively few who acknowledge membership” in Christianity or Orthodoxy (*End*, 73-74). At the same time, “the Orthodox fathers and mothers would be quick to insist that the most trustworthy and most satisfying road to full participation in the saving life of Christ is revealed in the traditional teaching *of* and participation *in* that One, Holy, Orthodox, Catholic, and Apostolic Church” (*End*, 74). The line that he dances around here is a bit tricky, with the key distinction between church as institution and Church as mystical body, which is actually a distinction that the Orthodox fathers and mothers would not readily accept. On one hand, he does not want to say that there are some who will be left *out* of salvation. On the other hand, he also does not want to let go of the idea that there is a being *in* of salvation. As a poet and not a systematic theologian, he has no obligation to clarify the minutia here. He believes that “salvation” involves being part of a larger “body.” The point isn’t that those not in the church are not in the body but, quite the opposite, that there is a body to be part of and that those not part of the church which is the institution or the religion may nonetheless be part of the “Church” which the Orthodox call “the One Body—that is to say, Christ’s Body.” He writes, “We acquire our salvation *through* our partaking of that body, regardless of our meager apprehension of the matter” (*End*, 74).

While any talk about the necessity of belonging to any particular “church” (whether understood as institution or cosmic body) will strike readers who do not belong as decidedly excluding, the nuance that Cairns is trying to communicate is one that is radically inclusive. He pointedly quotes Bishop Kallistos Ware on this idea: “We can say where the Church is; we



cannot say where she is not” (qtd. in *End*, 74). The implication is that anyone, whether acknowledging it or understanding it or belonging to any church institution, could nonetheless belong to the body, even those of other religions or no religion. Cairns further explains: “Dwelling somewhere at the heart of this business lies the Orthodox understanding of the human person, an understanding that commences with the conviction that we—every one of us, of whatever religion or nonreligion—are made in the image of God, that we continue to bear His image. As the Orthodox like to say, we are written as the *icon* of God. What may come as news to some, even so, is that the *one* God is said to exist in *three* Persons engaged in a single *perichóresis*, a single circling dance, and that our trope of *Trinity*, then, is one way of figuring God Himself as an *essentially* relational being” (*Edge*, 223). To insist on the significance of the Church understood as the Body is not, as it might sound, to parochially insist on that one’s religious tradition is the one and only that leads to salvation but rather to insist on the importance of individual human beings being part of a larger Body. That that Body is so closely associated with the institution of the Orthodox church is very much a secondary matter for Cairns to the larger concern that all humans need to be part of God’s Body, as it were, to be in relationship. To put it more simply, Cairns writes, “Thanks to the long-standing tradition that monk manifests, I have a developing sense that salvation finally must have to do with all of us, collectively, and that it must have to do with all else as well—all of creation, in fact” (*End*, 75).

The “sense that salvation finally must have to do with all of us, collectively,” has multiple implications in Cairns’s poetry and spirituality. The obvious one has to do with his ideas about the possibility of eventual universal salvation. The more immediate implications have to do with how salvation is not “a discrete, individualized, private relationship” but rather “how we are called to work this business out together,” that is to say, not only as members in a larger,

possibly universal, mystical body but as members in actual, that is to say, local communities (*Edge*, 222). He writes that “while salvation happens to persons,” he does not see it as a “simply personal” matter (*Edge*, 221). In an anecdote from one of his pilgrimages to Mount Athos that he repeats often, Cairns writes, “I like very much the response that a wonderful priest gave to a man who asked him recently if Jesus Christ was his personal savior: ‘Nope,’ he said, ‘I like to share him’” (*Edge*, 221).

The communal aspect of salvation and of the spiritual journey can be seen throughout Cairns’s poetry. In an early poem, “After the Last Kiss,” for instance, he highlights the very practical need for community in difficult times. The poem is in the voice of one who has recently died speaking to those grieving. Rather than saying prayers, the voice suggests, the bereaved should “Settle instead for food, common meals of thick soup. / Invite your friends” (*Compass*, 22). The voice of the dead person encourages “lively conversation” over the “steaming bowls” and the sharing of “bread (there really must be bread).” He urges that if they have “Something to say” to one another, they need to “Say it now.” Finally, when the time comes for the people to leave, “Kiss each guest” even if it causes “embarrassment.” He even encourages “repeat[ing] your farewells a time or two more / than seems fit.” The voice concludes that all of this—this very practical, very physical enacting of community, the friends, the food, the conversation, the physical affection—does have a connection to prayer, even though the poem initially suggests that it may be only to replace prayer. The poem ends by suggesting that if those grieving fail to “embrace” their friends “at such common departures,” then the “prayers will / fall as dry crumbs” and fail to bring any “comfort” (22). In this poem, enacting community appears to enable prayer, or at least make prayer not in vain.

The relationship between prayer, salvation, and community is developed at greater length in a series of Cairns's most recent poems, the fourteen Idiot Psalms included in and providing the structure for his collection of the same name, *Idiot Psalms*. In these poems, Cairns writes in the voice of Isaak, which is also the name he took when becoming Orthodox and the name by which he is known on Mount Athos. The poems follow the form of the biblical Psalms of David. They also take up similar subject matter, both the praise and lament, with the lament predominating. The lament includes lament over particular instance of suffering and over suffering in general and, most pointedly, over the poet and others' shortcomings and distance from God. As a series, the poems enact a movement that speaks directly to Cairns's understanding of the collective nature of the spiritual journey and of salvation. In an interview on this book, he explains that "*Idiocy*" has to do with being "cut off from others, for good or ill," whereas the Orthodox tradition of the "Holy Fool" has to do with being "so engaged with the progress of others that he sacrifices his own well-being, his own self-regard." He offers, "I suppose I think of myself as something of an idiot hoping to become something of a fool, and a holy one at that" ("Scott Cairns and His *Idiot Palms*"). In another interview, he proposes that that same distinction provides the structure for the book, noting that "the book has an arc of movement from idiot to fool" (qtd. in Dixon). One of the clearest ways in which this movement develops is in the poems' progression from a focus on the individual to a focus on the community, whether in terms of grieving, noting shortcomings, or seeking the face God.

The first five of these poems speak in the first-person singular. The focus is the prayer of the individual seeking God. In the first poem, the poet prays "that *I* might glimpse" God's "shadow" (*Psalms*, 13, emphasis added). In the third poem, there is a collective—specifically, a committee meeting—but the members are not a community. They as individuals sit in the

committee meeting cut off from any true contact or engagement with each other. Their isolation is emphasized by poet's laments, which is not that *they* are all in this sad situation but rather, more individually, that "*I am drowning here*" (26, emphasis added). Similarly, in the fourth poem, the poet writes about "my heart," "my heart," "my heart" (30). In the fifth, he writes, "I stoop to find / my knees" (35). The first-person singular shifts to the first-person plural in the sixth and seventh poems, where, respectively, the poet protests the sufferings brought about by the economic injustice of class inequality and the sufferings brought about by our fragile bodies (40, 47). In the ninth Idiot Psalm, the poet speaks directly to the tension between the individual and the community when it comes to praying for salvation. While believers rightly pray "*Lord, we say, have mercy on us,*" it is too often the case that what "each idiot more nearly means to plead" is actually "*save me*" (60). Notwithstanding that confession, which certainly is more of a confession than an accusation, the poet continues with "us" in the tenth Idiot Psalm. Here, *us* overtly includes all of creation. He addresses God, "O Great Zookeeper attending all such / critters in Your ken, both microscopic / and immense" (66). He concludes the poem with a prayer for God to "mitigate / the ache attending all of the above," that is, to lessen the suffering of all beings, or, put more strongly, to save all things (66). In the eleventh poem, Cairns continues using plural language, describing God as being "in our midst" and "among us." Here, as in the prior poem, it is not just the community of believers but, perhaps even, the whole universe that is involved in this community. God is "O Pulse / Unceasing within each quark," that is, present within the very building blocks of matter itself (69). In the twelfth poem, it is the love and embrace of God that are "binding us together" (74). While the thirteenth poem returns to the use of "I," the introductory note informs us that this is a "*penitential*" poem (77).

The final poem of this series, “Idiot Psalm 14,” returns to “we” in a sweeping way, though it retains a single use of “I” (82). The scene is of the Eucharist Communion, with the element of *community* in the foreground.

Holy One, allow  
that as we near the cup, before the coal  
is set upon our trembling tongues, before  
we blithely turn and walk again into  
our many other failures, allow that we  
might glimpse, might apprehend something of the fear  
with which we should attend this sacrifice,  
for which we shall not ever be found worthy,  
for which—I gather—we shall never be prepared. (82)

The prayer of this poem is a prayer for a moment of progress in the journey toward salvation for all who have gathered. As Cairns writes elsewhere, “It is not, finally, *my* prayer that I am after, but *the prayer of the Holy Spirit in my praying*, praying for the restored, noetic center of my person, my one-day recovered *nous* connecting me to Christ and, as it happens, His existential Body, the church” (*Edge*, 174). It is certainly not that Cairns wishes for the individual to dissolve or disappear into the community. The poems marked by “I” are not lesser psalms, lesser prayers. The point isn’t to denigrate the first-person singular, which does not, in the end, even disappear as its prominence decreases. The point is, rather, to show the emerging importance of the first-person plural. He explains that “the recovery of holy tradition has made me less inclined to see ‘my journey’ as mine alone” (“Lives Together,” 38). Indeed, on his third pilgrimage to Mount Athos, he brings along his son and writes: “It is a wonderful thing to pursue the prayer of the heart, a wonderful thing to proceed along the way of the pilgrim. It is far better to proceed along that way with another” (*Edge*, 220).

For Cairns, salvation is not about going to heaven or escaping hell, not a one-time conversion event, not about the individual, and not exclusive to Orthodoxy or even Christianity. Instead, salvation is about being connected to God, about a process or a journey, about a healing

of the *nous* or our ability to perceive enormity, and about all of this taking place within community. Cairns sees salvation as, of course, a gift of God but also as process aided by spiritual practice, including poetry, liturgy, and, especially, prayer. While Cairns repeatedly attributes this generous view of salvation to Orthodoxy, it appears in his writing as a revision of what he perceives to be predominant in the popular Christianity in the West and as a recovery of what he perceives to have been lost from ancient and Eastern Christianity. In characteristic postsecular fashion, this recovery is a kind of revision and the revision a kind of recovery. In his work dealing with what he considers to be the treasures of the faith, his revision takes on a gentle and affirming stance. While he has made it clear that he “wrestles” with the terms he writes about (“Conversation,” *Image*, 65), in these poems it is a playful wrestling. In other poems of his, to which we will turn shortly, the wrestling takes on a sharper and more critical edge. It is still playful, but fiercely so, as he pushes back on the particular texts of the tradition that he finds most difficult or most problematic.

## Chapter Eight: Wrestling with the Text

### **Revision that Is Critical**

For Cairns to work to recover religious terms and practices that are both ancient and Eastern and to bring them to bear in the contemporary West makes him a postsecular poet, engaging deeply and in a sustained manner with the sort of recovery work that postsecular literature often entails. That he applies pressure to current religious understandings with these materials makes him even a bit more characteristically postsecular, engaging in religious innovation. But to see Cairns at his most characteristically postsecular, we need to turn to those texts where he engages most forcefully and pointedly in religious revision, specifically, in the revision of the sacred texts of his religious tradition. In texts such as the Adventures in New Testament Greek poems and his series of meditations on the liturgical calendar for Advent, Lent, and Easter, we see Cairns responding to the sacred texts of the religious tradition. In the Idiot Psalms poems, we see him writing in the form and mode of those texts. In his book *Endless Love: Poems of the Mystics*, we see him actually rewriting those texts, giving translations and adaptations from a wide range of writers from the Christian mystical tradition, from the New Testament through Saint John of the Cross. These translations and adaptations remains thoroughly faithful to the original grain of these texts. Where Cairns most strongly writes and reads against the grain of certain texts is when he rewrites in his practice of midrash, which can best be seen in his libretto *The Martyrdom of Saint Polycarp* and his series of poems “The Recovered Midrashim of Rabbi Sab.”

At his most characteristically postsecular, however, Cairns will insist that he is also being most certainly orthodox. The orthodox Christian tradition is and has long been a living tradition. All living traditions are always undergoing change. And this living tradition, specifically, has always included practices of change and revision. To adapt the tradition is to continue it. Moreover, in the specific revisions he makes, he works against the grain of the words of certain texts but in what he understands to be the spirit of the overall religious tradition in which those texts find their place. He is not pitting the spirit of the text against the letter of the text, as that phrase is typically understood. The letter of the text already is imbued with the spirit of the text, which does not mean that the letter must be followed to the letter but that the letter cannot be followed to the letter because even the letters are breathing and living, pointing continually to the multiple possible and finally inexhaustible meanings. His practice of midrash is a practice that takes up both letter and spirit together. In this practice, he is simultaneously dreadfully serious and gleefully playful.

Cairns explains of the rabbis who practiced midrash that “their midrashic method has been to ‘search out’ the difficult passages—the utterly perplexing ones—trusting that, if those passages appear to trouble their assumptions, it is because their assumptions needed work. Their vision was due for revision” (*End*, 103). Cairns follows through on this penchant to intentionally look for more possible meanings in the difficult passages. In *The Violent Legacy of Monotheism*, Regina Schwartz likewise takes on the troubling passages of violence in the Bible and calls for the very kind of rewriting that Cairns undertakes, grounding that call in the example of the very biblical text itself—or rather, the multiplicity of biblical texts, which do not all say the same thing over and over again but rather constitute a tradition of revision. Schwartz writes: “The prophets rehearse creation again and again, in a chorus of differences—now the God who created



the heavens and earth measures everything and punishes the sinner, now the God who created the heavens and earth strengthens the weary, now creation is invoked in a prayer of thanksgiving uttered by Jonah in the belly of a whale” (173). From prophet to prophet with later prophets retelling earlier stories and reworking earlier themes, it is “innovative interpretation” rather than “a drive to interpret authoritatively” “which becomes the ground of continuity” (174). In other words, the prophets remained true to what they read by continuing in the spiritual work of those writers who wrote it. Using these prophets as her model, Schwartz calls for more interpretations of scripture to be written, “accounts of accounts,” “re-creations rather than a recovery of a definitive truth” (164). Schwartz wants readers to continue to “rewrite” the biblical texts “in a new key” (176).

This sort of reading implemented in many of Cairns’s texts is also described in several. In “Archeology,” he uses the archaeological “*dig*” as a metaphor for digging into traditions and their texts. Once one gets past the familiar surface of “undervalued, overlooked terrain,” one will find that “much survives interment” but that “little / survives intact.” One uncovers “pieces” of the “city” that was before and needs to sort them out like pieces a puzzle. He writes, “the pleasure lies // in fingering loose ends toward likely shape, / actually making something of these bits / of persons, places, things one finds” (*Body*, 20). This poem lays out the practice that is reading, and the pleasure of it. It is messy and unsure. What one uncovers in digging isn’t the city but fragments of city. What one uncovers in reading isn’t the meaning but fragments of meaning. “Lesson One” of the poem is about how much can be found even where one might not expect to find anything. “Lesson Two” is about how much one has to participate in putting what one finds together. In “Ruminant,” Cairns compares reading to taking the Eucharist, playing off the double meaning of his title, both to chew something again (as some animals chew the cud)

and to read in a slow, recursive, manner, as if chewing it over again and again in one's mind: "the monk's thin lips / trembled as he took the holy fruit— / how *every* word becomes a subtle / flesh" (*Compass*, 112). It is a particular way of reading that honors a particular power in poetic and sacred language. It is the way of reading by "mulling matters over and again." He adds, however, that it's "never quite again" since the meaning in the words reread isn't the same on subsequent encounters. The meaning "will / not quit" and will not "hold still."

In "As We See," Cairns presents "The Book there on the stand," the Bible set in church, where it suffers from "chronic, homiletic burial," the state of always being treated as if dead by so many preachers' sermons, by explications and explanations that presume the text has one static meaning (*Compass*, 114). It is "entombed" in "layers / of accretion, layers of gloss applied." The layers of accretion are the layers of interpretation that have been piled onto the text to the degree that they become mistaken for the text. What is being described is a situation where the faithful know what the Bible says and means before actually reading it, with the act of reading itself serving simply to confirm the already established interpretation provided to them beforehand. The layers of gloss are glosses in the sense of annotations with definitions but also bring to mind the practice of glossing over a text in the sense of moving quickly past its difficulties and in the sense of putting a shiny finish on it, with emphasis on both the shiny and the finish. By defining the text before opening it, the interpreters not only avoid the difficult and ugly parts of the text but also treat it as if its meaning was a finished thing, no longer available for further unfolding, but done, set, already established. The layers here do not represent an openness to multiplicity of meanings so much as a long history of a rigid meaning being laid down on top of the text, covering over not only the previous meanings but also the text itself (without some excavation of the text's history of interpretation, which such readers are not apt to

undertake, only the top layer shows). Why has this been done? “[H]ardly any” of the “varied purposes” have been “laudable.” It has been done “to keep the terms quite still, predictable.” That such has been the practice with the Bible in so many churches for so long makes the text “arduous / to open.”

Cairns dismays over how the Bible has been treated, particularly the rigid, literalist way it has been interpreted in so many Christian churches. But he rejoices in an older way of reading, one that does also exist in some Christian churches (particularly, he notes, in the ancient Syriac Churches [“Shaping What’s Given,” 80]) but that exists most prominently as a Rabbinic approach to reading, namely, midrash. Cairns discusses his understanding of midrash as an interpretive practice at length elsewhere. In this poem, he writes of it:

Which is why I'm drawn to—why I love—the way  
the rabbis teach. I love the way they read—opening  
The Book with reverence for what  
they've found before, joy for what lies waiting.  
I love the Word's ability to rise again

The emphasis that Cairns rightly attributes to the rabbinic readers (one suspects a touch of romanticizing here, as one imagines the other sort of homiletics exists in all religions based on a holy text) emphasizes opening up a text’s meaning, not closing it down. He notes that reading isn’t an utter free-for-all of signification but that the previous interpretations ought to be taken into account. Indeed, the Book is held in “reverence” because of what meanings it has offered in the past, whether to these very readers opening it again or readers who have preceded them.

As Cairns understands it, the rabbinic method is a very different approach to the layers, which are not bad or avoidable, so much as an occasion for calcification. Rather than confusing the most recent (or one’s favorite) layer of interpretation of a text and rather than trying to get to the text itself somehow free of interpretation, one could embrace the layers as possible meanings, possible meanings touched by the life of the text, meanings to be added to, meanings to be

interrogated. This is the way that Cairns describes the midrash elsewhere, using the same word “layers” to indicate a different way of reading than the way bemoaned in the poem at hand:

Imagine a column of Torah, a column of sacred text.

Imagine a surrounding layer of narrative explication, inscribed in response to the provocations of the scripture’s puzzling phrases, words, letters.

Over time, this outer layer itself provokes subsequent exegetical layering.

Now, imagine this activity continuing until the generated power of Torah emanates outward, endlessly infusing every layer of response with its own power to produce further text. (“Shaping What’s Given,” 79)

Here the layers contribute to, rather than prevent, the text rising again. We should pay careful attention to the word “love” echoing through these lines. While the phrasing hints at the colloquial use of *love* to mean *really like*, we should take seriously his claim to love—to have a profound, heartfelt, defining appreciation and affection for—this approach to reading. We should also hear echoes of that great theme in the text at hand, the love of God, the love of neighbor, the love of enemy, the love of the world, and on. In the Christian context, the capitalized Word means several things, which, in the context of Cairns’s poetry, become even a bit more complicated. There is, of course, the famous passage in the first chapter of the Gospel of John that equates Jesus with the Word, evoking the Cosmic Christ as the *Logos* which, in the beginning, was with God and was God. Though *logos*, particularly in later appropriations of it in Western philosophy, has come to indicate something particularly cerebral, disembodied, and masculine and something transcendent as opposed to immanent, we should not consider this to be Cairns’s meaning here. Instead, we should turn to the perspective that equates this Word, this *logos*, with the feminine Wisdom of Hebrew scripture. On this very point, Cairns explains his

understanding of the difference between Greek and Hebrew approaches to meaning and language in his own glosses on two respective words for *word*, *logos* and *davar*, the former Greek pointing to some predetermined meaning, the latter Hebrew alive and apt to provoke additional meanings, “with a future as dense as its past,” as he puts it in the poem “In Lieu of Logos” (*Body*, 70).

The phrase “Rise again” has to do with new life, pointing both to a reversal of the homiletic burial of Christian sermonic tradition and to the Resurrection central to Christianity. Pointing at the resurrection and to two other key passages in the New Testament, the transfiguration and the sermon on the mount, gives a sense of how, for Cairns, this approach to reading plays a part in the larger spiritual journey. Cairns connects reading with transfiguration. The poem begins with a quote from Isaac the Least, the early Christian father, suggesting, “The transfiguration of our Lord—that is, the radiance in which he was bathed at the pinnacle of Mount Tabor—did not manifest a change in Him, but a change in those who saw Him.” It is not about getting the meaning right. It is about seeing in such a way as to be transformed. He asks us to “Suppose” that “the Holy One Whose Face We Seek” is already present. We cannot see God not because God is “invisible” but because we are “ill equipped” to see. It is only the “pure in heart” who “see Him now.” Still, our practice of reading has value. The “fixed attention” we give, to God, to the text, reveals “the gap” between “what is seen and what is here.” It seems that to even recognize that gap takes up part of the way across it.

What if in pushing back against the text, digging into it for all its worth, creatively revising it for the present, what if in practicing his postsecular midrash Cairns veers off the path of Orthodoxy and even orthodoxy? What if he writes something, in short, that is heretical? Previously, we’ve seen how he had some good words for that one heresy, the belief in the salvation of all. In another poem, “Adventures in New Testament Greek: Hairesis,” he has good

words for heresy itself. He suggests that “most heretics” “have spoken to *The Good* as well // as they could manage” and that, in fact, Christianity would be better off with another “good heretic or two” (*Compass*, 95). He defines heresy much more generously (and accurately) than the prevailing understanding, as “having chosen / one likely story over its more well received / counterpart, whose form—to the heretic—looks far // less compelling.” As for himself, he writes, “The benediction I would choose would be the one / invoking *all* the names of God” (95). Finally, and most importantly, he writes: “Even heretics love God, and burn / convinced that He will love them too” (96). At least, the heretics are doing the best that they can, with all good intentions. At most, they might enrich the faith, not only adding to its diversity but also infusing it with “something like / integrity” (95). He does not claim to be a heretic. But he doesn’t shy away from the edges for fear of heresy.

In the poems most likely to be heretical, he provides himself a measure of plausible deniability by speaking in the voice of an invented character, Rabbi Sab, though his obvious joy in doing this and his obvious affection for and identification with the good Rabbi make that deniability not all that plausible. In a note introducing the series of poems, he explains that the Rabbi was devoted to God but that his “devotion” did not keep him from speaking of God with “a tone of accusation.” He was known both for “compassion” and for “upbraiding of the pious” and was given both to “denunciations” and “glee.” In addition to “manic depression,” “drunkenness,” and “bad manners”—which descriptions are possibly the ad hominem responses of the said pious but also possibly accurate descriptions—he has also been “accused of apostasy” and “blasphemy” (*Body*, 37). In an interview, Cairns describes the Rabbi as “something of a fictive construction, albeit one constructed from impressions I’ve retained of certain historical figures, compounded by a somewhat *improved* version of myself. He seems to bear vestiges of

the historical Sabbatai Zevi, and of Isaac Luria, confused somewhat with other figures—Abba Simeon of the midrashim, Saint Ephraim the Syrian, Saint Isaac the Syrian, Saint Athanasius, Origen, with a touch (alluding to Salinger here) of Saint Francis and Heidi's grandfather. I'll put it this way: if I were able to actually acquire certain characteristics of those mystics whose lives and words have thrilled me, I would be something like Rabbi Sab" ("Conversation," *Prairie Schooner*, 51). Rabbi Sab's reverence for the truth and irreverence for what has been presented so far as truth make him a good candidate for a heretic. In the series of the poems themselves, the supposedly recovered midrash, a few of the poems suggest something of the glee in their subject matter, as in the joyful retelling of creation in "YHWH's Image" and the playfully invented back story for Song of Songs in "Solomon's Erotic Imagination." But, predominantly, the glee is actually inseparable from the darker elements of his midrash practice, the depression, the denunciation, and the bad manners. For it is the darker of these poems on the thematic level that are the most textually playful, the glee coming from the sheer mischievousness of rewriting the biblical accounts.

### **The Violence of the Text**

In "Jephthah's Piety," "The Sacrifice of Isaac," "The Death of Moses," and, most powerfully, "The Turning of Lot's Wife," Cairns writing in the voice of Rabbi Sab takes up specific scenes in the Bible where God and people acting at God's command or in God's name commit acts of senseless violence. Rabbi Sab does not attempt to qualify these scenes, explain, minimize, or put a figurative spin on the violence they depict, even while, in "Jephthah's Piety," he admits that it isn't surprising that readers have done just that, with "wishful postulations," "anachronistic constructions," and "other hedgings" that would try to lessen or ameliorate the violence, indeed the evil, of what is written (*Body*, 50). These poems are about the inexplicable,

though they move with regard to the inexplicable in two opposite directions at once. First, these poems simplify the biblical text. They render the violence committed in as plain and stark terms as possible. In doing this, they hold the God of the text accountable for the violence committed by Him and in His name (and it is certainly He in these poems). They likewise hold the would-be pious readers accountable for recognizing this violence for what it is, inexplicable and inexcusable. But, second, even as Rabbi Sab speaks in the voice of a prophet against this sort of inexplicability, he also speaks in the voice of a poet or mystic in favor of another sort of inexplicability that the biblical text contains—a textual and spiritual richness that cannot be reduced to or completely overcome by the violence of the text. The poems, at moments, introduce certain phrases, images, and metaphors, which are as inexplicable as the violence they complicate.

Out of the series, the poem “Jephthah’s Piety” offers the least redemption and the most condemnation. It is a midrash of the story of Jephthah from the eleventh chapter of the Book of Judges. In the biblical story, the Hebrew warrior goes to fight a battle against the neighboring Ammonites over disputed land. To gain “a little leverage in war,” as Rabbi Sab puts it, he makes a vow to God: “If you deliver the Children of Ammon into my hands, then whatever comes out of the door of my house on my safe return from the Ammonites shall be the Lord’s and shall be offered by me as a burnt offering” (qtd. in *Body*, 50). He wins the battle and comes home to his daughter and only child coming out of the door to greet him and celebrate his victory. In the biblical story, he is stuck by grief at what he feels he must do. But his daughter willingly offers her life for the sacrifice because her father made a vow which father and daughter both believe cannot be broken and because God appears to have allowed him to win the war. She only asks to spend some time, two months, in the mountains grieving because she will die a virgin. Her father



allows this and, when she returns, fulfills his vow to God. The biblical story is framed and presented in such a way that a reader might be led to feel pity for both Jephthah and his daughter, combined with awe at the mortal devotion they both have, the length they will go to in order not to break a vow to God. The biblical passage could be taken to imply that where Jephthah went wrong was not in killing his daughter in the end but in making such a promise so rashly in the beginning.

If the biblical text might be said to have the sad or somber tone of a cautionary tale, Rabbi Sab's midrash has only the sharpened edge of a prophetic accusation. If the biblical text might be said to invite sympathy for Jephthah as a basically good man who fell victim of a moment of his own impulsiveness and foolishness, Rabbi Sab calls it as he sees it: Jephthah is bloodthirsty. In the midrash, Jephthah wins the battle and returns home "[c]overed in gore," "swaggering," and "not quite satisfied" (50-51). He watches the door of his house, "eager to see what he could kill next." When his daughter runs out with "her arms thrown wide" to embrace him, Jephthah is "stopped short" for "a flashing instant" as he realizes who it is before him. However, in contrast to the biblical text where horror accompanies this moment of recognition, in this midrash that very moment is the moment "when he was pleased that he had made his vow." Without a word of warning or explanation, without allowing her two months to grieve, without hesitating or grieving himself, he runs "her through with his sword" and cuts off her head, the latter act conceived "As a kind of mercy." Finally, in the last words of the midrash, he enters the house "to be adored."

Rabbi Sab changes the details of the poem, making Jephthah more overtly ruthless to force readers to face the senselessness and brutality of this act of violence. Once readers condemn Rabbi Sab's Jephthah, they are forced to see that the Bible's Jephthah is not

categorically better. Both Jephthahs kill their daughter for no reason. It makes little difference if one is sad and the other sadistic. Moreover, the midrash version makes clear that the killing of the one daughter is only a small part of the violence of the story of Jephthah, even if it is particularly poignant because it is his own daughter. The biblical version of the story makes it plain that the war itself with the Ammonites was entirely avoidable and that a diplomatic solution could have been reached, as the two sides have a relatively lengthy discussion about who should own the land in question and why before they resort to fighting. In terms of scale, the greater violence was that war, a fact which the biblical text does not even pause over but which Rabbi Sab connects integrally to the killing of the daughter. He writes, “Children are always dying, being killed—both in scripture and in fact” (50). Before he killed his own child, he killed the children of others. Rabbi Sab points out that “*the Children of Ammon*” were, in fact, the children of someone, that that phrase is not simply about the ethnic or national background of the Ammonites, though often “euphemize[d]” as such. The Ammonite fighters were someone’s children, no matter what age. And, as in all wars, we can assume that young children also were killed, maimed, or left as orphans.

If the biblical story of Jephthah is told in a way that might lessen the impact of both the war and that one brutal and inexplicable act afterward, then Rabbi Sab’s midrashic revision doubles down on the violence to focus the reader squarely on it. In this poem, the violence does not belong to God directly but to those who consider themselves to be God’s people, those who have the habit of “confusing their own blood lust with the will of God.” The final words of the midrash drive the accusatory point home. Upon killing his daughter, Jephthah “then entered *our* house to be adored” (emphasis added). Where one would expect the text to say that he entered *his* house, it says *our* house. The only likely antecedent to this *our*, which would include Rabbi

Sab and his audience, would be that the house Jephthah enters is the biblical text and biblical tradition. He enters the Bible as a warrior “adored,” at least implicitly, by those who honor this text. With this final linguistic twist, Rabbi Sab demands that the people of the book, himself included, be accountable for giving an accounting of the violence of the text.

Two more midrashim, “The Sacrifice of Isaac” and “The Death of Moses,” continue in the same vein. They both force a focus on the violence of the text by rewriting the stories to make them even more violent than the biblical version but they do so with the implication that the more violent versions *should not actually be* any harder to stomach. The more violent versions could easily be inferred (or imagined) from the only somewhat more sanitized biblical versions. But these two poems also make a few rhetorical moves that distinguish them from “Jephthah’s Piety.” One difference is that these two poems do implicate—that is, blame—the God of the text for the violence committed. In “The Sacrifice of Isaac,” God commands the killing, while in “The Death of Moses” God commits it. Another difference is that both of these texts also credit God for reversing or undoing the violence. And, most importantly, in and about those moments of undoing, the texts burst beyond their discursive limits with lines of poetic—rather than narrative or rational—significance. In this way, these poems, like the one discussed above, levy sharp critiques at the violence of the biblical text. But that is not all that they do. Neither—and this is the point—is violence all that the biblical texts do.

In “The Death of Moses,” Rabbi Sab retells a brief and particularly odd story from early in the Book of Exodus. After speaking to Moses from the burning bush and sending him to Egypt to free the Hebrews from slavery, God decides to kill Moses. The crucial part of the biblical passage that appears in the column beside Cairns’s text reads simply: “At a night encampment on the way, the Lord encountered Moses and sought to kill him” (*Body*, 48; Exodus 4:24). The

decision is inexplicable. No reason is given. It is left to the reader to try to guess based on the context—was it because Moses hadn't circumcised his son? was it because he had asked too many questions at the burning bush?—or to simply wonder why. The takeaway appears to be that God has God's reasons. It is not the place of humans to know the why but simply to fear and obey. While such a message may speak of God the inscrutable to some readers, it will certainly suggest God the capricious to others. The text is certainly problematic. If Moses, friend of God, has not obviously disobeyed in any way but is on the way to do the great task that God has told him to do and still is not safe from God killing him for no apparent reason, then it would be difficult to consider God as just or good in the ordinary sense of those words. So the passage certainly calls for midrash.

In his midrash, Rabbi Sab fills in some of the gaps in this story, beginning with suggesting some reasons why God wanted to kill Moses. The “conversations with Moses” were “tedious.” More than tedious, with all of Moses's questions and objections, they constituted “blithe insubordination.” That's why God's “anger . . . became nearly uncontrollable.” To suggest that God could not control God's anger would be blasphemous, so Rabbi Sab comes right up to that line but stops short by saying it was *nearly* so. Of course, and one suspects that this is the point, these reasons for God's anger do more harm than good in establishing God as reasonable. He comes off less inscrutable than petty, hotheaded. Though the biblical narrative does not have Moses die until some forty years later when he almost reaches the Promised Land, in another passage that has its own problems, Cairns titles this poem “The Death of Moses.” Rabbi Sab explains, “Of course, Moses was instantly dead” the moment God decided it was to be so. “For who can live, even briefly, beyond the forbearance of the Lord?”

Rabbi Sab insists that Moses is dead “notwithstanding” Moses’s “insistence upon remaining upright” and “walking about.” This delightful contradiction becomes the second focus of the midrash, after the anger of God. Moses eats “a big meal” and falls asleep, “dreaming of the innkeeper’s well-fed wife.” But these facts, “these incidentals,” Rabbi Sab asserts, do not count as “evidence of life.” Quite the opposite, the fact that Moses can “sleep at all” after the “unpleasantness” with God at the burning bush shows that he must be dead. His “many dreams” make the case even stronger. Other than the one about the innkeeper’s wife, apparently, “none of them” were “the dreams of the living.” He dreams of “vast chasms,” “pouring vortices,” and “a single ram tethered to a post of limestone.” It may be that these dreams anticipate specific events that take place later in the biblical narrative of Moses’s life—the vortices suggesting the water of the Red Sea swirling around and miraculously drowning the Pharaoh’s army, the ram suggesting the institution of ritual sacrifice for the sins of the people, and the chasm suggesting the enormity of God Moses would glimpse when allowed a glimpse of God’s back. But whatever the references, and whether there are any specific ones, the point made in the midrash is that the dreams are not “of the living.” Beyond that, they are as inexplicable as the God of the text.

The poem ends recalling how “the Lord soon repented of His momentary whim,” “retracted the death,” and “returned Moses to his place among the many other volatile shadows.” To say that God “repented” also borders on blasphemy, as it may indicate that God did something wrong to repent of. But it is, after all, biblical itself, since God “repents” later on in the Book of Exodus of other harm he intended to do to people (Exodus 32:14). Though it is generally understood that this repentance is not repentance from wrong but changing of God’s mind, Rabbi Sab tantalizingly leaves the word unglossed, which allows the stronger meaning of the word to hang in the air. Meanwhile, in another playful contrast, Moses knows nothing about

having been dead or having been restored to life. He “ordered a big breakfast and went his way as if nothing much had happened, pinching the innkeeper’s wife on his way out the door.”

Rabbi Sab’s irreverence toward Moses is set against Rabbi Sab’s irreverence toward God. In his happy appetites, the holy man comes off unwitting but affable. That God is in a quarrel with the man that the man is not even privy to does not put God in a favorable light. The poems focuses on three things, the capriciously violent God (who thankfully repents), the hapless and happy Moses, and the enigmatic but highly suggestive dreams. The poem speaks at certain key moments with a possible (but ambiguous) tone of irony. It is not fully clear that we are to take seriously that Moses was dead. To say that “Of course” he was could verge on sarcasm against God. It could also be to take the God of the text at face value, a more frightful but also more fruitful proposition. We live always on the verge of death. When Moses is returned to life, Rabbi Sab describes it not with the word *life* but by saying that Moses was “returned . . . to his place among the many other volatile shadows” (*Body*, 48). To be alive is not so far from being dead.

In “The Sacrifice of Isaac,” Rabbi Sab takes up the biblical story from the Book of Genesis where God commands Abraham to sacrifice his son Isaac. Abraham takes his son, builds an altar, binds him and places him upon it, and takes up the knife to kill him. In the biblical version, at the last moment, God’s angel stops him. Instead of killing Isaac, the angel has Abraham sacrifice a ram which just so happened to be stuck in a nearby thicket. It turns out, it appears, that the whole point of the episode was to test Abraham’s faith and obedience. The implication is that Abraham passed the test by proving that he was willing to sacrifice his son to obey. What makes this passage more problematic than the story of Jephthah is that it is God who commands the sacrifice, not just the man confusing his own desire for the will of God. What makes the story safer, as it were, than that one is that God also stops the killing and apparently

never actually intended it. It would be reasonable to read the biblical narrative, in fact, as a reversal of the ritual of child sacrifice. It would be reasonable to read the biblical narrative as a grand reversal, as if God were saying to Abraham, “What you know of gods is that they demand the killing of children. We are not going to do that. I am a different kind of God.” It would be all-too-easy, that is, after getting over the initial shock of what appeared to be about to happen, to skip over the violence of this story, to focus on the stopping of the knife and the living Isaac at the end of the tale.

Such a reading would not do justice to the real “horror,” as Rabbi Sab puts it, of this story. So in this midrash, he invents an alternative telling of the story, saying that the story as we know it from the Bible has been “misrepeated so thoroughly” because too few people “could bear the memory of Abraham’s knife as it entered the heart of his son” (*Body*, 43). In Rabbi Sab’s version, Abraham does kill his son. He writes, “the Lord pressed his servant inexplicably far” and “the knife did” enter his son. The blood poured out over father and son, altar and ground (*Body*, 43). To insist on this version is narratively sound, since readers will, upon reaching the point where Abraham picks up the knife, already see, already imagine, already anticipate this outcome. The very power of the reversal depends on it. And just as it is imagined, so it also can be remembered. Rabbi Sab writes that it does happen to force readers to remember, to focus on, to come to terms with, this image of Abraham killing Isaac in order to understand how violent the scene is, how violent its imagery, its emotional content, how violent an outcome God asked for and Abraham consented to. Like the biblical narrative, Rabbi Sab does not stop with Isaac killed. Instead, “[i]n pity,” God pauses time and “retract[s] the merest portion of its descent” and then stops Abraham. This happened, Rabbi Sab asserts, “only in time,” with a play off the phrase “in time” to indicate both just before time ran out and exclusively inside of the dimension of time

itself. The biblical version is the version that takes place inside time. But other version remains present “[j]ust outside time.” We cannot forget that, Rabbi Sab insists. In that version, “the boy is still bloodied upon the rock, the man fallen upon him, left with nothing but his extreme, his absolute, his dire obedience.”

This midrash forces readers of the biblical narrative to face the horror of the scene. It cuts off any rushing to consolation that things turned out well (though, even in the biblical narrative it only turns out relatively well as one imagines that, even with Isaac alive, Abraham and Isaac both would be traumatically scarred for the rest of their lives). It places the blame squarely on both God and the man, God for requiring such obedience and Abraham for giving it. But this midrash does several more things as well. God shows “pity.” God repents of what God has done, actually rewinding time. And, finally, God takes responsibility for the violence. Where readers might, Rabbi Sab fears, rush to the consolation of Isaac not dying, God holds the image, indeed, the body of Isaac dead. In Rabbi Sab’s version, Isaac remains dead outside of time. And precisely there, God remains with him and with his father. Isaac dead and Abraham grieving are lying “in the spinning swoon of the I Am.” This is the image with which Rabbi Sab ends the poem, the two bloodied bodies, forever suspended in the presence of God. As the poem itself attests, the violence of the text is inexplicable. But here, Rabbi Sab shows us something else that is inexplicable. God has repented of the violence, undone it, but stays with these bodies, holds them. In this, there seems to be some redemption that goes beyond what could be put into words in any other way.

One more midrash and a later poem on the same biblical text develop even further the two competing aspects of inexplicability, an inexplicability of violence and an inexplicability of something else—poetry, richness, compassion—that runs alongside and in the face of the



unspeakable violence in the text. In “The Turning of Lot’s Wife” and “The Righteous Man of Gomorrah,” Cairns, through Rabbi Sab, takes up one of the most painful of all biblical stories, so painful not only because of its grotesque and inexplicable violence but also because of its long use by religious people against people who are not heterosexual. This is, of course, the story of the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah. The popular interpretation of this biblical story is that the cities were destroyed because many of the people in them were gay. This interpretation is based mainly on the part of the narrative when Lot, Abraham’s nephew, is visited in Sodom by angels who warn him of the coming destruction of the city. Some men from the city demand that Lot hand the visitors over to them so that they can rape them. Lot offers his own daughters instead but the men turn the women down and insist on the apparently male (but actually angelic) visitors. Oddly, the great wrong that is seen here in the popular homophobic interpretation is that the men want to have sex with other men—not that they want to rape visitors to their city. In contrast, many biblical scholars focus on the crime of attempting to rape the guests and the prior pattern of violence within the city that this one episode suggests. Based on both textual and historical evidence, they understand the text to indict the people of the city for their lack of hospitality, a capital offense in a harsh desert climate. But the prevailing popular interpretation, used to condone hostile attitudes and actions toward people who are not heterosexual, is what makes this story so painful in the present.

In either case, it is clear that the text presents the cities as sinful according to the text’s conception of God’s ethical standards. But whatever those sins are, the violence with which they are punished is utterly out of proportion. No matter how guilty anyone in the cities could have been and no matter what they could have been guilty of, all but the most pious readers can only stand in shock at the punishment meted out in the text: “the Lord rained upon Sodom and

Gomorrah sulfurous fire . . . He annihilated those cities and the entire Plain, and all the inhabitants of the cities and the vegetation of the ground” (Genesis 19, qtd. in *Body*, 41). The Bible rarely reaches violence of such scale and so directly at God’s own hand (the Flood and the Apocalypse being two other notable examples). Even if many—or all—of the men and women of these cities and the surrounding areas were guilty of capital offenses, murder, rape, whatever horrible acts one cares to imagine, the rational mind cannot come to terms with this punishment as good or just in any normal use of those terms. Even those who accept capital punishment for certain crimes could not offer a justification for the destruction of “all of the inhabitants of the cities”—which would obviously include all of the children as well—and of the earth itself surrounding the cities.

In several ways, “The Turning of Lot’s Wife” and “The Righteous Man of Gomorrah” continue the work of the poems we’ve already looked at by asking readers to face without blinking the inexplicable violence of the text. Likewise, they also weave in that other kind of inexplicability which runs counter to the violence. But the approach these poems take is different. Whereas the poems considered earlier deal directly with the ones committing and receiving the violence—Jephthah, and his daughter; God, Abraham and Isaac; God and Moses—these poems put God and the people killed in the cities in the background, each focusing instead on an individual that God, in the biblical narrative, meant to spare. It is as if the violence of the stories is too immense to try to tackle straight on and full scale but must be approached through the individual losses of individual characters. Rabbi Sab, for the same reason, does not feel the need to extend the scope of the violence to get readers’ attention. God remains in the background, with an implied censure for the inexplicable act of violence and with, perhaps, an implied connection to the inexplicable love of the characters of the poem who are, in the very

same text that deals violence, still made in the image of that God (as Rabbi Sab stresses, in “YHWH’s Image”).

In the chapter in the Book of Genesis preceding the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah, God discusses His plans with Abraham. Abraham bravely objects. He asks, “Wilt thou also destroy the righteous with the wicked?” (Genesis 18:23, King James Bible). To do so would not be like God, he argues. In fact, taking one step further, it would be wrong. When God agrees to spare the cities if fifty righteous men can be found in them, Abraham talks God down to forty, thirty, twenty, and then, finally, ten—though, sadly, never dares to ask outright that the city not be destroyed regardless of how many righteous men (or women or children) there are or are not in them. At any rate, God finds fewer than ten. From Sodom, only Abraham’s nephew Lot and his wife and daughters evacuate the city before it is destroyed. The biblical text says nothing of the righteous from Gomorrah, though the text leaves open the narrative possibility that there was at least one there too. Cairns invents this person and calls him “The Righteous Man of Gomorrah.” Like Abraham, Cairns leaves alone the discussion of whether destroying even the wicked by fire is justified or justifiable. Cairns neither endorses nor challenges that particular aspect of the story in this particular poem. It is as if, for the sake of the argument, he focuses only on a person who clearly did not deserve this destruction.

The poem opens with this man waking up after the fire has fallen. He is alive but severely “burnt,” laying in the ashes of the city, “the spanning wreck” (*Compass*, 148). In the middle of the short poem, rain begins falling on him. When the raindrops “touch” his skin, it feels “both exquisite and a searing pain.” When he calls out for his “wife and child,” he hears no answer. The rains turn into “sea,” as if to wash away the ruins of the city. The man names this sea “*Met*,” an English transliteration for the Hebrew word for *to die*, “because it bore in tepid depths / the

death of all he cherished.” The poem ends with these words: “then [he] drank his fill of it,” which portrays in two ways an image of the man taking his own life. To drink the depths of a sea would be to drown in any context. That the man here drinks the depths of a sea named death makes that drowning both figurative and literal. While Rabbi Sab often tucks his commentary under the plausible deniability of irony, insinuation, contradiction, he nonetheless makes fairly clear commentary. In contrast, this poem does not, leaving much to be inferred by the reader. But even that commentary, which certainly can be inferred, is not the point. The point of this poem is the viscerally communicated pain of a man caught up in the crossfire of God’s wrath. His body is wracked, his family killed, his city burnt down. He is left with nothing but the sea of death. God all but kills him along with the others. But God might as well have killed him too. For all practical purposes God did, though he left the actual task of dying to the man. That the man is “righteous” appears to matter little in the text, overwhelmed by that he suffers so much. The poem invites readers to exercise imagination, to set aside for a moment questions of wickedness and righteousness that may or may not deserve such punishment, and to imagine the pain and suffering that the punishment causes, both to those it is aimed at and to all around them. Then and only then can the righteousness or wickedness of the punishment itself be considered, a task that this poem leaves entirely to the reader, being satisfied to create the conditions in which such consideration can be properly undertaken, that is, the condition of a visceral conception of what this punishment means in human terms, a punishment that the biblical text describes only in terms of fire falling and not in the terms that must follow, the terms which this poem makes clear, those of flesh burning.

Back in the voice of Rabbi Sab, Cairns visits the same text in a similar way in “The Turning of Lot’s Wife.” After God’s destroying angels lead Lot, his wife, and their daughters

from the city, they warn the refugees to flee to the mountains and not look back. But Lot's wife does look back and is "turned into a pillar of salt" (Genesis 19:26; qtd. in *Body*, 41). The biblical narrative says little about why she looked back or why, for that matter, she was punished for doing so. It could be read as implying some weakness on her part. Rabbi Sab will have none of that. His retelling of her story recovers her as a woman of strength and compassion. And it is her strength and her compassion that stand both as the strongest condemnations of the violence of the text and that demonstrate also its richness which, as these midrashim seek to demonstrate, cannot be reduced to that violence.

Rabbi Sab begins his recovery of this erased women by pointing out: "First of all, she had a name, and she had a history" (*Body*, 41). The name Sab gives her is Marah, which means bitter, an ironic name in this instance because Marah is also the name given to certain bitter waters the Hebrews encountered after leaving Egypt, which God, upon hearing the people's complaints, made sweet and drinkable (Exodus 15:23-25). In contrast to those waters, this Marah's life is made bitter by God. Though Rabbi Sab must invent them, an invented name and history are better than erased ones, particularly when they are overtly (i.e. admittedly) invented, thus asserting the person's dignity and identity without erasing the crime of erasure. Marah came into the world "with remarkable ease" and grew into an adult "with a manner of grace that came to be the sole blessing of her aging parents." Rabbi Sab puts it plainly: "She was beloved." And, from that excess of love she received, she gave: "Marah moved about her city with unflinching compassion, tending to the dispossessed as if they were her own. And they became her own." The city was "given to all species of excess," Rabbi Sab writes. As a result, "there were a great many in agony—abandoned men, abandoned women, abandoned children." She "poured" onto these people "her substance and her care." The overtly feminist move of recovering Marah's

name which had been erased is joined by the implied feminist critique of the virtue spelled out in her history which had also been erased but which, now told, begs the question of whether she, a woman, was not counted among the number of righteous “men” needed to save the city—and, if not, why she was not.<sup>20</sup>

The compassion of Marah for the people of the city, *her* city, stands as the poem’s great critique of the violence which is rained down upon it and, by extension, its critique of the angels

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<sup>20</sup>In his conversation with Norris, he notes in answer to a question from an audience member that his solution for “fixing that problem” of women excluded from Mount Athos is to visit a particular woman’s monastery nearby. He also suggests that a woman might try “one more” church because “The next one may be getting it right” in terms of not treating women as second-class citizens (742). These statements show two things. First, he does consider it a “problem” and not “right” for women to be excluded. Second, he does not have any sharp critique to offer regarding their exclusion. He finishes his answer to the question with an odd comment, which was interrupted and which he didn’t finish: “If you were to go to an Orthodox church in Greece, you would find that the women sit on one side and the men sit on the other. But that’s kind of equal. And I think being off-put because the priest and people in the altar space are men—” (742). It seems peculiar that Cairns would, without any apparent intentional irony, defend the segregation of men and women with a “separate but equal” argument. One wonders what Cairns was going to say if he had finished the statement. For instance, was he going to say that being off-put because the priest and people in the altar space are men is or is not justified? If the latter, one wonders what possible justification could be offered. He addresses the same issues in an interview in *Faith and Leadership*. Asked whether he ever finds the tradition “too narrow,” he replies, “It can be.” His immediate example, offered without any further prompting, is to note that “women can’t be priests” or “go to Mount Athos,” which suggests that he does not endorse these exclusions. However, he goes on to qualify this in a way that will not be fully satisfying to many readers. He says, “from the outside [Orthodoxy] looks so rigid and cranky and fussy and legalistic, but from the inside it feels so much different than that” (“Words”). He goes on to explain, “Women are a big part of the worship. We speak of the women apostles—‘Saint Thecla, equal to the apostles; Saint Mary Magdalene, equal to the apostles.’ These are the epithets that we fix to their names. They are a core group of women. And ‘Mary the Mother of God—Theotokos.’” Many readers will not find the inclusion of women figures in the worship of the tradition to make up for the official exclusion of women from the highest roles and places of worship. He concludes, “from the inside it feels a lot more welcoming and a lot more inclusive than it does look and appear, I presume, from the outside. I haven’t been on the outside for so long, it’s hard for me to remember how it looked.” One would not think that this is not the universal experience of Orthodox women. However, while his statements in these interviews regarding this aspect of Orthodoxy, which he did not create and which he does not endorse, may be unsatisfying, one of his strongest poems presents an unequivocally pro-woman stance, taking on characteristic features of a feminist revisionist interpretation of scripture. “Lot’s Wife” begins with a powerful line: “First of all, she had a name . . .” (*Body*, 41).

of destruction who carried out God's sentence and who "announced without apparent sentiment what was to come" (one of whom "would not meet her eyes") and the man Lot, her own husband, who did nothing to stand up to them or to God, who Rabbi Sab calls a "coward and sycophant" and shows "outrunning" Marah and their daughters as they flee the city. The poem ends with that moment which is the only moment of her life that the biblical narrative depicts, when, in fleeing, she looks back on the city and is turned into the famous, cautionary pillar of salt. As Rabbi Sab tells the story, she stops and stands in an "impossible interval." Before her, her daughters are running "safely to the hills." Ahead of them is "the old man" who, despite his flaws, "she had served and comforted for twenty years." Behind her, lies "a city's conflagration." In that moment, "Marah saw that she could not turn her back on even one doomed child of the city, but must turn her back instead upon the saved" (42). In this impossible choice, Marah shows the utmost love and compassion. Her death stands as a sharp critique of the violence of the text. But she does not turn to salt in protest. The criticism comes afterward; it is implied. The turning could almost be considered an act of solidarity with those she loved and whose death she could not condone. But it is even less political than that. She turns to help them or, if she cannot do that, then simply to be with them. Just as the violence of the text is inexplicable, so is the overwhelming compassion of Marah. And Marah is, we must remember, made from Rabbi Sab's perspective in the image of that same God. So while this most powerful of Rabbi Sab's midrashim hurls a powerful criticism at the violence of the text and at the God of that violence, it simultaneously recovers this other dimension, this superabundance of love, this excessive enormity expressed by utter disregard for self on behalf of those who suffer. There can be no greater love than, in the off-chance that it might do some small measure of good, to choose the lot of the doomed over the lot (indeed, the Lot) of the saved.

## The Hard Compassion of God

It could be argued that the compassion shown by Marah and the love shown by the righteous man of Gomorrah are extensions or manifestations of the love of God. All the same, those texts and the other midrashim considered so far are most powerfully and definitely shaped by censures of the violence of the God of the text. But even while that violence and Rabbi Sab's prophetic resistance to it are not all that those poems contain, not all of Rabbi Sab's midrashim deal primarily with the violence of the text. Even as the biblical text is complex, multivocal, and multifaceted, so are Rabbi Sab's responses. Three more poems in the voice of Rabbi Sab—"At Grips with Jacob," "In the Well of Joseph's Brief Despair," and "Jonah's Imprisonment"—and two texts that Cairns describes as midrash, the libretto he wrote for *The Martyrdom of Saint Polycarp*, in which he speaks in the voice of Saint Polycarp, and "September 11," a separate poem composed of lines from the libretto, manifest and engage what might be called the hard compassion of God. If God may act violently in some texts, in others God is present with humans, not always in a gentle way, in the midst of the violence they are suffering, whether inflicted by God for their own good or, more commonly, inflicted by other people.

In "YHWH's Image," the midrash that begins the series, accompanying the biblical passage, "And God said, 'Let us make man [sic] in our image, after our likeness,'" Rabbi Sab retells the story of the creation of humans (Genesis 1:26; qtd. in *Body*, 30). He does not change the details of the story as much as in some of the other texts but adds a few which highlight certain implications of the biblical text. Both "weary" and "giddy" about the earth He has created, God lies down in the dirt and begins covering Himself in it: "He began to coat His shins, cover His thighs, His chest." Once "wholly interred" in this dirt, He parts "the clay" He has shaped around His body and steps out of it, "leaving the image of Himself to wander in what



remained of that early morning mist” (30). For Cairns to have Rabbi Sab retell the story in this way has several implications. First, it emphasizes the basic goodness and sacredness of the material world itself, the dirt which we are and in which we live. It stresses the closeness between God and this dirt, so close that God would not only have a body which appears in this poem to be corporeal but also cover that body in dirt. The poem recovers the basic earthiness of the creation story that Cairns and the rabbis share.

Second, it emphasizes the basic relationship between God and humans, the relationship of reciprocal likeness. It is not just that God created humans but that God created humans in God’s image. For anyone who wants to believe in a loving God, this is a great puzzle because it means that what humans are like is also in some degree what God is like and we know that humans are prone to violence. The poems that call the God of the text to task for violence have this implication hanging in the background. To condemn the violence of God is not to blaspheme some deity removed from humanity but to renounce the violence that has its home in the human heart—the violence that would cause certain biblical writers to shape God in their own image, returning the favor for that original act of creation. What we see of God in the text is what the biblical writers struggle with regarding not just the sacred or higher realities of the cosmos and whatever lies beyond it but what they struggle with regarding human nature and tendencies as well. If we create God in our own image in writing or interpreting sacred texts and if we find an image of inexplicable violence staring back at us, we are looking into a mirror. But, as Saint Paul makes so clear in the New Testament, that mirror is a darkened one (1 Cor. 13:12). At the same time, if we also find inexplicable compassion staring back, that too is a mirror. The point isn’t that the Bible says *nothing* about God and *only* reflects human preoccupations back to human readers and writers. While that would certainly be the prevailing secular reading of the texts, the

biblical traditions within which Cairns and the rabbis he invokes can be found would not hold that position. And yet, as these texts highlight, they would acknowledge that the images of God found in the Bible are very much connected to the realities of the humans who wrote them and who read them.

And yet, even as the text proposes a closeness and a likeness between God and humans, it also recognizes a loss. The human is an image of God. But a hollow one. People are in the shape of God but are, in this text, missing the God part inside. That which is missing establishes the terms of the pain, loss, and yearning that mark human life. It is this double correspondence between God and humans—that of image and of loss—that establishes the possibility of God’s empathy and compassion for humans. There is a definite but imperfect correspondence between God and humans, between the image and that which the image is the image of. This correspondence is the basis for God to have compassion on humans, but, because of the pain associated with the loss, it must often be a hard compassion. The compassion of God, as well as the shared image of God among humans, in turn is the basis for human compassion for one another. What these texts are getting at is the heart of both Jewish and Christian theology. We are in a world that is simultaneously marked by sacredness and the loss of sacredness, simultaneously marked by goodness and violence. In that context emerges the dire need and the opportunity for compassion, but it must often be a hard compassion, hard in that it may be rough and imperfect and hard because it may be just what is needed in the hardest times.

While elsewhere Cairns uses the story of Jacob wrestling with the angel to talk about prayer and I am using it to talk about the intersection of poetry and the religious, in “At Grips with Jacob,” Rabbi Sab uses it to say more about the relationship between God and humans, which is related to but not precisely the same as the other two topics. While the biblical text says

little about God's feelings or purpose or thoughts during the contest, this midrash fills in those gaps. In this text, the one wrestling Jacob is figured "the Angel of the Lord." The poem begins with him "stoop[ing]" for "a little sport." It is play. The Angel of the Lord "smile[s]" and is "well pleased" by Jacob's efforts. But Jacob's determination outlasts the Angel's expectations. Jacob continues after the "obvious" "impossibility" of winning for "many days." Though he cannot defeat the Angel, he does wear the Angel out, leaving him "glassy-eyed" and "annoy[ed]" (*Body*, 44). As in the biblical text, the Angel puts Jacob's hip out of joint. At this point, Rabbi Sab adjusts the narrative in a way that lays the ground for a developing understanding of humans by God. He writes: "Jacob's agony was a surprise to both. And as the man spun in the dust, tearing up great fistful of earth, the Angel of the Lord came to suspect a manner of suffering He had not known" (44). What is particularly notable is that God doesn't fully understand humans in this text, that what God does not know particularly relates to how humans may suffer, and, most significantly, that God is learning about humans and their suffering. The poem ends with the Angel having set Jacob's hip back and Jacob sleeping calmly. The Angel watches him as he sleeps, "admiring the phenomenon of change" and "speculating" about "the compensating aftermath of anguish" and about "the man's astonishing ability to be made whole" (45). This poem establishes a foundation for a hard compassion, a compassion rooted in the pain and suffering of life, one that may in some small part relieve those things but that does not discount or ignore them. God is surprised at both how humans may hurt and at how humans may heal. But it is this surprise that leads God to tending to Jacob's injuries in a practical way and to attending to Jacob's as he sleeps, simply watching in awe at the human body and human being. This combination of tending and attending, of practical aid and interest or awe, are the marks of compassion.

Another midrash, “In the Well of Joseph’s Brief Despair,” enacts this sort of compassion even more thoroughly. The poem fills in gaps in the story of Joseph being betrayed by his brothers, thrown into a well, and then sold into slavery. While the biblical story, which occupies the late chapters of the Book of Genesis, focuses on how God helped Joseph to overcome these trials and how Joseph, later on, forgave his brothers, this midrash focuses on his emotional and physical of experience of suffering in that one particular moment in the well and its psychological aftermath, something the biblical text says incredibly little about. This midrash puts God in a different role too, not the source of Jacob’s later success but a presence, not necessarily a comforting presence but a present presence, with Jacob in the well and with Jacob years after as he relives the trauma of that event. The poem begins with Jacob lying in the bottom of the empty well, covered in “mud” on the “chill floor” (46). He lies there exhausted, having given up trying to get out. He has been “calling for mercy” to no avail, so it seems. The scene is dominated by his view of the sky: “the young man saw the world above poised as a pale blue pool—remote and indifferent.” It “seemed . . . to absorb just about everything—all light, all hope, his future.” He gives in “to the pressure of the blue pool held above him, falling silent as its trembling aspect became an abysmal amplitude” (46). These images of the sky have multiple overlapping significances. We know, from Cairns’s other writing, that the phrase “abysmal amplitude” signals the presence of God (the “abysmal fullness” of *Short Trip to the Edge* [22]). The particular phrasing here needs to be teased out carefully. The poem does not say that God is “remote and indifferent” but that Joseph saw Him as such. The poem does not say that God absorbed “all light, all hope” but that He “seemed” to. But it also says that what seemed to be one thing “became” another thing. The “trembling aspect,” that which corresponds not only with awe but with suffering and fear, becomes the “abysmal amplitude.” The poem goes on to say that

as Joseph was taken into slavery, he continued staring at the sky: “The journey into Egypt was one long study of the sky without conclusion.” This is not presented as something pleasant. But it is presented as something inexhaustible.

The poem downplays the downs and ups (especially ups) of Joseph’s travails and successes thereafter, naming them briefly and noting that he “came gradually into his own” and even “had the last laugh” with his brothers. But it does not downplay the effects of that initial trauma. Even in his later years, the poem has him avoiding sleep. And when he sleeps, he relives that time in the well. The poem speaks to a hard compassion, the always accompanying expansiveness of God. In the darkest moments, the presence of God is there. It is not a comfort but something significant anyways. It inspires an appreciation of the expansiveness of the world, in both its cruel and compassionate aspects. That understanding puts everything else in perspective, relativizing all of his “accomplishment[s]” (47). But finally, it does become an enabling more than disabling presence. God did not cause the trauma in the story and did not relieve it. But while Jacob lies exhausted and despairing when in the well initially, getting to the point where he cannot move, later in the dream that is a memory or a traumatic recurrence, he can move. The final line of the poem puts him back in the very same well in his memory, still “naked” and “stunned,” which is where he finds himself whenever he falls asleep. But is it not just “the hollow of that well” that he returns to. It is also “the return of that blue expanse.” But this time, “he looked, and swam” (47). Though the well is dry, at first he figuratively drowns in it. Now, he figuratively swims. The poem represents a hard sort of compassion that is steeped in reality, the reality of trauma and the reality of the ability to overcome trauma. In both, it is the presence of the sky which stands in as the presence of God that is always with Joseph, present with him in his suffering. Finally, beyond representing this sort of hard compassion, the poem

enacts it or rather invites it, by sympathetically and vividly describing Joseph's suffering to the reader, asking the reader to practice empathy and understanding and helping the reader to do just that.

The hard compassion of God is also at work in "Jonah's Imprisonment." But here it is at work more actively. While God learns compassion in wrestling Jacob and is there as an eventually enabling presence in Joseph's despair, God teaches Jonah about compassion and acceptance of others through the particular hardship of being swallowed whole by a fish. The biblical story in the Book of Jonah give readers a lot to not like about the man. It is not so much that he disobeys God's order to go to Nineveh and prophecy its destruction by hiring passage in a ship going in the opposite direction or that he endangers the lives of the sailors on that ship by provoking God to send a mighty storm after the ship. Most readers would certainly be able to sympathize with running away from a difficult task and would appreciate the redemptive aspect to Jonah's owning up to his mistake and willingly sacrificing his own life to right his wrong and save the ship by telling the crew what he had done and that they needed to throw him overboard into the sea to calm the storm and save themselves. In the biblical text, where most readers will find that Jonah really goes wrong is *after* he has finally obeyed and gone to Nineveh with God's message. In response to Jonah's prophesying, the king of Nineveh himself puts off his royal robes, sits down in ashes, and declares a fast as a sign of repentance: "yea, let them turn every one from his evil way, and from the violence that is in their hands. Who can tell if God will turn and repent, and turn away from his fierce anger, that we perish not?" (Jonah 3:8-9). And, indeed, the biblical text reports, "God repented of the evil, that he had said that he would do unto them" (3:10). The city is not destroyed. It is at this point that Jonah turns out to be such an unsavory character. The King James Bible renders it in English as wryly as possible: God not destroying

the city “displeased Jonah exceedingly” (4:1). Jonah is so displeased that he goes outside the city to see what will happen and, when nothing does, complains to God, explaining that this possibility of mercy was why he didn’t want to come and prophecy in the first place and that he just wants to die now. It isn’t entirely clear why Jonah wants the city destroyed, perhaps for his own continuing judgmentalism of the wickedness that God had sent him there to decry, perhaps for the embarrassment of having prophesied something and it not coming true, perhaps a general disdain and prejudice based on class, ethnicity, or religion—or some mix of factors. At any rate, the desire makes him quite the unsympathetic character.

For much of the story, the point might seem to be a lesson that one should obey God and, in the event of a lapse, one should repent as soon as possible. One gets this from the fact that both Jonah and Nineveh disobeyed, were almost destroyed, repented, and were saved. But God’s final actions and words with Jonah suggest a different takeaway, which is the one that Cairns through Rabbi Sab picks up on in his midrash. While Jonah is sitting outside the city complaining, asking to die, and watching to see whether anything will happen to the city, God sends a plant to grow up beside Jonah and shade him from the sweltering sun. The next day, God sends a worm to kill the plant. This also displeases Jonah exceedingly, who, again, asks to die. Then, as the final words of the book, God speaks a great lesson in compassion: “Thou hast had pity on the gourd, for the which thou hast not laboured, neither madest it grow; which came up in a night, and perished in a night: And should not I spare Nineveh, that great city, wherein are more than sixscore thousand persons that cannot discern between their right hand and their left hand; and also much cattle?” (4:10-11). These words suggest that the real point of the story isn’t obedience and repentance but compassion. It also suggests, subtly, a socioeconomic and even ecological bent to that compassion. Whereas Jonah appears to demonstrate tendencies that

characterize economic or class privilege, both in that he has benefited from a plant he has not tended in any way and in that he values it more than he values the lives of people, God stresses the importance of human (and bovine) life and, in particular, the vulnerability of the people Jonah would see destroyed, by indicating that they cannot tell left from right, which may refer to children, people with developmental disabilities, or people without even the most basic literacy, that is to say, people who are socioeconomically disadvantaged in some way and who are, it seems implied, morally not culpable for the sins of the city, which may, after all, have a lot more to do with the fine robes that the king took off.

It is this forceful point about compassion and these subtle hints about economic inequality that are the points of the story the midrash focuses on most. Picking up the story with Jonah running away, Cairns through Rabbi Sab suggest that Jonah's problem with going to Nineveh was that he did not want to have "*any* intercourse with unbelievers, whom he, out of habit, identified as the unwashed" (*Body*, 52). Inventing a few details, Rabbi Sab goes on to explain: "From birth, he had been protected from . . . body odor, poorly cooked food, substandard grammar." It is not that these pampered experiences are wrong in and of themselves, the poem clarifies. Jonah's "insistence upon" having things his own way is the real problem. The midrash suggests that his sin was his disdain for and sense of separateness from those who were socially, ethnically, religiously, and economically different, in his view inferior, to himself. "And so," Rabbi Sab writes, "the Lord, in His compassion, undertook to deliver Jonah from his own sin" (52). Being inside the fish "was like death." In this telling, Jonah was not to actually die but his familiar way of viewing the world and viewing his place in it was. He learned that "the body, unadorned by ointments, oils, or silk is little more than meat, mere meat for fishes" (52). In a line that needs some teasing apart, Rabbi Sab states that "If Jonah chose to distinguish himself from



other meat, he would have to come up with other criteria, and pretty soon” (52). Several sorts of distinguishing may be suggested here. Rabbi Sab’s Jonah has been distinguishing himself from other people on the basis of the material things that come with being rich, the ointments, oils, and silk which he has been stripped from. Those are shown to be inadequate criteria to separate people from other people, since, when we face death, they fall away and we all alike become food for worms or fishes. Looked at this way, the point may be that Jonah *should not* look for other criteria but should accept his shared meatiness with other people and, indeed, with other forms of life (the cows as well as the fish). On the other hand, the phrase “and pretty soon” and the fact that Jonah will die if he does not find some way to distinguish himself from the other meat “digesting” in the fish’s belly suggest that he *should* look for other criteria. The materials of wealth that he has based his sense of himself on to this point are inadequate. He will have to find some human qualities to define himself as a person: say, compassion.

In the biblical story, it is unclear whether Jonah ever learns the lesson that God speaks to him at the end of the book since the story never gives Jonah’s response. Earlier in the book, it seems that Jonah did learn something in the belly of the fish. But, given his later attitude, perhaps that lesson did not stick or that Jonah was not yet able to generalize what he learned beyond himself to see how it applies to all. From the belly of the fish, Jonah cries out to God with a moving poem, one that refers specifically to his own current suffering but that, one would think, ought to apply broadly to anyone in a difficult place. Jonah describes the dark place he was in, how he repented and called for help, and how God saved him: “out of the belly of hell cried I, and thou heardest my voice” (Jonah 2:2). Near the end of his prayer, he adds, “They that observe lying vanities forsake their own mercy” (Jonah 2:8). This is quite a telling line, one that anticipates God’s words at the end of the book and that illuminates the midrash at hand. It is

here, even if just for a moment, that Jonah realizes the importance of mercy, realizes the worthlessness of “vanities” (such as wealth), and realizes that pursuing vanities leads to a loss of mercy. While he appears to completely forget this lesson (and perhaps didn’t really learn it even though he spoke it) in the biblical text, the midrash ends with the time in the belly of the fish and credits it with Jonah learning that all-important lesson about compassion, about feeling with others, about not seeing a hard distinction between oneself and those who are different. Perhaps the idea is that whatever Jonah may have forgotten and needed to learn later on, the seeds were planted in the experience of the depth of the sea inside the fish. Perhaps it is just that the fish provides a more compelling image for the midrash than the plant. At any rate, the midrash concludes that “the monster was Jonah’s deliverance,” providing him with a “perspective, from which Jonah was then fully willing to embrace anybody” (53). The lesson isn’t obey or else. The lesson is have compassion, embrace anybody. It is about how hard times can teach compassion, even as hard times require compassion.

In one more text that Cairns describes writing in terms of midrash, though not one of the Rabbi Sab midrashim, Cairns makes a direct connection between ancient texts and contemporary events, with both speaking to each other and revolving around the hard compassion of God. Cairns rewrites an ancient epistle from the early Christian church, written from one church to another, that has come to be known as *The Martyrdom of Polycarp* as a libretto for an opera of virtually the same name, *The Martyrdom of Saint Polycarp*, in a collaboration with composer J.A.C Redford. In writing the text, Cairns went through a process of listening for and finding in ancient manuscripts—while also inventing in his own manuscript—the voice of Polycarp. While acknowledging that his libretto is a new creation, he feels it remains faithful to Polycarp (“On Making,” 77). Substantial portions of the libretto are quoted or nearly quoted from the earlier

text, particularly the narrator's portions. The plot of the libretto also follows the movements of the original story closely, move by move.<sup>21</sup> The story takes place in and around the ancient city of Smyrna in the second century C.E., within the Roman Empire and during a time when Christians were being persecuted, with several even killed for their faith. As an elder and leader of the Christian community, Polycarp is sought out by soldiers to be brought before the Roman proconsul and a bloodthirsty mob. Before being apprehended, Polycarp has a vision in which he realizes he will be burned alive for his faith. Though he could escape, he allows himself to be captured, because of that vision and because he feels fleeing would endanger his religious community. When brought before the mob, he refuses to renounce his faith and instead embraces his execution as a martyr. Miraculously, the fire does not touch him, so he is stabbed to death. Both the second-century epistle and the twenty-first-century libretto cover the same ground in relating these events.

It is clear that Polycarp shows compassion. His death, which the texts portray as avoidable, was because he didn't want harm to come to the religious community of which he was a pillar. He allows himself to be captured and killed, rather than escaping, because he fears that running away would allow the persecuted community to be destroyed (Cairns, *Polycarp*, 7). Cairns writes that while reading and writing, "as I moved from scene to scene, I came to think that I knew the man, and was therefore able to imagine some of the interior struggle he might have undergone, including his concerns for his people, his church" ("On Making," 77). The ancient epistle even suggests, in retrospect, that in dying Polycarp "put an end to the

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<sup>21</sup>Cairns credits his composer collaborator for these ideas, explaining that J.A.C. Redford "was the one to seize upon the existing narrative shape of the historical letter . . . adapting portions of the letter to supply the story. This was an absolute blessing. Once the challenge of producing the narrative thread was solved, I was all the more free to pursue revisions—subsequent drafts--of the monologues without the burden of narration. To my ear, the monologues immediately improved, becoming purer, lighter, more suggestively poetic" (77).

persecution” facing Christians in that region (*Polycarp*, 313). In his own Epistle to the Philippians, Polycarp urges religious leaders to “be compassionate, merciful to all” (291). So the compassion of Polycarp stands out, as it should. But there appears to be a larger and harder compassion in the text, which is the hard compassion of God for Polycarp and, by extension, for all who suffer, particularly all who die, unjustly. It is not an easy compassion, not even easily identified as compassion. God does not save people from death and suffering in these texts but remains present with them. The death is given significance in and through the presence of a larger presence. It is so that the libretto ends with Polycarp entering heaven. But that is not the focus of either the libretto as a whole nor, as we have seen, of Cairns’s own theology of salvation. It is a sort of salvation in life, even salvation in, rather than merely after, death, which is a part of life, sometimes timely and other times, as in the case of martyrs and other innocent victims, untimely.

In writing the libretto, Cairns engages deeply with the original text both where he follows it to the letter and where he takes artistic, which is to say, midrashistic license. Cairns departs from the ancient epistle in two ways. The first of these is that he brings in passages from a number of other ancient texts. One of these is Polycarp’s Epistle to the Philippians. Cairns describes reading and rereading this text while writing the libretto as a way to get a sense of Polycarp and his voice (“On Making,” 77). In the libretto, Polycarp appears briefly writing that epistle, though the words the libretto attributes to it do not in fact appear in the historical document but represent Cairns’s (accurate) understanding of the sort of thing that Polycarp would say based on what he did say. The libretto also includes short passages from the Book of Daniel on the burning alive of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego (see Daniel 3:12-30), from the Book of Revelation regarding that letter’s encouragement to the church in Smyrna on

withstanding persecution even to death (the words “Faithful unto death” serve as a refrain; see Revelation 2:8-11), and from Saint Paul’s Epistle to the Romans about how “Neither death nor life not height nor depth / Has strength enough to move us from His love” (Cairns, *Polycarp*, 3; see Romans 8:38-39). He also quotes the Book of Exodus regarding the bush that burned but was not consumed (Exodus 3:2) and includes in the libretto a refrain from Psalm 34: “Taste and see that the Lord is good,” with the words “Taste and see” especially repeated (Cairns, *Polycarp*, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10, 15; see Psalm 34:8). The final words of the libretto are “Taste and see. The Lord is good” (15). Finally, additional words from the Book of Exodus provide the central image that connects the ancient text with the contemporary libretto with contemporary events (Exodus 13:21). The quotations and paraphrases from biblical and other ancient texts in addition to the quotations from *The Martyrdom of Polycarp* serve to deepen and enrich the intertextual nature of the libretto. As always, Cairns’s engagement with the one text is not just an engagement with that one text but with multiple texts; it is, in that, a more thorough engagement with the larger tradition from which these texts emerge. The quotations are the pull as he wrestles with his text. Where he pushes is where he contributes his own original lines.

The second way that Cairns departs from the ancient epistle are in the lines he composed that, even while still at least partially an engagement with and an interpretation of these other texts, represent not just the work of selection and arrangement of old writing but new writing. These departures serve to fill in the gaps and to interpret and to connect our time with these texts from the ancient past. In the ancient epistle, fire plays a prominent role. Polycarp has a vision of being burned alive and then the vision comes true but the flames do not touch or harm him. When he is then fatally stabbed, his blood extinguishes the flames. In the contemporary libretto, fire has more than just a prominent role. Cairns makes fire, along with smoke, the central image.

In both the ancient epistle and the contemporary libretto, before being apprehended, Polycarp goes into a “trance.” In both texts he sees his pillow on fire and realizes, and says to those with him, “I must be burned alive” (*Polycarp*, 319; Cairns, *Polycarp*, 5). While the ancient epistle says no more about this vision, Cairns dramatizes it in the libretto, setting up the fire as the central image.

In the scene enacting the vision, Polycarp asks, “Am I fallen into Hell? And do these flames / tender my destruction, or do they move in kind caress?” (5). The question marks underscore the ambiguity, as do the options given, destruction or kind caress. He goes on to say, “I seem to see my person bathed in fire, bathed in light. / I see, I think I see, the air is all of flame” (5). The words “seem” and “I think” underscore the uncertainty, as do the options, fire or light. And once more, he says, “And though my heart runs wild, though I fear, / I seem to see my person borne upon bright wings of flame” (5). Though with more certainty now, there is both the fear and the flying. Another comment he makes intensifies the complexities of the image: “The flame accepts the offering, the holocaust received. / And in such dire communion, the blessed / Become His element” (6). While it is used here in its more general sense, meaning “A sacrifice wholly consumed by fire” (*OED*), the choice of this word “holocaust” obviously invokes the Shoah. A line is drawn here connecting the crucifixion of Jesus and the persecution of the early Christians at the hands of Rome, the genocide of European Jews at the hands of the Nazis, and—as we will see shortly—the killing of civilians in the United States by Al-Qaeda. Though it would be a mistake to think that Cairns is insinuating some sort of parity in scale among these events, he is pointing out the shared human history of death by fire for no reason or for evil reasons. The image of the Eucharist finds—or at least asserts beyond all evidence—something sacred in the midst of needless death and suffering.

The image of fire continues throughout the libretto, leading up to and culminating with Polycarp burnt at the stake. Quoting from the ancient epistle, the narrator of the libretto explains that there was “a great flame blazing forth” but “a marvel” occurred. The fire surrounded Polycarp but did not touch him. It was “not like burning flesh, but like bread in the baking, or like gold and silver burning in a furnace” (Cairns, *Polycarp*, 14). Upon his miraculous protection from the fire, Polycarp and the Cloud of Witnesses—the libretto’s chorus representing the saints who have died and who watch believers on earth—speak together and invoke parallel biblical scenes: the burning bush from which God spoke to Moses (“The fire roared; the bush was not consumed” [Cairns, *Polycarp*, 14; see Exodus 3:2]) and the story of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego thrown into fire by a Babylonian King (“The three companions stood amid the flames, / And with their Lord communed” [Cairns, *Polycarp*, 14; see Daniel 3:12-30]). Before and after Polycarp is put into fire, the angels repeat three times and are joined by the cloud of witnesses for a fourth and final time lines that quote yet another biblical instance, the one which becomes the very heart of the libretto, the image from the Book of Exodus of God going before the Hebrews in the forms of fire and cloud: “The pillar of cloud by day / And the pillar of fire by night / Did not depart from before the people” (Cairns, *Polycarp*, 11, 14, 14 again, 14-15; see Exodus 13:21).

This driving emphasis on the image of fire and the use of the specific image from the Book of Exodus came about as part of Cairns’s response to the events of September 11, which took place while he was writing the libretto. The very day of the attacks he found himself writing, “working on scraps of verse . . . [i]n order *to find* feeling” (“On Making,” 75). He describes what he was doing as “trusting in the rabbinic approach of midrashim as a way to proceed through enigma” (“On Making,” 75). He explains that “the writer of midrashim” when

“confronted by a *dark saying*—an enigmatic passage with which he is at a loss to deal—will have recourse to another text, *a verse from afar*, which is able to supply some sense to the apparently senseless matter before him. In this case, the events of 9/11 were my dark saying, and miraculously my verse from afar, Exodus 13:21-22”—“The Lord went before them by day in a pillar of cloud to lead them along the way, and by night in a pillar of fire to give them light”—“came to the rescue” (“On Making,” 76). In an hour, he recalls, he wrote the following lines, which he describes as “two squat quatrains, like columns lying down”:

According to the promise, we had known  
We would be led, and that the ancient God  
Would deign to make His hidden presence shown  
By column of fire, and pillar of cloud.

We had come to suspect what fierce demand  
Our translation to another land might bode,  
But had not guessed He would insist our own  
Brief flesh should bear the flame, become the cloud. (“On Making,” 76; *Polycarp*, 6-7, 15)

These lines first appear in the libretto as the words of Polycarp upon seeing the vision of his being burned alive and then appear again at the end of the text spoken by Polycarp, the Cloud of Witnesses, and the Angels while Polycarp is in the fire, with the vision coming true. But Cairns initially wrote these lines as *his own* midrash on the events of September 11 before he realized that they would fit into the libretto. He also published these same lines as a poem titled “September 11,” independent from the libretto and with a line from Exodus as an epigraph (*Compass*, 161). After writing the lines and after reading more about Polycarp (attending particularly to Polycarp’s “dream of a flaming pillow, a flaming bed,” his words “I must be burned alive,” and his “willingness to receive the martyr’s flame”), Cairns writes, “my own words returned to me as being germane to the heart of the matter, as being suggestive of the heart of Saint Polycarp, whose image I was hoping to find” (“On Making,” 76). Cairns found in these



eight lines “a disposition—a resigned, if baffled, willingness” that helped him discover “the right tenor for Saint Polycarp’s voice,” which was “not so much predetermined as faithful, trusting, willing to see what would come of his honoring God, of his saying yes to whatever befell him” (76, 77). Cairns further writes, “I began to understand that the unfailing courage he exhibited at the end of his life was not a static perfection, previously attained . . . but was a maturity that the bishop of Smyrna had grown into. His serious questioning of what God would have him do became, for me, absolutely essential to that growth” (77). These eight lines become the very poetic heart of the libretto and they speak most directly to its central concern, the hard compassion of God.

It is not obvious how these lines speak to God’s compassion, certainly not as clear as they speak of God’s hardness. It is an image, like the hard compassion of God elsewhere in Cairns’s midrashim, that is pointedly ambiguous, with destruction and salvation so closely entwined that it is difficult to know where to assign responsibility for each, whether to know that God is the God of salvation in the face of destruction caused by others or whether God is simultaneously a God of destruction and salvation, or whether God is a God whose idea of salvation comes through destruction. Taken out of the context of the larger textual and religious tradition, these lines might suggest something quite opposite of where Cairns stands (and, for that matter, opposite where Polycarp stood). There are several ways one could misread them. If the column of fire and the pillar of cloud evoke the destruction of the World Trade Center towers, as they certainly do, then one might wonder what sort of God “[w]ould deign to make His hidden presence shown” in that way. It would not be a God of compassion but a God of violence. While that would be the attackers’ belief, it is certainly not Cairns. Likewise, if “[o]ur translation to another land” “demands” our suffering in these bodies, one might suspect that the poem is one

decrying the material world as temporary and, even, bad, something the faithful endure until they can arrive in a place that has no suffering and no materiality, the heaven by-and-by of some strands of Christian theology. But, as Cairns has made very clear, that too is not his belief. He values materiality as the place of the sacred and plays down the role of heaven in discussing salvation.

The purpose of Cairns's midrash poems is not always to resolve enigmas. Often he seems intent primarily on making enigmas recognized as enigmas—letting perplexity stand as perplexity, an antidote to those who would tidy up the ancient texts into seamless theologies. After all, Cairns has said that the rabbis he seeks to emulate “‘search out’ the difficult passages—the utterly perplexing ones” (*End*, 103). These lines certainly do some of that work. They present the biblical text that they quote and they present the present tragedies and hold them side by side. Presenting the painful contradiction or at least juxtaposition between positive religious beliefs and negative life experiences is quite enough to sustain a meaningful and worthwhile text. The lines present enigma for enigma's sake. They also present enigma for the sake of grieving—expressing unresolved and even unresolvable grief. They do not need to do more than that. But, as it turns out, they do also do more. Cairns has said that the rabbis look for the “difficult” and “perplexing” texts not just for the sake of doing so but “trusting that, if those passages appear to trouble their assumptions, it is because their assumptions needed work. Their vision was due for revision” (*End*, 103). These lines are an instance of revision, the revision of several ancient texts. They also speak directly to a revision, the revision of one's understanding of God and the spiritual life. These eight lines are structured around a revision of vision. They begin with what the religious believers “had known” from scripture (i.e. “the promise”). The lines move to what the religious believers “had come to suspect” regarding what they had

known, that is, their shifting and deepening understanding of the significance of the text and its promise, because of what they had experienced in their lives. The poem then ends with what those believers “had not guessed” but now realize regarding a still different and still deeper understanding of that significance in light of the present tragedy, whether the tragedy of being killed for your beliefs as with Polycarp or killed for someone else’s as with the thousands of civilians who died on September 11.

The content of the developing understanding has two aspects, which the poem presents as spiritual insights. The first insight (the significance that had been suspected) has to do with the necessity of suffering as part of life and as part of the spiritual journey. It is necessary not because it necessarily contributes some positive good but because it is inevitable and can often be learned from and grown through. The second insight (the one that had not been guessed) has to do with the way in which that suffering may become extreme, certainly, but more crucially the way in which the presence of God is to be manifest through people, even or especially in their suffering. The ancient promise is that “God / Would deign to make His hidden presence shown.” The realization is that “He would insist our own / Brief flesh should bear the flame, become the cloud” (*Polycarp*, 15). In the version of these lines that Cairns published separately as a poem, independent from the libretto, titled “September 11,” he made a few small changes. Some of them seem relatively insignificant, such as removing the capitalizations from the beginning of lines that do not begin sentences. But one small change does seem significant. The word “insist” in the penultimate line is changed to “allow” (*Compass*, 161). God insisting that we bear the flame and become the cloud becomes God allowing that. This change of word does not change the meaning of the text as much as it might seem. But it does highlight a particular tension that exists in the poem with either word in place. On one hand, it would certainly make sense that

Cairns would not want to be understood as telling readers that God insists on suffering or, more specifically, that God caused the attacks on September 11 or even the murder of Polycarp. The word change makes sense in light of that. But there's more at work here. While God allows people to suffer and if one believes in an all-powerful God, then one might say that God even insists on suffering by not stopping it, the question here isn't one of theodicy, the question of why or how God could allow (or cause) evil. Bearing the flame and becoming the cloud obviously mean suffering. But they also mean manifesting the presence of God. It may be that God insists on suffering in the sense that God asks people to accept, rather than deny, that suffering exists—as Cairns says of Polycarp, he learned to honor God by “saying yes to whatever befell him” (“On Making,” 76, 77)—and, thereby, to make meaning in the face of it. It is this that God allows people to do. It is in the midst of suffering that God insists people manifest divinity. The message is that even in the hard suffering that we endure in this life—particularly in times of senseless violence—God remains present in the suffering. In other words, there remains an enormity to reality—a richness that is present in and beyond all reductive violence—and those who suffer manifest that richness.

## Conclusion

The English word *dogma* has come to mean “doctrine authoritatively laid down.” Being dogmatic means being rigid, inflexible, stuck on predetermined meanings. But the ancient Greek roots of the word are actually more generous, meaning “to seem, to seem good, to think, suppose, imagine” (“dogma,” *OED*). It is true that Cairns values dogma, that is, the teachings and texts of the Christian tradition. But he is not dogmatic in the usual sense of the meaning. He understands the texts and teachings not as ones that close down meaning but as ones that open up meaning. For him, the Christian tradition does not purport to describe what *is* objectively but what *seems* from the experience of the communities of men and women who have sought the enormity of God over the centuries. For Cairns, the Christian tradition is one that invites thinking, supposing, and imagining. It is dogma without dogmatism. In this way, Cairns’s pilgrimage into Orthodoxy has not meant following a path precisely laid down for him in the manner of a prescription but rather journeying along the path of those who have gone before him in the manner of a shared search, wherein as a pilgrim Cairns takes into account the advice and wisdom of the community but also makes his own mark as those before and beside him did and do as well. Cairns’s pilgrimage is as much a postsecular spiritual journey as the postsecular exile is—both marked by wrestling with tradition and with the sacred—which can be seen in the pull or affirmation of so many of Cairns’s poems related to the aspects of Christianity and Orthodoxy he finds affirming and the push or antithesis of so many of Cairns poems related to the parts that he cannot abide, particularly including the violence of the biblical text.

It might be said that the exile leaves home to find God, while the pilgrim heads home to find God. But it seems that neither arrive quickly or finally. Just as Li-Young Lee confesses that even though he is an exile he wants to find home, so Cairns confesses that even though he feels at home within the religious tradition of Orthodoxy he has not, in the end, found the home that is an abiding awareness of God's presence. So he continues seeking. While in an early text he uses the story of Jacob wrestling with the Angel as a way to push back on the violence of the biblical text and to speak to the hard compassion of God, in a more recent poem on the same story he uses that image as a way to talk about the spiritual journey, which, for him, is the journey of prayer, the journey to arrive at an abiding awareness of the presence of God and to thereby be transformed. He attributes this use of the story to a monk he spoke with during one of his pilgrimages to Mount Athos. He writes, "a father at one monastery helped me to see that prayer was itself an ongoing struggle; he likened the matter to that of Jacob's wrestling with the angel of the Lord, and he helped me to glimpse that even the pain of that struggle was to be recognized as a blessing" (*End*, 95). The monk counseled Cairns to "plead with Him to meet you" in the heart and then to "hold onto Him, and not let go," even though "like Jacob . . . you will be wounded." The monk went on to say that "He is never not here" but that through the struggle of prayer God will help the pilgrim to "know He is here." The monk says, God "helps you to meet Him" in the heart. Though "you will be wounded by that meeting," "[t]he wound will help you know, and that is the blessing" (*End*, 95). While such a description of the spiritual journey might be easy to romanticize, Cairns stresses the difficulty, pain, and slow progress in a recent poem. In "A Word," he describes his "long grappling // with that very angel here—still / here—at the base of the ancient / ladder of ascent." In contrast to Jacob, he finds himself not overcoming but "languishing yet at the very / bottom rung, letting go my grip / long before the blessing" (*Psalms*,

12). Cairns does not journey by way of tradition because he finds it easier or quicker but because he finds that it offers him the resources to deal with how hard and how slow that journey is, resources that include the texts with which meaning can be made and the wisdom and experiences of those who have gone before. But as much joy as he receives from the treasures of the faith and as much fun he has playing with and rewriting the texts of the faith and as much meaning as he gets from these and other aspects of the tradition, the pilgrimage is not a short trip to perfection.

Though he titles his memoir *A Short Trip to the Edge*, the poem of the same title with which that memoir ends does not have him arriving at the goal of his spiritual journey. Instead, it has him glimpse that enormity and then return to his daily life (*Edge*, 258). In this way, the poem at the end of his memoir points back to the poem at the beginning of his memoir, where he writes, as he does in many places, about the slowness of his pilgrimage:

Given time enough,  
the slowest pilgrim—even he—might  
register some small measure of belated  
progress. (*Edge*, vii)

After the short trip to Mount Athos comes the long trip that is the pilgrimage of life. But the one helps the other. He works to take what he finds from the texts or places of the ancient religious tradition, bring them into his daily life, and live them out there. In the postsecular moment, for some the only way forward toward God is the way back into a religious tradition that may offer something useful along the journey.

## PART IV: POETRY AS INVITATION



## Coda

*altar, n.*, A block, pile, table, stand, or other raised structure, with a plane top, on which to place or sacrifice offerings to a deity. (*OED*)

*poem, n.*, A piece of writing or an oral composition, often characterized by a metrical structure, in which the expression of feelings, ideas, etc., is typically given intensity or flavour by distinctive diction, rhythm, imagery, etc. (*OED*)

I began this dissertation by posing the question of what postsecular poetry means in contemporary literature in the United States, how to define and describe it and how to understand its significance. I followed this overarching inquiry with four questions that are more specific. The first three were: What themes, forms, and purposes distinguish postsecular poetry? Who are the major postsecular poets? And, how does postsecular poetry engage with that which has traditionally been considered the domain of religion and spirituality? These are the questions that I have attempted to answer to this point. In Part I, I proposed that we can understand postsecular poetry by using the story of Jacob wrestling the angel (or unknown being) as a mythic, critical framework. I offered a list of characteristics of postsecular poetry and a rough genealogy leading up to and survey of contemporary United States poets writing poems that have those characteristics. I proposed that two crucial topoi in this body of work are exile and pilgrimage. In Part II and Part III, I gave extended analyses of how the work of Li-Young Lee enacts exile and how the work of Scott Cairns enacts pilgrimage as modes of “wrestling with angels,” modes of engaging in religious revision of a historical religious tradition. These chapters have addressed in a substantial way these three questions regarding the meaning of postsecular poetry. What has

been largely implicit to this point, although implicit as an animating concern, has been my fourth question: What can postsecular poetry contribute toward the “flourishing of all”? We have arrived at the point where we can address this more directly.

What we understand postsecular poetry to contribute will have a lot to do with what we understand poetry itself to be or to do. Considering the two definitions from the *Oxford English Dictionary* used as epigraphs above can help us do this. In the definition of *altar*, we are given a description of form as well as function. The definition begins by describing the form of an altar. An altar is “[a] block, pile, table, stand, or other raised structure, with a plane top.” Saying that, though, is not enough. The definition continues, has to continue if it is to be useful as a definition of this word, to note the function of an altar. An altar is an object “on which to place or sacrifice offerings to a deity.” Both form and function are integral to understanding an altar. An altar is shaped a certain way and it is shaped for a certain purpose. The same is the case with poetry. But we are, by habit, more skilled at considering form than at considering function, a situation that is reflected in the definition for *poem*, which gives us a description of form—a poem often has “metrical structure” and “distinctive diction, rhythm, imagery, etc.”—but only the vaguest sense of function: poetry has something to do with “intensity or flavor” and with “the expression of feelings, ideas, etc.” To understand poetry, we need to know more about the function of a poem. To understand the contribution of postsecular poetry, we need to know more about the function of postsecular poem.

While our vocabulary for poetic form is highly developed—*pentameter*, *onomatopoeia*, *caesura*, etc.—we do not have a comparable apparatus for poetic function. That lack may be a blessing, since the functions of poetry may not be suited to such technical discussion. But the subject has certainly been discussed and remains contested. Some people talk about poetry as if it

could effect change, the change we need to see in ourselves or in our world, while others talk about poetry as if its very point is that it has no use at all, as if art by definition defies utilitarian ends. The words from W. H. Auden's "In Memory of W. B. Yeats"—"poetry makes nothing happen" (82)—have come to represent the latter understanding, in which art has its own value, in which poetry exists for its own sake, a refuge from the brutality of utility. Poetry makes nothing happen, Auden continues, but "survives / In the valley of its making where executives / Would never want to tamper." In a time when business executives measure out the health and lives of people and ecosystems in dollars, the idea that art cannot be reduced to its use-value because it has no use-value is an appealing perspective. Archibald MacLeish ends his "Ars Poetica" with the famous dictum, "A poem should not mean / But be" (107). Poems just *are*, in all their beauty and formliness. Would that this be so.

In contrast, the words of Horace from his much earlier "Ars Poetica" have come to represent the former understanding of poetry, the view that poetry *does* do something. Horace describes poetry as having purpose. He names that purpose as "either to profit or to delight" (71), terms Sir Philip Sidney adjusted slightly to "teach and delight" (122). In a time when so much needs doing, the idea that a poem should not be but *do* is also an appealing perspective. We can hear this perspective in Elizabeth Ammons's hopeful, necessary book *Brave New Words: How Literature Will Save the Planet*. She extols "the power of texts to teach us about ourselves" and "the power of words to inspire us, to transform us, to give us strength and courage for the difficult task of *re-creating* the world" (14). She asserts that "texts have transformative power. They play a profound role in the fight for human justice and planetary healing that so many of us recognize as the urgent struggle of our own time. Words on the page reach more than our minds.

They call up feelings. They call out to our spirit. They can move us to act” (172). Would that this too be so.

Both understandings have insight. Poems are aesthetic artifacts that do nothing. Poems are rhetorical tools that do something. Poetry has no problem with paradoxes. All the same, either way of thinking can be taken too far. With respect to the view that poetry does something, it is obvious that poetry usually does very little to change people or to change the world. Also, it is the experience of many readers that many poems that have personal or social change as their only aim are not well written and not even, in some cases, rightly considered poetry. Yet, with respect to the view that poetry does nothing, it is likewise apparent that good things *have* happened around, and possibly through, poems. Moreover, whether readers or poets like it or not, whether successful or not, poetry always *tries* to make things happen, cannot help but try, because poetry is made of words and that is what words do. Even though many readers share John Keats’s disdain for “poetry that has a palpable design upon us” (493), Terry Eagleton rightly insists that “All poetry has palpable designs on us” (90). As Eagleton further puts it, “words have force as well as meaning” (90). Even though historical discussions of poetics have often privileged the aesthetics of poetry over the rhetorics of poetry, poems cannot occur in a vacuum. Poems are never pure artistry, untouched by audience or purpose, even though those rhetorical facets may be skillfully hidden or subdued.

It seems that a middle way—between art and rhetoric, between being and doing—may help us better understand the significance of poetry in general and postsecular poetry specifically. I am particularly drawn to what Ann Jurecic says about the matter:

Literature matters . . . not because it changes our brains, hearts, souls, or political convictions, but because the practice of reading literature slows thought down. In

a hurried age, and with the constant distractions provided by instantly available entertainment, a book provides a rare opportunity for sustained focus, contemplation, and introspection. Literary critics and educators can encourage readers to take advantage of the *invitation* to dwell in uncertainty and to explore the difficulties of knowing, acknowledging, and responding to others. In the end, however, it's the reader's choice. (24, emphasis added)

Through my inquiry into the meaning of postsecular poetry, I have come to a very similar place. I see poetry as invitation. While poems do something, they do not actually, which is to say, directly effect change in readers or in the world. Poems are textual artifacts that reflect the inner work that the poets have undertaken in writing them and that invite readers to undertake the same sort of inner work. Poems do not transform readers. Poems invite readers to partake in being transformed. And, to quote Jürgen Habermas once again, poems offer to those who take up the invitation “semantic resources” for the necessary work that follows (“A Reply,” 76-77). No one articulates this insight better than the poet Jay Wright, when he says that a poem asks its readers “to create the act of becoming aware, attentive, active and transformed . . . to accept the poem’s challenge and to listen to, walk along, sing along and be with the poem . . . ‘to become’ with the voices . . . to reach for wisdom” (“Unraveling,” 5-8).

The meaning, the human significance, of postsecular poetry lies in the poems’ invitation to do inner work and in the resources that the poems offer for doing that work. Postsecular poems invite us to do many different tasks. Of course, there is the invitation to make meaning out of the words themselves—to interpret what the text is saying and what it means, etc. This is an important kind of inner work, perhaps the principle one that poems invite. But it is not the only kind, nor, necessarily the most crucial. To interpret is joined by other tasks: To work

through one's relationship to religious and secular traditions, whether coming or going, inside or outside or in between. To practice feeling solidarity with the downtrodden. To practice seeing multiple perspectives at once. To practice living with ambiguity. To cheer up. To praise. To grieve. To develop a sensitivity to and awareness of the earth. To imagine. To visualize. To sense. To forgive. To hope. To acknowledge fear. To desire. To change one's mind. To be emboldened. And on and on.

Sometimes the invitation of the text is explicit in the text, as in Scott Cairns's invitation to read from the *nous*:

let's try something, even now. Even as  
you tend these lines, attend for a moment  
to your breath as you draw it in: regard

the breath's cool descent, a stream from mouth  
to throat to the furnace of the heart.  
Observe that queer, cool confluence of breath

and blood, and do your thinking there. (*Compass*, 104-05)

Most times the invitation is implicit in the poem, present not necessarily in its content but in its form or in the play between content and form. For instance, while the meter of a poem might reinforce or qualify the *content* of the poem, it contributes to the *function* of the poem by inviting readers into a particular rhythm. The same goes for other aspects of poetic form. Images invite readers to imagine certain sights, sounds, smells, and tactile sensations from the material world. Metaphors invite readers to suspend themselves between multiple meanings. Conflicts ask readers to feel certain tensions. Characters give occasion for readers to practice empathy. And so on. Even in these lines by Cairns, the invitation resides more powerfully in the literary form than in the literal content. If one will respond to the invitation to “try something, even now”—to attend to the breath while reading the poem—it will be because of the implicit invitation of the formal aspects of the poem as much as because of that overt invitation. The formal aspects that

constitute the implicit invitation include the direct address which invoke the reader as a reader; the enjambment of line breaks and stanzas which introduce pauses at key words; the imagery of blood, breath, stream and furnace which ask the reader to consider their own breathing more deeply than they may be used to; the musical qualities of repetition of words and sounds (e.g., tend/attend, throat/heart, breath/breath/breath) which ask readers to pay heightened attention to the language and its sounds; and the final stanza switching from tercets to a single line which creates the space for a final, lingering pause. The function of the form of poetry is not so much to reinforce or qualify theme or content but to invite readers to engage in certain ways of reading that have to do with human experiences beyond theme or content.

If we want to access the meaning of postsecular poetry, we will have to develop ways of reading that involve or that prepare us for emotional, intellectual, and, indeed, spiritual work. Postsecular poetry calls for critical contemplative reading as a methodology, wherein one approaches the poems in a holistic way, integrating the critical and the contemplative stances, foregrounding literary form and humanistic purpose simultaneously, aware of the texts not only as aesthetic artifacts but also as events of human commun(ica)tion.

I want to bring this study to a close with Denise Levertov's "Illustrious Ancestors." One of the earliest of the contemporary postsecular poets in the United States, Denise Levertov's life bears the imprint of the postsecular historical moment, beginning with the plural religious traditions in her family and background and her own religious and spiritual journey. On her Welsh mother's side, Levertov was "descended from a locally famous mystic, Angell Jones of Mold." On her White Russian father's side, she was descended from "the famous Rabbi Schneur Zalman, founder of the Chabad branch of Hasidic Judaism" (Burke, 250). While her father became a Christian and "thought of himself as a Jew who found the messiah," Denise Levertov

“thought of herself as an agnostic” for most of her life but converted to Christianity later in life (Burke 251). The same year that she died, Denise Levertov gathered religious poems from her earlier work into *The Stream and the Sapphire*, a book which, as she writes in its forward, “trace[s] my own slow movement from agnosticism to Christian faith, a movement incorporating much of doubt and questioning as well as affirmation” (vii). Kevin F. Burke describes Levertov as “a woman who wrestled with God” (253). Burke explains that her “turn” toward the religious “emerged gracefully, organically from her own poetic vocation” (254). Writing about writing “The Mass for the Day of Thomas Didymus,” which began as “an agnostic Mass,” Levertov explains, “when I arrived at the *Agnus Dei* I discovered myself to be in a different relationship to the material and to the liturgical form from that in which I had begun. The experience of writing the poem—that long swim through waters of unknown depth—had begun a conversion process” (qtd. in Burke, 254). Her journey into the Christian tradition was a postsecular pilgrimage, marked by affirmation as well as questions, by push as well as pull. It was integrally connected to her poetry.

Written well before her conversion but during the course of that same journey,

“Illustrious Ancestors” also wrestles with the sacred in a characteristically postsecular way:

The Rav  
of Northern White Russia declined,  
in his youth, to learn the  
language of birds, because  
the extraneous did not interest him; nevertheless  
when he grew old it was found  
he understood them anyway, having  
listened well, and as it is said, ‘prayed  
with the bench and the floor.’ He used  
what was at hand—as did  
Angel Jones of Mold, whose meditations  
were sewn into coats and britches.  
Well, I would like to make,  
thinking some line still taut between me and them,



poems direct as what the birds said,  
hard as a floor, sound as a bench,  
mysterious as the silence when the tailor  
would pause with his needle in the air. (87)

This poem is prototypically postsecular in almost every aspect of the definition of postsecular poetry that I proposed in the introduction to this dissertation. The poem takes on that which might be considered religious or spiritual and does so “with a difference,” affirming the spiritual resources of Levertov’s two religious heritages but adapting them for her own efforts to be in this world fully and deeply, her own secular (at the time) but spiritual poetic practice. The poem uses traditional religious language, religious figures, and religious imagery, the ancestors, the praying, the meditations. It also foregrounds traditional religious thematic concerns, including silence, mystery, interconnection, and nature. It adopts a transreligious stance, welcoming readers who are Christian, Jewish, or secular in particular, but not excluding anyone through any hint of doctrinal narrowness.

Finally, the poem’s poetic formal aspects, in conjunction with its themes, suggests what might traditionally be called religious or spiritual rhetorical purposes. The poem reflects the inner work the poet has undertaken and invites readers to undertake the same sorts of inner work for themselves. Some aspects of this invitation are overtly communicated in the themes of the poem, while other aspects are implicit in its formal qualities. First, the poem invites readers to slow down, to pause, and to be present. It invites readers to be present to the text and to the spiritual and material worlds it is part of. This invitation can be found thematically. For instance, as we read of the needle pausing in the air, we might take the occasion to pause too. It can also be found formally. Immediately upon speaking about that pause, the poem ends, giving us white space in which to pause. The short length of the poem encourages us to go slowly, while the very short first line starts us off with only two words before the first pause. The indent setting the first

sentence of the poem from the second and final sentence allows readers to take a breath between hearing about the poet's ancestors and hearing about what use she would make of their gifts to her.

Second, the poem invites readers to honor their predecessors, to honor the gifts they have left us from their religious traditions, regardless of whether we belong to those traditions, and to affirm and be grateful for the good that has been passed down—and, by extension, to honor our connection to all human beings. This invitation can be seen thematically through the poem's title, the attribution of illustriousness to those who have gone before the poet, and in the line that declares that the poet understands there to be "some line still taut between me and them." Formally, this same invitation comes through the tone that attends the descriptions of the ancestors, a tone of affection and affirmation, which gives occasion for readers not only to follow suit with regard to these same ancestors of Levertov's but also to consider what we ourselves have been gifted by those who have gone before us that we might likewise appreciate and affirm.

Third, the poem invites readers to become more attuned to the sacredness of the material world. This can be seen thematically in the Rav (in his wiser years, though not "in his youth") listening well and learning the language of birds; in the hardness of the bench and floor with which—not simply *on* which, but *with* which—he prayed; in the materiality of the needle, threads, and fabric of the coats and benches into which Angel Jones of Mold's meditations are sewn; and in the aspiration toward hardness and soundness in Levertov's own poetry. The same invitation also takes place formally in the imagery that attends and enables each of these same moments in the poem that thematically speak to its material, which is to say, ecological aspects.

Each image asks and helps readers to attend affirmingly to the earth and the things of the earth with visual, tactile, and auditory memory and with spiritual imagination.

One could go on. In similar ways, thematically and formally, the poem invites readers to undertake many tasks related to inner work, while offering the means and occasion to do each: to reflect on silence and to take a moment of silence; to consider and embrace mystery; to honor work done well, whether the work of praying, sewing, or making poems; to appreciate the cosmic significance of small moments and small acts; and to aspire toward personal, which is to say, spiritual depth. The poem offers a microcosmic vision of *The World That Could Be*. A world where everyone practiced these sorts of tasks, held these sorts of attitudes, paid this sort of attention and respect would certainly be a world conducive to “the flourishing of all.” Like so many other postsecular poems, this poem presents this vision and offers readers the invitation and resources to take one small step toward its becoming. This is the gift of postsecular poetry.

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