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THE WITNESS OF SACRAMENTAL POETICS

AS APOCALYPTIC FOR THE PEOPLE

By

James David Dark

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Approved:

Professor William P. Franke

Professor Richard McGregor

Professor Hortense J. Spillers

Professor M. Douglas Meeks

FOR TODD GREENE

“Perhaps this is the mysterious "it" of the common phrase "it is snowing"--what we are always inside of.”

--Joshua Clover, “The Bubble and the Globe”

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CHAPTER I

RELIGION AS POETICS OF THE PEOPLE

The Conned Man

Here's the way it went. I sat eating and reading alone at a table in a Nashville location of the Wendy's Old Fashioned Hamburgers franchise when I spotted, out of my periphery, a heavy man at a table nearby with a collection of shopping bags on the floor next to his chair. He ate quickly, but his face registered no agitation as he stared straight ahead. Upon finishing his meal, he made his way to the door. From there, the restaurant's large glass windows afforded me a view of the man's progress across the parking lot, and I was intrigued to note that his next destination was a Domino's Pizza at the nearest corner of a strip mall just a few yards away. Within minutes, he exited with a Domino's bag added to his collection and went directly into a TCBY ("The Country's Best Yogurt"). He followed the same pattern as he exited with a new bag and then finished off, as far as I could tell, with the Subway Restaurant next door, disappearing around the corner with bags in both hands. I've seen him around town many times since, always bearing a diversely branded burden that may or may not contain brand products within.

Reflecting upon this episode, I began to concoct a thought experiment. What if the fellow suffered from an emotional disorder that rendered him incapable of incredulity and therefore peculiarly vulnerable to commercial claims, so vulnerable, in fact, that he believed—could not *not* believe-- *all* commercials? Whereas most people appear capable of filtering out the myriad forms of sales pitch, guarantee, promise, and false covenant foisted upon public minds via billboards, posters, product placement and all manner of electronic media, perhaps this unfortunate soul could not. And if this were the case, I reasoned, something as seemingly insignificant as exposure to a three-minute commercial break might suffice to send him on his way searching, enthralled along a perverse pilgrimage that would consume the length of his progressively less healthy life. In this way, he is successfully enlisted in an endless series of faith-based initiatives provoked by and based in the alluringly situated but necessarily insincere signals, the deliberate fictions, of a brand culture which, taken together, render him the subject of a cruel psychological experiment. His work, we understand, will be cut out *for* him, and advertising strategies ostensibly

crafted to move a few units, to sell a little confidence here and there, will have unwittingly come together to reduce the beleaguered existence of this imperiled soul to a psychic nightmare.

I intend this account of a conned man to serve as an instructive caricature as I take up the problematic of religion, the ways the religious sphere has been conventionally ordained, and how religion, as a category, might be more meaningfully and critically deployed. The mental bind, the illusion, in which the conned man lives, moves, and has his being, need not involve theistic confessions or metaphysical claims to be understood as an ineluctably religious one ("religio" as *binding* influence), and the same goes for the high budget, high tech processes of religious formation whereby his emotional health has been compromised. He has become what various brand agencies once beheld and in fact bargained for when they took a theoretical interest in him as a potential target market. Such interest is admittedly limited to his purchasing capacity, but an advertising campaign, to be successful, must seek to address the whole self, the everyday emotional life of individuals, with the imaginative constructions of brand culture (no less binding, we understand, for being mere constructions). The narrative associations of a brand are designed to prey upon and cater to every discerned aspect of the individual's social imagination, conjuring desired behavior by creating, if only momentarily, a loss of identity that can be most reliably recovered by way of accessing a certain proffered product. The conned man has received and incorporated (or has perhaps been incorporated by) these calls to worship, these carefully calibrated mystifications, one after the other, and has come to believe that the answer to his meaning-problem resides within these stories in which he's been successfully enlisted. He will know no lasting satisfaction on his quest, because too much is never enough and, as my caricature has it, he won't stop believing. He is an ensnared civilian immersed in a religious crisis.

What do we gain by considering the plight of the conned man through the lens of religion? By doing so, we're afforded a tool for critically examining the kind of immersive campaigns that go some distance in overcoming his powers of discernment, a space for raising the question of agency—always a religious question—for this mobile buyer moving through a fantasized space, *and* a pivot-point for envisioning the possibility of creative countermeasures. In this way, religion is a term that characterizes the net we're held within, whether willingly or unconsciously, a net

that is alternately woven and unwoven. If, as is the case with the conned man, we see religion as a kind of nightmare from which we mean to awaken, the awakening itself is also religious.
As a thick accounting of practice, religion names the binding *and* the loosing of hearts and minds, the entrenched means to status-quo fulfillment as well as the open spaces that lay outside them, the rituals to which the likes of the conned man would have been converted *to* as well as those they've been converted *from*. All are illumined and brought into dramatic relief by the problematic of religion.

In the interest of widening the scope and applicability of the conned man's clinically gullible imagination, the caricature might be helpfully moved beyond fast food franchises to include other forms of brand culture. Consider the ostensibly mature adult whose waking moments expend primary energy not toward self-actualization or discerning and meeting the needs of a close relative or neighbor but to feeling rage toward famous strangers: competing media pundits, celebrity politicians, sports figures, or participants on a televised dance competition. Imagine the armchair activist e-mailers, anywhere along the ideological spectrum, who primarily speak in conversation-stoppers, who can't change their minds and won't change the subject. Consider also the consumer of luxury goods, the talk radio enthusiast, the political party apparatchik, the soul whose emotional life is increasingly enthralled by and conducted through online social networks, or the magnetic pull of an Apple store.

While largely uncoerced and free to weave their way amid distractions, commodities, and various service options, these figures are obedient to certain given scripts and symbols of human flourishing characteristic of brand culture even as they convert their attention from one distraction to another many times on a given day. While their consciences evade, to some extent, the endless moral injury of the conned man, any attempt to represent these phenomena in a non-compartmentalized fashion will return us to the question of religion; or, to risk redundancy, the issue of *performed* religiosity remains in play, religion *as practice* as opposed to conscious profession. If we think of a brand campaign as a form of proselytization, the strategies and tactics at work within reigning technopolies challenge the popular separation of the merely secular from the ostensibly sacred. Whether geared toward securing votes, moving units, developing a

following, selling tickets, or organizing military recruitment, the colonization of the targeted imagination, from whatever sphere, will ignore our habitual distinctions. Frames of mind and forms of consent are being religiously cultivated and maintained through popular postures of passive reception upon which successful conscription is performed. This is the exchange of *confidence* connoted in the work of *con* artistry (the con game of the con artist is a matter of selling confidence). If religion is a thick descriptor of the instruction we've received, for better and worse, it is both the terrain of the con *and* the naming of said terrain. Religion is the name of the con game. If to *be* conned is human, confessing to having been conned is an act of religious awareness.

Religion is Non-optional

Against accounts of religion which imply that it operates in a space outside of everyday practices, concerns, and motivations, the theory of religion I posit keeps the question of religion open, allowing it to designate any number of social bonds *avowedly* religious or otherwise. Rather than framing religion as a set of propositions to which the critical subject can lend or withhold assent, I take religion to be a neutral social fact which will often include, rather than eschew, the rational sense we make (or try to make) in our representations of our worlds. I take religious belief to be instrumental, formative, and, with the anthropologist Talal Asad, "a constituting activity in the world."[1] Understanding, with Marx, that religion can effectively name those forms of consolation (other-worldly and/or market-driven) which anaesthetize the popular imagination into submission, the "illusory happiness" of the conned man and his ilk, there is nevertheless more to the picture. Marx also gives us the more comprehensive account in which religion names as well the stock inventory of word and image on offer for narrating historical processes, an assemblage of ways of putting matters, explaining the how's and why's of life and how it might yet (or should) be lived:

> Religion is the general theory of this world, its encyclopedic compendium, its logic in

[1] Talal Asad, "The Construction of Religion as an Anthropological Category" in *Genealogies of Religion: Discipline and Reasons of Power in Christianity and Islam*, (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993), 47.

> popular form…The wretchedness of religion is at once an expression of and protest against real wretchedness. Religion is the sigh of the oppressed creature, the heart of a heartless world, and the soul of soulless conditions*…*[2]

As an expression of material wretchedness that is also a protest against it, Marx views religion as a form of creative labor. This language recasts religion as not merely the opiate of the masses but, more broadly, the poetics of the people. Like ritual, symbol, or ceremony, religion isn't something one can be for or against or decide to somehow suddenly engage. Religions are always already underway. Or as the old Palmolive commercial once put it, we're *soaking* in them. Their engagement precedes us, having already formed our imaginaries. It is in this sense that Marx insists that "the critique of religion is the prerequisite of every critique."[3] It is that with which we have to do (or the way we do everything we do or think we do). It binds us for better and worse till we begin to critique it religiously and relentlessly, in view of the possibility of better boundedness, different and more redeeming orientations, or, to put it a little strangely, less bad religions. Religiosity, in this sense, is a sort of non-optional sociality, an open-ended form which funds the more settled forms we usually have in mind when we speak of religions. And one's religiosity is never not in play in one way or another. It names the patterns, shifting or consistent, avowed or unavowed, of all our interactions.

The Myth of Critical Detachment

In this way, economies of meaning (read religions) are what we have to talk about as well as what we *have* to talk about. We can call them consensual fictions or, in Daniel Dubuisson's phrase, "cosmographic formations" whose apparent purpose is "to describe the world and tell this or that group of humans, or even all of humanity, how to live in it."[4] But to be deployed critically, meaningfully, and helpfully, religion will have to refer to more than the scams we imagine

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[2] Karl Marx, *Critique of Hegel's "Philosophy of Right,"* trans. Annette Jolin and Joseph O'Malley (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977), 137.
[3] Ibid. 131.
[4] Daniel Dubuisson, *The Western Construction of Religion: Myths, Knowledge, and Ideology*, trans. William Sayers (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2003), 17-18.

uncritical or unenlightened others consistently fall for. If, within our usage of the category, religion only names the ideological delusions of *other* people, we have yet to deeply realize the pervasiveness of freeing and binding artifice.

In his essay "Imagination as Value," Wallace Stevens is especially helpful here. Reason, as he has it, is "the methodizer of the imagination," but ""the truth seems to be that we live in concepts of the imagination before the reason has established them."[5] What we take to be a critical hold of a concept or a construct of the imagination does not change our immersion within or our dependence upon it. Reason brings its critical witness to the imaginative communal witnesses that, in no small way, sustain it. Reason normalizes, gets hold, and posits, but analytical posturing is the latecomer to meaning-making. The mythic imagination precedes the analytical (sustains and underwrites it, in a manner of speaking). And if the religious imagination rehearses and names the myths, the stories whose artifice both frees and binds, religion, properly understood isn't merely representative of that which might momentarily escape rational analysis. It *generates* analysis as a form and, when heeded, it will awaken analysis to its own pretensions. The term "religion" might even be broad and comprehensive enough to deliver analysis from the myth of critical detachment.

This is where my theory of religion diverges from Bruce Lincoln's account of religion in his "Theses on Method" even as I play off it as a point of tangency. Beginning with Thesis 1, Lincoln asserts that history's claim (as method) upon religion is "proprietary" and, as such, it is "a relation of encompassment" to religion, "the object of study."[6] Without apology, Lincoln is employing the language of mastery, of a comprehensive hold upon religion without remainder or, it would seem, surplus meaning beyond critical grasp. And already, there is a notable distance between Lincoln's characterization of the task at hand and Jonathan Z. Smith's more self-effacing assertion that, for the student of religion, the "foremost object of study" will have to be one's own relentless "self-consciousness," because "*There is no data for religion*. Religion is solely the creation of the scholar's study," and what *is* there to scrutinize and examine is merely "the imagination of

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[5] Wallace Stevens, "Imagination as Value" in *The Necessary Angel: Essays on Reality and the Imagination*, (New York: Vintage Books, 1951), 154.
[6] Bruce Lincoln, "Theses on Method" in *Method & Theory in the Study of Religion* 8.3, 1996, 225.

religion."[7] In contrast, Lincoln maintains that there is indeed a manifest discourse--not a mere concept--that can be isolated fixed upon, described, and encompassed, and it is called religion.

More specifically, according to Thesis 2, religion "is that discourse whose defining characteristic is its desire to speak of things eternal and transcendent with an authority equally transcendent and eternal." While there is undoubtedly no lack of discernible discourse (popularly termed "religious") and centuries of interpretation which seem to perfectly fit this "defining characteristic," it can hardly be said that all religious practices, speech, or the majority of texts deemed religious fit the bill. Within various religious traditions, there certainly are claims to God-inspiredness and anticipation of postmortem bliss, but this doesn't begin to describe (or encompass) the whole of religious expression. To be faithful to the "rigorous critical practice" with which Lincoln sets history's authority "in the sharpest possible contrast"[8] to religious authority, the historian of religion will have to be attuned to the fashion in which the religious voice (or the voice *preserved by* religious tradition) seeks to simply tell it like it is, to be observationally honest (apart from otherworldly, metaphysical considerations) about the way things are, and to assert, often out of an ominously beleaguered state, a word of testimony in the direction of hoped-for, but sometimes not-within-reach, justice.

In this way, our theory of religion will have to consider the generative matrices of religious speech by way of what Mikhail Bakhtin termed *heteroglossia*: "All languages of heteroglossia, whatever the principle underlying them and making each unique, are specific points of view on the world, forms for conceptualizing the world in words, specific world views, each characterized by its own objects, meanings and values."[9] While the conceptualizations of religious speech will often assume the power of popular myth, commanding widespread (perhaps largely unanticipated) attentiveness and allegiance to its narratives, they shouldn't be *characteristically* defined as *desiring* or constantly *aspiring* toward the status of metanarrative (read "eternal and

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[7] Jonathan Z. Smith, *Imagining Religion: From Babylon to Jonestown* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982), xi. I find Smith's assertion compelling but would place within the list of tasks to be taken up by the aspiring student of religion an aliveness to the myth—*as myth*—of critical detachment.
[8] Lincoln, "Theses on Method" 225.
[9] M.M. Bakhtin, "Discourse in the Novel" in *The Dialogic Imagination*, trans. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981), 291-292.

transcendent"). The conceptualizations are often generated out of earthbound, everyday concerns. Sometimes religious speech is simply one human voice saying, in an especially persuasive fashion that somehow binds the listener, how life looks and feels from a particular standpoint. It could even be something as seemingly quotidian as a commercial, a talking point, or a plug for a product.

You Can't Step in the Same Religion Twice

With Thesis 3, Lincoln draws a neat line between the discourse (*history* of religions) which will always "insist on discussing the temporal, contextual, situated, interested, human, and material dimensions" and the other discourses (ostensibly religious practices and institutions) which "characteristically represent themselves as eternal, transcendent, spiritual, and divine." This dichotomy is deeply problematic. It shouldn't be denied that many self-described religious institutions (which often enjoy tax-exemption status) represent themselves in this way, as safely sequestered away from political and economic matters but usually willing to offer their services in the role of chaplaincy or "spiritual counsel." But this positioning of a religious tradition is frequently challenged as *mis*representation *from within the religious traditions themselves* by religious adherents who insist on speaking to and within the very dimensions Lincoln characterizes as the exclusive concerns of historical discourse. These are the agents of socio-religious reform who point out the false advertising, false witness, unjust practice, and unfaithfulness at work in disembodied (spiritualized) representations of religion and seek to resist, disrupt, and turn around the (for now) prevailing, bad faith discourse. This, too, is religion. When it comes to this aspect of religious discourse, the line Lincoln draws is a historical fiction, though he might conceivably resort to placing the voices of religious reformation on the side of the practitioners of "history of religions" discourse.

In the same vein, Thesis 4 insists that religious discourse must be made to endure "the same destabilizing and irreverent questions one might ask of any speech act."[10] This is most assuredly the case, and one name for this uproarious, unseemly, and unstable mumbo-jumbo of

[10] Lincoln, 225.

an endlessly self-interrogating process is religion. Lincoln here echoes the prophetic imperative at work at the margins (and sometimes the center) of every religious tradition. Prophetic traditions ensure that religions aren't static or monolithic (except according to some self-described adherents who also play their parts, heretical or otherwise, *within* the traditions). One can never step into the same religion twice, because religions are always in flux, always changing. The devastating, destabilizing questions put to religion don't begin with the application of historical method. It is religious discourse *itself* that is present within and, in some sense, engendered by way of such questions being put to reigning religious normatives. Such questions are the stuff of religious discourse. The neat cleavage Lincoln presumes between the critical and the religious is untenable.

Whether haplessly or profoundly, religious discourse is often at least an attempt, we might say, at good conscience. And interestingly, in Thesis 5, Lincoln places good conscience at the center of scholarly virtue (a religious commitment?). Reverence and the good manners the decision to revere might generate, Lincoln consigns to the realm of religion. Why the distinction? The historian of religion, by Lincoln's lights, is committed to the truth of all matters while the religious pilgrim seems to want otherworldy consolation at the cost of rigorous truth. Why a hermeneutic of reverence and a hermeneutic of good conscience must be viewed as mutually exclusive isn't made clear.

The Ideology of Others

In Thesis 6, Lincoln locates an unwillingness to bring critical inquiry to religions on account of the cultural relativism informed by "a certain displaced defensiveness" and "the guilty conscience of western imperialism."[11] This is certainly right, insofar as it's wrong to withhold the ministry of critical inquiry from religious peoples we feel compelled to leave to their unenlightened plight out of a sense of, as Lincoln might put it, politeness. But there is also a posture (sometimes equated with cultural relativism) that rightly recognizes—or confesses--a tendency, within ourselves, to mistake a deeply dogmatic and subjective account of another person's (or people's)

[11] Ibid. 226.

belief and practice for a more-than-sufficiently objective representation of our object of study. We have to keep before us the question of whether or not we're doing justice to what we presume to understand, and this question has to remain open. Or, as Hans-Georg Gadamer puts it, we have to discover repeatedly "what is common to all modes of understanding," namely that "understanding belongs to the being of that which is understood."[12]

Thesis 7 presents the danger of attributing stability to cultures in a manner that stresses continuity and whereby "internal tensions and conflicts, turbulence and incoherence, permeability and malleability are largely erased." This is indeed the danger of ideology and the place where history is transmogrified into propaganda, but it isn't necessarily at this point that narrative takes a turn, as Lincoln has it, for the religious. Here again, Lincoln renders religion synonymous with ideology in a fashion that doesn't do complete justice to the way religions function.

In Thesis 8, Lincoln actually addresses this concern by noting how scholars, in treating religious groups, will "mistake the ideological positions favoured and propagated by the dominant fraction for those of the group as a whole," and, as a result, they "replicate the recognitions and misrepresentations of those the scholars privilege as their informants." But in a similar fashion, Lincoln let's the most widely disseminated and loudly broadcast versions of ostensibly religious discourse (the conversation-stopping power of fundamentalism) be *the* "defining characteristic" of religion as he represents it in the theses. Representing religion accurately will involve "probing beneath the surface"[13] of the most popular versions of religion *and* the unexamined presuppositions of scholarly discourse. Lincoln advises as much in Thesis 9.

Theses 10 and 11 offer a very good word for the (note the careful wording) "would-be student of ideology."[14] The consciousness with which we bring (or try to bring) our thoughts to bear upon ideology "is itself a product of that (ideological) system," and "the system's very success renders its operations invisible."[15] But fortunately, by studying "the ideological products and operations of other societies" which are "initially unfamiliar" and by which we have yet to be

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[12] Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, trans. Joel Weinsheimer and Donald G. Marshall (London: Continuum, 2004), xxviii.
[13] Lincoln, 226.
[14] Ibid. 227.
[15] Ibid. 226.

bombarded in the way we're pummeled by and immersed within our own, we can perhaps glean useful lessons to apply to ourselves as we attempt to self-apply the critical inquiry we so easily level at the alleged ideology of others. In his conflating of the two, might *the ideology of others* serve as Lincoln's best definition of religion?

Thesis 12 observes that "many students of religion" denounce critical inquiry as "reductionism," and Lincoln maintains that the intent of the charge (and he identifies no other) is "to silence critique." Whether within or without one's religion, critique is indeed a hard pill to swallow (perhaps especially when unaccompanied by a discernible sense of reverence or respect toward the object of critique), and there will often be an attempt on the part of religious adherents to silence that which calls their beliefs and their practices into question. But the intent of the reductionism charge isn't always a matter of trying to shut someone up. It might often be a more casual, friendly observation (a counter-critique) that the way a religious tradition is being characterized within the work that calls itself critical inquiry is not a sufficiently thick description; that it isn't even functioning as representation; that it *reduces* the object of study; that it is, in fact, an instance of shoddy ethnography. It need not be an instance of a pouting student of religion wishing that the critical inquirer would ratify a religion's purported "claim of transcendent nature and sacrosanct status."[16] On doing the job (history of religions) well, Clifford Geertz's word on ethnography is especially helpful: "Doing ethnography is like trying to read (in the sense of 'construct a reading of') a manuscript—foreign, faded, full of ellipses, incoherencies, suspicious emendations, and tendentious commentaries, but written not in conventionalized graphs of sound but in transient examples of shaped behavior."[17] An intense attentiveness to "transient examples of shaped behavior" can assist in avoiding the dangers of reductionism, and it might also require a willingness to bracket (for at least a time) the perceived claims to transcendent nature as a side issue and not necessarily the primary (or the defining) characteristic of religious discourse. The bracketing procedure might be more helpful to the practice of critical inquiry, as a starting point, than beginning with the refusal to ratify claims that aren't even necessarily on the table.

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[16] Ibid. 227.
[17] Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures: Selected Essays*, (New York: Basic Books, 1973), 10.

The final thesis, Thesis 13, announces that the historian (or scholar), performing her function, won't allow those one studies to define the terms in which they will be understood (in a certain tension with Gadamerian sensibility) and will never fail to distinguish between "truths," "truth claims," and "regimes of truth."[18] This is mostly acceptable, but, as is the case throughout the theses, it seems as if scholarship is being let off the hook; that ideology runs rampant throughout religious discourse and history is more easily and blessedly made immune. It's as if Lincoln would worry less if he believed religious discourse worried more about its ideological tendencies and submitted to a more fine-grained examination (history of religions) of its own thinking. He doesn't believe it submits easily to the critical gaze. And this is certainly true.

But historically, religious discourse exposes itself (sometimes willingly, sometimes not) to the risk of fresh analysis, better thinking, and it happens *from within* more than Lincoln seems willing to grant. Religious discourse, whether in text, image, or practice, will often mask reality, certainly, but, like scholarship, it also *un*masks. It doesn't only always abuse. It also disabuses. And it often contains the means, through new and better readings, interpretations, and performances to call its own perceived claims into question. Just like scholarship. To even put it this way begins to make the line between religious and scholarly discourse seem a little less definitive, and a complex space for the giving and receiving of critical witness begins to appear. Might a kind of self-conscious mythologizing animate the accounts, the representations, the tales we tell concerning our alleged objects of study?

Let Us Compare Mythologies

Lincoln offers a provocative analysis of this wider terrain of human mythmaking in *Theorizing Myth: Narrative, Ideology, and Scholarship*, and it places his "Theses on Method" within an extremely helpful context. In the epilogue, "Scholarship as Myth," we receive the word on scholarship we longed for in the theses: "I not only grant but insist that scholarship—like human speech in general—is interested, perspectival, and partial and that its ideological dimensions must be acknowledged, ferreted out where necessary, and critically cross-examined."

[18] Lincoln, 227.

Here, Lincoln makes the same critical demands upon scholarship that he brings to religious discourse.

What sign of good faith will scholarship bring to demonstrate its struggle against the merely ideologically driven? Footnotes. Footnotes signal "sustained engagement with the data" and a posture of open-handedness and transparency toward a community of interlocutors who will "act as a check on ideological manipulation."[19] And lest we suspect Lincoln is still privileging the *study* of myth (and religion) as a way of transcending ideology-saturated mythmaking, he lays down a provocative aphorism: "If myth is ideology in narrative form, then scholarship is myth with footnotes."

He even describes an occupational hazard that sits very nicely alongside the theses: "Students of myth seem particularly given to producing mythic, that is, ideological, narratives, perhaps because the stories they tell about storytelling reflect back on them as storytellers themselves."[20] In view of such on-the-job pitfalls, the relentless self-consciousness that Jonathan Z. Smith commends to the would-be student of religion is especially needful, and this self-consciousness will be fueled by a heightened awareness of the limitations and the historical situatedness involved in students' attempt to mythmake (study religion) well: "As students of myth, we can turn our attention to the mythmaking of our scholarly, as well as that of other, ancestors, secure in the knowledge that our descendants will one day return us the favor."[21]

Taken together, Lincoln's theses and the epilogue to *Theorizing Myth* serve as an admonition to proceed with caution, to slow down, and to enter into (and receive) the communal accountability that makes just speech, better (less illusory?) mythmaking, and critical resistance to ideology possible. While Lincoln once grandly set aside the practice of reverence as a religious (non-scholarly) virtue, one is left with the sense that tact and care are very much called for in his sense of proper practice in the study of religion. A sense of relentlessly self-conscious mythmaking—open to the creative possibilities the traditions under examination might yet

[19] Bruce Lincoln, *Theorizing Myth: Narrative, Ideology, and Scholarship*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999), 208.
[20] Ibid. 209.
[21] Ibid. 216.

generate--seems in order if we're to actually see and somehow understand what we too often presume to hold at a critical distance. "Sustained engagement with the data" appears to demand as much. How might the mythmaking of scholarly engagement bear witness *to* the witness of meaning-making traditions?

Accepting footnotes as one sign of such serious, sustained, and sufficiently self-conscious engagement, I'd like to extend this creative component (often *knowingly* creative) to every form of narratival (and therefore mythic) witness. And here, we return to the question of binding and freeing artifice and the possibility of giving, receiving, discerning, and crafting witnessing forms. Re-presenting, commemorating, or giving form to human experiences and insights is the work of *traditioning* itself, of setting down and passing down a communal—or potentially communal--witness. In reference to the legacy of Abū Hāmid al-Ghazālī as a "courageous bricoleur" within Islamic traditions, Ebrahim Moosa describes this as the "imaginative work of tradition" where "different narratives" are "forged."[22] And this witnessing work is undertaken within, and perhaps to some degree even conjures, an in-between, "liminal space" which somehow "frames all other spaces," a "threshold area" crucial to any claims of inside or outside, a terrain "that one crisscrosses daily" as one would move from the entrance of a private dwelling into the perceived public of the street. Borrowing an Arabized Persian word from Ghazālī, Moosa calls this space *dihlīz*, "a mobile force field…[that] lends itself to nontotalitarian modes of being and thought."[23]

Moosa reveals, in a footnote fittingly enough, that this way of translating *dihlīz* comes to him via Talal Asad who posits the concept of "complex space and complex time" which might afford us a vision "of embodied practices rooted in multiple traditions, of the differences between horizons of expectation and spaces of experience—the differences that continually dislocate the present from the past, the world experienced from the world anticipated, and call[s] for their revision and reconnection."[24] Asad in turn credits Anglican theologian John Milbank for this way of

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[22] Ebrahim Moosa, *Ghazālī and the Poetics of Imagination*, (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2005), 27.
[23] Ibid. 48-49.
[24] Talal Asad, "Muslims as a 'Religious Minority' in Europe" in *Formations of the Secular: Christianity, Islam, Modernity*, (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003), 179.

figuring complex space. Milbank notes that the ways traditions impinge upon one another and "complexly overlap" can't be rightly reckoned within an "enlightenment simple space" which is always "merely an abstracting, idealizing project," compared to "complex space," because "there is no such thing as absolute non-interference; no action can be perfectly self-contained."[25] In a world of such complex overlap and mutual imbrication, it would be incredibly difficult to speak of religion, myth, or symbol in terms of their alleged roles (i.e. the role of religion, religion's role) as if they keep to the corners we designate in our attempts to manage what we take to be their meanings. Doing so is to fail to adequately register the living, interweaving dialectic of *dihlīz*.

In a demonstration of the productive play afforded by a self-conscious situating within *dihlīz* itself, a professor of Islamic studies, an anthropologist, and a theologian together here make a way –or perceive a way—where the conventions of popular and much academic discourse only allow for dead-ends. They describe a space for decentering the alleged center, rendering possible a scene of recognition concerning historical and contemporary witnesses as well as an awareness of their mutual imbrication as a given. This is more than a space for inter-religious dialogue, comparative theology, or an exchange of ideas; *dihlīz* is a space in which meaning and orientation are given and received, by and through, the witness of others and where, in Jonathan Z. Smith's terminology, we keep our bearings by holding to our representations loosely to better recognize that the data we believe we have on one another, the differently religious other, and ourselves is, to some degree, *imagined* data.

Holding to the concept of *dihlīz* as the threshold space which frames all other conceived spaces, the site of the giving, receiving, discerning, and confessing of mythic accounts, I'd like to thicken and expand it further by incorporating it into the relational dimension Judith Butler terms "the structure of address." In the attempt to give or even formulate an account[26] of ourselves that can "conform to norms that govern the humanly recognizable," we are already interrupted and enabled by "a sociality that exceeds" whatever we take to be exclusive to ourselves. This sociality is the structure of address that "establishes the account as an account," an irretrievably relational

[25] John Milbank, "Against the Resignations of the Age" in *Things Old and New: Catholic Social Teaching Revisited*, ed. F.P. McHugh and S.M. Natale (New York: University Press of America, 1993), 19.
[26] For my purposes, Butler's *account* is largely interchangeable with my understanding of *witness*.

account, we understand, because “no account takes place outside the structure of address.” No myth, narrative, representation, or witness can have its meaning alone. “It is only in dispossession” that it can be communicated at all.[27]

And in a move that should serve as an admonition against presumed mastery or proprietary gestures of encompassment, Butler suggests that the structure of address is the *enabling interruption* when it comes to the stories we tell ourselves to ourselves, the stories we live by: “The moment the story is addressed to someone, it assumes a rhetorical dimension that is not reducible to a narrative function. It presumes that someone, and it seeks to recruit and act upon that someone…it is invariably interlocutory, ghosted, laden, persuasive, and tactical.” In this sense, an awareness of the structure of address is itself an assertion of complex space an understanding of which reveals our stories as always-already hybrid, porous, and open-ended, our every meaning dependent upon a crossroads of meaning. When a note of judgment or critical assessment arises, it can’t proceed as if “unbeholden to the ethics implied by the structure of address” and without tending toward a kind of violence in its presumed “break with relationality.”[28] And even within a proper sense of mutual interdependence, Butler believes judgment always falls short of recognition (“Recognition cannot be reduced to making and delivering judgments about others”[29]).

It is here that I’d like to bring the imagery of Moosa’s *dihlīz* and Butler’s structure of address together to deploy religion as, in one sense, the creative work of binding and freeing artifice; creative work, in various forms, that precedes and saturates us long before we count ourselves as having been in any way addressed *by* it. To claim to be *against* religion, in this sense, is as incoherent as being for it. One could just as well take attempt a principled stand against symbols, constructs, promises, or social bonds. When we think of it this way, the myth of critical detachment we often bring to our discourse concerning religion begins to ring hollow. Butler is particularly instructive on this point concerning the loss of absolutely self-possessed knowing when we begin “to accept not just that we address others when we speak, but that in some way

[27] Judith Butler, “An Account of Oneself” in *Giving an Account of Oneself*, (New York: Fordham University Press, 2005), 36-37.
[28] Butler, “Against Ethical Violence” in *Giving an Account of Oneself*, 63.
[29] Ibid. 44.

we come to exist, as it were, in the moment of being addressed, and something about our existence proves precarious when that address fails." And in the stronger sense, "what binds us morally has to do with how we are addressed by others in ways we cannot avert or avoid; this impingement by the other's address constitutes us first and foremost against our will or, perhaps put more appropriately, prior to the formation of our will." According to Butler, when we're unconscious of or believe ourselves to be impervious to the action of address, "we miss the very mode by which moral demands are relayed. That is, we miss the situation of being addressed, the demand that comes from elsewhere, sometimes a nameless elsewhere, by which our obligations are articulated and pressed upon us."[30] To draw Butler's discussion into my own, what we miss when we resist awareness of our situation of being—and having been—addressed is the social fact of religion.

Don't Believe Everything That You Breathe

While I wouldn't have dreamed of bringing "religion" into it at that stage, it is precisely an aliveness to the situation of being addressed that I once hoped to cultivate in my daughter when she was a toddler. Faced with the difficulty of maneuvering her around in the seat provided her in a shopping cart while responding to her demands for candy and brightly colored pieces of plastic placed strategically at her eye level in the aisles and checkout line of our nearest grocery, it eventually occurred to me that making more explicit the forms of address in which she had been ritually immersed might prove helpful. "They're trying to trick you," I told her. I hasten to add that a more nuanced consideration of a market economy in which we live and move and have our being would follow in the years to come, but I was pleased to hear her whisper, on more than one occasion, "You're trying to trick me," in the presence of mildly predatory advertising strategies in those complex spaces where the con is always on. A counter-mantra, we understand, is often called for. I would suggest we begin to cobble them together, almost instinctively, when we see how and why we're being addressed, when we begin to see the religious situation.

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[30] Judith Butler, *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence*, (London: Verso, 2006), 130.

To my mind, to describe the situation thusly is to expand the space of—and make a way for—the exercise of critical consciousness. Religion is probably the only term comprehensive enough to begin to name, with Marx[31], those forms of ideological mystification that disorder and perpetuate dysfunction as well as the emergence of emancipating forms that might transform the scene, the complex space—the field of action--for tying and untying, binding and freeing artifice; that valley of decision where we might begin to see myths otherwise powerful and pervasive enough to conceal their own contradictions for what they are, or better, for what they're doing. In this vein, the neutral fact of consensual fictions that govern and form a culture—that, in some sense, *are* culture—isn't a problem, but presuming we're operating outside of them in a myth-free or religion-free zone, effortlessly wise to their pull, is probably ideology in action. In its resistance to the perverting, formative power of bad narratives, the critical poetic work of being aware and enacting *re*formation is itself relentlessly narratival.

This is powerfully exemplified in what Northrop Frye takes to be a culturally crucial achievement of Samuel Beckett. Beckett gives us narrative voices who chart the ways they are "oppressed by the pervasive lying of the imagination, by the way in which one unconsciously falsifies the facts to make a fiction more symmetrical" while lamenting the resigned revelation "that there is no escape from fiction."[32] In keeping with this, the narrator of *The Unnamable* manages to articulate a witness concerning his own immersive environment of signals and noise, static and desire, even as he seems to drown within it, losing, it seems, all hope of orientation. The guiding metaphor which the narrator has to struggle to see clearly again and again, reluctantly but resolutely, is the matter of voices and words:

> Unfortunately it's a question of words, of voices, one must not forget that, one must try and not forget that completely, of a statement to be made by them, by me…some process no doubt, that I've got stuck in, or haven't yet come to…impossible to stop, I'm in

[31] "Religion, and we will come back to this, was never one ideology among others for Marx." Jacques Derrida, *Specters of Marx: The State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning, & the New International*, trans. Peggy Kamuf (New York: Routledge, 1994), 42.
[32] Northrop Frye, "The Nightmare Life in Death" in *The Hudson Review* 13.3, 1960, 448.

words, made of words, others' words, what others, the place too, the air, the walls, the floor, the ceiling, all words, the whole world is here with me.[33]

For Beckett, this assessment is nothing more complicated or profound than a reading on a local situation, an effort to objectify, if only for a moment and mostly unsuccessfully, the process of ones own confusion, a setting down of the testimony of one more beleaguered mind comparable to that of the conned man. Best to keep at it: "All words, there's nothing else, you must go on, that's all I know…you must say words, as long as there are any…you must go on, I can't go on, I'll go on."[34]

Though it comes to us as a radically thinned-out summons[35], it seems to me that Beckett is delivering a charge concerning the imperative of poetic resistance within ones, for better and worse, inescapably religious situation, the obligation to tie and untie and tie again the knot that you need with available materials (words, for instance, "as long as there are any"), to have a go at binding or setting down an intuition concerning likenesses and differences in the direction of an arresting—if not redeeming—construct, to make a space, at least for recognition.

And here we consider again the image of the conned man and the commercially concocted dramas that operate within, even as they depend upon, his nervous system. In such a scenario, is a spark of recognition even possible? We here recall Theodor Adorno's assessment of the way it works: "It is part of the mechanism of domination to forbid recognition of the suffering it produces."[36] But in spite of the culture formed and forming around, within, and for him, we can stop short of construing his crisis as one in which his hope of resisting or even experiencing himself consciously has been irretrievably cut off,[37] what Adorno grimly terms "liquidation."[38] The raw *given* data of *received* artifice, that artifice which, in the case of the conned man and his ilk,

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[33] Samuel Beckett, *Molloy, Malone Dies, and The Unnamable: Three Novels*, (New York, Grove Press, 1959), 534-537.
[34] Ibid. 577.
[35] "The expression that there is nothing to express, nothing with which to express, nothing from which to express, no power to express, together with the obligation to express." Beckett, "Three Dialogues" in *Disjecta: Miscellaneous Writings and a Dramatic Fragment*, (New York: Grove Press, 1984), 139.
[36] Theodor Adorno, *Minima Moralia: Reflections from Damaged Life* (London: Verso, 1978), 63.
[37] "People's last possibility of experiencing themselves has been cut off by organized culture" Ibid. 65.
[38] "In the age of the individual's liquidation, the question of individuality must be raised anew." Ibid. 129.

only engulfs and overwhelms, need not liquidate personality inevitably, as the Orwellian story goes. There often remain avenues for *counter*-artifice, that seemingly ineffective poetic act that undertakes what Robert Stepto calls the "transformation of data into metaphor."[39] This is Stepto's characterization of W.E.B Du Bois's narrative method in *The Souls of Black Folk*, an attempt to join his own scholarship with songs, making sound work against crushing realities, attempting exorcism, conjuring a space for recognition, analysis, and a provocative account of what's going on, a space for the bearing of poetic witness.

Monitor the Pictures (To Be or Not To Be)

While the work we call poetic is certainly something more, we do well to keep in mind that it is also never anything *less* than the setting down—or the intoning of—a construct, the creative positing of new forms which often strip down the old ones, the practice of the artistry of social change. Whether descriptive, lyrical, or weirdly explanatory (telling it *slant*, in Dickinson's phrase), the construct *gives* witness. In this way, the specifically *sacramental* poetics I have in mind self-consciously strives to conjure better, more redeeming stories than the ones that currently structure the given world, and its practitioners understand that critical detachment from this complex, storied, and therefore *religious* space is, in no small way, a delusion. To *re*conceive, even out of thin air, the given formations or to decree them *de*formations is to reconfigure the sacred status quo with counter-commemorations. Or as Adorno puts it, "In creating cultural categories we give shape to this world, and whoever manages to change the categories thus changes the shape [of a given world]."[40] To draw upon the all-too-*un*problematized idiom of ones immediate culture and transform given data into new and better forms is to recognize a religious imperative of engagement. While it is discerned in conditions as complex as Moosa's *dihlīz*, responding, with an engagement of one's own, to the fact of having been addressed is as simple, straightforward and commonplace as the everyday, intellectual drive to somehow make sense of ones situation. There is more than one way to sing, draw, remix, versify, or simply speak an

[39] Robert B. Stepto, "The Quest of the Weary Traveler: W.E.B. Du Bois's *The Souls of Black Folk*" in *From Behind the Veil: a Study of Afro-American Narrative,* (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 1991), 53.
[40] Adorno, 99.

alternative world into existence within the shell of the dominant one, more than one way to respond artfully, and therefore redemptively, to atmospheric conditions hostile to life. The cost of neglecting to do so, of not engaging the forms by which we are engaged, is playfully but devastatingly explored by E.E. Cummings.

In a self-penned introduction to his novel *The Enormous Room*, a fictional account of his months in a prison camp in Normandy during World War I, Cummings' introduces himself to a fastidious interlocutor. Anticipating exasperation over the very idea of a literary offering in troubled times, he begins with an admonition that seems intended as a kind reassurance, "Don't be afraid." But his listener sneers at the suggestion, which he attributes to Cummings, that art could ever hope to be "of vital consequence."

"Did it ever occur to you," he asks, "that people in this socalled world of ours are not interested in art?" A note of resentment concerning what he takes to be Cummings' self-important presumption creeps in, " I dare say you don't say precisely why you consider your art of vital consequence."

Cummings' retort implies that the possibility of individual consciousness, the possibility of experiencing oneself *as* a self, resides in artistry: "Thanks to I dare say my art I am able to become myself."

So is artfulness the only avenue of human development? "What do you think happens to people who aren't artists? What do you think people who aren't artist's become?"

"I feel they don't become: I feel nothing happens to them; I feel negation becomes of them."

Of all the nerve. "Negation?"

"You paraphrased it a few moments ago…'This socalled world of ours.'"

"Labouring under the childish delusion that economic forces don't exist, eh?"

"I am labouring."[41]

If I read him correctly, Cummings is laboring *against* the possibility of human insentience, his own and others, and *for* a creative witness that might somehow testify to something beyond

[41] E.E. Cummings, Introduction to *The Enormous Room*, (New York: Modern Library, 1934), vii-x. I owe my awareness of this text to Durs Grünbein.

the merely mechanistic. Incidentally, his invention of a hostile conversation partner in response to whom he might articulate as much is itself a witnessing work. Within the reigning liturgy (Gk. *leitourgia*, work of the people) of image, symbol, and story being undertaken by the imagined communities of nation states, businesses, and other monied interests, the individual may avoid being absorbed (or negated) through the undertaking of counterliturgies, the deployment of disruptive intelligence that might open life, any life, to the possibility of change.

What one cannot do without suffering the forfeiture of soul is to hold oneself aloof from this process ("This socalled world of ours") and let the reigning, deluding forms go uninterrogated as if they're inevitable. In this sense, I suspect Cummings fear of negation is in sync with Frantz Fanon's famous prayer, "O my body, always make me a man who questions."[42] There are means to flipping the given scripts, of changing or widening the narrative parameters that enclose us, of setting an echo going, but this requires a lively awareness of their presence, of the ways they've formed us religiously. The poet-philosopher William LaFleur describes this work of sacramental poetics thusly:

> Our task should be that of exposing the specific metaphor, representation, or religious idea that causes or sanctions cruelty, not the more generalized—and ultimately impossible—task of trying to make a world in which metaphor, narrative, and religion cease to exist. Wittgenstein showed that we cannot live without pictures. We can and must, however, constantly monitor our pictures to see what they are doing and neglecting to do.[43]

In LaFleur's view, the fact of binding and freeing artifice (religious imagery, we're prone to call it, as if there's an imagery that isn't) occasions the work of making new and better sense while holding to a redemptive skepticism nicely captured in an aphorism of the singer-songwriter Beck: "Don't believe everything that you breathe." But the space for gaining the critical foothold to rightly give or withhold belief in an immersive environment of image and symbol is, perhaps

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[42] Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, trans. Richard Philcox, (New York: Grove Press, 2008), 206.
[43] William R. LaFleur "Body" in *Critical Terms for Religious Studies*, ed. Mark C. Taylor, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), 51.

paradoxically, a hermeneutic work of believing that precedes understanding. A critical monitoring of what's been thrown together in and as symbol (*sym-bol* Gk, to throw together) can't be undertaken without belief in and within symbols themselves. We have to find ourselves knowingly enmeshed *in* religious discourse, perhaps more consciously inundated, before we can begin respond to and participate within it critically. The power to arrest our impressions and render discourse more coherent can't be accessed outside of discourses themselves. Or as Paul Ricoeur puts it, humanity "remains language through and through" even as we "aim at a second naïveté in and through criticism. In short, is by *interpreting* that we can *hear* again."[44]

As we will see in the witnessing work of James Joyce, Ralph Ellison, and Ursula Le Guin, poetic resistance *to* or critical deployment *of* available myths and symbols demands immersion and investment. You have to draw your life from them to resist them properly. As Ricoeur insists, we have to knowingly orient ourselves within the given mix of symbols to appropriate and transcend them effectively:

> The world of symbols is not a tranquil and reconciled world; every symbol is iconoclastic in comparison with some other symbol; just as every symbol, left to itself, tends to thicken, to become solidified in an idolatry. It is necessary, then, to participate in the struggle, in the dynamics, in which the symbolism itself becomes a prey to a spontaneous hermeneutics that seeks to transcend it. It is only by participating in this dynamics that comprehension can reach the strictly critical dimension of exegesis and become a hermeneutic; but then one must abandon the position—or rather, the exile—of the remote and disinterested spectator, in order to appropriate in each case a particular symbolism.[45]

Ricoeur's account of "the world of symbols" implies a knowing relationality, an investedness, that will be required of anyone wishing to navigate this complex space of imaginative constructs that order our understanding of our worlds. It brings to mind Guy Davenport's assertion that everything we dignify with the name of art is, in some sense, a dabbling in symbols, that "Art itself is a symbol," and that if "a symbol is simply a drenched

[44] Paul Ricoeur, *The Symbolism of Evil*, trans. Emerson Buchanan, (New York, Harper & Row, 1967), 350-351.
[45] Ibid. 354.

identity, a thing more than equal to itself," then the work of drenching and re-drenching the placeholders we fashion, of attempting new ones in the symbolic form of another having-to-do-with, is a fluid work, a work that is never done.[46] As E.E. Cummings sketch attempts to demonstrate, the serious play of poetic resistance to dominant symbols (dominating because, in Ricoeur's formulation, they've thickened and solidified into idolatrous forms) will often be met with the charge of frivolity and uselessness. But such creative engagements with the powers that be are the labors of critical consciousness itself. Whether in the form of a collage, a song, a breaking of bread, a joke, a drawing, a blog, or the placing of a flower in a rifle, this sacramental poetics takes myriad forms. How many forms for assuming and lifting a voice? As many as there are people.

It is within the complex spaces of unavoidably symbolic activity, of binding and freeing artifice, that one might discern what Hortense Spillers refers to as the "symbol-making task." Accounts of the practice of "symbol-making" appear throughout her work as a space-making tactic, most notably in her discussion of the emergence of "the black woman as artist" who finds herself to be the bearer of a "cultural apprenticeship" consisting of a tradition which, apart from a few autobiographies from the nineteenth century, was "virtually suppressed until the period of the Harlem Renaissance and later."[47] When the voice one hopes to designate has been denied public existence, how does one expand the sphere of possibility *within* the given "universe of symbol-making?"[48] It won't be done from scratch, as it were. All is already context. The already-long-ago-underway universe of past and present symbol-making, the sometimes unwelcome designations of others, will have to serve as the field of action and innovation. Most famously in "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book," Spillers gets right down to it: "Lets face it. I am a marked woman, but not everybody knows my name." The markers that precede the possibility of an identity are "a sort of telegraphic coding." They are "markers so loaded with mythical prepossession that there is no way for the agents buried beneath them to come clean."

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[46] Guy Davenport interviewed by John Jeremiah Sullivan, "The Art of Fiction CLXXIV," *Paris Review* 163, 76.
[47] Hortense Spillers, "A Hateful Passion, A Lost Love: Three Women's Fiction" in *Black, White, and in Color: Essays on American Literature and Culture*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003), 97.
[48] Spillers, "Interstices: a Small Drama of Words" in *Black, White, and in Color*, 167.

What to do with *mythical prepossession*? For starters, don't believe everything that you're breathing. And from there, to measure up to the task of inventive self-assertion, one "must strip down through layers of attenuated meanings." Here, Spillers provides an inventory: "Peaches," "Brown Sugar," "Sapphire," "Earth Mother," "Aunty," "Granny," "God's 'Holy Fool,'" "Miss Ebony First," and "Black Woman at the Podium." There are the given functions in the forest of symbols that meet the perceived needs of the popular imagination, but the one thing needful in the scene she describes, the witness of the black female artist, will defy these caricatures: "I describe a locus of confounded identities, a meeting ground of investments and privations in the national treasury of rhetorical wealth. My country needs me, and if I were not here, I would have to be invented."[49]

This assertion of a *have-to*, the lifting of a voice required by a human commitment to lively thriving and the possibility of communion, cracks the pavement of the pre-conceived, refusing the assigned roles symbolically set before it and denying the concepts that resist the poetic thinking that insists *this* has to do with *that*, what I take to be the symbol-making task. This is the sacramental poetics of fresh iterations. When it comes to naming sacramental poetics as the creative labor that overcomes every conceivable boundariey (political, religious, economic, or entertainment interests, for instance), the best break-down I know of comes from the discussion of the poets Juliana Spahr and Joshua Clover concerning what they call "The 95¢ Skool." Their proposal consists of people regularly sitting at a table, discussing and devising poetry, and, lest their community take a turn for the overly highfalutin, snobby, or inaccessible, it is agreed that operating costs, per person, shall not exceed 95¢. Most importantly, the moving target, the alleged content, and the animating concern of their poetic community is a world without borders. The community's object of study, its abiding interest, is any and everything all of the time. Their poetic practice is a mode of endless engagement committed to redemptive problematizing at every turn:

> Say poetry is understood as a specific mode of engaging the same set of problems that everything else means to engage. And the desire of poetry is not to represent the world

[49] Spillers, "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book" *Black, White, and in Color*, 203.

> but to change it and be changed by it; to be adequate to its time, of its time, part of the constellation. Say poetry is understood as being a way of grasping things that otherwise would escape, or grasping things in a way that understands them otherwise: a kind of counter-cognition.

A counter-cognition adequate to its time is what I take to be the task of sacramental poetics defined. What is more, the project of the 95¢ Skool is "neither poetry or context but the potential relation of the two. This is the work of work. We take this to be fundamental of workshop: no separation of poetry as an independent or personal activity…We elect Heraclitus over Parmenides, political economy over money, sewing over sewn. We take all of this to be not utopian but the beginning of realism."[50]

As I read Spahr and Clover, their proposed program entails the popular resistance and innovation that, instead of merely representing the world, hopes to somehow contribute to its transformation. Their concern is the pursuit of the possibility of a discourse that redeems and makes new; not a departure *from* reality, but a deeper engagement *within* it. This is what they deem "the work of work," a communal effort that hopes to be meaningfully reality-based, and it allows for no strict separations between the personal, the political, the poetic, or the ostensibly religious. As is the case with this poetics I call sacramental, it refuses every dualism set before it. Relation is all.

Seeing the Form

In my discussion concerning the witness of sacramental poetics, the phrase "Insert soul here" is intended to serve a wide variety of purposes. At the outset, it is a word of admonition concerning the offerings of commercial culture as strategic, *habit-forming* calls to worshipfulness. In this vein, it might prove helpful to inscribe the words "INSERT SOUL HERE" somewhere on or near our computer screens, televisions, and iPhones or to at least keep them somehow in mind when we listen to political commentators tell us what's what and where precisely we'd do well to

[50] Juliana Spahr and Joshua Clover, "The 95¢ Skool" in *Poets on Teaching: A Sourcebook*. Ed. Joshua Marie Wilkinson, (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2010), 185-186.

direct our rage to better ascertain the religious appeals being made. But I also offer the words more positively to indicate the summons to investment entailed in the sacramental poetic works, whether literary or in the direction of civil disobedience, my study considers. “Insert *soul* here” I take to be the operative, implicit invitation in the address of Ellison’s *Invisible Man*, for instance, and a given in the strain of poetic concern I trace as present in the program of 95¢ Skool, a spirit whose looks are everywhere, everywhere better and more redeeming efforts to exhibit reality to ourselves and others are performed.

But whether deployed negatively or positively, the call to “Insert soul here” is a direction to know—or to know that we *already* know intimately—the kind of dreams, those consensual fictions, in which the conned man and his like are immersed. In this sense, sacramental poetics doesn’t simply represent *what* we see but strives as well to *make* us see, to see the forms that bind us as well as the new, poetic forms that invite us to see our worlds and our place within them differently. As Audre Lorde reminds us, this is the everyday expression that gives voice to the otherwise inarticulated idea or feeling, the creative labor we honor with the name of poetry: “This is poetry as illumination, for it is through poetry that we give name to those ideas which are—until the poem—nameless and formless, about to be birthed, but already felt.”[51] By performing this illuminating, light-bringing function, sacramental poetics already achieves the work of apocalyptic (Gk. apokálypsis, unveiling or revelation). This is the reworking of experience under and with the light of critical consciousness. Lorde is especially helpful: “I speak here of poetry as a revelatory distillation of experience, not the sterile word play that, too often, the white fathers distorted the word *poetry* to mean—in order to cover a desperate wish for imagination without insight.”

Without poetry, in Lorde’s sense, status quo imaginative forms remain devoid of insight, conveniently and deliberately so for the dominating forces of vested interests who thrive and depend on namelessness. But for Lorde, the poetic is the vital avenue for the insertion of soul, specifically the souls of women:

> For women then, poetry is not a luxury. It is a vital necessity of our existence. It forms the quality of the light within which we predicate our hopes and dreams toward survival and

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[51] Audre Lorde, “Poetry Is Not a Luxury” in *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches*, (Trumansburg: The Crossing Press, 1984), 36.

> change, first made into language, then into idea, then into more tangible action. Poetry is the way we help give name to the nameless so it can be thought. The harvest horizons of our hopes and fears are cobbled by our poems. Carved from the rock experiences of our daily lives.[52]

Here Lorde places poetry, which my discussion terms sacramental poetics, squarely within the complex space I refer to as the religious situation, our given space of meaning-making *and* the emerging spaces we have yet to spy, our illusions *and* our redemptive wrestling with and beyond them, false *and* critical, redeeming consciousness. As Lorde has it, "Poetry is not only a dream and vision; it is the skeleton architecture of our lives. It lays the foundations for a future of change, a bridge across our fears of what has never been before."

And we do well to expect, Lorde's account of this critical-poetic inheritance is irretrievably political, a deepening of the possibilities of human identity, differently deploying them after her own image:

> The white fathers told us: I think therefore I am. The Black mother within each of us—the poet—whispers in our dreams: I feel therefore I can be free. Poetry coins the language to express and charter this revolutionary demand, the implementation of that freedom.[53]

For my purposes, Lorde's account highlights the social character of poetry and, more specifically, the notion of sacramental poetics as the activity that seeks to change current of discourse into more revolutionary currencies, dislocating present imaginings into awareness, an attempt to view ourselves and others properly, more holily and wholly.

Its work begins when the available means of alleged communication seem to overwhelm the possibility of communion. These are the conditions in aid of which the artistry of sacramental poetics is called upon. I have in mind what Durs Grünbein refers to as "poetic thinking." This is poetics as the available and vital way, as Lourde puts it, to be most meaningfully opposed to death-dealingly reductive word play. It is the practice that orchestrates the disclosure of insight and, by doing so, calls present understandings and allegiances into question. Grünbein describes the everyday practice of re-envisioning of the reigning discursive imaginings this way:

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[52] Ibid. 37.
[53] Ibid. 38.

> Imagine a thinking that could penetrate into certain otherwise hard-to-reach places, like dental floss between the wisdom teeth or an endoscope into the stomach. It will make certain places visible for the very first time—individual branches of the otherwise intractable psychic cave system that runs through the bodies of all humans and can be discovered only by a resourceful imagination audaciously pushing forward into still unsecured galleries. This thinking is poetic thinking, and it is not the exclusive domain of poets and literati; rather, it is a method used by many small search parties that have started out from several directions unbeknownst to one another, an army of phenomenologists working on expanding the confines of our shared imaginaries.[54]

Grünbein's account of the communal work of mutual evocation, that which expands the confines of our shared imaginaries, moves across disciplines, professions, and vocations to name every particular instance of an audacious, resourceful imagination taking up of the work of redeeming analysis and social consciousness, every forming of a search party no matter how small, anywhere two or more are gathered for the purpose of being attentive to reality together. These are the occasions that mark the giving and receiving of artful witness that Hugh Kenner calls "feats of attentiveness," and we can note that they are never without a certain investigative heft. "A work of art is someone's act of attention, evoking ours" Kenner tells us.[55] And forms of attentiveness, deployed throughout history and even now, are legion. These sacramental poetic forms themselves evoke our attention, our response, and our continued cultivating witness.

Although he limits himself to the genre of the novel and is perhaps too myopically beholden to Lorde's "white fathers" to see that what he's describing is only an innovation to the self-described modern, T.S. Eliot appears to have a bead on the self-conscious myth-crafting of sacramental poetic forms when he praises James Joyce's "mythical method" in *Ulysses*. To assert, as Eliot does, that Joyce *uses* myth is to miss the insight I've sought to convey concerning all discourse as inescapably mythical (or relentlessly narratival), but this early appreciation of Joyce's witness illuminates my sketch of sacramental poetics:

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[54] Durs Grünbein, "The Poem and Its Secret" trans. Andrew Shields in *The Bars of Atlantis: Selected Essays*, (New York: Farrar, Strauss, and Giroux, 2010), 90-91.

[55] Hugh Kenner, *The Pound Era* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1971), 53.

> Mr. Joyce's parallel use of the Odyssey has a great importance. It has the importance of a scientific discovery. No one else has built a novel on such a foundation before: it has never before been necessary...In using the myth, in manipulating a continuous parallel between contemporaneity and antiquity, Mr. Joyce is pursuing a method which others must pursue after him...It is simply a way of controlling, of ordering, of giving a shape and a significance to the immense panorama of futility and anarchy which is contemporary history. It is a method already adumbrated by Mr. Yeats, and of the need for which I believe Mr. Yeats to have been the first contemporary to be conscious. It is a method for which the horoscope is auspicious...We may now use the mythical method. It is, I seriously believe, a step toward making the modern world possible for art.[56]

If we consider the ethical and explanatory power of folk tales, parables, ballads, and blues or the patchwork assembling of foraged wisdom and the *necessarily* mythic quality of prophetic iteration at work in all manner of sacred texts, we can add that the "mythical method" Eliot names here is a tactic in lively operation long before it was so named. The forward step he celebrates as an innovation is a movement that includes, first of all, many a *backward* step which brings back with it more ancient broadcasts, a redeployment of Homer's song and dance, we might say, to print technology. Nevertheless, the attempted giving of shape and significance to an otherwise formless futility and anarchy he espies is an apt way of characterizing the sacramental poetics my study explores, that creative labor of which I take Joyce to be an exemplary practitioner. We now turn to Joyce's lyrical witness which self-consciously traditions its way within, beyond, and, in an important sense, *on behalf of* the unfathomable density of the traditions that formed him.

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[56] T.S. Eliot, "Ulysses, Order, and Myth" in *Selected Prose of T.S. Eliot*, ed.Frank Kermode, (San Diego: Harcourt Brace & Company, 1975), 177-178.

CHAPTER II

LANGUAGE IS NEVER OWNED

"Her old thoughts were going to come in handy now, but new words would have to be made and said to fit them."[57]

Zora Neale Hurston

"What love has begun, humor has the power to continue."[58]

Aimé Césaire

"What I claim is to live to the full contradiction of my time, which may well make sarcasm the condition of truth."[59]

Roland Barthes

Story and Song

The artist Carl Andre once observed that while "Culture is something that is done to us. Art is something we do to culture."[60] And it is in this mode of art as a task undertaken amid the immersive cultural formations that bind and at least occasionally free--Read religions--that we might best discern and receive the creative witness of James Joyce. Moving between the work of disassembling and re-assembling available symbols in words and images with leaps of faithfulness from one form to another, Joyce's lyrical labors can only be rightly deemed *anti*-religious if the sites of his imaginative resistance--

Roman Catholicism, British imperialism, and Irish nationalism, for instance--are the only games in town, liturgical practices somehow easily isolatable from one another. But Joyce had a more

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[57] Zora Neale Hurston, *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, (New York: Perennial Classics, 1998), 31.

[58] Aimé Césaire, "Poetry and Knowledge" in *Lyric and Dramatic Poetry: 1946-1982*. trans. Clayton Eshleman and Annette Smith, (Charlottesville, University Press of Virginia, 1990), l.

[59] Roland Barthes, *Mythologies*. trans. Annette Lavers, (New York: Hill and Wang, 1972), 12.

[60] Quoted in Lewis Hyde, *Trickster Makes This World: Mischief, Myth, and Art*, (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1998), 307.

complex understanding of the function and the not-yet-anticipated possibilities of liturgy and a grasp of language; too complex, in fact, to ever view a strictly *anti*-liturgical stance as desirable or even possible. Any one liturgy is helplessly—not to say *hope*lessly--interwoven with another. What *is* possible is the creation—or perhaps, more appropriately, the cobbling together, the conglomewriting[61]—of counter-liturgies. Having at it with his own purposes in mind, Joyce could tell reality differently in the hope of awakening his readers with experiments in "benefiction,"[62] a blessing of renewed awareness to the sweet old world we're in. Liturgy, the creative, symbol-making work of the people, is the way we get enthralled and disenthralled, abused and disabused; the socially wrought ways of putting things we lose, gain, and constantly redeploy. The work that is liturgy is a work of meaning-management we're never entirely done with. Whether knowingly mythic, defensively optimistic, redemptively comedic, or a carefully calibrated form of realpolitick, our liturgies are as inescapably social and unavoidable as dreams.

In an articulation of this religious situation that seems to draw Joyce and his student Marshall McLuhan to the table in one fell swoop, Lewis Hyde offers the following description of the meaning-making scene: "Story and song: these are two of the hypnotics by which social orders maintain their self-enchantment, the radio playing all day in laundries and gas stations, a background hum of catchy ballads to keep an agreed-upon reality in place and seemingly alive."[63] Like every form of sacramental poetic, Joyce's offerings aim to stir the pot of whatever "agreed-upon reality" lately and momentarily holds sway, but the pot and its contents, the given and received liturgies of a given locale, are never exactly removable. Religious commitments as currently organized are, in this sense, crucial to the liturgical work to be done. It is what there is to work with, the game you have to be knowingly *in* to win.

As we will see, this is what one of Stephen Dedalus' interlocutors will refer to as supersaturation.[64] Stephen's poetic renunciation of the traditions he knows in their given, *institutionalized* forms can't be undertaken apart from the material of the traditions themselves.

[61] Not a Joycean concoction, if you can believe it. I owe this one to Paul Muldoon.
[62] James Joyce, *Finnegan's Wake*, (Viking Press, New York, 1939) 185.
[63] Hyde, *Trickster Makes This World: Mischief, Myth, and Art*, 218.
[64] Joyce, *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man: Text, Criticism, and Notes*, ed. Chester G. Anderson, (New York: Viking Press, 1968), 240.

Stephen's imagination is as saturated as everyone else but perhaps in a more achingly self-conscious fashion. "You behold in me," he remarks at one point, " a horrible example of free thought."[65] Joyce himself viewed saturation as an apt characterization of any and everyone's thought processes and hoped to transmit this sense within his fiction. In an exchange with a French translator concerning Joyce's preferred avoidance of quotation marks in *Ulysses*, he observed that Stephen's situation should be evident to the reader who "will know early in the book that S.D.'s mind is full like everyone else's of borrowed words."[66] This novel insight of mutual imbrication is self-evidently an unavoidable human condition for the generally agnostic but movingly open-minded Leopold Bloom, a rumored Freemason who was born to a Roman Catholic mother, raised as a Jew by his father, and given a Protestant baptism before converting back to his prenatal Catholicism. Bloom posits the inevitable communism of our imaginings and disavows a too-knowing knowingness concerning ones own thought processes with an aphorism: "Never know whose thoughts you're chewing."[67]

While a creative consciousness completely detached from and independent of warring and institutionalized religious forms does not appear to be a possibility for Joyce, liturgically piecing together a more radically comprehensive and human one is. Joyce will have to create it out of the myriad forms of his own singular, localized, tireless, inimitable faith. He offers a provocative self-assessment in an early letter to Lady Gregory Augusta, playwright and co-founder of the Abbey Theater: "I know that there is no heresy or no philosophy which is so abhorrent to my church as a human being…Though I seem to have been driven out of my country here as a misbeliever I have found no man yet with a faith like mine."[68] His mind, like everyone else's, will often seem like nothing more than a container chockablock full of the bad, death-dealing ideas of others, but it might yet serve—and by force of will *will* serve—as the poetic fund of legend, lore, and image for an unmanacled imagination.

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[65] Joyce, *Ulysses* (New York: Vintage Books, 1961), 20.
[66] Joyce, *Letters of James Joyce*, ed. Stuart Gilbert, (New York: Viking Press, 1957), 263.
[67] Joyce, *Ulysses*, 171.
[68] Joyce, *Letters,* 53.

The most oft-cited characterization of this posture occurs in *Ulysses* when Stephen, having listened to the appeals to God, empire, and hard work made by his dim-witted, schoolmaster employer Garrett Deasy in his office, casually asserts that history is a nightmare from which he is currently trying to awake. The statement evokes a paradigmatic sensibility that runs throughout the novel, a sensibility the reader will have to adopt as the necessary mindset for receiving the various witnesses Joyce means to channel, house, and unleash for our approval. *Ulysses* itself gives voice to the bardic impulse, to worlds going on underground, to older forms of knowingness than the mercenarily knowing airs of Mr. Deasy can know or understand. “The ways of the Creator are not our ways, Mr Deasy said. All history moves toward one great goal, the manifestation of God.”

“That is God.” Stephen posits, gesturing to the sound of “Hooray! Ay Whrrwhee!” impinging upon the window from outside, “A shout in the street.”[69] The sacred will have to be firmly and democratically situated in the quotidian, by Stephen’s lights, not dictated by Deasy’s declarations of responsibility and claims to realism, civilization, and organization. “Those big words,” Stephen calls them, “which make us so unhappy.”[70]

What seems to be at stake in their exchange is the possibility of signification. Who gets to signify? Will Stephen’s attempt at signification be received as significant? Will the words be welcomed even as they defy, mock, and move outside the categories with which the bureaucrat hopes to effectively order the world? *Ulysses* responds to the mess of history with a mobile army of metaphors, a chain of signifiers which, unlike other forms of presumed power, doesn’t claim to *make* anything happen. It will just go on and on as a way of putting it, of happening, of proceeding, of proving almost nothing, in its unacknowledged legislations of reality. The words won’t claim to go beyond words. Freed from the burden (or the burden of the posture) of absolute knowingness, cognitive certainty, or religious orthodoxy, the Joycean mind is determined not to fall for transcendental pretensions or any reification (idolatry) of concepts, and it is perhaps all the more determined to listen for and receive that which eludes category and commodification. All the

[69] Joyce, Ulysses, 34.
[70] Ibid. 31.

more determined to be attentive to the revelatory moment, the everyday apocalypse, the not-yet-acknowledged sacramental which butts up against the despotically reigning norms.

The Possibility of Redemptive Meaning-Making

For Joyce, there is no mere to the *merely* poetic, lyrical, or narratival and no metaphysical bedrock to which popes, priests, presidents, or princes might have access beyond merely linguistic forms. The world as we know it, in this sense, is endlessly narratival, infinitely talkaboutable, and forever awaiting new recastings, the work of counter-liturgies, as it always has. Joyce would have us learn to stop worrying and love the wonder-working power of words. He appropriated this liberating way of understanding the liturgies that bind (his gospel truth of not-quite-so-hard-hitting history as, more or less, the latest in consensual fiction) from the theories of Giambattista Vico which he said should be used "for all they are worth."[71] If we're awash in constructions, the religious situation might be more fluid than we thought. In his call to religiously awaken ourselves to the constructedness of the mind's concretizing conceptions, Vico's account of illuminating fabrication almost seems to parody the idea that the given form of things is divine and therefore forever binding:

> But in the night of thick darkness enveloping the earliest antiquity, so remote from ourselves, there shines the eternal and never failing light of a truth beyond all question: that the world of civil society has certainly been made by men, and that its principles are therefore to be found within the modifications of our own human mind.[72]

Vico insists upon the manufactured quality of our sense of reality—Wittgenstein *avant la lettre*--and, with this in mind, observes the factual givenness of the world-ordering power of words. In Isaiah Berlin's estimation, Vico helps us to see (or remember) that the words we inherit and employ had and have "the force of original acts." This has long been the case. "Agamemnon and Jeptha (who belonged to the age of "the gods") sacrificed their daughters because the very

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[71] Joyce, *Letters*, 241.

[72] Giambattista Vico, *The New Science of Giambattista Vico. Rev. translation of the 3d ed. (1774),* ed. Thomas Goddard Bergin and Max Harold Fisch, (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1968). 96.

action of uttering the oaths had the force of natural causality, and the words directly altered (and were recognized as acts which could not but alter) the status quo simply in virtue of having been spoken." By Berlin's lights, Vico was "the first to grasp the seminal and revolutionary truth that linguistic forms are one of the keys to the minds of those who use words, and indeed to the entire mental, social and cultural life of societies."[73] For the Joycean mind, this will render the cold, hard facts of nightmare history a little less cold and a little less hard. A literary/liturgical awakening might yet turn the whole thing around over time. The lyrical will go on having its say, a very different say, needless to say; a saying witness that will forge a better, more redeeming consciousness than those histories that crown themselves realistic and "official" and do collateral damage among the living, those histories that believe themselves to be, with the power and pride of the Garret Deasys of the world, a mission accomplished.

According to Stuart Hampshire, "Joyce turned back across 200 years to Vico, in his own *ricorso*, for a new humanism independent of social history" in which "the universal family of man is constituted by language and not by social structures" and the mass of humanity is "reconstituted, not through controlled and fact-respecting history, but through a wild, far-ranging, and imaginative philology" whereby "fiction is rolled back to its prehistorical beginnings and prose to rituals of barbarism and to incantation, jingle, and pun." The organic bonds between word, image, and reality as we see it are to be revered as, for better or worse, the liturgical forms on offer, the binding or freeing artifice in the air. If we're attentive to them, there might be an epiphany around every corner, one apocalypse after another awaiting a witnessing recognition and a redemptive redeployment. Stephen, as we've seen, and Bloom less self-consciously, could hear one developing just outside any and every window. "In Joyce coincidences in language are to be treated like natural portents."[74]

In Joyce's world, the lyrics, phrases, puns that populate our mental atmosphere "carry condensed messages to be slowly, speculatively unraveled." The unraveling and re-raveling of

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[73] Isaiah Berlin, *Vico and Herder: Two Studies in the History of Ideas*, (London: Hogarth Press, 1976), 51.

[74] Stuart Hampshire, "Joyce and Vico: The Middle Way" in *Giambattista Vico's Science of Humanity*, eds. Giorgio Tagliacozzo and Donald Phillip Verene, (Baltimore Johns Hopkins Press, 1976),

received liturgies is crucial to the possibility of awakening, of making meanings that redeem. In this sense, *Ulysses* aspires to function as an exemplary conduit to an international, inter-generational, radically ecumenical arsenal of word and image from which we draw…"spiritual capital…whether in mandarin writing or in the crude patter and songs of streets and pubs." [75] It's own liturgical formulation could even occasion the kind of unity that might yet and even now rise above nightmare history, a common humanity, a common sense, a public commons that is more knowingly "the universal basis of human culture."[76] According to Joyce's strange, misbelieving faith, the spiritual capital is there already, shouting in the streets, with or without longish books and published poetry. It doesn't depend upon our assent, our theorizing, or our witness. It's going public anyway for anyone with an ear to hear and an eye to see. But how might one meaningfully witness to it, this fire-hose full of the epiphanic blasting every which way?

"Why don't you play them as I do?" asks stately Buck Mulligan in his ongoing back and forth with Stephen on the subject of life and how to live it.[77] He's referring to the exploiting, enculturating British, but Mulligan's question highlights the distinction between Mulligan's detached and frivolous way with people and things and Stephen's resistance to this way of responding to the peopled world. At the beginning of the novel, Stephen is gradually making his way from an enchanted sense of things to a discernment of somebodies in the bodies around him. Both sensibilities are crucial to his perceived vocation: "Signatures of all things I am here to read, seaspawn and seawrack, the nearing tide, that rusty boot. Snotgreen, bluesilver, rust: coloured signs. Limits of the diaphane. But he adds: in bodies."[78]

In this turn to a more affectionate attentiveness that pays heed to the seemly and conventionally unseemly without fastidious discrimination, *Ulysses* models the sacramental poetics Stephen is beginning to learn. Contrary to the Mulligan aesthetic, it achieves epiphany not by belittling the British or Dublin urbanites but by rendering them beatific. Their buying and selling, daydreams, erotic fantasizing, their supposed profanities all undergo lyrical affirmation.

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[75] Ibid. 322.
[76] Ibid. 323-324.
[77] Joyce, *Ulysses*, 16.
[78] Ibid. 37.

This way of affirmation, this habitual magnanimity, comes more easily to Leopold Bloom who Stephen will figuratively receive as father and mentor, but for Joyce, it comes in the most exemplary fashion--most naturally and unself-consciously--to Molly.

Hurry Up and Matter!

To do the work of sacramental poetic witness (a work that is never done) will require a renunciation of the self-serious, self-consciousness Stephen feels all too powerfully in Mulligan's presence. He will have to let the pain that frets his heart ("pain, that was not yet the pain of love"[79]) be transformed in the direction of redemptive, other-centered usefulness. He will have to let his tightly-held pride of theory be one guess, one more interpretation, another heartfelt witness among others. The same goes for questions of belief and unbelief. Who can say when one stops and the other starts? Both will perform a creative function in Stephen's poet-priestly functions as he thinks/prays: "I believe, O Lord, help my unbelief. That is, help me to believe or help me to unbelieve?"[80] To worry over it at all whether in mockery, as Mulligan does, or in a forcible denial of ones own ability to put two and two together is to try to "weave the wind,"[81] and to fail to hold ones constructions loosely, a breakdown of the very bardic receptivity upon which his priestly-poetic practice depends. Open-handed, self-empying receptivity will have to somehow trump his all-too-easy knee-jerk judgmentalism if he's to see his situation rightly, if his overly individualized sense of endless injury is to undergo a transformation into love. With the Zen-like calm Leopold Bloom achieves less frantically, Stephen will reach a point in which his mind can "cease to strive" and know that his life doesn't depend upon his own sense of knowing. It is in such moments that he achieves, through renouncing a feverish sense of achievement, the "peace of the Druid priests of Cymbeline."[82] For Joyce, the hierophantic—the showing of the holy--is only accessed through self-effacing hilarity. In this sense, the work of sacramental poetics cannot be envisaged or even meaningfully glimpsed by the proud of heart.

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[79] Ibid. 5.
[80] Ibid. 214. See Mark 9:24.
[81] Ibid. 21.
[82] Ibid. 218

Preceding this moment is the exchange in which Stephen's laughter begins to "free his mind from his mind's bondage."[83] In the library scene of "Scylla and Charybdis," Stephen powerfully feels and simultaneously resents the need to weigh in heavily with his Shakespeare/Hamlet/Fatherhood theory as he's surrounded by professional literary figures upon whom a successful career in letters might depend. He wants to make an impression which can't be dismissed. He feels compelled to hurry up and matter. This bondage, as René Girard would have it, is "the mimetic pressure"[84] that makes *the world*, in the worst, most reductive sense of the word, go round. But to give in to it, Joyce understands is to give in to the same dire, death-dealing seriousness that makes of history a nightmare. To play at the serious game of mimetic rivalry is to insist that there's more to his big idea than others. It is to play at the self-importance of being earnest. Will Stephen hold his creative witness together by *not* trying to hold it to together? Will he understand his words' worth in the sense that Vico commends? Can he resist the postures of ideology, the last temptation of *un*poetic coherence?

"Jest on. Know thyself,"[85] Stephen thinks or says to himself. And it is of a piece with the disavowal of his own theory (followed incidentally, by the inner, mental assertion that he *does* believe it, at least every so often).[86] If insight and understanding are to flow freely, unwoven and unknotted-up, he mustn't bear the false witness of fixed belief or unbelief. Belief comes and goes, and it can't be worn as a credential. It's the deeply human fact-of-the-matter whether we know we're only seeing through a glass darkly or not. The jest is the ultimate hermeneutic (Richard Kearney calls Stephen's realization "a send-up of Socratic self-knowledge"). It's how one gets hold (or loses the navel-gazing hold) of oneself, losing your life to find a more lively one. In Stephen's case, it is a turn toward the Vico-informed ethic of the novel: "Not only does Stephen revoke his own theory of triangles supplanted by trinities, but he goes on to confront the radical consequences of this disavowal. First, he undermines the metaphysical model of self-thinking

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[83] Ibid. 212.
[84] René Girard, "Do You Believe Your Own Theory?: French Triangles in the Shakespeare of James Joyce," in *A Theater of Envy*, (South Bend: St. Augustine's Press, 2004), 263.
[85] Joyce, 216.
[86] Ibid. 214.

thought as the ultimate guarantor of truth."[87] He never knows whose thoughts and beliefs he's chewing and he knows it. We note that Joyce himself holds to the same catch-as-catch-can ethic when the question of attribution arises in an exchange with the avant-garde composer, George Antheil. As is the case with whatever we call our own, when it comes to poetic creation out of the materials at hand, we are people ineluctably born of sound, sensation, and image. Self-thinking thought, strictly speaking, is a pretension Joyce is content to abdicate: "I am quite content to go down to posterity as a scissors and paste man for that seems to me a harsh but not unjust description."[88] What lies before the artist are the possibilities of appropriation and depropriation, love and theft. But it is only in seeing, saying, and showing without grasping—without, in harried fashion, calling attention to his showing business--that Stephen or Joyce or anyone might make of the "wide earth an altar."[89]

Every Telling Has a Taling

It is here that Stephen recalls (or prognosticates) Leopold Bloom's proffered wedge of melon, and Leopold Bloom is liturgically accorded the poetic-prophetic powers of Coleridge's Ancient Mariner. The memory comes with its own subtitle "A creamfruit melon he held to me. In. *You will see*."[90] [my italics] With many a page to go this moment offers the trajectory of the novel in apocalyptic nutshell form. As Kearney describes it, "June 16, 1904? One epiphanic time in one epiphanic space? A day in the life of three Dubliners, retrieved, rewritten, and resurrected as literature? Not a triumphal literature of closure to be sure, but a textuality of endless openness to the event of life as serendipity, surprise, accident, grace."[91]

Like the novel itself, the meeting between Stephen and Leopold redemptively unsettles, for both parties, whatever seemed most obvious. Their aliveness to one another will bear witness to a creative intelligence beyond their own given, taken-for-granted stations. Stephen, the artist-

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[87] Richard Kearney, "Traversals and Epiphanies in Joyce and Proust," in *Traversing the Imaginary: Richard Kearney and the Postmodern Challenge*, eds. Peter Gratton and John Panteleimon Manoussakis, (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2007), 190-191.
[88] Joyce, *Letters*, 297.
[89] Joyce, *Ulysses*, 218.
[90] Joyce, *Ulysses*, 217.
[91] Kearney, 196.

as-*young*-man, will be confronted by the unending, makeshift artistry of the elder Bloom's comic and compassionate visions as their interface takes up the witnessing work of the novel, leaving no detail of human existence unsacramentalized. Under Joyce's gaze, experience refuses to divide itself up the way we often feel we need it to, and dominating divisions are defied by the free associations of any and everyone's taking in of their own everyday lives.

It is here that Joyce joins his contemporaries in the Dadaist and emerging Surrealist movements who also sought to bring into more dramatic relief the observable fact of free association--*Look harder, everyone, at your own thought processes*--in the hope that the soul-crushingly bad stories that dictated the brutal behavior of their era would be somehow destabilized and undermined. If we find ourselves to be, as everyone in Joyce's world is, what Spillers terms "a locus of confounded identities,"[92] perhaps we can adopt a creatively opportunistic view toward the words and images that come unbidden to mind and expose and subvert the role playing games of status quo normalcy. The fields of perception—our shared imaginaries—can be expanded. As Hugo Ball observes concerning the redemptive problematizing of reality among the Dadaists, their site of activity is "the questionable nature of art itself, its complete anarchy, its relationship with the public, race, and contemporary culture. It can probably be said that for us art is not an end in itself…but it is an opportunity for true perception and criticism of the times we live in."[93] Religiously attentive to the untapped powers of happenstance, Joyce partakes of, navigates, and alternately casually and painstakingly seeks to map, within one locale, that complex space Moosa calls *dihlīz*, a space anarchic in the sense that no *one* archy can hold *sole* legitimized sway.

Or rather, any voice that hopes to assert itself in the direction of swaying the will of another can only do so as one inescapably *storied* interest among others ("Every telling has a taling and that's the he and the she of it").[94] One image or lyric or symbol is as available and readymade for reworking as another in a space of oscillation where no one interest--whether

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[92] Spillers, "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book" 203.
[93] Hugo Ball, "Romanticism: The Word and the Image" (1916) in *Flight Out of Time: A Dada Diary*. trans. Ann Raimes, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996), 58.
[94] Joyce, *Finnegan's Wake*, 213.

understood to be ethnic, nationalistic, religious, or economic—has definitive hold. Aimé Césaire describes engagement with and by this space as "a process of disalienation," in the case of the surrealist movement. Not as novelty, as in Eliot's championing of the "mythic method," but as a rediscovery, among high moderns, of what lyrical free association--Joyce calls it "myriadmindedness"[95]--never forgot in the first place: "Surrealism provided me with what I had been confusedly searching for. I have accepted it joyfully because in it I have found more of a confirmation than a revelation….It shook up absolutely everything. This was important because the traditional forms—burdensome, overused forms—were crushing me."[96] In sync with surrealism, Joyce hopes to restore long-forgotten solidarities often forcibly denied and, for the not-yet-initiated, perhaps assert them for the first time.

In this channeling of counter-liturgies, Joyce's sacramental poetics seek to subvert every form of unredeeming history personal, religious, political, and international. This is Joyce's political, poetical aesthetic. As Richard Ellman observes, "Joyce's politics and aesthetics were one." [97] The text and the intertextual relations inscribed within his text dutifully call into question the non-Vico-illuminated understanding of competence, success, destiny, progress and every nightmarish meta-discourse such understanding underwrites. Or as Derrida has it in his consideration of Joyce's witness against and among institutionalized and institutionalizing forms of knowing in "Ulysses Gramophone":

> The classical concept of competence supposes that one can rigorously dissociate knowledge (in its act or in its positing) from the event that one is dealing with, and especially from the ambiguity of written or oral marks—let's call them gramophonies. Competence implies that a metadiscourse is possible, neutral and univocal with regard to a field of objectivity, whether or not it possesses the structure of a text. Performances ruled by this competence must in principle lend themselves to a translation with nothing left over on the subject of the corpus that is itself translatable. Above all, they should essentially not be of a narrative type. In principle, one doesn't relate stories in a

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[95] Joyce, *Ulysses*, 205.
[96] Aimé Césaire, "An Interview with Aimé Césaire" by René Depestre in *Discourse on Colonialism*. trans. Joan Pinkham, (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2000), 83-84.
[97] Richard Ellman, *The Consciousness of Joyce*, (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1977), 90.

university; one does history, one recounts in order to know and to explain; one speaks about narrations or epic poems, but events and stories must not be produced in the name of institutionalizable knowledge.[98]

Derrida's concern here, it seems to me, is the same worry that haunts Stephen concerning life laid down at the altar of the ideological ("I fear those big words, Stephen said, which make us so unhappy"), the reified verbal, the words that presume they're really getting down to business in their presumed, bottom-line, more-realistic-than-thou definitiveness. It also resonates with Bloom's casual observation concerning the tactlessness of proprietary claims, a distaste for which informs his ruminations over how to respond to the "historical fact" of adultery even then, he imagines, yet-again-in-the-making between Molly and Blazes Boylan. In what sense is she *his* to have and to hold? Can people be rightly gotten hold of? Can we claim competence in the speech acts with which we hope to order or rearrange the flux, managing the meaning of others? Bloom's ruminations remind the reader that it doesn't work that way with life and other words. These thoughts interface with Bloom's contemplation of the Liffey: "How can you own water really? It's always flowing in a stream, never the same, which in the stream of life we trace. Because life is a stream."[99] The event of life is moving, under our noses, within our minds, just outside the window, in the street, and in the schoolyard. Alive to the flow and against all-too-solid sound of institutionalizing claims, Joyce challenges his audience to look harder at—and stop denying--their own motion sickness, to see, hear, and discover their lives and their language to be unstable and not at all unitary. In this way, *Ulysses* portrays what power-brokers and alleged policy-makers carefully commenting upon popular grassroots challenges to autocratic regimes in Northern Africa might call a *fluid* situation. As Joyce shows us, our situations are *always* fluid. And if we bring his witness to bear upon our interpretation of any and all perceived *facts on the ground* as we study the situation, we're prone to see more in the way of liturgical possibilities. What is a policy, after all, except liturgy writ large?

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[98] Jacques Derrida, "Ulysses Gramophone," in *Acts of Literature*, ed. Derek Attridge (New York: Routledge, 1992), 282.
[99] Joyce, 153.

Literature, the Press, the Turf, the Gentle Art of Advertisement

Within this sacramental poetic sensibility, there are ample possibilities for story, song, analogy, and sketch, but there is no getting hold of life, no shrink-wrapping of reality even in words. Emmanuel Levinas is especially evocative here: "Language refers to the positions of the listener and the speaker, that is to the contingency of their story. To seize by inventory all the contexts of language and all possible positions of interlocutors is a senseless task. Every verbal signification lies at the confluence of countless semantic rivers."[100] One can imagine universal inventories of word and image, in the vein of Borges, for instance, and it can make for evocative fiction. But there is no successful seizure, no means to liturgical mastery on offer, just more words work and making (or trying to make) words work well. No professionals, exactly, in such big words as religion, history, language and literature. But *just* witness (or more just than not, witness that *does* justice) might be possible by way of *non*-mastery (a method of non-mastery which Derrida appears determined to keep outside or at least on the margins of officialdom). If all history is fabled history and history that believes itself to be somehow *above* confabulation proves itself deadly again and again, how do we give meaningful accounts? How might speech acts be undertaken well? How might we do good things with words?

With *Ulysses*, Derrida believes Joyce expands the space of literature, the space of the talkaboutable which, by its performative witness interrogates the bad language (whether termed religious, political, or economic) of the *done deal*, the totalizing characterization, those words that make us so unhappy. Literature, in this sense, carries its authority unauthoritatively, open-handedly, defying the boundaries of the institutionally fixed. Literature itself is, according to Derrida, "this strange contradiction, this institutionless institution."[101] For my purposes, literature is, in this sense, one manifestation of the reordering witness of sacramental poetics.

"I want you to write something for me," Myles Crawford, editor of the Freeman's Journal, tells Stephen as he places a nervous hand on his shoulder. "Something with a bite in it…You can

[100] Emmanuel Levinas, *Humanism of the Other.* trans. Nidra Poller, (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2003), 11.
[101] Derrida, "This Strange Institution Called Literature: An Interview with Jacques Derrida," in *Acts of Literature,* 42.

do it. I see it in your face...All balls! Bulldozing the public!" While what Crawford seems to have mostly in mind here appear to be in some sense mere mercantile concerns ("He wants you for the pressgang," J.J. O'Molloy explains), the phrases and headlines thtat Joyce places on the pages featuring this exchange tell a larger story, anticipating a space involving liturgical broadcasts and the administration of evangelion as well as one of Bloom's constant preoccupations, the discernment of possibilities for advertising space: "Literature, the press…the turf…OMNIUM GATHERUM…The gentle art of advertisement…We'll paralyze Europe." These associations come to Stephen (and to the reader) as something akin to an accidental assigning of a priestly vocation with Crawford imposing the laying on of hands as he fixes upon him a "bold unheeding stare." In some sense conjuring the space, the work, the feat of attentiveness we have in *Ulysses*, Crawford instructs him to compose a work of mass mediation bursting with cosmic proportions of bold catholicity: "*Put us all into it*, damn its soul. Father Son and Holy Ghost and Jake M'Carthy."[102] [my italics]

But Stephen's vocation will not be more fully discerned until Bloom gets through to him. Interestingly, the telephone whirrs during this scene of recognition, and it's Bloom on the line. Crawford doesn't get the picture: "Tell him to go to hell."[103] The summons to imaginative sympathy, so robustly exemplified in Bloom, will have to wait a few hours. The reader will note that this isn't the first of many reminders, peppered throughout the novel, that Elijah ("a new apostle to the gentiles"[104]) is calling.

What Bloom, "the famous Bloom…the world's greatest reformer,"[105] "the Messiah ben Joseph or ben David,"[106] will bring to bear upon Stephen's imagination and, in a larger sense, the witness that is the novel is an ear for sacramental poetics, a redemptive and redeeming imagery of not-to-be-mastered confluences. To the extent that religion, as understood by Stephen, has been a debilitatingly binding influence not only within his own mind but as a corrupting presence in the life of his family and community, the question of belief (to serve or not to serve) has been

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[102] Joyce, 135.
[103] Ibid. 137.
[104] Ibid. 333.
[105] Ibid. 481.
[106] Ibid. 495.

ineluctably tied to Roman Catholic Church. Even his rebellion is articulated in the borrowed language of faith. What was observed in *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* remains the case: “It is a curious thing, do you know, Cranly said dispassionately, how your mind is supersaturated with the religion in which you say you disbelieve.”[107]

Bloom’s mind is certainly supersaturated as well, but the question of what he believes never arises. Whatever it is he believes, he might say, is what he does. He entertains certain notions and finds them deeply entertaining. He wonders over the pain of childbirth and imagines what it might be like if everyone changed places (“If we were all suddenly somebody else”).[108] He tries to live justly and walk humbly, attentive to the more open-ended, incoming transmission of the epiphanies of the everyday (“Wireless intercontinental and interplanetary transmitters are set for reception of message”[109]). He speculates and questions the world unfurling before him and loves mercy without crediting the notion that some fervent credo, other than having a go at loving people, is required of him. Like Stephen, he rebels against the idea of a divinely ordained church (or nation) that wields the power to damage and destroy without the will to save or redeem, but the given liturgies, popular deemed religious or otherwise, is entirely up for grabs (as it always was). It can and does bind, but it can also loose. It can be made to loose.

Bloom certainly registers Stephen’s resistance to the liturgies that anesthetize and delude the popular imagination into submission, but he has sympathy for the theatrics that give joy without doing any discernible harm. Upon observing a priest performing the eucharist, he thinks, “Look at them. Now I bet it makes them feel happy. Lollipop. It does…There’s a big idea behind it, kind of kingdom of God is within you feel. Then feel like one family party, same in the theatre, all in the same swim. They do. I’m sure of that. Not so lonely.”[110] To the extent that any liturgy occasions a means of honoring, of exercising due reverence to, relationships between people, that liturgy is just alright with Bloom.

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[107] James Joyce, *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man: Text, Criticism, and Notes*, 240.
[108] Joyce, *Ulysses*, 110.
[109] Ibid. 483.
[110] Ibid. 81.

Bloom's assessment of the scene is informed by--but not limited to—his skills as an advertising salesman. He takes the measure of the artifice on offer, weighing out its effectiveness in the work of behavioral instruction, but he also feels approval for that which lifts human spirits, according them dignity instead of degrading them, and form of humane and human commitment. And here, he serves as a model participant within what Richard Rorty envisions as "a poeticized culture," one that deems the artifice of a tradition—and in this sense any tradition in itself--as one more vocabulary, one more way of describing things" among others. This is no scandal for Bloom at all, in fact it's an irretrievable given that

> Tradition turns out to be a painted backdrop, one more work of man, one more bit of cultural stage-setting. A poeticized culture would be one which would not insist we find the real wall behind the painted ones, the real touchstones of truth as opposed to touchstones which are merely cultural artifacts. It would be a culture which, precisely by appreciating that *all* touchstones are such artifacts, would take as its goal the creation of ever more various and multicolored artifacts.[111]

As Joyce's exemplary practitioner of creative attentiveness, Bloom revels in the contingency of every binding or freeing liturgy and daydreams of ways they might be better and more humanely arranged. If the ritual theaters of empire, commercial enterprise, or Roman Catholic tradition seem to have left any fellow citizens worse for having worn them, he hopes they might survive their degradation long enough to try them on differently or create new ones out of the old. Either way, the liturgical artifacts on offer can be made to resonate in a fashion that makes (or might make) all things new. Paying critical and even affectionate heed to them as meaning-making forms restores unto language its community-forming powers, summoning the hearer, Rorty hopes, toward better economies of meaning. For Joyce, it's these economies, the better and the worse ones, that are liberatingly and hilariously up for grabs. "I have discovered I can do anything with language I want," he once remarked to Beckett.[112] And lest we confuse this

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[111] Richard Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 53-54.
[112] Richard Ellman, *James Joyce*, New and Revised Edition, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1982), 702.

for just one more arrogant assertion of his genius, we might think again of Bloom ("How can you own water really?") and Joyce's self-assessment as an artist as one whose primary genius consists in his proficiency at cutting and pasting.

The Word Is Always Half Someone Else's

"Poetry is never a personal possession," Susan Howe insists. "The poem was a vision and gesture before it became sign and coded exchange in a political economy of value."[113] Never knowing whose thoughts he's thinking exactly, Bloom employs poeticizing means with unself-consciousness of free association all day long. "Peace and war depend on some fellow's digestion. Religions. Christmas turkeys and geese. Slaughter of Innocents. Eat, drink, and be merry,"[114] thinks Bloom to himself, and, as is the case with most of his noteworthy phrasemaking, he doesn't make a note of it. This thought comes to him on the heels of a Hobbesian vision of human nature red in tooth and claw ("Every fellow for his own, tooth and nail. Gulp. Grub. Gulp. Gobstuff…Eat or be eaten. Kill! Kill!") followed by a quick consideration of the practical implications of a house of hospitality facility in Dublin which provides food for all comers all day ("Suppose that communal kitchen years to come perhaps. All trotting down with porringers and tommycans to be filled. Devour contents in the street…Then who'd wash up all the plates and forks?").[115] Like Stephen he considers those big, unhappy-making words like peace, war, God, and religion, but he doesn't fear them. He collates, contemplates and redeploys them within a bardic economy. And to his everlasting credit, Bloom does as much without letting his right hand know what his left hand is doing ("Plenty to hear and see and feel yet").[116] What Stephen agonizes over, Bloom humorously and imaginatively manages, in word *and* in deed, without giving his liturgical practices much self-conscious thought. As I understand the situation, it is Bloom's effortless poetics that Stephen will learn to emulate and which Joyce champions in this, his recasting of the epic heroic.

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[113] Susan Howe, *The Birth-mark: Unsettling the Wilderness in American Literary History*, (Hanover: University Press of New England, 1993), 147.
[114] Joyce, *Ulysses*, 172.
[115] Ibid. 170-171.
[116] Ibid. 115.

And in this way, the unprecedented candor of description of Joyce's sacramental poetic witness, especially in the "Circe" episode of *Ulysses*, is inseparable from the posture of non-judgment (Bloom holds unwaveringly to "the *sacred* benefit of doubt"[117] my italics) and the generosity of spirit Bloom brings to his reception of the world: "My beloved subjects, a new era is about to dawn. I, Bloom, tell you verily it is even now at hand. Yea, on the word of a Bloom, ye shall ere long enter into the golden city which is to be, the new Bloomusalem in the Nova Hibernia of the future."[118] To my mind, this is Joyce's exaltation of the force that drives the flower, the mode of non-coercion, of letting be, and the bracing spirit of delayed judgment, an eye and an ear for *trans*partisan interests, that make life, peace, and social innovation possible. Gilles Deleuze characterizes the posture this way:

> Judgment prevents the emergence of any new mode of existence…Herein, perhaps lies the secret: to bring into existence and not to judge. If it is so disgusting to judge, it is not because everything is of equal value, but on the contrary because what has value can be made or distinguished only by defying judgment.[119]

Against the totalizing impulses of isolated, warring parties who view the public commons of creation as a zero sum game of winner-take-all, Bloom issues a call for a more revolutionary and radical reformation: "I stand for the reform of municipal morals and the plain ten commandments. New worlds for old. Union of all, jew, moslem and gentile. Three acres and a cow for all children of nature. Saloon motor hearses. Compulsory manual labour for all. All parks open to the public day and night. Electric dishscrubbers." This is Joyce/Bloom's liturgical re-rendering of "Let him who is thirsty come" (Revelation 22:17), an infinite hospitality ("You call it a festivity. I call it sacrament.") without borders:

> Tuberculosis, lunacy, war and mendicancy must now cease. General amnesty, weekly carnival, with masked licence, bonuses for all, esperanto the universal brotherhood. No

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[117] Ibid. 465.
[118] Ibid. 484.
[119] Gilles Deleuze, "To Have Done With Judgment," in *Essays Critical and Clinical*, trans. Daniel W. Smith and Michael A. Greco, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), 135.

more patriotism of barspongers and dropsical impostors. Free money, free love and a free lay church in a free lay state.

One Father Farley on the phantasmic scene offers an assessment of this Bloomian evangelion: "He is an Episcopalian, an agnostic, an anythingarian seeking to overthrow our holy faith." [120] But we know him to be anything but an anythingarian. The cigar-wielding Bloom of an earlier, non-phantasmic scene in the "Cyclops" episode has given us a similar stand-off in his positing of bar-room, prophetic: "Force, hatred, history, all that. That's not life for men and women, insult and hatred. And everybody knows that it's the very opposite of that that is really life…Love, says Bloom. I mean the opposite of hatred." It is with this assertion that Bloom is mockingly decreed by his hearers a "new apostle to the gentiles."[121] It appears that Joyce would assert, uninstitutionally speaking, that he is exactly that and more. Or as Bloom observes to Bella Cohen concerning his function as a bearer of earnest and necessarily comedic good news: "I am exhausted, abandoned and no more young. I stand, so to speak, with an unposted letter bearing the extra regulation fee before the too late box of the general post office of human life."[122]

Bloom's daydreamt determination to counter the dehumanizing, dividing-up powers of Dublin's everyday hegemonies, whether leveled in the name of commercial, political, or ecclesial interests, resonates with Michel de Certeau's observation concerning the not-to-mastered, pre-Enlightenment datum of polyphonic discourse among human beings: "Pluralism, before becoming at Vatican II a doctrine or a programme, was a fact."[123] Within *Ulysses*, not only are proprietary claims in a forest of symbols that knows no borders unseemly and unfitting, but its summons to lively consciousness concerning the scandalous relationality of all things is such that, by Joyce's lights there's simply no such thing as a strictly foreign influence. Bloom's homeland is his hat. And in his case, the fact of pluralism is cause for celebratory mindfulness and humanizing solidarity. Here again, Joyce's poetic cause addresses Rorty's hopes:

[120] Joyce, 489-490.
[121] Ibid. 333.
[122] Ibid. 528.
[123] Michel de Certeau, "Is There a Language of Unity?" in *Dogma and Pluralism*. Ed. Edward Schillebeeckx, (New York: Herder and Herder, 1970), 79.

> Human solidarity…is to be achieved not by inquiry but by imagination, the imaginative ability to see strange people as fellow sufferers. Solidarity is not discovered by reflection but created. It is created by increasing our sensitivity to the particular details of the pain and humiliation of other, unfamiliar sorts of people. Such increased sensitivity makes it more difficult to marginalize people different from ourselves by thinking "They do not feel it as we would," or "There must always be suffering, so why not let them suffer?"[124]

In its liturgical function, *Ulysses* issues an invitation to imaginative magnanimity, to see ourselves in strangers, to see ourselves within them instead of holding them at a critical, self-protective distance. "Perhaps there is someone," thinks Stephen to himself having just placed a bit of dried snot on a rock ledge. He's wondering if someone might possibly discover what he's left there ("Let look who will").[125] As Declan Kiberd reads it, this dim registering of the possibility of the existence of other people making their way across his presumed threshold (recall Moosa's *dihlīz*) signals "the beginning of wisdom" within the text. For all his intellectual powers and self-justifying eloquence, it is in this saving instance that "Stephen starts to open a relationship with the world."[126]

This developing receptivity prepares him for that happenstance encounter with Bloom where Stephen is confronted by what Certeau speaks of as "the aberrant" which is "the first signal of another world." Out of our tendency to read reality according to our own isolated, illusively autonomous imaginings, the aberrant "stimulates a curiosity eager to escape from [or be relieved of] its own problematic." Reverberating beyond the Bloom/Dedalus interface, I believe Joyce means for *Ulysses* to function as one such manifestation –and a chronicling--of the redeeming instance of the aberrant. In Certeau's account, the delusion of autonomy, by way of the aberrant, begins to give way to an emerging sense of heteronomy, "a wound in rationalism." Paradoxically, heteronomy of the sort Bloom prescribes in his phantasmic proclamations is the stimulus to imagination *and* the very thing that strikes us as inadmissible. Heteronomy bears witness to the

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[124] Rorty, xvi.
[125] Joyce*, Ulysses, 51.*
[126] Declan Kiberd, *Ulysses and Us: The Art of Everyday Living*, (London: Faber and Faber, 2009) 73.

fact of other not-yet-familiar people as it shakes the ground of our lonely certainties.[127] It is in this encounter with the unfamiliar other that we discover that, as Levinas asserts, “heteronomy is somehow stronger than autonomy.”[128]

Stronger, we might add, because no longer bearing the burden of delusional, personal sovereignty be they drawn from Dublin-based resources of individualistic virtue in business, church, Irish nationalism, British empire, or literary fame beyond the emerald isle. Stephen will open up, as Bloom is always already opened up, to the ceaselessly communal, inescapably social flow of myriad-minded language, his own and others never exactly distinguishable. As Bakhtin instructs, “language, for the individual consciousness, lies on the borderline between oneself and the other. The word in language is half someone else’s.”[129] And just as a space is cleared--arranged by authorial stage direction—so that Stephen might recognizes an affinity with Bloom and, as the myriad-minded story goes, lose his sense of self-possession by *becoming* Bloom, *Ulysses* itself aspires to function as a scene of recognition concerning the inescapable contingency of every human identity. The two-become-one are entirely submerged within and dependent upon Molly’s stream of consciousness before it’s done. If every telling has a tale, this one owes its life to her yeses. And humane ordering of human interests, liturgically speaking, always depends on a yes to the stranger without and within. In *Ulysses* (your yeses), Joyce would have the reader look harder at the affirmations that make for life and more life, the boundaries of *yours and mine* and *ours and theirs* that boundary up political-poetic possibilities, and the possibility of a “counter-mythology,”[130] as Spillers puts it, in which heroes and heroines lose their lives to find them, alive again, in one another. Kiberd characterizes the proffered apocalyptic thusly: “Joyce was following Paul of Tarsus in the attempt to imagine a world without foreigners, a world made possible once men and women accept the foreigner within the self and the

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[127] Michel de Certeau, *Heterologies: Discourse on the Other*. trans. Brian Massumi, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986), 177.

[128] Emmanuel Levinas, *Entre Nous*. trans. Michael B. Smith and Barbara Harshav, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998), 111.

[129] M.M. Bakhtin, “Discourse in the Novel” 293.

[130] Spillers, “Interstices: a Small Drama of Words” in *Black, White, and in Color: Essays on American Literature and Culture*, 167.

necessarily fictive nature of all nationalisms."[131] The necessary poeticizing, that creative symbol-making task involved in such showing business, is an imaginative work that Joyce would have his readers never stop doing. As we will see in our next chapter, Joyce's desire to summon his readership toward the political-poetic possibilities of imaginative magnanimity is a concern he shares with W.E.B. Du Bois and Ralph Ellison who understood literary fiction to be nothing less than "the brightest instrument for recording sociological fact, physical action, the nuance of speech, yet achieved."[132]

On Being Able to Say Everything

In this way, sacramental poetics serves to reinstate a sense of heteronomy, the lyrical that precedes the analytical and the deludedly detached critical, the poetic that is, we understand, the older, more lively and knowingly relational form. Sacramental poetics coincides with "the saying" which Levinas distinguishes from the definitively said. "Saying bears witness to the other of the Infinite which rends me, which in the saying awakens me," instructs Levinas. "Saying as testimony precedes all the said"[133] It is with this sensibility in mind that I believe Joyce self-consciously strives to render human life as lyrically as possible lest it lose, or never discover to begin with, it's saying power. Like *Finnegans Wake*, *Ulysses* is an attempt at the lyrical wit of a folk song, because it's primarily the sung and recited that can hope for a living, imaginative, full-bodied reception, not argument or analysis as such. It's the songs that say and live and ring truly. Or as George Russell puts it in the "Scylla and Charybdis" scene: "People do not know how dangerous lovesongs can be…The movements which work revolutions in the world are born out of the dreams and visions in a peasant's heart on the hillside. For them, the earth is not an exploitable ground but the living mother."[134]

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[131] Kiberd, 310-11.

[132] Ralph Ellison, "Twentieth-Century Fiction and the Black Mask of Humanity," in *Shadow and Act* (New York: Vintage, 1964), 26.

[133] Emmanuel Levinas, "God and Philosophy" in *Collected Philosophical Papers*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Dordrecht: Martinus Nijhoff Publishers 1987), 170.

[134] Joyce, *Ulysses*, 186-187.

Joyce's prioritizing of the lyrical as what the witnessing work at hand demands brings to mind Walter Benjamin's account concerning the possibility of truth in the task of creative representation: "Truth is not a process of exposure which destroys the secret, but a revelation which does justice to it."[135] As we've noted, doing justice to the revelation--the apocalypse--that is everyday life is both the priestly-poetic vocation Stephen proclaims for himself and the mental hobby Bloom undertakes without letting his right hand know what his left hand is doing. But it is also the groundbreaking testament of *Ulysses,* the Bloomsday chronicle, itself within which, as Hugh Kenner observes, "Some mind, it is clear, keeps track of the details of this printed cosmos, and lets escape from its scrutiny the fall of no sparrow." Even as much as Stephen, Leopold, and Molly are the fruits of Joyce's painstakingly undertaken transubstantiation of his own life and observation, this mind, affectionately looking after, directing, and describing persons and things, is also an artful figuring of a justice-rendering spirit which, should it ever prove to no longer exist among people, should probably be invented anyway as often as possible:

> The intrusion of this consciousness is perhaps the most radical, the most disconcerting innovation in all of *Ulysses*. It is something new in fiction. It is not the voice of the storyteller: not a voice at all, since it does not address us, does not even speak. We do not hear its accents, we observe its actions, which are performed with a certain indifference to our presence…Like an author's ideal reader, this Arranger keeps remembering, savoring.[136]

While Kenner's Arranger might prove too much the anythingarian for some sensibilities, its determination to hold to poetic justice with one hand and the candor of realism with the other house a form of witness within which both might abide. This brings to mind an opening for such a poetic possibility (albeit involving a more Bloom-like deity than most *officially* religious traditions endorse) Stephen expresssd within *Portrait*: "I tried to love God, he said at length. It seems now I failed. It is very difficult. I tried to unite my will with the will of God instant by instant. In that I did

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[135] Walter Benjamin, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, trans. John Osborne, (New York: Verso, 1977) 31.
[136] Hugh Kenner, *Ulysses*, (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1982), 64-65.

not always fail. I could perhaps do that still."[137] Like Bloom, Joyce will affectionately chronicle what *he* sees and counts as sacred even if it surpasses the sanctioned-as-sacred spaces of the given conventional liturgics of his day in their war-making, mercenary, sanctimonious, life-denying practices. By doing so, he will of course leave no sacred cow untipped, but his sacramental poetics extends the notion of due reverence *beyond* the perverse liturgics fof his contemporaries. *Ulysses* reveres life *more* comprehensively. If *Ulysses* isn't fit to read, Joyce once observed, life isn't fit to live.[138] And it is in view of his long-term success in expanding his growing public's sense of what's to be rightly counted as sacred, beyond creed, country, and ethnicity, that Guy Davenport, for one, conjectures that prophetic tradition might eventually catch up to him: "I think the day will come when Joyce will be canonized as a saint in the Catholic Church."[139]

And with this we might begin to consider the animating concern of sacramental poetic witness as a circle whose center is everywhere and whose circumference is nowhere. We return to Derrida's account of *Ulysses* as a series of affirmations which upholds itself with *yeses*, most importantly its final one. Molly Bloom's "Yes," generates the life of the novel's ongoing witness, inaugurating and *re*-inaugurating the welcome that bears the possibility of a loving future. "*Yes* would be transcendental adverbiality, the ineffaceable supplement to any verb: in the beginning was the adverb, yes, but as an interjection, still very close to the inarticulate cry, a preconceptual vocalization, the perfume of discourse"[140] As Derrida says of the yes, it is "pre-ontological" in that "it holds open the circle that it institutes,"[141] occasioning the heteronomy within which delusions of autonomy are made possible.

This sense in which a commonsensical heterononomy trumps, precedes, and even funds the seemingly self-sufficient sacrosanct is especially evident the moment Bloom looks after a drunken Stephen, as he has, in some sense, been doing for as many people as he can throughout the novel. Joyce describes his alive and signaling hospitality to one in need as being

[137] James Joyce, *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man: Text, Criticism, and Notes*, 240.
[138] Patricia Hutchins, *James Joyce's World*, (London: Methuen and Co., 1957), 139.
[139] Guy Davenport interviewed by John Jeremiah Sullivan, "The Art of Fiction CLXXIV," *Paris Review* 163, 83.
[140] Jacques Derrida, "Ulysses Gramophone," 297
[141] Ibid. 302.

carried out "in orthodox Samaritan fashion."[142] In the context of the parable (Luke 10:25-37) to which Joyce alludes, the only possibility of sustainable orthodoxy (right belief) is ortho*praxy* (right doing), both because Samaritans aren't Jewish and, as the parable seems to indicate, doing *is* believing. Bloom *does* the truth in love and Stephen will hear and learn. The proselytizing powers of the New Bloomusalem, in this sense, overcome the prerogatives of avowed belief, unbelief, *and* misbelief, making believers of us all.

And again, Derrida's witness is especially helpful here. He characterizes the poetic as never anything less than "that which you desire to learn, but from and of the other, thanks to the other and under dictation, by heart."[143] The poetic is only that which is received, taken in, and learned *as* poetic, as the figuring of experience that makes articulate that which, without this expression, wasn't. The poetic, in this sense, only lives *between* people, a giving and receiving of spirited newness. While *Ulysses* is never deficient or restrained in its desire to explain and describe the events of Bloomsday, what it aspires to convey and cultivate primarily is a consciousness, a way of looking at and being in the world. A sacramental poetic instruction is in play here. Note the way, Derrida describes his reception of a poetic signal which appealed to him religiously, calling out to him as a vocation and articulating an otherwise unarticulated discontent, the vocation and the articulation that is literature:

> Being Jewish and a victim of anti-semitism [as a child in Algeria] didn't spare one the anti-Arab racism I felt everywhere around me, in manifest or latent form. Literature, or a certain promise of "being able to say everything," was in any case the outline of what was calling me or signaling to me in the situation I was living in at that time, familial and social…At the same time, I believe that very rapidly literature was also the experience of a dissatisfaction or a lack, an impatience.[144]

As Derrida testifies, literature--or, for our purposes, the sacramental poetic expression—performed a *de*normalizing function when it came to the reigning social norms of his situation, changing the tune and expanding, rather than narrowing, the space for candor, for *saying* what he

[142] Joyce, *Ulysses*, 613.
[143] Derrida, *Acts of Literature*, 22.
[144] Ibid. 39.

could see and now notice as problematic. If you can only *see* what you've learned to *say*, sacramental poetic expression won't just mirror what we see, it *makes* us see and therefore say, or tell, our own stories, the stories that *have* us, differently. It offers itself as a transparent lure, a confidence, a gift, what W.E.B Du Bois will call a "gift of Spirit,"[145] that will have to be learned--if its witness is to be received--by heart. It cannot have its meaning alone.

[145] W.E.B. Du Bois, "The Sorrow Songs," in *The Souls of Black Folk: Authoritative Text, Contexts, Criticism*, eds. Henry Louis Gates and Terri Hume Oliver, (New York: Norton, 1999), 162.

CHAPTER III

POETICS OF INSINUATION

"How shall we put ourselves in touch with reality?"[146]

James Baldwin

"Poetic knowledge is characterized by humankind splattering the object with all its mobilized riches."[147]

Aimé Césaire,

Apocalyptic for the People

In his magisterial volume *Black Reconstruction in America: 1860-1880a* (1935), W.E. B. Du Bois begins his account with a sober recognition of the stakes confronting his complex rhetorical task, "In fine, I am going to tell this story as though Negroes were ordinary human beings, realizing that this attitude will from the first seriously curtail my audience."[148] Despite his dutiful and painstaking use of primary sources, he knows that those most invested in popular misconceptions of his subject will distort his narrative witness the better to reside comfortably within their preferred abstractions of no-fault American history. And even those who emerge from the reigning willed myopia to pay him heed will have to pay unaccustomed attention to his account.

With his witness, Du Bois means to bring the difficult past to the rescue of his ongoingly problematic present, and this work can't begin without undoing the strategic deceptions of "the fairy tale of a beautiful Southern slave civilization."[149] How to proceed? Every so often within the text, Du Bois indulges a sacramental poetic form, breaking out of his careful, formalized historiography to draw upon the available mythologies that undergird the fairy tale to seize upon

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[146] James Baldwin, "As Much Truth As One Can Bear" in *The Cross of Redemption: Uncollected Writings,* ed. Randall Kenan, (New York: Pantheon, 2000), 30.
[147] Aimé Césaire, "Poetry and Knowledge," lv.
[148] W.E.B Du Bois, "To the Reader" (1934) in *Black Reconstruction in America: 1860-1880*, (New York: Free Press, 1998)
[149] Du Bois, *Black Reconstruction in America*, 715.

and deploy them differently. And to my mind, he does so most beautifully with a bit of apocalyptic supposition concerning the formal conclusion of the Civil War, the day “freedom came to America.”[150] For all their self-satisfied and often death-dealing talk of manifest destiny, do Americans actually believe in God? Du Bois submits a picture for our approval:

> Suppose on some gray day, as you plod down Wall Street, you should see God sitting on the Treasury steps, in His Glory, with the thunders curved about him? Suppose on Michigan Avenue, between the lakes and hills of stone, and in the midst of hastening automobiles and jostling crowds, suddenly you see living and walking toward you, the Christ, with sorrow and sunshine in his face?
>
> Foolish talk, all of this you say, of course; and that is because no American now believes in his religion. Its facts are mere symbolism; its revelation vague generalities; its ethics a matter of carefully balanced gain. But to most of the four million black folk emancipated by civil war, God was real. They knew him. They had met him personally…in the black stillness of the night. His plan for them was clear; they were to suffer and be degraded, and then afterwards by divine edict, raised to manhood and power; and so on January 1, 1863, He made them free.

There is so much here. By out-theologizing the God-talkers, Du Bois calls their very witness into question, making clear that the avowedly religious among his audience—presuming hey mean to be at all serious in their assertions--will have to adjust their imaginations and play to a different calculus. And his lyrical hermeneutic isn’t done. The biblical witness will be made to resonate further and more deeply and more comprehensively than any conveniently de-politicized or spiritualized reading of Scripture will allow:

> It was all foolish, bizarre, and tawdry. Gangs of dirty Negroes howling and dancing; poverty-stricken ignorant laborers mistaking war, destruction, and revolution for the mystery of the free human soul; and yet to these Black folk it was the Apocalypse. The magnificent trumpet tones of Hebrew Scripture, transmuted and oddly changed, became a brand new Gospel. All that was Beauty, all that was Love, all that was Truth, stood on

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[150] Ibid. 121.

top of those mad mornings and sang with the stars. A great human sob shrieked in the wind, and tossed its tears upon the sea -- free, free, free.

And in the event that we have yet to receive his drift, Du Bois will have us understand that the coherence of Christianity and the redemptive meaning of America itself are at stake in our reception—or refusal—of the great human sob turned song he discerns:

> A great song arose…It was a new song…They sneered at it—those white Southerners who heard it and never understood. They raped and defiled it—those white Northerners who listened without ears. Yet it lived and grew; always it grew and swelled and lived, and it sits today at the right hand of God, as America's one real gift to beauty; as slavery's one redemption, distilled from the dross of its dung.[151]

Like Joyce a misbeliever at best, Du Bois nevertheless throws down a metaphysical gauntlet. What meaning is there in the ascension of Jesus of Nazareth to the right hand of the Almighty (*Dextera Domini*, Mark 16:19, Acts 2:34) if this song-prayer (Psalm 63:8) ever ancient and ever new isn't squarely situated within this eternal elevation asserted by Christian tradition? Is the Christian hope to be understood as a meaningfully human commitment or not? If it is, then Du Bois offers his provocative account on conventionally religious grounds in the hope that it will be received as *actionable* intelligence, a revelation that might serve to overcome the willful amnesia of white supremacist history. In this sense, what I view as the lively apocalyptic of Du Bois' sacramental poetic witness George Shulman calls prophecy: "Prophecy raises the issue of *authority* with unrivaled profundity and intensity. Prophetic voices ask not whether we are ruled by authority, but which authority rules in and through us." Probing the contradiction between our alleged or advertised commitments, our self-image as it were and the publicly visible facts on the ground, "Prophecy asks, What gods do you already serve? What is your animating faith?...Here is my table of values, what is yours?"[152]

The table Du Bois sets before us as *his* animating faith is the global mission not-yet-accomplished—then or now—of "abolition-democracy." The question driving his account of the

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[151] Ibid. 123-125.
[152] George Shulman, *American Prophecy: Race and Redemption in American Political Culture*, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008), 29.

Reconstruction era ("What were to be the limits of democratic control in the United States?") is also, according to his story, "the great and primary question which was in the minds of the men who wrote the Constitution of the United States and continued in the minds of thinkers down through the slavery controversy." And for Dubois, the question--the living hope--of abolition-democracy is alive and signaling: "It still remains with the world as the problem of democracy expands all races and all nations."[153]

Like Dorothy Day, Ho Chi Minh, Martin Luther King Jr., Allen Ginsberg and countless others, Du Bois spies in the working mythologies of the God-blessed, Christ-haunted United States, imagery a-plenty for making the globe safer for abolition-democracy. The availability of the tools of brand machinery and the question of truth in advertising need not get in the way of one another when it comes to the symbol-making task of sacramental poetics. You have to take what's there. You can't start over. You have to play the ball where it's dropped. Luc Sante describes the situation: "The trick is that you can't deliberately fabricate a myth; all you can do is spot one lurking among preexisting elements and then pump it full of air."[154]

If appeals to the fixed authorities of God and country, in whatever locale, obstruct the movement of abolition-democracy, Du Bois will creatively unfix with counter-appeals to the same authorities in what Shulman calls a "return to [perceived] origins." In line with a tactic of poetic-prophetic insinuation, Du Bois refuses to conceive authority as an all-too-definitive noun and instead seeks to "renew it as a verb." In this way, "God or justice are not substances to define rightly as grounds of justification but commitments to risk and remake in action."[155] The meaning of the words will have to remain, as it were, in play. Everything depends upon it. This is Dubois giving us an apocalyptic of, by, and for the people. Liturgically speaking, anything less lively in the way of response is a failure to live up to the words' worth, the good work to be done with these soundings, And in the case of God's name, the failure to renew, risk, and remake is to deploy the name of the Lord in vain.

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[153] Du Bois. 184.
[154] Luc Sante, "Strength Through Joy," in *Kill All Your Darlings: Pieces 1990-2005.* (Portland: Yeti, 2007), 110.
[155] Shulman, 30.

You Have Heard It Said, But I Say Unto You

"It is between the lines of Scripture that the narratives of insurgence are delivered," Hortense Spillers asserts concerning the African-American church's "special relationship of *attentiveness* to the literal Word that liberates." And this relationship of call and response and of counter-evocation even takes the form of "a radically alternative program"[156] when the question of liberation is placed to the side, or worse, denied by our reading of Scripture. *Hear* the good news of God's Word, we are told. But if the *proffered* good news fails to resonate in a redemptive fashion, failing to put on flesh or stopping short of speaking emancipation the embodied situation, "the actual mess of human being,"[157] the time has come for the unfixing of alleged authority. Here, Spillers turns our attention to J.W.C. Pennington's pulpit of the Fifth congregational Church of Hartford, Connecticut on November 2, 1845: "If the word of God does sanction slavery, I want another book, another repentance, another faith, another hope!"[158]

In Pennington's insistence that the word of God according to Scripture *be made flesh* as good news to those enslaved, he joins Du Bois in staring down the white supremacist interpretation that underwrites the perverse, proprietary gaze of the slave-owner. Drawing on the pivot point popularized by Jesus, he compels his audience to choose *this* day which interpretation they shall serve: You have heard *this* said, he seems to say, but *I* say unto you. Where the old dispensation decreed a fate, Pennington demands a decision. Life and living and the possibility of a meaningful Christian witness, more than a work of vanity, are at stake. The gaze of his community's *experiential* witness against the reigning reductionist mythology of life-denying, biblical interpretation signals the possibility of the "brand new Gospel" Du Bois poetically posits. As Spillers will argue concerning the posture of Ellison's Invisible Man, "It is this return of the gaze that negotiates at every point a space for living," which " we must willingly name the

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[156] Spillers "Moving on Down the Line: Variations on the African-American Sermon," in *Black, White, and in Color*, 252.
[157] Ibid. 263.
[158] Ibid. 253. "If the concept of God has any validity or any use, it can only be to make us larger, freer, and more loving. If God cannot do this, then it is time we got rid of Him." James Baldwin, *The Fire Next Time*, (New York: Random House, 1963), 47.

counter-power, the counter-mythology."[159]

And with this recognition of the sacramental poetic work to be done, we note that the winning of hearts and minds occurs, as Joyce understands, amid "the mythological fortunes (words and images)," the binding and freeing artifice, of the powers that be. As Spillers has it "We are, after all, talking about words, as we realize that by their efficacy we are damned or saved."[160] The moving target of sacramental poetic consciousness, in this sense, is the colonizing impulse Césaire calls "thingification,"[161] the habit of mind that would reduce living humans here, there, and yon to their perceived use value. And the overcoming of thingification in the dream of abolition-democracy is a struggle powerfully exemplified in Du Bois' tactics as well as those of democratic agitators, whether in Bahrain, Yemen, or Sudan, who hope to be seen and heard as individuals with hopes and commitments more complex and dignified than those associated with the caricature of the radical Islamist. Those on the far side of abolition-democracy long for a more redemptive problematic than the assessing gaze that looks at the image of beleaguered human life and, in Ellison's phrase, "sees not a human being but an abstract embodiment of living hell."[162] Amid the received liturgies that thingify, how might one hope to flip the script?

"Being a problem is a strange experience,"[163] Du Bois observes in the opening strains of *The Souls of Black Folk*, and in no time at all, we find ourselves invited into a relentlessly narratival sphere of a scandalized, but nevertheless alive and signaling pluralistic counter-mythology. Do *you* find *me*—this register I've presumed and the witness I bring— problematic? Du Bois seems to ask. Are *you* a problem too? What shall we make of this situation? What *have we* here? Du Bois' names this space of redemptive problematization further: "All in all, we black men seem the sole oasis of simple faith and reverence in a dusty desert of dollars and

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[159] Spillers, "Interstices: a Small Drama of Words," in *Black, White, and in Color*, 167.
[160] Ibid. 159.
[161] Aimé Césaire, *Discourse on Colonialism*. trans. Joan Pinkham, (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2000), 42.
[162] Ellison, "The World and the Jug," in *Shadow and Act*, 112.
[163] W.E.B. Du Bois, "Of Our Spiritual Strivings," in *The Souls of Black Folk: Authoritative Text, Contexts, Criticism*, 10.

smartness."[164] Are we awake to the table of values Du Bois has in mind? Who or what do we find problematic now? And if we receive the drift of a statement like "The problem of the twentieth century is the problem of the color-line,"[165] the problem of color and culture (or the *sense* of the problem, the sense we're receiving/producing) is now internationalized and ineluctably contemporary. Just in case we remain confused concerning the significance and the location of this problematized and problematizing voice to which we're an audience or if we're in any way tempted to make of his voice one more clamoring of someone's special interest-driven issue, Du Bois strikes a note concerning other comprehensive souls to which we'd perhaps do well to remain repeatedly and repentantly attuned. Voices, let the record show, that are *with him* (or shall be made to be with him) on the subject of this problem: "I sit with Shakespeare and he winces not. Across the color line I move arm in arm with Balzac and Dumas, where smiling men and women glide in gilded halls…I summon Aristotle and Aurelius and what soul I will, and they come all graciously with no scorn or condescension."[166]

Du Bois understands that his presence, a commanding *and* inviting presence, within this assemblage will strike many as unseemly (not that such folks will have read this far), but such judgments are now *their* problem. And in keeping with this critique of thingification, the presumed autonomy of hegemonic economies of meaning which presume to circumscribe difference within self-described civilization, we might return to Certeau's characterization the aberrant which signals the alluring fact of another world spinning within whatever we heretofore thought of as exclusive to our own. What we've long heard said and presumed and believed about the other is the problem *now* as we spy an entry into the renewed and renewing space of the talkaboutable, a widening of the sphere of ethical priority. As these things go, Certeau's signaling heteronomy serves as that stimulus to imagination, that "problem" of a human noting aloud in an address to us that it's a funny thing being "a problem," that very voice that initially—it is implied-- strikes us as somehow *in*admissible. Heteronomy bears witness to heretofore disallowed presences, shaking

[164] Du Bois, "Of the Dawn of Freedom," 16.
[165] Du Bois, "Of the Dawn of Freedom," 17.
[166] Du Bois, "On the Training of Black Men," 74.

the grounds of our assurances and our certainties.[167]

While Du Bois doesn't employ the language explicitly, the rhetorical strategies he employs are in keeping with the standard operating procedures of what I take to be the sacramental poetic tradition, leaving it to the reader to receive or resist the sensibility proffered by way of a poetic of insinuation, addressing and drawing out the audience that is anyone with an ear to hear and eye to see. In this way, Du Bois eschews what Houston Baker refers to as the aspiration toward "a mastery of form" and deploys "the *deformation of mastery* "[168] or what I take to be the lyrical imperative of *non*-mastery as a method. Like the prayer-song of African-American experience which he takes to American's "one real gift to beauty" to global culture and "slavery's one redemption," Du Bois issues the call whose continued existence and ultimate significance will depend entirely upon the lived and lively response of its hearers.

The Way We Look To A Song

It with this open-handed ethic in mind that Du Bois speaks of the work of the Fisk Jubilee Singers whose performances around the world both funded the establishment of Fisk University and exemplified the ongoing lyrical and prophetic heft of what Du Bois refers to as the Sorrow Songs. "So their songs conquered," he insists. And while it is clear that the songs didn't (and haven't) fully transformed the hearts and minds of all who've entertained them, for Du Bois, the songs remain the same: "The true Negro folk-song still lives in the hearts of those who have heard them truly sung and in the hearts of the Negro people…The songs are indeed the siftings of centuries; the music is far more ancient than words," [169]

Positioning *The Souls of Black Folk* as an attempt to give voice in sync with these songs, Du Bois describes the hope that breathes within them, a hope upon which the songs and Du Bois' own work, in no small way, bank: "The meaning is always clear: that sometime, somewhere, men will judge men by their souls and not by their skins. Is such a hope justified? Do the sorrow songs

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[167] Certeau, *Heterologies: Discourse on the Other*. trans. Brian Massumi, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986), 177.
[168] Houston Baker, *Modernism and the Harlem Renaissance*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987), 49.
[169] Du Bois, "The Sorrow Songs," 156-157.

ring true?" Eschatologically speaking, these are fearsomely open questions which Du Bois feels compelled to leave unanswered, except by way of throwing them back upon the reader accompanied, we understand, by the expenditure of his own hopes, by his own intellectual efforts, and by the challenge to no longer "stand meekly dumb before such questions." Du Bois demands that the fact of the songs (the sacramental poetic witness that is their content) demands a reckoning, an according of freedom of opportunity to those "who brought the Sorrow Songs," this genre of *actionable intelligence*, "to the seats of the Mighty."

Having already drawn Shakespeare, Balzac, and Aristotle into his great cloud of witnesses, he broadens his testimony concerning the pluralistic facts-on-the-ground to include the indigenous peoples of the Americas: "Your Country? How came it yours? Before the Pilgrims landed we were here." But lest this particular gauntlet be misunderstood, he again recasts his account to insist that the songs are themselves a manifestation of "our gift of the Spirit." And here we rightly recall the image of African—American culture (a category now deeply broadened) as what seems to Du Bois to be, at least for now, "the sole oasis of simple faith and reverence in a dusty desert of dollars and smartness" which he now situates both as "our gift," awaiting reception, *and* "the hope [not unrelated to the hoped-for reception] that sang in the song of my fathers"[170]

Having launched his open-ended query concerning the fate of the songs (Will they sing true?), the specific hope that the songs--among which now resides *his* song--might be received as an ethical summons, that the call would be met with response, is pronounced as a prayer-appeal in Du Bois' conclusion, "The After-Thought":

> *Hear my cry, O God the Reader; vouchsafe that this book fall not still-born into the world-wilderness…Let the ears of a guilty people tingle with truth, and seventy millions sigh for the righteousness which exalteth nations, in this drear day when human brotherhood is a mockery and a snare. Thus in Thy good time may infinite reason turn the tangle straight, and these crooked marks on a fragile leaf be not indeed*

[170] Ibid. 162-163.

Into our hands he commits the gift of Spirit and the sign of our reception will be solely verified (or not) in a posture/practice of universal enfranchisement ("the righteousness which exalteth nations") which seeks to overturn the material conditions which "in this drear day [our day]" give the lie to "human brotherhood."

"The call," Certeau reminds us, "cannot be known outside of the response which it receives. It has no expression of its own."[172] Here the fragility of the call, the voice, that which might yet ring true (or in Du Bois' parlance "*sing* true") is especially evident. While Du Bois might differ over the starkness, the extreme thinning out of the possibility of the call *even bearing the power of expression* apart from the response, Du Bois here anticipates Certeau's understanding of belief, ideas, and all manner of professed religiosity having *nowhere else to happen* but practice. At first blush, this might appear to be bad news, in Certeau's account, for a poetics of insinuation, as if practice will have to be be radically distinguished from words, images, and mythologies. But on the contrary, Certeau hones down motivations, desires, and beliefs so closely that the metaphorical, for instance, is *never* a separate issue. To speak of story or song as an addendum won't do. And to speak of *religious* discourse would be a redundancy. Discourse, in the thickest sense, is what there is: "The story does not express a practice. It does not limit itself to telling about a movement. It *makes* it. One understands it, then, if one enters into this movement oneself."[173]

In light of this analysis, Du Bois estimation of the power of song ("The true Negro folk-song *still lives* in the hearts of those who have heard them truly sung" [my italics]) might appear a little less romanticized. And in a Certeauian key, the myths (or dreams) with which the songs are fraught will weave their way into unforeseen, perhaps unanticipatedly redeeming manifestations. Either way, the practices we discern will only be rightly analyzed by way of our receptive tracing of the stories/songs that spawned them: "A theory of narration is indissociable from a theory of

[171] Du Bois, "The After-Thought," 164.
[172] Michel de Certeau, "The Weakness of Believing," trans. Saskia Brown, *The Certeau Reader,* ed.Graham Ward, (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 2000), 227.
[173] Certeau, "Story Time," in *The Practice of Everyday Life*. trans. Steven Rendall, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), 81.

practice, as its condition as well as its production."[174] Or as Certeau enigmatically states the situation elsewhere: "Everything assumes a dream."[175]

Fiction Is the Language Without Force

Lest we wrongly register a note of frivolity here, we should note that, within Certeau's economy, there's no such thing as a *mere* dream. The dream is, in fact, the thing. It is that with which we have to do. In an especially provocative passage in the essay, "The Weakness of Believing: From the Body to Writing, a Christian Transit," he offers a consideration of how the biblical witness gives rise (or is made to give rise) to movement, a making-believe that can't exactly be called *making*, marked by a lightness that can feel unbearable. In our day, "the Bible passes by *like* a convoy of representations [my italics]," and copies of this bestselling collection, "these processions of dreams," are, to some degree, recognizable to us even as the dreams are expressed in a language foreign to "the languages of the sites where our knowledge is held." The foreign language is that "manner," procedure, and style which still offers "the possibility of an echo—a response of gratitude—which precedes the production of what one can call sense (this echo resounding in the receptive region)." Consider Du Bois' gift of the Spirit and the register of sensing and receiving it.

Because sense is produced in response to what Certeau views as a kind of dream procedure, "fiction [itself] does not have a sense. It [rather] generates a movement." And it is in this sense that "fiction is the language without force." As Auden says of poetry, it *makes* nothing happen, we understand, because it "is deprived equally of the privilege of stating being and of the power to organize practices (including the practice of its own reading)." And it is only received to the extent that we abandon--or hold loosely to--the forms of make-believe native to "the sites where our knowledge is held," giving space to "a strength of weakness," forgetting oneself "in order to reply to it, relinquish, as in sleep, the concern to secure a site or a truth." It is in this surrender, this non-mastery, this giving up, this holding loosely absolutely essential to the faintest

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[174] Ibid. 78.
[175] Certeau, *Cultures in the Plural*. trans. Tom Conley, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997, 18.

possibility of reception, that “a movement starts up,” “a whole activity develops,” and “an interpretation is made.” Interpretation, as Certeau construes it, is “constructed as a function of a depropriation,” an acceptance of distance, a letting go that is, in a necessarily weak sense, a holding on.[176]

This theory of religious reception can be helpfully illumined by taking into account Certeau’s description of “the myth of the Reformation” in “The Scriptural Economy.” Here he offers a counter-witness—by way of a biblical hermeneutic--to the idea that “the Scriptures provide…a model one can use to re-form both society and the Church.” As Certeau sees it, “the variants of this myth [even today] are found everywhere,” underwriting the notion “that Reason must be able to establish or restore a world, and that it is no longer a matter of deciphering the secrets of an order or a hidden Author, but of *producing* an order so that it can be *written* on the body of an uncivilized or depraved society.” In an assessment that speaks to questions of colonialism, alleged fields of study, ethnography, and target markets, Certeau’s moving target--which we can interestingly place alongside Du Bois’ project--becomes evident: “Writing becomes science and politics…It becomes violence, cutting its way through the irrationality of superstitious peoples or regions still under the spell of sorcery.”[177] But what of fiction, the *knowing* fiction of complex spaces in which, as Joyce shows, “Every telling has a taling” and the fluidity of our religious situation is understood as a given. Might Certeau be clearing a field for study, for the imagined data of myths with footnotes?

In its discerning of the gifts of spirit, Certeau’s theory of religious reception registers the insinuating witness of sacramental poetics, a sending and a receiving that is an ethical summons, a witness that is never a done deal, a boasting right, or, properly understood, a position that could occasion a totalizing gaze; a call that depends upon a response, claiming (in the proprietary sense) nothing at all, a testifying posture that is, perhaps paradoxically, stronger than argument.

This is also the open-handed posture, the language without force, at work in Du Bois’s “After-Thought,” the prayer-plea (to us) that his witness will not prove to have been mere

[176] Certeau, “The Weakness of Believing,” 233.
[177] Certeau, “The Scriptural Economy,” in *The Practice of Everyday Life*, 144.

paperwork. He lets it all go, in a gesture of creative depropriation, leaving everything to the possibility of what we might characterize as the life-giving, memory-restoring forms of a public scrutiny to come. And if we recall the sorrow songs within which Du Bois means to fall in sync, we can also note that the posture is marked by what Cornel West calls the "against-the-evidence hope"[178] taken up and performed repeatedly by the beleaguered and oppressed, a hope that refuses, with the sensibility I term apocalyptic, all manner of widely broadcast, alleged inevitabilities in the name of what might yet be.

Jiujitsu of the Spirit

It is within the sacramental poetic economy operative in the dialectic of mythological appeals that Ralph Ellison sees possibilities for what Certeau will call a space-making enterprise, the complexifying of a *place* which renders the possibility of a *space*. With his masterpiece, *The Invisible Man*, he creates and posits an unnamed figure whose versifying wit seizes upon the subversive possibilities of the mythic mode. As Ellison notes in an interview, "I learned very early that in the realm of the imagination all people and their ambitions and their interests could meet."[179] Citing Joyce and Eliot as among his chosen ancestors, Ellison operates self-consciously as "an heir of the human experience which is literature,"[180] and his creation of the Invisible Man draws the institutionless institution into our sketch of the sacramental poetic.

In an exceedingly well-lit, forgotten basement section of an apartment building restricted to people of color, the Invisible Man narrates his past in his present, recounting a series of episodes in which his trust was broken by one party after another across the ideological spectrum. "All my life," he tells us, "I had been looking for something, and everywhere I turned someone tried to tell me what it was."[181] But returning like an oft-repeated chorus, his tale hearkens back to the advice accorded him by his grandfather in his childhood ("an odd old guy, my grandfather, and I am told I

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[178] Cornel West, *Prophesy Deliverance!: An Afro-American Revolutionary Christianity*, (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1982), 35.
[179] Ralph Ellison, "That Same Pain, That Same Pleasure: An Interview," with Richard G Stern in *Shadow and Act*, 12.
[180] "Change the Joke and Slip the Yoke," in *Shadow and Act*, 58.
[181] Ellison, *Invisible Man*, (Vintage International: New York, 1995), 13

take after him"). From his deathbed, the man spoke in terms he is told no one saw coming:

> Son, after I'm gone I want you to keep up the good fight. I never told you, but our life is a war and I have been a traitor all my born days, a spy in the enemy's country ever since I give up my gun back in the Reconstruction. Live with your head in the lion's mouth. I want you to overcome 'em with yeses, undermine 'em with grins, agree 'em to death and destruction, let 'em swoller you till they vomit or bust wide open.

And from here, the Invisible Man reports a consensus among his survivors: "They thought the old man had gone out of his mind. He had been the meekest of men." Even as he is rushed out of the room, the shades are drawn, and the flame of the bedside lamp is turned low, the grandfather manages an addendum to this legacy delivered in a fierce whisper: "Learn it to the younguns."[182] While his elders promptly instructed him to wipe these words from his memory, words confined till now within "the family circle," the Invisible Man takes them to heart as a tactic that might overcome the stratagems of unfriendly forces that would transmogrify him, as the novel demonstrates, for their own purposes.

Ellison notes elsewhere that what the grandfather "advises is a kind of jiujitsu of the spirit, a denial and rejection through agreement." Submission to one coded meaning, he understands, can pave a means to effectively decoding another, making a way where there wasn't one. "Thus his mask of meekness conceals the wisdom of one who has learned the secret of saying the "yes" which accomplishes the expressive "no." Here, too, is a rejection of a current code and a denial become metaphysical."[183]

As we will especially see in the novel's jarringly evocative conclusion, this is the way *The Invisible Man* offers—or better, gives rise to—its mythic witness. Drawing on Northrop Frye's definition of myth as the communication that unites dream and ritual in verbal form and Barthes' gesture toward deessentializing the concept, Spillers suggests that, for Ellison, "myth becomes a tactic for explanation" and that "the novel may be considered a discourse on the biographical

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[182] Ibid, 16.
[183] Ellison, "Change the Joke and Slip the Yoke," 56.

uses of history," specifically, a mythic plundering of available word, caricature, tale, image which he can draw from as a "usable past."[184]

Traumatized "to the point of invisibility," the Invisible Man takes up the burden—and the release—of a no-holds-barred, tell-all.[185] In the mode of Dostoevsky's Underground Man, he resists every temptation to self-edit and commits himself solely to the discipline of free-flowing candor. As Ellison characterizes it, the text is "is one long, loud rant, howl and laugh. Confession, not concealment, is his mode."[186] His only business is *showing* business. Spillers spells out his compulsion which relates inextricably to his perceived vocation:

> Invisible Man must assume all, must take upon himself the haunted, questioning, troubled, even self-subversive, stance of one who insists on *telling* others. This telling fulfills a bardic task, an oracular chore, and one would do well to refuse either, but pain compels Invisible Man to talk. He calls it "nightmare" and essentially speaks to us out of his own sustained bardic trance, while as ignorant youth, he spoke from the nightmare of others.[187]

He will let fly with the voices within and without, in Joycean fashion, eloquently eschewing any voice—whether echoing from his past or projected upon the reader--that would tell him he'd do better to know his place and keep it all to himself. And yet he *will* know his place, in the sense that he will *make more* of the mythologies *placed* upon him than his enemies have yet known or understood. If a place is contained, in Certeau's account, by the rules of the allegedly proper, the *given* pattern of his reader's certainties, he will seize upon "proliferating metaphors" that have thus far organized a place and deploy them in "an ensemble of movements" that actuate instead a *space*. Despite the reigning metaphors of the received proper place, they can't "describe" a space anymore than "a mobile point 'describes' a curve." They are ripe for *re*-composition through the illuminating of intersections, through the refusal of the given area *as designated*. Certeau describes this jujitsu of spirit, this redeeming redesign thusly: "*Space is a practiced place.*" If it's

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[184] Spillers, "Ellison's "Usable Past": Toward a Theory of Myth" in *Black, White, and in Color*, 67-69.
[185] Ellison, *Invisible Man*, 437.
[186] Ellison, "Change the Joke and Slip the Yoke" 57.
[187] Spillers, 70.

the mythological labor of stories that transform places into space (and vice-versa), the Invisible Man's self-conscious mythologizing will transform, for his reader, the settled givens of a place into the foreignness of a space rendered revolutionary, rich, and strange.[188] His address is peremptory: "Thus, having tried to give pattern to the chaos which lives within the pattern of your certainties, I must come out. I must emerge."[189]

In this way, the Invisible Man takes the available instances of *binding* artifice and, through acts of religious creativity, proffers what Spillers calls a myth of conscience: "Invisible Man, seeking the why of his acts, cuts loose from prevailing myth in a sequence of subversive moves that conjoin him with other myths of conscience—the countermythologies."[190] With what Joyce might call "his monomyth,"[191] he fulfills his bardic task by forging an irretrievably relational space, what the novel's conclusion will offer as zone of largely forbidden mutuality. Like Joyce and Du Bois, Ellison generates a genuinely *novel* and therefore redemptively subversive offering within the human experience, the *freeing* artifice, that is literature, an experience of which he *knows* himself to be an heir.

Meanwhile On the Lower Frequencies

"What else could I do? What else but try to tell you what was really happening when your eyes were looking through?" asks the Invisible Man. And here he strikes a note of casual inevitability concerning the only tactic available—tell it *true*-- to one whose existence within the reigning economies of meaning is one of practical invisibility "without substance, a disembodied voice, as it were." [192] To tell (or try to tell) what's really happening, to hazard a little cosmic plainspeak, to cobble together your own witness box out of thin air, is one way of giving voice, of making believe, of being social. This too is a space-making enterprise. Hoping *in spite of* the popular evidence to the contrary in the given world, "that closed world from which there is no

[188] Certeau, "Spatial Stories," in *The Practice of Everyday Life*, 116-118.
[189] Ellison, *Invisible Man*, 438.
[190] Spillers, 80.
[191] Joyce, *Finnegan's Wake*, 581.
[192] Ellison, *Invisible Man*, (Vintage International: New York, 1995), 581.

exit," Paolo Freire describes, he mythically renames "the limiting situation" in the hope of transforming it.[193] In sacramental poetic terms, Ellison *names* the tension between reality and invention and thus fulfills what Freire deems the fundamental means to a fully human existence, to name and thereby problematize toward naming and narrating (mythologizing) again.[194] With a cultivation of creative verse, one can make a vineyard of the heretofore cursed.

"I'll verse you but I won't curse you," observes one self-proclaimed bearer of "shit, grit, and mother-wit,"[195] who crosses the Invisible Man's path, a figure who refers to himself as Blue in one breath and Peter Wheatstraw in the next. By the end of Ellison's novel, we see how this mode of artful communication, this proffering of a verse, this method of *taking care*, has been inherited by the Invisible Man himself. A lively, wide-awake orality, a gift of Spirit, has successfully insinuated itself. The redeeming dialectic of critical consciousness has been passed down and received. And from here on out, plurality isn't an issue, but a fact, a fact to be met with receptivity and wit: "Life is to be lived, not controlled; and humanity is won by continuing to play in face of certain defeat. Our fate is to become one, and yet many—This is not prophecy, but description."[196]

Lest we think of his witness as *mere* words or *mere* verse, we're reminded that his account bears the critical heft of observational candor, and if we won't see and get in on the drift of his problematic, we're pulling the wool over our *own* eyes. But it could be that the reader begins to credit his narrative with explanatory power. Maybe we *do* see. Perhaps the call is being successfully transmitted: "Who knows but that, on the lower frequencies, I speak for you?"[197]

With this question (by my reckoning, the best last sentence of any novel I know), a table is set and a site (or what Certeau might prefer to call "a non-site") is made ready and available for all takers. A space is cleared which, to my mind, evokes Du Bois' ("After-Thought") as well as the concluding section of Fanon's *Black Skin, White Masks* ("At the end of this book, we would like

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[193] Paolo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, trans. Myra Bergman Ramos, (New York: Herder and Herder, 1972), 34.
[194] Ibid. 76.
[195] Ellison, *Invisible Man*, 176.
[196] Ibid. 577.
[197] Ibid. 581.

the reader to feel with us the open dimension of every consciousness."[198]). The singular has all along hoped for and now posits, with a gesture of non-mastery, an *offering* really, the first-person plural. In some sense, the reader is invited to assume the status of *former audience* and *make voice with* the invisible man's voice in response to an appeal to common human experience we now understand—if we hadn't already—to have been in play all along.

In this light, critical consciousness, the *modus operandi* of sacramental poetics, always was and ever will be a team sport. The legacy is *re*cast, because no one has their meaning alone. Critical consciousness is a public commons, a mobile mother-wit, a moveable feast that's long underwritten whatever powers of redemptive skepticism we've felt at work within ourselves. Or as Spillers has it:

> Ellison harnessed "blackness" to a symbolic program of philosophical "disobedience" (a systematic skepticism and refusal) that would make the former available to anyone, or more pointedly, any posture, that was willing to take on the formidable task of thinking as a willful act of imagination and invention. In other words, Invisible Man made 'blackness' a process, a strategy, of culture critique, rather than a condition of physiognomy and/or the embodiment of the auto-bios-graphe…Under the 'laws' of this novel, the game of "blackness" was no longer captive to the auspices of dominance, somewhere "out there" beyond the veil [Du Bois' counter-mythological trope], but came home, as it were, right between the ears, as the glittering weapon of an "invisible" field of choice. With the "world" in his head now, invisible man quite literally and figuratively "contained" the wealth that white philanthropy had alienated in the first place as its own to proffer.[199]

"The formidable task" of thinking, imagining, and inventing again is the work now assigned the reader. This critical consciousness (ever ancient and ever new) begins (or re-emerges) with an awareness of what appears to be contradiction, often enough derived from unconsciously ideological necessity; unconscious, we might say, until a counter-witness gets through (whether in story, song, or any disruptively truthful description) defying our standard operating procedures.

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[198] Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, 206.
[199] Spillers, "Peter's Pans: Eating in the Diaspora," in *Black, White, and in Color*, 5.

Having gained access through insinuation, it announces its presences now "right between the years," interrogating the ideological given. If the "ideological" is, William Pietz defines it, "how you have to *think* in order to *feel* morally good about yourself, given what you actually *do.*"[200] Critical consciousness begins with a sense of the dawning of a painful tension between reality and invention, a pain that can only be relieved by conceiving your world differently, by imagining it anew. For Ellison this is the gift (a gift of Spirit?) at work in the insight he shares with Joyce and Vico, the gift of "an ironic awareness of the joke that always lies between appearance and reality, between the discontinuity of social tradition and that past which clings to the mind. And perhaps even an awareness of the joke that society is man's creation, not God's." [201] I take this to be a mark of the sacramental poetic awareness that glows within and, in spite of the institutionalizing darkness, on the lower frequencies. Given its unavowably religious pretensions, the darkness generally finds it cannot afford to understand or even entertain such an awareness.

Everything Presumes a Dream

In the counter-ideological fashion of sacramental poetic expression, critical consciousness compels us to change our minds by way of voices we discover strangely aligned with what we begin to take to be our own. The redirection of our accreditation ensues. Certeau describes the process aptly: "The *credibility* of a discourse is what first makes believers act in accord with it. It produces practitioners. To make people believe is to make them act. But by a curious circularity, the ability to make people act—to write and to machine bodies—is precisely what makes people believe."[202] This corralling of the myths that bind into emancipating spaces, redemptively problematizing the ideological, is the sacramental poetic task of which I take Ellison to be a model practitioner. The operative metaphor, the dream, the myth, and the imaginary, as Certeau understands, name the material upon and within which redeeming discourse is to be

[200] William Pietz, "Problem of the Fetish, IIIa," *Res* 16 (Autumn: 1988) 112.
[201] Ellison, "Change the Joke and Slip the Yoke," in *Shadow and Act*, 53-54.
[202] Certeau, "The Scriptural Economy," 148.

done (what Howard Thurman calls "God's working paper"[203]). Spillers again: "The *materiality of discourse* is as solid an aspect of political economy as the Gross Domestic Product, and it's far-flung subtleties and evasions, its coded displacements and well-choreographed insinuations, decidedly more pernicious as the missile that hides its hand. To spot it by preventing, or warding off, its closures, *on its own terrain*, with its own weapons, defines the "war," as I have understood it."[204]

As we return to Du Bois, we see such revolutionary re-appropriations of available material emerge, drawing upon other myths and re-mythologizing (or re-mixing) the given that once seemed soul-crushingly inevitable in his account of the "growth of a class of free Negroes" preceding (and persisting beyond) the Civil War era. Du Bois describes "the ethical and social leader" that was "the freedman" and offers an interpretation of what Certeau might call a revolution (or a mutation) of the believable:

> Freedom became to him a real thing and not a dream. His religion became darker and more intense, and into his ethics crept a note of revenge, into his songs a day of reckoning close at hand. The "Coming of the Lord" swept this side of Death, and came to be a thing to be hoped for in this day…Negro religion thus transformed itself and identified itself with the dream of abolition, until that which was a radical fad in the white North and an anarchistic plot in the white South had become a religion to the black world.[205]

It's especially interesting to note how Du Bois reserves the word "religion" for the "real thing" at work within the heart, mind, and body of this emerging class. For Du Bois, true religion (the belief that is practice as opposed to wishful thinking confused with conviction) is not to be ascribed to the fads and plots of those parties whose existence was less directly beleaguered. There are lived dreams, and then there are fads: "No American now believes in his religion."[206]

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[203] Howard Thurman, "Prayer" in *A Strange Freedom*, eds. Walter Earl Fluker and Catherine Tumber, (Boston: Beacon Press, 1998), 88.
[204] Spillers, "Peter's Pans: Eating in the Diaspora," 7.
[205] Du Bois, "Of the Faith of the Fathers," in *The Souls of Black Folk: Authoritative Text, Contexts, Criticism*, 126.
[206] Du Bois, *Black Reconstruction in America*, 123.

Something of what Du Bois is extolling, alongside the critique the true religion of "the freedman" implies, is present in Certeau's account of the tactics employed by "indigenous Indian cultures" in their response to Spanish colonization: "They metaphorized the dominant order: they *made it* function in another register [my italics]."[207] If we bring to Du Bois' account Certeau's description of "the murmuring of everyday practices," we can consider how the "darker, more intense religion" of "the freedman" appropriated many of the words and images which, under the auspices of white oppression, had been made available or, at least, accidentally accessible to redemptive use. As Certeau has it, "It is through them [everyday practices] that an uncodeable difference insinuates itself into the happy relation the system would like to have with the operations it claims to administer."[208]

This account of practices implied in Du Bois and Certeau is its own summons to feats of attentiveness which I take to be the task of the critical theorist, the prophet, and the poet. To my mind Du Bois employs just such a tactic, poaching upon the reigning dreamscape, when he coined the term "abolition-democracy" and rearranged an American myth or two, re-deploying them to more globally enfranchising ends, and recasting two powerful words, conflates them in a re-visioning of American mission:

With questions of "true significance, "social development," and "the problem of democracy," powerfully set forth, certain openings are made into a scene bewilderingly different from popular accounts (even today) of the meaning of the United States' perceived self-interest.[209]

The same scene is signaled by Howard Thurman in words spoken on the air over radio station KSFO in San Francisco on the evening of Martin Luther King's assassination. Refusing the designations of the dominant, prevailing mythologies of America, King's movement redirected them to function in a new, largely unanticipated register. "In him the informed conscience of the country became articulate. And tonight what many of us are feeling is that we all must be that conscience wherever we are living, functioning, and behaving." A demonstrably living conscience, we understand, is an informed conscience that awaits articulation and which necessarily achieves

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[207] Certeau, "'Making Do': Uses and Tactics," in *The Practice of Everyday Life*, 31-32.
[208] Certeau, "Indeterminate," in *The Practice of Everyday Life,* 200.
[209] Du Bois, *Black Reconstruction in America 1860-1880*, (New York: Free Press, 1998), 184.

it with and through others. Thurman is describing the practice of sacramental poetic witness. “He was able to put at the center of his personal religious experience a searching ethical awareness. Thus organized religion as we know it in our society found itself with its back against the wall. To condemn him, to reject him, was to reject the ethical insight of the faith it proclaimed. And this was new.”[210]

Like every instance of sacramental poetic, the innovation—the ongoing innovation—Thurman describes both confronts, challenges, and seeks to redeem the stock inventory of word and image that passes for the common decency (“organized religion”) by questioning the discernible content and the on-the-ground verifiability of its claims. It’s as if the movement King represented and represents is performed (and might yet perform) acts of ethical alchemy upon and out of the materiality of any available discourse.

The poetic practice of critical consciousness, in this sense, will involve the tact that necessarily precedes a meaningful tactic. I have in mind here Julia Kristeva’s definition which, to mu mind, describes the intense attentiveness characteristic of the sacramental poetic sensibility my study considers. What is tact? Kristeva: “To hear true, along with forgiveness. Forgiveness: giving in addition, banking on what is there in order to revive, to give the depressed patient (that stranger withdrawing into his wound) a new start, and give him the possibility of a new encounter.”[211]

Never Know Who You’re Talking To

Before I bring Joyce back into the proceedings, I’d like to observe how Kristeva’s word on tact—on *hearing true*—can be helpfully teased out by the enigmatic ending of Du Bois’ autobiography. Just as he concludes *The Souls of Black Folk* with a consideration of written words as almost inevitably subjected to futility (“crooked marks on a fragile leaf”) save for the hope of being somehow salvaged by an animating reception among the living, he commits the meaning of his own existence--his work, his voice, his spirit—to the work of future remembering,

[210] Thurman, “Martin Luther King, Jr.” in *Strange Freedom*, 186.
[211] Julia Kristeva, *Black Sun: Depression and Melancholia*, trans. Leon S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1989), 189.

a work he commissions within the redeeming dialectic of dreams and deeds: “Let then the Dreams of the Dead rebuke the Blind who Think that what is will be forever and teach them that what was worth living must live again...Teach us, Forever Dead, there is no Dream but Deed, there is no Deed but Memory.”[212]

Against the prevailing mythologies that project the defeat of abolition-democracy unto eternity, he again casts his own labor beyond his own beleaguered present and into ours. *Perhaps* he speaks for us. Like Ellison’s Invisible Man, he gives his witness over to the possibility of new encounters, weighing out his own death and the death of all living and carrying on in the hope of a revival committed to others. This is the move of *ex*tradition upon which a witnessing tradition will have to bank, a saying that will live again through, and, in spite of, the said. The *given* gesture depends upon an economy--a household--of gift. It is here that Du Bois’ words resonate with Levinas’ account of the giving of witness: “It is sincerity, effusion of oneself, ‘extraditing’ of the self to the neighbor. Witness is humility and admission; it is made before all theology; it is kerygma and prayer, glorification and recognition.”[213] As we will see in the next chapter, it is only in this effusion of self, some form of it, that a sacramental poetic practice can be undertaken.

In his calling upon a witness *to* his witness and that of the “Forever Dead” he addresses, Du Bois extends to his audience the invitation to be shaped by what’s been recognized, seen, and heard in his work and in this way to have paid *his* sorrow song meaningful heed, making it sing true. And as I hear it, this hope for new, perhaps unanticipated encounters means to extend what seems to be that “sole oasis of simple faith and reverence in a dusty desert of dollars and smartness” beyond what Du Bois regretfully but provocatively counted as its present boundaries. This refusal to count these boundaries as definitive is characteristic of the cultural consciousness Ellison treats in his essay, “The World and the Jug”:

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[212] W.E.B. Du Bois, *The Autobiography of W.E.B. Du Bois: A Soliloquy in Viewing My Life from the Last Decade of Its First Century*, (New York: International Publishers, 1968) 422-423.

[213] Emmanuel Levinas, *Otherwise Than Being Or Beyond Essence*, trans. Alphonso Lingis, (The Hague, Martinus Nijhoff Publishers, 1981), 149.

> Negro American consciousness is not a product (as so often seems true of so many American groups) of a will to historical forgetfulness. It is a product of our memory, sustained and constantly reinforced by events, by our watchful waiting, and by our hopeful suspension of final judgment as to the meaning of our grievances.[214]

Here, Ellison describes a creative determination to attend to what are often only dimly perceived redemptive possibilities, that same "hopeful suspension of final judgment" (Joyce calls it the sacred benefit of doubt) which his Invisible Man articulates so movingly when he considers his own proneness toward pulling the wool over his own eyes: "I knew that my forgetfulness wasn't real, as one knows that the forgotten details of certain dreams are not truly forgotten but evaded."[215] What I take to be the most significant material token in the novel, an object that challenges the narrator—and the reader—to resist the temptation to ever foreclose meanings in our attempts to make sense of ourselves comes to him in his time among the communists in the Brotherhood. It is there that he receives the confidence of a Brother Tarp, a fellow southerner, who explains his persistent limp as an unshakeable body memory from the nineteen years he spent dragging a chain in a prison yard until his escape. Unable to explain to his own satisfaction his compulsion to do so, he gives him a thick, oily piece of filed steel ("It's the one I filed to get away") and trusts him to make of it what he will and should: "Funny thing to give somebody, but I think it's got a heap of signifying wrapped up in it and it might help you remember what we're really fighting against. I don't think of it in terms of but two words, *yes* and *no*; but it signifies a heap more…"[216] I read this gesture as a call to reside in the meaning—the significance—of the struggle they have in common in such a way as to remain alive to the possibility of further, richer meanings than whatever he's tempted to settle for as progress or success, that he not take such possibilities for granted. Perhaps he speaks for more people than his tale has *thus far* had in mind.

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[214] Ellison, "The World and the Jug," in *Shadow and Act*, 124.
[215] Ellison, *The Invisible Man*, 537.
[216] Ibid. 388.

And if historical consciousness, as Jan Patočka maintained, is life that *never* takes itself for granted,[217] it seems to me that critical consciousness (I employ the terms almost synonymously) is generated by a such interfaces with the materiality of a call, a ringing true which, perhaps tragically, can't achieve meaning all by its lonesome. In this sense, critical consciousness is the confronting/confronted consciousness, searching out insinuations and perhaps performing a few, the open mind one can feel descending, emerging, or growing as if out of the pavement. In this way, our refusal to imagine beyond the present status quo begin to feel like a sort of ethical negligence, criminal in its way, and our stock inventory of memory begins to insinuate, somehow ineluctably, a demand for re-appraisal or a fresh narrativizing. Or as Spillers puts the matter in what I take to be a kind of critical-poetic demand: "We never surpass some things, or get over them, insofar as their opaqueness bears down on the imagination with a clarity of refusal that must be confronted."[218] In this way, the sacramental poetic task requires both seeking out the experience of being redemptively unsettled and persisting in wakefulness to the reverberations of our liturgies beyond the scope of our intentions.

"Never know who you're talking to," thinks Leopold Bloom to himself.[219] And here we have the apocalyptic receptivity—applying both to input and output—of which Joyce makes of Bloom a kind of accidental hero. As an ad man alive to the unintended consequences *and* the serendipitous occurrences that follow his own words and actions and everyone else's, he exemplifies the poetic power of knowing that you don't know, that you can only receive the fullness of another person to the extent you know you aren't successfully *fathoming* their depths anymore than you can fully or authoritatively fathom your own. Or as Stephen has it, beginning to receive, in some sense, Bloom's drift: "Every life is many days, day after day. We walk through ourselves, meeting robbers, ghosts, giants, old men, young men, wives, widows, brothers-in-love. But always meeting ourselves."[220]

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[217] Erazim Kohák, *Jan Patočka: Philosophy and Selected Writings*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989), 5.
[218] Spillers, "Peter's Pans: Eating in the Diaspora" 3.
[219] Joyce, *Ulysses*, 163.
[220] Joyce*, Ulysses,* 213.

When the Invisible Man urges us to *live* life, in view of the reciprocity to come ("Our fate is to become one, and yet many."), instead of seeking to *control* it, he signals a call to the knowing relationality his final question facilitates. In the flow of self-conscious and unself-conscious, meaning-making discourse, the strange, difficult, and poetic work of being alive to our own is a work that is never done. Bakhtin puts it nicely: "One's own discourse is gradually and slowly wrought out of others' words that have been acknowledged and assimilated, and the boundaries between the two are at first scarcely visible."[221]

And in their insistence upon the social fact of mutual imbrication, that complex, ineluctably religious space I wish to stress, all three authors (Du Bois, Joyce, and Ellison) jettison the myth of critical detachment and invite their readers to an envisioning of human society as one of meaningful, gracious, and playful reciprocity ("Don't kid yourself," the Invisible Man remarks, "The only scientific objectivity is a machine."[222]).

They're engaged in what might be fruitfully understood to be a spirit work of call and response. While Du Bois and Ellison's invocations are most evident in the conclusions of the works we've examined (*Epiklesis* Gk. for invocation, calling upon, making an appeal), Joyce understood his writing to perform a liturgical function from his earliest self-understanding onward. As he noted in a letter to his brother Stanislaus, "I am writing a series of epicleti—ten—for a paper. I have written one. I call the series *Dubliners*."[223] Within his poetic-priestly vocation, everything depends upon the possibility of co-celebrants.

"Who ever anywhere will read these written words?" Stephen asks himself in *Ulysses*.[224] For Joyce, the fiction is a liturgical summons that can only be answered and carried on by a reader. We also have an anecdote relayed by Samuel Beckett who tells of how "One day a visiting Englishwoman listened to him reading a passage from the book [Finnegans Wake] and sternly remarked, 'That isn't literature.' 'It was,' Joyce replied, meaning that it was while she was

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[221] M.M. Bakhtin, "Discourse in the Novel," 345 note 31.
[222] Ellison, Invisible Man, 505.
[223] Joyce, *Letters of James Joyce*, 55.
[224] Joyce, *Ulysses*, 60.

listening to it."[225] In his attempt to bring a credible consciousness of the world to the world, the sacramental poetic transmission depends upon reception. Critical consciousness, in this sense, is a poetics in search of a living constituency ("His producers are they not his consumers?").[226]

In this way, the redeeming dialectic of call and response conjures the space of sacramental poetic consciousness to which all comers are invited. And concerning the product of memory Ellison calls "Negro American consciousness," we have an expansion of the subject in Spillers' meditation upon the concept of black culture. "It would be more accurate to say black diasporic culture," she observes.[227] Whereas Ellison viewed African-American concern as a "concord of sensibilities"[228] which might yet be brought to bear upon an infinite variety of human concerns, Spillers critiques what's become of it and laments the ways in which the brand-version of black culture "in its current avatar" has been made to "bolster the dangerous regnancy of corporate media and supreme commercial value," and thus been enlisted to the purposes of global *dis*-order in contemporary history. The distinction--between brand and lived, historical hope--is essential in a global scene where "the imagined moral credibility of black now translates into an enablement of the most repressive practices among the world democracies today." And yet, the concord Spillers forecasts fixes its sites on an ever widening field:

> In a sense, if there is no black culture, or no longer black culture (because it has "succeeded"), then we need it now; and if that is true, then perhaps black culture—as the reclamation of the critical edge, as one of those vantages from which it might be spied, and no longer predicated on "race"—has yet to come.[229]

Here, Spillers draws the "myths of conscience" we've discussed toward what Grace Lee Boggs calls "the humanity-stretching movements."[230] And it is their sponsorship of the possibilities of reclamation--the critical edge of sacramental poetics--to which we now turn.

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[225] Richard Ellman, *James Joyce*, New and Revised Edition, 702.
[226] Joyce, *Finnegans Wake*, 497.
[227] Spillers, "The Idea of Black Culture" in *CR: The New Centennial Review* 6.3 (2007), 21.
[228] Ellison, "The World and the Jug" 131.
[229] Spillers, "The Idea of Black Culture" 26.
[230] Grace Lee Boggs, *Living for Change: An Autobiography*, (Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 1998), xi.

CHAPTER IV

A SLIGHT EDGE OF LIFE OVER DEATH

"I don't know, it's just what the song says. Isn't it what we're doing here? Bringing leaves out of the stones!"

"Sounds like religion."

"You and your fancy book-words. It's just a song."[231]

Ursula K. Le Guin, *The Dispossessed*

"If you don't use your own imagination, somebody else is going to use it for you."

Ronald Sukenick[232]

"Worship is a matter of profound intent. I tried to invite everybody. It's very easy to misunderstand."

Duke Ellington[233]

It Would Be the Real World

To begin with the interplanetary, I give you a scene from the imagination of the novelist, essayist,and translator, Ursula K. Le Guin. It's a scene of wisdom getting through in an instance of what it might be appropriate to call, in the positive sense, *religious reading* (call it apocalypse, call it a breakthrough). Her landscapes feature all manner of traditions, economies, and senses of religiosity coming into contact with one another, and any number of sacred cows (patriotism, gender, race, and religion) getting casually tipped over again and again. The characters in her

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[231] Ursula K. Le Guin, *The Dispossessed*, (New York: Avon, 1974), 38.

[232] Quoted in John Madera, "O For a Muse of Fire: An Interview with Lance Olsen," *Rain Taxi*, Online Edition: Summer 2010
http://www.raintaxi.com/online/2010summer/olsen.shtml

[233] Quoted in Geoffrey O'Brien, "The Grandest Duke," New York Review of Books, October 28, 2010.
http://www.nybooks.com/articles/archives/2010/oct/28/grandest-duke/?page=3

fiction—and, I would argue, her readers—are constantly made to encounter themselves through strange worlds and the scandalously familiar characters that inhabit them. It's as if her science fiction landscapes serve as thought experiments which powerfully speak to the cross-cultural spaces of our own time. Shallow worldviews are redemptively undone by the blessedly undeniable fact of other lives, the cultures underway on other planets. As these worlds prove to be not just possible, but *factual*, they critically engage all that's been taken to be inevitable, the binding "Just the way things are," in the lives of Le Guin's protagonists. As we ourselves often experience a shift when we take in a story, a lyric, or a poem, the unexamined passions that underwrite the perceived inevitabilities, the have-to's, what Aimé Césaire calls "the blue steel rigidities" that cut "through the mysteries of the flesh"[234] now undergo (*must* undergo) a lively interrogation. This is what *overtly* religious traditions often refer to as repentance, allowing a re-arranging of ones mental furniture, turning the mind around. When we have a script for what seemed realistic and right, and the script gets suddenly, strangely flipped, we can be assured we're in a place now transformed into a space of sacramental poetic activity.

In *Four Ways to Forgiveness*, Yoss, a middle-aged woman in a dilapidated house in a war-torn village, is reading a publication of the Ekumen, a cosmic communion of eighty-three habitable planets and three thousand nations whose mere existence has a provocative way of relativizing (without necessarily negating) one's sense of sovereignty, people-hood, and place. The publication, we understand, broadens any sense anyone might have of *the public*. The reports of whatever once passed as a *National Geographic* equivalent, if you like, have begun to give way to the tales, stories, and songs of an *Intergalactic Cosmographic*. But this is all new to Yoss whose planet of sojourn has only recently made contact with the Ekumen. She lives alone with her pet, Tikuli, and she's giving herself a moment of pause. She knows that what she's reading is fair and balanced, and whatever comfort she might think to derive by suggesting that what's coming to her is somehow biased is a luxury she's recently come to understand she can no longer afford. Given the military violence and environmental devastation that all-too-obviously

[234] Aimé Césaire, "Notebook of a Return to the Native Land" in *The Collected Poetry of Aimé Césaire*, trans. with an Introd. and notes by Clayton Eshleman and Annete Smith, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983), 69.

pervades her world, she's a reader who's lost her taste for tales that primarily serve to flatter her own life and surrounding culture. In this sense, she is eager to be *dis*illusioned. "On the planet O there has not been a war for five thousand years," she reads to herself. "And on Gethen there has never been a war."

> She stopped reading, to rest her eyes and because she was trying to train herself to read slowly, not gobble words down in chunks the way Tikuli gulped his food. "There has never been a war:" in her mind the words stood clear and bright, surrounded by and sinking into an infinite, dark, soft incredulity. What would that world be, a world without war? It would be the real world. Peace was the true life, the life of working and learning and bringing up children to work and learn. War, which devoured work, learning, and children, was the denial of reality. But my people, she thought, know only how to deny. Born in the dark shadow of power misused, we set peace outside our world, a guiding and unattainable light. All we know to do is fight. Any peace one of us can make in our life is only a denial that the war is going on, a shadow of the shadow, a doubled unbelief…So as the cloud-shadows swept over the marshes and the page of the book open on her lap, she sighed and closed her eyes, thinking, "I am a liar." Then she opened her eyes and read more about the other worlds, the far realities.[235]

With this remarkably rich passage, Le Guin gives us an anatomy of an emerging mind, the kind of imaginative conversion I imagine Du Bois and Ellison would discover at work in their ideal readers. It's the sight of someone deciding to stop living inside the surrounding lies they've only just begun to discover. It isn't that Yoss will, from here on out, find her native culture irredeemably contemptible—she's opening herself up to risk, the risk that lets in the realities, the lives, that might make her own passions, her own decisions, feel devastatingly foolish, a problem. She is going to see and hear; come what may. She will look rightly and let the chips fall. She's committed, in a certain sense, to a life of refusal, a refusal in which she won't let her own anxiety out-shout the whisper of revelation. She will give sustained attentiveness to that itch that can only be scratched by thinking, by imagining the world anew.

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[235] Ursula K. Le Guin, *Four Ways to Forgiveness* (HarperPrism: New York, 1995) 1.

This description of words that must be made to stand clear and bright again and again even as they fade into an infinite, dark, soft incredulity brings to mind the subtlety evoked by Howard Thurman's description of the task of critical discernment, an occasion that is never a mission accomplished, a work that is never exactly done: "The margin of self-deception is ever in flux. We are not quite sure that things are, in truth, as they seem to be in fact. We are therefore threatened by each new situation because it may reveal the awful magnitude of our previous self-deception."[236]

For Yoss, the initial sense of threat has somehow inaugurated an opening (though we feel the crisis could easily have yielded a different, harder turn which could reject the Ekumen's witness as too good to be true), and her doubled unbelief, what Pierre Bourdieu refers to as "the self-legitimating imagination,"[237] has been, for the moment, overcome, even as it is ever in flux. This inaugural of an opening is a location that generates a promising dialectic which serves to expand a space of the talkaboutable, hosting all manner of redemptive problematizing. Le Guin's Ekumen is especially evocative in this regard as its representatives (they enter civilizations as Investigators followed over time by Envoys) knowingly immerse themselves in a complex cultural interface which defies, as the learned Envoy knows to, the conventional cordoning off of politics, religion, business, and art from one another. Strictly speaking, they are neither missionaries nor anthropologists, but the mere fact of their existence, their attempt to explain it, and their offering of communion into their order makes of their witness a disruptive imagination within sometimes hostile worlds. While the subversive quality of Le Guin's creation certainly resonates with our consideration of Du Bois, Ellison, and Joyce thus far, our primary focus will be the way an examination of the Ekumen might enter into a space of mutual illumination with the critical liturgical work, in word and deed, of Daniel and Philip Berrigan.

Human from Earth

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[236] Thurman, "Reconciliation" in *A Strange Freedom: The Best of Howard Thurman on Religious Experience and Public Life,* eds. Walter Earl Fluker and Catherine Tumber, (Boston: Beacon Press, 1998), 176.
[237] Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste*, trans. Richard Nice, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1984), 31.

In *The Left Hand of Darkness*, Genly Ai, an Envoy of color who hales from Terra (Earth), brings good tidings to the planet Gethen on behalf of the Ekumen. And lest we presume a missionary position in which the complications of cultural exchange are allegedly one-sided, with the Envoys vouchsafing enlightenment upon the natives, we'll note that the schooling goes both ways. The Gethenians, we come to understand, are androgynous. And apart from the monthly stage of *kemmering*, the days of the month when they develop male *or* female features and copulate with a partner, they are without gender. Because the average Gethenian is neither male nor female, rarely monogamous, and has usually borne children *and* fathered them, the gender roles to which Ai's imagination is prone to defer are nowhere to be found. As Ong Tot Oppong, an early Observer of the first Ekumenical landing wrote down in his field notes:

> What is very hard for us to understand is that, four-fifths of the time, these people are not sexually motivated at all…Our entire pattern of socio-sexual interaction is nonexistent here. They do not see one another as men or women. This is almost impossible for our imagination to accept. What is the first question we ask about a newborn baby?…One is respected and judged only as a human being. It is an appalling experience.[238]

Even with an abundance of admonitory field notes, Ai will come to see tragically and self-effacingly his failure to view those among whom he lives as *both* male and female, as opposed to habitually viewing them as one or the other. Such tragic misunderstandings and hard-won illuminations are among the vocational pitfalls of being an Ekumenical Envoy:

> My job here was a one-man job. There is only one First Mobile. The first news from the Ekumen on any world is spoken by one voice, one man present in the flesh, present, and alone. He may be killed…or locked up with madmen…one after the other; yet the practice is kept, because it works. One voice speaking truth is a greater force than fleets and armies, given time; plenty of time; but time is the thing the Ekumen has plenty of.[239]

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[238] Ursula K. Le Guin, *The Left Hand of Darkness*, (New York: Ace Books, 1969), 94-95. I follow Le Guin's use of the masculine pronoun when referring to Gethenians.
[239] Ibid. 27.

And with this in mind, he persists in his nation-by-nation engagement with Gethen, mindful of the fears his aloneness is meant to at least partially quell, "The first Envoy to a world always comes alone. One alien is a curiosity, two are an invasion."[240]

But even with this precaution among nations that have never gone to war, there's the matter of the religious commitment of national identity. And for those possessed by it, as we might guess, the health of other nations, as a global unity (to say nothing of a distant interplanetary communion with its lone, unarmed representative) isn't necessarily a top priority for the people who esteem themselves to be *in power* over others. Drawing from the Investigator's research, Ai has placed his primary hopes in the nation of Karhide. As he observes to its prime minister, Estraven, he comes without signs, wonders, or definitive proofs, only his "ansible [communication device], my box of pictures, the indubitable peculiarity of my body, and the unprovable singularity of my mind"[241] to extend the shared hope of communion, exchange, alliance, and interaction.

Estraven has tried to prepare the King, Argaven, for an audience with Ai, but despite the care and skill of his presentation, the slightest allusion to the scope of the Envoy's society strikes him as an intolerable threat to all the King holds dear. As Estraven explains, "All I've told him means to him simply that his power is threatened, his kingdom is a dust mote in space, his kingdom is a joke to men who rule a hundred worlds."

"But the Ekumen doesn't rule," Ai protests. "It co-ordinates."[242] We will come to understand that Estraven follows him completely.

"Mr. Ai: do you know, by your own experience, what patriotism is?"

"I don't think I do. If by patriotism you don't mean the love of one's homeland, for that I do know."

"No, I don't mean love, when I say patriotism. I mean fear. The fear of the other. And its expressions are political, not poetical: hate, rivalry, aggression."[243]

Poetic expression, in this sense, is the never-not-redeeming expression which, counter to the *merely* political, will disturb, rather than sustain or buttress, the given status quo. And the

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[240] Ibid. 209.
[241] Ibid. 135.
[242] Ibid. 17.
[243] Ibid. 18.

poetic, we discover, does not go over well when the Envoy secures a moment in the King's company. Alone with Ai, we realize that Estraven has tried to confront the conscience of the King with the novel idea of patriotism as a *lived* practice. Might it lurk in the King's heart? Might it move past vain imaginings and perhaps put on flesh? To have even posed such questions will lead to Estraven's exile. In autocratic form, he is incapable of entertaining the question, he *is* Karhide, and he mistakens his own sense of power for love of country. And the alleged patriotism with which King Argaven congratulates himself (as landed gentry often will) is, in practice, merely the costly, fidgeting fear of a cornered animal.

The truth of the matter, that Ai isn't trying to challenge him, but merely communicate, is an incommunicable fact. He offers space-travel and cosmic community to the king and his people, but Argaven can only think in terms of his own power. He only speaks the language of career ambition and survival strategy, and he's genuinely befuddled over why anyone with any power would ever want to *share* their resources? When he asks why the Ekumen wants an alliance ("this kingdom out in nowhere, this Ekumen"), Ai responds: "Material profit. Increase of knowledge. The augmentation of the complexity and intensity of the field of intelligent life. The enrichment of harmony and the greater glory of God. Curiosity. Adventure. Delight."[244] But these phrases have absolutely no appeal to the King and his sense of conservative self-possession. Ai persists:

> The Ekumen is not a kingdom, but a co-ordinator, a clearinghouse for trade and knowledge; without it communication between the worlds of men would be haphazard, and trade very risky, as you can see. Men's lives are too short to cope with the time-jumps between worlds, if there's no network and centrality, no control, no continuity to work through; therefore they become members of the Ekumen.

Are they all as black as Genly Ai? He asks.

"Some are blacker…we come in all colors.[245]

Still wincing from his conversation with Estraven and wrestling with an all-too-lucid, emerging recognition that comes to so many of Le Guin's characters, an insight increasingly

[244] Ibid. 34.
[245] Ibid. 35.

difficult to suppress, King Agraven wonders how the Ekumen would define the word "traitor." Ai produces his ansible and sends the question to a Stabile of the Ekumen via interstellar transmission. The answer will only madden Agraven further: "To King Argaven of Karhide on Gethen, greetings. I do not know what makes a man a traitor. No man considers himself a traitor: this makes it hard to find out."[246]

When we bring this logic to bear upon the preferred abstractions of pundits and politicians, we begin to see that Le Guin has some rather large fish to fry, collapsing, as the sacramental poetic inheritance will, our habitual distinctions between the political, the pietistic, and the poetic. As we might expect, King Agraven angrily dismisses the Ekumen's wisdom as the kind of thing he could have procured from his own religious crackpots.

Having made a poetic demand of the King by way of his costly questions, Estraven barely escapes Karhide with his life, but, perhaps fearing repercussions from the "Kingdom out in nowhere," he allows the Envoy the liberty of leaving and finding his way to other nations. Nevertheless, he issues a press release that sounds like it could have come from a propped-up Middle Eastern dictator under revolutionary threat ranting about *foreign influences*, something of an impossibility, we understand, from the ineluctable relationality that underwrites an Ekumenical (or sacramental poetic) point of view. Estraven, he insists, has proven traitorous and has authored a plot to render Karhide a "subject nation in a certain Union of Peoples…let all men know that no such Union does exist, being a device and a baseless fiction of certain conspiring traitors who seek to weaken the Authority of Karhide in the king"[247]

A Body Mystic

With King Argraven's frantic assertion that this rumored communion, the alive but non-coercively signaling fact of this Ekumen of Known Worlds is a baseless fiction of treacherous agents, we begin to see the skewering liveliness of Le Guin's sacramental poetic concerns. What do planets and aliens have to with the contemporary scene? Le Guin places her work among the myths of conscience: "They are metaphorical ways of coming at our present reality which is, after

[246] Ibid. 39.
[247] Ibid. 30.

all, all we can *really* write about."[248] Le Guin's worlds are scenes of liturgies and counterliturgies and their devastating, inevitable interplay. We can note too that while the Envoy customarily hopes to win hearts and minds by way of deploying a larger affirmation of life than their potential converts have yet known or understood, it is often the Envoys themselves who get converted.

Because Le Guin divides *The Left Hand of Darkness* into sections of Ekumenical ethnography, Gethenian creation myths, and narration traded between Genly Ai and Estraven, we're creatively deprived of a clear analytical foothold from which to assess the various players. Just as we've begun to presume Genly Ai to be our hero, we discover Estraven, stripped of his political power, risking his life at every turn to protect the Envoy and serve his mission. His entreaties to Karhide's neighbor, Orgoreyn, are scarcely more successful than Ai's, and his witness to him within the corridors of power are viewed as lunacy at best and the opportunism of an unemployed political operative at worst. Of Ai, he attests: "In his presence, lines drawn on the earth make no boundaries, and no defense…He is not to be feared, I think. Yet he brings the end of Kingdom and Commensalities with him in his empty hands." [249] But such pronouncements only make Estraven politically useless to the governments that might otherwise capitalize upon his skills.

Over the course of the novel, the two are reduced to the plight of refugees whose survival will depend on one another. Ai questions the ease with which Estraven, expelled from Karhide, would urge the Envoy's proposed alliance upon foreigners. Estraven is nonplussed, "What does it matter which country wakens first, so long as we waken?"[250] Does he not hold Orgoreyn in contempt like the average Karhider?

> I lack the trick of it. I know people, I know towns, farms, hills and rivers and rocks, I know how the sun at sunset in autumn falls on the side of a certain plowland in the hills; but what is the sense of giving a boundary to all that, of giving it a name and ceasing to love where the name ceases to apply? What is love of one's country; is it hate of one's uncountry? Then it's not a good thing…Insofar as I love life, I love the hills of the Domain

[248] Quoted in Owen Bennet, "Ursula K. Le Guin: The Interview" BBC World Service, http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/p00d5vqc
[249] Ursula K. Le Guin, *The Left Hand of Darkness*, 85-86.
[250] Ibid. 198.

of Estre, but that sort of love does not have a boundary-line of hate. And beyond that, I am ignorant, I hope.[251]

And here, it is especially evident that the Envoy is not involved in a missionary endeavor. Having presumed to be, as the Envoy, one upon whom nothing, generally speaking, is lost, Ai begins to understand that his poetic task is one of mutual enrichment, and perhaps, when it comes to an adept like Estraven, he is compelled to discover that his status is one of apprenticeship. If the Ekumen is, as Ai's been taught, "an experiment in the superorganic,"[252] it's outreach is not a work of charity, a vouchsafing of its riches from on high, but an essential function of its own dynamism. When Estraven wonders aloud concerning the Ekumenical method of sending one Envoy at a time, Ai offers a conjecture that's only begun to dawn on him by way of their relationship:

> It's the Ekumen's custom, and there are reasons for it. Though in fact I begin to wonder if I've ever understood the reasons. I thought it was for your sake that I came alone, so obviously alone, so vulnerable, that I could in myself pose no threat, change no balance: not an invasion, but a mere messenger-boy. But there's more to it than that. Alone, I cannot change your world. But I can be changed by it. Alone, I must listen, as well as speak. Alone, the relationship I finally make, if I make one, is not impersonal and not only political: it is individual, it is personal, it is both more and less than political. Not We and They; not I and It; but I and Thou. Not political, not pragmatic, but mystical. In a certain sense the Ekumen is not a body politic, but a body mystic. It considers beginnings to be extremely important. Beginnings, and means. Its doctrine is just the reverse of the doctrine that the end justifies the means. It proceeds, therefore, by subtle ways, and slow ones, and queer, risky ones; rather as evolution does, which is in certain senses its model… So I was sent alone, for your sake? Or for my own? I don't know.[253]

If we're to make the most of Le Guin's Ekumen as a trope, it is at this point that we do well to recall Derrida's riff on the poetic as that which can't be properly undertaken alone, that

[251] Ibid. 212.
[252] Ibid. 135-136.
[253] Ibid. 259-260.

which we desire to learn, but *always* from and of the other, thanks to the other and under the *dictation* of the other, by heart. The hopes at work within—or rather witnessed to by—the Ekumen are inescapably relational. In this way, it serves as a sort of rubric for sacramental poetic practice, never a handing down of wisdom, but a commitment to redeeming dialectic in sync, in its way, with the stated objectives of the 95¢ Skool which involves the exchange and the cobbling together of poetic intelligence. Within the Ekumen, *all along* encompassing though not yet *formally* extended to Estraven and his people, Genly Ai discovers himself to be a perpetual student whose education is, among other things, a thinning out of his sense of self-possession over against others and a transformation of his alleged accumulation of knowledge into the relational knowledge that is only accessed through *ac*knowledgment of the other as in no way ultimately estranged, only *known*—or experienced--where two or more are gathered. Or as William Franke puts in what I take to be a kind sacramental poetic aphorism: "Knowledge, humanly considered, is valuable in proportion to the intensity and richness of the relationships it enables."[254] Le Guin's "body mystic" which is both more and less than political seeks to overcome the false dichotomy of yours and mine and move toward, in Estraven's terms, the sort of love that does not have—or any way give credence to--a boundary-line of hate.

And in language I take to be evocative of Joyce's vision of a New Bloomusalem, a catholicity whose center is everywhere and whose circumference is nowhere, Genly Ai portrays the Ekumen as a mission never-quite-accomplished:

> Ekumen is our Terran word; in the common tongue it's called the Household; in Karhidish it would be the Hearth…It is an attempt to reunify the mystical with the political, and as such is of course mostly a failure; but its failure has done more good for humanity so far than the successes of its predecessors. It is a society and it has, at least potentially, a culture. It is a form of education; in one aspect, it's a sort of very large school--very large indeed.[255]

Where he once viewed Estraven as a potential convert to this very large school, Ai comes to see

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[254] William Franke, "Programmatic Essay on Knowledge in the Humanities" http://sitemason.vanderbilt.edu/files/gGoCGs/Intro%20Essay.2010.doc
[255] Ibid. 135.

that it is primarily Estraven's witness that renders the economic/Ekumenic vision of reality publicly visible and, by the end of the novel, Gethen's formal entry into the Ekumen possible. In this way the novel's portrayal of the exchange of poetic intelligence is made—or brought--to blossom.

To Make a Space of a Place

"Notional knowledge is the assimilation of facts leading nowhere; whereas real knowledge is some mysterious alchemy whereby the truth of existence, including the facts, leads one to moral development or simple action on behalf of people, on behalf of actual needs."[256] While this distinction between the knowledge that accumulates without occasioning newness of life and the poetic knowledge that makes new resonates with the Ekumenic vision we've drawn into our discussion of the sacramental poetic, it isn't science fiction. It's a clarifying word from the Jesuit poet-activist, Daniel Berrigan, concerning his own hopes for liturgical possibilities, the kind which, in this case, have landed him in jail following his involvement in the prayerful burning of draft files in Catonsville, Maryland on May 17, 1968. With his brother, Philip (also a Catholic priest) who had also performed a similar action in Baltimore in 1967, they were concerned with the debased currency of the liturgical forms with which their tradition had been entrusted when it came to the war-making liturgies, the paper-work, for instance, of the United States government whose enlisting of young men to the violence and devastation of Vietnam constituted, according to their sacramental poetic witness, a demonic stronghold.

They viewed their actions as redemptive raids on the sacrosanct. And in a manner provocatively reminiscent of Joyce, Daniel Berrigan speaks of the moral bankruptcy of so much of his tradition as an opportunity to give it a more lively—and therefore faithful—interpretation. He viewed it as "a reshuffling of the Catholic Cards, that holy tarot deck, stacked to the elbows with assured salvation and no losers. Did not every one of us hold a winning hand?" And in this way, their *transparent* liturgy would serve to disrupt and destabilize, even if only in one local instance, the *unacknowledged* liturgy of the draft: "Those draft files! They were, of course, more than they

[256] Daniel Berrigan and Lee Lockwood, *Absurd Convictions, Modest Hopes*, (New York: Random House, 1972), 193.

purported to be. They had an aura, they were secular-sacred documents of the highest import."[257]

With an eye on the meaning—or potential meaning--of Roman Catholicism in America, the Berrigans fulfilled Walter Benjamin's dictum concerning the redemption of tradition: "In every era the attempt must be made anew to wrest tradition away from a conformism that is about to overpower it."[258] As we have seen among our practitioners of sacramental poetic, a tradition has to take verb form in order to credit itself, to be credible, to *make* believe. The Berrigans would practice their place into a space and keep alive the possibility of a tradition that might continue to be, if even for the first time in this mad context, inherited:

> Who owned the tradition, anyway; and who was worthy to speak on its behalf?...Indeed, the issue was not simply that a tradition was traduced daily by those responsible for its purity and truth. The issue was a far more serious one…The tradition was a precious voice, a presence, a Person. The war had silenced the voice, outlawed the Person. Church and state had agreed, as they inevitably did in time of war, that the Person was out of fashion, "for the duration." He had nothing to offer in the face of guns…He was a prisoner of war this Jesus. He was in a species of protective custody.[259]

Through what is, in this event, the direct action of sacramental poetic witness, the Berrigans expose the liturgies of murderous abstraction in an exercise which, in Daniel Berrigans terms, means to concretize, "The great sinfulness/of modern war is/that it renders concrete things abstract." Berrigan describes the action as an act of responsibility before the divinity that demands incarnate witness: "I was trying to be concrete/ about death because death is a concrete fact/ as I have throughout my life/ tried to be concrete about the existence of God/ Who is not an abstraction/ but is someone before me/ for Whom I am responsible."[260]

By confronting and dramatizing American liturgy at home and abroad, the action sought to provoke a meaning crisis for the American public, positing a sacred sense of reality counter to

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[257] Daniel Berrigan, *To Dwell in Peace: An Autobiography*, San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1987), 201.
[258] Walter Benjamin, "Theses on the Philosophy of History," in *Illuminations*, ed. by Hannah Arendt and trans. by Harry Zohn, (New York: Harcourt Brace and World, 1968), 255.
[259] Berrigan, *To Dwell in Peace: An Autobiography*, 201-202.
[260] Berrigan, "Trial of the Catonsville Nine" in *Poetry, Drama, Prose*, 240-241.

reigning dis-order, making plain the arbitrariness of "the way things are," creating scenes of recognition in which the habitual de-valuing of life is no longer deemed inevitable, necessary, or even realistic.

> I tried, in response, to put matters biblically. That there was a history for acts such as ours. In such biblical acts, results, outcome, benefits, are unknown, totally obscure. The acts are at variance with good manners and behavior. Worse, they are plainly illegal. More yet: everything of prudence and good sense points to the uselessness and ineffectiveness of such acts…And yet, and yet, it is also said: The poor mortal is to go ahead; in spite of all. To go ahead, in faith; which is to say, because so commanded…One had very little to go on; and went ahead nonetheless. Still, the "little," I reflected ruefully, had at least one advantage. One was free to concentrate on the act itself, without regard to its reception in the world. Free also to concentrate on moral preparation, consistency, conscience. Looked at in this light, the "little" appeared irreducible, a treasure…So, despite all, a history of sorts was launched on a May morning in 1968. Also, a tradition was vindicated, at least to a degree. Or so I believe to this day.[261]

In Berrigan's invoking of the "very little to go on," we have a description reminiscent of Auden's take on the poetic that *makes* nothing happen but merely survives somehow in the valley of having been said however ineffectively, a way of happening. In this case, the seemingly weak gesture is, for Berrigan, nothing less than the vindication, the public coherence outside one federal building in 1968, of the Christian tradition itself as he understands it. The verification comes from an FBI agent who, upon seeing Daniel's brother Phillip exclaims, "Him again! Good God, I'm changing my religion!" The liturgical clarification has gotten through. "I could think of no greater tribute to my brother."[262]

Whether in literature, song, prayer, or ritual, sacramental poetics channels a growing pressure through *the dramatizing of dialogic tension*, the tension between a well-heeled power with it's self-proclaimed status as the maintainer of commonweal and good order and another

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[261] Berrigan, *To Dwell in Peace: An Autobiography*, 219-220.
[262] Ibid. 221.

power which calls this status into question, making moves that might sober, demystify, or disenchant a public which remains in the former power's thrall, under hypnosis as it were. By dramatizing this tension *as it grows*, it becomes more possible for more people to see that the reigning mythology's claims of justice, progress, good order, and consensus are not unambivalent indices.

Such determined and radical mindfulness is robust, improvisational, and marked by an ever-renewed and robust commitment to the wellbeing of others, even when it takes the unself-conscious, decidedly non-activist stance of a daydreaming Leopold Bloom who conjures a redeeming space without his left hand knowing what his right hand is doing. In the case of the Berrigans' sacramental poetic witness, like that of Du Bois, ostensible Christians on the American scene are made to doubt their own status as believers if they can't sustain a higher estimation of human life. Their witnessing work exposes the bad politics and the bad religion involved in the habitual devaluing of human life that informs our societal status quo and challenges us to keep our God talk inescapably social. And in every instance, sacramental poetics unmasks the religious character of those forces that claim to be free of religious influence and impervious to it.

The witnessing work of sacramental poetic accomplishes this unmasking through creatively problematizing unexamined liturgies. As Hugh Kenner observes of the forms we honor with the name of art, it "lifts the saying out of the zone of things said."[263] Where there are forgotten assertions within the given liturgies (whether of advertising, the workplace, or political rhetoric) the sacramental poetic overturns our divisions and makes them plain through feats of attentiveness.

The Actual World Is Our Only World

Daniel Berrigan's work is often criticized for its ineffectiveness on the structural level. Homeless people get fed, draft files get burned, weapons of mass destruction get destroyed, and people get arrested, but *what really changes*? This is where his longer, downright Ekumenical

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[263] Hugh Kenner, *A Homemade World: The American Modernist Writers*, (New York: Knopf, 1975), 60.

view of history comes in. And Berrigan, to my mind, often seems to be its most eloquent spokesperson:

> The good is to be done because it is good, not because it goes somewhere. I believe if it is done in that spirit it will go somewhere, but I don't know where. I don't think the Bible grants us to know where goodness goes, what direction, what force. I have never been seriously interested in the outcome. I was interested in trying to do it humanly and carefully and nonviolently and let it go.[264]

When Berrigan reads the scriptures, he is moved to note that "We are unready for God; we are hardly more ready for one another."[265] And scripture that doesn't in some way dislocate our imaginings of success, victory, terror, goodness, and beauty is scripture that has yet to be meaningfully received, made to live, or even read properly. Berrigan's scripture calls the reader out of Egypt and every form of enslaving culture. But if the demanding word of liberation is reduced to manageable, idolatrous terms, its summons to creative freedom can't be discerned.

Against an allegedly Christian witness that concerns itself primarily with otherworldly consolation, Berrigan posits "The actual world is our only world,"[266] and insists that divinity be understood as operative in the this-worldly, reality-based realm. Berrigan's biblical thinking insists that *now* is the new *then*. In Berrigan's economy, it's what God, even as a most redemptive idea, is for:

> Humankind, it seems, has always been overdue to see God's Word as subversive of a human dis-order largely disobedient, rebellious, and perverted—one close to self-destruction from toxic fouling of our nest, or from weapons designed to protect our *mammon*, the money of exploitation. The word of God revolutionizes this social chaos nonviolently, replacing the politics of greed, blood lust, and violence with politics designed for children.[267]

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[264] Chris Hedges, "Daniel Berrigan: Forty Years After Catonsville," http://www.thenation.com/doc/20080602/hedges

[265] Berrigan, *Jeremiah: The World, the Wound of God*, (Minneapolis, Fortress, 1998) xii.

[266] Berrigan, *Consequences: Truth and…*,(New York: Macmillan, 1967), 78.

[267] Daniel Berrigan, Introduction, Philip Berrigan and Elizabeth McAlister, *The Time's Discipline: The Beatitudes and Nuclear Resistance*, (Baltimore: Fortkamp, 1989), xx.

And with this appeal to A.J. Muste's demand for a foreign policy that's good for children, we move toward the broader witness associated with the Berrigans and Elizabeth McCalister and their charge that the United State's military budget, especially when it comes to nuclear proliferation, reflects a cultural commitment that is most helpfully understood as a form of religion. Their actions, which involve lifelong commitments to the attempted destruction of nuclear warheads, led to Philip Berrigan spending eleven years of his life in prison. While the sincerity of their position is too profound to be understood as a mere tactic, their appeal to the Constitution is powerfully in line with Lewis Hyde's dictum: "The eternals are vulnerable at their joints. To kill a god or an ideal, go for the joints."[268]

As McAlister argues, the United States government's commitment to nuclear proliferation constitutes the establishment of a national religion which violates the non-establishment clause in the First Amendment. "Its existence, its pre-eminence, its rituals, gods, priests, and high priests make serious encroachments on all of us….violating our freedom of religion." This "state religion compels a quality of loyalty focused on our acceptance" of nuclear weapons "as a necessity. Weapons we are expected to pay for, adulate…become sacred objects of worship."[269]

As the Berrigan's have it, such drastic times call for drastic measures which, in Philip's view is nothing less than the task of securing space for coherent witness: "In more civilized times, symbols tend to belong to everyone. In times like ours, driven and captivated as they are, people misunderstand symbols and fear them. Restoring symbols and purifying them through suffering and public exposure is part of the renewal of a community of sanity; in fact a definition of the Church."[270] And in language very reminiscent of Le Guin's Ekumen, Daniel Berrigan characterizes this work of restoration and clarification of witness "as a way of seeding something into history."[271] Through acts of religious creativity, the practitioners of sacramental poetics problematize the reigning nomenclatures with socially disruptive newness.

[268] Hyde, *Trickster Makes This World*, 253
[269] Philip Berrigan and Elizabeth McAlister, *The Time's Discipline: The Beatitudes and Nuclear Resistance*, 133.
[270] Ibid. 84.
[271] Berrigan and Lee Lockwood, *Absurd Convictions, Modest Hopes*, 107.

Alive, in this way, to the social fact of religion, Daniel Berrigan is especially eloquent in his diagnosis of inherited religious forms that enslave all the more deviously for going unscrutinized. Here, he seems to have in mind suburbs, churches, and courtrooms and their subtle--but not so subtle--bindings. His sense of the loss of critical consciousness in these environments is devastating:

> It is necessary above all to be concrete when we speak of these things. Men, even good men, are commonly disposed to submit to the slavery of the actual; they literally cannot imagine themselves in any life situation other than the one in which they live. They inherit a style, a culture, a religion—and they prolong such forms—because they are there; useful, comfortable, logical, venerable. Their minds wear the costumes of their ancestors, a clothing that was once befitting, literally, but is now simply a folklore or a fakeout. So they call folklore a religion and a fakeout in adult life. And, alas, who shall disenchant them? But let it at least be said, as the Lord implies from His Roman courtroom, such lives as these must not make large claims to the truth.[272]

In his allusion to Jesus' conversation before before Pontius Pilate (John 18:33-38), he equates the hapless donning of the costumes of received religious tradition, fearfully unexamined, with the mercenary cynicism of Pilate. The poetic demand Berrigan makes of us is, for starters, to find our mythological presumptions presumptuous by awaking ourselves to them. For Berrigan, this connecting of dots in the face of prevailing mythologies whose caretakers busy themselves in (and derive their status from) making sure such connections aren't made is the name of the human game in the worlds we're in.

Poets Are the Most Specific People On Earth

Of Daniel Berrigan, Kurt Vonnegut remarked, "For me Father Berrigan is Jesus as a poet. If this be heresy, make the most of it."[273] And one senses that this is his highest possible compliment. The vocation Vonnegut spies is the one Berrigan sees in Jesus as the figure of the

[272] Berrigan, *No Bars to Manhood*, (Garden City, Doubleday, 1970), 55.
[273] Quoted on Cover, Berrigan, *Prayer for the Morning Headlines: On the Sanctity of Life and Death*, (Baltimore: Apprentice House, 2007).

divine in the most realistic human we have: “Jesus, by a method that was breathtakingly realistic and right, sought to break the universal dominion of Death over [women and] men.”[274] A poetic mind like the one we find in the figure of Jesus is, in this sense, a demythologizing force at work upon the prevailing, death-dealing mythologies working their ways upon the world. The poetic Berrigan has in mind, which my study terms the sacramental poetic, operates in that “broadest sense” of the term which, in Jonathan Lear’s definition of the poet, names the activity of the “creative maker of meaningful space. The possibility for such a poet is precisely the possibility for the creation of a new field of possibilities. No one is in a position to rule out that possibility.”[275]

In these terms, the seriousness of poetry is the human seriousness, the work of creating a space for the possibility of redemptive culture. It is in view of this understanding that Anthony Towne, who, with William Stringfellow, had harbored a fugitive Daniel Berrigan following Catonsville, remarked, “It is my considered opinion that any society that locks up priests is sick, and any society that imprisons poets is doomed,”[276] and spoke of the poetic tasks that create, in the most life-giving sense “normal living,” which, “if there is any love in it, is one long gorgeous and, no doubt, subversive conspiracy.”[277] Poet practitioners are the caretakers of words, of what we do with words. In this sense, theirs is the work of religious mindfulness, “Poets…are the most specific people on earth. That is what poetry is all about.”[278]

And as we have seen, the perceived threat of sacramental poetic witness is met by the threat *to* it by interests that prefer to keep accounts of people, events, and doings liturgically *un*related and boundaried up. Berrigan’s poem “Prophecy” traces the tension to the pressure to not *say* what he *sees*:

The way I see the world is strictly illegal

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[274] Berrigan “A Homily by a Fugitive Priest,” William Stringfellow and Anthony Towne, *Suspect Tenderness: The Ethics of the Berrigan Witness*, (New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, 1971), 7.
[275] Jonathan Lear, *Radical Hope: Ethics in the Face of Cultural Devastation*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2006), 51.
[276] Anthony Towne and William Stringfellow, “On Sheltering Criminal Priests” in *Suspect Tenderness: The Ethics of the Berrigan Witness*, 22
[277] Ibid. 31.
[278] Ibid. 48.

To wit, through my eyes

Is illegal, yes;
to wit, I live

like a pickpocket, like the sun
like the hand that writes this, by
my wits

This is not permitted
that I look on the world
and worse, insist that I see

what I see
--a conundrum, a fury, a burning bush[279]

With his direct allusion to the prophetic imagination of Moses, we're reminded of the provocative conflation—within the Berrigan witness—of religious freedom with poetic freedom and therefore human freedom. In these matters, there is neither separation nor the possibility of critical detachment. In societal doings, there is no question that is not a question of religious formation, no proper compartmentalizing possible. And for Berrigan, this is a delightful state of affairs in which all are invited "to allow the Word of God full play in our lives and in our minds," and, when called for, to see and think the world illegally.[280] Most importantly, he wouldn't have anyone operate under that delusion of folklore and fakeouts which leads people to think they've successfully separated themselves from religion (or poetry), just because they're describing it (or

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[279] Daniel Berrigan, *And the Risen Bread: Selected Poems*, ed. John Dear, (New York: Fordham, 1998), 230.
[280] Daniel Berrigan "A Homily by a Fugitive Priest," 3.

think they are). With such pitfalls in mind, we return to Le Guin's universe, this time to a world which, in view of the threat it is to progress, has outlawed poetic intelligence.

To Sing a Song Without the Tune

In *The Telling*, our protagonist, Sutty Das, is a Terran Observer for the Ekumen, hoping for Envoy status at some juncture. We discover that the Ekumen homeworld, Hain, which she longs to visit, is where Envoys are trained. When she recalls a friend who received training as an Envoy, we catch a glimpse of the popular perception of the place: "Lucky man…He got away, he went to Hain…he's been where everything isn't God and hatred, where they've lived a million years of history, where they understand it all."[281] She arrives on Aka, which the Ekumen visited before 150 years ago, and whose most vocal inhabitants appear to long for the intergalactic inclusion that might result from a visit from the Envoy.

In no time, she realizes that the research from the Ekumen's first landing appears to be obsolete. Akan culture has gone corporate, and the rich cultural heritage, that of the Dovzan, which they all once called themselves (They're all "Akans" now), seems to have melted into thin air:

> The government of this world, to gain technological power and intellectual freedom, had outlawed the past. She did not underestimate the enmity of the Akan Corporation State toward the "old declarations" and what they meant. To this government who had declared they would be freed of tradition, custom, and history, all old habits, ways, modes, manners, ideas, pieties, were sources of pestilence, rotten corpses to be burned or buried. The writing that had preserved them was to be erased.[282]

Having seen first-hand forms of collective mania called religion on Earth, Sutty is sympathetic to the desire of many Akans to break free of certain paradigms, but when she begins to become more deeply acquainted with resisting Dovzans, she isn't prepared for the knee-jerk intensity of a man called the Monitor who's been sent to keep an eye on her interaction with them: "They seek to drag us back into that paralysis, that mindless barbarism. They may treat you

[281] Ursula K. Le Guin, *The Telling*, (New York: Harcourt, 2000), 6.
[282] Ibid. 57.

kindly, but I tell you they are ruthless… Their so-called knowledge is rant, superstition, poetry. Do not put my people into the painful position of finding a scientist of the Ekumen in possession of illegal materials..” He had begun to stammer, groping for words.

“I am not a scientist.” Sutty responds. “I read poetry.”[283]

Among the Dovzan, she adopts the posture of a student, a *yoz*, who seeks the counsel of many a *maz*. There are parallels with her own past, but she finds it increasingly unseemly to refer to their commitments as a religion, as she understands the term. “It seemed not incorrect, but not wholly adequate. The term *philosophy* was even less adequate…Later she called it the Forest,” since it had been referred to as *the way* through one. It was similarly associated with the image of a mountain, but in time, “she ended up calling it the Telling.”

Were there words to “mean sacred or holy? There were words she translated as power, mystery, not-controlled-by-people, part-of-harmony,” but “it appeared that in the old Akan way of thinking *any* place, *any* act, if properly perceived, was actually mysterious and powerful, potentially sacred.” (my italics) And proper perception *always* depended on proper “description--telling about the place, or the act, or the event, or the person. Talking about it, making it into a story.”[284] We note again that the Ekumen enriches itself as its representatives themselves get schooled, and that discernment of the holy has nowhere else to happen but in the giving and receiving of story, a sacramental poetic economy of meaning. It won’t be reduced or explained away; we can only bear witness to it with an awareness that its significance does not begin (or end) with our witness. As Levinas puts it: “Signification cannot be directly understood in a flash of light that illuminates and chases the night from which it arises, that it unravels. It needs all the density of the story…*Signification is not separate from the access leading to it*. Access is part of signification itself. The scaffoldings are never dismantled.”[285] Only the story--the Telling--harbors the hope of complexifying wholesomely. Story and song.

Sutty is actually in possession of a Hainish proverb that gives this sacramental poetic sense: “*To learn a belief without belief is to sing a song without the tune*.” This names a relational

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[283] Ibid. 86.
[284] Ibid. 96.
[285] Emmanuel Levinas, “Signification and Sense,” in *Humanism of the Other*, trans. Nidra Poller, (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2003), 20.

commitment, and a parting with undue critical detachment: “A yielding, an obedience, a willingness to accept these notes as the right notes, this pattern as the true pattern, is the essential gesture of performance, translation, and understanding.” It “need not be permanent, a lasting posture of the mind or heart; yet it is not false. It is more than the suspension of disbelief needed to watch a play, yet less than a conversion. It is a position, a posture in the dance.”[286]

To bring this sensibility to our discussion of poetic witness as apocalyptic, it seems to me that the determined receptivity required of one who means to listen, watch, or read, in Le Guin’s economy, resonates with what Franke terms an “openness
to the radical alterity of apocalypse” without which “we cannot be open to dialogue in an unrestricted sense.” Revelation, in this sense, “and particularly texts purporting to deliver apocalyptic revelations, must be understood essentially as forms of communication.”[287] Such apocalyptic receptivity understands that “apocalypse, as the advent of the end, is nothing that we can *do*, though we can be aware of and perhaps cooperate with its happening to us. Indeed, from a certain point of view, this is already what tradition itself” or the traducing that is tradition, ”is all about. Apocalyptic…rather than being taken as an aberration, symptomatic of a pathology of Western civilization that could be cured [as it seems corporate-minded Akans would have us do] should be accepted as part of the whole and as standing for the possibility of renewal inherent within this tradition. From this type of imagination, new and different proposals unceasingly draw their inspiration…Every imagination of the end in apocalyptic style is the occasion for new orientation toward the open space we call the future.”[288]

It’s the Way We Have the World.

But as Sutty begins to discover more fully, the Akan Corporation’s attempted undoing of the Telling is essentially a foreclosure of the apocalyptic imagination, a renunciation of relationality and its poetic and political possibilities. And it seems to have been the technological dream of a

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[286] Le Guin, *The Telling*, 90-91.
[287] William Franke, *Poetry and Apocalypse: Theological Disclosures of Poetic Language*, (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2009), 43.
[288] Ibid. 40.

global "March to the Stars," developing after the Ekumen's first landing, that set them off in the direction. They traded their living tradition "for a great hierarchy in which each individual served the indefinite growth of the society's material wealth and complexity. From an active homeostatic balance they had turned it to an active forward-thrusting imbalance." The image that arises in Sutty's mind as she tries to distinguish between the sacramental poetic inheritance that is their past and the psycho-covenant that is their hoped for future is that of a person "sitting thinking after a good meal and somebody running furiously to catch the bus."[289]

In the meantime, one *maz* after another urges Sutty to record and recite and to gather the things that remain in view of the mad cleansing that threatens the possibility of human meaning. The Telling, after all, is what there is. As Maz Elyed puts the matter:

> It's all we have. You see? It's the way we have the world. Without the telling, we don't have anything at all. The moment goes by like the water of the river. We'd tumble and spin and be helpless if we tried to live in the moment. We'd be like a baby. A baby can do it, but we'd drown. Our minds need to tell, need the telling. To hold. The past has passed and there is nothing in the future to catch hold of. The future is nothing yet. How could anybody live there? So what we have is the words that tell what happened and what happens. What was and is.

Is it memory Maz Elyed means to say? History? "Elyed nodded, dubious, not satisfied by these terms." The presumed detachment from the Telling is the problem. "We're not outside the world, yoz. You know? We are the world. We're its language. So we live and it lives. You see? If we don't say the words, what is there in our world?"[290]

And here again, we're into the sacramental specifics of a life-giving unity asserted (and perhaps only asserted) through ceremony, story, lyric, and embodiment, and it is the self-emptying power of witness alone that would educate, illuminate, and feelingly persuade. We're reminded of Aimé Césaire's assertion that "The unconscious that all true poetry calls upon is the receptacle of original relationship that binds us to nature."[291]

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[289] Ibid. 110-111.
[290] Ibid. 132-133.
[291] Aimé Césaire, "Poetry and Knowledge," xlviii.

In the meantime, Sutty returns to an old, discarded category and notes, for the record, that, in her opinion, it's the Akan Corporation State that can rightly be called a religion.[292] How to go about urging Aka to decriminalize the Telling becomes Sutty's primary mission.

But for our purposes the Telling, the Ekumen, and the Akan Corporation are all ineluctably religious forms. Religion is the way we have our worlds. And there are so many ways sacramental poetics rejoins our sense of the sacred to the everyday, affording us one religious realization after another. How might we be more alive to its witness, less religiously opposed to it? "Ut implerentur scripturae. Strike up a ballad," cries Stephen Dedalus.[293] That the scriptures might be fulfilled, sing a song, and we'll make of it what we will. There are liturgies yet to be resisted, embraced, and differently deployed.

As Daniel Berrigan understands the witness of Jesus, it demands that we live in search of "the larger yes," the wider human affirmation in any given circumstance, "and live according to the slight edge over death."[294] How might tellings (every tale has one), conventionally dismissed as religious or at least thereby deprived of their socio-critical heft, be better viewed in all their sacramental poetic power. We will address this question in our final chapter.

[292] Ibid. 113.
[293] Joyce, *Ulysses*. 561.
[294] Berrigan, "An Ethic of Resurrection," in *Testimony: The Word Made Flesh*, (Mary Knoll, Orbis, 2004), 220-221.

CHAPTER V

EXPERIMENTING WITH AN AMEN

"No one survives without being addressed."[295]

Judith Butler

"How we imagine property is how we imagine ourselves."[296]

Lewis Hyde

How much did she scallop, harness and weights? Here

she is, Amnisty Ann! Call her calamity electrifies man…

No electress at all but old Moppa Necessity, angin mother of

injons. I'll tell you a test. But you must sit still. Will you hold your peace and listen well to what I am going to say now?[297]

James Joyce

Step Back from Religion

In April of 2003, a sitting U.S. president who claimed Jesus of Nazareth as his biggest influence was asked about his life as a man of prayer and how his religious commitments lined up with his decision to take the country into war, George W. Bush responded with the following:

> I don't bring God into my life to be a political person; I ask God for strength and guidance; I ask God to help me be a better decision. The decision about war and peace is a decision I made based upon what I thought were the best interests of the American

[295] Judith Butler, "Against Ethical Violence" in *Giving an Account of Oneself,* 63.
[296] Lewis Hyde, *Common as Air: Revolution, Art, and Ownership*, (New York: Farrar, Strauss, & Giroux, 2010), 26.
[297] Joyce, *Finnegans Wake*, 207.

people. I was able to step back from religion, because I have a job to do. And I, on bended knee to the good Lord, asked Him to help me to do my job in a way that's wise.[298]

As a testimonial, this is a powerful portrait of what is perhaps the classic neoliberal understanding of the concept of religion, and it should be very familiar to all of us. There is a pathos at work, and it's reflected in the way one can balance life at work and life in the spaces designated as places of worship, the way business is done, the way we often feel obliged to put what we take to be a specifically religious faith to the side when we're buying and selling, the way we go about being allegedly realistic. Bush attempts to tell the tale of the struggle of vocation, of faithfulness to a job with certain demands that might not coincide with the language usually associated with religion, a human heart in conflict with itself. This view of a divinity who is essentially a non-political being that we can bring in for wisdom and comfort and keep respectfully separate from our business, our job to do, is a view held by many Westerners across party lines, and it will often be hard to remember that it bears no resemblance to anything most any religious tradition, popularly conceived, has ever deemed orthodox. Nevertheless, it's standard operating procedure. And in a faithful reflection of these values, elected officials, managers of "public relations," and contracted apologists for "shareholders" are generally expected to "step back from religion" in their doings and tellings of doings while simultaneously giving lip service to the integrity and sacrosanct status of everybody's private, personal faith, including their own.

Needless to say, this study asserts that one can step back from religion no more easily than one remove oneself from the power of story, promises, dreams, symbolism, or human relationality. Claiming aloofness to these processes or to dismiss someone else's commitment as merely religious as opposed to one's own commitment to the demands of getting down to business is to ignore the inescapability of our own liturgical actions and those of others. It is to disavow the fact of our own religious witness while carrying it out, the witness that is nothing more nor less than what we do with ourselves, our energies, our resources. Or, to put it provocatively, show me a transcript of the words you've spoken, typed, or texted in the course of a day, a strict

[298] George W. Bush, interview by Tom Brokaw, *Nightly News*, NBC, April 24, 2003

account of your undertakings, and a record of your financial transactions (gas mileage, receipts), and I'll show you your religion.

As we've considered the resistance to the Berrigan witness and the popular ease with which religion is spoken of as a presence that can be somehow isolated as a monolithic influence, unproblematically held at a distance for the purpose of critically assessing its value, content, and claims to which the individual is free to grant or withhold personal assent, what might it mean to deploy religion as a way of naming our animating concerns and their accompanying liturgies across the board? What if we held, for instance, to Smith's provocation concerning imagined data and Certeau's privileging of story? Might it serve our tracing of sacramental poetic witness among religious forms?

To Redeem and To Humanize

As an anthropologist determined to push at the supposed boundaries of his discipline by calling many of its most sacredly held assumptions up to constant questioning, Talal Asad brings a critical contribution to the determinedly self-conscious study of religions. In his work, it's as if he leaves no presumption unproblematized as he flips the script, for starters, on religious/secular distinctions. While he stops short of declaring the liberal modernity that presumes to hold religious forces at bay as itself one more religious form in disguise, he nevertheless clears a path whereby ostensibly religious traditions (normalized by the anthropological gaze) are allowed to function as forms of sacramental poetic witness over against modernity's universalizing claims.

"If one believes oneself to be the source of salvation, the wish to make others reflect oneself is not unbenign, however terrible the practices by which this desire is put into effect." Here we have a typically effective overturning of categories in Asad's tale. He isn't referring to religious fundamentalists whose evangelical zeal justifies a coercive conversion of infidels. He's talking about "the European wish to make the world in its own image" and asking, concerning this anthropological encounter, "whose history is being made?"[299] Which agents seek to remake the world into their own image? Whose fundamentalism? Which salvation? Throughout his work,

[299] Talal Asad, *Genealogies of Religion: Discipline and Reasons of Power in Christianity and Islam*, 12.

Asad exposes an unacknowledged soteriology at work within discourses (secularism, the nation-state, globalism) and the rhetorical strategies that would reduce the living, local, functioning traditions of witness to one more instance of "religion" now rendered "a transhistorical and transcultural phenomenon,"[300] traditions conveniently deprived of their socio-critical and poetic authority.

Asad concerns himself with "the authorizing process by which 'religion' is created,"[301] and it is in this sense that he is engaged in the work of genealogy, which he defines as "a way of working back from our present to the contingencies that have come together to give us our certainties."[302] The ongoing cultural production of certain certainties is the heritage of "the Enlightenment project" which "consists not simply of looking and recording but of recording and remaking."[303] By Asad's lights, the Enlightenment project generates discourses which constantly absolutize a sense of the secularized universal, inscribing its own sense of unity on all that it beholds. This is the subtle, moving target of Asad's criticism, "the domain of secular history." By his account, "as history became substantialized and singularized, it assumed the form of a universal force that pushes mankind along the path of progress, punishing error and inadequacy—very much as the God of the Old Testament did."[304]

The trouble with this secularizing impulse seems to be an inability (or a refusal) to recognize itself, self-consciously, as an always, already underway discourse. In their characterizations of religious behavior, anthropologists habitually import "a theological preoccupation into an avowedly secular intellectual task"[305] by knowingly and authoritatively supplying what they've found deficient in religious practitioners self-descriptions (namely a discussion of symbols, rituals, and meanings divorced from religion as instrumental, formative, and as "constituting activity in the world"[306]). This is the discourse of a phenomenological

[300] Ibid. 28.
[301] Ibid. 37.
[302] Talal Asad, *Formations of the Secular: Christianity, Islam, Modernity*, (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003), 16.
[303] Asad, *Genealogies of Religion*, 269.
[304] Ibid. 123.
[305] Ibid. 60.
[306] Talal Asad, *Genealogies of Religion: Discipline and Reasons of Power in Christianity and Islam*, (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993), 47.

approach, popularly exemplified by Clifford Geertz, which makes it hard to discern whether (or how) "religious experience relates to something in the real world that believers inhabit. This is partly because religious symbols are treated, in circular fashion, as the precondition for religious experience (which, like any experience, must, by definition, be genuine), rather than as one condition for engaging with life."[307]

While Asad appears to be arguing that symbols are non-optional for the avowedly secular and avowedly religious alike in their engagement with life, he isn't insisting that everything is religious or that nothing is secular ("I assume, on the contrary, that there is nothing *essentially* religious, nor any universal essence that defines 'sacred language' or 'sacred experience.'"[308]). His focus is instead on discernible practices, disciplines and programs that serve forms of communal living ("Searching for symbolic meanings is not the name of *my* game."[309]). But even after thoroughly examining an aspect of religious practice (pain in medieval Christian ritual, in this instance), he adds a qualifier which serves both to undermine any sense of having attempted a definitive account of religion and to sound an enigmatic note concerning what Asad has in mind when he thinks of religion: "In my opinion, the story I have tried to tell…produces grounds for understanding partly what 'religion' was, not for identifying what part of it is 'true religion.'"[310]

Without making an appeal to a universal essence of religion (and perhaps keeping open the question of what might constitute, in some context, "true religion") Asad nevertheless strikes a universal tone concerning a kind of ideological captivity: "We are all already-constituted subjects, placed in networks of power, and in reproducing ourselves it is also the latter we reproduce. To do otherwise is to risk confronting the powers that give us the sense of who we are, and to embark on the dangerous task of reconstructing ourselves along unfamiliar lines."[311] The context of this assessment of human behavior is a discussion of Salman Rushdie's *The Satanic Verses*, its composition, its reception, and the bad faith at work in the spirit of self-congratulation among those (Rushdie included) whose editorializing around the phenomenon somehow assumes that

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[307] Ibid. 51.
[308] Asad, *Formations of the Secular*, 25.
[309] Asad, *Genealogies of Religion*, 110.
[310] Ibid. 124.
[311] Ibid. 270.

the novel “has dared to challenge taboos set up by the forces of inhumanity.”[312] Asad maintains that in their representation of Islam and their championing of the novel, Rushdie and his enthusiasts are blissfully entrenched within the powers of a self-congratulatory complacency: “It is, understandably, easier to use our readings to confirm those powers.”[313]

Against characterizations of Rushdie as “an anti-imperialist who celebrates hybridity and rejects the certainties of an orderly world,” Asad argues that the novel “assumes the categories of an imperialized world” presenting “the possibility of salvation through literature” and “urges upon (Muslim/immigrant) Indians a more progressive morality” seeking to “subvert their traditions in the hope that they will translate themselves into identities appropriate to the modern (i.e., *civilized*) world.”[314] Looking hard at the subtle strategies of this kind of “imperializing orthodoxy”[315] is Asad’s concern as he tries to outline and understand “the sacred geography of modern secular culture” and describe “the imaginative spaces of power it [the novel] expresses and inhabits.”[316]

Here again, Asad stops short of describing secularism (in spite of its orthodoxies and its sense of the sacred) as religious. As a student of religion with a similar interest in examining and publicizing “the ambiguous legacy of the Enlightenment,”[317] I think it more effective to let religion, as a descriptive term, be applied more broadly to all narratives and networks that seek to bind hearts and minds. At the very least, employing Dubuisson’s terminology of “cosmographic formations”[318] to better illuminate the religious function of secular discourse might serve the study well. While Asad certainly approaches this mode of naming unacknowledged religious forms in his accounts of the global market and consumer capitalism, his reluctance to carry it that little bit further remains puzzling.

But perhaps Asad’s strategy is formed around his sense that questioning too presumptuously “the self-evident character” of the secular and the ways it informs our thinking is as treacherous as believing one has a hold on religion. “It is not easy to grasp it [the secular]

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[312] Ibid. 275.
[313] Ibid. 270.
[314] Ibid. 290.
[315] Ibid. 292.
[316] Ibid. 301.
[317] Ibid. 306.
[318] Dubuisson, *The Western Construction of Religion: Myths, Knowledge, and Ideology*, 17.

directly," Asad observes. "It is best pursued through its shadows, as it were."[319] Nevertheless, he describes his project (in *Formations of the Secular*) as "an exploration of the epistemological assumptions of the secular."[320]

Tracing the secular in a genealogical fashion, Asad notes that reading religious scriptures through the grid of myth (while exempting the secular from mythological status) "has helped to constitute the secular as *the* epistemological domain in which history exists as history—and as anthropology."[321] Such selective mythologization is especially problematic when an allegedly unmythological secularism comes to be viewed by its adherents as a redeeming power. This is what Asad calls "secular redemptive politics" which often involves " a readiness to cause pain to those who are to be saved by being humanized." As he observes, "The thought that the world needs to be redeemed [by liberal modernity] is more than merely an idea. Since the eighteenth century, it has animated a variety of intellectual and social projects within Christendom and beyond, in European global empires."[322]

For Asad, this only rarely directly articulated idea is at work in the unprecedented prominence and global application of "American secular language of redemption" drawing on the notion (religious?) "that 'freedom' and 'America' are virtually interchangeable" and that "the universalizing moral project of the American nation-state" is "the project of redeeming and humanizing the world."[323] While believing (and advertising) itself to be above the fray of religious hysteria (against which the Enlightenment sets itself), liberal society, Asad argues, is a political formation within which lethal force is integral and rendered legitimate by its presumed project of secular redemption. As I read him, it is here that Asad's critique is very much in line with Le Guin's tale of the Akan corporate state's resistance to its own indigenous culture and Berrigans witness against the violence of the avowedly irreligious nation-state.

In Asad's latest free-standing work, *On Suicide Bombing*, this line of criticism, an elaboration on the concept of imperial orthodoxy, is especially effective. The secular version of

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319 Asad, *Formations of the Secular*, 16.
320 Ibid. 25.
321 Ibid. 43.
322 Ibid. 60-61
323 Ibid. 147.

redemption is able to define itself against the motives attributed to “religious terrorism.” “That appellation,” Asad explains, “defines the bomber [the terrorist suspect or the insurgent] as morally underdeveloped—and therefore premodern—when compared with peoples whose civilized status is partly indicated by their secular politics and their private religion and whose violence is therefore in principle disciplined, reasonable, and just.”[324]

While the actions of the United States government (once branded the “War on Terror”) are often associated with all manner of biblical imagery appropriated for a wide variety of ends, this aspect of popular religiosity is not Asad’s concern. His focus is the ideology of liberalism at work in American foreign policy which he refers to as “a project of universal redemption” that informs the mostly unstated conviction “that some humans have to be treated violently in order that humanity can be redeemed.” Having articulated this principle, Asad traces how it might lead to the conclusion that “the suicide bomber belongs in an important sense to a modern Western tradition of armed conflict for the defense of a free political community: To save the nation (or to found its state) in confronting a dangerous enemy, it may be necessary to act without being bound by ordinary moral constraints.”[325] Asad puts these thoughts on redemptive possibilities in the form of a question: “If modern war seeks to found or to defend a free political community with its own law, can one say that suicide terrorism (like a suicidal nuclear strike) belongs in this sense to liberalism?” He proposes that considering this question might be “more significant than our comforting attempts at distinguishing the good conscience of just warriors from the evil acts of terrorists.”[326] By insinuation, Asad focuses the conversation toward a habit of thinking Daniel Berrigan, in conversation with Thich Nhat Hanh, terms as that “terrible casuistry that trades off human bodies and looks on an abstract, future good as an excuse for present evil.”[327]

Having expanded the sphere of appropriate subject matter for an anthropologist and, in the process, presented pressing questions for religious studies, Asad recasts these matters further by describing all the practices of violent conduct (that of insurgents, soldiers, state-sponsored

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[324] Talal Asad, *On Suicide Bombing*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007), 45.
[325] Ibid. 62-63.
[326] Ibid. 92.
[327] Thich Nhat Hanh and Daniel Berrigan, *The Raft Is Not the Shore: Conversations Toward a Buddhist-Christian Awareness*, (Maryknoll: Orbis, 2001), 22.

torturers) “in our secular world” as being “thought to ultimately secure a kind of collective immortality.” It’s all faith-based initiative all the time, he might say. But Asad takes it further in a fashion that provokes further questions concerning how he means to define religion. This faith in violent conduct, he says, is “what some scholars call civil religion and others pseudoreligion.”[328] Does Asad here allude to a space for describing religious practice as true or false? Faithful or unfaithful? His work is already undoubtedly a form of witness with a certain binding potential, but what might he make of the concept of sacramental poetic witness?

Sacramental Poetics as Illegal Thinking

In a piece entitled “Free Speech, Blasphemy, and Secular Criticism,” in *Is Critique Secular?*: *Blasphemy, Injury, and Free Speech*, Asad enters the conversation surrounding the matter of Danish cartoons of Mohammad. In his conclusion, he poses a series of provocative questions that seem to signal the notion of a sacramental poetic witness in sync with the concerns of the Berrigans’ activism. What if the perception of Muslims’ worries over blasphemy was to extend beyond what many non-Muslims consider petty issues? What if traditionally religious language in the key of social protest *meant* something to Europe? He ponders the possibilities of reception:

> What would happen if religious language were to be taken more seriously in secular Europe and the preventable deaths in the global South of millions from hunger and war was to be denounced as "blasphemy," as the flouting of ethical limits for the sake of what is claimed to be freedom? What if this were to be done without any declarations of "belief," and yet done in all seriousness as a way of rejecting passionately the aspiration to totalized global control? Of course Europe's proscription of theological language in the political domain makes such a use of the word "blasphemy" inconceivable. But does this impossibility merely signal a secular reluctance to politicize "religion," or is it the symptom of an incapacity?[329]

[328] Asad, *On Suicide Bombing*, 96.
[329] Talal Asad, “Free Speech, Blasphemy, and Secular Criticism,” in *Is Critique Secular? Blasphemy, Injury, and Free Speech*, with Wendy Brown, Judith Butler, and Saba Mahmood, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2009), 56-57.

While my hope for the term sacramental poetic is, on the one hand, to draw ostensibly *non*-religious voices like Ellison and Joyce into a more knowingly religious discourse, I intend, on the other, to lift those voices who are marginalized for being labeled *merely* religious, a designation I am not prone to ascribe to any human voice even as I find it critically helpful, to describe, with the Berrigans, the will to totalized global control as ineluctably religious. The terminology of sacramental poetic witness is, needless to say, an attempt to overcome the cultural incapacity to which Asad alludes, an incapacity toward the reception, in my sense, of *sacramental poetic intelligence*, the witness that will often see the world illegally, in Berrigan's parlance, because it insists upon the relationality, the interdependence, which dominating forces will find it necessary to deny as legitimate or realistic.

As I read him, Richard King is driven by a similar concern. By King's lights, reduction of a witness, the site of enunciation of a wisdom tradition, for instance, to a "religion" is "the epistemological equivalent of immigration and border control. It is the point at which 'foreign' wisdom traditions become *naturalized* as "religions" and it is on these that such worldviews and forms of life are allowed to enter the mainstream world of western intellectual debate."[330] In another context, King notes how the same move is often at work when we characterize historical or contemporary personages as mystical: "The very fact that 'the mystical' is seen as irrelevant to issues of social and political authority itself reflects contemporary, secularized notions of an attitude toward power. The separation of the mystical from the political is itself a political decision!"[331] Or as William Cavanaugh observes, making a related point, "The distinction between politics and religion was not discovered but invented."[332] The subtle, secularizing mythology (Every tale has a telling.) that would divide commonly human commitments was once craftily spied out by Berrigan's mentor Dorothy Day who sensed a removal—or sidestepping--of the ethical and political heft of her own witness in the rush to decree her career as somehow saintly.

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[330] Richard King, "Philosophy of Religion as Border Control" in *Postcolonial Philosophy of Religion*, ed. Purushottma Bilimoria, (Dordrecht: Spinger, 2009), 44.
[331] Richard King, *Orientalism and Religion: Postcolonial Theory, India, and 'The Mystic East*, (London: Routledge, 1999), 10.
[332] William T. Cavanaugh, *Torture and Eucharist: Theology, Politics, and the Body of Christ*, (Oxford: Blackwell, 1998), 5.

“Don’t call me a saint,” she said. “I don’t want to be dismissed so easily.”[333] Better to be legally barred than to have ones witness spiritualized or cordoned away in the realm of the saintly, the pious, or the mystic. Better to be allowed to ring true.

The Religious Situation

The sacramental poetic witness allows for no such distinctions but asserts itself, liturgically, in any and every scene, challenging us to examine our own abstractions religiously to examine what they’re doing, who they’re helping, what costs they’re exacting. As we’ve seen in Asad’s account of the unacknowledged soteriology at work in avowedly non-religious projects of universal redemption and Le Guin’s tale of Akan Corporation religion and the sad caricature of the conned man, there is no non-liturgical space in human societies, but there is much in the way of what Doug Meeks terms “a distorting transcendence”[334] which reigns in the absence of poetic-critical consciousness.

In a diagnosis that might serve the conned man well, David Loy characterizes this distorting transcendence as that which haunts “the ‘commonsense’ everyday world, riddled as it is with unconscious, because automatized, ontological commitments.”[335] Being alive to them, alive to the complexities of one’s own religious situation is nothing less than a commitment to become aware of what’s going on in one’s mind (commitment to seeing our heretofore unconscious and ever-shifting, ever-enslaving commitments) and of the damage our fixations do. Our fixations generate suffering (our own and others) by constantly sabotaging the possibility of love, life, and communal mindfulness even as we mistake our fixations for our only hope for love, life, and ultimate significance. These fixations are what Loy calls (drawing the phrase from Otto Rank) “immortality projects.”[336]

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[333] Dorothy Day, *Selected Writings*, ed. Robert Ellsberg, (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1992), xviii.
[334] M. Douglas Meeks, *God the Economist: The Doctrine of God and Political Economy*, (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1989), 42.
[335]David Loy, “Dead Words, Living Words, and Healing Words: The Disseminations of and Dōgen and Eckhart,” in *Healing Deconstruction: Postmodern Thought in Buddhism and Christianity*, ed. David Loy (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1996), 34.
[336] David Loy, *Lack and Transcendence: The Problem of Death and Life in Psychotherapy, Existentialism, and Buddhism*, (New Jersey: Humanities Press, 1996), 3.

Grounded (if I may be permitted a paradox) in his understanding of Buddhist traditions, Loy is able to name our drive to "immortality projects" as "a sense of ontological lack." This lack names the anxiety generated by "two opposed but complementary fears": "Life fear is anxiety in the face of standing out from nature, thereby losing connection with a greater whole. Death fear is anxiety in the face of extinction, of losing individuality and dissolving back into the whole."[337] Or as Loy so effectively puts it in his description of the lack that drives the people of the West individualistically, politically, and spiritually, our immortality projects are funded by our misapprehension of the intuition that informs the feeling that "'I' am not real right now."[338]

The intuition is explained by the Buddhist notion of *anatta* (no self) and Loy draws on this teaching as he describes the immortality project that is the ego-self (the big one that drives all our little ones): "The ego-self is this never-ending project to realize oneself by objectifying oneself, something consciousness can no more do than a hand can grasp itself, or an eye see itself." Out of the "perpetual failure" of this project, a failure no amount of money, fame, or accomplishment can prevent, we develop a fear of the shadow, this "sense-of-lack" from which we're forever on the run.[339] Unconscious commitments to myriad forms of distorting transcendence follow, the transcendence that would deny at every turn (or try to deny) the binding and potentially emancipating fact of interdependence and the irretrievably relational essence of human being. Meeks describes the religious situation thusly: "There is in reality no such thing as a radically individual and isolated human being. We are what we are as a result of being constituted by our relationships." Where Loy posits *anatta* in response to deluding forms, Meeks raises the Christian witness of "communal coinherence"[340] (drawn from the Trinitarian doctrine of the Cappadocian Fathers, *perichoresis*, mutual indwelling of God the Father, the Son, and the Spirit) which critically counters the myths of self-sufficiency and self-possession: "The self-giving life of the trinitarian community of God is a criticism of the self as private property."[341] In this way, both traditions

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[337] Ibid. 62.
[338] David Loy, *A Buddhist History of the West: Studies in Lack*, (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2002), 3.
[339] Ibid. 4.
[340] Meeks, *God the Economist: The Doctrine of God and Political Economy*, 12.
[341] Meeks, "The Social Trinity and Property," in *God's Life in Trinity*, ed. Miroslav Volf and Michael Welker, (Fortress Press, 2006), 21.

counter “unhealthily religious” forms with a more redeeming poetics of human meaning-making.[342]

We Can Never Escape a Religious Interpretation of the World

In the Zen teaching of Huang Po, the idolatrous commitment to immortality projects is tied to the feverish formation of concepts or the making of forms:

> When all such forms are abandoned, there is the Buddha. Ordinary people look to their surroundings, while followers of the Way look to the Mind, but the true Dharma is to forget them both. The former is easy enough, the latter very difficult. Men are afraid to forget their minds, fearing to fall through the void with nothing to stay their fall. They do not know that the Void is not really void, but the realm of the real Dharma. This spiritually enlightening nature is without beginning, as ancient as the Void, subject neither to birth nor to destruction, neither existing nor not existing…It cannot be looked for or sought, comprehended by wisdom or knowledge, explained in words, contacted materially or reached by meritorious achievement. All the Buddhas and Bodhisattvas, together with all wriggling things possessed of life, share in this great Nirvanic nature…You cannot use Mind to seek Mind, the Buddha to seek the Buddha, or the Dharma to seek the Dharma. So you students of the Way should immediately refrain from conceptual thought. Let a tacit understanding be all![343]

To the extent that we make of Buddhism (or any tradition, ideology, or enthusiasm) an attempt to transcend the realm of tacit understanding, to leap past the sense of finitude that informs our existence, to somehow definitively overcome our sense of lack, we condemn ourselves to never seeing the world and our place within it properly, to never entering the realm of real dharma. According to Loy, the attempt to transcend religiosity (at its best a *self-consciously* tacit understanding) is another doomed immortality project. Derrida suggests as much when he asks

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[342] Meeks, *God the Economist*, 41.
[343] Huang Po, *The Zen Teaching of Huang Po on the Transmission of Mind*, trans. John Blofeld (New York: Grover Press, 1958), 41-42.

rhetorically: “Should one save oneself by abstraction or save oneself from abstraction?”[344]The play of religion is that with which we have to do or the way in which we do everything we do or think we do or, as Le Guin might put it, the way we have the world. ”If that lack is a constant, and religion is understood as the way we try to resolve it, we can never escape a religious interpretation of the world.”[345] There is, after all, no stepping back from religion. We are, in this sense, mything persons through and through .

What sort of religion might form around such a realization? A religion of awakened insights that don’t presume to expiate the lack, insights recorded and put into engaged and engaging practice of constant interrogation with an eye toward further insight. As Morny Joy testifies, these insights “represent neither a nihilistic nor determinist description of reality, but a radical interrogation of the assumed self-sufficient status of any entity—be it a person or an object.”[346] As Loy maintains, this is the religious interpretation (the way of life) the Buddha taught. In view of *anatta* (“the strange but essential Buddhist claim that our sense of subjectivity does not correspond to any real ontological self”[347]), this interrogation, an interrogation whose end is compassionate practice, is what we have (all we have) to do, a pilgrimage that involves, over and over again, “the deconstruction and reconstruction of the fictive sense of self.”[348] It is a journey of new and ever-renewed awareness. As Joy describes it, “What is needed is a new way of relating to the world: a different sense of self. This would be a version that both critiques and constructs its practice with insights born of self-questioning honesty, i.e., by a mindfulness of our selves, in whatever guise they are manifested.”[349]

This form of sacramental poetic privileges a sense of mystery (of knowing that we are not knowing) in all of our dealings. It remains perpetually open to the unforeseen possibilities in the way we’ve, thus far, sought to organize our worlds. It assumes, as a given, that the status quo

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[344] Derrida, “Faith and Knowledge: the Two Sources of ‘Religion’ at the Limits of Reason Alone” trans. Samuel Weber in *Religion*, ed. Jacques Derrida and Gianni Vattimo, (Stanford: Stanford University Press), 1.
[345] Loy, *A Buddhist History of the West, 8.*
[346] Morny Joy, “Mindfulness of the Selves: Therapeutic Interventions in a Time of Dis-solution,” in *Healing Deconstruction*, 78.
[347] Loy, *The Great Awakening: A Buddhist Social Theory*, (Boston: Wisdom, 2003), 22
[348] Ibid. 5.
[349] Joy, “Mindfulness of the Selves: Therapeutic Interventions in a Time of Dis-solution,” 97.

never goes far enough in imagining further, in widening the sphere of humaneness and hospitality, in refusing to settle for the deadened and deadening practice of already-made-up-minds. It is a radical open-endedness hell-bent on seeing what it has yet to see. As Loy explains:

> Buddhist awakening does not grasp or otherwise resolve the essential mysteriousness of our being in the world. It opens us up to that mystery, a mystery that is an essential aspect of the meaning of 'sacred.' In practice, this means that the broadest context for all our intellectual efforts is a wonder in the face of a world that always exceeds our ideas about it. That excess does not signify any defect in our understanding. Rather, it is the source of our understanding, allowing for a perpetual bubbling-up of insights and images—when we do not cling to the ones that we have already become comfortable with.[350]

The Way This World Is Experienced

In his attentiveness to the insights and images to which we've become comfortable and accustomed, Loy turns this interrogating, religious tradition toward the unacknowledged religious traditions that vandalize our physical and psychic landscapes. Our damaging activity originates in our damaging, perverting imaginations which are founded, in Buddhist terms, in a deluded sense of duality that can only be overcome by an awakening to our "interpenetrating nonduality with the world, which is wisdom."[351]

In histories of violent conflict, he notes the way one gang of oppressors is eventually replaced by another whose mission was founded, ironically enough, upon involves overturning oppression. Engaged Buddhism has an illuminating word concerning the necessity of a hyper-mindfulness concerning one's attempt at revolutionary practice:

> From a Buddhist perspective, there is nothing surprising about that. If I do not struggle with the greed in my own heart, it is quite likely that, once in power, I too will be inclined to take advantage of the situation to serve my own interests…If I remain unaware that my sense of duality is a dangerous delusion, I will understand the problem of social change

[350] David Loy, *The Great Awakening: A Buddhist Social Theory*, 27.
[351] Ibid. 29.

> as the need for me to dominate the sociopolitical order…Emphasis on transience implies another nonduality, that between means and ends…Peace is not only the goal, it must also be the way; or as Thich Nhat Hanh and Mahaghosananda have put it, peace is every step. We ourselves must be the peace we want to create.[352]

This commitment to a practiced wisdom (which never stops asking itself if it's still wisdom and therefore, in fact, still practiced) is especially devastating (or redeeming) in its refusal to settle for rhetoric or any abstraction that would draw attention away from narratives of inter-being. Morny Joy describes this sensibility especially well:

> Buddhism does have much to offer a technologically dominated society, which often equates the mere verbalization of the factors in a problematic situation with an instant solution to it. In contrast, Buddhism eschews arid theorizing in the name of commitment to awareness of the internal and external barriers which cause estrangement in its many guises.[353]

The understanding of estrangement on offer within Engaged Buddhism offers an especially holistic understanding of the world in its counter-witness to the mythologies of economic "progress." It also involves a certain *de*-spiritualizing of otherwise other-worldly religious imagery to better sharpen its powers of social witness (a witness that was perhaps loud and clear—alive and signaling--in an age when sacramental poetic witness had yet to be spiritualized away). Loy describes the six realms of samsara as "the different ways we experience this world as our attitude toward it changes." This is especially helpful in his account of hell: "The hell realm is not necessarily a *place* I will be reborn into, due to my hatred and evil actions. It can be *the way this world is experienced* when my mind is dominated by anger and hate." In a manner especially well-suited toward the deconstruction of an anxious mindset, "The twelve interlinked factors of *pratitya samutpada* (interdependent origination) do not necessarily refer to different lifetimes; that teaching can be understood as describing the various causes and effects of 'my' mental processes right now."[354]

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[352] Ibid. 35.
[353] Joy, 96.
[354] David Loy, *The Great Awakening: A Buddhist Social Theory*, 8.

The Conceptual Necessity of Global Poverty

This description enables Loy to offer a diagnosis of “a fundamental and inescapable poverty built into a consumer society.” He traces the misguided pilgrimage compelled by the anxious craving whereby we desire objects, fall into a sense of frustration and impotence, and then avoid an awareness of our sadness by craving something else. With this hellish religion at work in the world of so-called wealth, he questions the efficacy of grand, international projects which mean to end poverty by creating economies focused on consumption. Drawing from Buddhist texts, Loy maintains that such endeavors “are grasping a snake by the wrong end” in an effort to help people not yet “seduced by the utopian dream of a technological cornucopia,” not yet fixated on Western fantasies. ”It is presumptuous to assume that the only way to become happy is to get on the treadmill of a lifestyle dependent on the market and increasingly preoccupied with consumption.”

Most provocatively, Loy notes how the notion of global poverty has become “conceptually necessary” in our drive to commodify and monetarize the world.” Instead of focusing only on neoliberal understanding of poverty, “we also need to address the personal, social, and ecological costs of our obsession with wealth and growth.” We have to allow other narratives other testaments (other religions?) alternative to “the neoliberal economic understanding of what happiness is and how to achieve it.”[355] Engaged Buddhism insists “that the single-minded pursuit of material wealth does not make human beings happy or even rich, for a world in which envy and miserliness predominate cannot be considered one in which poverty has been eliminated.”[356]

Loy highlights the tragic and dangerous presumptuousness at work in asserting (in policy) that the non-Westernized poor, in order to be happy and fulfilled, need to be converted to the unacknowledged religious commitment to running ones life away on “the treadmill of market consumerism.” And he proposes that ”our evangelical efforts to economically ‘develop’ other societies, which cherish their own spiritual values and community traditions, may be viewed as a

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[355] Ibid. 41.
[356] Ibid. 40.

contemporary form of religious imperialism. Does that make the globalization of capitalism a new kind of mission to convert the heathen?"[357]

Loy certainly thinks so. And if we concede his point but maintain that global capitalism is still, as a religion, more scientific and less idealistic than any possible alternatives, Loy flips the script:

> Contemporary economics is much more 'idealistic' in the sense that it presumes an unrealistic image of human nature derived from an eighteenth-century ethical system, utilitarianism, which was not derived from empirical observation but conceived in a philosopher's study. As a result, economists today tend to live in an idealized, one-dimensional world of statistics and equations that do not accurately reflect human values and goals. [358]

Psychic Strip-mining

As Loy's articulation of Buddhist witness has it, global capitalism is a religion that undermines the possibility of flourishing for other religions performing a psychic strip-mining upon cultures where it holds sway:

> Where there are no restrictions to protect social relations, commodification tends to occur with every potential resource that can be utilized for economic gains. This includes the very moral fabric of society, woven of innumerable personal relationships, now commodified into 'social capital' or 'moral capital'—ugly economist terms that describe how market forces rely upon but damage that fabric of interpersonal responsibility.

As a religion, global capitalism operates under the limited criteria of merely mercantile values. Most paradoxically, "it requires character traits such as honesty and trust in order to work efficiently, yet it is primarily motivated by a desire for profit that erodes such personal responsibility for others."[359] In service to the legal fictions that are transnational corporations, character traits, human understood, are in short supply. These abstractions are unable to repent,

[357] Ibid. 60.
[358] Ibid. 53.
[359] Ibid. 67

unable to be enlightened, and unable to love because every gesture, even before it is conceived, is reduced to public relations' gambits aimed at converting populations. Loy marvels at "how extraordinarily persuasive their conversion techniques are," and maintains that "If we are not blinded by the distinction usually made between secular and sacred, we can see that advertising promises another kind of salvation, i.e., another way to solve our lack." By his assessment "religions are not fulfilling their responsibility if they ignore this religious dimension of capitalism, if they do not emphasize that this seduction is deceptive because this solution to our unhappiness leads only to greater dissatisfaction."[360]

Global financial profiteering as an end in itself corrodes a culture's resources for thinking, imagining, and acting humanely, devaluing (or dissolving altogether) the ethical reservoir of other religious traditions. And the marketing machinery it employs and to which it expends most of its resources "constitutes the greatest effort in mental manipulation that humanity has ever experienced—all of it to no other end than creating consumerist needs for the sake of corporate profit." [361]

As Meeks notes, "The most successful ideology is one that is not recognized as an ideology,"[362] and the broadband powers of proselytization at work within consumerist ideology go undetected and unengaged so long as its work of religious formation are rendered immune from the religious critique of sacramental poetic witness. Perhaps it is primarily this very witness which remains to assert that the human commitment of "communal cooperation" is "a higher survival value than increased [financial] profits."[363] Against the presumptions and the pretensions of global capitalist religion, Loy asserts that "Our national and international nervous systems are not for sale to the highest bidder," and in a broad call for engagement, he suggests that we begin by "refusing to allow our nervous systems to become addicted to the channels of communication that maintain the collective trance generally accepted as 'social reality.'" Cultivating a sense of nonduality is the primary issue, because "ultimately it is the sense of duality between ourselves

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[360] David Loy, *A Buddhist History of the West,* 200.
[361] Ibid. 208.
[362] Meeks, *God the Economist*, 130.
[363] Ibid. 152.

and others that shores up the social structures institutionalizing greed, ill will, and delusion."[364] And with this issue in mind, he suggests that one possible beginning might be "a movement to restrict the role of advertising, on the grounds that today much of it has become as bad for our psychological and spiritual health as tobacco is for our physical health."[365]

Such initiatives hardly begin to form in our minds until we begin to see and interrogate the connections between our states of mind and the way the world is being badly, dualistically organized with our presumed consent. Engaged Buddhism widens the sphere of sight and interrogation When we see the connections, the relatedness of phenomena, and learn to enjoy seeing them, we can begin to put questions to ourselves, our habits, our ways of seeking peace.

There Are No Unrelated Phenomena

As a kind of mantra that signifies an aliveness to relationality, alertness to the social fact—not the idea—of an inescapably communal essence to everything and everyone we might otherwise ignorantly and destructively come to view as our and ours alone, Meeks recalls an expression that once peppered the exchanges of older, English-speaking generations: "Much obliged." The habitual resistance to such awareness is increasingly evident: "Now one seldom hears this in our society, for we do not want to be obligated."[366] But the sacramental poetic witness I've attempted to trace is a lively summons, whether in story, song, image, or action to what Meeks calls "complex participatory consciousness,"[367] and to the extent that we think of it as a religious summons, we do so properly only to the extent that religion is here manifest as an ethical witness to the relationality in which we live and move and have our being, the provocative sense in which Derrida asserts that "Religion is responsibility or it is nothing at all."[368] And as Butler reminds us, our irresponsible breaks with the relationality that sustains and addresses us are only ever the mad presumptions of deluded minds.

In this way sacramental poetics is a summons to ever-renewed perception and

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[364] David Loy, *The Great Awakening: A Buddhist Social Theory*, 38-39.
[365] Ibid. 89.
[366] Meeks, *God the Economist*, 119.
[367] Ibid. 154.
[368] Jacques Derrida, *The Gift of Death*, trans. David Wells (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995), 2.

recoginition of accountability. As the witness of Thich Nhat Hanh has it, this is a call to see ourselves anew and simultaneously a call to see poetically *and* to perceive reality as it is. As his Buddhist renders the call, it is an active awareness of interpenetration which, incidentally, does not depend upon our awareness. He will hold a piece of paper, for instance, in front of his listener and observe, "If you are a poet, you will see clearly that there is a cloud floating in this sheet of paper." Without a cloud, there is no rain. Without rain, no trees. And without trees, there will be no paper (on down—or up—to loggers, packaging, and transportation). When we bring our thoughts to bear on the detailed histories of what has been made manifest (or simply *is* manifest) before our eyes, we receive the sense that "the cloud and the paper inter-are." This is the intensely reality-based notion of "Inter-being,"[369] a showing business to which practitioners of sacramental poetics (perhaps the most serious people in the world) mean to give and receive constant witness. Far from being an escape into disembodied bliss, this sensibility dissolves whatever dichotomies might keep us from perceiving and responding to the complex relatedness of all of life. It is a call to a deeper investment than our usual abstractions allow.

Hanh subverts the Cartesian formula and seamlessly inserts an ethical imperative born of a determination to be realistic by being awake:

> There are hundreds of thousands of stems linking us to everything in the cosmos, and therefore we can be. Do you see the link between you and me? If you are not there, I am not here. That is certain. If you do not see it yet, look more deeply and I am sure you will see. As I said, this is not philosophy. You really have to see.[370]

Sacramental poetics resists the barricades that await it ("this is not philosophy"), barricades that would reduce its witness to a merely intellectual exercise or a form of spiritual consolation. It challenges the language games that obstruct the possibility of insight: "You have to *see* life. You should not say, life *of* the leaf, you should only speak of life *in* the leaf and life *in* the

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[369] Thich Nhat Hanh, *The Heart of Understanding: Commentaries on the Prajñāpāramitā Heart Sutra*, ed. Peter Levitt, (Berkeley: Parallax Press, 1988), 3.
[370] Ibid. 25.

tree."[371] And it speaks to "the issues" by deftly refusing (and rendering hopelessly illogical) the very concept of issues in their present organization and staging:

> The affluent society and the society deprived of everything inter-are. The wealth of one society is made of the poverty of the other. 'This is like this, because that is like that.' Wealth is made of non-wealth elements, and poverty is made by non-poverty elements. It is exactly the same as with the sheet of paper. So we must be careful. We should not imprison ourselves in concepts. The truth is that everything is everything else. We can only inter-be, we cannot just be. And we are responsible for everything that happens around us.[372]

While religion is often characterized as a commitment to concepts (concepts which, more often than not, impede the possibility of thinking coherently or acting humanely), the sacramental poetics is a practice of lively and committed mindfulness of the causal web. In this sense, it doesn't exactly spiritualize anything, and its concepts, to whatever extent they're allowed to momentarily form, are designed (or narrated) to heighten our awareness that all our activity of doing, saying, and consuming is always already, ineluctably involved in socio-political-economic enterprise. As I understand her, Iris Murdoch characterizes the witness I have in mind in her definition of love not as a flight from reality but a constant engagement with it in ongoing discovery: "Love is the perception of individuals. Love is the extremely difficult realisation that something other than oneself is real. Love, and so art and morals, is the discovery of reality."[373]

Insert Soul Here

To review, there is no escaping a religious interpretation of the world. There are, now and then and often, apocalyptic forms that comes to us through the witness of sacramental poetic ventures which we might call, with Eliot, a kind of redeeming "raid on the inarticulate."[374] And in view of this, I offer what I take to be a redeeming word on listening and making from the poet

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[371] Ibid. 26.
[372] Ibid. 33-34
[373] Iris Murdoch, "The Sublime and the Good," in *Existentialists and Mystics: Writings on Philosophy and Literature*, ed. Peter Conradi, (New York: 1997), 215. With thanks to Sallie McFague for the tip.
[374] T.S. Eliot, "East Coker," in *Four Quartets*, (London: Faber and Faber, 1944), 22. I owe my awareness of this passage to Damien Durr.

Robert Haas. The poetic intelligence he describes constitutes an alive and signaling ethical summons:

> I have it in mind that, during the Vietnam War, one of the inventions of American technology was a small antipersonnel bomb that contained sharp fragments of plastic which, having torn through the flesh and lodged in the body, could not be found by an X-ray. Often I just think about the fact that some person created it. At other times I have thought about the fact that the bomb works on people just the way the rhythms of poetry do. And it seems to me that there are technes on the side of life and technes on the side of death. Durable and life-giving human inventions—tragedy, restaurants that stay open late at night, holding hands, the edible artichoke—were probably half-discovered and half invented from the materials the world makes available, but I think that they were also the result of an active and attentive capacity for creation that humans have—that is, finally, the only freedom they have—and that a poetry that makes fresh and resilient forms extends the possibility of being alive.[375]

As Certeau instructs, sacramental poetics does not express a practice, nor does it limit itself to telling about a movement. It *makes* it. One understands if one enters into the movement oneself. Insert soul here.

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[375] Robert Hass, "Listening and Making," in *Twentieth Century Pleasures*, (New York: Ecco 1984), 132-133.

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