

EVOLUTION AND APOPHATIC THOUGHT:
A THEOLOGICAL POETICS FOR OUR TIME

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Crow-Work

Eric Pankey

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The Second Sex

Michael Robbins

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Uncommon Prayer

Kimberly Johnson

Persea, 2014

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In a letter to his friend Léontine Zanta, Pierre Teilhard de Chardin wrote about the need for a renewed conception of the divine, his hope for a “new religion” or “improved Christianity” whose “personal God is no longer the great ‘neolithic’ landowner of times gone by, but the Soul of the world—as demanded by the cultural and religious stage we have now reached.”¹ At the basis of de Chardin’s observation is the insight that humans’ conception and language of the divine are deeply related to the material, social, and cultural conditions in which they live. Living traditions of faith have always had to adapt to the contemporary world, and often there is a tension between the adaptation and the more radical call of the tradition’s prophecy and wisdom. Early in Christian thought, Platonic philosophies were revising the sense of the divine, one far removed from the world, very different from

1. *Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, Letters to Léontine Zanta, trans. Bernard Wall (New York: Harper & Row, 1965), 114 (letter dated 26 January 1936).*

the divine disclosed in Jewish and Christian scriptures, where God interacts with humans in history, laments, gets angry, and feels pain.

Implicit also in de Chardin's letter is the idea that the image of God as the great landowner has dominated Judaism and Christianity at least partly because of their emergence during the Neolithic era, the time when plant cultivation, settled communities, and the "ground and polished tools of the new economy,"² tools that were manufactured using other tools,³ enabled movement from hunter-gatherer to agricultural ways of life. Taking ownership of the land thus became the great mark of success. de Chardin quotes Henry Breuil to the effect that, "'We have only just cast off the last moorings which held us to the Neolithic age.'"⁴ In de Chardin's day (1881–1955) many forces were converging to bring about this reorganization of human thinking, feeling, and living. Besides the political and social upheavals following the First World War, there were the continuing expansions of knowledge of the natural world on both the micro and the macro levels, growth of insights into the human psyche (from psychoanalysis to existentialist thought), growth of various communications technologies such as the telegraph and telephone, and the expansion of transportation by car and airplane. Since then many further developments in all of these areas have continued. Not least among them is the emergence of the Internet, which is deeply related to an expanding sense of human discourse as open-ended, decentered, constantly under revision, and centrifugal in its effects. Although these effects are neither entirely inevitable nor new, the Internet nevertheless plays into their intensification.⁵ Given how interconnected many parts of the globe now are economically, politically, and materially, we urgently need a more dynamic and open-ended sense of knowledge, the world, and ourselves. For those of us in various traditions who believe in God, this sense of interconnection is also revising our sense of the divine.

2. *Lewis Mumford, The Transformations of Man (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1956), 29.*

3. *See Haim Ofek, Second Nature: Economic Origins of Human Evolution (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 167–72.*

4. *Recorded in Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, The Phenomenon of Man, trans. Bernard Wall (New York: Harper & Row, 1959), 221.*

5. *Johnny Ryan, A History of the Internet and the Digital Future (London: Reaktion Books, 2010), 41–44, 70–115, 137–43.*

However, our brains are still in many ways wired for earlier stages of development.⁶We are still evolving, and there remains a lot to do to cast off the moorings holding us to the Neolithic era.

De Chardin's idea of God as the soul of the world resonates with the pantheism embraced by many theologians in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries.⁷ This view emphasizes the presence of the divine in all things without reducing the divine to the things of the world (which would be pantheism) or even to the greatest of all things (which is a distortion of traditional theism). According to pantheism, as according to very traditional theology, even to call God "Being" or "Ultimate Being" risks reifying the divine.⁸ God is, rather, "without," that is outside of or beyond, being—which means that everything one might say of the divine—"God is good," or "God is love"—is, no matter how true, also a radical misstatement.⁹ As a result, many contemporary theologians are turning to apophatic theology, which emphasizes that because God transcends all categories and language, we are better off emphasizing what the divine is not, allowing the mind and heart to enter into a "cloud of unknowing."¹⁰

At the same time, as Sweeney says in T. S. Eliot's "Fragment of an Agon," "I've gotta use words when I talk to you."¹¹ But how does one speak of the ineffable? Aquinas's way was to speak in metaphors

6. See Yuval Noah Harari, *Sapiens: A Brief History of Humankind* (New York: Harper Collins, 2015), 40–45.

7. See David Tracy, *Blessed Rage for Order: The New Pluralism in Theology* (New York: Seabury, 1975), 175–91; Roland Faber, *God as Poet of the World: Exploring Process Theologies*, trans. Douglas W. Stott (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2008), 1–43, 121–32; and Catherine Keller, *Cloud of the Impossible: Negative Theology and Planetary Entanglement* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2015), 1–86, 196–214, 306–16.

8. See Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae, Vol I: "Christian Theology,"* ed. Thomas Gilby, O.P. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 166–94 (1, 1ae, Question 12).

9. See Jean-Luc Marion, *God Without Being*, trans. Thomas A. Carlson (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991).

10. See the anonymous medieval text *The Cloud of Unknowing: and The Book of Privy Counseling*, ed. William Johnston (Garden City, NY: Image Books, 1973); and Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite, *The Divine Names and The Mystical Theology*, trans. John D. Jones (Milwaukee, WI: Marquette University Press, 1980).

11. T. S. Eliot, *Collected Poems 1909–1962* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1970), 123.

with full acknowledgment that all images are inadequate.¹² One consequence of this inadequacy is the need to use a variety of figures, each of which discloses and conceals, though differently from others, so that each can address the others' deficiencies. Thus, besides soul of the world, we might think of God, in the terms of Alfred North Whitehead, as the "poet of the world," who is "with tender patience leading it by his vision of truth, beauty, and goodness."¹³ This leading is done non-coercively, but with constant fidelity, allowing the creation to exist with its own integrity, in its own complex and relational terms.

One could well read the older conception of the divine landowner as the one whose death Nietzsche proclaimed. A signal moment occurs in the passage of *The Gay Science* concerning the madman in the marketplace:

'Where is God?' he cried; I'll tell you! *We have killed him*—you and I! We are all his murderers. But how did we do this? How were we able to drink up the sea? Who gave us the sponge to wipe away the entire horizon? What were we doing when we unchained this earth from its sun? Where is it moving to now? Where are we moving to? Away from all suns? Are we not continually falling? And backward, sideways, forwards, in all directions? Is there still an up and a down? Aren't we straying as though through an infinite nothing? Isn't empty space breathing at us? Hasn't it got colder? Isn't night and more night coming again and again?¹⁴

In the post-Newtonian setting of this passage—where the earth is unchained from the sun and we are continually "falling" in "empty space," the "infinite nothing"—where is the great landowner? Even the interlocking spheres of Ptolemy's world have come unchained. As much as this passage is about the death of the old image of God, it also announces the death of the old, relatively static, geocentric cosmology. As de Chardin emphasized, what is called for is a conception of the divine that speaks within the cosmos where we actually live.

We need an evolutionary theology to make sense of human freedom. A literal creation of adults with fully formed consciousness

12. Aquinas, *Summa*, 56–58 (1, 1ae, Question 1, Answer 9).

13. Alfred North Whitehead, *Process and Reality: An Essay in Cosmology* (New York: Macmillan, 1929), 526.

14. Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, trans. Josefine Nauckhoff (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 119–20.

and freedom is a square circle, gibberish of which the divine is not capable because it does not refer to anything. Rather, freedom must evolve in its own slow time.¹⁵ As Daniel Dennett writes, free will in any meaningful sense emerges out of deep time and the slow development of more and more complex organisms with brains to support the kinds of imagination, long-range projections, and anticipations of consequences that allow actual decisions in a humanly real sense to take place.¹⁶ Further, for this evolution to occur, the divine must withdraw from the creation to allow it to develop in accordance with its own laws. One point where the divine is able to interact with this creation most dynamically is in the depths of human consciousness (perhaps in the consciousness of other animals too), but then humans also have the capacity to ignore or turn away from divine promptings, which are nevertheless always gently there.¹⁷

Many theologies today seek to respond and open to new experiences of God. They take their cues not so much from an agenda of doctrines to be protected as from humans' quest for the living God, as Elizabeth Johnson puts it, bidding farewell to the old idea of God as the puppet-master of history—closely allied with God as the great landowner. The living God might be hinted at but cannot be contained in any concept, metaphor, or doctrine. To the extent that the divine guides history, it is in cooperation with human beings and other creatures of the earth.¹⁸ The movements of history remain, therefore, contingent and open-ended. In the thinking of panentheism, the divine is in some sense dipolar, both fully transcendent and fully immanent, completely other and, as St. Augustine said, closer to us than we are to ourselves.¹⁹

This work of theological renewal is not the work of theologians alone, nor is it the exclusive province of persons clear in their beliefs,

15. John F. Haught, *God after Darwin: A Theology of Evolution* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 2001), 87–117.

16. Daniel C. Dennett, *Freedom Evolves*, (New York: Viking, 2003). See especially 56–61, 169–202, 259–87.

17. See Philip Clayton, *Adventures in the Spirit: God, World, Divine Action* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2008), 185–227.

18. Elizabeth Johnson, *Quest for the Living God: Mapping Frontiers in the Theology of God* (New York: Continuum, 2007), 1–69.

19. St. Augustine, *The Confessions of St. Augustine*, trans. John K. Ryan (New York: Image Books, 1960), 84 (3.6.11).

whatever relevance the ocular metaphor of clarity might have. The philosopher Richard Kearney has coined the term 'anatheism' for his own version of this exploration, which is not traditional theism exactly—the term signals an opening to the divine that comes after one has left behind older and outdated theologies. The themes that Kearney emphasizes characterize much of this moment's renewal in thinking: movement away from overarching, singular systems of thought (including exclusivist attitudes toward religious traditions and denominations); opening to God as encountered in everyday experience (rather than hewing simply to established dogmas or their established interpretations); favoring hermeneutic breaks and gaps, states of unknowing; encountering the sacramentality of everyday life; committing to social justice for impoverished and otherwise marginalized persons; and looking to arts and literature for insights and cues.

Among the novelists whom Kearney considers in terms of the sacramentality of the everyday, Proust is one whom philosopher and politician Gianni Vattimo echoes at the beginning of his book *Belief*: "For a long time I woke up early to go to mass, before school, before the office, before university lectures."²⁰ He alludes to Proust's *In Search of Lost Time* because his reflections have to do, as he says, with "la recherche du temple perdu" [the search of the lost temple]. He goes in search, not of a simple restoration, but rather of a new vision related to but not bounded by the past. He finds himself in constant dialogue with Nietzsche, Heidegger, and Jesus—even conjecturing that his own career began with these great existentialists precisely because he started with a Christian inheritance that he never really left.²¹ Christianity has long been associated with Platonic strains of thought related to presence and essence—the logocentrism that Derrida and company decry—but such a metaphysics is not one readily found in Christian or Jewish scripture, though one can see it beginning to leave its mark in some of the later books of the Christian Testament, such as the Gospel of John (which was written later than the other canonical gospels and the letters of St. Paul). It is by now a commonplace that existentialist thought—with its emphases on time, choice, and the everyday human lifeworld—is much more allied in

20. Gianni Vattimo, *Belief*, trans. Luca D'Isanto and David Webb (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1999), 20.

21. *Ibid.*, 33.

sensibility than Platonism is with the world encountered in the Jewish and Christian Testaments.²² Vattimo takes his reading of the “weakening of strong structures” in the history of Being, the receding of the old logocentrism, as a kind of “transcription of the Christian doctrine of the incarnation of the Son of God.”²³ This divine act of kenosis or self-emptying is one that Haught relates to the primal act of creation, the divine withdrawal that allows the world’s creative dynamism, including that of evolution, to occur.²⁴

Because of this shift away from various brands of essentialist metaphysics, the thinkers I’m discussing generally eschew the ideal of an overarching system. Evolution itself speaks of a radically unfinished universe, meaning that a finished system of thought is impossible because the world is not complete. There is no singular and adequate system but constant interpretation, the movements of insight and judgment leading to further questions and insights on and on.²⁵ It is fitting that David Tracy has said that the fragment is the genre for our day: “The fragment is something that sparks into the realm of the infinite yet disallows a totalizing approach, and at the same time opens up material realities—which we have learned from liberation and political and feminist theologies is very important.”²⁶ The genre of the fragment enables a speaking into human experience without an aching after settled doctrine.

Also fragmented is the old notion of the Cartesian ego as the basis of the certainty of clear and distinct ideas. Tracy calls upon us to “cease clinging to our most cherished illusion, the substantial self...”²⁷ Coming into greater prominence is a sense of the self as fragmentary, dynamic, deeply entangled with other persons and the material world, and largely unknown even to itself. At the same time, along with the

22. See William Barrett, *Irrational Man: A Study in Existential Thought* (New York: Doubleday, 1958), 69–91.

23. Vattimo, 36.

24. Haught, 117–28.

25. See Walter J. Ong, S.J., “Hermeneutic Forever: Voice, Text, Digitization, and the ‘I,’” *Oral Tradition* 10.1 (1995), 3–26.

26. “The Impossible God: An Interview with David Tracy,” Lois Malcolm. (*The Christian Century* 119.4 February 2002), 24–30 (www.religion-online.org, accessed 8 June 2007).

27. David Tracy, *Plurality and Ambiguity: Hermeneutics, Religion, Hope* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), 75.

critique of the substantial self, a theme emerging into greater prominence is a salvation that consists in flourishing. In this context I think of Gerard Manley Hopkins' gustatory metaphor of self, the "taste of myself...more distinctive than the taste of ale or alum."²⁸ There is, as it seems to me, a growing recognition that the divine calls us to savor this distinctive self—which is far different from the illusion of the substantial ego—and that salvation means its fulfillment. But like a seed underground, a self must fragment to grow.

These various approaches signal a dynamic and adventurous movement in historic mindedness, a view of history as open-ended and on the move rather than a foregone, teleologically determinate conclusion.²⁹ The divine gently and persistently calls, but humans are the ones who make history happen. In the words of the Hegelian-Marxist-Lacanian philosopher Slavoj Žižek,

With Christ's incarnation, the externalization/self-alienation of divinity, the passage from the transcendent God to finite/mortal individuals is a *fait accompli*, there is no way back—from now on, all there is, all that "really exists," are individuals, there are no Platonic Ideas or Substances whose existence is somehow "more real."³⁰

Terry Eagleton makes a similar point when he asserts that Christianity does not start from the "portentous vagueness of some 'infinite responsibility,'" but rather "starts from a crucified body."³¹ It is that embarrassing and scandalous fact of Christian beginnings that signals the disruptive, subversive, and impossible energy of the divine's interventions in history.

If Ezra Pound's observation that poets are the antennae of the race³² has any validity, it should come as no surprise that among the

28. See Walter J. Ong, *Hopkins, the Self, and God* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1986), 27–28.

29. Bernard J. F. Lonergan, "The Transition from a Classicist World-View to Historical Mindedness," *A Second Collection: Papers by Bernard J. F. Lonergan*, ed. William F. J. Ryan, S.J. and Bernard J. Tyrrell, S.J. (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1975), 1–9.

30. Slavoj Žižek and Boris Gunjević, *God in Pain: Inversions of Apocalypse* (New York: Seven Stories Press, 2012), 172 (the quoted passage comes from Žižek's chapter "Only a Suffering God Can Save Us," 155–92).

31. Terry Eagleton, *Culture and the Death of God* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2014), 206.

32. Ezra Pound, "The Teacher's Mission," *English Journal* 23.8 (October 1934), 630–35.

vital workers in this development of a new language of the divine in a post-Darwinian, postmodern world are our poets. Eric Pankey's poetic vocation has led him, like Jacob, to wrestle with his image of the divine, an intimate agon that has proceeded for decades. As in the best of monastic tradition, Pankey's faith has been a true and complex journey, not always a matter of settled belief but rather of constant searching. In a recent interview, he said,

I always imagined that one day my faith would be solid and certain, a kind of bedrock upon which one might build a sturdy foundation. But an "ebb and flow" has been my experience of faith: something liquid, shifting, mutable; something that, from the proper distance in space and time, might seem stable, but, lived minute by minute, day to day, or articulated in poem after poem, shape-shifts before my eyes.³³

Any alert and engaged faith life must undergo changes—how many lives of faith have been marred because adults try to negotiate their experiences in a framework of adolescent or childhood faith? But the changes and growth are unlikely to adhere to stereotypical patterns or a neat trajectory.

Pankey's latest book, *Crow-Work*, begins with a moment of divine unknowing, in a poem with the aptly penitential title "Ash": "At the threshold of the divine, how to know / But indirectly, to hear the static as / Pattern, to hear the rough-edged white noise as song—" (3). The speaker no sooner formulates the moment than he corrects himself: "Wait, not as song—but to intuit the songbird / Within the thorn thicket, safe, hidden there" (3). From the opening lines, Pankey echoes his great precursor Wallace Stevens, whose "To an Old Philosopher in Rome," begins, "On the threshold of heaven, the figures in the street / Become the figures of heaven..."³⁴ though instead of entering a blurred version of the present scene, which becomes for the "Old Philosopher" (who is George Santayana) a kind of imagination's heaven, Pankey's speaker gives himself to the buzz and blur as an entry into a moment of unmaking: "Imagine a Buddha, handmade," he says,

33. "Mine Has Been a Journey Full of Dead Ends and Washed-Out Roads": A Conversation with Eric Pankey," interviewed by Will Wlizlo, 2013: milkweed.org/blog/interviews/five-questions-eric-pankey/.

34. Wallace Stevens, *The Collected Poems of Wallace Stevens* (New York: Knopf, 1987), 508.

Four meters high of compacted ash, the ash
Remnants of joss sticks that incarnated prayer.

With each breath, the whole slowly disintegrates.
With each footfall, ash shifts. The Buddha crumbles.
To face it, we efface it with our presence. (3)

The meaning is not so much in the image as it is in the process of its effacement. It is a kind of apophatic exercise—witnessing its disintegration means standing in readiness for what the image opens into. The image formed of the ash from devotional incense sticks becomes, then, an image of the inadequacy of the image. The poem aptly ends with an echo from the First Book of Kings (19:12): “There was fire, but God was not the fire” (3). At this point in the story, the prophet Elijah, knowing that all of the other prophets have been put to the sword, is in flight for his life. He is given to know that the Lord will be passing by, so he stands at the mouth of his cave and witnesses a powerful and destructive wind, an earthquake, and a fire; but the Lord is in none of these. But when he hears a “tiny whispering sound,” he knows that it is the Lord, so he hides his face in his cloak and listens to the disclosure of what he is to do next. In the immensity of this silence, the grandeur of the divine reveals itself.

“Ash” is a fitting entry into *Crow-Work*, which is an extended meditation on life in the material world and its decay, as well as its renewing life. As these poems show, a living faith means a living in mindfulness of the sacramentality of this passing material world. It also means alternation between silence and speaking through a variety of fragments and voices, which requires patience with oneself: “I am practicing detachment,

/ and have become artful / At the practice, but not the detachment” (65). The practice itself, irrespective of the results, can be enough—if detachment becomes yet something else to achieve, it is not detachment but distraction.

It can be a complicated thing, this life of contemplation. As it happens, I’m writing this having just visited the Benedictine monastery where I went to college. The monks’ primary vocation is to live a contemplative life—mass, Liturgy of the Hours, private prayer, and *lectio divina* (holy reading). In a sense their primary vocation is hanging out with God. However, this life also moves them to engage in

many kinds of service—running a school of theology, giving retreats, receiving guests, traveling to give conferences and lectures, working in parishes, providing for the needy in various ways; but I believe that were they to live as contemplatives only, they would continue to make a profound difference in the world. It's a difference that happens by a kind of osmosis.

Pankey is alive to such complications as these. As the speaker of "If We Never Meet Again this Side of Heaven" says, "Time to stop musing / and get to work" (65). And then following a space, he continues,

Cold sunlight chimes on tide-exposed rocks.
Frost flowers on marsh heather.
Wind buffets the gull's scraggly cry.

The conundrum:

musing is my work. (65)

Pankey makes many contributions to this world, not the least of which are his poems, but musing is also profoundly his work, as his speaker is reminded when he notices himself musing over the sunlight and rocks, the flowers, the gull's cry. It's a vocation of hanging out in the world where the divine panentheistically dwells.

Further, his is the crow-work to which his title poem refers: "The crows, in their crow-like way, do their crow-work, / tidy up the wreckage, the aftermath" (10). Living in the wreckage and aftermath of what has gone before, the poet sets out to assemble something new out of the fragments left behind, but these assemblies retain the spark of the fragment genre. The very titles signal the importance of the fragmentary, the partial, the unfinished:—"Caravaggio's Severed Heads," "Fragments from an Excavation," "Preparatory Drawing for an Unfinished Triptych," "The Original Scriptures No Longer Exist, Merely Translations of Translations of Corrupted Texts," "Palimpsest of Chalked Equations and Erasures," "Fragment," "Bone Fragments." The fragmentary provides a focus for the work while crucially leaving room for further creation, including within the fragmentary self: "Who am I but fragments and accretions, // A raft built from a shipwreck's scavenged timbers...?" (11). Transient, tossed, uncertain,

the improvised raft of the self can get into areas where the unwieldy ship cannot go—inlets, pools, and tributaries—places that hold their own treasures.

Fittingly for this focus on assembling something out of wreckage left behind, these poems also preoccupy themselves with making sense of what the past is and how we can orient ourselves to it: “The past is a book left out in the rain: ink blurs, pages fuse together” (8); “To see the past we seclude ourselves in cave-depth. // To see the past we descend” (9); “The past like a poem, I’ve come to learn, / Does not change, / but around it language does” (20); “The past? Back there at an impossible distance” (21); “The past is a raveled tapestry, A furrow cleaved open like scripture” (26); “The past—imperfect, at a remove—remains” (27); “The past is a point of departure / But from there it is hard to parse the detour or destination” (49). Blurred, hidden, multivalent, impossibly remote, furrowed, unavoidable, opaque, the past refuses to mean one thing, to signify singularly or reductively.

As the past demands multiple languages, so does the theological discourse of these poems, constantly reaching into the past, but for the sake of re-contextualizing, listening for possibilities, making something new. There are also moments of detachment from the need for either language or something new:

Hearing a sounded bell tone continue
Into a range of ever-widening waves
One is tempted to express something
About the infinite, but lost in a vibration
At the limit of hearing, one keeps quiet to hear
Into what otherwise might be called silence. (56)

Better at times to “hear / Into” what turns out to be a kind silence, a kind of hermeneutic gap, than to fall back on a worn-out language—the “infinite” and all that. If we already know how the language goes, we might do better to wait for something else to come along. One thing that Pankey marvelously allows to come along is the opportunity to make new use of old language:

The torso of god is amber;
Below, fire.

We speak with new tongues,
Take up serpents.

To render (meaning both replicate and reduce),
God shapes straw-tempered clay. (32)

The middle two lines, taken from Mark 16:17–18, echo part of the great commission, Jesus’s sending of his disciples into the world to spread the gospel. By placing those lines in this litany of fragments, Pankey plays into energies of the phrases that are less evident in the full prose passage. Here they become part of a series of mystical and fiery visions.

A specialist in fiery visions, Michael Robbins, in *The Second Sex*, takes on the role of prophetic trickster. He is already establishing a public voice, having entered what has come to be called the God wars. For example, in his review of David Bentley Hart’s *The Experience of God: Being, Consciousness, Bliss* (2013), he wrote, “whatever the New Atheists don’t believe in, it’s not God, at least not God as conceived by a single one of the major theistic traditions on the planet.”³⁵ As he goes on to explain, the traditional conception of God is not of the greatest being among all beings, but rather the one who is beyond being, wholly other. One traditional function of the prophet is to call his or her own people back to the life to which they are called, often with an eye toward social justice. In the review already quoted, Robbins does exactly this:

In this country, for instance, the transfer of wealth from the poor to the rich continues unabated while the CIA assassinates Pakistani grandmothers tending their gardens. Yet a great many American Christians are content to ignore their own Scripture’s not exactly subtle precepts regarding economic justice and state murder, preferring to fret about the age of the earth and the calamitous threats posed by same-sex marriage.³⁶

As in his poems, there is a sparkling intelligence at work here.

From the start, *The Second Sex* shows Robbins’ alacrity with combining old language and new, shifting registers, mixing what used to be called high and low culture, rereading the old in fresh terms. These poems partake of the disruptive energy of Jesus’s parables, which John Dominic Crossan has demonstrated often subvert their

35. Commonweal, Jan 27, 2014: www.commonwealmagazine.org/book-reviews/he-who.

36. *Ibid.*

hearers' expectations, so that they deliver a jolt of such energy as to shock any attentive listener into a new way of being and thinking.³⁷ With an easy sweep he takes in The Stones, *Macbeth*, and the gospels:

Is this Mick Jagger which I see before me?
Come, let me clutch thee.
I consider the lilies beneath me.
I tell the Magdalene not to touch me. (5)

Or within two lines, he can go from echoing Abraham Lincoln to Allen Ginsberg to John Ashbery: "our fathers brought forth a queer / shoulder in a convex mirror" (8). Somehow everything is included in this impishly redemptive vision.

For an American poet writing in a prophetic strain, the unavoidable presence is Walt Whitman; true to his trickster sensibility, Robbins fashions himself as an ironic Whitman: "I am small. / I contain platitudes" (12). Indeed he does, but he's constantly finding ways to make familiar turns of phrase into something that we haven't heard before: "I tell the content to fuck the form" (5); "Nostalgia's / just another word that starts with *No*" (13); "Hold steady, / Holy See. You've really got / a hold on me" (19); "We're all adults here, / except for the children" (22); "We demur to dissect" (26); "I put on my pants / one day at a time. // I have an eight-track mind"; "My toast always lands Christ-side up" (30). "God keep the world this clean and bright / and easy to believe in / and let me catch my bus all right, / and then we'll call it even" (37). Whatever the poet might contain, these poems contain multitudes, from aesthetic principles to seventies recording devices to mystical visions in bread products. The divine disclosed here is inclusive, incarnate, and up for a good laugh.

As Robbins recognizes with his statement that nostalgia is another word that begins with "no," many kinds of nostalgia can get in the way of facing into an uncertain future in openness to the new and unexpected, which is the moment when the kingdom of God can enter. The entry of the kingdom into human experience also means for Robbins becoming more deeply human: "God became a man, / surely I can do the same" (20). I'm reminded of the statement by St. Irenaeus,

37. *John Dominic Crossan, Raid on the Articulate: Comic Eschatology in Jesus and Borges (New York: Harper & Row, 1976).*

“The glory of God is man fully alive.”³⁸ He goes on to explain that the fullness of life for humans is the beatific vision. Robbins’ version of what it means to be human includes also our contemporary insights about fragmentation and animality: “I and I am I because I know / I wanna be your little dog” (20). Given our evolutionary prehistory, we have many kinds of animal in our make-up:

My reptile brain sheds its skin.
On its belly it goes supernova.
It got over getting over
that assimilated Jew, Jehovah.

The joke is on the strict separation of religious traditions, for finally the divine cannot be assimilated to anything. To resist our own assimilation into outdated versions of our own traditions, we need to stay alive to our wilder parts, including our lizard brains, to answer to the sheer wildness at the heart of God’s call, a wildness (think of John the Baptist dressed in his camel hair garb, living in the wilderness, subsisting on grasshoppers and wild honey) that is apt to disrupt everything and call for social justice, a year of forgiveness, and a preferential option for the poor.

Fittingly, the book ends with an allusion to the Desert Fathers—“Those weirdos in their caves” (50), who took to lives of radical poverty and prayer outside of what they considered the corrupting influence of the cities:

Once you got ‘em talking,
they’d prattle on for years.

And I’d be more like them
if I were less like this,
a billion points of glitter
in a fathomless abyss.

But the fathomless abyss is a place of hermeneutic breakdown where one may well encounter the divine. In his swirl of wild wit, Robbins keeps bringing us to the brink of this moment of encounter. He is a father of the glittering desert abyss.

Kimberly Johnson brings a mystical sensibility and scholarly acumen to her poems. In *Uncommon Prayer* she employs the sacra-

38. See www.ewtn.com/library/Theology/Irenaeus.htm.

mental poetics that she describes in her scholarly study *Made Flesh*: the “capacity of language to manifest presence.”³⁹ By adverting to their own materiality as marks on the page as well as sound, such poems become instances of what they refer to—moments of incarnate presence—calling to mind one classic maxim of a sacrament, that it is what it signifies. The opening poem, “Matins for the Last Frost” (3), delivers a recognizably Romantic note of religious discourse applied to the natural world, an apt reminder that one of the great theological achievements of the last two centuries has been the breakdown of the old binary opposition between the sacred and the secular.⁴⁰ As Father Hopkins, one of Johnson’s great influences, wrote, “The world is charged with the grandeur of God.”⁴¹ All the world, in other words—from “shook foil” to the “ooze of oil” to the poems we write about them—is sacramental. The “Matins,” or morning prayer, of this poem consists in a detailed description of a tulip bulb breaking open in the spring. The second poem, “Blanks,” complicates the matter, however, by putting the life of faith into question: “Faith’s for the sucker / whose luck’s run out” (4)—or rather, the poem critiques a notion of faith as magic, an assurance that you’ll hit the jackpot if only you believe. But luck remains merely luck, and God is no puppet-master; “sometimes / you pull the handle and it comes up blanks” (4). The speaker of this poem is on a journey, driving down the highway with the “thousand blinding coins” of the sun spilling across her “windshield’s dustdapple” (4). By the third poem, “Three Lauds,” she’s at a rest stop giving thanks for the accouterments of relief: “Praise to the freshwater spigot, the gravel / path winding along and away / from the asphalt to the only tree in sight” (5). Having escaped the oppressively monetary metaphor of the sun, she finds herself once more able to praise in simple terms, resting in the moment of the freshwater spigot rather than driving in anticipation of some heavenly jackpot.

39. Kimberly Johnson, *Made Flesh: Sacrament and Poetics in Post-Reformation England* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2014), 6. She has also done an excellent translation of Virgil’s *The Georgics: A Poem of the Land* (New York: Penguin, 2009).

40. See William F. Lynch, *Christ and Prometheus: A New Image of the Secular* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1970).

41. Gerard Manley Hopkins, “God’s Grandeur,” *The Poems of Gerard Manley Hopkins*, ed. W. H. Gardner and N. H. MacKenzie (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1967), 66.

As Johnson shows in her prose study, one way that poems draw attention to their own materiality is in the manner of Goerge Herbert's word play: "The punning words resist determinate integration into a referential schema, instead announcing themselves as objects."⁴² By calling attention to words as things, rather than windows onto some impossibly disembodied meaning, these poems maintain a thoroughly incarnational sensibility, calling us constantly back to the things of this world, the only world we have to encounter the divine. As Johnson says, again of Herbert though in terms that apply to her work as well, the "aesthetic is rendered as a site of immanence, an instrument by which presence is made possible."⁴³

A striking instance of this word play playing into new possibilities of meaning takes place in her poem "Metronome," that instrument of mechanical regularity; but this metronome has sprung a spring and "become an undependulum" (24), that is, a pendulum you can't depend on, though in its irregularity it now makes its own distinctive rhythms: "Let the town talk about my late stroke, scold // That I put the *sin* in syncopate" (24). Those offbeat rhythms of syncopation have indeed proven threatening to some neighbors who depend on traditional regularity in their music; some even go so far as to call syncopation devil's music. But Johnson holds out for the blessings of brokenness, and thus the broken metronome's redemption into a new kind of sound that has its own hymn to sing, even if the neighbors insist on finding scandal there.

She plays similar variations on the voices informing her own, perhaps none more than the biblical Psalms, which echo throughout the collection—see especially the sequence "Siege Psalter" (35–60)—and Hopkins. In "Golf" she echoes and swerves away from Hopkins' "God's Grandeur": "Glory be to God for bungled things, for the early frost, the miscarriage, the land mine sunk forgotten in the wheatfield, the liger. For all things marred and misbegotten, praise Him—ham-fisted, hamstrung, and never else so like us" (41). God is hamstrung because of the divine withdrawal, kenosis, self-emptying that allows the world to have its own integrity. The divine creation is also an act of letting go, knowing that strange and tragic things will occur, not

42. *Johnson, Made Flesh, 50.*

43. *Ibid., 51.*

merely the delightful liger (offspring of a lion and tiger), but miscarriages of various kinds and tools designed to maim. The poem does not praise God for the latter per se, but rather for the letting go, which means that tragedy may emerge, but also that the universe will have its own dynamics and freedom will occur.

Even further along the lines that Hopkins laid out, Johnson picks up the sense of vocation as becoming one's own deepest down self, to become the energy in the world that no one else can be. "Each mortal thing does one thing and the same,"⁴⁴ says Hopkins, but this "same" thing is not the same activity or pursuit, but rather the doing of that which is most deeply one's own: "Deals out that being indoors each one dwells"; it is a process of individuation, of selving: "myself it speaks and spells, / Crying *What I do is me: for that I came.*"⁴⁵ The poem "Whiskey" takes up this cry of selving: "O Water of Life, fill me up; make me your shotglass, your hipflask, my most hollow crannies brimming with you. Let me guzzle away the persistent, insatiate, maculate me of me" (57). Jesus' first miracle in the gospel accounts is turning water into wine at the wedding feast at Cana; here the speaker, in her desire to become "shotglass" and "hipflask," cries out to turn the "Water of Life" into whiskey—she desires strong drink indeed. Finally this Water of Life, become Whiskey of Life, so fills her that it transforms her, and drinking this whiskey means also drinking in her own distinctively marked and spotted self, the "maculate me of me." But then drinking in this distinctive taste of self is also drinking in the divine. These sacramental poems are celebrations of the world, and therefore they are celebrations of the God present throughout this world, present intensively in the depths of oneself. Among the worldly things these poems celebrate is the stuff of poetry—the multivalent, wayward, rich, and strange material language that we use to make our poems.

In the introduction to her translation of Virgil's *Georgics*, Johnson describes the poem as a text designed to temper the "greedy domain of the mind" during a "time of empire," and she ends by declaring, "It is a poem for our time."⁴⁶ In other words, she sees the poem as cultivating a generous domain in human consciousness, one where we

44. Hopkins, 90.

45. *Ibid.*

46. *Introduction, Georgics, xxii.*

may find unity in difference though without “imposing unanimity.”⁴⁷ I would like to say that all three of the books I’ve been discussing here deliver poems for our time. As they show, we are inheritors of rich cultural traditions, including rich theological traditions—and not merely Christian (though my own limitations constrain my focus here). At the same time, much of the public discourse surrounding matters of faith remains dishearteningly fundamentalist and reductive. We need such books as these to expand our own most generous awareness.

47. *Ibid.*