ABSTRACT

American Religion and its Discontents:
American Ideology and Alternatives in
DeLillo, Pynchon, Castillo, and Robinson

Jordan D. Carson, Ph.D.

Mentor: Sarah K. Ford, Ph.D.

This study examines the critiques of American civil religion by four contemporary American authors: Don DeLillo, Thomas Pynchon, Ana Castillo, and Marilynne Robinson. The works of these authors revolt against secularism as a normative worldview, showing religious faith to be an unvanquishable facet of human life. Yet these writers also insist that religious faith is often misplaced in spiritually enervating objects. They diagnose American cultural malaise as a spiritual deficiency requiring a spiritual remedy. DeLillo, Pynchon, Castillo, and Robinson view contemporary American selfhood as a truncated thing and impute the poverty of this selfhood to two paradoxically related causes: the first is a lack of recognition of genuine transcendence, and the second is a pervasive and comprehensive American ideology that serves as an ersatz spiritual discipline, offering "America" itself as transcendent and dictating the individual's vision of the good life. The purpose of this study is not to offer a normative account of the form and function of American political ideology, but rather to demonstrate how these four

writers depict and respond to it. Each of the respective chapters on DeLillo, Pynchon, Castillo, and Robinson proceeds through two movements: first, establishing the author's depiction of American political ideology as a false religion, then identifying the spiritual alternatives presented by the author. Excepting Robinson, the authors discussed have been accused of lacking moral vision and even of nihilism; this study aims to combat this reputation and to show that these writers unequivocally hold human flourishing to be contingent upon a flourishing spiritual life.

American Religion and its Discontents:
American Ideology and Alternatives in DeLillo, Pynchon, Castillo, and Robinson

by

Jordan D. Carson, B.A., M.Div., Th.M.

A Dissertation

Approved by the Department of English

_____

Sarah K. Ford, Ph.D., Chairperson

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of
Baylor University in Partial Fulfillment of the
Requirements for the Degree
of

Doctor of Philosophy

Approved by the Dissertation Committee

_____

Sarah K. Ford, Ph.D., Chairperson

_____

Ralph C. Wood, Ph.D.

_____

J. Lenore Wright, Ph.D.

_____

Julia E. Daniel, Ph.D.

_____

Joe B. Fulton, Ph.D.

Accepted by the Graduate School

May 2017

_____

J. Larry Lyon, Ph.D., Dean

Page bearing signatures is kept on file in the Graduate School.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to express my sincerest thanks to Dr. Luke Ferretter. Without his direction and criticism, this work would not exist. Not only has he been my mentor throughout the writing of this dissertation, I would not have been capable of this work without his advice and guidance over the last six years.

CHAPTER ONE

Introduction: American Religion and its Discontents

The American Adam has been one of the motifs most characteristic of American literature. R. W. B. Lewis traces it back to Charles Brockden Brown and James Fenimore Cooper then through Hawthorne and Whitman all the way to Salinger and Bellow.[1] The motif surfaces in such recent works as Thomas Pynchon's *Mason & Dixon* and Toni Morrison's *Paradise*. R. W. B. Lewis describes the American Adam as "the authentic American as a figure of heroic innocence and vast potentialities, poised at the start of a new history" (1). But this definition is incomplete. This "new history" must have some kind of telos, some greater end. The concomitant of this new history was the understanding of "the world as starting up again under fresh initiative, in a divinely granted second chance for the human race, after the first chance had been so disastrously fumbled in the darkening Old World" (Lewis 5). The image of the American Adam links the biblical and the secular: it is characterized both by a vision of freedom and independence and by a divine mandate to tame and cultivate. Lewis argues that this image was once a great source of hope. Even writing back in the 1950s, Lewis laments how Americans fancy that they have outgrown such hope. He refers to his time as an "age of containment" (196-8). He believes that hopelessness has become a perverse virtue of sorts, an emblem of maturation. Lewis seeks to reclaim a place, certainly not an uncritical one, for the image of the American Adam as a means to combat the hopelessness of his "age of containment." Such tendencies toward "containment" are not

[1] See Lewis, *The American Adam* 1-10.

absent from our culture today. We are probably not, on the whole, too much more optimistic today. Yet there are some who would locate the source of such cultural anemia not in the outmoding of the image of the American Adam but in the very American myth that animated it in the first place. Some American writers have recognized that this notion of freedom and independence ultimately serves as a means of consensus and constraint and, further, that the belief in America as a divine mandate has become a license for oppression and a source of spiritual suffocation.

This study examines four American authors: Don DeLillo, Thomas Pynchon, Ana Castillo, and Marilynne Robinson.[2] For these writers, America is not simply a setting or a milieu. They are fiercely concerned with American life – with the cultural climate and its political, moral, and spiritual tenor. I contend that these writers view contemporary American selfhood[3] as a truncated, diminished thing and that they impute the poverty of this selfhood to two (paradoxically related) causes: the first is a lack of recognition of genuine transcendence, and the second is a pervasive and comprehensive American ideology that serves as an ersatz spiritual discipline, offering "America" itself as transcendent and dictating the individual's vision of the good life. The purpose of this study is not to offer a normative account of the form and function of American political ideology; my intention is to demonstrate how *these four writers* (DeLillo, Pynchon, Castillo, and Robinson) depict and respond to this ideology.

---

[2] I use "American" here in a strictly geographical sense. Interviews suggest that Ana Castillo would not self-identify as an American author. But she was born in the United States, has a Ph.D. in American Studies, and much of her work offers a critical appraisal of American culture and identity.

[3] By "American selfhood" here, I mean, in the broadest sense, the personal experience and sense of identity held by individuals living in America, taken collectively. I have elected not to use the term "American self" here, since I use it elsewhere as a typology with ideological implications. "American selfhood" is, of course, a generalization, and there are many exceptions. But the writers I discuss here focus on what *they understand* to be general characteristics of individual life in America today.

The self bears a knotty relation to culture. If American life is impoverished, as these authors suggest, it is necessary to plumb the relationship between individuals in America and their cultural milieu. To sketch my argument, I will need to define two terms that are central to my study: transcendence (and its cognates) and the American self.

Transcendence

My understanding of the term transcendent, and its cognates, is derived primarily from the work of Louis Dupré. According to Dupré, "transcendence is not merely what lies beyond the world, but first and foremost what supports its givenness" (*Passage* 251). Transcendence, then, is not synonymous with the supernatural or the divine, although it can include either or both of those, but rather it is primarily our source of ontological grounding. Nor is the transcendent synonymous with the sacred, especially not "the sacred" as commonly understood today.[4] The traditional notion of the sacred, at least as used in the field of comparative religion, is "a *direct, immediate experience*, characterized by some degree of passivity" (Dupré, *Selfhood* 21). The sacred is one of various ways of formulating one's experience of the transcendent, and "it appears less and less appropriate to describe modern man's awareness of transcendence" (Dupré, *Selfhood* 18). I will return below to the role of the sacred in mediating the transcendent.

If the transcendent is that which supports the world's "givenness," this idea of givenness is contravened by the Cartesian notion, characteristic of modern Western society, that the self is the true, sole locus of meaning and value. According to Dupré,

[4] Although Dupré never explicitly names or engages the work of Mircea Eliade, he does seem to have Eliade's work in mind when referring to common views of the sacred, especially Eliade's 1957 work, *The Sacred and the Profane.*

"The notion of transcendence lost much of its meaning when the mind itself had to define what, by its own description, totally surpassed it" (*Religion* 15). This evisceration of the notion of transcendence has had deleterious effects on selfhood. When meaning and value are understood to be located in the human mind, rather than encountered directly from nature or the divine, all extra-mental reality becomes objectified. However, "once the constitution of 'objectivity' has become the principal function of the mind, the mind itself ends up possessing no content of its own. . . . The self has become a mere function of its own mental acts" (Dupré, *Religion* 114). When the mind becomes merely the source of objectivity, there is nothing left of substance; selfhood then lacks content and the capacity for inwardness.

The transcendent is a crucial component of what Dupré calls the "ontotheological synthesis." This tripartite synthesis of the transcendent, the cosmos (or natural world), and the self long nourished and sustained human culture and endowed human beings with coherent, robust selfhood. Dupré explicates its breakdown, beginning in the late Middle Ages with the rise of nominalism through Scotus then Occam, and continuing through the Renaissance and the Enlightenment. The ontotheological synthesis disbanded in two broad steps: "the one between the transcendent constituent and its cosmic-human counterpart," and "the one between the person and cosmos (now understood in the narrower sense of physical nature)" (*Passage* 3). After passing through the sieve of modernity, these three components now stand autonomously.

The upshot, for Dupré, is that the collapse of the ontotheological synthesis has resulted in an impoverished selfhood. He contends that "the nature of selfhood is that the self is *essentially* more than a mere self, that transcendence belongs to its nature as much

as the act through which it is immanent to itself, and that a total failure on the mind's part to realize this transcendence reduces the self to *less* than itself" (*Selfhood* 104). (I will contend that this is a strong conviction of all four writers in this study.) All three components of the synthesis are necessary for an integrated self, and this integration is crucial for human flourishing. A non-integrated self cannot realize its potential: "With its scope thus limited freedom itself becomes jeopardized. Within such a restricted vision any possibility of meaning beyond the directly experienced is excluded" (*Selfhood* 104). The absolute reduction of the self to immanent experience has led to dissatisfaction and even dehumanization. The transcendent informs and shapes the moral component of life. Anticipating what Alasdair MacIntyre would develop more fully in *After Virtue*, Dupré (writing in 1976) posits that a wholly immanent moral code is not only lacking in foundational support and therefore ineffective but also potentially oppressive (*Selfhood* 40-1).

The role of direct experience returns us to the place of the sacred. The sacred relates to transcendence in the role of integrating the self with the transcendent. With the breakdown of the ontotheological synthesis, the transcendent has come to be viewed as unprecedentedly distant, while the world has been viewed increasingly as secular: "As man discovers the control over his universe to reside within himself, the need to relate each aspect of existence to a transcendent principle ceases to be felt urgently" (Dupré, *Selfhood* 22-3). The principal role of the sacred, however, is precisely to relate these aspects of existence to the transcendent. The sacred, according to Dupré, has typically denoted a type of direct experience of the transcendent, the kind of direct experience that the modern self, with its privatized spirituality, is no longer capable of. The world is no

longer perceived as intrinsically sacred. The sacred is thus no longer a category of experience but one of interpretation: "If anything is 'sacred' to the modern believer, it is only because he *holds* it to be so by inner conviction and free decision, not because he passively *undergoes* its sacred impact" (*Selfhood* 29). Divorced from direct experience, this modern conception of sacred departs radically from the traditional, religious understanding of the term. We end up with *sacralize* as a verb that signifies a conscious human choice. Formerly, "verbal revelation, and ecclesiastical institutions determined the inner experience, today it is mostly the inner experience which determines whether and to what extent outer symbols will be accepted" (*Selfhood* 29). For Dupré, this inward movement of piety is irreversible, at least in the foreseeable future. The sacred will always be mediated. The key, then, is to relearn to recognize the transcendent. Dupré worries that we are no longer even capable of recognize the transcendent. Lacking the sacred, we lack integration, but sacralization depends upon one's capacity to acknowledge and recognize transcendence.

The attendant lack of integration has not gone unfelt in secular societies. The fragmented nature of a completely immanent framework has engendered an experienced absence of transcendence and precipitated a search for a new synthesis. These searches are not necessarily efficacious: "…even if we grant that modern man's spiritual need forcefully reopens the question of transcendence, it does not follow that the question itself places life in a transcendent perspective and, even less, that it constitutes a return of the sacred" (Dupré, *Selfhood* 24). Some, like Ernst Bloch, have attempted to recapture the sacred, as integrating symbol, from a *completely* secular framework. This wholly immanent attempt at integration Dupré calls "progressive secularization," by which he

means a "more radical (and more sophisticated) effort to be secular by expanding the immanent world view so as to include even the *religious experience*" (*Selfhood* 25). These attempts, born of an experienced "need for that other dimension which neither enlightenment nor scientism nor even the new social activism can provide" refuse to accept "a commitment to the transcendent as to *another* reality" (*Selfhood* 25-6). They are rather attempts to imbue a wholly immanent and secular existence with the aura of the sacred. Charles Taylor describes something similar to "progressive secularization" by examining attempts to endow life with greater meaning while remaining within a purely immanent framework. Taylor cites Luc Ferry's work as an example of an attempt to offer a meaning to life that "goes beyond the usual scope of our lives, but which remains immanent" (*Secular* 677). Ferry examines the greater meaning people have found through working in service and aid organizations to suggest that there is "in the succouring of human life and well-being universally a goal which really transcends the ordinary ambit of life" (Taylor, *Secular* 677). Other attempts at integration include large collective events like rock concerts and raves. Such events are "[f]usions in common action/feeling, which take us out of the everyday . . . [and] often generate the powerful phenomenological sense that we are in contact with something greater, however we ultimately want to explain or understand this" (*Secular* 517-18). For Taylor, the motivation for such events lies in a desire to experience the transcendent. Ultimately, for Dupré and for Taylor, these purely immanent attempts at transcendence only highlight the continuing need for true transcendence. This is a transcendent that is not *chosen* but rather experienced.

I would like to suggest an attempt at self-integration that neither Dupré nor Taylor considers: American ideology. Although he taught at Yale, Dupré, who is Flemish, is primarily a Continental thinker, and he never focuses specifically on America. I believe that if he did, he would find that America itself – America as an idea, an ideology – has assumed the place of the transcendent for many in modern America. This, I argue in the chapters that follow, bears much of the blame for the anemia of the American self, according to the authors in this study. I have sketched Dupré's "ontotheological synthesis" in such detail because it offers a conceptual framework applicable to all four authors of my study. While they do not employ Dupré's terminology, all four authors expose what they understand to be a futile attempt at "ontotheological" reintegration, and each proposes his or her own alternatives. But before I can make that argument, I must also explain precisely what I mean by the phrase "American self."

The American Self

Two facets of the notion of selfhood are crucial for my purposes. First, as Charles Taylor shows, we cannot consider the self without including some understanding of the good. According to Taylor, "The notion of self which connects it to our need for identity is meant to pick out this crucial feature of human agency, that we cannot do without some orientation to the good, that we each essentially are (i.e., define ourselves at least inter alia by) where we stand on this" (*Sources* 33). Similarly to Dupré, Taylor insists that selves do not exist in a vacuum but rather "only in a certain space of questions, through certain constitutive concerns" (*Sources* 50). This orientation to the good also involves story, or narrative. Here Taylor picks up Alasdair MacIntyre's understanding of quest and narrative as foundational for any coherent life. A vision of the good gives one's life a

telos, and the journey (or quest) for that telos entails a narrative – a history and a future shaped by that telos (*Sources* 48).

The second feature of selfhood important for this study is that the self exists in tension. Dupré writes, "As a self-constituted, dynamic synthesis, selfhood unites in a more or less harmonious tension opposing forces" (*Selfhood* 42-3). A balance must be maintained between these opposing forces, and an undue indulgence of any one of them may compromise the integration of the self. The self is the subjective side of personhood, and as such it both collates and transcends one's particular functions, relations, and environments. According to John P. Hewitt, the self as linked to the "larger and longer sense of personhood that transcends particular situations, roles, and group memberships, for all human beings, is anchored in two fundamentally different forms of identity": social identity and personal identity (169-70). All selves are shaped by culture, and yet they bring their own personal identity to bear on that culture as well. The self is founded upon tension; it is a divided existence.

By "American self," I intend a notion of the self that is shaped by the inheritance of modernity (via the Enlightenment) common to the Western world, but that is also uniquely American by virtue of being run through the alembic of the American mythos. The American self bears a complex and indivisible relation to culture, leading to a unique combination of such tension and narrative. American culture itself is founded upon tension. R.W.B. Lewis argues that all cultures are sustained by, and essentially *are* debates (2). Cultures are distinguished, then, by their particular dialogues or debates. Hewitt shows how American culture is founded upon dichotomies, including individuality vs. community, freedom vs. authority, and here vs. elsewhere. Built upon

these polarities, American culture leaves citizens perpetually torn and fosters ambivalence among the American people (Hewitt 236). And yet, in spite of this ambivalence and tension, there is also a broader form of consensus. These debates are never self-contained; they are all occasioned by a larger vision. There are always images and narrative that "give direction and impetus to the intellectual debate itself," and the debate and the story mold and mutually reinforce each other and gradually issue in cultural myth (Lewis 3). American culture fosters, and thrives on, various debates, and there are manifold responses to American life. But all of those responses, all of the ambivalence that Hewitt details, are absorbed into and sustained by a larger American myth: the myth of Election, or American exceptionalism.

This American myth begins with the legacy of the Puritans. The inheritance of modernity, according to Sacvan Bercovitch, was baptized by the Puritans and their successors, and was amalgamated with spiritual ends to produce a compelling national ideology. Bercovitch details how the Puritans developed a "rhetoric of consensus" that they then bequeathed to America. Thus, the unique contribution of the Puritans was not religious but rather "lay in the realm of symbology": "The Puritans provided their heirs, in New England first and then the United States, with a useful, flexible, durable, and compelling fantasy of American identity" (Bercovitch, *Rites* 7). This rhetoric of consensus gave theological backing to Puritan "errand in the wilderness," linked personal identity to corporate endeavor, and gave the enterprise itself an apocalyptic teleology (*Rites* 32-5). America as social enterprise was united with soteriology; they effectively "impose[d] a sacred *telos* upon secular events" (Bercovitch, *Origins* 52). *This* was the Puritan legacy: America as chosen nation.

The rhetoric of consensus was commensurate with the notion of "representative selfhood," which, "bound the rights of personal ascent to the rites of social assent" (*Rites* 36). In other words, a mutually reinforcing relationship obtained between the individual as representative of all Americans and America itself as an ideal to which the individual conformed. For example, the "self-reliant man . . . was . . . paradoxically, a cultural pattern, the model of a rising nation" (*Rites* 47). Such tales of American heroes and exemplars celebrated "the representative self as America, and of the American self as the embodiment of a prophetic universal design" (*Origins* 136). To be American was, *essentially*, to be caught up in sacred national destiny; American was "a federal identity not merely *associated with* the work of redemption, but *intrinsic to* the unfolding pattern of types and antitypes, itself a prophecy to be fulfilled" (Bercovitch, *Origins* 88-9).

This merger of sacred telos and secular aims eventually produced the American myth. By the American myth, I mean a conception of America as characterized by liberal values and invested with a sacred telos. The "American Way" is marked by "freedom, opportunity, democracy, and radicalism itself" and a remarkable spectrum of "creative energies—enterprise, speculation, community-building, personal initiative, industry, confidence, idealism, and hope—unsurpassed by any other modern nation" (Bercovitch, *Rites* 19, 8). But, as Daniel Walker Howe suggests, the myth of America is most essentially captured by the idea of equality and the notion that the self is freely chosen: "The capacity to choose is at the heart of political freedom as Americans have conceived of it, and the capacity to choose or revise one's own identity is perhaps the ultimate exercise of that capacity" (257). The ideals of freedom and its concomitant, independence, comprise the heart of the American myth. With the American Revolution,

independence became a concrete national goal at both the corporate and individual levels; eventually it was transmuted to the realm of the exchange of ideas and personal liberties. Outside America, independence threatened social stability, but in America it became the rhetoric of consensus and "the norm for representative selfhood": this "summons to independence magnified the 'pursuit of happiness' from a merely private enterprise into an enterprise that entailed not only the common good but the redemption of mankind" (Bercovitch, *Rites* 38, 42-3).

Echoing what Dupré and Taylor claim about the modern self lacking integration, Bercovitch argues that modernism after the seventeenth century has engendered a world of autonomous individuals in which no theory of government was compelling enough in its own right to foster community. Even the "pragmatic federalism" proffered by the American Constitution-makers, with its separation of powers, was inadequate (*Rites* 40). It offered no spiritual coherence, a need that was not extinguished with feudalism. Americans still needed "some means of consecrating their way of life—a set of metaphysically (as well as naturally) self-evident truths; a moral framework within which a certain complex of attitudes, assumptions, and beliefs can be taken for granted as being right; a super-empirical authority to sustain the norms of personal and social selfhood" (*Rites* 40). The lacking spiritual coherence was supplied by the American myth, which "gave the country a past and a future in sacred history, rendered its civic institutions a fulfillment of prophecy, elevated its so-called true inhabitants…to the status of God's chosen, and declared the vast territories around them to be *their* promised land. above all, it grounded the myth in a central symbol, 'America,' that . . . was invested . . . with the double powers of materiality and the spirit" (*Rites* 41-2).

This myth exists today as a powerful and all-encompassing ideology.[5] As Bercovitch uses the term, drawing from the field of anthropology, ideology is defined as "the web of ideas, practices, beliefs, and myths through which a society, any society, coheres and perpetuates itself" (*Rites* 13). This is not ideology in its more pejorative sense – the medium of demagogues and pundits. Ideology, as Bercovitch uses it, is inherently conservative but not static; it is both constraining and creative, marking "the interaction between levels of experience and belief (religious, intellectual, political, technological, aesthetic), reinforcing, modifying, redefining, and challenging each other in a volatile fusion" (*Jeremiad* xv). In this sense, American ideology permits and even induces dissent as a source of vitality, so long as the dissent intends as its end a better, "truer" America. Debates of this kind ultimately helped to fuel the notion of a transcendent America. American ideology imputes to "America" (as cultural symbol) a history and a future telos that conflates sacred and secular: "As the myth's dominant symbol, interchangeably sensory and ideological, 'America' came to signify both self-gratification and the self-evident good, the most pragmatic of communities and the most abstract of ideals" (Bercovitch, *Rites* 42). To be clear, this ideology is not simple nationalism; it cannot be reduced to a sense of pride or superiority. Rather, it is a belief in a consecrated national destiny.

One need not accept every component of Bercovitch's analysis to affirm that this America myth/ideology ratifies a transcendent "America." The American myth, boasting both spiritual and material components, offers an ersatz, though compelling, version of the ontotheological synthesis Dupré finds lacking in much of modern culture. The

[5] According to Bercovitch, "'America' (as a cultural symbol) bridges the antinomies that are often used by political scientists to distinguish between myth and ideology" (*Rites* 41).

American self, with its ambivalence and tensions, is held together or integrated by the ideological symbol "America." All selves are shaped by culture, and yet they bring their own personal identity to bear on that culture as well. The self, integrated by the sacred, would bring values correlated with transcendence to bear on culture. But when that culture itself is seen as transcendent, and the destiny of a nation as part of the soteriological plan of God, then the relationship changes drastically. Today, many if not most Americans no longer consider America to be a "light unto the nations" or the "city on a hill" (though some certainly still do). But even of those who do not, many continue to see America *functionally* as a form of the transcendent. The American Way still functions as *the* true path.

American Religion and Its Alternatives: DeLillo, Pynchon, Castillo, and Robinson

In this study, I argue that the works of four authors – Don DeLillo, Thomas Pynchon, Ana Castillo, and Marilynne Robinson – seek to expose the limits and faults of American ideology and offer their own vision of vital spirituality. The aim of this study is not simply to delineate the ways these writers criticize America and the particular evils and excesses they impute to this nation. Dissent, after all, is nothing new, and Bercovitch shows how America, as an ideological entity, actually depends upon such dissent. The "American jeremiad," as Bercovitch calls such dissenting voices, serves a ritual function in the sustenance of American life and culture. The form of dissent Bercovitch refers to excoriates some aspect of contemporary life by appealing to traditional values or policies. It decries some practice that deviates from what is "truly" American, truly part of the good life (the American life). I intend to demonstrate how the writers in this study, rather than arguing on behalf of a "truer" America, show American ideology to be a spiritual

discipline, a powerful and formative set of rituals and practices dictated by a certain vision of the good. There are two factors at work here, exposed in the authors' critique of the American self. One is the lack of true transcendence – the inability to recognize it and allow space for it in order to attain an integrated selfhood. The second is the way that America itself, as an ideology, has usurped that function.

This is not to say that these authors have somehow achieved a viewpoint of neutrality and objectivity from which to comment on American life. On the contrary, there is no escaping ideology as understood according to Bercovitch's definition. America's sharpest critics are shaped by it to some degree, even as they shape it. There is simply no complete transcendence of one's situatedness. But, though ideology cannot be escaped, it is possible to narrate it, and, as Bercovitch exhorts, exposing the limits of this ideology is itself a necessary, salutary, and feasible task. Exposing these limits functions to uncover the deficiency of "America" as symbol for truly integrating the self.

This study proceeds along the lines of two central arguments. First, I argue that the works of these authors identify the ideology of American exceptionalism as an ersatz but compelling spiritual discipline that has engendered spiritual anemia and forms of oppression. These writers aim to divest "America" of its claim to transcendence and reveal America for what it is: a place and a way of government, a set of non-transcendent ideals, a place of freedom but also of oppression, not wholly evil but also not a chosen nation. (This is certainly not a comprehensive condemnation of all things American; rather, it is a demonstration of limits and tendencies of excess.) Second, I contend that these authors demonstrate the necessary role of the transcendent in an integrated selfhood and thus emphasize the task of recognizing true transcendence. They diagnose American

cultural malaise as a spiritual deficiency requiring a spiritual remedy and depict alternative spiritual visions which inspire practices that lead to greater human flourishing.

My research seeks not simply to unearth the religious or spiritual bent of these authors and their works. Rather, my intention is to show how these authors suggest that the transcendent is a crucial component of selfhood and that American culture militates against this possibility by circumscribing it in ideology. This project has certain similarities to Christina Bieber-Lake's *Prophets of the Posthuman*, in that it focuses on how these authors engage the question, How do/should/can we live now? in a specifically American context.

Excepting Robinson, the authors I discuss are not generally viewed as writers who are overly concerned with spirituality. Some critics have labeled DeLillo, Pynchon, and even Castillo as nihilists with no clear moral vision, as I discuss in the chapters to follow. I aim to combat this reputation and to show that these writers unequivocally hold human flourishing to be contingent upon a flourishing spiritual life. This study contributes to the growing field of "postsecular" studies by focusing on specific spiritual disciplines and the resultant moral formation. I build upon the work of scholars such as John McClure by taking the rejection of a hyper-rationalist, anti-religious secularism as a starting point, and focusing further on particular expressions of faith, both fruitful and destructive, in the works of my chosen authors. Rather than pinpointing authors' attacks on secularism as such, as a totalizing, vicious, or constraining ideology, I focus on specific beliefs and practices and how they translate into political action and human flourishing. In other words, I look at the characters in these authors' texts and ask, How are these spiritual disciplines (those apparently endorsed by the author) shaping the moral lives of these

characters? How do these individuals live in community? How do they treat others? How do they care for the earth? In each chapter, I comment on the success of the author's spiritual vision as offering a valid alternative to the quasi-religious American ideology that he or she shows to be spiritually constrictive.

My argument relies primarily on close readings of the authors' works. All four of these authors have, at times, been essayists. Though I focus primarily on their novels, I also consult essays by the authors when relevant. I analyze passages that describe and characterize contemporary American life, focusing on several specific issues that guide my study of the authors' works. By examining these particular issues, I hope to demonstrate how these authors expose the limits of American ideology. One issue is the texts' demonstration of ways American ideology is *ontologically* violent or oppressive. Another is the texts' depiction of what I will call the Americanization of consumerism. Consumerism plays a part in American ideology, but in a very particular way. Consumerism in America claims America as its telos: examples would include "buy to support our troops" and "buy American-made." A third guiding topic is spiritual hunger and a lack of fulfillment. There are places in the work of all of these authors where characters seek genuine transcendence but turn to substitutes and find themselves dissatisfied. Finally, I examine the role of religion in the work of each of these writers. For all of them, religion can be both positive and negative, salutary and oppressive. I give particular attention to places in the text where the authors use traditionally religious or liturgical language, frameworks, rituals and structure. I pay special attention to how works suggest that certain forms of religion have become coopted so as to become oppressive and must therefore be dismantled. Each of these authors proposes his or her

own vision of authentic spirituality. I attempt to convey the contours of these expressions of spiritualities, explaining where and how they differ from traditional or dominant forms of religion, and identifying how they form individuals morally and spiritually.

While centering on these same questions, the chapter on Marilynne Robinson departs methodologically from the other chapters. While I draw upon literary critics to interpret the works of all four authors, I do not offer external critiques of the spiritual alternatives of DeLillo, Pynchon, and Castillo. However, in examining Robinson's spiritual alternative, I turn to other philosophers and theologians to offer an external critique. Robinson is included in this study because she, like the other authors, identifies and powerfully critiques through her fiction a form of American ideology that functions as a pseudo-religion. Unlike the other authors, Robinson most fully articulates her alternative spiritual vision in her nonfiction. I adopt a different methodology to examine Robinson's work because she propounds, in her nonfiction, a theologically-grounded alternative vision that contradicts its own terms, and that fails to qualify as an alternative because it cannot be adequately distinguished from the ideology it denounces. The comparisons I make of Robinson to Reinhold Niebuhr, Jeffrey Stout, and George Kateb are necessary to demonstrate the incoherence of Robinson's theological position. On account of this incoherence, I subject Robinson's work to an evaluation I do not make of the other authors. For DeLillo, Pynchon, and Castillo, I make no attempt to rank or evaluate their spiritual alternatives; I simply seek to demonstrate that they are indeed alternatives, which, in their own respective ways, offer moral resources. With Robinson, I submit that her alternative spiritual vision is the least convincing.

Conclusion

This study is not intended to be a rejection of American culture. On the contrary, I submit that all four of these authors hope to improve American life. But they do not criticize in the name of a "truer America." What is wrong with America is not that certain cultural facets or tendencies are "un-American"; what is wrong is that too much of life is evaluated strictly by that American – un-American dichotomy.

These writers seek the integrated life, of which the recognition and experience of the transcendent is foundational. According to Louis Dupré, with modernity each of the three elements of the ontotheological synthesis achieved autonomy. However, he does not see this as necessarily deleterious. Only when one element comes to dominate and diminish or (relegate) one or both of the others is this disastrous. The requisite for late modernity (which is how Dupré sees postmodernity or postsecularism), according to Dupré, is that we achieve a new synthesis of these three elements. This is both possible and necessitated by the way that modern thought has "opened up a gap in the very nature of the real that will never be closed again" (Dupré, *Passage* 252). Dupré argues, "The spiritual discovery of the moderns consists in understanding the active relationship of mind to cosmos as one that changes the nature of the real" (*Passage* 252). Dupré maintains that the notion of transcendence has been under revision since the fifteenth century through the present, and the "search for an adequate conception of transcendence appears far from finished" (*Passage* 252-3). This rethinking of transcendence will undoubtedly continue in what many have called our postsecular age. But according to the authors in this study, American ideology, in spite of its long tenure, is certainly a poor substitute, one that must be supplanted by a richer notion of transcendence.

CHAPTER TWO

Unsaying American Ideology: Don DeLillo's Apophatic Approach

> For consciousness to conceive of what it cannot define or say is for it to transcend itself in its very act of conceiving and saying. Such a significance, or ultra-significance, can be vouched for only by the effects it inspires in human beings, and it can be given a definite content not in itself and as such but only by human action and emotion, and perhaps devotion. This sort of non-object is what orients and evokes our most powerful passions. It has many different faces, both human and divine, as well as demonic and uncanny. But all are only reminders of something beyond themselves that does not accept being defined in any finite terms.
>
> - William Franke, *A Philosophy of the Unsayable*

DeLillo has said that his first novel, *Americana*, was his own "journey – into America" which has become his primary subject ("Interview"). The son of immigrants who was raised Catholic, DeLillo watched his immigrant father vigorously pursue the American dream. Though he thoroughly self-identifies as American, DeLillo's upbringing has given him – perhaps fortuitously for a writer – both an insider's and an outsider's perspective on American life and culture. DeLillo has been concerned with selfhood in contemporary America since his earliest novels. All throughout *End Zone*, characters employ different (futile) means of "self-actualization" or "self-realization," and the opening of *Players* likewise broaches the topic: "Motels. I like motels. I wish I owned a chain, worldwide. I'd like to go from one to another to another. There's something self-realizing about that" (3). DeLillo's characters are constantly pursuing self-realization through chasing the American dream. DeLillo does not eschew the American dream; he claims that in his own way he followed the footsteps of his Italian

immigrant parents, buying into the dream himself ("Interview"). But while he has never denied the glittering potentialities that attend American life, he has always been interested in the shadows they cast as well, and in exploring this subterranean America and tracing to its source the discontent seething below the surface. This chapter demonstrates how DeLillo's work illuminates the spiritual etiolation that has resulted from deluded efforts at personal fulfillment. DeLillo reveals that the myth of the American Dream is artificially bolstered by a confluence of political ideology and consumerism that entices Americans with the dual promise of spiritual and material fulfillment. Ultimately, I argue that DeLillo not only chronicles the spiritual aridity of American culture but also offers in response an art that preserves a space for mystery through an apophatic approach to the transcendent.

Given the overtly political nature of much of DeLillo's copious body of work, he has sparked critical conversations about the nature of an artist's responsibility in addition to his literary merits. George F. Will first accused DeLillo of being a bad citizen. Reviewing *Libra*, Will condemned the novel as "an act of literary vandalism and bad citizenship" (A25). Others, like Frank Lentricchia, have taken Will's charge as a badge of honor, a sign of authentic cultural engagement, but Will complains that "conspiracy addict" DeLillo offers a baseless, lunatic theory as a means of advancing left-leaning political sentiments.[1] By purportedly using the "raw material of history" with no "concern for truthfulness," DeLillo betrays literary ethics.[2] But even before Will,

[1] As Lentricchia notes, DeLillo adopts a theory that had been around for twenty-five years. See Frank Lentricchia, "*Libra* as Postmodern Critique" 200.

[2] It is not without some irony that Will and DeLillo later both signed a petition in defense of religious freedom in the wake of the *Fatwa* sentenced by Khomeini upon Salmon Rushdie. See "Rushdie Novel Stirs Passions East and West; Answer to the Cardinal," co-written with (or at least co-signed by)

Washington Post book reviewer Jonathan Yardley and critic Bruce Bawer accused DeLillo of penning political tracts rather than novels and espousing an excessively gloomy, apocalyptic view of American culture. Bawer's 1985 critique of *White Noise* foams with vitriol:

> While those of us who live in the real America carry on with our richly varied, emotionally tumultuous lives, DeLillo . . . continues, in effect, to write the same lifeless novel over and over again--a novel constructed upon a simpleminded political cliché, populated by epigram-slinging, epistemology-happy robots, and packed with words that have very little to say to us about our world, our century, or ourselves. If anyone is guilty of turning modern Americans into xerox copies, it is Don DeLillo. (42)

While Yardley lauds DeLillo's literary talents, he too chastises DeLillo for squandering his "talents on monotonously apocalyptic novels the essential business of which is to retail the shopworn campus ideology of the '60s and '70s" (3).

The presence of such ideology in DeLillo's work has contributed to the ostensible want of depth in his characters. DeLillo's characters often seem to lack substance, appearing as personifications of ideas, which is one of the factors fueling the categorization of his work as postmodern. Such characters appear to be pawns of their environment, devoid of the psychological and spiritual depth to challenge or critically engage their world. Tony Tanner was critical of *Underworld* for this reason.[3] Others, however, have insisted that DeLillo's characters expose the withering effects of American culture, arguing that if DeLillo's characters are flat or vicious it is because our culture is flat and vicious. Of *Underworld* character Nick Shay, Jesse Kavadlo writes, "If Nick seems disembodied—a word that merges Kirn's and Tanner's suggestion that he is

---

Mary Gordon, Andrew Greeley, John Guare, Maureen Howard, Garry Wills. *New York Times* 26 Feb. 1989: 4:22.

[3] See Tanner, "Afterthoughts."

an outline, résumé, or mere voice—then Nick is stripped of his palpability by the social conditions that precipitate the novel" (107). One may apply the same logic to the paranoia present in DeLillo's work, though some critics disagree.

In addition to criticizing his leftist politics, some critics have cited DeLillo's use of paranoia as a further breach of literary ethics. James Wood argues that "*Underworld* reads as if complicit with the paranoia it describes," proliferating into endless connections when it should be offering the reader a means of navigating such a web (11). Peter Knight, on the other hand, argues that DeLillo both exposes the costly toll that pervasive paranoia exacted on the America public during and after the Cold War years and tracks the shift to a new variety of paranoia tied to the insidious web of multinational capitalism ("Connected" 828-30). Knight's reading sees DeLillo's treatment of paranoia as diagnostic, intended as a means of resistance. Although DeLillo has been tied to Thomas Pynchon as a poster child of paranoiac fiction, critics such as Glen Scott Allen distinguish between the pair's respective approaches to paranoia. Allen contends that DeLillo rejects the "paranoid strategy for postmodern survival" endorsed by Pynchon in favor of "an almost romantic return to the sovereign powers of the individual" who is capable of resisting such paranoia (116-17). According to Allen, DeLillo depicts paranoia as a perfectly rational coping mechanism for the postmodern alienated subject – for whom the choice between art and terrorism is virtually random – but insists that we need not become such alienated, paranoid people. The element of paranoia has fascinated critics, but such attention risks unjustly marginalizing DeLillo as a mean conspiracy theorist. Frank Lentricchia argues, with reference to *Libra* especially, that it is a mistake to use "paranoia" to describe DeLillo's work because this diverts attention away from the

breadth of the novel's critique, allowing one to marginalize or dismiss the critical thrust of the book ("*Libra*" 205).

One of the more expansive critical discussions has been the debate over whether DeLillo is properly placed in the modernist tradition or the nebulous genre of postmodernism. DeLillo has said he would not describe his work as "postmodern": "If I had to classify myself, it would be in the long line of modernists, from James Joyce through William Faulkner and so on. That has always been my model. I think of postmodernism in terms of literature as part of a self-referring kind of art" ("Take Five"). Many have followed suit, considering DeLillo a modernist. The link to modernism was forged early in DeLillo's career, as Tom LeClair, in the first book-length study of DeLillo, wrote, "if postmodernism continues to be defined as a deconstructive movement – and I believe it almost always is – these 'systems novelists' [including DeLillo] would be more accurately termed 're-moderns,' to suggest their continuity with modernism" (9). If some critics see DeLillo's characters as feckless pawns, others tout DeLillo as a modernist champion of "an almost romantic return to the sovereign powers of the individual" (Allen 116). Paul Maltby argues that the way DeLillo portrays "visionary experience" in his work aligns him more closely with the Romantics than with any of the "canonical" postmodern writers (260, 274). Maltby insists that DeLillo, without irony or parody, affords his characters the measure of critical autonomy needed to assess their culture.

The clear influence of Joyce and Eliot and his frequent portrayal of the artist as hero are among other factors that have landed DeLillo in the modernist camp.[4] Paul Gleason analyzes DeLillo's allusions to *The Waste Land,* comparing DeLillo and Eliot to make the case that while *The Waste Land* is actually nihilistic, DeLillo "posits language and art as ways in which humanity can redeem historical experience" (139). Gleason argues that DeLillo is more successful than Eliot in combating nihilism because he suggests ways art and language can "reinvent and redeem the waste that defines America" instead of privileging the past and retreating into aestheticism as Eliot proposed (130). Philip Nel identifies DeLillo's use of language as conveying a modernist inclination.[5] Nel points to DeLillo's use of juxtaposition as a means of allowing for authentic political engagement and rescuing his work at least to some extent from charges of "depthless postmodernism" (14). While DeLillo takes as his subject a postmodern world, his penchant for locating the epical in the quotidian also reveals modernist tendencies. Similarly, Timothy Parrish claims, "DeLillo might be understood as a late modernist writing about the consequences of postmodernism" (87). Parrish concludes that DeLillo retains a belief in the authority and autonomy of the author: "Although DeLillo recognizes the threat that our many postmodern systems of technological representation pose to the autonomy of the novelist, he never doubts his own authorial

---

[4] See Maltby 263. For others who have offered evidence of DeLillo's portrayal of the artist as hero, see Nel "DeLillo and Modernism"; Lentricchia "*Libra* as Postmodern Critique"; and Charles Molesworth "DeLillo's Perfect Starry Night."

[5] Curiously, this same fascination with language has led Dale Peck to loop DeLillo in with "high postmoderns" simply on account of his style. Peck sees DeLillo's Joycean fascination with language as a shallow game, a kind of filigree compensating for a lack of empathy and substance. See: Peck, Dale. "The Moody Blues." Rev. of *The Black Veil,* by Rick Moody. *The New Republic* 1 July 2002. Web. In a review that appears intentionally incendiary, Peck sees DeLillo as the final impotent heir to "the most esoteric strain of twentieth-century literature," which began "with the diarrheic flow of words that is *Ulysses;* continued on through the incomprehensible ramblings of late Faulkner and . . . the word-by-word wasting of a talent as formidable as Pynchon's; and finally broke apart like a cracked sidewalk beneath the weight of the stupid--just plain stupid--tomes of DeLillo."

ability to reproduce those systems within the universe of his novels" (87). Thus, even if his characters cannot seem to transcend their environment, DeLillo as author can. Parrish claims that DeLillo grants this same authorial power to many of his artist characters (90-1). John McClure also sees DeLillo as operating in a modernist vein because of the he way "resacralizes" the world, "subtly loosening the fabric of everyday reality so that something else – presence or emptiness – shines through and by introducing, often without any fanfare, a series of mysterious interruptions of quotidian reality" (65). The fact that DeLillo typically cloaks such "moments of possibility" in ambiguity, leaving it open whether they usher in authentic mystery or are a means of delusion, further reveals him as to be a modernist (McClure 65).

DeLillo has said he considers himself a modernist, but according to Peter Knight, "the irony is that it is the explicitness with which DeLillo acknowledges his enormous debt to modernism that ends up rendering him postmodern" ("Postmodernism" 27). Knight, while acknowledging DeLillo's use of the artist-as-hero trope, emphasizes the fact that DeLillo's fiction also recognizes how consumer capitalism has vexed artistic endeavor. Artist now has to deal with the reality that their work can never be wholly free of the clutches of commodification and consumerism, either in its reception or its production. Knight contends that DeLillo's artist figures, as well as DeLillo himself as artist, are subject to permanent mediation through consumer culture ("Postmodernism" 28-30).

Knight is far from alone in this contention. DeLillo's acknowledgment of the potency of consumer culture has prompted a few critics to categorize him as a strict postmodernist – one who perceives and accepts, whether reluctantly or exuberantly, an

age of irreversible hyperreality. John Johnston dubs DeLillo's later work "post-cinematic," by which he means "a state in which the world seems to have lost all substance and anchoring or reference points, except in relation to other images or what are also conceived as images" (268). Douglas Keesey and Anthony DeCurtis make similar arguments regarding *Americana* and *Great Jones Street*, respectively.[6] John Frow seems to suggest that DeLillo is best aligned with philosopher Gilles Deleuze, glorying in postmodern "play" as a form of liberation. In a similar vein, Steven Kellman and Paula Bryant argue that DeLillo upholds the permanent divorce of signifier and signified as an expedient of liberation. Kellman avers that DeLillo employs "language that consoles and protects although and because it ceases to signify"; he reads DeLillo's works as "parables of fascist reading" because of the way they champion polyvalence and open-endedness (72-3, 76). Paula Bryant likewise reads the final chapter of *The Names* as subverting an ostensibly modernist ending with the "exuberant, unsettling demonstration of the potential for human freedom inherent in the deliberate disordering and recreation of language" (157).

Knight highlights a crucial facet of this discussion that is central to my analysis: "The basic debate that has fascinated many readers of DeLillo is whether his writing is able to maintain a critical distance from the culture he describes. Put simply, is his writing a symptom, a diagnosis, or an endorsement of the condition of postmodernity?" ("Postmodernism" 27). This question of critical distance is of course related to Fredric Jameson's characterization of postmodern art as lacking the critical purchase to oppose

[6] See Keesey, *Don DeLillo*; and DeCurtis, "The Product."

the ascendancy of late capitalism and its withering effects.[7] Knight believes that DeLillo considers this postmodern condition permanent and irreversible, a fact evident in DeLillo's depiction of Kennedy's assassination and its media coverage: "The real significance of the assassination for DeLillo is the effect that endlessly watching the violent deaths of Kennedy and Oswald has on society at large, making Americans victims of the postmodern condition" ("Postmodernism" 33). In other words, from the assassination on, all such acts of political violence become spectacles, media-mediated events, and perpetrating such violence becomes a means of connection and recognition for alienated souls like Oswald, whose hopes and dreams are shaped by the very mediating forces that have marginalized and alienated them in the first place. As Knight reminds us, the disquieting implication of the possibility that consumer capitalism has infiltrated every last facet of human life, including artistic genesis, is that resistance is hopeless ("Postmodernism" 36-7). Not only would opposition be fruitless, we lack any diagnostic vantage point from which to espy the exact source and consequences of the problem.

DeLillo dramatizes this very issue in many of his characters, but perhaps most poignantly in *Mao II*. There, DeLillo confronts Frederic Jameson's very concern by regarding one of the same artists considered by Jameson: Andy Warhol. In *Mao II*, a character visits a Warhol exhibit focused on Warhol's Mao works. As Joseph Dewey notes, the novel clearly depicts the way Warhol's work "extracts the Communist leader's notorious image from its troublesome historic context . . . and freefloats it as a mass of reproduced images until the proliferation of images, not the person, becomes the subject—a second Mao" (109). Another character in the novel, Bill Gray, a Salinger-like

[7] See Jameson, *Postmodernism*.

reclusive novelist, has (unsuccessfully) sought isolation in order to avoid just such commodification. Bill bemoans the loss of his ability, and the ability of artists in general, to shape his culture. He ultimately dies an ignominious death in the process of trying to offer himself in exchange for a hostage, attempting corporeally to achieve what he believes his writing no longer can. But, as Dewey recognizes, DeLillo does not share Gray's pessimistic outlook: DeLillo casts a critical eye on the exile of Gray, who "is more a monitory character, a caution against the easy concession to unearned pessimism, the retreat into the cold solace of silence and isolation" (104). DeLillo seems to have more hope than Gray for the power of art.

Many critics and theorists reject the idea that late capitalism could be so far-reaching that resistance is hopeless. Though its tendrils have dismaying reach, there are grounds for fruitful if imperfect diagnosis and opposition. But if our current state is as irrevocable as DeLillo seems to believe, criticism must take new forms. Thus Knight, articulating a common view, claims: "It is therefore arguable that in DeLillo's novels the possibility of transcendence and the imagination of an alternative to the seeming inevitable triumph of neoliberalism is not to be found in some inaccessible and outmoded otherworldly realm but within the very technologies and discourses of contemporary life" ("Postmodernism" 38-9).[8] Critics have advanced various versions of this argument. One way DeLillo combats an image-bound consumer culture is his use of language. DeLillo frequently refers in interviews to his practically religious fascination with language. David Cowart has explored DeLillo's use of language in the most depth, endeavoring to show how DeLillo's usage both adopts and challenges the insights of deconstruction and

[8] See also David Cowart, *The Physics of Language* (Athens: U of Georgia P, 2002); Mark Osteen, *American Magic and Dread* (Philadelphia: U of Pennsylvania P, 2000); and Dewey, *Beyond Grief and Nothing*.

poststructuralism (209-10). For Cowart, DeLillo believes, in qualified sense, that language can access the Real, that words can do real work towards describing and creating reality. This argument is echoed by Dennis Foster, who uses Kristeva's work on prelinguistic speech to argue that "disregard of the referential dimension of language" produces disastrous consequences for DeLillo's characters (168). Other critics such as Mark Osteen argue that DeLillo appropriates such artistic techniques as montage and bricolage to effect "artistic resistance and redemption" even out of commodified materials (245-6).

Some critics have pushed this argument further, asking how bricolage or the manipulation of language can truly offer any radical critique or alternative as long as it is purely immanent. Dewey argues that DeLillo turns to the aesthetic as a means of authenticity, but he qualifies it with the recognition of DeLillo's persistent but increasingly manifest undercurrent of spirituality. Especially in a consumer culture, "DeLillo could not endorse the aesthetic expression without qualifying its evident fallibility. Indeed, there has always lurked within his vision the ennobling assumption of a plane of experience that is unironically vertical rather than horizontal" (Dewey 11). With its overtly Catholic elements, the 1997 publication of *Underworld*, generated focused critical attention to the religious and mystical aspects of DeLillo's work. DeLillo has been untypically forthright in interviews about his Catholicism. Though by all accounts a "lapsed Catholic" as an adult, DeLillo still self-identifies as Catholic, and he has mentioned in numerous interviews how formative his Catholic childhood and education have been for both his worldview and his writing.[9] Whatever his precise

[9] For example, see Don DeLillo, interview with Robert McCrum, *Guardian* 7 Aug. 2010.

present relationship to Catholicism, his work contains explicitly Catholic characters, structures, and themes, as critics have demonstrated.

John McClure has been the pioneering proponent of DeLillo as a "postsecular" writer. According to McClure, DeLillo believes the key to our current cultural morass is ultimately religious: as our problems have "religious and quasi-religious roots," so "the only proper way of addressing these woes will likewise be religious" (64). Religion, as McClure understands DeLillo to mean it, is not any traditional hierarchical or formal structure. It is an intuition that "must be disarticulated from dreams (and institutions) of power and grandeur" (65). DeLillo is often critical of certain iterations of organized religion, especially when a religious collective entirely subsumes individuality (as with Karen Janney in *Mao II*) or clings to authority to the point of being oppressive and abusive (like Sister Edgar in *Underworld*). Yet, DeLillo is also consistently sympathetic to religious impulse and spiritual longing. McClure posits that though DeLillo "partially endorses the central religious intuition of a something beyond the quotidian," he "often suggests that [religious intuition] must be differently understood, as emanating not from some transcendental beyond but from the world itself and its inhabitants" (65).[10] "There is no exclusively secular option, then, in DeLillo's world," McClure claims (75), pointing to numerous DeLillo characters who transfer unmoored spiritual desire to ephemeral or vicious objects, resulting in their own spiritual and often physical self-destruction. Characters such as Glen Selvy in *Running Dog* are DeLillo's impeachment of a culture that will not validate spiritual longing, an essential aspect of humanity that must find an outlet somewhere. McClure argues, finally, that DeLillo melds his Catholic roots with

[10] McClure's phrasing obscures the point that in DeLillo, as in the apophatic theology that I will discuss, to sharply distinguish between the transcendent and worldly is to create a false dichotomy.

two other "sacramentalist countertraditions," American natural piety and American pragmatism, to arrive at a kind of secularized sacramentalism that does not preclude the prospect of something "beyond" but "suggests . . . that spiritual nourishment can best be found by way of a departure downward, from all sorts of strategies of abstraction and insulation, into the living cosmos" (77-9). McClure's most significant insight, as it pertains to my argument here, is the way that these religious manifestations in DeLillo's work, however heterodox or heretical, result in some measure of redemption. And even though DeLillo often presents such mysteries as ambiguous and shadowed, they are also in some way efficacious.

While McClure focuses on the "postsecular," Amy Hungerford looks to the pre-Vatican II Latin Mass, which DeLillo (born in 1936) grew up with, as the model for DeLillo's "sacramental" conception of language. In the Latin Mass, most participants do not understand the individual words being spoken, and yet it creates a mystical communion with the divine. It is actually, "partly because of its lack of transparency, [that it is] a more adequate vehicle for spiritual experience" (56). Hungerford argues that DeLillo translates this aspect of the Latin Mass into his fiction by preserving within language itself the element of mystery that would allow for mystical experience. DeLillo thus dissolves any clear distinction between transcendence and immanence. Language comes to serve as a sacrament in the true Catholic sense: "language becomes an instance – or rather, for DeLillo, the instance – of something like divine immanence. It is not so much the medium through which persons can come into contact with God as a medium that contains the transcendent within it" (Hungerford 72). The effect of sacramental

language is the preservation of a mystical relation to one's world; language, then, sustains the religious experience without specifying the content.

My argument extends the work of McClure and Hungerford, plumbing the role of mystery in DeLillo's work, while also expounding on the insights of Cowart, Dewey, Osteen and others who have sought to map the ways DeLillo critiques his postmodern culture from within. These critics have noted ways that DeLillo indicts an American culture seduced by simulacra and exposes its spiritual deficiency, but they have paid much less attention to the exact role of American political ideology and its relationship with consumerism in DeLillo work. This chapter attempts to offer a clearer picture of this relationship in DeLillo's work, exploring how such ideology presents characters with a compelling but ultimately constrictive spiritual discipline.

After establishing how DeLillo unmasks the beguiling allure of American ideology, I identify ways he points toward the possibility of a more stable and actualized selfhood through rooting the self in the transcendent. I agree with those critics who see DeLillo as upholding art itself as a means of redemption, and my argument focuses on specific strategies that DeLillo adopts to give his art redemptive potential. I argue that through his use of language, retaining a Catholic and even apophatic approach, DeLillo preserves an element of mystery to liberating effect. This is not simply, as Bryant and Kellman suggest, a loosening or rending of signified and signifier for the sake of play to find creative space in a meaningless world, but a way of opening the door to the transcendent. While agreeing with Hungerford's insight into DeLillo's appropriation of the form of the Latin Mass, I provide a corrective to her conclusion that DeLillo invokes mystery without content – the "belief in belief" – to give literature itself a religious aura,

an approach which is of questionable value. In response, I expand upon the work of McClure, who has recognized the benignity that results for DeLillo's characters from these "ultimate moments" of mystical connection. I extend his argument by examining apophatic elements in DeLillo's work. Apophatic discourse – discourse that points toward that which is beyond language – is not merely a means of highlighting the limits of language but a way of approaching the Ultimate that results in personal transformation. I insist that by employing apophatic techniques DeLillo establishes the salutary and even soteriological dimension of mystery.

American Believers

According to DeLillo, human beings have an innate need to believe. His characters confirm what Louis Dupré and Charles Taylor have stressed: spiritual longing does not dissipate with the decline of organized religion. The question becomes not whether but how religious belief will be expressed. "When the Old God leaves the world," there will always be "unexpended faith" (*Mao II* 7). Disciples of traditional religions tend to fare poorly in DeLillo's fiction; their religion subsumes rather than integrates them as selves, or organized religions come to eerily resemble power structures.[11] Most of DeLillo's characters are spiritual vagrants, for whom the "Old God" is not a viable object of belief, in search a new synthesis, a new integration of self. DeLillo's oeuvre could be read as the annals of consumer culture's failed pilgrims. I contend with Joseph Dewey that throughout his career DeLillo comes to "a bracing

[11] There are certainly exceptions to this: for example, the Sufi faith and music of Brutha Fez in *Cosmopolis*, Father Paulus, Sister Gracie and to some extent Sister Edgar in *Underworld,* the qualified endorsement of glossolalia in *The Names*, and, perhaps, the Buddhism of Levi Blackwater in *Running Dog*. DeLillo's portrayal of traditional or organized religion has become more favorable throughout his career, and his criticism of certain expressions of organized religion does not constitute an absolute opposition to religion as such.

confidence that the material world cannot bear to be simply what it is" (11-12). DeLillo supports Louis Dupré's conviction that the self must be integrated through some form of "ontotheological synthesis," in which the self finds mooring through a dual relation to the transcendent and the cosmos or material world (*Passage* 3).[12] Many of DeLillo's pilgrim characters attempt such a synthesis through some variant of political ideology.

The proliferation of buzzwords like transnationalism, globalization, and global citizen may tempt one to conclude that we live in post-ideological age, if ideology is understood to be linked to a single nation-state. While the notions of globalization and transnational capitalism (ideologies in their own right) regularly appear in DeLillo's later works, DeLillo quashes the notion that American ideology has faded into the glowing cyber-matrix of a global age. America's response to 9/11 – both "officially" and unofficially – has demonstrated the tenacity of American ideology. The "war on terror," while opposed by a significant sector of America, is certainly an American mindset, a reinscription of "Us"; though the "Them" is far more abstract and diffuse than in the Cold War, the "Us" of American ideology persists. Joseph M. Conte has pointed to the possibility that American rhetoric now ultimately serves globalizational ends, claiming, "It is disconcerting to regard how representative democracy, or 'freedom on the march,' has subsequently been employed as a shill for globalization in the war in Iraq" (187). Conte's suggestion warrants consideration, but for my purposes – in terms of how

[12] We must distinguish between Dupré's notion of "ontotheological synthesis" and the "ontotheology" – the conception of the divine as Being – that has been attacked by philosophers and theologians such as Martin Heidegger, first, then Emmanuel Levinas, Jacques Derrida, and, more recently, by Jean-Luc Marion, John Caputo, and others. William Franke has argued that one may accommodate their concerns without a wholesale rejection of ontotheology, but the important point here is that it is possible to conceive of an ontotheological synthesis that includes an understanding of the divine or transcendent that differs from the God of classical theism and the God of Christianity. As evidence of this, Dupré, identifying the need for new forms of ontotheological synthesis, cites Cusanus (Nicholas of Cusa) as a possible exemplar, a figure who has also been invoked by Marion and others.

American ideology functions, and how DeLillo treats it artistically – it changes little. This American ideology continues to function as a ersatz spirituality, with damning consequences.

Any concept of selfhood implies a conception of the good. DeLillo's spiritual drifters find political ideology so compelling because it offers a clear-cut conception of the good and a putative transcendence. In an interview, DeLillo offered his take on religion in America today and its role in his work in light of his Catholic upbringing:

> The Latin mass had an odd glamour—all that mystery and tradition. Religion has not been a major element in my work, and for some years now I think the true American religion has been "the American People." The term quickly developed an aura of sanctity and inviolability. First used mainly by politicians at nominating conventions and in inaugural speeches, the phrase became a mainstay of news broadcasts and other more or less nonpartisan occasions. All the reverence once invested in the name of God was transferred to an entity safely defined as you and me. But do we still exist? Does the phrase still soar over the airwaves? Or are the American People dead and buried? It seems the case, more than ever, that there are only factions, movements, sects, splinter groups, and deeply aggrieved individual voices. The media absorbs it all. ("*PEN* Interview")

Religion as a sociological phenomenon is not a major subject in DeLillo's work, but religious belief certainly is. DeLillo's assessment here accords with Bercovitch's account of the "Puritan origins of the American self": sacred and secular aims are conflated – our innate spiritual longing is translated "safely" to a political collective. America, or "the American People," becomes both reality (as physical populace) and ideal, a first-person identity and a third-person identity. While the "American People," as a unified entity exists as a reality only as a media figment, the power of this idea is not "dead and buried." Even as "the American People" becomes pure simulacrum in the media's hands, its alluring aura perdures. Even a hyperreal image can retain mythic appeal, offering an ersatz variant of Dupré's ontotheological synthesis.

DeLillo portrays the continuing pull of American ideology in *White Noise*. Stacey Olster has pointed out how, living in a consumer culture, Jack Gladney frequently recurs to American mythology as a grand narrative by which he locates and stabilizes his life. In the novel's opening scene, Jack observes students returning to college from their summer break and renders the scene as "an ode to Manifest Destiny, with station wagons evoking covered wagons on their journey through the west campus, and saddles, sleeping bags, and bows and arrows taking pride of place among the students' belongings" (Olster 81). Olster notes that Jack's categorization of the students of the "College-on-the-Hill" by economic class "is deliberately framed by DeLillo to recall the theocratic 'Citty vpon a Hill' in which spiritual election was a function of its Puritan settlers' visible economic prosperity" (81). Even though Jack lives in a postmodern age in which he locates mystical elements in his daughter's recitation of "Toyota Celica" in her sleep, Jack cannot dispense with American myth as a source of spiritual community and continuity. Likewise, his *Underworld* characters wax nostalgic for the Cold War. *Underworld* begins by depicting a clear Us vs. Them mentality, as the *Times* juxtaposes a headline about the Giants' remarkable win with the news of the USSR exploding an atomic bomb, both on the front page (*UW* 668). As the novel weaves achronologically through the decades, we glimpse characters decades later confiding that they miss the sense of security and the clear division of right and wrong furnished by the Cold War.

As we see in *White Noise*, this American dream of security and identity does not end with the Cold War; political ideology finds consumer culture a thoroughly hospitable environment. In *Americana*, David Bells tells us, "To consume in America is not to buy; it is to dream. Advertising is the suggestion that the dream of entering the third person

singular might possibly be fulfilled" (*A* 257). In *Americana,* DeLillo links the genesis of the American myth and the genesis of television. The crux of both is this dream of becoming the "universal third person." A character quips that television came to America on the Mayflower, his point being, as Frank Lentricchia notes, this possibility of entering the third person: "it is *that* [the universal third person] which 'came over on the Mayflower,' the person we dream about from our armchairs in front of the television, originally dreamt by the first immigrants, the pilgrims on their way over, the object of the dream being the person those pilgrims would become, could the dream be fulfilled: a new self because a new world" (193-4). This is an eloquent way of reemphasizing Sacvan Bercovitch's notion of the representative self – the American self in which first- and third-person become inextricably tied to one another in a reflexive relationship. This longing for a third person self is the American legacy, the American dream, easily exploited by advertising. The third person becomes a means of integrating the first person: "To be real in America is to be in the position of the 'I' who would be 'he' or 'she,' the I who must negate I, leave I behind in a real or metaphoric Europe" (Lentricchia 195). The American dream has always been a third person sensibility, even as the desire for freedom and independence; the independent and free individual is a new "he" or "she" for which the "I," in seeking, sheds the old self. As Lentricchia states, television simply plucked the American dream that was ripe for manipulation: "Advertising 'discovered' and exploited the economic value of the person we all want to be, but the pilgrim-consumer dreaming on the original Mayflower, or on the new Mayflower in front of the television, 'invented' that person" (194). In other words, "the distinction between the real and fictional cannot be sustained; its undesirability is the key

meaning, even, of being an American. . . . The Mayflower may or may not have been the origin of origins . . . but, in any case, for America to be America the original moment of yearning for the third-person must be ceaselessly renewed" (Lentricchia 194-5).

While the third person "invented" on the Mayflower may have been organic, borne of earnest religious faith and the belief of participation in divinely-sanctioned destiny, DeLillo shows how the universal third person becomes a means of ideological manipulation.[13] In *Point Omega*, Richard Elster, a "defense intellectual" during the second Iraq War, explains the exploitative attempts by the American government to rationalize and represent the war:

> "There were times when no map existed to match the reality we were trying to create."
> "What reality?"
> "This is something we do with every eyeblink. Human perception is a saga of created reality. But we were devising entities beyond the agreed-upon limits of recognition or interpretation. Lying is necessary. The state has to lie. There is no lie in war or in preparation for war that can't be defended. We went beyond this. We tried to create new realities overnight, careful sets of words that resemble advertising slogans in memorability and repeatability. These were words that would yield pictures eventually and then become three-dimensional. The reality stands, it walks, it squats. Except when it doesn't." (*PO* 28-9)

Cowart points out that this dialogue is not the easy shot at the Bush administration that it may appear to be. Rather, as the novel paints Elster as gradually and begrudgingly becoming a "defense intellectual," it reminds us how we are prone to error because of the place of the third person dreams we all harbor ("Lady" 42). DeLillo conveys how this process can lead to the complete immolation of the first person. We see the third-person fantasy self clearly in *Underworld* through the "Texas Highway Killer," Richard Henry

[13] Bercovitch argues in *The Puritan Origins of the American Self* and *Rites of Assent* that it is precisely the religious foundation of this third-person sensibility that allowed it to become to tied to individual identity. Even as the religious roots weakened and faded away, the sensibility persisted.

Gilkey, who is perhaps the most unsettling of many such examples in DeLillo's work. Gilkey becomes a serial killer not out of misanthropy but because he can only really perceive himself as a self in the third person, through a deadly form of triangulation. Gilkey has "to take everything outside, share it with others, become part of the history of others, because this was the only way to escape, to get out from under the pissant details of who he was" (*UW* 266). He lives through the lives of his victims. He calls a reporter live on television and he feels, as he talks to her and watches her on the television talking back to him, that he is being reified. Seeing her and hearing his voice on the TV makes him real to himself (*UW* 269-70).

Consumer culture thrives on this kind of triangulation, which may be spiritually lethal, even if not physically so. In the interview quoted above, DeLillo concludes his remarks about the splintering of "the American People" by saying, "The media absorbs it all." This loaded last line warrants scrutiny. DeLillo implies that though the "American People" no longer exists as a material reality (if it ever did) it abides as a spiritual entity kept in circulation by the media. With the media driving consumerism, DeLillo's work evinces an integral connection between ideology and consumerism. This connection is explored in depth by William Cavanaugh, who explains the potency of consumerism as a spiritual discipline that instructs consumers how to see the world and who they should be. Cavanaugh elucidates two ways consumerism constitutes a spiritual discipline. First, consumerism inculcates a kind of false transcendence by distancing us from material things themselves and inciting "a restlessness that constantly seeks to move beyond what is at hand" (Cavanaugh 48). Consumers are removed from the processes of production and even from a thing's natural use, so that the thing itself cannot satisfy but must be

given a mythology or an accompanying ideal. Rather than buying a thing for its utility, one buys it for its associations, its third-person promises. The dissatisfaction that should be directed toward gratification in the truly transcendent (allowing then for proper use and enjoyment of material goods) is redirected immanently toward mythologies or ideals that occupy the place of the transcendent. Such specious transcendence is offered by national ideology, or even by waste, the inevitable byproduct of all production and consumption (especially weapons production, the hallmark of American might). In *Underworld*, Nick Shay muses about the worship of waste: "Maybe we feel a reverence for waste, for the redemptive qualities of the things we use and discard. Look how they come back to us, alight with a kind of brave aging" (*UW* 809). Nick watches the recycling process: a farrago of muck, castoffs, and leftovers comes in and then leaves repackaged and rebranded as a story of redemption and recovery. This "mystery" of redemption even draws its own pilgrims; families and school groups all come to Nick's facility:

> [G]as keeps rising from the great earthen berm . . . it produces a wavering across the land and sky that deepens the aura of sacred work. It is like a fable in the writhing air of some ghost civilization, a shimmer of desert ruin. The kids love the machines, the balers and hoppers and long conveyors, and the parents look out the windows through the methane mist and the planes come out of the mountains and align for their approach and the trucks are arrayed in two columns outside the shed, bringing in the unsorted slop, the gut squalor of our lives, and taking the baled and bound units out into the world again, the chunky product blocks, pristine, newsprint for newsprint, tin for tin, and we all feel better when we leave. (*UW* 810)

These "pilgrims" experience recycling as a process of repristination, even salvation. There is "sacred work" going on here, affording visitors the consoling notion that this "desert ruin" is not their own doing, or, if it is, that they are making it all new again. The

second way consumerism forms a person spiritually is through the offer of community. This may be solidarity with a protest movement through buying a musical album or becoming a fan of a baseball team by buying their team baseball cap. Or, as in *Underworld*, it may be supporting the United States' Cold War effort by supporting the companies that the make weapons that symbolize American dominance. But even the most well-intended consumption contributes to the replacement of concrete political action or solidarity with virtual solidarity through consumption (Cavanaugh 50).

DeLillo exposes the unique relationship in America between political rhetoric or ideology and media-driven consumerism, especially in his depiction of the American Cold War climate. For example, DeLillo begins *Underworld* by confirming this inextricable link between ideology and consumerism, gradually amassing parallels between baseball and the Bomb in the opening chapter. Then in a section of *Underworld* titled "Better Things For Better Living Through Chemistry"[14] (an actual slogan of DuPont), we watch various characters buy into product slogans as they buy into American ideological stances. The Deming family – tellingly named Rick, Erica, and Eric – are consummate consumers and patriotic Americans. Erica does "things with Jell-O that took people's breath away" as a way of combatting a nagging gloom (*UW* 513-14). Erica's concern for openness and visibility reveals this gloom to issue from a deep-seated fear of the secret and opaque. Meanwhile, Eric has secreted himself away in his room to pleasure himself with a condom he likes using "because it had a sleek metallic shimmer, like his favorite weapons system, the Honest John, a surface-to-surface missile" (*UW* 514). Eric is fantasizing about this very weapon, its "infallible flight," its "precision so

[14] The phrase "Better Things for Better Living…Through Chemistry" actually bookends DeLillo's 20th century work, appearing in both *Americana* and *Underworld.*

saintly and sun-tipped," and "the way the fireball haloes out above its column of smoke and roar, like some nameless faceless whatever. It made him want to be a Catholic" (*UW* 514-15). This excerpt is representative of the novel's accruing parallels between religion and ideological orientation. The links between commodities and ideology proliferate. Erica makes "strontium white" Jell-O chicken mousse and cleans with a "satellite-shaped" vacuum cleaner (*UW* 516, 520). While Rick and Eric drive out to a field to spot the newly launched Sputnik, Erica exhibits paranoia regarding the satellite, feeling "a twisted sort of disappointment. It was theirs, not ours" (*UW* 518). Significantly, the text of this section of the novel is interspersed with the text of warning labels from various products, repeated catechetically, demonstrating how consumer goods shape the lives of these characters. When we meet Eric later in his 30s, it is no surprise he is a "bombhead" who works on weapons development and delights in spreading ghastly rumors about the mutational effects of weapons testing on "downwinders" (*UW* 403-6). We begin to see in the Demings the underlying fear and malaise that attends such ideological orientation, and we also see, especially in Eric, the religious feeling that ideological authority can evoke. We see the same thing in other characters. Sister Edgar's latex gloves embody a confluence of grand narratives: "Safe, yes, scientifically shielded from organic menace. But also sinfully complicit with some process she only half understood, the force in the world, the array of systems that displaces religious faith with paranoia" (*UW* 241). Matt Shay can no longer distinguish mundane goods from military ones: "How can you tell the difference between syringes and missiles if you've become so pliant, ready to half believe everything and to fix conviction in nothing?" (*UW* 466).

DeLillo not only links political ideology and consumerism, but he also explicitly links political allegiance and religious belief. I maintain that, as DeLillo consistently exhibits a sympathy and admiration for religious belief, he does not intend simply to present religion as a power structure. His point is rather, as John McClure has noted, that political bodies and structures may assume a role characterized by an air of mystery which may evoke the awe and fear traditionally ascribed to the divine (*Partial* 71-2). In short, this comparison speaks to the current role and nature of political organizations and the innate human attraction to mystery. DeLillo depicts how political bodies often play the priestly role of secrets-keepers. Such entities inspire awe by shrouding themselves in mystery while also promoting some clear telos – namely, the flourishing of the "chosen" nation and its citizens' security. In *Libra,* the wife of a CIA operative views the CIA as "the best organized church in the Christian world, a mission to collect and store everything that everyone has ever said and then reduce it to a microdot and call it God" (260). The CIA commands awe and respect because it operates under and trades in secrecy. Secrets bestow power; to disclose them is to risk loss of authority. Thus, a CIA agent views his own agency this way: "He believed secrets were childish things. . . . thought they'd built a vast theology, a formal coded body of knowledge that was basically play material, secret-keeping, one of the keener pleasures and conflicts of childhood. Now he wonders if the Agency is protecting something very much like its identity—protecting its own truth, its theology of secrets" (*L* 442).

The Bomb, too, possesses this kind of power, inspiring a complex of fear and security. The character of J. Edgar Hoover thinks, "There is the secret of the bomb and there are the secrets that the bomb inspires" (*UW* 51). As Osteen claims, "The Bomb

engendered underworlds – not only the secrets of powers and dominions, but also the private fears of Americans and the remedies sought to quell them" (220). The Bomb promotes an epidemic of fear and paranoia – a level of fear that throws people back upon America as a source of security and reassurance: "This desire for absolute security readily mutates into a rigid form of dualistic thinking in which absolute good battles absolute evil" (Osteen 220). This role of security is, of course, playing God, inspiring what one character calls, "The faith of suspicion and unreality. The faith that replaces God with radioactivity, the power of alpha particles and the all-knowing systems that shape them, the endless fitted links" (*UW* 251). McClure articulates the nature of this relationship between paranoia and religion: "conspiracy explains the world, as religion does, without elucidating it, by positing the existence of hidden forces which permeate and transcend the realm of ordinary life" ("Postmodern Romance" 103). The bomb, and the ever-growing nuclear stockpile of the Cold War, becomes the Alpha and Omega. It becomes an article of belief in the faith in America as the chosen nation.

American ideology becomes a compelling religion in its own right. For example, in *Underworld* we see through the character of Sister Edgar, a faithful if somewhat jaundiced nun, that while she never loses her Catholic faith, another, subtle and pernicious faith ascends to rival it. As the Cold War strictures fade away, Edgar comes to see how the degree to which the American ideology of Us vs. Them has structured her life. She finds, "The serenity of immense design is missing from her life, authorship and moral form" (*UW* 817). Edgar believes, "All terror is local now" (*UW* 816), and this tests her faith, because she is used to dealing with giant, cosmic forces. She realizes, "It is not a question of disbelief. There is another kind of belief, a second force, insecure,

untrusting, a faith that is spring-fed by the things we fear in the night, and she thinks she is succumbing" (*UW* 817). Her Catholic faith alone has not offered her the security and sense of probity that have buoyed her; she needs political assurance as well. And DeLillo makes it clear how damaging this reliance on American ascendancy and power has been. Edgar, though she is regularly out serving the derelict sections of the Bronx, is rather misanthropic. Her treatment of her pupils borders on abuse. She is also a severe germaphobe; she needs physical and environmental cleanliness when she should be looking to the cleanliness of her soul and the way she treats others.[15] In the end, it is a religious vision, a miracle, that grants Edgar to spiritual rejuvenation, compelling her to do what her "other" faith could not – embrace those around her, even the charismatic Christian sect for which she has a strong antipathy, without reaching for latex gloves. Edgar feels "An angelus of clearest joy. . . . Everything feels near at hand, breaking upon her, sadness and loss and glory and an old mother's bleak pity and a force at some deep level of lament that makes her feel inseparable from the shakers and mourners, the awestruck who stand in tidal traffic—she is nameless for a moment, … pouring into the crowd" (*UW* 823). DeLillo injects ambiguity into the veracity of her vision, but its effects are undeniably salutary: her religious vision reforms her in ways her ideological faith never could, inspiring to what McClure refers to as a "sacramental mode of being" ("Mystery" 167).

In *Underworld*, Nick Shay muses, "How human it is to see a thing as something else" (64). DeLillo makes it clear that human beings have an inherent fascination with mystery. Even the Bomb's "evil twin," waste, comes to command awe, fear, and even

[15] Throughout there are clear parallels between Sister and the another Edgar – J. Edgar Hoover – parallels which are far from complimentary.

worship. But, while all kinds of mystery generate appeal, McClure trenchantly observes that "DeLillo's work urges the reader to perform a discrimination of mysteries – to check his or her fascination with forensic and esoteric mysteries and explore the possibility of apophatic and sacramental modes of being" ("Mystery" 167). DeLillo aids the reader in discrimination through exploring the damaging effects of misplaced religious devotion. Thus, near the end of *Underworld*, we find Nick Shay, now a middle-aged grandfather with a successful career in waste management (which he sees as a kind of transcendence) and an ordered life, longing for some other form of mystery: "I'll tell you what I long for, the days of disarray, when I didn't give a damn or a fuck or a farthing. . . . I long for, the breach of peace, the days of disarray when I walked real streets and did things slap-bang and felt angry and ready all the time, a danger to others and a distant mystery to myself" (*UW* 806, 810). It is revealing how corrupted Nick's horizons have become when he misses the violent and aimless days of his youth (McClure, *Partial* 94). The forms of self-integration and synthesis that Nick has found are clearly deficient.

Sister Edgar and Nick are just two examples in which DeLillo exposes the limits and crippling effects of ideology as a substitute spiritual discipline. In these two characters, we see how their neatly ordered and "integrated" lives still leave them unfulfilled. But DeLillo gives us other characters who show a different dark side to such ideology: those whom it marginalizes. In *Underworld*, for example, DeLillo clearly depicts the American Dream as exclusionary. Baseball, the all-American sport, appears to transcend race – allowing the black youth Cotter Martin to befriend the older white Bill Waterson during the Giants-Dodgers game – until Cotter comes out of the scramble for a ball in possession of an historic home run ball. Bill immediately assumes a kind of white

privilege, trying to convince Cotter the ball really belongs to him. That night, while Cotter sleeps, the ball is pilfered by his own father, Manx, who then hocks the ball for a fraction of its worth. No one will fully trust the word of Manx, a marginalized black man, as to the ball's legitimacy. When he does finally sell the ball to Charles Wainwright, he does so by appealing to family legacy, inspiring Charles to dream of passing the ball, along with the historic moment it signifies, down to his son. Manx, of course, having stolen the ball from his own son, will never pass on any American legacy. He has no share of the American dream that he might pass it on. Even *Underworld*'s paratextual elements indicate the Martin family's marginalization: each of the three short sections given to narrating their lives are separated from the rest of the text by blank black pages.

Apophatic Discourse and Technique

DeLillo demonstrates the desperate need for ontotheological synthesis of the self in a postmodern age and pinpoints the attributes of this age that render such synthesis impossible. The remainder of this chapter explores how DeLillo, in addition to exposing the deleterious effects of spurious spiritual objects, points toward the transcendent. In an interview with Anthony DeCurtis, DeLillo said, "I think my work has always been informed by mystery; the final answer, if there is one at all, is outside the book. My books are open-ended. I would say that mystery in general rather than the occult is something that weaves in and out of my work. I can't tell you where it came from or what it leads to. Possibly it is the natural product of a Catholic upbringing" ("Outsider" 55). I will now turn to some of the ways that DeLillo invites this mystery and transcendence – that which is "outside the book" – into his work. What DeLillo ultimately intends, I argue, is to point toward the mystery that transcends both the possibility of media

absorption and cooptation by terrorist groups.[16] In a culture in which he believes the primary religion turns out to be the American people, or America as an idea, a culture which is thoroughly image-bound, DeLillo is compelled to find new (often oblique or negative) ways to intimate the transcendent. I argue that DeLillo attempts to carve out a space for the transcendent through his use of language and through his appropriation of the apophatic tradition. I now offer a brief overview of apophatic discourse before surveying apophatic techniques that DeLillo employs in his work.

At its most basic, "The apophatic is the linguistic strategy of somehow showing by means of language that which lies beyond language" (Turner qtd. Franke 152). While in the original Greek *apophasis* means negation or denial, Patristics scholar J. P. Williams states that truly apophatic statements are not simply negative statements which profess to be truth claims but rather "a kind of negation which denies the accuracy of both whatever affirmative proposition is at stake, and its contradictory" (5). On one level, apophasis may be considered a second-order discourse that concerns not a discursive subject but discourse itself and its limitations. Such a conception has the benefit of utility, offering a clearly delimited notion of what apophasis is and does. But, as William Franke insists, this undercuts its significance, "for then apophatic discourse is presented as having no bearing on extralinguistic reality, no ontological import," when actually the ontological "realm is redefined by apophasis as the mystery of the real upon which discourse opens at the limits of what it is able to articulate— as what it cannot formulate and determine in terms of itself" (152). Apophatic discourse does possess an ontological dimension, one which places demands on the individual "speakers."

[16] In *Cosmopolis*, Eric and Vija argue about this very thing, Eric insisting that the self-sacrifice of a protester who has set himself on fire stands outside possible reappropriation by the market. Vija, the embodiment of a nihilistic globalization, pouts when she cannot produce a convincing rebuttal.

Apophasis is a way of approaching some mystery or mystical experience that has made an indelible personal impact but for which language is finally inadequate. Apophatic texts and approaches always emerge out of specific traditions, signally when a tradition reaches stasis or finds itself in decay or waning relevance. For example, Williams relates how certain Buddhist schools adopted apophasis as means of combatting the moral quietism that resulted from certain understandings of freeing oneself from attachment. Apophatic discourse is perhaps most potent as a way of resisting the degree of closure and ossification that can result in oppression and coercion. It resists the human proclivity to bend the power of God or Truth to human order, the cooptation of the authority of God for the sake of human establishment. Apophasis points to the reality that language can never fully encapsulate the Real.

Apophaticism, for its unyielding insistence on fallibility, is not, however, a complicated form of agnosticism. It offers a means of "unsaying" or "unknowing" ostensibly absolute statements that fall short of the full reality without stagnating into mere cynicism. According to Franke,

> As a position of *un*knowing, apophaticism would seem to be an agnosticism. And yet it is not the position as such but rather the moving away by negation from any position in which knowing can rest secure that is most characteristic of apophaticism. It does not remain within the limits of any knowledge or even of any definite and achieved state of unknowing—as if that way the question could be resolved once and for all agnostically. (199)

Apophasis assumes some form, or limit, of experience, and it does not engender "discursive rest"; rather, each successive attempt to speak about the divine (or Real), even as it is incomplete, leads to greater knowledge and spiritual development in the individual. It is precisely through this recognized partial failure that apophasis engenders

its fruitful tension. Apophatic discourse is never simply an intellectual endeavor, for it entails an acknowledgement of the failure of "human intellectual resources" and thus requires an "existential commitment" from the outset (Williams 190). Williams states that "apophasis is in some sense a validation of the soteriological need to speak of the divine, coupled with a repeated recognition that each attempt so to speak is not entirely successful" (5). This need to speak, combined with the failure of language to adequately capture experience, "flushes the human need for icons of the ultimate out of the epistemological arena into a wider existential ground" (Williams 9-10).

The "existential" ramifications of apophasis include what I will call its social dimension. Apophatic discourse serves to affirm and preserve of a degree of pluralism. While no religious system or understanding of truth can exist without kataphatic (positive, affirmative) statements, apophatic fulfills a monitorial function by insisting that all kataphatic statements remain incomplete and that no one individual or group possesses *the* truth. Because apophatic thought creates a space for the Truth-beyond-language rather than producing affirmations, "methodologically it can play a key regulatory role, given the pluralistic situation of philosophy today, by offering a theory as to why this pluralism of discourses is necessary in the first place" (Franke 149). In turn, such recognition fosters humility and greater social awareness. J. P. Williams establishes a direct connection between apophasis and the recognition of alterity. The process of shattering one's own images and affirmative statements about the divine (or greater truth) results, on the one hand, in a shattering of the self for whom those were absolutes/truths, and, on the other hand, in "encounters with the 'other' who subverts our self-sufficiency" (223). Because of this encounter with the Other, there is an "essential connection" between the

apophatic activity of union with God and compassionate care of one's fellow creatures (Williams 192). Apophatic discourse *demands* practical activity. The very acknowledgment of that which is beyond language reveals its call upon one, even if that call cannot be easily defined.

Apophasis in DeLillo's Work

The most significant aspect of apophatic thought in terms of its function in DeLillo's work is the effect that it has on the individual. Apophatic discourse is not simply a way of speaking (or not speaking) about the divine or Real but also, and fundamentally, a means of moral self-formation. DeLillo has at least some familiarity with apophatic writings; the anonymous 14th-century mystical text, the *Cloud of Unknowing,* appears in both *Underworld* and *White Noise*. His use of language – the very structuring of sentences and arrangements of chapters and sections – also employs techniques used by apophatic writers. This includes the creation of spatial relationships in the text and drawing attention to *aporia* (felt absences) in the text.[17] Cowart has pointed out DeLillo's penchant for creating verbless paragraphs, forcing the reader to consider the order of the words and their relation to each other. But my aim here is to extend this analysis, to move beyond the consideration of how DeLillo's use of language preserves a

[17] For example, as Liliana Naydan has suggested, *Point Omega* juxtaposes a slowed-down representation of violence in the film *Psycho* with the complete absence of the representation of (implied) violence in the main narrative of the novel. The effect of this is twofold, exhorting readers to consider how representations of violence in media and film are received and appropriated by audiences, and drawing readers' attention to the potentially influential role of absence (aporia) – what (possibly or probably) occurs off-screen yet profoundly shapes what is on-screen. Naydan interprets *Point Omega* as an attempt by DeLillo to offer a counternarrative to the kind of fundamentalism that may inspire terrorism. I would argue that it also continues DeLillo's efforts to find ways to criticize and counter the abrading power of the media. The fact that in the exhibit (an art exhibit showing the film *Psycho* slowed down to last 24 hours) the viewer can walk behind the screen, along with the fact that it is slowed down, draws attention to the film's status as a created, manipulated, simulated, representation of violence. And, by constraining the viewer to experience the film differently, leveling out the suspense and the graphic horror and gore, we are led to consider and examine our very expectations and reactions because of their very absence.

degree of mystery to an analysis of how this openness spiritually forms individuals. Apophasis is not only part of DeLillo's own Catholic tradition and explicitly referenced in his work; it also exhibits a natural affinity for the postmodern milieu because it recognizes the dynamic nature of truth while also fostering spiritual development:

> What apophasis has to receive from the postmodern consciousness is a reinforcement of its own insight that what is at stake here is not merely changing human perceptions but changing human perceivers, and not merely developing apprehensions of an unchanging truth, but apprehensions of a truth that is itself both unchanging and dynamic. What apophasis has to contribute to the postmodern consciousness, is a sense of the celebration of that dynamic, and a rich tradition of negotiating its organization into a *paideia* or anagogy which effects human liberation. (Williams 219-20)

I contend that the effect of DeLillo's apophatic techniques, whether or not he consciously intended them, is a form of unsaying that offers the potential for new insight and urges a vision of compassion and communion with others.

Christopher J. Knight, in his work on modern apophaticism, argues that "the post-Jamesian artist or intellectual has made it something akin to a practice to imagine the work as incomplete, except as this completion is understood as taking place in a realm outside of, or invisible to, common understanding. As [Henry] James, in the voice of one of his characters, writes, 'The pearl is the unwritten'" (5). For DeLillo, whom Knight does not discuss, "unwritten" would have two senses: that which is outside the text, as he avers the final answers are, and that which he actively and explicitly un-writes in his work. Any work that is "incomplete," pointing toward something outside the text, must preserve mystery in some fashion. I seek to demonstrate that DeLillo's use of apophatic techniques serves to preserve mystery on the one hand, while, on the other hand, insisting on the discriminatory principle that mystery must engender a recognition of alterity and

never be divorced from the world. In this way, DeLillo "unsays" ideologies and esoteric mysteries that would parade as ersatz spiritual objects while maintaining an opening toward the transcendent.

The Hazards of Belief Without Content

The last line of Cormac McCarthy's novel, *The Road*, describes a scene of the deep heart of the unfolding natural world where things "hummed of mystery" (287). This ambiguous invocation of mystery finds parallels in DeLillo's work, and Amy Hungerford has linked these two authors in this way, ultimately to question the value of such ambiguity. Acknowledging the possibility that such invocation of mystery attempts to prop the door to the transcendent open in a postmodern age, Hungerford brackets DeLillo in a group of writers, including McCarthy and Toni Morrison, who "want the fruits of religious power – or at least, they want to help us imagine compelling versions of religious power – without having to answer for the assumptions about the world, and about writing, upon which such visions are built" (133). Hungerford sees this as a dereliction of writerly responsibility. Yet, if such ambiguity "in this sense insulates religious assumptions from individual and communal thought, and from individual and communal response" (Hungerford 133), it also obviates false statements and the sort of idolatry that becomes a mask for power and oppression.[18] I contend that DeLillo's use of mystery discloses an acute awareness of "the assumptions about the world, and about writing, upon which such visions are built," that Hungerford argues he ignores. DeLillo is conscious of writing in age in which terrorism has become an ostensibly rational response to the world. Furthermore, Hungerford's linkage of McCarthy and DeLillo elides very

[18] I do not mean to suggest that religious beliefs should be kept out of the public sphere or off the courtroom floor. I simply want to reiterate that there is a defensible rationale for such "vagueness."

important differences in the way these two handle mystery. Her contention that DeLillo usurps religious authority to gild literature with prestige and thus offers "belief without content, belief in meaninglessness, belief for its own sake," ignores the fact that DeLillo makes it abundantly clear how disastrous and deadly belief without content can be.

Hungerford focuses the first section of her argument on the *Mao II* character, Karen Janney, an ex-Moonie who has found no satisfactory replacement to fill her need for an absolute authority figure. Hungerford claims that Karen's "peculiar" use of language "is ultimately held out as an antidote to the failure of the writer, Bill Gray" (62). She contends that Karen exhibits an exemplary capacity for belief, evident in her "fractured" language that is syntactically formed by her cult history. Karen is described as a consummate believer, though the object of her belief is rather inconsequential: "if it's believers you want, Karen is your person. Unconditional belief. The messiah is here on earth" (*Mao II* 69). Hungerford maintains that Karen's "capacity to believe" is exceedingly more important than the content of her belief because it reveals her aptitude for imagination (64). Yet DeLillo's work would seem to counsel against such "unconditional belief."

Hungerford overlooks the fact that Karen embodies the crowd mentality that is censured throughout the novel, a mentality that DeLillo suggests should be feared and resisted. Certainly, "fractured" language can be fruitful for imagination. But Karen's indiscriminate mysticism is finally to be rejected because she possesses no authentic, recognizable self. Hungerford suggests "that the fractured quality of her language . . . demonstrates what it would mean to find a language commensurate to imagination, commensurate to the mystery that Karen honors in all that she encounters" (64). But

Karen's encounters are *all* mystery. She prowls the derelict parks and lots of New York, absorbing and attempting to parrot the "vernaculars" of the slum culture (*Mao II* 175), all the while "telling them about a man [Reverend Moon] from far away who had the power to alter history" (*Mao II* 172). She tells "familiars in the park…how to totalize their lives according to the sayings of a man with the power" (*Mao II* 176), yet she herself is only trying on different vernaculars with no cohering principle.

For Karen, mystery remains only a source of fascination in the shallowest sense. She never achieves any authentic communion; she fears real contact with others:

> contact could be dangerous. . . . She was learning how to alter the way she walked and sat, how to hide her glances or sort of root them out. She remained in the deep core. She walked within herself, did not cross the boundary into the no-man's-land of a glance, a fleeting ray or recognition. Like I'm a person and you're a person, which gives you the right to kill me. She formed a picture of people running in the streets. (*Mao II* 176)

Karen's "imagination" is thoroughly devoid of real engagement; there is no true recognition of alterity except as a curiosity. Hers is the worldview of the crowd, the collective, the non-self who experiences no true interpersonal contact or communion. As Joseph Dewey recognizes, her language is not "commensurate to imagination" as Hungerford insists (64), but rather discloses a lack of selfhood: "when DeLillo follows her character as she moves through the harrowing night-world of Manhattan's homeless after Gray disappears, she feels 'all drift and spin' (142) with her authority now suddenly absent. The narrative voice appropriately flatlines into non sequiturs and disjointed observations, childlike syntax and diction, garbled fragments and clichés" (Dewey 110). The writer Bill Gray had come to fill the authority figure role formerly occupied by Reverend Moon, but now Karen drifts about in search of a new home for her ample belief. She glimpses one possibility as she watches the news on television (notably,

without sound) and sees the implacable surging crowds at the funeral of Ayatollah Khomeini. Karen's responds by telling herself that surely no one nearby is watching, or else there would be people everywhere filling the New York City streets: "If others saw these pictures, why is nothing changed, where are the local crowds, why do we still have names and addresses and car keys?" (*Mao II* 191). Belief without content leads to encounter without engagement. Others do not register with Karen as autonomous individuals. Suffering is unreal to her: she watches the crush of contained people in an internment camp and mentally compares it to a religious painting of suffering (*Mao II* 33-4). Hungerford insists that DeLillo holds Karen up as an exemplar, but if we see Karen instead as a hapless, pathetic figure, Hungerford's argument founders.

Karen is no isolated case: throughout his novels, DeLillo depicts an environment in which self-mystification is almost endemic. In perhaps the grimmest scene in *Underworld*, waste disposal experts Viktor Maltsev and Nick Shay stare at preserved malformed fetuses in a literal museum of mutants in post-Soviet era Kazakhstan. In the presence of these deformed dead, Viktor tells Nick that the atomic bomb and all this radioactive aftermath became a reality as soon as it became a real possibility: "'once they imagine in the beginning, it makes everything true,' [Viktor] says. 'Nothing you can believe is not coming true'" (*UW* 801-2). When the unimaginable becomes reality, when cyclopses leave the pages of Homer and enter the quickened world, nothing seems impossible. Self-mystification becomes rampant, as Viktor's next words reveal: "An interesting thing. There is a woman in Ukraine who says she is second Christ. She is going to be crucified by followers and then rise from the dead. Very serious person. Fifteen thousand followers. You can believe this? Educated people, look very normal. I

don't know. After communism, this?" (*UW* 802). What would seem to be most implausibly fantastic, when measured against the irradiated realities floating in jars of ether, is less easily dismissed. Because this need to believe finds so many readily available objects, DeLillo cautions against facile gravitation toward precisely the kind of mystical aura that Hungerford argues he seeks to invest in language.

The character of Vija Kinski in *Cosmopolis* offers a further example of DeLillo's wariness of any attempt to coopt religious authority. Vija serves as chief theorist to financial titan Eric Packer. Vija, who emerges from a Catholic church when the reader first encounters her, translates simple awe and mystery, the aura of it, from the Catholic religion to the notion of wealth as existing for its own sake. As she steps into Eric's mobile office – a titanic, futuristic limousine – she remarks "Oh and this car, which I love. The glow of the screens. I love the screens. The glow of cyber-capital. So radiant and seductive. I understand none of it" (*C* 78). This lack of understanding, nonetheless accompanied by such awe, mirrors the mystery and wonder which Hungerford claims that DeLillo intends to lift from religion and translate to literature. The thrust of the entire novel, *Cosmopolis*, is that such blind enthrallment with aura bars the way to true self-understanding and identity. Aura becomes mere spectacle:

> He knew what she was thinking. Never mind the speed that makes it hard to follow what passes before the eye. The speed is the point. Never mind the urgent and endless replenishment, the way data dissolves at one end of the series just as it takes shape at the other. This is the point, the thrust, the future. We are not witnessing the flow of information so much as pure spectacle, or information made sacred, ritually unreadable. The small monitors of the office, home and care become a kind of idolatry here, where crowds might gather in astonishment. (*C* 80)

DeLillo has pointedly spoken of the perilous divorce of ritual from the world. Speaking in an interview about the fictional cult he portrays in *The Names*, DeLillo said, "In *The*

Names my interest was the way in which a mind centered on ritual can so easily slip off into violence. I thought that ritual stripped from the world becomes dangerous, becomes violent. It loses its connection" ("Writing"). *Cosmopolis* reveals that the same danger threatens when information is divorced from the world. Vija watches the stock tickers and sees only the pulsing glow, while the world outside of the buffered limousine surges with violence. Vija is described as a kind of religious figure or oracle: she emerges from the Church of Saint Mary the Virgin in simple dress, gray-haired but with a youthful face, and she likes to sit in the seat of power in Eric's limousine and speak "ex cathedra" (78, 100). She fancies that her market theorizing carries a weight and subtlety comparable to Catholic casuistry, but the thin, abstract nature of her ideas becomes apparent when she encounters the true exigencies of non-digital, extra-limousine life. Violence fails to trouble Vija as long as she can rationalize it as a necessary component of her theory. For example, she theorizes the source of the sense of well-being that Eric experiences upon hearing of the murder of his friend and rival Nikolai Kaganovich: "He died so you can live" (*C* 82). Vija dilates about market totality and the reabsorption of violence and revolution, but she cannot rationalize a man who has set himself on fire in protest (100). Eric thinks, "A man in flames. . . . What did this change? Everything . . . . [Vija] had been wrong. The market was not total. It could not claim this man or assimilate his act. Not such starkness and horror. This was a thing outside its reach" (*C* 99-100). Vija is dejected; her only rebuttal is to snivel about the burning man's unoriginality. When Eric challenges her, she "sharply" replies, "That was theory. I deal in theory" (*C* 95). Like Karen, Vija is soulless spectator. For all her posing, as her boss Eric begins to perceive, she has no self, no identity in the world: "She talked. This was her job. . . . But what did

she believe? Her eyes were unrevealing. At least to him they were . . . bright at times but only in the flush of an insight or conjecture. Where was her life? . . . Give her a history and she'd disappear" (*C* 104-5). Vija fades from the narrative, a defeated figure and cautionary tale reinforcing Nick Shay's question in *Underworld*: "What was Latin for if you couldn't reduce the formal codes to the jostled argot of the street?" (*UW* 107).

Hungerford imputes to DeLillo an attempt at what Dupré calls "progressive secularization": the "effort to be secular by expanding the immanent world view so as to include even the *religious experience*," imbuing a wholly immanent existence with the aura of the sacred (*Selfhood* 25). She reads DeLillo as attempting a "turn to religious authority as a renewable resource for literature [that] can be seen as an attempt to restore to literature the traditional cultural authority that deconstruction and multiculturalist critique called into question" (Hungerford 136). David Cowart has made a compelling case that DeLillo does seek to restore to literature and language a measure of its lost authority but without making a "prison-house" out of language (*Physics* 177-8). DeLillo seeks to restore to language not only cultural authority but also the capacity to invoke the religious or numinous that transcends language. Cowart hints at this in his assessment of *The Names*, concluding that, "DeLillo leaves open the possibility that a relationship persists between the linguistic and the divine" (174). DeLillo's subtlety, his apparent insistence on the openness of this possibility, also serves to forestall any absolutization of the relationship between the linguistic and the divine.

I will not argue that DeLillo specifies the content of the religious experience to which he points the reader; I agree with Hungerford's contention that, like the Latin Mass, DeLillo preserves a "lack of transparency" (56). Yet Hungerford's equation is

more symmetrical than she thinks. Granting her statement that a majority of those present would not understand the words of the Latin Mass, it remains that the Latin Mass never transpires in a vacuum. Even as the participants experience mystical connection by being lost in translation, most of them at least, know something about the God they have come to worship; catechism ensures this knowledge. Thus, any mystical communion with God that occurs during the Latin Mass takes its form from this theological foundation. In contrast, Hungerford argues that DeLillo preserves a mystical experience divested of any content or foundation. While she is correct in one sense, DeLillo aspires to something greater than aura. DeLillo offers guidance through his evisceration of spurious forms of mysticism and through his circumspect affirmation of religious contemplation. DeLillo makes clear that numerous entities which exude an aura of sacramental mystery only prove themselves sources of destruction and pain. On the other hand, those mysteries which seem to be authentic (in the sense of benign and redemptive) lead to spiritual fulfillment and communion with fellow human beings.

Deus Absconditus

For DeLillo, mystery – the uncertain, the unsayable, the unknowable – demands contemplation and, in turn, engagement. Apophatic discourse should not be understood simply as a means of affirming the notion of *deus absconditus*, the hidden God. DeLillo's characters reference divine hiddenness so frequently that it becomes a trope in DeLillo's work. Several characters equate the notion of the hidden God with power such that it becomes a means of mastery or coercion. For them, mystery is not an invitation to engagement but to conquest.

In *Underworld*, Nick Shay recalls his reading of *The Cloud of Unknowing,* an apophatic text written by an anonymous Catholic mystic. The careful reader notices that Nick's reading of it departs from the book's intent. Nick relates his own reading: "it made me think of God as a force that withholds himself from us because this is the root of his power" (*UW* 295). For Nick, the pursuit of God is a somewhat erotic fascination with negation and secrecy, an attempt to penetrate a darkness that Nick understands to be the source of power: "This is what I respected about God. He keeps his secret. And I tried to approach God through his secret, his unknowability. Maybe we can know God through love or prayer or through visions or through LSD but we can't know him through the intellect. *The Cloud* tells us this. And so I learned to respect the power of secrets" (*UW* 295). Nick's entire life is driven by the need for order and mastery, and he never seems to seriously entertain the possibility that the pursuit of God has a moral component. Acknowledging that love, prayer, and visions may offer alternative means of insight, Nick spurns them all. Nick further explains his understanding of *The Cloud* to Donna, a woman he meets in a hotel where she is attending a swingers convention with her husband:

> We approach God through his unmadeness. . . . How can we attempt to know such a being? We don't know him. We don't affirm him. Instead we cherish his negation. . . . And we try to develop a naked intent that fixes us to the idea of God. *The Cloud* recommends that we develop this intent around a single word. Even better, a single word of a single syllable. (*UW* 295)

Ironically, it is Donna who proposes the word love as the focal term for approaching the divine. But the word itself is insignificant, for Nick entirely misses the point of the focal word: the meaning of the word or the syllable matters not because the point is to move past the word. He tells Donna that as a twenty-year-old he agonized over which word to

use, finally landing on the phrase *todo y nada*, which is itself laden with theological import borrowed from St. John of the Cross. Now middle-aged, Nick tells Donna that this same phrase describes sex. Tellingly, as Nick and Donna have sex following their discussion, Nick narrates it in terms similar to those with which he describes his attempt to know God. Nick scrutinizes her before, during, and after intercourse, so intently that she asks him to stop. Nick's thoughts disclose what amounts to conquest in the fullest sense:

> I raised up and saw how small she looked, naked and abed, how completely different from the woman of the movietone aura in the hotel lobby. She was near to real earth now, the sex-grubbed dug-up self, and I felt close to her and thought I knew her finally even as she shut her eyes to hide herself.
>
> I said her name. (*UW* 300)

Nick respects secrecy as a source of power, but he also desires to exert power. Unable to penetrate the divine mystery, he forces Donna into the role of surrogate, intent upon knowing her through and through to the point of mastery. He presses and presses until no part of her remains a mystery to him, but, in the end, it remains "bleak bargain sex" which Nick knows will only result in guilt and further secrecy (*UW* 294). (In addition to committing adultery, Nick has even confided in Donna a detail he has never told his wife: he accidentally shot and killed a man when he was seventeen.)

Nick, in his reading of *The Cloud*, misses entirely its point about the mystery of the divine. Authentic apophatic discourse does not and cannot leave a person unchanged. Nick evinces a notion of the hidden that evokes only an inert fascination or desire for power, whereas the apophatic tradition is separated from vague mysticism or merely negative statements by the fact that a genuine apophatic approach issues in personal, spiritual development and engenders compassion and action in the world (Williams 187-

88). Nick refuses the kind of contemplation must would lead to engagement rather than conquest.

Transcendence in an Age of Terror

From his earliest works, DeLillo has demonstrated a prescient understanding of the growing power of terrorism. This milieu has shaped the way DeLillo approaches mystery and the notion of the transcendent in his work, as we shall see in DeLillo's novel *Falling Man*. As much terrorism is, ostensibly at least, religiously motivated, DeLillo's apophaticism serves to preserve mystery in a way that gainsays fundamentalist certainty without rejecting the possibility of transcendence altogether. The apophatic tradition has long been a way of unsaying substantialist conceptions of the divine or transcendent that have become means of oppression or that have become so tired, rote, and deflated that they lose their power. Mystery is a "key component of mysticism in apophatic writings . . . . neither a set of abstruse doctrines to be taken on faith nor a secret prize for the initiated. Mystery is a referential openness onto the depths of a particular tradition, and into conversation with other traditions" (Sells 8). Because apophatic writings rely on tensions, juxtapositions, and negations, any enlightenment "is glimpsed only in the interstices of the text, in the tension between the saying and the unsaying. Yet as elusive as it is, it is in principle accessible to all. The decision to write takes the discourse out of the immediate control of its author and opens it to readers beyond any particular group or school" (Sells 8). As Liliana Naydan observes in her analysis of *Point Omega*, "fundamentalists paradoxically demystify mysteries such as those that Catholics value" (100). In *Falling Man,* DeLillo suggests that apophasis is really a means of stripping

away barriers to the transcendent, while sustaining the value of mystery in inspiring greater awareness of one's world.

In *Falling Man,* DeLillo's "9/11 novel," the shifting narrative focus creates a running juxtaposition of Hammad, a fictionalized version of the one of the hijackers, and Lianne, a New York woman whose semi-estranged husband is a survivor of the attack. The spiritual lives of both are explored throughout the story, revealed to the reader through internal monologues. For DeLillo, those characters who find spiritual fulfillment are those whose contemplation of mystery translates into worldly compassion and human communion. In *Falling Man*, Hammad's ideological fervor leads him to become increasingly enthralled with death, while Lianne's spiritual quest leads her to a fuller engagement with the world and comfort in her own identity.[19]

In the wake of the attacks, Lianne critically examines both her own spirituality and the validity of religious belief in general in light of the ostensibly religious motivation of the terrorists. Thinking back to her youth, she recollects her nominally Catholic father telling her, "Human existence had to have a deeper source than our own dank fluids….There had to be a force behind it, a principal being who was and is and ever shall be. She loved the sound of that, like chanted verse, and thought of it now, alone, over coffee and toast, and something else as well, the existence that hummed in the words themselves, was and is" *(FM* 231). Even as Lianne finds this possibility of transcendence compelling, the prospect of fanaticism ruptures her captivation. Her friends are reading the Koran so as to be more informed about Islam, and Lianne is troubled to learn that the first line is, "This book is not to be doubted." She agonizes that

[19] DeLillo is not Islamophobic or categorically dismissive of Islam. Other works include Muslim characters who are held up as exemplary, for example, Brutha Fez in *Cosmopolis*.

religious devotion will cancel out the world: "God would consume her. God would de-create her and she was too small and tame to resist. That's why she was resisting now. Because think about it. Because once you believe such a thing, God is, then how can you escape, how survive the power of it, is and was and ever shall be" (*FM* 235). Lianne fears the kind of "unconditional belief" demonstrated by Karen Janney in *Mao II*, the kind of faith that could watch with awe as the crowd surges toward the coffin at Khomeini's funeral and wonder why individuals still have driver's licenses and why there should be individuals at all. Lianne begins attending mass and reveals a flickering belief which she is afraid to probe and further define: "She didn't believe this, the transubstantiation, but believed something, half fearing it would take her over" (*FM* 233).

Lianne attempts to compensate for her spiritual insecurity by seeking assurance through empirically verifiable signs of health. Despite exhibiting no discernible symptoms or maladies, she requests a battery of medical tests, all to confirm that she has "normal morphology." Normal morphology becomes a form of identity in which Lianne seeks solace and affirmation of wellbeing. Yet her confidence in her physical condition proves insufficient; she feels the uniquely human desire for transcendence, the grasping after that which Louis Dupré calls our ontological grounding:

> She had normal morphology. She loved that word. But what's inside the form and structure? This mind and soul, hers and everyone's, keep dreaming toward something unreachable. Does this mean there's something there, at the limits of matter and energy, a force responsible in some way for the very nature, the vibrancy of our lives from the mind out, the mind in little pigeon blinks that extend the plane of being, out beyond logic and intuition. (*FM* 232)

Lianne continues to debate this question, to believe and to doubt. She worries that belief opens the gate to fanaticism. She worries that God will overcome her, that the truth will

consume her so that there will be no escape. The reader perceives that Lianne's fear has already come true: her ceaseless internal wrestling indicates that there is no escape, that she is already consumed. Belief here is an ongoing process, a form of apophatic discourse with no terminal point in view. In accordance with DeLillo's penchant for ambiguity, Lianne never exactly settles for herself the question of God. This is the last spiritual reflection we get from her:

> She thought that the hovering possible presence of God was the thing that created loneliness and doubt in the soul and she also thought that God was the thing, the entity existing outside space and time that resolved this doubt in the tonal power of a word, a voice.
>
> God is the voice that says, "I am not here."
>
> She was arguing with herself but it wasn't argument, just the noise the brain makes. (*FM* 236)

Lianne's thoughts combine apophatic and kataphatic statements about God. This statement's tension allows for productive reflection: God is not present, yet God speaks. If God is not "here," is God somewhere else? As in *Underworld*, spiritual insight remains steeped in ambiguity. Each of Lianne's intimations of transcendence is presented alongside a dismissive rationalization, and every possible spiritual insight may also be nothing more than the ticking of physiological processes. Gradually, DeLillo establishes a reflexive connection between the physical and spiritual so that transcendence and immanence are not easily separated. While Lianne may believe it possible to dismiss her internal arguments about God as "noise the brain makes," it is by directing her attention toward the "hovering possible presence of God" that she sees how the question bears upon human lives. According to William Franke, this is the true fruit of apophatic discourse:

> A major motivation for turning our attention toward what cannot be said is that only in this domain, if at all, is it possible for truth in its (always only

> virtual) wholeness to be touched and brought into contact with life. Though Truth, especially in its wholeness or totality, is presumably forever beyond our comprehension, discourses on what cannot be said bear witness to how it bears upon us and thus to how we can live in relation to and in acknowledgment of this perhaps divine (im)possibility. Partial truth may not be truth at all; the truth is perhaps to be defined simply as the whole. (33)

The felt absence of God, this longing for divine presence, draws Lianne out of herself and into her life and into communion with others. The more she attends church, the more she feels a sense of communion and spiritual fulfillment:

> She was stuck with her doubts but liked sitting in church. She went early… to be alone for a while, to feel the calm that marks a presence outside the nonstop riffs of the waking mind. It was not something godlike she felt but only a sense of others. Others bring us closer. Church brings us closer. What did she feel here? She felt the dead. . . . It was a comfort, feeling their presence . . . . They brought intimacy and ease. (*FM* 233)

While the communal nature of church, the very literal communion of saints, directs her attention outward toward others, there is a concomitant movement in the opposite direction: "But isn't it the world itself that brings you to God? Beauty, grief, terror, the empty desert, the Bach cantatas. Others bring you closer, church brings you closer, the stained glass windows of a church, the pigments inherent in the glass, the metallic oxides fused onto the glass, God in clay and stone, or was she babbling to herself to pass the time?" (*FM* 233-34). The two movements here create a tension: others bring one closer to God, and the pursuit of God brings one closer to others. Lianne thinks "it is not something godlike" she feels but a sense of community. Yet she feels there is something in that sense of communion that gestures at the Transcendent. Furthermore, the content of her descriptor, "godlike," is left open-ended. The closest DeLillo comes to defining "godlike" is to suggest that it is this very capacity to inspire communion with others and

invest itself in dailyness. For DeLillo, the world may bring us to God, but God must bring us to the world.

In the text of the novel, it is just after Lianne thinks, "God is the voice that says, 'I am not here,'" that she reaches a point where she is able to get on with her life after the attacks. Lianne's revelation has the sacramental effect of restoring her to her own life and history: "She was ready to be alone, in reliable calm, she and the kid, the way they were before the planes appeared that day, silver crossing blue" (*FM* 236). Contemplation here leads to engagement. She comes to a sense of wholeness, a sense of bodily self which is more than simply physical:

> It was just her, the body through and through. It was the body and everything it carried, inside and out, identity and memory and human heat. . . . It was something she'd always known. The child was in it, the girl who wanted to be other people, and obscure things she could not name. It was a small moment, already passing, the kind of moment that is always only seconds from forgetting. (*FM* 236)

Apophatic discourse is precisely a means of referring to "obscure things she could not name"; it attempts to point toward that which cannot be said because it is rooted in transient experience. *This* sense of bodily existence – as one who stands in some relation to that which cannot be said – is then offered as the revised, final definition of "normal morphology" for Lianne (*FM* 236).

In contrast to the way Lianne's embrace of mystery revitalizes her life and draws her into community with others, the terrorist Hammad's fideistic "faith" is depicted as a form of escape, a deluded, misanthropic, and world-denying attempt to vault himself into eternity. The novel offers brief snapshots of Hammad's life. He lives in Germany pursuing flight training. He is a marginal member of a radical jihadist group. He fears the group's senior members, one of whom shames Hammad for his lack of chastity and

proclivity to glut himself on street food. Hammad's devotion to the group strengthens as he is challenged and chastened by the charismatic leader, resulting in a gradual rejection of the world. This rejection is no traditional askesis, however, for there is no spiritual change in Hammad but only a resignation to a collective will. Hammad is impressed primarily by the strength of their conviction that there is no greater glory or purpose than death. This conviction "is the truth he has always looked for without knowing how to name it or where to search," and the hijacking plan "shapes every breath he takes" (*FM* 176). While the contemplation of mystery opens up the world for Lianne, the all-encompassing devotion to plot narrows the for Hammad: "They felt the magnetic effect of plot. Plot drew them together more tightly than ever. Plot closed the world to the slenderest line of sight, where everything converges to a point." (*FM* 174).

Hammad's ideological commitment to his terrorist group would be more accurately called thanatological than theological. He believes that people "need to be ashamed of their attachment to life," that worldly commitments are "empty space" (*FM* 177). Hammad's desire to "spread his arms and walk right into" a storm he sees coming in off of the gulf suggests that even the method of death is not of primary importance to him (*FM* 177). Hammad is not given to contemplation at all, never dwelling on the purpose of the group's plot: "He didn't think about [it]. All he saw was shock and death. There is no purpose, this is the purpose" (*FM* 177). One of the novel's last scenes, certainly its most chilling, conveys Hammad's final thoughts as the plane his group has hijacked nears the World Trade Center:

> Forget the world. Be unmindful of the thing called the world.
> All of life's lost time is over now.
> This is your long wish, to die with your brothers. (*FM* 238)

Hammad is "wishing for death" and focused on "eternal life" (*FM* 239). At this point, he takes comfort from a story which was initially told to him as a tale of horror by a fellow Muslim. The man had told Hammad about the waves of child suicide brigades used during the Iran-Iraq War, detailing how thousands of children were sent to their deaths as a military tactic (*FM* 77-8). As Hammad sits in the plane nearing his death, he recalls this story: "He took strength from this, seeing them cut down in waves by machine guns, boys in the hundreds, then the thousands, suicide brigades, wearing red bandannas around their necks and plastic keys underneath, to open the door to paradise" (*FM* 238). It is the zealous certainty of Hammad's belief and death-wish that gives Lianne pause in her spiritual pursuit, the notion of God that can overcome someone to the extent that she commits acts of terror like Hammad's and those responsible for the child suicide brigades. It is significant than in the sections on Hammad, his thoughts are always about death, Paradise, and ritual and *never* about Allah. Hammad never thinks about the nature of the divine, never pursues any divine mysteries, never learns humility or compassion.

The apophatic approach assumes an individual's attempt at communion of the self with the divine or Ultimate. Union or integration, but never self-immolation, is the intention, and discourse about the unsayable is rooted in some form of experience of the unsayable. Hammad has no such experience. He is convinced by a zealot's impassioned speech which "sounded like philosophy" (*FM* 176), and, unlike Lianne, he never wrestles with the possibility of One who "was and is and ever shall be" (*FM* 235).

Dominus Vobiscum: The Reader's Burden

DeLillo's invocation of mystery does not offer a coherent theological or spiritual vision. The reader must pursue that outside of the book. But DeLillo confirms that the

problems of our age are spiritual and thus require spiritual answers, and he insists that any authentic spirituality must result in worldly action. Most notably in *Underworld*, but in other works as well, DeLillo directly challenges the reader to a pursuit of mystery and an engagement with one's world.

In its first line and again near the end, some 800 pages later, *Underworld* directly addresses the reader, placing the burden of interpretation upon her. The novel begins ambiguously, with the polysemic line: "He speaks in your voice, American, and there's a shine in his eye that's halfway hopeful" (*UW* 11). The antecedent of "American" is, intentionally of course, left open; it may refer either to a shared language or to the national identity of the addressed reader. The direct, second-person address resumes at the novel's end, brilliantly integrated into a section in which DeLillo blends traditional third-person omniscient narration with the conceit of internet-surfing. The section is framed so that web navigator suddenly becomes "you." "You" are present as Sister Edgar experiences the miracle referenced above, the miraculous appearance of Esmeralda that results in Edgar's embrace of those around her. And after the miracle ceases, "you" are charged with judging its veracity:

> And what do you remember, finally, when everyone has gone home and the streets are empty of devotion and hope, swept by river wind? Is the memory thin and bitter and does it shame you with its fundamental untruth—all nuance and wishful silhouette? Or does the power of transcendence linger, the sense of an event that violates natural forces, something holy that throbs on the hot horizon, the vision you crave because you need a sign to stand against your doubt? (*UW* 824)

The answer is yes; both responses find textual backing, and "you" are left with a tension. The apparent insufficiency of both options guides the reader in a further intellectual ascent toward the nature of the Ultimate and of the very possibility of the miraculous. As

Mark Osteen states, "Ultimately, however, what matters is not whether the apparition is 'real' (it resides in a fiction, after all), but that each reader be forced to decide if such things are possible, and what they mean if they are" (258). The ambiguity here, as Joseph Dewey argues, is not intended merely to mystify but to augment: "DeLillo's narrator-authority liberates the contemporary reader into complexity, offers not essential truths for the reader to grasp but rather the essential, sustaining truth of grasping itself, the reader as invested in and as rewarded by the text as the writer" (124). As the image of Esmeralda flickers into view, even Sister Edgar's fellow nun, Gracie, expresses her skepticism, saying, "It's just the undersheet . . . . A technical flaw that causes the image underneath" (*UW* 822). Yet in spite of, or perhaps because of, its ambiguity, it is enough to change Edgar's perception of things and her relation to those around her; the mystery impels her to a new level of engagement with her world.

As *Underworld* closes, DeLillo evinces a clear connection between the apophatic approach (or "discursive unrest") and the "existential" plane. As "you," the internet surfer, click through links, concluding with a perusal of the etymology or "tunneled underworld" of the word "peace" (*UW* 826), "your" attention is drawn from the glow of the screen to the radiance of the immediate physical world:

> And you glance out the window for a moment, distracted by the sound of small kids playing a made-up game in a neighbor's yard, some kind of kickball maybe, and they speak in your voice, or piggyback races on the weedy lawn, and it's your voice you hear, essentially, under the Glimmerglass sky, and you look at the things in the room, offscreen, unwebbed, the tissued grain of the deskwood alive in light, the thick lived tenor of things, the argument of things to be seen and eaten, the apple core going sepia in the lunch tray, and the dense measures of experience in a random glance, the monk's candle reflected in the slope of the phone, hours marked in Roman numerals, and the glaze of the wax, and the curl of the braided wick, and the chipped rim of the mug that holds your yellow pencils, skewed all crazy, and the plied lives of the simplest

> surface, the slabbed butter melting on the crumbled bun, and the yellow of the yellow of the pencils, and you try to imagine the word on the screen becoming a thing in the world, taking all its meanings, its sense of serenities and contentments out into the streets somehow, its whisper of reconciliation, a word extending itself ever outward, the tone of agreement or treaty, the tone of repose, the sense of mollifying silence, the tone of hail and farewell, a word that carries the sunlit ardor of an object deep in drenching noon, the argument of binding touch, but it's only a sequence of pulses on a dullish screen and all it can do is make you pensive—a word that spreads a longing through the raw sprawl of the city and out across the dreaming bourns and orchards to the solitary hills.
>
> Peace. (*UW* 827)

Pensiveness, as described at the end of this passage, here takes on a connotation of quietism, which would make of peace only a velleity. But the rueful tone and ostensible pessimism of the last few lines are a challenge to "you," the reader, a summons to engagement rather than resignation. DeLillo's novel itself certainly aspires to accomplish more than making the reader "pensive." As one attempts to penetrate that which is beyond comprehension and the mystery of how it might enter the world, one becomes more attuned to the world. In the quoted passage, the mundane becomes refulgent. As many critics have noted, DeLillo has spoken in an interview of the "radiance in dailiness" ("Outsider" 63), but no one has noted how DeLillo literally enacts that phrase in this scene. The physical objects in the room surrounding "you" are described in terms that suggest radiance, images of light and the color yellow: ordinary things like pencils and pastries are "alive in light," "glazed," "reflected," "yellow," "the sunlit ardor of an object deep in drenching noon." Here is DeLillo's discriminatory principle for differentiating among the mysteries: it must impel one towards a "becoming in the world." These provoke one to transcend mere pensiveness, to become more than "pulses on a screen" or ink on a page. In the passage above, we are brought back to the novel's first page when, as "you" look out the window and glimpse children playing, "it's your voice you hear,

essentially, under the Glimmerglass sky." By hearing one's voice in others, one communes with them, however momentarily, and this draws one out of cyberspace into the "argument of things to be seen and eaten" and "the argument of binding touch."

David Cowart demonstrates that in *The Names*, "Cultist and terrorist are manifestations of a need for stable meanings (though only the terrorist imagines reliable categories of good and evil, just and unjust). Each turns to violence in a desperate attempt to restore a vanished center to life" (*Physics* 171). This desire for "stable meanings" supersedes all other concerns, so that their aims lose all points of contact with daily life. The arguments of the visible and tangible no longer exert any influence on the terrorist or cultist. The need for stable meanings is not limited to terrorist and cultists, but their refusal to acknowledge any sense of mystery leads to a ready acceptance of violence. DeLillo wrote in a post-9/11 reflective essay, "It is the presumptive right of those who choose violence and death to speak directly to God" ("Ruins" 38). For DeLillo, there must be a connection between mystery and the mundane, and it is the "argument" of mundane life swirling all around us that tempers the use of violence.

McClure points out that several of DeLillo's novels "climax in dramatic episodes of worshipful communion . . . [in which] characters unfulfilled by quests for knowledge and control or by practices of privileged superficiality find comfort in experiences of sacramental communion" ("Mystery" 166). Such experiences are always rooted in the embrace of mystery, "And these characters have experiences of profound unknowing that resemble those described by apophatic mystics . . . The Ultimate is and must remain, even as it is approached, utterly unnamable and profoundly mysterious: those who seek it must surrender to mystery" (McClure, "Mystery" 166-7). Such scenes in DeLillo's work

are typically couched in ambiguity. McClure, borrowing from Vattimo, calls this a "rhetoric of weakening"; I contend that it is really an apophatic approach to mystery which places the final burden of discernment on the reader.

Conclusion

Perhaps DeLillo would finally place himself in the Catholic apophatic tradition. I do not know. It is clear, however, that DeLillo banishes all usurpers from the throne of transcendence, leaving the seat open to a truly mooring object of spiritual longing. Maybe, as Christ told the mother of James and John, the seat is simply not his to give. Ultimately, if these mysteries are ambiguous, their effects are not. No DeLillo character who places his or her faith in ideology, commodity, or conspiracy finds fulfillment. In "unsaying" these idols, DeLillo creates a space or felt absence. In *Falling Man*, a German character, Martin, expounds his view that America, especially in the wake of the 9/11 attacks, is losing its place of ascendancy and its international influence. According to Martin, "[America] is losing the center. . . . There's an empty space where America used to be" (*FM* 191, 193). To this, an American character responds, "Ask yourself. What comes after America?" (*FM* 192). DeLillo suggests that America is a poor object for one's ultimate faith, and challenges the reader to discern what must come after. DeLillo employs apophatic discourse in a way that refers beyond the text. And there, I submit, lies the key to an integrated selfhood, for, as Dupré claims, "the nature of selfhood is that the self is *essentially* more than a mere self, that transcendence belongs to its nature as much as the act through which it is immanent to itself," and the failure to find mooring in transcendence "reduces the self to *less* than itself" (*Selfhood* 104).

CHAPTER THREE

The Depth of the Riches: Thomas Pynchon's Spiritual Hybridity

At the end of *Vineland*, the character Prairie appears to be, in spite of herself, fascinated if not infatuated with power in the form of the novel's villain, Brock Vond. This despite the fact that Vond has brainwashed and tormented Prairie's mother, hunted her father, and generally stands for everything Prairie claims to detest and lament. In her fascination-in-spite-of-herself, Prairie imitates, to a lesser degree, the (spiritually fatal) flaw of her own mother, Frenesi, who similarly came under Vond's spell. This same conceit – the seduction of otherwise radical, or at least sensible, characters by contemptible authority figures – appears elsewhere in Pynchon's works, including in his most recent novel, *Bleeding Edge*, in which protagonist Maxine Tarnow has a tryst with a shady government agent. Though one may, not without evidence, accuse Pynchon of latent sexism here, I think this almost masochistic fascination with power is Pynchon's way of depicting one aspect of the human condition: our need for transcendence.[1]

His apparent, though qualified, endorsement of anarchism notwithstanding, Pynchon recognizes that human beings have a need for order and stability.[2] In *Vineland*, we are told, "Brock Vond's genius was to have seen in the activities of the sixties left not threats to order but unacknowledged desires for it. While the Tube was proclaiming youth

---

[1] There are numerous male characters throughout his work who find power equally alluring. Thus, Pynchon is clear that this proclivity for being seduced by authority is not a strictly feminine quality.

[2] Pynchon depicts anarchism positively or at least without clear criticism in *The Crying of Lot 49*, *V.*, and, most prominently, in *Against the Day*. For a nuanced and well-researched treatment of Pynchon's view of anarchy, see Benton, "Daydreams and Dynamite."

revolution against parents of all kinds and most viewers were accepting this story, Brock saw the deep . . . need only to stay children forever, safe inside some extended national Family" (*VL* 269). I argue that here, and throughout his work, Pynchon depicts the human need for self-integration and shows how devastating the effects can be when this need is misplaced. This self-integration includes a need for family and community but also extends to one's relations to the physical world and the transcendent: what Louis Dupré calls the ontotheological synthesis. In the quote above and throughout his work, Pynchon suggests that radical movements and well-intentioned reforms are easily co-opted. One reason for that, according to his work, is the prevalence of a quasi-religious American ideology that purports to offer the kind of transcendence and order that most Americans now desire. The idea of a "national Family," as mentioned in the quote above, as well as that of national destiny, plays a key role in the spiritual formation of many Americans.

Don DeLillo's professed desire for privacy is far exceeded by that of Thomas Pynchon, who has never granted a single interview. Nevertheless, Pynchon's fiction and his occasional essays convey a great deal about his concerns regarding contemporary American life. His essays elucidate what his fiction reveals only through meticulous parsing: despite his reputation as the paragon of postmodern literature, Pynchon is a sincere moralist and formidable political critic. Though an extremely private person, Pynchon shows a keen awareness of American popular culture and contemporary political life.

Scholars such as Cyrus Patell have insightfully considered Pynchon's indictment of Americans' complicity in systems of oppression and stasis (129). In *Vineland,* especially, Pynchon makes it clear that even many countercultural radicals were all too

easily turned into accomplices.[3] A typical account of such complicity is something like what magnate Crocker Fenway says to hippie private eye Doc Sportello about the willingness of the average American to be bought off with shiny material goods:

> "It's about *being in place.* We . . . we're in place. We've been in place forever. Look around. Real estate, water rights, oil, cheap labor—all of that's ours, it's always been ours. And you, at the end of the day what are you? one more unit in this swarm of transients who come and go without pause here in the sunny Southland, eager to be bought off with a car of a certain make, model, and year, a blonde in a bikini, thirty seconds on some excuse for a wave—a chili dog, for Christ's sake." He shrugged. "We will never run out of you people. The supply is inexhaustible." (*IV* 347)

Certainly, for many of Pynchon's characters (like Crocker Fenway), as for many Americans, the enticements of power and money loom large in their willingness to overlook social inequalities and widespread spiritual malaise. Others just get swept along by the demands of mundane life, too bogged down or ground down to think too much about "Them" (the shadowy entities calling the shots); such individuals are victimized by the system even if they obliquely contribute to it. But Pynchon's critics have not considered in any depth why – for those who, perhaps, cannot be bought off with a measly chili dog – the "American Dream" continues to be so compelling in Pynchon's view. One answer is found in the notion of the new car and the chili dog: as simple material goods, these may not be irresistibly enticing, but as symbols of the American Dream and the promise of being able to make something out of oneself, that is a different story. The *idea* that one can seize the opportunity to buy a new car is exceedingly more powerful than the possession of a new car itself. The underlying ideology is that *this*

---

[3] This is perhaps why, as Steven Weisenburger has suggested, Pynchon is always subversive but rarely simply vindictive or rage-filled: he understands how easily the most conscientious objector becomes unwitting abettor ("*Gravity's Rainbow*" 43-44). Weisenburger recalls that Pynchon began his literary career as a technical writer for Boeing, where he covered technological developments in aviation and weaponry that turned out to be for the U.S. military, filling a role of subtle complicity in the American military machine.

nation – America – is a place where one can make something of oneself. *This* is the land of opportunity, and uniquely so. For Pynchon, there are many who are true believers in American exceptionalism, unwitting allies of an evil axis that is actually running the country.

This notion of exceptionalism is not only tied to the idea of freedom and opportunity; it also addresses a spiritual need. Like DeLillo, Pynchon suggests through his work that we are all spiritual creatures. In his essay, "Is It O.K. to Be A Luddite?" Pynchon surveys a few of the ways Americans have persisted in expressing belief in a higher reality:

> As religion was being more and more secularized into Deism and nonbelief, the abiding human hunger for evidence of God and afterlife, for salvation - bodily resurrection, if possible - remained. The Methodist movement and the American Great Awakening were only two sectors on a broad front of resistance to the Age of Reason, a front which included Radicalism and Freemasonry as well as Luddites and the Gothic novel. Each in its way expressed the same profound unwillingness to give up elements of faith, however "irrational," to an emerging technopolitical order that might or might not know what it was doing.

Pynchon insists that spirituality, especially expressions that affirm the possibility of the miraculous, is foundational for political awareness and action, and thus for human flourishing in general. As Pynchon claims later in his "Luddite" essay, "To insist on the miraculous is to deny to the machine at least some of its claims on us, to assert the limited wish that living things, earthly and otherwise, may on occasion become Bad and Big enough to take part in transcendent doings." Even in his earliest novel *V.*, sometimes seen as anti-clerical, atheism gets treated as harshly as does an anemic and patriarchal expression of Catholicism.[4] Spirituality is a vital part of human life, but not all spiritual disciplines are salutary, as evinced by Pynchon's excoriation of certain strains of

[4] For a perceptive treatment of religion in *V.*, see Freer 25-28.

Catholicism. Another such spiritual discipline that Pynchon finds deleterious is an American ideology that upholds America as divinely chosen (Elect) nation. I argue that for Pynchon, America, as an ideal, assumes its own divine imperative and many Americans find their spiritual mooring in the ideology America, with ruinous consequences. The myth of American exceptionalism, or Election, surfaces often in Pynchon's work. Pynchon shows us how this faith in American exceptionalism is, for many, a religion. As a religion, or spiritual discipline, this ideology assumes the place of more authentic spiritual disciplines whose very absence has inspired the spiritual vacuum that people seek to fill.

Critics have long recognized Pynchon's insistence that autocratic systems bent on total control result in dehumanization or, in the vernacular of *V.*, "inanimateness." But little consideration has been given to Pynchon's depiction of how such control is achieved. For all his excoriation of nefarious governmental machinations, Pynchon does not spare average citizens or even would-be revolutionaries from blame. So, why and how do such totalizing systems obtain? I contend that for Pynchon one reason (though there are others as well) is the fact that American political ideology functions as a compelling religious or spiritual discipline. As mentioned earlier, the Puritan theological roots of American exceptionalism make this ideology particularly susceptible to adoption as a spiritual discipline. It is a myth perpetuated both by truly noble ideals and by insidious parties motivated by greed and power. The notion of exceptionalism becomes problematic when it shifts from a secular affirmation of noble ideals to a claim of divine election. The notion that America is destined to become the pinnacle of history can lead to the tendency to ignore history – to dismiss complex causes and unintended effects and

overlook the oppressive or ruinous consequences of decisions made in the name of national preservation.

In this chapter, I take up and extend arguments and observations made by various scholars regarding both the religious and spiritual elements and the political critique at work in Pynchon's texts. What distinguishes my argument is the contention that Pynchon exposes American ideology as an ersatz and repressive spirituality, and that he presents previously undiscerned spiritual alternatives. Pynchon shows such ideology to be an ersatz or pseudo-spiritual discipline, one that results in a narrow worldview and engenders a fanatical sanctimony and a hubristic single-mindedness that rationalizes violence in the name of national destiny. Furthermore, it blinkers its adherents to their own spiritual poverty. I argue that Pynchon exposes this ideology as a false spiritual discipline and also locates the resources for political awareness and personal fulfillment in other, more authentic spiritualities. John McClure has argued that "Pynchon suggests that in the context of a global consumer capitalism that reaches into the mind to shape expectations and desires and disciplines those who refuse the dreams it has implanted, only something as powerfully transformative as a spiritual discipline can enable individuals to reclaim some mental autonomy and resist the psychological and physical coercions of the market" (*Partial* 56). McClure's contention is convincing but incomplete. I argue that Pynchon also urges alternative spiritual disciplines as requisite for resisting the allure of American ideology. It is not just late capitalism that poses such a threat but also the myth of America as a chosen nation.

Postmodern Moralist? Pynchon In Critical Context

Pynchon's standing as a postmodernist has sometimes attenuated his moral voice, as critics question his sincerity and argue that his postmodern philosophical assumptions undermine any moral thrust in his work. Thus, we need to consider in what ways Pynchon should be considered postmodern and to examine his credibility as political voice. Pynchon studies have burgeoned over the last half century, resulting in an elephantine corpus of Pynchon scholarship that draws contributions from many academic disciplines. An adequate synopsis of all of the critical perspectives on Pynchon's work would require a multi-volume work. Here I offer an overview of some of the major topics of Pynchon scholarship, focusing on those which are most pertinent to my own argument.

For as many critics as have characterized Thomas Pynchon as a postmodernist, we have almost as many understandings of the label postmodernist. Certainly, Pynchon adeptly executes many of the stylistic and technical devices characteristic of postmodernism. Some even consider Pynchon a pioneer of postmodern literature: Brian McHale suggests that not only is Pynchon's fiction exemplary of postmodernism, his work *occasioned* the development of postmodern literary theory ("Postmodernism" 97). Several elements of Pynchon's fiction land him in the postmodernist category. First, Pynchon refuses to privilege "high" over "low." One of the most salient aspects of Pynchon's work is his commingling of highbrow and lowbrow and his appropriation of pop culture. Perhaps more than even most of his postmodernist peers, Pynchon often combines impressive erudition and bracingly crass humor in the same paragraph and even same sentence. His work is also populated with hilarious if often gauche musical numbers. (These sometimes seem to function like a Greek chorus and other times they

are simply ludic intervals.) Another postmodernist feature is Pynchon's frequent use of irony and pastiche. Virtually every established literary genre as well as many of the associated subgenres and variants has found its way into Pynchon's novels.[5] Finally, Pynchon routinely destabilizes his fictional worlds and the narrative frame. As McHale notes, Pynchon frequently uses complicated framing devices that are sometimes inverted and turned back on themselves. His fiction also includes the recognition of multiple worlds, some of which are purely metaphorical but described in detail for entire chapters, as well as "worlds under erasure" in which a narrative segment is contradicted by a competing one or is overtly deconstructed by the narrator. These destabilizing strategies, according to McHale, function to "foreground ontology by exposing to view the operations by which narrative worlds are made and, more to the point, unmade" ("Postmodernism" 108).

Although philosophy and literary technique doubtless inform one another in many cases, we must separate technique from philosophical assumptions about epistemology and ontology. Critics remain divided as to whether Pynchon is philosophically as well as stylistically postmodernist. In one of the earliest major essays on Pynchon, Tony Tanner observed that Pynchon frustrates the reader's expectation of closure. Analyzing *V.*, Tanner pointed out that Stencil's quest for V., and the author's "quest" were not identical ("Caries" 52-3). Much subsequent critical discussion stemmed from Tanner's insight. In what Hanjo Berressem has categorized as the second phase of Pynchon criticism, critics, catalyzed by the insights of poststructuralism, crowned Pynchon "master deconstructionist" and argued that his Byzantine, self-effacing, and self-erasing plots are

[5] For a thorough survey of the literary genres appropriated by Pynchon throughout his works, see McHale, "Genre-Poaching."

intended to highlight the fruitlessness of any search for coherence (170). Molly Hite offers one version of this claim: "One of Pynchon's central insights is that people tend to 'read' experience the same way that they read books. A novel is traditionally a totalizing structure that derives much of its energy from its promise to reveal the intrinsic connections uniting apparently contingent elements" (17-18). Hite contends that Pynchon's insistence on undercutting this totalizing structure and disappointing expectations of closure serves a liberating, moral purpose. Yet, Pynchon's work suggests one the one hand a distinction between stability or self-integration and on the other, forms of coherence that are totalizing and absolute and therefore oppressive and exclusionary. Moreover, Pynchon is equally critical of the profligacy that can result from the categorical dismissal of all metanarratives.

If philosophical postmodernism entails a form of nihilism, a growing cadre of critics maintain that, at least in this particular sense, Pynchon is no postmodernist.[6] David Cowart has provided perhaps the most comprehensive and focused defense of Pynchon as humanist and moralist. It is typical of postmodernist literature to assume an ahistorical approach, to render history, culture, and myth as "foreshortened, flattened, all surface" (*Dark Passages* 111-12). Pynchon does frequently deconstruct the myths he takes up, but he does so not out of an absolute principle but for the sake of revision. Cowart's assessment of *Vineland* holds for much of Pynchon's work: "Through a combination of this eccentric mythography with a moral earnestness expressed as a penchant for political didacticism, Pynchon produces, in *Vineland*, a fiction devoted less to indeterminate postmodernist 'play' than to totalizing modernist 'purpose'" (*Dark Passages* 111-12). As

[6] I grant that what often falls under the umbrella of nihilism is really a vulgar form of hedonism that lacks the complexity and nuance of philosophical nihilism. I mean here that for these critics, with whom I agree, Pynchon would not be a nihilist under any definition of the word.

I demonstrate below, in *Vineland* and elsewhere, Pynchon locates a modest hope in forms of communitarianism and various expressions of spirituality.

In the wake of Fredric Jameson's influential work, some have questioned the capacity of Pynchon (and postmodern art generally) to offer an effective political critique. Linda Hutcheon, Paul Maltby, Samuel Thomas, Joanna Freer and others have made a convincing case that Jameson's incisive and groundbreaking critique is not as airtight or comprehensive as it purports to be.[7] These scholars contend that postmodern art can and does successfully critique postmodern culture, even on Jameson's own terms.

Critics have identified various ways that Pynchon exposes the limits of postmodernism even as he operates with many of its premises. Dennis Lensing argues that while Pynchon exhibits the typically postmodern view of the plurality of Truth, he also exposes the limits of postmodernism by "warning against the excesses to which postmodernism can be prone, excesses in which the untrammeled proliferation of signification leads to the ultimate dissolution of all meaning" (126). Lensing claims that, by deprivileging any one discourse (namely, science) yet retaining a historical sense of cause and effect, Pynchon defies the limitations associated with postmodernism by Fredric Jameson and his ilk (126-7). Brian McHale also argues that Pynchon offers new possibilities for the kind of cognitive mapping that Jameson doubts is possible in the era of global capitalism. McHale contends that Pynchon's "genre-poaching" – the way he adapts literary genres contemporary with the era in which his narrative unfolds – serves the end of "*mediated historiography*—the writing of an era's history through the medium of its popular genres" ("Genre-Poaching" 24-5). Elsewhere, McHale argues that "the

[7] See Hutcheon, *Politics of Postmodernism*; Maltby, *Dissident Postmodernists*; Thomas, *Pynchon and the Political*; and Freer, *Thomas Pynchon and American Counterculture.*

complex spatialities of Pynchon's texts" – the multiple worlds in constant flux – offer a potential for "different, more constructive possibilities of cognitive mapping" ("Postmodernism" 109). Inger Dalsgaard glimpses this same potential in Pynchon's treatment of time, drawing from Pynchon's essay on sloth, in which he critiques the conception of time as tied to productivity. Dalsgaard argues that in *Against the Day* Pynchon adopts the conceit of time-travel as a way of subverting this regnant view of time: "This 'orthogonal time,' which for a capitalist state becomes a dominant tool for regularizing mind-sets and behavior, stands in opposition to alternative kinds of time perception and productivity. These can be found, Pynchon writes, in daydreaming, spiritual encounters, or even technology" (116). With these alternative means of perception, Pynchon suggests that one need not experiment with time travel to achieve a new level of awareness of the depredations of late capitalism. This is a foundational point for my argument, as I contend that Pynchon points to certain spiritual disciplines as viable means of achieving a heightened awareness and executing the cognitive mapping that so concerns Jameson.

Though critics have debated the effectiveness of postmodernist literature in mounting a political critique, there is little question that Pynchon's work seeks to make a political statement. Joanna Freer has insisted that Pynchon be recognized as a formidable political philosopher in his own right (1). Another central focus of Pynchon's critics is his take on the legacy of the Enlightenment, especially as it pertains to American politics. Many critics agree that Pynchon targets Enlightenment rationalism, with its concomitant notion of Progress, exposing the oppressive consequences of the hubristic claim to

mastery.[8] (By Enlightenment rationalism, here, I mean a worldview that abstracts and idealizes, tends toward a materialistic philosophy, and is generally progressivist.) Pynchon depicts this Enlightenment mentality as a driving force of American history. Donald J. Greiner, analyzing Pynchon's characters Mason and Dixon as twin figures of the American Adam, argues that Pynchon offers an ironic version of the tale, excoriating the Enlightenment drive for mastery embodied (at least until they wise up) by Mason and Dixon (78-79). Greiner sees the notion of Manifest Destiny as a direct result of the Enlightenment mentality. Joseph Dewey finds that Pynchon links Enlightenment philosophy with a certain "muscular" brand of Christianity that Pynchon takes to task in *Mason & Dixon* (113). While Pynchon depicts various expressions of spirituality as liberating, he often shows religious strains that adopt an Enlightenment-informed view of human nature to be oppressive. The gravest effect of such Enlightenment thinking is that it leads to dehumanization. Jeff Baker, analyzing the actions of rocket-engineer Franz Pökler in *Gravity's Rainbow*, writes that they "reveal that the 'problem' with such abstracting, idealizing systems is not only that they are unable to subsume the entire range of living experience, but that they also directly affect and shape the human beings who employ such systems in order to manipulate and control their world" ("Albatross" 181). I extend the argument of Baker and others by demonstrating below that Pynchon correlates the dehumanizing consequences of the Enlightenment mindset with its rejection of religion and spirituality as irrational.

Scholars adduce the "anti-rationalist" or "irrealist" elements of Pynchon's fiction as proof of the author's opposition to Enlightenment rationalism and his attempt to offer

[8] Other critics who take this view include David Cowart and Arthur Saltzman. See Cowart, *Dark Passages* 138-48; Saltzman: "Cranks" 64-5.

an alternate vision of human life. According to Victor Strandberg, Pynchon achieves a calculated antirationalism by "playful magic realism" and religious elements in his work (107). In addition to narrative destabilization and the rendering of conflicting narratives, Pynchon often inserts fabulous and fantastic components: cottage-sized, sentient fruits and vegetables, a were-beaver, a race of people living inside a hollow earth, a time-travel machine, and ship-sized sand mites. As Jeff Baker notes, Pynchon accords such fantastic and science-fictional elements the same ontological status as the "realistic" parts, with a mind to showing us just how entrenched Enlightenment thinking has become: these outlandish occurrences "reveal, in our very characterization of them as impossibly absurd and humorous, just how completely successful was the victory of the Enlightenment project in its reduction of possibilities to certainties" ("Albatross" 177-78). Pynchon's use of the fantastic and absurd is morally driven, having pointed political implications. Drawing from Ernst Bloch, Samuel Thomas suggests that fantasy like Pynchon's becomes a legitimate and powerful form of political inquiry because it calls us to question our epistemological assumptions by drawing attention to what we do and do not include in our perceived realm of possibility (33-36). For Pynchon, violence, oppression, and exclusion often issue from fixed, absolute notions of what is possible.

Pynchon's consideration of alternate or multiple worlds and dimensions also includes the spiritual. The 1997 publication of *Mason & Dixon*, with its more overt engagement with religion and a cleric as its ostensible narrator, drew increased attention to religion and spirituality in Pynchon's work. David Cowart has argued that Pynchon's disdain for the easy either/or binary and his tendency to preclude resolution are not intended as postmodern play or an experiment in endless signification, but as a means of

paving the way for a fuller, more authentic spirituality and thus a recognition of "the possibility that spiritual realities have been obscured by centuries of what Derrida calls 'logocentric metaphysics'" ("Luddite" 360-61). Religious elements have populated Pynchon's work since his first novel, *V.*, in which Catholicism figures prominently, though Pynchon excoriates a certain authoritarian version of it. *Gravity's Rainbow* is organized according to the Christian liturgical calendar, and *Mason & Dixon* begins during Advent. Pynchon's work includes allusions to nearly all of the world's major religions, Western and non-Western, as well as spiritual disciplines associated with indigenous and shamanistic expressions of religion. Joseph Dewey and John McClure, among others, have demonstrated that Pynchon draws frequently from Eastern mystical traditions, especially Buddhism (Dewey 116-17; McClure 35).

As with Pynchon's treatment of myth and history, critics have had differing views about why and with what seriousness Pynchon views religion and the proposition of transcendent truth. Especially in the 1980s and 1990s, many critics argued that Pynchon lampoons belief in such truth. These arguments tend toward various iterations of the one advanced by Brian Ingraffia: "that Pynchon, by presenting such mocking parodies of belief in a transcendent realm and by showing the destructive consequences of such belief, advocates the Nietzschean belief that there is 'only the earth'" (53). Ingraffia and others, such as Deborah Madsen, argue that Pynchon locates a more accurate and liberating view of the human situation in the absence of transcendental truth, as "the expectation of a transcendental source of meaning obscures the real nature of her world" (Madsen 76). Other scholars including Judith Chambers, John Johnston, and Bernard Duyfhuizen offer versions of an argument that religious language and expectations are

tied to totalizing structures and systems that are oppressive and must be resisted.[9] I aim to show that Pynchon's rejection of totalizing and oppressive systems and power structures extends not to all but only to certain, hierarchical expressions of religion.

The last two decades have seen a greater acknowledgment of the spiritual and religious side of Pynchon's work, especially the influence of spirituality on politics and morality. The link between politics and spirituality is no surprise when one considers that Pynchon has acknowledged the influence of the Beats on his work and worldview. Joanna Freer expounds a point also made by Jeff Baker that Pynchon's intellectual and cultural roots in the 1960s counterculture and the Beats shapes his spiritual and political outlook in notable ways, including his turning to the "wisdom of the East" in later works and identifying as the cause of moral impoverishment "modern society's lack of real engagement with the beyond" (Freer 25).

John McClure contends that while Pynchon bemoans the current spiritual deficiency of American society and seeks to pave the way to a fuller, more vital spiritual life, he offers no easy answers. Rather, McClure suggests, borrowing from Vattimo, Pynchon always presents spiritual and religious options in a "rhetoric of weakening" (40). McClure argues that the "postsecular" themes developed in contemporary theory and literature "suggest . . . that the extraordinary does not speak in the totalizing language of dogmatic theology; that its promptings are partial, or plural, or only imperfectly decipherable to human ears" (16-17). He adds that while Pynchon often undercuts totalizing strands of religion, he intends not to reinforce a hard secularism but to point toward viable spiritual alternatives (19-20).

[9] See Chambers, *Thomas Pynchon*; Johnston, "Schizo-Text"; and Duyfhuizen, "Transmissions."

In this vein, Kathryn Hume connects the possibility of non-material realities to Pynchon's depiction of multiple worlds. Analyzing *Mason & Dixon*, Hume contends that Pynchon insists upon layers of reality that impinge upon one another in order to probe and expand our sensitivity to the world(s) around us ("Mason" 59-60). This sensitivity has moral and social ramifications. Hume analyzes Pynchon's religious and political vision in *Against the Day*, arguing that for Pynchon the two – religion or spirituality and politics – must be, if authentic, intertwined (Hume "Religious" 182). Hume contends that Pynchon presents "entering a convent and becoming a dynamiter" as two of the few responsible reactions to late capitalist society (169). Hume contends that with this novel Pynchon places Christianity in the foreground while retaining the bevy of spiritualities present in many of his works (Hume 171); any spirituality, however, if it is genuine, will impel one to resist the inequities of capitalism. Amy J. Elias has also made a compelling argument that for Pynchon spirituality has significant bearing on politics. Elias proposes that *Against the Day*, a novel that frustrates typical genre expectations, is best categorized according to a genre she terms "postmodern pilgrimage." Elias gives a thorough survey of the various religious and spiritual practices and motifs in the novel, arguing that all of these are best considered in terms of the notion of pilgrimage. Though exhibiting elements of the quest genre, pilgrimage better describes the novel because the journey itself – with its concomitant salutary effects – rather than possession of a grail is the object. Drawing on the work of Victor Turner, Elias shows how pilgrimage in the novel engenders *communitas* among the pilgrims; this *communitas* has political ramifications, as it suspends social hierarchy (Elias 34). Furthermore, "Pilgrimage reveals the constructed nature of social and historical space and the possibility of alternative space-

time" (Elias 34). In other words, pilgrimage offers a greater awareness of one's world, the knowledge necessary for any kind of reform or revolution.

Pynchon's spiritual concerns cannot be divorced from his ecological concerns. Christopher K. Coffman has shown that in *Against the Day*, the novel's moral/spiritual, ecological, and spatial concerns are all interconnected and mutually informing (92).[10] Especially in *Against the Day*, but in other novels as well, Pynchon conveys that spiritual and spatial awareness are integrally connected, in that mystical awareness of multiple worlds results in a heightened sensitivity to one's physical world. Both types of awareness also serve to attenuate the objectification and ruthless exploitation of the environment.

Pynchon's use of multiple worlds and narratives also has clear historiographical purpose. Historiography is a major (if not *the* primary) concern of Pynchon's, and critics have given it much attention. For the purposes of my argument, Pynchon's spirituality and his historiography are vitally connected, for both concern the role of American political ideology in the spiritual lives of the American people. David Cowart has even credited Pynchon with anticipating the watershed historiographical work of Hayden White *(Dark Passages* 45-6). According to Hanjo Berressem, Pynchon seeks to redeem "history from within historiography" by demonstrating "the complexity of history, the fictional character of all forms of historiography, and the ways in which history is hijacked and falsely factualized by the powers that be" (172). Pynchon faults naïve historiography for aiding and abetting a virulent strain of American exceptionalism. Amy J. Elias analyzes Pynchon as historiographer and argues that Pynchon shares three

[10] This point has also been made convincingly by Dwight Eddins, who argues that *Gravity's Rainbow* advocates an Orphic spirituality, or an "eco-spirituality" that is "Earth-centered."

assumptions with contemporary philosophy of history: "history is polyvocal"; "history is produced by event"; and "history is tropological narrative" ("History" 124). An awareness of history's polyvocality results in a hermeneutics of paranoia in Pynchon's characters: they are suspicious of any totalizing system, recognizing that the true meaning of "everything is connected" should be a shared recognition of plurality rather than a connectedness forcibly achieved through manipulation. Viewing history as produced by event (a notion that comes first from Heidegger and later from Foucault) means denying that history is simple causal process. Seeing that history lacks logical or systematic structure "makes us aware of its *sublimity* in a Kantian sense: history becomes something that exceeds our cognitive faculties and makes us aware of the limitations of our own thought" (Elias "History" 128). Pynchon's "subjunctive" history is his version of the historical sublime. Finally, understanding history as tropological narrative means acknowledging that historical events are always (in Hayden White's term) "emplotted," constructed as narrative "according to the tropes available to storytelling – that is, as tragedy, comedy, romance or irony, depending upon how the historian understands these events" (Elias "History" 131). Elias argues that Pynchon's history is "doubly emplotted." ("History" 132). Recognizing that historical narratives are already rendered tropologically (though they suppress this by masquerading as fact), Pynchon presents already troped history in tropes of his own. Pynchon thus creates of history an "explanatory myth, or fabulation . . . an explanatory legend about the values upon which the social world operates" (Elias "History" 132).

Brian McHale has identified another historiographical method in Pynchon's work. Here, in a perceptive reading, McHale argues that Pynchon is pioneering a new way of

recreating a society's history. As the novel moves through various time periods, Pynchon appropriates literary genres that arose or were popular at the historical point at which the novel's events are set (McHale, "Genre-Poaching" 19). Pynchon's rationale, according to McHale, is a new and effective form of cognitive mapping: "To map an era's genre system is to map its popular *self-representations*. Every popular genre, for all its obvious limitations, distortions, and suppressions, captures the way a historical epoch represented itself *to* itself" (McHale, "Genre-Poaching" 25). By using various genres to illuminate each other, Pynchon spotlights the distortions and falsehoods present in individual genres, disclosing prejudices and ideologies informing these different types of stories.

Finally, Pynchon's historiography is connected to another political facet of his work: his trenchant critique of colonialism. From his first novel, *V.*, Pynchon has exposed the initial devastation of colonial occupation as well as its subsequent ramifications and devastating legacy. Michael Harris demonstrates ways that Pynchon eschews a single totalizing historical account in favor of a plurality of histories, which he creates by offering perspectives of the colonized (201). Harris shows that Pynchon ties colonialism to a refusal of plurality that ultimately results in a drive toward mastery and the objectification of other human beings (209). Thus Pynchon's insistence on the multivalence of history and experience encourages a mentality free of colonial inclination. Critics like Pedro García-Caro have argued that, especially in *Mason & Dixon*, Pynchon seeks to gainsay American exceptionalism, exposing impure motives at work in the nation's founding and linking American practices to those of colonialist nations with whom America claims to have no similarity. Kyle Smith explores the ways that Pynchon reveals the U.S. – a nation that touts itself as "essentially nonimperial" –

guilty of the same exclusivist mindset that is at the heart of colonialist imperialism (185). Smith looks at Pynchon's appropriation of the British spy genre, demonstrating that Pynchon manipulates "the spy genre's uncertainties to reveal the imperial Self as the true enemy, and to show how the imperial Self constructs the various Others using its own fears and fantasies" (187). The upshot is that Pynchon highlights the injustice that is at the core of America's foundation, as "Nation is thus inescapably created of what it destroys and rejects and rationalizes away" (Smith 193). Similarly, David Seed argues that in *Mason & Dixon*, Pynchon shows the process of surveying and mapping the line to be not one of demarcation but of mastery and control motivated by political and commercial concerns: "Line or wall here represents an attempt to impose an official ideology that the newly pluralistic cultural landscape of America resists" (92).

For Pynchon, spiritual development is crucial for resisting and preventing imperialism. Yet, Pynchon conveys that spiritual vapidity does not result only from a metastasizing rationalism that dismisses all religion as superstition. There are also forms of political ideology that assume religious status and function as a pseudo-spiritual discipline, molding their adherents into narrow-minded and unfilled individuals. Pynchon depicts the ideology of American exceptionalism as one such spurious spirituality.

"Did God Intend It Only For Us?": The Myth Of American Election

The myth of American election surfaces in virtually all of Pynchon's works. In *Gravity's Rainbow,* Tyrone Slothrop connects the Calvinist notion of Election with America's founding by recalling the "Slothropite heresy" of his Puritan ancestor, William Slothrop. William questions the Puritan notion of election; in his tract, *On Preterition*, he "argued holiness for these 'second Sheep,' without whom there'd be no elect" (*GR* 565).

William draws attention to the point that the notion of election inherently leads to exclusion and questions the treatment of the non-elect: "William felt that what Jesus was for the elect, Judas Iscariot was for the Preterite. Everything in the Creation has its equal and opposite counterpart. How can Jesus be an exception? . . . Well, if he is the son of man, and if what we feel is not horror but love, then we have to love Judas too. Right?" (*GR* 565). Unsurprisingly, these views get William expelled from the Massachusetts Bay Colony. But, reflecting on his ancestor's ideas centuries later, Tyrone Slothrop is led to consider explicitly how the notion of election has shaped American history, and he wonders if things could have been different: "Could [William] have been the fork in the road America never took, the singular point she jumped the wrong way from? Suppose the Slothropite heresy had had the time to consolidate and prosper? Might there have been fewer crimes in the name of Jesus, and more mercy in the name of Judas Iscariot?" (*GR* 565). Stumbling through the morass of post-WWII Germany, Tyrone's ruminations on the Slothropite heresy impel him to consider the ramifications of nationalistic campaigns for global supremacy. He wonders if there is a way to start over: "maybe for a little while all the fences are down, one road as good as another, the whole space of the Zone cleared, depolarized, and somewhere inside the waste of it a single set of coordinates from which to proceed, without elect, without preterite, without even nationality to fuck it up" (*GR* 565-66). By the end of *Gravity's Rainbow*, however, we see that this not a possibility for a nation. Utopian visions can exist only, as Paul Maltby states, as a "territory of the spirit" (182), though, as we will see, for Pynchon this is no mean thing.

The myth of American election also appears in *Inherent Vice* in Doc's dream about a boat called *Preserved*. But this dream turns out to be one of Pynchon's ventures into the subjunctive, a comment on how the American dream proved to be ever only a dream:

> yet there is no avoiding time, the sea of time, the sea of memory and forgetfulness, the years of promise, gone and unrecoverable, of the land almost allowed to claim its better destiny, only to have the claim jumped by evildoers known all too well, and taken instead and held hostage to the future we must live in now forever. May we trust that this blessed ship is bound for some better shore, some undrowned Lemuria, risen and redeemed, where the American fate, mercifully, failed to transpire (*IV* 341)

Here Pynchon suggests that while the potential of the New World to be a place of freedom and flourishing was real enough, this glittering potential was quickly kidnapped and wielded as a pretense for subjugation. These "claim jumpers" held a nation hostage to its own election, hoodwinking people into sacrificing their own goods and freedoms for the sake of a national destiny. This interpretation is confirmed in the novel's subsequent scene. The American dream apparently remains in Doc's mind later the same day as he stares at a mural portraying the arrival of the 1769 Portolá expedition to the West coast near what is now Los Angeles. One of the explorers is depicted as an American Adam: "On the face of one of them . . . there was an expression of wonder, like, What's this, what unsuspected paradise? Did God with his finger trace out and bless this perfect little valley, intending it only for us?" (*IV* 343-44). Tellingly, this mural is housed inside the palatial mansion of mogul Crocker Fenway's exclusive club, "the Portola." The club's members, Fenway's ilk, are exactly those who believe that America is "only for us," with "us" being not the American populace but the one percent, the extremely wealthy. It is also significant that, "The pictorial style reminded Doc of labels

on fruit and vegetable crates when he was a kid. Lots of color, atmosphere, attention to detail. . . . Everybody in the scene looked like a movie star" (*IV* 343). This compelling vision of providentially granted possibility is pure engineered nostalgia, a stylized scene used to sell an ideology the way one sells produce. When Doc comments admiringly about the picture to Crocker Fenway, the latter simply replies that he has never paid it any attention. Doc, in his bumbling innocence, is naïve enough to be beguiled by the manufactured nostalgia. Doc admires the ideal, while Fenway – who epitomizes the idea of a WASP tycoon – gives it no consideration because this compelling nostalgic vision is the means by which men like Crocker fleece *hoi polloi*. The last line of the quote above indicts the likes of Fenway in rhetorically asking if God intended the new world *only* "for us." For Pynchon, this attitude of "Election" becomes the root of all of the new world's evils.

In *Mason & Dixon*, Pynchon's most focused treatment of American ideology, he renders the American dream as corrupted from the very beginning. As Pedro García-Caro insightfully points out, *Mason & Dixon* opens with a scene, set in a Philadelphia parlor during Advent of 1786, in which a rambunctious pair of twins ask their uncle for a "Tale about America" involving conflict with Indians and with the French (7). Here we have American youth "already craving the ultimate American epic: the frontier tale" (García-Caro 111). Pynchon presents the exceptionalist mindset as part of America's earliest history, ingrained in the first post-Revolution generation. (The name of the twins' sister, Tenebrae, suggests, darkly, that something is perhaps already amiss in this first generation of American youth.) As Reverend Cherrycoke, the aforementioned uncle, starts into his American tale, he relates, in places, a version of the Puritan vision of

America as New Jerusalem. America promises an opportunity to avoid the transgressions and iniquities of the Old World: "I was back in America once more, finding, despite all, that I could not stay away from it, this object of hope that Miracles might yet occur, that God might yet return to Human affairs, that all the wistful Fictions necessary to the childhood of a species might yet come true, . . . a third Testament" (*M&D* 353). But such miracles as Cherrycoke hopes for never materialize. For Pynchon, as I will suggest below, miracles are not out of the question, but they are seldom witnessed in the inhospitable environment which America has become. Pynchon's "realm of the Sacred" is a realm of plurality and openness, and as America becomes mapped and demarcated it becomes the kind of stodgy and potentially oppressive place Pynchon laments in his essay, "Is It O.K. to Be a Luddite?" The process of mapping confines America "into the Net-Work of Points already known, that slowly triangulates its Way into the Continent, changing all from subjunctive to declarative, reducing Possibilities to Simplicities that serve the ends of Governments,—winning away from the realm of the Sacred, its Borderlands one by one, and assuming them unto the bare mortal World that is our home, and our Despair" (*M & D* 345). Any possibility that America is a realm of the Sacred is quickly undercut as Mason and Dixon visit the sight of the massacre of Conestoga Indians at Lancaster. Dixon considers such a heinous act as worse than anything he witnessed in colonial South Africa (*M & D* 347).

However, even though America as "third Testament" is forever confined to a subjunctive possibility, the notion of America as the chosen nation, the City Upon a Hill, continues to shape the minds and values of Americans. Pynchon offers us numerous characters for whom this vision of American election has become a spiritual discipline,

and not all of them are villains. One need not be vicious to believe in American exceptionalism. Nonetheless, many of Pynchon's villains – at least the American ones – do typically exhibit a kind of arrogant, bellicose individualism rooted in an ideology of exceptionalism. In *Against the Day*, the ruthless robber baron Scarsdale Vibe sees the preservation of America (*his* vision of America), at any cost, as his Christian duty. Vibe is intent on violently extirpating all communists, socialists, and anyone else he believes threatens the "Republic": "what a burden it is to be told to love them, while knowing that they are the Anti-christ itself, and that our only salvation is to deal with them as we ought. . . . When the Lord's people are in danger, you know what he requires. . . . Smite often and early" (*ATD* 332-333). God and country are not separate terms for Vibe. And while characters like Scarsdale Vibe conflate American politics with the kingdom of God, (chronologically) later characters like Brock Vond embody a kind of Reaganite ideology in which America remains the "City Upon a Hill" but God, even as rhetoric, has mostly faded from the picture. We see in Pynchon's corpus, the gradual process that Sacvan Bercovitch details in which the original Puritan theological underpinnings of the notion of America as Elect nation are slowly effaced and America itself, as ideal, becomes its own Alpha and Omega.[11]

We see this in *Vineland* through the character Brock Vond, a Reaganite and federal agent who perfectly embodies the ostensibly paradoxical American notion of rugged individualism as the hallmark of national unity. In other words, he exhibits what Bercovitch calls the Representative Self, in which the notion of individualism functions as a social unifier, and a mutually reinforcing relation obtains between the idea of individualism and the ideology of America as the land of opportunity in which

[11] See Bercovitch, *Puritan Origins*, especially chapters 4-5.

individuals may realize their dreams. As Cyrus Patell notes, "Herein lies the genius of the ideology and perhaps the reason for its efficacy: it enforces conformity at the very moment that it extols individuality" (xii). Individualism, as an ideology, functions as a pretense of freedom and opportunity, a pretense sufficiently alluring to inveigle individuals into forfeiting their actual freedom and individuality for the sake of the ideal. Reaganism surfaces frequently in *Vineland*, and, as Patell demonstrates, Reagan took the idea of America a City Upon a Hill very seriously, alluding to it regularly in public speeches, even though he transformed Winthrop's communal ethic into one of individualism (x-xi). *Vineland* character Brock Vond perpetuates this sense of election, even as it is now divorced from its theological foundation. As David Cowart observes, even though Vond is not a religious man at all, he "exemplifies a Puritan outlook" with his ideals of temperance, hard work, and "especially the distinction between the regenerate saved – a select remnant – and the vast body of the unchosen" (*Dark Passages* 102-103). This vestigial sense of Election underlies Vond's cavalier political action. In a scene in *Vineland*, a federal grand jury assembles to look into Hollywood drug usage, a nod to the historical blacklisting of actors as a means of inflaming patriotic impulses (Thoreen 221). Drug-enforcement agent Hector

> assumed parallels were being drawn to back in '51, when HUAC [the historically factual House Un-American Activities Committee] came to town . . . . But why right now? What did it have to do with Brock Vond running around Vineland like he was? and all these other weird vibrations in the air lately, like even some non-born-agains showing up at work with these little crosses, these red Christer pins, in their lapels. (*VL* 338-39)

David Thoreen has insightfully pointed out that these "red Christer pins" allude to FEMA and Rex-84, an emergency plan prepared by the government which entailed suspending the constitution and declaring martial law (222). In 1951 – the year Hector recalls –

Reagan, now U.S. President in *Vineland*'s present, was President of the Screen Actors Guild. Thoreen argues compellingly that these red cross pins are both references to fascism, in recalling the swastika pins of German officers, and a "parody of the puritan belief in predestination, for what are they but the outward and visible signs of election? Secure in the innermost inner circle of FEMA, these men . . . can count themselves among the saved" (222). Though tasked with providing relief to victims of disaster, the resources at their disposal ensure that these men never have to suffer any trauma themselves. The force of Pynchon's parody lies in the fact that these FEMA "elect," are not elected at all, but rather appointed by those already in power (Thoreen 222).

One character refers to Vond and his cronies as crusaders of "the True Faith," explained as a vaguely Christian, capitalist ideology that gets handed down "generation to generation" by the elect "living inside their power, convinced they're immune to all the history the rest of us have to suffer" (*VL* 232). This idea of immunity to history stems from the notion of election: it is a form of entitlement rooted in sense of destiny. While these "crusaders of the True Faith" may be godless individuals themselves, such ideology indeed functions as a kind of faith, one in which America assumes the aura of divinity. America as ideal becomes the kingdom, the New Jerusalem. This faith inculcates a false transcendence by persuading Americans into distancing themselves from any economic hardships and subtle denial of freedom for the sake of America's preservation and flourishing. (Of course, this hardship is not endured by those in power.) At the same time, the watchword of this "True Faith" is individualism, making it all the more insidious. The Reaganite mentality of those like Vond claims individualism as the hallmark of the American spirit. Convinced they live in the "land of the free," Americans are led to think

that ideology only exists elsewhere. As Cyrus Patell notes, "Part of the reason why individualism is so effective as an ideology is that the official narrative that surrounds it renders it invisible by fostering the belief that group formations like ideology do not really exist" (14). The dissemination of this individualism ultimately rests on conformity.

Pynchon makes it clear that American ideology, when it becomes a spiritual discipline, leaves its faithful spiritually impoverished and serves as a front for exclusion and oppression. We see in *Bleeding Edge* how tenuous this American faith is and the infantilization and the petrification of the American people that results when this faith is shaken. The 9/11 attack on the World Trade Center occurs in the middle of the novel, and Pynchon describes New Yorkers watching the after aftermath on television as "[a] viewing population brought back to its default state, dumb-struck, undefended, scared shitless" (*BE* 321). Pynchon gives us a picture of an American people who, otherwise lacking in spiritual direction, depend on an ideology for their spiritual mooring. As one character observes, "The Trade Center towers were religious . . . . They stood for what this country worships above everything else, the market, always the holy fuckin market," going on to accuse America of "holy wars against competing religions" (*BE* 338). The market, while certainly it pertains to global capitalism, also constitutes the means by which America preserves its pride of place as world power. To worship the market, in the context of the novel, is another way of worshipping America itself. Yet, Pynchon suggests that the American people are so lacking in spiritual depth that when the towers fall and their faith in American exceptionalism is shattered, they are simply helpless. Pynchon depicts a vicious cycle in which national leaders then prey upon this public helplessness in the attempt to restore the public's faith. This is evident in the description

(given by a third-person omniscient narrator) of the propagation of the phrase "Ground Zero":

> [F]orces in whose interests it compellingly lies to seize control of the narrative as quickly as possible come into play and dependable history shrinks to a dismal perimeter centered on "Ground Zero," a Cold War term taken from the scenarios of nuclear war so popular in the early sixties. This was nowhere near a Soviet nuclear strike on downtown Manhattan, yet those who repeat "Ground Zero" over and over do so without shame or concern for etymology. The purpose is to get people cranked up in a certain way. Cranked up, scared, and helpless. (*BE* 327-28)

A helpless population will run for security into the muscled arms of a mighty government, willing even to overlook certain losses of liberty. In *Bleeding Edge* Pynchon depicts the gradual entrenchment of law enforcement in and around New York until it becomes a virtual police state (*BE* 329). Even more alarming, he details instances of discrimination perpetrated under the pretense of the Patriot Act. Islamophobia and other forms of prejudice are docilely accepted as part of the War on Terror. Irony and fiction are said to be war casualties (*BE* 335). The very tenuousness of this American faith has engendered an environment of fear and impotency, and the fear will drive people right back to the brittle comforts and stability that this faith offers.

This spiritual deficiency does not only surface during times of crisis; Pynchon paints many of his zealously nationalistic characters as spiritually anemic. Characters like Brock Vond and Scarsdale Vibe are desperate, racked by insecurity as they cling tenuously to power, and Pynchon depicts the destruction and anguish they leave in their wake. Vibe's mining operations pillage the land and crush the laborers. Vond provokes an atmosphere of fear and distrust, all in the name of American stability and security. Even the venerable Reverend Cherrycoke, who wants to believe that America will be the

New Jerusalem, finds any ideology as absolutizing as American exceptionalism to be finally incompatible with openness and charity.

The Depth Of The Riches: Pynchon's Spiritual Alternatives

The remainder of this chapter will explore spiritual alternatives that Pynchon presents in his novels. I have argued that Pynchon exposes American ideology as an ersatz ontotheological synthesis, one that presents an obstacle to a fulfilling spiritual life, and proposes in its stead a new kind of ontotheological synthesis. As McClure claims, Pynchon undertakes Mircea Eliade's aim of "reenchantment without reenclosure" (31). Pynchon attacks systems of meaning that offer a totalizing, absolute picture of the world and that provide a clear, easy mooring, yet produce individuals who are spiritually deficient. What distinguishes Pynchon's vision of the ontotheological synthesis is that it holds together what are often considered polarities: the need for integration and stability, and the need to acknowledge that truth and reality are plural.

According to Louis Dupré, an ontotheological synthesis consists in a tripartite relation between the self, the transcendent, and the cosmos (or natural world). The synthesis that obtained in the Middle Ages has dissolved, as the advent of modernity "has transformed the relation between the cosmos, its transcendent source, and its human interpreter" (Dupré 248). The human interpreter now plays a central, creative role in discerning and defining the relation of the self to the other two components; we now understand human subjectivity to be fundamental. Both Dupré and Pynchon view this shift as potentially liberating. The decadence of postmodernism, for both Dupré and Pynchon, has been to erroneously assume that "the real as it is in itself" *wholly* depends upon "the real as it exists for itself" or as it exists for the subject (Dupré 252). A richer

vision of the world, which I will argue that Pynchon holds, affirms subjectivity without being comprehensively anthropocentric. The "human interpreter" does occupy a primary role in the creation of reality, but the mind maintains a *creative* rather than a determinative relation "to that physical reality on which it in other respects depends" (Dupré 252). Because of this creative capacity, one's spirituality plays a key role in one's understanding of the Real: "reality does not remain indifferent to modes of thinking and feeling. . . . The nature of the real is determined by the nature of the relations among its components . . . . since Aristotle, categories of being have been structures of relatedness. . . . Any change in these relations affects the status of the whole. Spiritual revolutions transform reality as much as physical changes do" (Dupré 251-2). For Pynchon, the American revolution was, in the sense I have been discussing, a spiritual revolution as well as a political one. Pynchon conveys that, as a spiritual revolution, American ideology has had ruinous consequences and only another spiritual revolution can grant the true liberty and individual fulfillment that America claims to offer.

Pynchon's works convey the notion that the self's relation to the transcendent entails a form of pluralism that recognizes the subjective nature of reality and of spirituality. His fiction portrays alternate worlds existing alongside and impinging upon our own, as well as miraculous events and divine interventions. He also shows characters observing a whole host of spiritual practices, from Christianity to Buddhism to Native American religions to Bogomilism. As Dupré defines it, "transcendence is not merely what lies beyond the world, but first and foremost what supports its givenness" (*Passage* 251). I contend that Pynchon's approach to the transcendence is to affirm a form of spirituality that is not syncretic but hybrid. This distinction, according to Theresa

Delgadillo, means that whereas syncretism is the "attempt to fuse divergent spiritual and religious practices into a unified whole," hybridity "emphasizes differing traditions and practices coexisting in the same world as aspects of the multiple subjectivities" ("Castillo" 890). McClure conceives of Pynchon's "partial faith" as a kind of "ontological pluralism," using a model of pluralism based on the work of William James. However, the spiritual disciplines presented in Pynchon's work are not all equal or synonymous, nor do they shape characters' lives in the same ways.

I contend that the most illuminating way to approach the role of spirituality and religion in Pynchon's work is the way that theologian S. Mark Heim approaches the question of religious pluralism: acknowledging that all spiritual or religious paths lead to certain desired ends and to recognize that those ends are not identical (Heim 6-7). In Pynchon's work, various spiritual disciplines develop individuals in different ways, not all of them positive. Pynchon acknowledges something like what Heim maintains: the world's religions and spiritualities are not different expressions of the same truth, nor do they simply see the same world in different ways; different religions see fundamentally different realities, resulting in *essentially* different value systems. In other words, salvation or spiritual fulfillment has content only in the specific context of a spiritual tradition. So, for example, Nirvana can be reached only via the Buddhist path to Enlightenment, not by Christian faith, for Nirvana is a different thing than Christian salvation.[12] But this is not to say that there is no commonality or grounds for peaceable interfaith dialogue. In Heim's book, *The Depth of the Riches*, the title of which is taken

[12] Here, I use the term salvation in its Christian context, as directly linked to the Kingdom of God of which Christ spoke. In the remainder of this chapter, I typically use the term salvation in the broader sense as Pynchon typically employs it: meaning deliverance or preservation, or transition to a higher plane of existence. Any religion or spirituality may offer salvation in this latter sense.

from Romans 11:33, he highlights the various "riches" that result from the plurality of theological and spiritual beliefs and practices. Heim stresses that every tradition has something to learn from every other. His view departs from pluralists who affirm the basic uniformity of all religious traditions, focusing instead on the very real differences. In short, Heim contends that all religious systems have distinctive ends and practices but each tradition may be made more robust and its practitioners spiritually richer by learning from other traditions. I propose that Pynchon's work suggests something similar to Heim's view.

Pynchon creates a host of characters who are depicted as explicitly religious in some sense. Pynchon's work challenges the modern definition of religion as a sociological phenomenon or construct, a thing that can be studied objectively and which can be categorically separated from the remainder of human life. Pynchon's "religious" characters may be villains or heroes or minor characters who seem to be mundane in every way. Their religious practices may include no supernatural or divine elements at all, and yet they pursue transcendence in some way. Quaternionists (mathematicians who study quaternions) and anarchists are depicted as religious, yet there are "Christer" villains. In short, the religious/spiritual is neither an absolutely positive nor an absolutely negative category in Pynchon. Rather, we see that various spiritual disciplines and formative systems of belief shape characters in different ways, and the spiritual *ends* – the various visions of *salvation* and ways that characters are shaped morally – these are clearly imbued with authorial opprobrium or approbation.

Pynchon does not champion one specific religious tradition over all others. (Nor does he offer an *orthodox* picture of any one tradition.) However, he offers us glimpses

into spiritual disciplines which may prove to be viable alternatives to a pseudo-religious form of American ideology, and the habits and values engendered through these spiritual disciplines and their effects are clear enough. The spiritual hybridity Pynchon appears to sanction allows individuals to draw from and integrate multiple subjectivities or ways of knowing the world. Such hybridity is not a capricious form of spiritual hodge-podge but serves a clear purpose: to challenge Western, Enlightenment-based notions of history and progress. The common denominator of these spiritual disciplines (the ones that Pynchon portrays without irony or criticism), is that in their own unique ways, they offer alternatives to Western religious traditions. As Joseph Dewey has argued, Pynchon views certain Christian teleological and eschatological expectations as responsible for American imperialism and exceptionalism ("Mapping" 120-21). Pynchon supports spiritual hybridity as a countermeasure against such iniquities. Dewey has shown how Pynchon seeks to temper "muscular" Christianity with elements of Eastern wisdom, but Pynchon presents other spiritual disciplines as well.[13]

John McClure has examined the topic of spiritual conversion in Pynchon's work. Citing the character Tyrone Slothrop, "a radically revised version of Calvinism's most famous conversion narrative" (42), and a few other Pynchon characters, McClure makes the point that these characters are converted from totalizing (and therefore oppressive) views or from views of the transcendent that are harmful to the earth. One such totalizing view, I submit, is American ideology. McClure contends that conversions in Pynchon lead, if not to salvation, then at least to better questions: "Pynchon . . . suggests that even

[13] I do not mean to imply that Pynchon rejects all notions of teleology and eschatology. Rather, I would argue that Pynchon rejects any notion of teleology or progress that sanctions racism, oppression, or a kind of gnostic dualism that disregards material wellbeing in the name of spirituality or knowledge.

the most whimsical and aestheticized turning can produce unintended effects, when those who turn encounter, within the orbit of spirituality, not childhood's soothing stories but the complex and yet profound articulation of adult questions and intuitions" (62). McClure is right; these conversions do lead to profound questions, but not all conversions lead to the same questions. To draw even a rough picture of what spiritual fulfillment looks like for Pynchon, it is important to ask what these "adult questions" are and what the answers, however provisional, might be.

McClure focuses primarily on conversions from secularism, demonstrating how Pynchon views spiritual discipline, especially as practiced within a community, as necessary to equip one to resist the depredations of capitalism. I want to extend and focus his approach, looking at conversions and concomitant spiritual disciplines as a means of resisting the allure of American ideology and demonstrating that Pynchon depicts American exceptionalism as a rival spirituality. In the remainder of this chapter, I aim to highlight the "depth of the riches" in Pynchon's work. Having considered Pynchon's depiction of American ideology, I proceed to focus on a few of the more prevalent and developed spiritual disciplines and their effects on the characters' moral and spiritual lives. I build upon the work of critics who have written on the religious and spiritual elements in Pynchon's work, synthesizing and extending their insights by focusing specifically on how the various spiritual and religious beliefs and practices shape the characters' political and social views, namely the ideology of American exceptionalism.[14] In what follows, I examine the implications and effects of characters' interactions with

[14] Amy Elias, Kathryn Hume, and Christopher Coffman have written excellent articles focusing on religious or spiritual elements in *Against the Day*. John McClure's work looks briefly at *Gravity's Rainbow* and *Vineland*. My argument not only extends their work but also looks at Pynchon's other texts as well, in order to give a total picture of Pynchon's spiritual and moral vision.

other worlds and with extra-worldly forces and beings, seeking to demonstrate that Pynchon depicts certain spiritual disciplines as necessary for achieving awareness of the oppressive nature of ideology and totalizing systems, for engendering a greater capacity for constructive political action, and for living more peacably and intentionally in community with others and in harmony with the natural world. Religious or spiritual insight is redemptive, for Pynchon, insofar as it leads toward these ends. Kathryn Hume is right to say that religion functions as a resistance politics for Pynchon ("Religious" 182), but religion is cannot be reduced to that: such a view of religion would be utter hypocrisy for Pynchon, who makes it clear how easily religion can be coopted. Where religion functions as a politics of resistance, this function is the result of fundamental ontological questions.

"Allegiance To Nothing Beyond": Spiritual Poverty

I begin with a negative example, one instructive in how spirituality shapes one's view of politics and power structures: "Christer Republicanism." Pynchon typically employs "Christer" pejoratively. The epithet is applied to such loathsome villains as Brock Vond and Scarsdale Vibe, as well as to more complex characters like Foley Walker. It is always connected with a certain type of Christianity, a hyper-evangelical variety that is integrally connected to a certain (Reaganite) American politics. In *Against the Day,* Kit Traverse thinks of "Christers" as those "whose allegiance, loudly and often as they might invoke Jesus Christ and his kingdom, was to that real [world] axis and nothing beyond it" (675). Christer refers to a type of person who sees God somewhat like a personal genie and has little concern with Christ himself and his teachings. I begin with this example to demonstrate that the beliefs in play here shape one's ethical and moral

decisions. As I discussed above, for Scarsdale Vibe, whom other characters do consider a religious man, the view of Christ as securer of individual reward and of God as cosmic military general sanctions the use of violence and oppression. This is connected to a stream of American exceptionalism in which American supremacy is bound up with the kingdom of God.

Another negative example is the "True Worshippers of the Ineffable Tetractys" or T.W.I.T., a neo-Pythagorean occult group who seeks enlightenment through mystical use of the Tetractys. (The group is also a self-proclaimed rival of the Order of the Golden Dawn, whose membership included Aleister Crowley.) The T.W.I.T.'s "Grand Cohen," a feckless Brit named Nicholas Nookshaft, explains that the ambition of the "Psychical Detective" is "someday to transcend the gray, literalist world of hotel corridors and requisition vouchers, and enter *the further condition*—'To know, to dare, to will, to keep silent'" (*ATD* 222). These four imperatives are key elements of Crowley's magical system *(Pynchon wiki).* The Grand Cohen explains that "[t]he first step in our Discipline here is learning how to re-acquire that rarefaction, that condition of light, to become once more able to pass where we will," thus paying lip service to a gnostic view of the material human body as an inferior form, a fallen vessel for a soul which "itself is a memory we carry of having once moved at the speed and density of light" (*ATD* 688). However, it quickly becomes clear that Nookshaft and the other T.W.I.T. "luminaries" seek not true enlightenment but power. The T.W.I.T. proves to be only one more appendage of Whitehall Lane, the nucleus of British power. Discussing the T.W.I.T., one character remarks, "So many of these mystical fellowships end up as creatures of their host governments" (*ATD* 933). The organization exploits the antebellum (WWI) popularity of

occult societies and what one dissident deems "vague" mysticism for the purposes of gathering intelligence as part of the "Great Game" (*ATD* 591). Pynchon lambasts such vague mysticism that has no correlative moral or spiritual enlightenment. Pynchon reserves special rancor for pseudo-religious organizations that serve as the beneficent faces for larger powers. T.W.I.T., at the behest of the British crown, seeks the legendary city of Shambhala, a sacred earthly paradise they intend to mine for its material wealth.

A final negative example is a form of organized religion diluted to a series of rituals designed solely for physical security. In an unnamed metropolis (New York City) on which a Visitor has wreaked havoc, the "Cathedral of the Prefiguration" has become a desperate, promiscuous attempt at physical and psychological self-defense:

> now, in arc-light, at the church's highest point, authorities had begun to project a three-dimensional image in full color, not exactly of Christ but with the same beard, robes, ability to emit light—as if, should the worst happen, they could deny all-out Christian allegiance and so make that much easier whatever turnings of heart might become necessary in striking a deal with the invader. . . . 'No one would venture at night into a neighborhood of known vampires without carrying along a cross,' as the Archbishop had declared, 'would they now? no, and so with this Our Protector,' who remained, guardedly, unnamed. (*ATD* 153)

The attack of "the Visitor" (brought about by American conquest and greed) recalls the events of 9/11, and Pynchon crafts this desperate religious pandering to resemble the anemic kind of civil American religion that experienced a resurgence after the attacks. Here we have the skirting of any direct Christian allegiance, by a supposedly Christian church, because it is only the aura of divinity that is sought. As with the T.W.I.T., we have a very vague sort of mysticism, yet here it takes the dual form of clinging to shadowy power and desperately attempting to propitiate an unknown yet apparently

hostile "Visitor." The Archbishop and his flock are perfectly willing to sell their souls, or at least amend their religious profession at first convenience, to save their skins.

These negative examples have in common a lack of any discernible moral or spiritual enlightenment. Pynchon excoriates vague mysticism, along with Gnosticism that disdains the material, for its tendency to reject the world and, concomitantly, human history. The forms of spirituality mentioned above all serve to buttress, if not actively promote, political and national ambitions. In contrast, the spiritual disciplines and traditions that Pynchon presents positively have in common an enlightened awareness of politics and human history as well as a moral vision that enjoins one to social action. In the sections that follow, I survey several of the most prominent, earnestly and unironically presented, spiritual disciplines in Pynchon's work.

"A Productive Sort of Delirium": Penance

One spiritual discipline, most prevalent in *Against the Day*, is the practice of penance. Kathryn Hume interprets the prevalence in *Against the Day* of penance, along with references to pilgrimage and grace, as signaling Pynchon's most cogent and most Christian (specifically Catholic) religious vision (171).[15] Rather than retracing Hume's steps, I will take up where she leaves off, giving a few brief instances of penance then focusing on how penance shapes the penitent – the character himself.

Near the beginning of *Against the Day*, Lew Basnight suddenly finds himself judged and scorned by everyone he knows for sins he has no recollection of committing. He is turned out by his wife and fired from his job. Lew's rejection by Chicago society

[15] I agree with David Cowart that Hume's case is overstated and that penance is sometimes more Buddhist than Christian, but Hume is right to point to penance as a major motif in the novel. (Hume acknowledges the presence of various other religious and spiritual traditions in the novel, as well.)

proves salutary, however, as his emotional turmoil sends him into a "waking swoon" through which he inhabits an alternate Chicago. Stumbling through this oneiric state, Lew encounters a group of "adepts" to whom he confesses his need to atone for his alleged sins so that he may be restored to his life. Lew finds his understanding of penance radically altered, as the adepts' leader, Drave, tells Lew, "Remorse without an object is a doorway to deliverance" (*ATD* 39). Lew then enters an outlandish novitiate which bears similarities to the experience of a Buddhist novice. (Lew later refers to this period as being "disciplined in the ways of the East" (*ATD* 48).) He is asked to perform virtually impossible tasks then "struck . . . repeatedly with a 'remembrance stick'" upon failing (*ATD* 40). Drave tells Lew, "Many people believe that there is a mathematical correlation between sin, penance, and redemption. More sin, more penance . . . . Our own point has always been that there is no connection. . . . You are redeemed not through doing penance but because it happens. Or doesn't happen" (*ATD* 41). Drave suggests that penitence is a *discipline*, not simply an appropriate response to something one has done. As a Catholic sacrament, penance includes the act of confession and often the performance of duties to prove one's inner attitude – and Lew's "novitiate" includes these elements – but the logic of Drave's instruction introduces a Buddhist element also. This becomes clearer later in the novel, as Lew thinks,

> Could be all those Catholics he'd run into in this line of work . . . had it right all along, and there was nothing in the day's echoing cycle but penance, even if you'd never committed a sin, to live in the world was to do penance—actually, as his teacher Drave had pointed out back during that winter in Chicago, another argument for reincarnation—"Being unable to remember sins from a previous life won't excuse you from doing penance in this one. To believe in the reality of penance is almost to have proof of rebirth." (*ATD* 689)

In other words, to do penance is an act of faith; it rests on a belief in a future, or at least a hope for a future, for others even if not for oneself.

Lew's novitiate produces profound changes in him. First, penance, as a continuous and meritless discipline, endows one with a moral sense, an understanding of the fallen nature of the world and the systemic nature of its problems. In Pynchon's novels, there are no innocents. Even his moral and political heroes – like the Counterforce and various anarchist, revolutionary, and grassroots groups – always find it necessary to compromise in some fashion. Second, Lew's penitence gives him a greater view and understanding of his own life and destiny. Drave calls Lew's disciplinary period a "productive sort of delirium," a term employed positively by Pynchon in several works, especially *The Crying of Lot 49*. Delirium, which as Drave explains "literally means going out of a furrow you've been plowing," allows one a view of the trajectory of one's own furrow and those of others, whom Drave says "are dutiful and dumb as oxen" (*ATD* 41). Lew learns "to step to the side of the day," a predictably good quality in a novel titled *Against the Day* (*ATD* 44). By stepping aside the day, Lew is about to see his own trajectory as like that of the cattle in the Chicago stockyards, and this leads him to a consideration of what he needs to change in his life (*ATD* 53-4). Lew experiences an enlightenment, a satori-like state "which he later came to think of as grace," in which he "found himself surrounded by a luminosity new to him" and "understood that things were exactly what they were . . . . [which] seemed more than he could bear" (*ATD* 42). Lew becomes keenly mindful of the miraculous nature of mundane human life, astounded that, "Despite the sorry history of . . . this city, the corporate neglect . . . the weekday-morning overture blared along as usual" (*ATD* 42). Lew, "transfigured and all," has become

acutely aware of the smallest details of the world around him, a quality that will lead him into detective work and later to an epiphany of the morally compromising nature of working for the US government and a sympathy with the strikers and anarchists.

"Relaxing Into Fate": Renunciation

In addition to the role of penance, we glimpse in Lew Basnight's character a precept that is true for all of Pynchon's spiritual pilgrims: the attainment of enlightenment if it is (by Pynchon's standards) authentic, is accompanied by greater attentiveness to, and involvement in, everyday life. Yet the practice of renunciation, or the overcoming of desire, especially salient in *Against the Day*, is also an important discipline in Pynchon's moral vision. For Pynchon's characters, pursuing a fulfilling relation to the transcendent – that which is the ground of one's being, one's ontological mooring – often demands some form of seeing past the material. This is not to say that Pynchon espouses a Gnosticism that views the material as evil or inferior to the spiritual – quite the contrary – but it means recognizing the supernatural or spiritual force(s) governing, or at least active in, the physical world. Renunciation, as Pynchon presents it, typically serves the greater good of the world as well as the individual. While many religious traditions encourage the discipline of renunciation, the practice as Pynchon depicts it is most integral to Tibetan Buddhism, in which it is coupled with compassion.

Pynchon generally depicts Buddhism positively and unironically, which is unsurprising given his averred love of the Beats and his affinity for all things countercultural.[16] Scholars have noted Pynchon's references to Buddhism, which are explicit in several places, but scholars generally have been content to identify Buddhist

[16] For a thorough and cogent treatment of Pynchon's relation to the Beats, see Joanna Freer, *Thomas Pynchon and American Counterculture*.

references and themes without further considering how these Buddhist practices shape or change Pynchon's characters. Exceptions include Robert Kohn, who has identified Buddhist themes in *The Crying of Lot 49*, and John McClure, who points out that in *Vineland* DL Chastain melds tenets of Buddhism with martial arts to produce a violent and vengeful, if contextually justified, practice. And Joseph Dewey's seminal article, "The Sound of One Man Mapping," illuminates the way that Pynchon's *Mason & Dixon* draws from the broader Eastern intellectual tradition to temper strains of "muscular Christianity."[17] In *Against the Day*, published nine years after *Mason & Dixon*, Buddhism appears with less bastardization and with much clearer spiritual ends.

Hume rightly points out that Buddhism is quite suited to the ambiguities of postmodernism and, thus, quite suitable to Pynchon's moral vision (185). In addition, I would argue that Pynchon sees in the Eastern worldview a spirituality that, being less eschatological, is not easily coopted by entities seeking power. Pynchon upholds the Buddhist, and more generally Eastern, mindset as a counterbalance to Christianity and Islam. In *Against the Day* alone several characters make explicit reference to the way that some forms of religion, (namely, Christianity, Islam, and vaguely gnostic occult sects) have, historically, tended to become aligned with those in power.[18] Positive depictions of Christianity and Islam elsewhere in his work suggest that Pynchon aims to temper

---

[17] See Kohn 74; McClure, *Partial Faiths* 51-55; and Dewey 113-117.

[18] This trend of thought – rejecting a religion simply because its organized form has been coopted – easily slides down the slippery slope to fallacy, and has been used as a facile apology for atheism and agnosticism. Volumes have been written on the "Constantinian Question" alone, and Pynchon does not employ this line of thought as a means of rejecting organized religion. As evidence, Dwight Prance, one character who gives voice to this line of thinking, offers it as a defense for his own employment by the powerbrokers of Britain's Whitehall Lane. I posit that Pynchon aims rather to temper tendencies toward conquest exhibited in more eschatological religions.

tendencies toward conquest exhibited in more eschatological religions, rather than reject them outright.

The of practice of renunciation takes several forms in Pynchon's work. One form of renunciation is the abnegation of personal vendettas or revenge. This practice is called "Christian forebearance" by the "Christian anarchist," Reverend Moss Gatlin. During the Colorado mining strikes, Gatlin exhorts the strikers to spare the "scabs" (strikebreakers), "if by [forebearance] we may thus further the dumb scab's education" (*ATD* 1009). But even the Reverend's "Christian forebearance" shows a Buddhist bent, being rooted in a conviction of cosmic balance that resembles the notion of karma: "it is a law universal as the law of Gravity and as unforgiving that today's scab is tomorrow's striker. Nothin mystical. Just what happens" (*ATD* 467).

Pynchon does not disdain violence absolutely – anarchists may resort to it – but it must be for the sake of something greater than personal vengeance. Pynchon suggests that violence that is personal – motivated by honor, revenge, and vendetta – exacts the heavy toll of reducing the perpetrator to an object for consumption. When the Chums of Chance prevent Heino Vanderjuice from carrying out an ostensibly justified assassination of a heartless robber baron, his life is saved from becoming a "cheaply-sold and dishonored thing" (*ATD* 1079). Had Heino carried out the killing, his own life would have been reduced to a contract handed on to some other killer. We glimpse the same life-depleting effect of violence when Frank and Kit Traverse become convinced they must avenge the murder of their father. The debt of vengeance dictates the trajectory of their lives, until each comes to his own renunciation of violence.

Another form of renunciation, most fully embodied by Cyprian Latewood in *Against the Day*, is the transcendence or sublimation of sexual desire. As Kathryn Hume has observed, Cyprian is "arguably the most fully developed religious character in any of Pynchon's novels" (179-80), which is not to say, however, that he is Pynchon's ideal. We first encounter Cyprian at Cambridge, where he is known on campus as a "sod," embracing a life of decadence and "unreflective obedience, day into night, to the leash-pulls of desire" (*ATD* 699). Cyprian revels in submissiveness; rejection and scorn excite him, and he has a penchant for sadomasochism. Yet Cyprian proves himself a "sod" with a soul, revealing a sensitive, searching, spiritual side: "Most who met him found it difficult to reconcile his appetite for sexual abasement—its specific carnality—with what had to be termed a religious surrender of the self" (*ATD* 877). Cyprian's spiritual hunger prompts him to suspend his religious skepticism:

> Cyprian, while rejecting his family's High Church faith, strangely had begun—especially when the Mags and Nuncs and Matins responsories could be heard from services at Trinity or King's—to glimpse that, precisely because of its impossibilities, the disarray of self-important careerists and hierarchy-obsessed functionaries, the yawning and fidgeting town-lad choristers and narcotic sermonizing—it was possible to hope, not so much despite as paradoxically because of this very snarled web of human flaw, for the emergence of the incommensurable mystery, the dense, unknowable Christ, bearing the secret of how once on a hilltop that was not Zion, he had conquered death. Cyprian stood in the evenings, at the Compline hour, just outside the light cast from the chapel windows, and wondered what was happening to his skepticism, which was seldom being addressed these days except by such truly horrible specimens as the Te Deum in Commemoration of the Khaki Election by Filtham. (497-8)

Hume writes that Cyprian here has "found Christ through the very ordinariness of the people at a Church of England service" (180), but her statement is too simplistic. Rather, this is the first instance of the negative theology that Cyprian will later develop more

fully: Cyprian here finds *not*-Christ, and embarks on a spiritual journey seeking the "unknowable Christ."

Cyprian's enjoyment of self-abasement, predominantly psycho-sexual initially, is eventually sublimated into humble religious obedience, culminating in his entering a convent. Cyprian's spiritual life is put on hold, however, as "the Crown," exploiting his submissive nature and acquaintance with the more disreputable urban quarters, conscripts him to foreign service. His service to the crown is largely involuntary, rather like the prostitution he has been forced to resort to now and then: "Foreign Section were using him as unquestionably as any of his former clients had" (*ATD* 705). But as he is deployed to various continental locales, he begins to transmute his desire "to lose oneself" and "surrender . . . the ego" from a physical to a communal desire (*ATD* 708). In Vienna, he begins to seek out not the seamy quarters of the city but the working-class grids, moving among the workers "not so much seeking exotic flirtation as to be absorbed somehow into a mobility, a bath of language he did not speak, as he had once sought in carnal submission an escape route from what it seemed of the world he was being asked to bear" (*ATD* 715).

Cyprian's spiritual transformation is galvanized by his relationships with others. Yashmeen Halfcourt, a fellow Cambridge student, is the first to recognize Cyprian as having a soul and a capacity for "religious surrender of the self." The pair find solace and encouragement in discovering in each other one who seeks to transcend "a world every day more stultified, which expected salvation in codes and governments, ever more willing to settle for suburban narratives and diminished payoffs" (*ATD* 877). Others had viewed Cyprian's desire for surrender as simply masochistic. Yashmeen's influence

impels Cyprian to stand up for himself and refuse to be belittled and physically abused by his monomaniacal superior officer (*ATD* 811-12). It is at this point that Cyprian slowly begins to cultivate a set of spiritual disciplines that, even more so than with Lew Basnight, closely resembles the disciplines of a religious novice. Cyprian discovers "a perverse fascination in Patience, not so much as a virtue but more as a hobby requiring discipline, like chess or mountain-climbing" (*ATD* 813). This discipline of Patience (significantly, capitalized in the cited passage) transforms the way Cyprian treats other people, replacing his proclivity for sarcastic and cynical retort, and reflects a new approach to surrendering his ego.

During a "fool's errand" mission, assigned by his malicious superior officer who hopes it will be Cyprian's demise, Cyprian experiences an epiphany, a glimpse of what it would be like to live in a truly uncaring world:

> When he tripped and fell, Cyprian for the first time was delivered into an embrace that did not desire him, as he became only another part of the mechanical realm, the ensouled body he had believed in until now suddenly of far less account than mass and velocity and cold gravity, here before him, after him, despite him. As the storm roared all around, he slowly struggled . . . to his feet. Danilo had vanished. . . . He didn't know which direction to start looking in. He stood in rain just at the edge of sleet and considered praying. (*ATD* 837)

This experience of cosmic void functions as a brief dark moment of the soul. It touches a spiritual nerve and induces a desire to pray. Such a desire is not uncommon during moments of peril, but subsequent events show this experience to have a lasting legacy in Cyprian's life. This brief sense of mechanical emptiness compels Cyprian to greater investment in others and in the tasks of daily life. The practice of compassion takes on new importance for him. He finds his vanished partner, Danilo, who has broken his leg, and during the process of caring for Danilo, Cyprian undergoes a personal, spiritual

transformation. Cyprian becomes Danilo's caretaker and "mother," "surprised to find emerging in his character previously unsuspected gifts, notably one for soup, as well as an often-absurd willingness to sacrifice all comfort until he was satisfied that Danilo would be safe for another spell, however brief" (*ATD* 839). Cyprian realizes that "questions of [sexual] desire" have never arisen during this time, and he experiences great joy a his "first encounter with release from desire":

> He was . . . tending to Danilo's sleep, as if he must be prepared in an instant to intervene if needed, to walk the other man's painscapes of dream or delirium. All at once . . . he found that for some undefined time now he had not even been imagining desire, its arousal, its fulfillment, any occasion for it. The imbalance he was used to experiencing as a numb space in the sensorium of the day, as if time were provided with sexual nerves, a patch of which had been waiting unaddressed, was, somewhat mysteriously, no longer there—it was occupied by something else, a clarity, a general freshening of temperature. (*ATD* 839)

Cyprian here achieves a satori-like state, a welcome clarity and sense of wholeness, no longer being subject to vertiginous sexual longing. Though temporary, this enlightened state becomes Cyprian's new ideal: "he found himself always unexpectedly trying to locate it again, as if it were something at least as desirable as desire" (*ATD* 840).

Cyprian's spiritual transformation also instils in him a new estimation of family and communal life. When Danilo is reunited with his family in Salonica after years of exile, Cyprian shares in his joy: "Once, in another life, Cyprian would have replied in his most withering tones, 'Of course, charmed I'm sure,' but now he found himself possessed . . . by a smile he could not control" (*ATD* 842). It is as Cyprian is acclimating himself to life in community, adhering to "the linear and the quotidian" (*ATD* 847), that he has a "Cosmic Revelation." Sitting across from a doting couple in a café at the advent of spring, Cyprian notices that he is surrounded by vernal budding and by couples, both

human and animal, and "dropping from the sky like pigeon shit" comes the revelation "that Love, which people . . . no doubt imagined as a single Force at large in the world, was in fact more like the 333,000 or however many different forms of Brahma worshipped by the Hindu—the summation, at any given moment, of all the varied subgods of love that mortal millions of lovers, in limitless dance, happened to be devoting themselves to. Yes and ever so much luck to them all" (*ATD* 848). Cyprian's old cynical side comes through at the end here, but he then catches himself, finding "a strange sober joy at the ability, which he seemed to have picked up only recently, to observe himself being annoyed" (*ATD* 848). Cyprian's efforts towards patience and detachment are paying dividends. To his joy, he realizes his ability to recapture the state he achieved while serving as Danilo's caretaker. Whereas the sappy couple across from him would have once galled him, now "he felt, against the face his soul would have if souls had faces, a brisk vernal equipoise, as if he were aloft, maintaining an angle of attack into the advance edges of a storm none would have seen to the end of. It surprised him, and did not surprise him" (*ATD* 848). When one of the couple ask if they are annoying Cyprian, he further confirms his spiritual progress as he responds, "I am offended only by certain sorts of wallpaper" (*ATD* 848). As an insightful reader has pointed out, Cyprian here alludes to Oscar Wilde's famous quote about fighting a duel with his wallpaper, as a way of saying, sarcastically, that "he realizes the nature of love and the superficiality of materialism" and that "[o]ne of his natures, the old or the new, the superficial 'wallpaper,' or the authentic self he is discovering, has to go" (*Pynchon wiki*).

Cyprian's renunciation is not only personal release from desire; it has political ramifications as well. Cyprian's new discipline of detachment that grants him the freedom and capacity to stand up to his despotic boss, Derrick Theign. Cyprian is no longer concerned with self-preservation, especially when it comes at the price of moral compromise. He refuses to take further orders from Theign, effectively demitting his role as stooge of British intelligence. Cyprian's detachment is further evident in the choice not to be present at Theign's demise. His name notwithstanding, Theign is no loyal soldier; he is a tyrant, and his maltreatment of numerous parties come back in what Pynchon would call karmic retribution. Cyprian does play a role in bringing about Theign's end, but his participation is not vengeful retribution, rather an act of justice on behalf of others. Cyprian's lack of vindictiveness is evident when, after being informed of Theign's imminent end by one of the many affronted parties, Cyprian elects neither to participate nor be present. Cyprian choice to defy Theign and abdicate his military duties galvanizes other servants of Whitehall Lane. Later on, Ratty McHugh, now emitting "the radiance of an awakened spirit" tells Cyprian, "The way you dealt with Theign was an inspiration to so many of us—sudden personnel vacuums all over Whitehall, amounting in some shops to mass desertion" (*ATD* 932). Cyprian's example empowered Ratty to abandon his Whitehall desk and become an anarchist activist.

Cyprian's political actions are now dictated by his own moral compass rather than by government orders. After the narrowest of escapes from death while on assignment in the Balkans, Cyprian has vowed never to return. His decision to return there, in order to disarm and destroy a poison gas pipeline, reveals his personal, spiritual growth. First, he has achieved a greater degree of detachment from physical desire: "When he allowed

himself to imagine inducements—sexual, financial, honorific—that might get him to change his mind [about returning to the Balkans], he was puzzled to find there was nothing the world could plausibly offer that he wanted enough" (*ATD* 939). The one thing that does convince him to return to the Balkans is a purely selfless impulse to protect innocent human lives, especially those of Yashmeen and the child she is carrying. Further disclosing Cyprian's "progress" (or cultivation of detachment) is his acquiescence to karma: "Cyprian had begun to 'relax into his fate,' as he put it. Once he would have been reckoning up, anxiously, how much remained to him of youth, looks, desirability, and whether it would get him at least to the next station of the pilgrimage, but that—he knew now, knew as if with some inner certitude—was no longer quite the point, and in any case would take care of itself" (*ATD* 939-40).

Cyprian's sense of karmic balance is further evidence in his sense of "familiarity" and joy at holding Ljubica, Yashmeen's newborn daughter, for the first time. Cradling the child, Cyprian feels a wash of "familiarity, as if this had already happened countless times before," which prompts him to confess to Yashmeen, "I knew her once—previously—perhaps in that other life it was she who took care of me—and now here is the balance being restored—" (*ATD* 950). Here again we see Cyprian "relaxing into his fate," viewing his own life in a cosmic context.

Cyprian's discipline of renunciation has brought him peace, enkindled within him a greater sense of compassion, led him into community with others, and reformed his political participation in the war. His spiritual journey culminates with his entering into a Bogomil convent, which he discovers adventitiously as he, Yashmeen, and Frank attempt to make their way out of the Balkans. Upon learning about the convent, Cyprian

immediately discerns it to be a place where he may finally be at home. He tells Yashmeen, "They are taking me in as exactly the person I am, . . . No more of these tiresome gender questions" (*ATD* 958). Cyprian enters the convent as a "Bride of Night," adopting a female identity that is figurative and performative while having nothing to do with physiology. He explains to Yashmeen,

> They have adapted the *σχημα* . . . the Orthodox initiation rite, to their own much older beliefs. In the Orphic story of the world's beginning, Night preceded the creation of the Universe, she was the daughter of Chaos, the Greeks called her *Νυξ*, and the old Thracians worshipped her as a deity. For a postulant in this order, Night is one's betrothed, one's beloved, one seeks to become not a bride at all really, but a kind of sacrifice, an offering, to Night. (*ATD* 959)

The faith of those in the Convent has a strongly Manichaean aspect: "the obligation of those who took refuge here to be haunted by the unyielding doubleness of everything. Part of the discipline for a postulant was to remain acutely conscious, at every moment of the day, of the nearly unbearable conditions of cosmic struggle between darkness and light proceeding, inescapably, behind the presented world" (*ATD* 956-7). Kathryn Hume points out that Cyprian's discipline, that of continuing to be conscious of this doubleness, resembles Pynchon's own attitude. Hume acknowledges that this "sounds more Manichaean than Catholic," but reminds us that if we "[r]ead 'dark' as forces of oppression, especially capitalist forces," then Cyprian's attitude certainly parallels Pynchon's own (180). The "night" to which Cyprian betrothes himself is not the forces of evil or oppression but rather the notion of creative potentiality. This is evident in the account of the "second sight" with which Cyprian looks at the carved saints in the chapel: "gazing into it as if into a cinema screen where pictures moved and stories unfolded which he must attend to. Shadowless faces of Zalmoxis and the saints. And depending on

a kind of second sight, a knowledge beyond light of what lay within the wood itself, of what it was one's duty to set free" (*ATD* 957). A strong current of negative theology runs through the practice of this sect: Cyprian's dedication to night is a testament to the incompletion or insufficiency of the "presented world" and a hopeful expectation of what may yet come to be.[19]

In the end, it is unclear whether Cyprian's is a martyrdom that Pynchon affirms. In his zeal, Cyprian appears to a adopt a new naivety regarding the world outside the convent. When Yashmeen admonishes him to reconsider taking vows in light of the fact that the Convent lies directly in the path of a coming war, Cyprian – who will supposedly be reflecting continuously on the struggle between light and dark – blithely denies that any war will come to pass. Though the merit of Cyprian's final decision remains unclear, the salutary effects of his renunciant path are clear; it transforms his political consciousness and nurtures in him the faculty of compassion.

"Love In Action": Attunement

One component of the ontotheological synthesis is the cosmos or natural world. As briefly discussed above, Pynchon's work includes a strong environmentalist vein: he portrays the earth as a sentient being that commands respect and nurture from human

[19] As a kind of negative theology, this notion surfaces in an earlier episode in which Cyprian, along with Yashmeen and Reef Traverse, find themselves at "the Anarchist spa of Yz-les-Bains," hidden away in the Pyrenees (*ATD* 931). Key descriptive phrases announce the function and aim of this spontaneous commune. The entrance is marked by "late-ripening vines . . . that looked like garlanded crucifixes" (*ATD* 931). This description highlights the nobility of sacrifice and evokes the notion that sacrificial death, even martyrdom, may be necessary for the sake of salvation (even if salvation is defined as deliverance from oppressive politics). Such a sacrifice occurs earlier in the novel in the death of Andrea Tancredi (*ATD* 742). Another important passage details a choir practicing in Yz-les-Bains' elliptical town plaza. The choir stands "near one of the foci of the ellipse . . . practicing a sort of counter-Te Deum, more *desperamus* than *laudamus*, brining news of coming dark and cold" (*ATD* 931). Figuratively, the fact that they do not stand in the center suggests the possibility of a balancing voice emanating from the other focus – a Te-Deum – but this voice is absent here. The result is a very (apparent) absence, the perception of which ideally prompts one toward critical reflection as well as lament.

beings. (Pynchon's earth is also sometimes vindictive and quite capable of wreaking havoc on abusive or neglectful human populations.) As a kind of ontotheological synthesis, American ideology also assumes a relation to the natural world in which the land exists to serve the desires of human beings. This is not a relation of mutual respect but one of domination. Pynchon's works include numerous depictions of characters and organizations heedlessly pillaging the land for all it is worth. Examples include coal mining in *Against the Day*, deforestation in *Vineland*, and the proliferation of landfills due to unbridled consumption in *Bleeding Edge*. For Pynchon, a respective, harmonious relation to the environment is paramount for human flourishing. And this relation to the environment is inextricably connected to one's relation to the transcendent. For Pynchon, one's respect for the natural world is rooted in the acknowledgment of spiritual forces at work.

Pynchon's work includes non-Western spiritual disciplines that engender what I am going to call attunement**,** borrowing novelist C. E. Morgan's definition of attunement as "love in action" ("Soul"). Attunement entails a degree of intimacy with someone (or something) such that one gains a sense of the other's nature and desires and even a sense of the other's history and future. To grant a being this kind of attention is to demonstrate love and respect of that being. Attunement, in Pynchon's most positively rendered characters, occurs at the intersection of the natural, the spiritual, and the human. In the universe of Pynchon's novels, there is no easy separation of the natural world and human history. An understanding of the desires and actions of human beings includes the ways that humans have interacted with, and often violated, the natural world.

One discipline that engenders attunement is the "cult" of *Feng-Shui*, a non-theistic philosophy (though not inherently incompatible with theism). This discipline is exemplified by the character of Dr. Zhang (also called Captain Zhang) in *Mason & Dixon*. Zhang, a Chinese exile and astronomer of sorts, has made his way to the "new continent" where he plies his trade of "*Feng-Shui* jobs." Zhang consults in the construction of new buildings, using his *Luo-pan*, a sort of compass, to help design structures so as to be in harmony with the energies at play in the natural world. (Like the Chums of Chance, Zhang is a character in a pulp serial called *The Ghastly Fop* who makes his way out of the "fictional story" and into the primary narrative of Pynchon's novel, interacting directly with Mason and Dixon after escaping from a Quebecois Jesuit college where he has made an enemy of the Jesuit priest Zarpazo.)

Zhang's *Feng-Shui* sensibilities impel him to criticize the "Visto" that Mason and Dixon and their party are clearing in order to draw and map what will later be called the Mason and Dixon Line. Upon joining the line-drawing party and seeing their work, Zhang interjects, "Terrible *Feng-Shui* here. Worst I ever saw. You two crazy?" (*M&D* 542). Their ensuing conversation reveals Zhang's *Feng-Shui*-inspired objections to the party's project of drawing a line across the land for the sake of boundary drawing:

> "[The Visto] acts as a Conduit for what we call *Sha*, or, as they say in Spanish California, Bad Energy.— Imagine a Wind, a truly ill wind, bringing failure, poverty, disgrace, betrayal,— every kind of bad luck there is, — all blowing through, night and day, with many times the force of the worst storm you were ever in."
>
> "No one intends to live directly upon the Visto," Mason speaking as to a Child. "The object being, that the people shall set their homes to one side or another. That it be a Boundary, nothing more."
>
> "Boundary!" The Chinaman begins to pull upon his hair and paw the earth with brocade-slipper'd feet. "Ev'rywhere else on earth, Boundaries follow Nature,— coast-lines, ridge-tops, river-banks,— so honoring the Dragon or *Shan* within, from which Land-Scape ever takes its form. To

> mark a right Line upon the Earth is to inflict upon the Dragon's very Flesh, a sword-slash, a long, perfect scar, impossible for any who live out here the year 'round to see as other than hateful Assault. How can it pass unanswer'd?" (*M&D* 542)

As embodied by Zhang, *Feng-Shui* makes one attentive to the land and gives one a standard for judging the merit and telos of technology. Practitioners value harmony with the Earth and with one another. Falsely imposed boundaries, while of course often necessary, ineluctably separate individuals and may lead to conflict and even violence on account of possessiveness. Zhang refers to the Line as a "Tellurick Injury" (*M&D* 544), which it is his destiny to resist even as it is the destiny of his enemy Zarpazo to inflict such injuries.

Zarpazo's mentality sheds further light on Zhang's motivations, which are rooted in peace and harmony, a product of the Chinese understanding of *yin* and *yang* and cosmic balance. On one level, Zarpazo opposes the "abhorrent Magick" of *Feng Shui* because it makes the Chinese people unreceptive to Jesuit proselytization:

> Why prevent the Chinese from practicing *Feng Shui*? Because it works . . . . It carries the mark of the Adversary,— It is too easy. Not earn'd. Too little of the Load is borne by the Practitioner, too much by some Force Invisible, and the unknown Price it must exact. What do you imagine those to be, that must ever remain so unreferr'd, and unreferrable, to Jesus Christ? And, as His Soldiers, how can we ever permit that? (*M&D* 523-4)

But the issue is rooted more deeply in the desire for power and control. Zarpazo is a devotee of radical "ortholatry," or worship of right lines and angles:

> The Model . . . is Imprisonment. Walls are to be the Future. Unlike those of the antichrist Chinese, these will follow right Lines. The World grows restless,— Faith is no longer willingly bestow'd upon Authority, either religious or secular. What Pity. If we may not have Love, we will accept Consent,— if we may not obtain Consent, we will build Walls. As a Wall, projected upon the Earth's Surface, becomes a right Line, so shall we find that we may shape, with arrangements of such Lines, all we may need. (*M&D* 522)

Zarpazo believes that an "ortholatrical" approach is necessary in this confounding new world "with Sects nearly as numerous as Settlers" and the gravity of heresy lost on them (*M&D* 522). Boundaries and walls are the surest way to create and sustain order. In contrast, Zhang believes "the Planet Earth to be a . . . living Creature" (*M&D* 602, Pynchon's ellipses), and that to violate its natural contours and boundaries, showing "indifference to the true inner shape, or Dragon, of the Land" by imposing artificial lines, is to invite the dragon's wrath (*M&D* 601).

The broader thrust of the *Feng-Shui* philosophy is that there is a correspondence between our external, natural world and our internal, spiritual world. Thus, Zhang believes that any violation of the land will result in a lack of harmony among people. Zhang's concerns are proved well founded as the negative effects of drawing the Line begin to accumulate. The Line interferes with long standing travel routes of Native American tribes, particularly their Warpath, inviting their retribution. The Line contributes to, and intensifies, Indian intertribal hostilities (*M&D* 675-7). As Mason and Dixon's line approaches the war path, enemy tribes intensify their hatred for one another: "At either end of the Warrior Path, the heat, the agitation, the increasing Tension grow. Never in memory, they are assur'd by their Mohawk Escort, have Iroquois and Catawba each wish'd so passionately the other's Destruction. Any new day may bring the unavoidable Descent" (*M&D* 676). The implication here is that the notion of marking boundaries and mapping, implicated as it is in *property ownership,* has influenced the Indians' ways of thinking about ownership, perverting traditional Indian understandings of land and its possession. The line also sunders communities and even families, creating insiders and outsiders arbitrarily. Zhang predicts that "the Line" will eventually result in

civil war. Explaining that "*Sha* takes time to accumulate and accelerate," Zhang affirms Zarpazo's conviction that lines and divisions are key to ruling over others, while insisting also that such division creates strife that suppurates and explodes:

> To rule forever . . . it is necessary only to create, among the people one would rule, what we call (. . .) Bad History. Nothing will produce Bad History more directly nor brutally, than drawing a Line, in particular a Right Line, the very Shape of Contempt, through the midst of a People,— to create thus a Distinction betwixt 'em,— 'tis the first stroke.— All else will follow as if predestin'd, unto War and Devastation. (*M&D* 615)

Of course, the Mason and Dixon Line did result in "Bad History" and, finally, in war. Zhang also foreshadows the land development of the American west, warning that carving up the land by lines and angles will make of it "A Prison," and that, "Settlers [will be] moving West into instant Control" (*M&D* 617). The influence of Zhang on Mason and Dixon, who initially dismiss him as insane, is to help them realize the dangers of the project, especially as it pertains to character of the nascent Republic: "Having acknowledg'd at the Warpath the Justice of the Indians' Desires, after the two deaths, Mason and Dixon understand as well that the Line is exactly what Capt. Zhang and a number of others have been styling it all along—a conduit for Evil" (*M&D* 701). Zhang's insistence that Mason and Dixon are violating the natural order by clearing their line prompts the pair to a consideration of what use the line will serve and who would benefit from it. Dixon's conclusion is that "something invisible's going on . . . We're being us'd again" for the sake of "American Politics" (*M&D* 478-9)

Zhang prompts the surveyors to consider not only who it is that they are working for and the consequences that their line will produce, but also the very nature of science. The pair come to an understanding that scientific methods may be applied for good or for ill, that scientific experiments should be coupled with some sense of teleology or, at very

least, a knowledge of one's patron. This dilemma haunts Dixon's dreams: "[Dixon] has . . . dreamt himself upon a dark Mission whose details he can never quite remember, feeling in the grip of Forces no one will tell him of, serving Interests invisible. He wakes more indignant than afraid. Hasn't he been doing what he contracted to do,— nothing more? Yet, happen this is exactly what they wanted,— and his Sin is not to've refus'd the Work from the outset.—" (*M&D* 394). Dixon eventually concludes that "Men of Science . . . may be but the simple Tools of others, with no more idea of what they are about, than a Hammer knows of a House," and that it thus matters immensely for whom the man of science is working (*M&D* 669). A scientist cannot refuse culpability when his work is employed for evil.

Feng-Shui is not the only discipline that engenders an attunement with the land. Christopher Coffman has detailed the ecological ethics rooted in Bogomilism, Orphism, and Shamanism in *Against the Day*. (Orphism also features in *Gravity's Rainbow*, as McClure notes.) In *Against the Day*, a Tarahumare *brujo* instructs Frank Traverse in the shamanistic practice of mystical journeying, which enlarges Frank's consciousness of the natural world and of human history. Pynchon's characters embark upon mystical journeys through various means: through sleep dreams, by listening to music, and, in the case of Frank Traverse, initially through the use of hallucinogens. Frank achieves enlightenment and "save[s] his soul" through what he refers to as "Native magic" (*ATD* 927-8).

Frank's spiritual development begins in the Mexican desert, after he meets a trio of Tarahumare Indians who believe Frank has just saved their lives. Frank is in Mexico attempting to hunt down the two men who killed his father. One of the Indians, a *brujo* (shaman or medicine man) named El Espinero, tells Frank, "You have fallen into the

habit of seeing dead things better than live ones. *Shabótshi* all do. You need practice in seeing" (*ATD* 392). As "practice," El Espinero gives Frank *Hikuli* (peyote), which he says is a cure for his lack of vision. Frank is "taken out of himself, not just out of his body by way of some spectacular vomiting but out of whatever else he thought he was, out of his mind, his country and family, out of his soul" (*ATD* 392). Frank embarks upon a mystical journey in which he finds himself flying through the air, led by a Tarahumare guide, through a series of underground caves until they reach one in which it is continuously raining. Frank's guide then relates a myth, at once creation story and moral parable, that imputes the existence of the desert to original sin, greed. The cave rainfall is all of the water that should have been nourishing the desert land. This first vision implants into Frank's mind a connection between natural resources, human greed, and devastation and suffering. In his first vision, the devastation is manifested in the land, but, eventually, Frank will learn to see how human history, too, is shaped by greed.

After his first "trip," Frank manages to track down and kill one of his father's murderers, only to sink immediately into regret. Afterwards, rather than a sense of justice accomplished, Frank feels, "Something like a cloak of despair was settling down over his soul, useful, like a duster out on the trail. He still didn't understand how much harder and less inclined to mercy it was making him" (*ATD* 471). Frank gradually realizes the further implication of El Espino's caution about seeing the dead better than the living: Frank's obsession with vengeance is blighting his life, impairing his ability to enter into community with others and to care about anyone other than himself.

The next time Frank takes a mystical journey, he is again in Mexico, near the site of Casas Grandes, the ruins of an Indian settlement that was suddenly abandoned in the

fifteenth century. Frank enters a dreamscape in which he first witnesses mundane life in an ancient Aztec city then beholds the hurried flight of the Aztecs at the onset of Spanish occupation. Frank seems to visit a sort of alternate Tenochtitlán, one that perhaps would have existed had Cortez not invaded. Still in his vision, he finds himself reading "the tale of The Journey from Aztlán" and,

> finding out this is a city not yet come fully into being, but right now really just a pausing point of monochrome adobe, for this gaudy, bright city they hope to find someday, Frank sees, is being collectively dreamed by the community in their flight, at their backs a terror not of the earth they thought they knew and respected, ahead of them, somewhere, a sign to tell them they have truly escaped, have found their better destiny, in which the eagle would conquer the serpent, the trespassers, content with what they had seized and occupied of Aztlán, would give up the pursuit and continue with their own metamorphosis into winged extraterrestrials or evil demigods or gringos, while the fugitive people would be spared the dark necessity of buying safety by tearing out the hearts of sacrificial virgins on top of pyramids and so forth. (*ATD* 925-6)

In his vision, Frank sees an alternate history, and the magnitude of life that was cut off and nullified by the Spanish conquest is impressed upon him. The import of his mystical journey is clarified shortly after, when he visits the dig site at Casas Grandes with his friend Wren:

> The site still bore the signs of abrupt departure . . . . Seeing the spectacle of mud dilapidation, sliding toward abandonment since long before the first Spaniards showed up, Frank understood immediately that this was where the *hikuli* had taken him the other night, what El Espinero had wanted him to see—what, in his morose and case-hardened immunity to anything extraliteral, he had to begin to see, and remember he saw, if he was to have even an outside chance of saving his soul. (*ATD* 928)

Frank has an epiphany, learning that El Espinero is trying to teach him to develop the breadth of vision to see both the history and the future of a place, to be able to envision alternate histories and to discern the consequences of human greed and predation. This is the vision Frank must gain if he is to "save his soul." Frank is now capable of seeing this

way: looking around at the ruins of Casas Grandes, he considers present American history in light of the fate of the ancient inhabitants of the city that now lies in ruins:

> He understood for a moment, as if in the breeze from an undefined wing passing his face, that the history of all this terrible continent, clear to the Pacific Ocean and the Arctic ice, was this same history of exile and migration, the white man moving in on the Indian, the eastern corporations moving in on the white man, and their incursions with drills and dynamite into the deep seams of the sacred mountains, the sacred land. (*ATD* 928-9)

The son of a miner who is also a Colorado native, Frank sees Colorado mining life in a new light, as a depredation of both the land and the labor force by greedy company executives solely interested in profit margins. This spurs him on to political action.

Initially, Frank joins the Mexican revolutionary cause, with a mind that he is somehow working toward righting the wrong vested upon the Aztecs by Spanish invaders. But as he witnesses the rapid succession of new leaders, of revolutionaries quickly becoming dictators only to be cut down by another revolutionary-soon-to-turn-dictator in a vicious cycle, Frank quits Mexico altogether. His emigration back to the United States is finally confirmed by another mystical journey, this time without the aid of peyote. While Frank's first mystical journeys are enabled by the *hikuli* cactus (peyote), the point is for him to learn to see the world differently. Eventually, Frank achieves the ability to enter this mystic state without the aid of hallucinogens. In Frank's final vision, he finds "himself back again in the same version of ancient Tenochtitlán that El Espinero's cactus had once taken him to" (*ATD* 993). This time, the town is given over to violence, though it is violence perpetrated with modern weapons. Frank hears gunshots and smells gasoline, and sees forces based on two large structures at war with each other. Above, "he could see nothing beyond a shadow which approached from the north, like a storm, covering more and more of the field of stars" (*ATD* 993-4). Back in the "indicative

world," Frank understands that two forces represent the ongoing civil strife in contemporary Mexico and that none of the revolutionary forces really represents a just cause that promises a peaceful national life for the people. Frank discerns the meaning of the shadow:

> The shadow overhead, all these centuries in pursuit of the Aztecs and their generations, southward in their long flight, came at last to hang in the sky over the Valley of Mexico, over the Capital, moving eastward from the Zócalo to gather itself above the penitentiary called "el palacio blanco," and condense at last one by one into the .38-caliber rounds that killed Madero and Pino Suárez and put Huerta into power, and despite the long and terrible struggle, and the people's faith so misplaced, had after all allowed the serpent to prevail. (*ATD* 994)

Frank's newfound political acuity changes his perception of affairs stateside as well. When Frank gets back to Colorado, he learns that the mine workers' union has been on strike for several months, resulting in the eviction of many families from company housing and the formation of tent colonies. Martial law has been declared and violent skirmishes have broken out. Government forces, operating at the behest of corporate interests, are preparing to raze the tent colonies, and people that Frank cares about are there. Again, Frank interprets the events in terms of conquerors and conquered. He perceives that greed is the inciting force in the declaration of martial law and the impending slaughter. It takes no convincing for Frank to join a convoy headed to the mine fields to give aid, even knowing that, "Everything's voluntary. Nobody makes a profit or gets paid, not even credit or thank-yous" (*ATD* 997). At the coal fields, Frank risks his own life to make sure others escape to safety when the National Guard moves in with armed force to raze the tent colonies and to route anyone left there.

Frank's mystical journeying has enlightened his understanding of the nexus between the earth and human greed and human suffering. While hallucinogens are the

inceptive catalyst for these visions, they are simply a preliminary means to the end of teaching Frank a new way of seeing. The discipline in focus is the ability to gauge the world in terms of human cost, to reverse the "habit of seeing dead things better than lives ones." Frank's augmented vision translates into greater compassion for others and increased sensitivity to the health of the land.

"The Journey Itself *Is A Kind Of Conscious Being": Pilgrimage*

The narrative of *Against the Day* tracks various pilgrimages, through the twentieth century and across the globe. All of these, one way or another, intersect through the search for Shambhala. Shambhala is a historical, though also mystical and mythical, city that figures in some strands of Buddhist and Hindu tradition. Today, Shambhala is most commonly used to refer to a Buddhist pure land, a place which is most important as a spiritual reality or state, even if it may be located geographically. The function of Shambhala in *Against the Day* most closely follows this pure land definition. A character in the novel describes it as, "An ancient metropolis of the spiritual, some say inhabited by the living, others say empty, in ruins, buried someplace beneath the desert sands of Inner Asia. And of course there are always those who'll tell you that the true Shambhala lies within" (*ATD* 628). In *Against the Day*, Shambhala becomes an index for all quests spiritual, financial, and political. As Christopher Coffman has noted, Shambhala is a key presence in the novel not only for its mythic associations but also "because it unifies the efforts of so many of the text's central characters" ("Bogomilism" 111). Because Shambhala is both a spiritual "place" of enlightenment and a location in the deserts of the East, its pursuers include both spiritual seekers and greedy capitalists salivating with oil interest. The Shambhala plot stream running throughout the novel ultimately conveys that

enlightenment and spiritual fulfillment are never to be gained in the way of consumers or political conquerors. Reaching the true Shambhala requires spiritual discipline, a pilgrimage of the spirit rather than a physical journey, although the latter may play a role as well, if accompanied by spiritual journeying.

Kit Traverse is one of the many pilgrims in *Against the Day*. Like many of Pynchon's pilgrims, Kit's pilgrimage begins as a political mission, as more of a quest than a pilgrimage. Kit grows up in a Colorado coalmining community, the son of a miner who is a closet anarchist whose political convictions and lived injustices lead him to moonlight as a bomber. Kit's father, Webb, is eventually found out and assassinated at the behest of his employer, robber baron Scarsdale Vibe. Kit turns to intellectual pursuits as his ticket out of mining country, and heads to Yale then to Göttingen to study mathematics on the dime of a generous patron, Scarsdale Vibe who, Kit eventually learns, also funded his father's murder. Upon this realization, Kit feels the onus of familial debt – vengeance for his murdered father – while also trying to extricate himself from debts incurred to Vibe and his company. As a means of escaping both, Kit agrees to light out to Inner Asia, at the behest of occult group-cum-political wing T.W.I.T., to gather intelligence on the international race to discover Shambhala.

Kit's journey holds for him no apparent religious significance. Kit's interest in mathematics, specifically vectors, had been quasi-mystical, and Yashmeen had called him "religious" (*ATD* 668). But Kit realizes that his interest in Vectorism was only a vain attempt at "transcendence . . . to escape the world governed by real numbers" (*ATD* 675). Of his journey to Inner Asia, "as far as Kit could see, this journey ahead of him was not for God, not for Yashmeen, who was the love of somebody's life no doubt, just not Kit's,

nor even any longer for the cause of Vectorism—maybe nothing more than the simple preservation through flight of his increasingly worthless ass" (*ATD* 745-6). Yet after arriving in Asia and meeting up with Yashmeen's adoptive father, Auberon, Kit finds himself, in spite of himself, on a pilgrimage. Before leaving for Asia, Kit is told,

> Kashgar is the spiritual capital of Inner Asia, as 'interior' as one can get, and not only geographically. As for what lies beneath those sands, you've your choice—either Shambhala, as close to the Heavenly City as Earth has known, or Baku and Johannesburg all over again, unexplored reserves of gold, oil, Plutonian wealth, and the prospect of creating yet another subhuman class of workers to extract it. One vision, if you like, spiritual, and the other, capitalist. Incommensurable, of course. (*ATD* 631)

But Kit is at this point primarily concerned with escaping his own debts.

During Kit's increasingly vague political mission, British intelligence dispatches him, along with British Lieutenant Dwight Prance, to establish connections with the Tungus people in "shamanic Asia" (*ATD* 764). The pair is instructed to undertake the journey as Buriat pilgrims (who are mostly Buddhists) on their way to Lake Baikal (a real holy place) and to follow the conventions of the traditional pilgrimage. When Kit questions the logic of this mimicry, Prance tells Kit, "If you are lucky enough to grow into your role, perhaps, somewhere on the journey north, all will become clearer to you" (*ATD* 764). Kit soon realizes this journey will be more demanding than he initially thought, as the Doosra (a zany, Mauser-toting desert prophet) tells him they will require a guide because "It isn't only the difficult terrain, the vipers and sandstorms and raiding parties. The *journey itself* is a kind of conscious Being, a living deity who does not wish to engage with the foolish or the weak, and hence will try to dissuade you. It insists on the furthest degree of respect" (*ATD* 765).

As Kit and Prance make their "pilgrimage," Kit unexpectedly finds himself being shaped spiritually. Their journey begins by reaching then proceeding through the Tushuk Tash or "the Prophet's Gate," a "great stone Arch . . . considered impossible actually to get to even by the local folks" (*ATD* 769). Significantly, the arch and surrounding area cannot be represented properly by cartographers: this holy site is a reality much greater than its physical dimensions: "Some spoke of the colossal gate as a precipice, a bridge, an earthen dam, a passage between high rock walls . . . for others it was not a feature of the landscape but something more abstract, a religious examination, a cryptographic puzzle" (*ATD* 769). Because maps are useless, negotiating this area requires a spiritual disposition and knowledge. Their guide, Hassan, retreats to pray upon learning that they will have to pass through the arch, and he insists upon strict observance of the traditional pilgrim's rites. If Pynchon stresses that the pilgrim's journey is its own destination, he also insists that the pilgrimage must be more than an objectless seeking after vague mystical experience. The physical rites and rituals are important for shaping one spiritually, even if one begins a rite without understanding or intent.

Throughout the journey, Kit learns (of necessity) to see with a spiritual vision. Of the canyons and rock towers, Kit considers, "What earthly process could have produced them was a mystery. With the sun at this angle, the Kara Tagh looked like a stone city, broken into gray crystalline repetitions of city blocks and buildings windowless as if inhabited by that which was past sight, past light, past all need for distinguishing outside from in" (*ATD* 770). Upon passing through the arch, Kit is granted a vision:

> The moment he passed through the Gate, Kit was not so much deafened as blinded by a mighty release of sound—a great choral bellowing over the desert, bringing, like a brief interruption of darkness in the daytime, a distinct view now, in this dusk, of sunlit terrain, descending in a long

> gradient directly ahead to a city whose name, thought at the moment denied him, was known the world over, vivid in these distances, bright yellow and orange, though soon enough it would be absorbed into the same gray confusion of exitless ravines and wind-shaped rock ascensions through which they had labored to get here and must again to regain the Silk Road. Then the vision had faded, embers of a trail-fire in the measureless twilight. (*ATD* 770-1)

What Kit sees here, he sees in "blindness"; his vision is a spiritual one, and what he sees is the hidden city of Shambhala. For Kit, this turns out to be not a place, at least not primarily, but rather a new disposition and understanding – a new capacity for compassion and attentiveness to suffering.

Ultimately, Kit is liberated from the debts he came to Asia in order to escape. After passing through the Arch at the journey's start, Kit has a recurrent dream throughout the journey. In the dream, "the Arch has been replaced by Kit himself, a struggle he feels on waking . . . to become the bridge, the arch, the crossing-over. The last time he has the dream . . . . A voice he knew he should recognize whispered, 'You are released'" (*ATD* 771). The ambiguity here allows that Kit is released from both of his nagging debts: his debt to Vibe and the debt to his father that would demand he kill Vibe. Kit here receives absolution, and, no longer at odds with himself, his vision is directed outward, to the plight of others and to the health of the natural world. Kit's journey takes him along parts of the Silk Road through areas where he glimpses the shadow of suffering cast by ruthless commerce, witnessing scenes such as "nephrite quarries where dust-covered spectres moved chained together on their own effortful pilgrimage toward a cup of water and a few hours' sleep" (*ATD* 771). Eventually Kit grasps the nature of his newly granted spiritual insight: he begins "to understand that this space the Gate had opened to them was less geographic than to be measured along axes of sorrow and loss"

(*ATD* 771). Kit, who has undertaken this journey on behalf of the British crown, comprehends that "the Great Game" has grave consequences, as he witnesses how the vying of nation-states for more lands and natural resources subjugates human beings and rapes the earth. Crossing a barren expanse, Prance explains to Kit that this area – "picked over" by Germans – was once the true historical Shambhala – "a convergence of gardens, silks, music—fertile, tolerant, and compassionate" (*ATD* 772). The demise of the place has been the result of political conquest, first by Muslim invaders "and next [by] Genghis Khan, and after him the desert" (*ATD* 772). A place like Shambhala never survives being conquered.

Kit evinces his newfound sense of compassion in the aftermath of the Tunguska event, an actual event that occurred in June of 1908, in which a great explosion (most probably due to meteor impact) leveled nearly 800 square miles of forest in Eastern Siberia. Kit, still out on his mission with Prance, wants to depart from their route to see if they may be of any help to those in the area, while Prance refuses, saying "My remit was political. This is not political" (*ATD* 782). The event also further fosters Kit's attentiveness to the natural world. Kit enters a satori state, in which he "understood for a moment that forms of life were a connected set . . . . He had entered a state of total attention to no object he could see or sense, or eventually even imagine in any interior way" (*ATD* 782). A bit later, Kit registers little surprise at the appearance of a talking reindeer named Ssagan that converses with Prance in Buriat: "It didn't seem that odd to Kit, talking with reindeer, Folk out here were said to do it all the time. Since the visitation at the Stony Tunguska, he had noticed that the angle of his vision was wider and the narrow track of his life branching now and then into unsuspected side trails" (*ATD* 785).

This reindeer has left his herd, telling his herders that "Kit was a pilgrim who could not proceed farther without Ssagan to pilot him through confusions in the terrain" (*ATD* 786). The reindeer becomes the third party to refer to Kit as a pilgrim or as a religious man, although this is the first time that Kit does not refuse to identify himself as such.

This chapter of the novel begins as a flashback, commencing with Kit's narration of reaching Lake Baikal, then relating the events leading up to that point before relating the events that occurred after. This structure parallels the development of Kit's understanding, as it is only upon his arrival at Lake Baikal that he understands he truly has been a pilgrim on a journey. Kit began this journey using pilgrim as a convenient cover, and he balks at his guide Hassan's ordinance that they will complete all aspects of the traditional pilgrimage. Though Kit insists he and Prance are actually neither Buriats nor pilgrims, Hassan peremptorily replies "for a devout Buriat the object of pilgrimage must be the great stone at the mouth of the Angara, where the river flowed out of the lake" (*ATD* 768). Hassan's response implies that Kit is a pilgrim, whether or not he elects to accept it. When they finally reach Lake Baikal, Kit realizes the importance of this journey, far beyond his ostensible remit: "It was not until he finally saw Lake Baikal that he understood why it had been necessary to journey here, and why, in the process of reaching it, penance, madness, and misdirection were inescapable" (*ATD* 768). Kit reflects that this pilgrimage has changed his perspective on his entire life to this point:

> A journey to [Lake Baikal] was not a holiday excursion. In some way he was certain of but had not quite worked through, it was another of those locations like Mount Kailash, or Tengri Khan, parts of a superterrestrial order included provisionally in this lower, broken one. He felt swept now by a violent certitude. He had after all taken the wrong path, allowed the day's trivialities to engage him—simply not worked hard enough to deserve to see this. His first thought was that he must turn and go back to

> Kashgar, all the way back to the great Gateway, and begin again. (*ATD* 769)

Kit's pilgrimage affords a vantage of his own wayward past and heightens his awareness of his own complicity in political machinations. The journey has deepened Kit's knowledge of the insidious nature of American ideology and project of expansionism. Through a conversation with Prance, Kit is led to consider that the U.S. operates as if it has a state religion. Prance argues, "Your whole history in America has been one long religious war, secret crusades, disguised under false names" (*ATD* 777). These political considerations, along with Kit's new attunement with the natural world, lead him to refuse to report back to the British agency sponsoring his mission about the Tungus people whom he encounters.

Kit acquires a new spiritual discipline, learning how through meditation he can regain the enlightened state he achieved during his pilgrimage. At the end of his journey, Kit encounters a man practicing "double-jointed singing," in which one voice produces both the sound of singing and the sound of a reed instrument. The man accomplishes this by standing angled to the wind so that "after a while it would have been impossible to say which, the man or the wind, was doing the singing" (*ATD* 787). Kit adopts a novice version of this singing that allows him to "enter a distinctly different state of affairs" (*ATD* 1080). This different state of affairs allows him a vantage point from which to better understand his own life and his web of relations. Kit uses this practice to help him "get back to the right piece of trail" when he has taken a wrong turn (*ATD* 1074). This discipline keeps Kit "on the trail" morally as well as geographically. For example, near the end of the novel, Kit realizes the engineering work he has been doing for the Italian air force has been aiding a nascent movement that is to become the fascism of Mussolini

(though Kit knows neither the term nor the man at this point): "For a while he allowed himself to be seduced into the Futurist nosedive, with its aesthetics of blood and explosion" (*ATD* 1073). But the aeronautical modifications Kit has made, enabling larger fighters to carry off the newly developed "nosedive," are used against labor strikes. Kit turns to meditation and reflects on his past pilgrimage as a way of recapturing his vision of Shambhala, which, in turn, helps him see his own complicity. The kind of flight he has been abetting is not the gesture toward transcendence he once supposed but rather, "it was all political" (*ATD* 1070).

Auberon Halfcourt is another of Pynchon's pilgrims**.** A Lieutenant-Colonel in the British military, Halfcourt has been in Inner Asia for years, charged with overseeing British interests there, and has established his own little oasis fiefdom. He is also the adoptive father of Yashmeen, whom he rescued (with motives not entirely above reproach) from imminent enslavement when she was a girl. Halfcourt's pilgrimage begins on account of Yashmeen's influence. When he first brought her back to Kashgar, he found himself torn between the impulses of erotic desire and the protectiveness of a guardian. This internal conflict has persisted long after he eventually sent her away to school, under the care of the T.W.I.T., to dispel his temptation. A letter from Yashmeen, now a young adult, stokes the embers of Halfcourt's internal struggle into a blaze, and the desire to be a part of her life, as father to her, compels him to spiritual self-evaluation. He appraises his own life as if through her eyes, confessing to his servant, "I am contaminated beyond hope . . . . Look at what I have done with my life. I must never so much as speak to her again" (*ATD* 765). Auberon has been serving imperialist colonial

military interests that are motivated by material greed, not to mention using his military authority in the region for illicit personal profit.

Yashmeen, having been under the care of the T.W.I.T. for some time, has begun to realize that the true interests of this occult society are centered around political power and that their interest in Shambhala is far from spiritual. She writes, "like those religious charlatans who claim direct intercourse with God, there are an increasing number at the T.W.I.T. who presume a similar intimacy with the Hidden City, and who, more disturbingly, cannot separate it from the secular politics of present-day Europe" (*ATD* 748). As she has discerned the demystified nature of the T.W.I.T., she has begun also to understand the nature of her father's military duty – furthering the interests of the crown, especially as it concerns colonialism, and she confesses to her father that this insight has tainted him in her eyes: "I find I cannot set aside your profession, the masters you serve, the interests which all this time out there in Inner Asia, however unconsciously, you have been furthering" (*ATD* 749). Finally, Yashmeen relates a dream she has had, one which, in spite of her disquieting new knowledge, gives her hope for the future of her relationship with her father (Auberon) and her own future life. I reproduce this dream in full, for it is crucial for understanding Auberon's pilgrimage as well as the pilgrimage of the Chums of Chance, which I subsequently discuss.

> But you came to me last night in a dream. You said, "I am not at all as you have imagined me." You took my hand. We ascended, or rather, we were taken aloft, as if in mechanical rapture, to a great skyborne town and a small band of serious young people, dedicated to resisting death and tyranny, whom I understood at once to be the Compassionate. Their faces were strangely *specific*, faces which could easily appear in the waking day here below, men and women I should recognize in the moment for who they were. (. . .)
>
> They used to visit all the time, coming in swiftly out of the empty desert, lighted from within. I did not dream this, Father. Each time when

> they went away again, it was to return to "The Work of the World"—always that same phrase—a formula, a prayer. Theirs was the highest of callings. If there was any point to our living in that terrible wilderness, it was to persist in the hope of being brought in among them someday, to learn the Work, to transcend the World.
>
> Why have they remained silent, for so long? Silent and invisible. Have I lost the ability to recognize them? the privilege? I must find them again. It must not be too late for me. I imagine sometimes that you have led an expedition to Shambhala, troops of horsemen in red jackets, and are there now, safe, among the Compassionate. (*ATD* 749, Pynchon's ellipses)

Reading this letter first depresses then galvanizes Auberon; he wants her dream to be true – to reunite with her and to be able to honestly explain that he is not the schemer she believes he likely is. Despondent as he is, "one day he creaked up onto one of the tough, low-set Kirghiz horses and went riding out alone, perhaps in search of the Compassionate, perhaps of whatever, by now, had become of Shambhala" (*ATD* 765-6). The next time he is seen, weeks later, he appears, cleaned up and composed, "except for the insane light in his eyes," at a book-dealer in Bukhara where he inquires about guides to Shambhala (*ATD* 766).

When Halfcourt asks the bookseller, Tariq Hashim, "how practical are any of [the written guides to Shambhala], as directions to finding a real place," the bookseller's reply is revealing: "It helps to be a Buddhist, I'm told. And to have a general idea of the geography out here" (*ATD* 767). Tariq's response intimates that enlightenment is not sought and found in the way of consumer products or conquerable lands or political power. It can only be had by the practicing of a certain discipline. Shambhala is both a mystical and a physical destination, and while geographical competence may lead one to the physical location, only spiritual proficiency can grant one enlightenment. Further proving the point, in a cheeky jab at the nature of modern tourism, Pynchon has the bookseller refer to the recent German translation of an alleged ancient guide to

Shambhala, "which all the Germans who come through here seem to be carrying in their rucksacks" (*ATD* 766).

While we receive no account of Auberon's soul searching, the next time he enters the narrative is to reunite with Yashmeen, as he proves himself a changed man. At their encounter he tells Yashmeen, "I am not who I was . . . . Out there I was the servant of greed and force . . . . All the while believing myself a military professional. The only love they permitted me was indistinguishable from commerce. They were destroying me and I didn't know it" (*ATD* 974). Any love that is "indistinguishable from commerce" is not love at all but the reduction of human beings to salable objects. Halfcourt then explains that he has faked his own death and deserted the military, placing his desire to reconnect with his adopted daughter above all else. The text asserts a direct connection between Halfcourt's military duties, which were colonial in nature and entailed the objectification of the colonized people, and his inability to love his adopted daughter without making of her an object of erotic titillation. Auberon has also realized, like Kit, that Shambhala, while it is (or was) a physical place, it is more importantly a state of being: "For me, Shambhala, you see, turned out to be not a goal but an absence. Not the discovery of a place but the act of leaving the futureless place where I was" (*ATD* 975). Thus, for Auberon, a search for enlightenment leads to greater insight into one's current situation; it grants a form of vision, one that, at Yashmeen's instigation, allows him to see the true nature of his military duty and the way politics and commerce become soul-crushing bedfellows.

In Yashmeen's letter to her father, she references the Compassionate Ones, those who carry out the "Work of the World," which she describes in religious terms. By the

end of *Against the Day*, we realize that Yashmeen's description of these Compassioante Ones – a "skyborne town of serious young people," both men and women – can only refer to the Chums of Chance, along with their eventual mates, the Sodality of Aetheronauts. The pilgrim journey of the Chums of Chance (called "sky-pilgrims" throughout the novel) is characterized most signally by works of compassion. The Chums are the fictional subject of a series of dime store page-turners (read by other characters in Pynchon's novel) and central characters in Pynchon's narrative. The Chums are adventurous aeronauts, patrolling the skies in their airship, the *Inconvenience*, in the name of good. While the Chums' story evokes early twentieth-century adventure comics, the Chums are no mere pastiche; they become increasingly complex characters throughout the novel, and their maturation, both physical and spiritual, is reflexively related to their gradual repudiation of their commanding office.

The Chums carry out missions for a shadowy entity known as "the Hierarchy," a thinly veiled version of some American governmental office, to which they are bound by a charter existing apparently in perpetuity. The Chums are known as a force of good, and they are loyal servants, obeying orders unquestioningly. Aboard their airship, the *Inconvenience*, demerits are issued for informal or unpatriotic speech, as well as for slipshod manners and sloppily performed chores. Details reveal the Chums to be (unbeknownst to them) a form of American propaganda. When the reader first encounters the Chums aboard their airship, it is draped in patriotic bunting and the crew sport "the summer uniform of red-and-white-striped blazer and trousers of sky blue" (*ATD* 3). We subsequently learn that their dress uniform contains a dickey with forty-four buttons, "one for each State of the Union" (*ATD* 15). (It is the turn of the twentieth century at this

point in the novel.) The original figurehead of the *Inconvenience* is, tellingly, a bust of President McKinley. Given Pynchon's meticulous attention to detail, it is surely no accident he chose the Republican McKinley, who figured largely in making the US a world power through various annexations, the Spanish-American War, and his embrace of big business. There are even hints at fascist tendencies, or at least affiliations, of the "Hierarchy." The first of the Chums' assignments narrated in the novel is their contract to provide surveillance for the Chicago World Fair.

However, as they Chums mature, they begin to critically consider the nature of their service. The Chums have "standing orders" to celebrate the fourth of July every year regardless of location, and one year, as they prepare to set off fireworks from their assigned location on a remote island in the Indian Ocean, the following dialogue occurs regarding the purpose of these pyrotechnics.

> "Lights and noise, just to keep us hoppin like trained baboons," was Darby's opinion.
>
> "Anyone at all educated," protested Lindsay, "knows that Fourth of July fireworks are the patriotic symbols of noteworthy episodes of military explosion in our nation's history, deemed necessary to maintain the integrity of the American homeland against threats presented from all sides by a benightedly hostile world."
>
> "Explosion without an objective," declared Miles Blundell, "is politics in its purest form."
>
> "If we don't take care," opined Scientific Officer Counterfly, "folks will begin to confuse us with the Anarcho-syndicalists."
>
> "About time," snarled Darby. "I say let's set off our barrage tonight in honor of the Haymarket bomb, bless it, a turning point in American history, and the only way working people will ever get a fair shake under that miserable economic system—through the wonders of chemistry!"
>
> "Suckling!" the astounded Lindsay Noseworth struggling to maintain his composure. "But, this is blatant anti-Americanism!" (*ATD* 111)

At this point, none has yet questioned his allegiance to the Hierarchy, but we see the budding capacity for critical thought that will gradually come to full fruition. The omniscient narrator then poses a rhetorical question to the reader: "Was it any wonder that when the opportunity did arise, as it would shortly, the boys would grasp unreflectively at a chance to transcend 'the secular,' even at the cost of betraying their organization, their country, even humankind itself?" (*ATD* 113). With the Chums, Pynchon plays on the secular-sacred and immanent-transcendent dichotomies. While secular can be antithetical to sacred (or religious or spiritual), it can also refer simply to non-ecclesial, civil life on earth's surface, where the Chums, as sky-adventurers, spend the minority of their time. Furthermore, the phrase "grasp unreflectively" is hardly indicative of a spiritual quest undertaken in full comprehension. The boys, while conscious of the value of pursuing transcendence, at first seek it in the wrong places.

It is their search for Shambhala that galvanizes their spiritual development. Their pursuit of Shambhala (their initial pursuit) becomes a *mise en abyme* for their larger pilgrimage over the course of the novel. The Chums are initially deployed on this search by the Hierarchy, unwittingly joining an international race to be first in discovery. Having received from an untrustworthy deliveryman a map supposed to lead them to Shambhala, the Chums then board the "subdesertine frigate *Saksaul*" and accompany Captain Toadflax and his crew down into the sandy depths, under the assumption that this mission to locate the holy City is "above board" (*ATD* 434). Captain Toadflax conveys an understanding that there is a spiritual element required of this search: "It is down here [beneath the desert sands] . . . quite intact and, make no mistake, inhabited as well—that the true Shambhala will be found, just as real as anything. And those German professors .

. . won't ever find it, not without the right equipment—the map you fellows brought, plus our ship's Paramorphoscope. And as any Tibetan lama will tell you, the right attitude" (*ATD* 435). Yet while detailing the mission to the Chums, Captain Toadflax belies this notion of spiritual orientation by slipping into reveries of "secular pleasures" such as fame and wealth. The Chums gradually realize they have been hoodwinked. Another crew member reveals that there is in "this search for Shambhala an unavoidable military element. All the Powers have a lively interest. The stakes are too high" (*ATD* 436-7). The *Saksaul*'s search ends fruitlessly as Shambhala remains unfound, but as they dock at the "subdesertine" port town of Nuovo Rialto, the Chums gather further details about the insidious nature of the quest. Encountering a pair of wildcatters in a bar, the Chums are told that while Shambhala "is probably real," the real purpose of their mission is gathering geological data for oil interests (*ATD* 441). The map the Chums have provided turns out to be unreadable with the ship's current equipment, as the ship's "paramorphoscope" lacks the capacity to see in four dimensions.

As Chums crew member Miles Blundell grasps, one needs the ability to see along the axes of space and time in order to reach the holy City; in other words, only a sort of *spiritual vision* will do. While in Inner Asia beneath the desert sands they do not find Shambhala, but Miles is "tormented by a prefiguration, almost insupportable in its clarity, of the holy City, separated by only a slice of Time, a thin screen extending everywhere across his attention, which grew ever more frail and transparent" (*ATD* 550). Miles understands the need to gain this form of sight, and their failure leads Miles, the spiritual torchbearer of the crew, to become "engaged ever more deeply with a project of the spirit" (*ATD* 550). Miles's "project of the spirit" is also a project of developing the

capacity to see in the fourth dimension, to experience time as a spatial dimension. (Time travel is a major motif of the novel, which Pynchon employs as a metaphor for moral vision. The ability to time travel is linked with an elevated spirituality.)

Miles's spiritual pilgrimage begins earlier in the novel, when in Venice he experiences "the prophetic vision of St. Mark, *but in reverse*" (*ATD* 250, Pynchon's italics). Through this vision, it is given to Miles to understand

> that we [the Chums], too, are here on a Pilgrimage. That our interest in the *itinerario sfinciunese* and the chain of oasis set down in it is less for the benefit of those who have engaged us than for our own. When all the masks have been removed, it is really an inquiry into our own duty, our fate. Which is not to penetrate Asia in hopes of profit. Which is not to perish in the deserts of the world without reaching our objective. Which is not to rise in the hierarchies of power. Not to discover fragments of any True Cross however imagined. As the Franciscans developed the Stations of the Cross to allow any parishioner to journey to Jerusalem without leaving his church-grounds, so have we been brought up and down the paths and aisles of what we take to be the all-but-boundless world, but which in reality are only a circuit of humble images reflecting a glory greater than we can imagine—to save us from the blinding terror of having to make the real journey, from one episode to the next of the last day of Christ on Earth, and at last to the real, unbearable Jerusalem. (*ATD* 251)

This cryptic and complex passage hints at many motifs and events of the novel, and only gradually does Miles come to understand the full implications of the vision. The eventual result of this Pilgrimage is that the Chums will repudiate all allegiance to the Hierarchy and become the Compassionate Ones, individuals working by their own initiative for the good of others. Significantly, the Chums glimpse Shambhala, not while on government sponsored quest, but only after they have repudiated their contract and severed ties with the Hierarchy (*ATD* 794-5). A clear, inverse correlation obtains between the Chums' fidelity to their contract and their spiritual progress. Miles is the one who names their vision, identifying it as Shambhala. Appropriately so, as Miles is their spiritual visionary

and the crew member with the clearest vision into the nature of their contract with the Hierarchy; he is the one with the foresight to encourage disaffiliation.

The event that allows their first true glimpse of Shambhala is the Tunguska event, an event of such magnitude (although no lives were recorded as lost) that it alters the consciousness of all affected by it.[20] In the novel, its effects are numerous, but its primary function is to perforate the seemingly unassailable belief in Progress. For many, especially the Chums, it rends not only creation but also an easy belief in progress and rationality. The event gives the lie to the notion humans exercise absolute control over earthly events, reminding humans that extra-human forces are at play. The event reintroduces the possibility of magic into the world: we are told that reindeer "discovered again their ancient powers of flight" (some even glowing "around the nasal area"); clocks and watches ran in reverse; and "Siberian wolves walked into churches in the middle of services, quoted passages from the Scriptures in fluent Old Slavonic, and walked peaceably out again" (*ATD* 784). Some understand the event in apocalyptic terms, associating it with "Tchernobyl, the star of Revelation," while yet others attribute the event to the destructive power of heretofore unseen military technology. (In this latter view, it foreshadows the coming destruction of WWI.) It makes people question things, and this, for some, like Kit Traverse, leads to moral advancement. For the Chums, it reveals Shambhala.

In the wake of the Tunguska event, all the members of the Chums experience time spatially. A city in which, at first, "no one appeared to live" and which "seemed a single giant roof of baked mud" changes before their eyes: "In the pale blue aftermath, the first

[20] The Tunguska event was a real event, which occurred in 1908. An explosion over Russian Siberia, generally attributed to a meteor exploding just above the surface, flattened about 770 square miles of forest. Astonishingly, no human casualties were reported.

thing they noticed was that the city below was not the same as the one they had arrived at the night before. The streets were all visible now. Fountains sparkled…. Markets seethed in cheerful commotion . . . the desert was renounced" (*ATD* 793). In addition to adding a dimension to their sight, the Tunguska event also has the further consequence of severing their inviolability: "What it would take the boys longer to understand was that the great burst of light had also torn the veil separating their own space from that of the everyday world, and that for the brief moment they had also met the same fate as Shambhala, their protection lost, and no longer able to count on their invisibility before the earthbound day" (*ATD* 793). The Chums no longer "transcend" life on the surface: they now have a clearer vision of events happening below, and those below now see them. Earlier, a character accuses the Chums of a blind faith that has rendered them gullible and subject to exploitation by their commanding office: "You have been so easy to fool—most of you anyway—you are such simpletons at the fair, gawking at your Wonders of Science, expecting as your entitlement all the Blessings of Progress, it is your faith, your pathetic balloon-boy faith" (*ATD* 555). (This passage refers back to the opening scene of the novel, in which the Chums are assigned to surveillance of the Chicago World Fair.) This faith, which has been slowly weakening, is shattered as they witness the unthinkable horrors of WWI.

Their vision has been changed irrevocably. The Tunguska event has caused a wrinkle in time, and the boys seem to be able to glimpse into the future as well as the past. They are now more attentive to destruction and to the impact of industrial development on natural world:

> Returning from the taiga, the crew of *Inconvenience* found the Earth they thought they knew changed now in unpredictable ways, as if whatever had

> come to visit above Tunguska had jolted the axes of Creation, perhaps for good. Below, across the leagues of formerly unmarked Siberian forest and prairie, they saw a considerable webwork of rail, steel within cleared rights-of-way below shining as river-courses once had. Industrial smoke, in unhealthy shades of yellow and reddish brown and acid green climbed the sky to lick at the underside of the gondola. Birds they were used to sharing the sky with, migratory European species, had vanished, leaving the region to the eagles and hawks that had formerly hunted them. Huge modern cities of multiple domes, towers of open girderwork, smokestacks, and treeless plazas sprawled beneath, without a living creature in sight. (*ATD* 795-6)

As World War I escalates "down on the Surface," and the boys encounter unfamiliar obstacles like no-fly zones and glimpse uncharted "surface" features like trenches, "Miles was aware in some dim way that this, as so much else, had to do with the terms of the long unspoken contract between the boys and their fate—as if, long ago, having learned to fly, in soaring free from enfoldment by the indicative world below, they had paid with a waiver of allegiance to it and all that would occur down on the Surface" (*ATD* 1022-23). As sky-voyagers existing primarily on a plane high above the "secular" world, the Chums were contractually bound not to interfere with the "groundhogs." But now, seeing events below with a new awareness of the horrors of war, "they looked on in helplessness and a depression of spirit new to them" (*ATD* 1021). Their ability to see "multiple worlds" finally leads to a different, more direct and non-partisan involvement in the "indicative" one. Pynchon here establishes a connection between spiritual/expanded vision and investment in earthly life. True transcendence is reflexively tied to the "work of the world."

The Chums come to embrace the fate intimated to Miles in his vision much earlier (*ATD* 250, quoted in full above), embracing their allegiance to the indicative world in inverse correlation with their abdication of allegiance to the National Hierarchy. Miles's

new augmented vision allows him greater empathy with the "indicative" world below. Miles comes to understand that those fighting in the war, those who were naïve boys believing themselves on the side of progress and justice, are making the "real journey" to the "real Jerusalem" (*ATD 251*), and that this is perhaps the ultimate "Station of the Cross" for the Chums.

Miles realizes that those fighting are parallel "adventurers":

> "Those poor innocents," he exclaimed in a stricken whisper, as if some blindness had abruptly healed itself, allowing him at last to see the horror transpiring on the ground. "Back at the beginning of this . . . they must have been boys, so much like us. . . . They knew they were standing before a great chasm none could see to the bottom of. But they launched themselves into it anyway. Cheering and laughing. It was their own grand 'Adventure.' They were juvenile heroes of a World-Narrative—unreflective and free, they went on hurling themselves into those depths by tens of thousands until one day they awoke, those who were still alive, and instead of finding themselves posed nobly against some dramatic moral geography, they were down cringing in a mud trench swarming with rats and smelling of shit and death." (*ATD* 1023-24, Pynchon's ellipses)

This vision is a turning point in the boys' inculcation of the discipline of compassion. Miles identifies the "boys" in the trenches with himself and the other Chums. This is true compassion: perceiving others' suffering as one's own. This is a vision of common humanity, of fellowship, that has nothing to do with nationality. Miles recognizes that patriotism is not inherently noble, and that "unreflective" bids for heroism may end in senseless slaughter. The effect of this vision, along with the salutary influence of their Russian counterpart, the *Tovarishchi Slutchainyi* (which roughly translates as Chums of Chance), is to break their last contract and become beneficent bandits, subject to no laws other than that of compassion.

The Chums join forces with the *Tovarishchi Slutchainyi*, whose crew has undergone a conversion of their own in the wake of the Tunguska event. Contemplating

the cause of the catastrophe, the Russian boys consider the possibility of their own collusion in the destruction because of their political and military allegiance. The event transforms the Russian Chums' perspective, Captain Padzhitnoff later telling the Chums, "I? since Tunguskan *obstanovka*, I believe everything" (*ATD* 794). They have disaffiliated with St. Petersburg entirely and rededicated themselves to humanitarian missions across the globe. Padzhitnoff and crew have even changed the name of their airship, now shorn of all official Russian insignia, from the *Bolshai'a Igra* to the *Pomne o Golodayushchiki*, which means "remember the starving" (*ATD* 1024). The two crews of Chums join forces and run aid missions, distributing food to areas in shortage, and even negotiating the release of prisoners of war. They continue this kind of work even after the armistice.

Ultimately, the Chums become The Compassionate Ones of Yashmeen's dream. We learn near the end of the novel that the Chums have been watching over the welfare of other characters, unbeknownst, at the time, to the latter. The Chums are responsible for the safe passage of Yashmeen, Reef, and their baby Ljubica out of the Balkans. They are also responsible for the rescue of Heino Vanderjuice, saving him from guilt and recrimination that would have resulted from his intended assassination of a corrupt businessman (*ATD* 1079-80).

Near the end of the novel, the Chums encounter a group of female sky-pilgrims called the The Sodality of Aetheronauts (*ATD* 1030). These girls are "dressed like religious novices" and, "Their names were Heartsease and Primula, Glee, Blaze, and Viridian, [and] each had found her way to this Ætherist sorority through the mysteries of inconvenience" (*ATD* 1030). The Chums not only join forces with the Sodality but also

marry them and start families. While the mission of compassion continues, the *Inconvenience* itself transforms into a way of life:

> And on they fly. The ship by now has grown as large as a small city. There are neighborhoods, there are parks. There are slum conditions. It is so big that when people on the ground see it in the sky, they are struck with selective hysterical blindness and end up not seeing it at all. . . .
>
> *Inconvenience,* once a vehicle of sky-pilgrimage, has transformed into its own destination, where any wish that can be made is at least addressed, if not always granted. For every wish to come true would mean that in the known Creation, good unsought and uncompensated would have evolved somehow, to become at least more accessible to us. No one aboard *Inconvenience* has yet observed any sign of this. They know—Miles is certain—it is there, like an approaching rainstorm, but invisible. Soon they will see the pressure-gauge begin to fall. They will feel the turn in the wind. They will put on smoked goggles for the glory of what is coming to part the sky. They fly toward grace" (*ATD* 1084-5).

In Yashmeen's description of the Compassionate as doing the "Work of the World," she posits that to "learn the Work [is] to transcend the World" (*ATD* 749). There is a paradox here. Initially, the Chums (before they are the Compassionate) transcend the world in that they float above life on the surface, insulated from it. But this is a spiritually valueless form of transcendence. It is only by fully engaging in the "Work of the World" – carrying out missions of compassion and aid – that they achieve true transcendence, bringing to the world of trench warfare and human subjugation a vision of community and charity. In the Chums, Pynchon shows compassion to be a discipline: not a sensibility or a feeling of pity, but a view of others' suffering as one's own and an active engagement in that suffering. And Pynchon suggests an inverse correlation between blind nationalism and compassion: so long as one can without compunction justify suffering and death as necessary sacrifice to for good of the flag, one cannot do the "Work of the World."

Conclusion

In *Bleeding Edge*, Pynchon recurs to the image of dowsing the desert. He is keenly aware that it takes spiritual resources to dowse the spiritual desert that is our modern American environment. For Pynchon, spiritual vitality is a pressing concern in America today, as he stresses in his essay on acedia:

> Unless the state of our souls becomes once more a subject of serious concern, there is little question that Sloth will continue to evolve away from its origins in the long-ago age of faith and miracle, when daily life really was the Holy Ghost visibly at work and time was a story, with a beginning, middle and end. Belief was intense, engagement deep and fatal. The Christian God was near. Felt. Sloth – defiant sorrow in the face of God's good intentions – was a deadly sin. ("Sloth")

Pynchon laments that we live in a time and place when acedia is no longer a spiritual problem but a crime against a politically motivated, profit-driven notion of progress. He rues that we cannot truly be guilty of spiritual despair because many of us have no true spiritual self to begin with. The spiritual disciplines that Pynchon presents in his work – the ones he depicts unironically and in earnest – are disciplines that translate into a greater investment in the world: works of compassion, care for the earth, and opposition to all forms of domination. For Pynchon, doing the real "work of the world" is contingent upon connection to the Transcendent. Pynchon, as a perspicacious student of history, may be wryly skeptical of our potential, but he is far from hopeless. Hope lies in recovering the conviction that our souls hang in the balance. In presenting a hybrid form of spirituality and exposing the limits of American ideology, Pynchon exhorts us to spiritually richer lives.

CHAPTER FOUR

Faith Without Work is Dead: Ana Castillo's Holy *Joderones*

Ana Castillo's work demonstrates that *the* "American self" does exist, but only as an ideal. As Castillo makes clear, there are actually many American selves. However, the fact that the American self is only an ideological construct makes it no less influential or enticing. What keeps many Americans, especially Chicanas, from a full, vital sense of self is the pressure to assimilate and embody the ideological American self. Ana Castillo offers a perspective on American ideology that is unique among the authors I discuss, for, though born, raised, and residing in the United States, she identifies as Chicana. As Castillo defines the term, Chicana signifies a woman with a borderlands consciousness, who feels at home neither in her country of residence nor in the country of her ethnic heritage. While any immigrant (or descendant of immigrants) may experience something like a "borderlands consciousness," the Chicana is one living in the United States but culturally descended from Mexico or another Latin American nation. This borderlands state is also called *nepantla*, a term which theologian Miguel de la Torre explains as being in the middle, "that situation in which a person remains suspended in the middle between a lost or disfigured past and present that has not been assimilated or understood" (74). This *nepantla* or borderlands state results from the process of *mestizaje*: the "cultural, political, religious, social, and physical 'mixing' birthed from the pain and anguish of continuous conquest" (de la Torre 74). Castillo describes her own experience of such homelessness: "Today, in my own nation of birth and citizenship, as a mestiza

born to the lower strata, at best, I am often mistaken for an immigrant, at worst, as a nonentity. Moreover, this occurs not only in the United States, the country of my birth, but also in European countries. In Latin America, including México, I am taken for a foreigner" (*Massacre* 17-18). Whereas Marilynne Robinson has written a book entitled *Mother Country,* Castillo as Chicana has no mother country at all.

In spite of her alienation, Castillo feels a connection to the land of her birth that makes her long to be here rather than elsewhere. She explains that if she were to retreat to live elsewhere, "the core of my being would long for a return to these lands. The collective memory that I share with other *indigenas* and mestizos and mestizas makes me yearn to claim these territories as my spiritual homeland" (*Massacre* 18). Castillo feels that her spiritual homeland lies in the United States, yet her cultural heritage renders assimilation possible only by rejecting that heritage.

The lamentable history of U.S.-Mexico relations and the process of Manifest Destiny have left Chicanas/os in this borderlands state.[1] Castillo recalls that in the 19th century the U.S. annexed half of Mexico, suddenly placing a sizeable population of Mexicans on the American side of the border. These Mexicans, who were not immigrants in any denotative sense, found themselves culturally as well as physically dislocated: "Assimilation into the fabric of the WASP American Dream had been the rule of thumb for all immigrants," but, "Chicanos for the most part were also not immigrants" (*Massacre* 2-3). Castillo describes the cultural disparity this way: "Unlike the white, Anglo-Saxon Protestant, whose Puritanism shaped a democracy founded on capitalism, the Mexican comes from, in the words of Octavio Paz, 'a Catholic world of Mexican

[1] Here I am explaining Castillo's position, which is undeniably reductionist. However, her account helps elucidate her own position and explain her own spiritual vision.

viceroyalty, a mosaic of pre-Columbian survivals and baroque forms'" (*Massacre* 91). While Castillo's account is clearly simplistic, it points to the cultural morass experienced by Chicanas/os today: they are caught between two cultures and marginalized by the dominant expressions of both. Deborah Madsen explains that Chicana subjectivity is shaped by a cultural milieu that includes "not just the cultural imperialism of the United States, expressed in a history of military aggression, conquest, annexation, and ongoing cultural and economic humiliation, but also the cultural imperialism of Mexico and Latin America from the perspective of which Chicanos/as are defined as mestizo, mongrel, Anglicized, and bastardized" (21-22). For Chicanas, the United States both is and is not their homeland, yet, driven by the universal desire to realize an authentic identity, they attempt, in various ways, to embrace this land as their homeland. Castillo maintains that, while it is possible for Chicanas/os to forge an authentic sense of self in America, the means adopted by many – especially attempts at assimilation – are spiritually and psychologically crippling. Nevertheless, the American Dream continues to entice many Chicanas/os.

Castillo asserts that any notion which might be called the "American self" is, *essentially*, non-inclusive of Chicanos and, especially, Chicanas. Her works make it clear that she is thoroughly versed in the American Dream and that she has glimpsed, perhaps even felt, its pull and allure while also witnessing its marginalizing effects. Her characters are constantly negotiating life in America as men and women who cannot feel at home there, however badly they may wish to. Many characters pursue the American Dream with abandon, only to be batted about and battered by it. They feel a compulsion

to become what Sacvan Bercovitch calls the American "representative self," even as this pursuit only succeeds in further disenfranchising them.

Castillo witnessed the continuing influence of American ideology on Chicanos/as as a participant in *el Movimiento Latino* in the 1970s. She recounts the impotence of their "efforts to bring unity and courage to the majority of our people" and the poor reception by their communities:

> Among the factors contributing to this were the desire to succeed, the consumer fever that overrides people's fundamental needs, and the competitive American premise that encourages individual versus community efforts. The temptations of the rewards of assimilation and the internalization of racism by the colonized peoples of the United States remain devastating. Society has yet to acknowledge the trauma it engenders. (*Massacre* 22)

Castillo depicts this trauma throughout her work, showing it to be physical, psychological, and spiritual. She insists that the only way for Chicanas to overcome it is to realize its spiritual essence and to embrace an alternative spirituality that grants one a sense of home and a stable selfhood.

Castillo, like the other authors in this study, suggests that the ideology of American exceptionalism, with its concomitant notion of the American Dream, is best understood not simply as a political stance, but as a spiritual discipline. As such, its influence is far-reaching, extending beyond the ballot and passport to the very soul. A spiritual discipline is a formational practice or complex of practices that trains us to see the world in a certain way and shapes our values (Cavanaugh 47). Any system which wields such influence is never morally neutral. Castillo asserts that understanding the spiritual quality of American ideology is imperative for Chicanas/os in a unique way. For though the hallmark of the American Dream is that *anyone* who works hard and believes

in it can avail herself of America's opportunities, Castillo maintains that this is utterly impossible for Chicanas who hope for a stable and fulfilling understanding of who they are. The crux of my argument in this chapter is that, for Castillo, the failure to descry the spiritual nature of American ideology results not only in an anemic spiritual life but in a disenfranchised existence for Chicanas; Chicanas must pursue an alternative spirituality that affirms them both as women and as "Mexic Amerindian," combatting the dual marginalization Chicanas face in America.[2]

Castillo believes it is possible for Chicanas/os to live a gratifying and stable life *in* America. But for Chicanas/os this requires an alternative spiritual discipline that draws from non-Western, indigenous symbols and beliefs as well as drawing *selectively* from dominate cultural systems. Castillo's position holds all spiritual truths to be contextual, honoring individual subjectivity while also emphasizing the role of communal interpretation. This alternative, hybrid spirituality grants Chicanas both greater awareness of the American milieu in which they live and the self-definition with which to live in it. I argue, finally, that Castillo's spiritual vision fosters a Chicana expression of what theologian Miguel de la Torre calls an "ethics *para joder*," a trickster ethics intended to harass and destabilize regnant power structures.

Writing Mestizaje: The Techniques and Vision of Chicana Literature

Castillo is one of a cadre of Chicana writers for whom art and theory are not easily separated. As Deborah Madsen states, "In important ways the subject of Chicana writing *is* the Chicana subject: feminine subjectivity in a Mexican American context is

[2] "Mexic Amerindian" is the term Castillo uses to refer to the heritage of Chicanas: "In this text I have chosen the ethnic and racial definition of Mexic Amerindian to assert our indigenous blood and the cultural source, at least in part, of our spirituality. I also use interchangeably the term *mestiza*" (*Massacre* 10).

the primary subject matter of Chicana literature" (5). Castillo confirms in the introduction to her essay collection, *Massacre of the Dreamers*, that Chicana literature, as she understands it, is a response to mainstream, predominately white feminism, which, however unintentionally, has perpetuated racism by focusing on the place of white women within a predominately white cultural milieu. Castillo states that earlier feminism failed to transcend white privilege: "most renowned white feminists came from privileged backgrounds. Their place in society could not be excluded from their understanding of it" (*Massacre* 4). As a result, Chicana feminists have had to shoulder the double burden of advocating for their people as well as for their sex (*Massacre* 4). Chicana writers have pursued this task through their art. According to Castillo, "much of our writing was directed at our own people, the texts intended to contribute to the discourse of our ongoing struggle for self-definition as well as offering a sense of place in society" (*Massacre* 187). This quest for self-definition has demanded innovation. For Chicana writers, traditional literary forms do not suffice because Chicanas cannot lay claim to any "traditional" American experience. These writers experiment with various literary forms and techniques in the attempt to capture and convey the unique subjectivity of the Chicana.

These techniques and innovations include code-switching (shifting freely between languages within the same text), absurdism, non-linear narrative, and magic realism, among others.[3] The use of bilingualism is crucial to the process of articulating Chicana subjectivity, for, as Castillo elaborates, language "is a way of seeing the world," and with "these two languages as part of our daily dynamic, we have a unique comprehension of

[3] For a detailed survey of Chicana literary techniques see Madsen 22-37.

society" (*Massacre* 227). Multiple languages allows for multiple dimensions, and the two dynamics interact with one another in creative and fruitful ways.

Castillo's unique mélange of ironic pastiche and literary innovation serves both to challenge the traditional assignation of ontological status and to forge ways to convey a new subjectivity. Her novel *So Far From God* depicts supernatural intervention (without irony) and also appropriates elements of the telenovela, such as episodic structure, the sacrifice of plausibility for effect, and a plot driven by coincidence (Mermann-Jozwiak 106-7). Elisabeth Mermann-Jozwiak suggests a dual purpose behind Castillo's appropriation of telenovela conventions: first, Castillo insinuates that life for a Chicana who tries to live within the dominant cultural systems *is* as preposterous as a melodramatic telenovela; second, Castillo seeks to "parody its underlying assumptions and the normative behaviors it projects" (107). These norms include patriarchal gender roles and expectations regarding marriage, sex, and reproduction. While Castillo certainly challenges such norms, Magali Cornier Michael identifies a constructive use of telenovela conventions, pointing out that telenovelas typically center on the resolution of conflict rooted in differences between social classes: "because 'they are expected to have a happy ending,' telenovelas tend to possess a certain utopian dimension; they are forced to imagine alternative, positive results of class struggle—in contradistinction to the horror and violence that have tended to mark much of Latin American class conflict" (120). As I demonstrate below, Castillo's work is not utopian, but Cornier Michael rightly posits that Castillo seeks to offer hope for the possibility of a more fulfilling life for Chicanas.

Castillo's use of the supernatural has led some to categorize her work as magical realism, a label that she resists. Critics like Roland Walter have insisted that Castillo's

use of magical realism is one of the elements that gives her work political clout, linking the material and spiritual in a way that demands concrete action (87). Yet Castillo herself has stated that the supernatural elements in *So Far from God* stem from her use of hagiography and saints' lives rather than magical realism (Caminero-Santangelo 83). Other critics have noted ways that Castillo parodies or revises the conventions of magical realism for political purposes. Aldama argues that Castillo "reinvent[s] the magicorealist narrator as partially fallible" and employs "magicorealism" self-reflexively as a way to subvert "spectacularist" capitalist culture from within, avoiding "the dangers of slipping into a formulaic use of magicorealism to package and sell the Latina as consumable exotic Other" (86). Caminero-Santangelo complicates any easy link between magic realism and political import in Castillo's work, demonstrating that several of the most political episodes in *So Far from God* – ones often linked to environmental activism – use no magic realism at all, and, furthermore, that Castillo depicts as magical many of the threats of active social engagement (82). Caminero-Santangelo claims that Castillo parodies magical realism to show that real change comes not from magic or miracles but human activism (which remains rooted in spirituality) (85).

Castillo, along with other Chicana writers, employs fragmentary narrative in the attempt to mirror the lived experience of Chicanas. Madsen insightfully observes that such fragmentation reflects characters' lack of "authority to create a unified vision of their lives" (37). Marginalized by dominant social structures, these Chicanas are unable to integrate themselves into their environment and attain a stable identity. Castillo's first novel, *The Mixquiahuala Letters,* has received much scholarly attention for its

fragmentary nature.[4] An epistolary novel, *Letters* consists of a series of forty letters, with a preface in which the author prescribes various reading schemas for different personality types: "The Cynic," "The Conformist," and "The Quixotic." Castillo's fragmented structure is not solely intended to reflect a lack of coherent identity. Larkin argues that Castillo intends to highlight that reading is both a reflexive activity – in that the reader both contributes and receives meaning and coherence – and a social activity, as the "reading subject [is shown to be] a plural, rather than singular, self" (144). The different suggested reading approaches yield different interpretations. Castillo interrogates the construction of meaning without denying its possibility.

The use of fragmentary narrative and lack of closure recalls the techniques of many of the "canonical" postmodern writers.[5] But critics have justifiably insisted on the need to exercise caution in labeling Chicana literature postmodern. While Chicana writers like Castillo craft texts that spotlight the constructedness of meaning and identity, they defy the assertion of many postmodern writers that the individual quest for meaning is futile. According to Holly Blackford, Chicana writers' "novels use self-reflexive storytelling to underscore the theme that within stories the individual *constructs* meaning. . . . individual characters achieve a spiritual consciousness that leads them to serve the spiritual and social needs of the ethnic community" (224). A few critics like Benjamin Carson posit a dissonance between Castillo's search for a viable Chicana identity and the "postmodern take on identity" that Castillo offers in her fiction (Carson 110). In the most extreme (mis)reading, B. J. Manríquez adopts Castillo's critique of oppressive cultural

[4] See Larkin 142-3; Madsen 93; Quintana 73-4, 83; Long Bennett 462-4; Szeghi 433; Benjamin Carson 115-16.

[5] I use quotation marks here because the very theoretical notion of a literary canon conflicts with many theoretical paradigms of postmodernism.

norms as the foundation for the spurious argument that Castillo is a nihilist who believes that "human beings exist in a silent, alien universe that possesses no inherent truth or meaning" (39). Manríquez mistakes Castillo's affirmation of multiple subjectivities, or hybridity, for total relativism and the utter absence of truth and meaning. More convincingly, Larkin distinguishes between "postmodern fragmentation" and the "lived experience of hybridity," arguing that they are two different things with very different implications. For Larkin, the very human dignity of the marginalized is at stake: "Although postmodern techniques have given voice to marginalized experiences and identities, the dissolution of the author (an extension of the dissolution of the self) also threatens the validity of identities that have already been invalidated by racism and sexism" (143). The goal, then, of Chicana writers is to forge a via media between perpetuating normative identities that are oppressive and the postmodern belief in the futility of the quest for meaning, both of which "foreclose the possibility for social transformation" (Blackford 247). In other words, Chicana writers like Castillo hold to the ostensibly paradoxical possibility of a constructed and fluid yet stable identity. Mermann-Jozwiak argues that Chicana writing has actually helped revise the ahistoricism of theoretical postmodernism: "While postmodernism with its emphasis on the local, the margins and difference has created spaces for Chicanas to speak from, Chicana writing, together with that of other women and people of color, has contributed to creating a multicultural, political version of postmodernism" (13).

Castillo envisions a construction of identity for those who live in but do not assimilate into dominant American social structures, and Chicana spirituality is the focus of her vision: "beneath the definition established by the cultural enthusiasm of

Chicanismo was and remains a significant component of the mestiza's identity— her spirituality. This undercurrent is the unspoken key to her endurance as a female throughout the ages: spirituality versus religion as well as spirituality versus a material dogma" (*Massacre* 100-1). Castillo believes that Chicana identity cannot be divorced from religion or spirituality. Castillo zealously arraigns the Catholic Church for sexism, but for her there is no question of jettisoning religion. Rather, she seeks other, more vital and affirming (woman-centered) forms of spirituality.

Castillo's vision of spirituality is complex and fluid, preserving space for multiple subjectivities. Spirituality may encompass and inform institutionalized religion, but the two are not synonymous; Castillo remonstrates against many aspects of institutionalized religion but insists that spirituality is the foundation of identity, "an acutely personalized experience inherent in our daily lives" (*Massacre* 11). Castillo views spirituality as inextricably connected to social issues of "race, gender, and class" (Lanza, "New Meeting" 658). Carmela Delia Lanza shows that "Castillo resists creating binary relationships with these topics" by adopting a hybrid approach that blurs the line between institutionalized religion and alternative spiritualities and seeks to carve out new territory for "women of color [to] participate and create within those spaces" ("New Meeting" 658). Caminero-Santangelo and Theresa Delgadillo align Castillo's spiritual vision with liberation theology on account of the way Castillo encourages active resistance to sources of oppression rather than passive acceptance of suffering (Caminero-Santangelo 86, Delgadillo 889-90). However, according to Gail Pérez, while "Castillo's revisionist Catholicism" aligns with the work of Latin theologians in striving to empower women to interpret the sacred as demanded by their own contexts, Castillo departs from those

theologians in her quest to unearth and implement the subversive "'forgotten' memories of another worldview, the suppressed countervalues of women and Native peoples" (Pérez 58-9). Without rejecting her Catholic heritage outright, Castillo turns to non-Western spiritual disciplines in her attempt to formulate a woman-centered spirituality. Castillo draws from various expressions of spirituality and insists that one's spirituality is subjective and individual, but she does have criteria: the spiritual disciplines Castillo draws from "have in common . . . an emphasis on liberation, in the sense of aiming toward 'justice, equality, human rights, true democracy, and a greater quality of life for all.' Moreover, they emphasize concrete experiences and daily life as 'the point of departure' for all analysis and praxis" (Cornier Michael 114).

The home, traditionally the domain of women, plays a central role in spiritual development. The home is a subversive and liberating site in which non-Western practices and values may thrive, especially *curanderismo,* a traditional form of holistic medicine, that features prominently in Castillo's work (Pérez 58-9). Castillo depicts the mundane rituals of home life in an affirming and even heroic light, reclaiming practices often considered subservient as indicative of strength and love. Madsen insists that Castillo depicts traditional domestic activities like cooking and homeopathic medicine "as an assertion of cultural identity and resistance to assimilation" (99). The home also becomes a space freed from patriarchy, a site of woman-centered, woman-led community. Pearce-Gonzales argues that in *So Far from God* Castillo portrays Sofia's home as a "Kristevan countersociety" because Sofia has created a space free of patriarchy, giving women control over their own spiritual lives (6). Finally, the home is a space where the politics of the dominant society may be subverted. Johnson posits that in

So Far from God Castillo presents the home as a free domain, "redrawing a geography of empowerment independent of paradigms of statehood and nationalism" (40-1). At the same time, the home space wields political influence: as a place that fosters the development of a radical political consciousness, the home becomes the source of local activism that extends beyond its walls.

Scholars like Delgadillo and Lanza have established the fact that Castillo depicts the liberating possibilities of a mestiza spirituality, yet they have paid little attention to Castillo's depiction of American ideology as one of the primary obstacles to such liberating spirituality. This ideology constitutes such a monolithic obstacle because it is, as Castillo shows, a kind of spiritually formative system. In this chapter, I argue that Castillo depicts the notion of the American self as a powerfully alluring ideal that results in the marginalization of Chicanos/as who attempt to embody it. I contend that Castillo offers an alternative spiritual discipline as a means of living in America without feeling the constant pull of the need to assimilate. First, I examine the depiction of the American Dream in Castillo's fiction and how it influences her Chicano/a characters, in order to establish that she portrays American ideology as a spiritual discipline. Then in a brief middle section, I argue that Castillo advocates a Chicana, feminist version of what Miguel de la Torre calls an ethics *para joder.* I offer an overview of de la Torre's ethics and introduce key terms concepts that are reflected in Castillo's work. In the final section, I turn to Castillo's essays and fiction in order to outline her spiritual vision and the alternative form of ontotheological synthesis she presents. Castillo envisions an interdependence between the self, creation, and the transcendent/Creator. One's sense of self is intimately tied to the land (even as land is a mental construct as well as a physical

reality), and spirituality for Castillo is inherently political and social. For Castillo, one's spirituality is first and foremost contextual and thus hybrid and affirming of multiple subjectivities. The final section conveys this vision through three movements, each of which focuses on the protagonist(s) of one of Castillo's novels. I contend that these novels depict the spiritual development of what de la Torre calls *joderones* or "bandit saints." Taken cumulatively, Castillo creates an order of these bandit saints who reflect her vision of an authentic Chicana spirituality that is both individually fulfilling and communally minded.

The American Dream as American Nightmare

In Castillo's novel *The Guardians*, a sign which hangs on the wall in an immigrant advocacy agency reads "The search for the American Dream could be your worst nightmare" (115). This proves to be the case for many of the Chicana/o characters in Castillo's fiction, as those who pursue the American Dream almost unquestionably end up on a trajectory of failure and rejection. The characters in Castillo's works who do achieve some "success" or upward mobility typically serve to demonstrate its arbitrary and fickle nature.

Peel My Love Like an Onion

In *Peel My Love Like an Onion*, Carmen "la coja" (Carmen the cripple) attains unexpected stardom as a singer after years of disappointment in other pursuits. In spite of a lame leg resulting from a childhood contraction of Polio, Carmen aspires to dance flamenco professionally. Surmounting a battery of obstacles, Carmen becomes a dancer

of some renown, dancing professionally for over twenty years. Her career ends prematurely as she is forcibly sidelined by the return of her childhood Polio.

As hard as she works, Carmen barely manages to make ends meet during her dancing years. Though celebrated by a small core of devoted flamenco fans, Carmen never gains a large audience. Her "big break" finally comes by sheer luck. Physically unable to dance, an old friend and dancing partner asks her to serenade him while he dances. Carmen's singing enchants her friend and their audience, and he invites her out to L.A. to sing on a record he is producing. Carmen joins a musical group that achieves an impressive level of success for a flamenco group. The irony, as Jane Rose notes, is that all of Carmen's tears and hard work as a dancer garnered her little measurable success, while a lucky break has made her relatively well off (404). Carmen's plight, prior to her breakthrough, was no fault of her own, but she is no proof of the reality of the American Dream. Quite the contrary: Carmen the cripple reveals the lameness of the American Dream. As further farce, the music which makes her successful is commodified and tokenized. The record is crafted and marketed as "international music," meaning that various musical styles are combined into a mélange that has no authentic musical identity. While not exactly muzak, the record hardly exhibits the soul of flamenco that Carmen so zealously defended during her dancing years. A listener tells Carmen that her song airs on "[t]he new gospel program . . . right after the Howard Stern Show?" (192). A radio station that runs a gospel program after a shock-jockey clearly values ratings and sizeable listener base above all else, and a non-religious album that fits into a gospel hour is likely lacking in soul.

Even as Carmen comes to be appreciated for her music, she remains Other. Near the beginning of the novel, Carmen relates the nationality confusion that she experiences while walking the Chicago streets: "You say your city the way some Americans say this is their country. You never feel right saying that—*my country*. For some reason looking Mexican means you can't be American. And my cousins tell me, that over there they're definitely not Mexican. Because you were born on this side pocha is what you're called there" (*Peel* 3). By the end of the novel, in spite of her demonstration of pluck and determination, "her" country only claims her as an exotic, a singer of "international" music.

Sapogonia

Carmen becomes a story of American success without seeking to be one, but such success eludes Castillo's Chicano/a characters who actively pursue it. Castillo's novel *Sapogonia* follows the immigration of artist Máximo Madrigal from his war-torn homeland of Sapogonia to the United States. Máximo, determined to make a name for himself, feels his homeland too small to contain his expansive (and expanding) ego. He leaves for America believing it to be the land of opportunity in which he will have no trouble establishing himself. Roland Walter states, "Maximo internalizes the value system of the dominant culture – the frenzy for commodities, money, fame and individual recognition based on a highly competitive spirit – and thereby accentuates what Castillo called the 'spiritual split in his collective psyche'" (86). Máximo ultimately seeks to embody what Sacvan Bercovitch calls representative selfhood, a mutually reinforcing process in which an individual attempts to shape his or her own identity by embodying a third-person ideal (32). The novel confirms this through its technique of alternating

between first and third person accounts of Max's life. Socolovsky argues that this approach gives the impression of Max creating himself as hero in his own story: "in slipping between the first and third person, Max succeeds in being both the hero and thus the central origin and source within the legend, and the narrator of that legend; he is the author and originating storyteller of the myth" (80). This is precisely the logic of Bercovitch's American "representative self." In its specifically American context, it is tied to an ideological individualism, in which a group is unified by its collective acceptance of the ideal of the self-made, cavaliering individual. This "rugged individualism" becomes the hallmark of American identity, and America as a collective ideal is valued and defended as the place where the individual may thrive.

Máximo understands the American Dream as a means of conquest and domination, of self-assertion at the expense of others (Lynch 132). But Máximo's ruthless exploitation never results in the development of any stable identity. He gains financial success and modest fame, for a time, but at great psychological and spiritual cost. His attempt at self-integration through the American dream ends not in self-integration but in self-erasure. Miguel de la Torre describes the irony of this ensnaring process: "For Hispanics to live within the borders of the US is to consent to the principle of their own subjugation while hoping that the empire, manifested as the American dream of upward mobility, will radically provide salvation from their present estranged existence" (100). Yet those who buy into this dream only catalyze their own marginalization. First, Máximo's attempt to live the America Dream means renouncing (or attempting to renounce) his Sapogonian heritage (Lynch 131). Yet even as Max is forced to reject his own Sapogonian values in his bid for success, others continue to see

him as ethnic other, which actually contributes to some degree to his success. His art is commodified, marketed as ethnic and exotic. One of his art shows is part of a monthly program showcasing artists from around the world as "a strategic move as part of the board's endless effort to practice cultural diplomacy" (*Sapogonia* 142). (The board makes no distinction between Canadian, Bolivian, and Sapogonian art, so long as the artist hails from another country.) Máximo believes he can be a representative self, an American hero, and epitomize the American Dream (which he sees as self-assertion), but American society will never embrace *him* as representative on account of his ethnic identity. The American Dream purports to offer freedom and opportunity to all, including immigrants and ethnic individuals, and this is what makes it so appealing to many of them. But Castillo presents American ideology as spiritually formative in a way that is essentially marginalizing. Castillo suggests that the attempt to embody the American dream can only prove demoralizing for those like Máximo, as the pursuit precludes self-integration from the start by forcing them to disown their heritage while they continue to retain ethnic status in the eyes of others, often in the form of tokenism (Lynch 132).

Assimilation is impossible for Máximo not only because other Americans persist in viewing him as ethnic other, but also because Máximo can never fully relinquish his Sapogonian roots, however vigorously he may try. As Socolovsky argues, Max is caught in the cross-pressures of being an exile and a tourist (76-8); he can neither fully leave one land nor fully assimilate into the other. Máximo confirms the constancy of his cultural ties in his excessive infatuation with a musician named Pastora, another Sapogonian exile. Pastora evokes in Max a sense of homesickness (Socolovsky 81), but he cannot let go of his need to be the American hero, either. The character of Max's homesickness

likewise reveals his solipsism: the aspects of Sapogonian life that he misses are hunting, bareback horse riding, and being treated well by women, all of which are individualistic acts of domination or self-assertion, and none of which are unique to his homeland. Max views his homeland, like he views America, as a place to assert himself. Castillo portrays the allure of the American dream: Max continues to pursue it even as it bars him from creating the sense of home that is only possible for Chicanos/as like him through adopting a mestiza/borderlands consciousness. In the final dreamlike scene, rendered so that it is unclear whether it is real or Max's fantasy, Max murders Pastora, driven by a rage that results from his inability to integrate himself into his environment.

So Far from God

Max's tale reveals the violence that often attends the pursuit of the American Dream. Likewise, in her novel *So Far from God*, Castillo creates several Chicana characters who find the pursuit of the American dream to be literally deadly. The most overt example is Fe, (whose name translates as faith), the representative "assimilationist" (Gillman and Floyd-Thomas 163). Fe commits herself unflaggingly to shrugging off her ethnic heritage and embracing all the trappings of American suburban life. Belying her name, Fe exhibits a skepticism regarding anything miraculous, as we see from her attempts to rationalize her younger sister's resurrection from death (*SFFG* 29). She believes truly that anyone who dedicates herself can succeed in this country. Fe, who "was not nearly as white as she thought she was" (*SFFG* 157-8), takes her social cues from Oprah and is a consummate consumer, spending all her money on "the long-dreamed-of automatic dishwasher, microwave, Cuisinart, and the VCR" (*SFFG* 171). After years of working in a bank where she "maintained her image above all—from the

organized desk at work to weekly manicured fingernails and a neat coiffure" (*SFFG* 28), she gets a job at Acme International cleaning parts for government weapons. Fe believes this is "[v]ery important work," even though she is slowly being poisoned by the chemicals she uses (*SFFG* 181). Ultimately, Fe's job, which she takes because its higher pay will translate into more consumer goods, consumes her (Gillman and Floyd-Thomas 163).

Castillo's depiction of Fe's death reveals the spiritual cost of Fe's faith in the American dream. As many critics have noted, Fe is the only one of her sisters who dies spiritually and remains dead.[6] Lanza observes, "In Fe's chase for the American Dream, she only finds infertility, deception, and ultimately a death that unlike her sisters' deaths, offers no spiritual transformation or resurrection" ("Hearing the Voices" 72). The darker side of the American dream manifests itself in Fe most noticeably in a physical way, but, because the physical and spiritual are always connected for Castillo, this is a spiritual ailment as well. The novel's narrator tells us that "after Fe died, she did not resurrect as La Loca did . . . . She did not return ectoplasmically like her tenacious earth-bound sister Esperanza. . . . Fe just died" (186). Fe's death crystallizes Castillo's assertion that this pursuit of the American Dream is a form of spiritual discipline, one that ends in spiritual death.

Fe's mentality and fate parallels the real-life situation of many that Castillo witnessed in Watsonville, California, a town with a Latino majority. In Watsonville leading a writing workshop, Castillo interviewed local women after the labor strike there in 1986.

[6] See Sauer 82; Pearce-Gonzales 9; Cornier Michael 131; Delia Lanza "Hearing the Voices" 72.

> The concept of the American Dream— an illusion long fostered by the system to maintain its workforce— was an overwhelming factor that played with the hearts and minds of the Watsonville residents, the women informed me. People in Watsonville truly believed they could improve their material conditions through hard work. In fact, in comparison to the conditions they lived in México, the material lives of mexicanas had improved. Simultaneously, in order to achieve the goals of the American Dream, the Mexican tradition of an extended family, including community, was deemed a hindrance and relinquished within the time span of a single generation. In a nation that strongly motivated people toward competition, individual achievement, and above all, material acquisitions, collective aspirations were deemed anachronistic. That is, grandparents and otherwise unemployed relatives outside of the nuclear family would become a burden on the way to material goals. (*Massacre* 43-44)

Here we see a further instantiation of the representative self, which has resulted in Chicanas/os rejecting their own cultural traditions and even, in a sense, their own families. Yet even after giving up so much, the work conditions for the Latinos/as in Watsonville were deplorable enough to warrant labor strikes.

In *So Far from God*, the death of Fe's sister Esperanza further depicts the ideology of American exceptionalism as spiritually formative. While Esperanza does not suffer the same spiritual death as Fe, she places her faith in American exceptionalism in a way that results in her untimely and ultimately meaningless death. Spiritual vagrancy drives Esperanza to ship off to Saudi Arabia as a military journalist.

With her journalism Esperanza attempts to fill a spiritual void. She has been a spiritual seeker throughout her life, transitioning from a Marxist Catholic to a cynical atheist to "pray[ing] to Grandmother Earth and Grandfather Sky" and combining sweat lodges with self-help books (*SFFG* 38-9). Esperanza finds a courage and spiritual affirmation in attending Native-American Church sweat lodges that "no kind of white woman's self-help book" can give her (*SFFG* 47), but she also finds the lodges

patriarchal and sexist. Ruminating on her participation in the sweat lodge meetings, Esperanza feels a need "to bring it all together, to consolidate the spiritual with the practical side of things" (*SFFG* 37). But she founders: unable to bring herself to actively resist sexist practices, she fails to find a spiritual discipline which truly affirms her as a woman. She continues in a state of uncertainty, and, ultimately, "she abandons her own culture to go off and fight a war that is not her own. Her death is directly linked, symbolically, to her confusion about to whom and to what causes she is accountable" (Gillman and Floyd-Thomas 165). When her father begs assurance that she will not be placed in harm's way, Esperanza replies that facing "real danger" is "the whole point of being a journalist" (*SFFG* 48). Her words here reveal not only a social consciousness but also the need to brave danger on behalf of a cause. Having found no satisfactory spiritual mooring, Esperanza accepts America as Transcendent, buying into the idea that the US must intervene to forestall "the imminent global crisis" (*SFFG* 47).

Ironically, Esperanza dies "an American hero," according to the official letter sent to her mother by the U.S. Army, and she is awarded a medal posthumously (*SFFG* 159). Esperanza's spirit meanwhile appears to her sister to speak about "the president's misguided policies, about how the public was being fooled about a lot of things that were going on behind that whole war business, how people could get some results by taking such measures as refusing to pay taxes" (*SFFG* 163). Significantly, Esperanza's body cannot be located and returned for burial, according to military officials. Her mother Sofia visits the capital several times to no avail, questioning how the officials can know with certainty that Esperanza is dead yet cannot locate her body. Esperanza has effectively been disappeared, allowing the Army elite to make her a martyr of their own

fashioning. Through the character of Esperanza Castillo conveys that a Chicana cannot exist in the dominant social structure *as* a Chicana. Markus Heide argues that Esperanza connects her community to the larger world through her politics, inspiring her mother Sofia to political activism (175). But Heide misses the fact that the "America" that claims Esperanza as its sacrificial hero is not Sofia's America at all. There is a disconnect between Esperanza's political action and political activism needed by the Chicano community in her home town of Tomé.

A third sister, Caridad, is also victimized by a mythical force, *la malogra*, that represents American ideology. The *malogra* attacks and mutilates Caridad, treats her like property, and renders her silent: her "nipples had been bitten off. She had also been scourged with something, branded like a cattle. Worst of all, a tracheotomy was performed because she had also been stabbed in the throat" (*SFFG* 33). Critics have rightly interpreted *la malogra* as a symbol of conquest.[7] Castillo's description of *la malogra* suggests the American notion of Manifest Destiny:

> [A] thing, both tangible and amorphous. A thing that might be described as made of sharp metal and splintered wood, of limestone, gold, and brittle parchment. It held the weight of a continent and was indelible as ink, centuries old and yet as strong as a young wolf. It had no shape and was darker than the dark night, and mostly, as Caridad would never ever forget, it was pure force. (*SFFG* 77)

The drive to mastery of the land endures today as American exceptionalism, which Castillo shows throughout her work to be a marginalizing, even rapacious, ideology.

The grisly deaths of the three girls, whose names represent the great Christian virtues of faith, hope, and love, ultimately suggest that these virtues are untenable and

[7] Pérez argues that as a depiction of conquest it "plac[es] Caridad in the place of the raped earth and indigenous woman" (69), while Alarcón sees it a representative of "the Spanish conquest of the Americas and its aftermath" (146).

misplaced in the patriarchal, marginalizing society in which they live (Sirias and McGarry 87). For Chicanas, placing faith and hope in the American Dream is a deadly venture, one that may even destroy one's capacity for love. Castillo exhorts Chicanas to a new spiritual discipline in which such virtues may bear fruit and allow one a fulfilling sense of self. The deaths of Fe, Esperanza, and Caridad compel their mother Sofia to forge a new way of life. Pérez posits that the girls are martyrs whose deaths "will inspire the reevaluation of the 'backward culture' of Tomé. After all, if the American Dream can't save us, what can?" (65). Sofia, influenced by her daughters, especially the youngest, La Loca, constructs a new spiritual identity, one that is gynocentric and draws from "multiple forms and systems of knowledge" (Delgadillo 891-2). Through Sofia, Castillo asserts that true spirituality is hybrid and contextual and also inherently political and environmental, encompassing and dictating one's relation to one's community and to the land.

In *So Far from God*, Castillo redefines sainthood. In Sofia and first in her daughter La Loca, Castillo portrays "holy *joderones*" or "bandit saints." According to de la Torre, these *joderones* are concerned primarily with the good of the marginalized rather than the prevailing mainstream, and their role is "to challenge external oppression and uncover its internalized manifestation" (113). Before further examining the spiritual transformation of Sofia and other fictional examples of Castillo's spiritual vision, I must offer a brief overview of Miguel de la Torre's theology, as it helps illuminate and place Castillo's work. In his work, *Latina/o Social Ethics: Moving Beyond Eurocentric Moral Thinking*, de la Torre explains his own version of liberation theology.

As I mentioned above, a few critics have noted the relevance of liberation theology for Castillo's work, and Castillo herself has explicitly endorsed, with qualification, some aspects of liberation theology (*Massacre* 107-8). Discussing women's liberation theology (also called *mujerista* theology), Castillo affirms its value "insofar as it attempts to reflect woman's reality to enable her to overcome material obstacles and to participate in a communal process with other women, her family, and community toward economic betterment within the ascriptions of her faith" (*Massacre* 108). Liberation theology has been around since the 1960s, and the basic premise, most relevant here, is that "all theological and ethical 'truths' are contextual" (de la Torre 4), that theology is intimately tied to and shaped by one's social, political, and communal context. Yet Castillo also expresses skepticism about the potential of Christian liberation theology to address fully the Chicana's context. Castillo enumerates two primary reservations. First, she insists that Christianity has encouraged a body-spirit dualism which has degraded the body: "Philosophically, Christianity is based on the belief in a remote God (generally still accepted as a male: father), far removed from our mortal, material selves. He is an inimitable model since he is spirit and we are flesh; and yet Christianity is based on the struggle that requires man to imitate God" (*Massacre* 108). Castillo acknowledges the Christian belief that divine spirit and human flesh are united in Jesus Christ, but she maintains that Catholic tradition has rendered the life of Christ in a way that marginalizes women, by casting Christ's humanity in exclusively male terms and failing to account for women's experience. The expectation that enfleshed humans are to imitate an "inimitable model" results in inevitable failure, which leads to Castillo's second objection. Secondly,

she objects to the "dualistic principle and polarization of good and evil," contending that Christianity "depends on our desire to disobey: to rebel against the repression of the human spirit and the desire to create a balance out of the celebration of flesh and spirit—to experience a life of ecstasy" (*Massacre* 109).

De la Torre's work accounts for both of these objections. He insists that an authentic Latina/o theology will adopt the "cultural symbols" of the people, including female incarnations of the divine. He also agrees with Castillo that the rationalism of "Western moral thought . . . that clearly demarcates good from bad" offers no means to "incorporate the both/and ambiguity common in messiness of life" (106). De la Torre argues that a truly liberating theology will account for "the ambiguity of a Latina/o moral agency that recognizes the need at times to dispense with personal piety for the sake of the greater good of survival – survival of not just the individual Hispanic, but more importantly, *la comunidad*" (106).

De la Torre is relevant for analyzing Castillo's work not simply because of this basic liberationist premise but for the specific ethics he derives from it. While many liberation theologians come from South and Latin American contexts, de la Torre's work specifically focuses on the situation of the Chicana/o living in America with a borderlands consciousness. Castillo attempts not only to identify and diagnose the plight of Chicanas/os but to pave a way forward. De la Torre's work shares her ambition, insisting upon a theology that is rooted in personal experience and thus "collapses the dichotomy between theory and praxis" (70). The Latina/o focus of de la Torre's theological work and the corresponding, contextual terminology illuminates Castillo's

work by offering the grammar to articulate the ethical and theological convictions Castillo conveys through her fiction.

De la Torre identifies several attributes of a Latino/a (Chicana/o) ethics. First, a Chicano/a approach must begin with *lo cotidiano*, which essentially means "the everyday along with all of its particularities" (de la Torre 70). This concept "incorporates the hermeneutics of the self" (de la Torre 71): context and personal experience, rather than any Kantian transcendental, become the starting point for ethical analysis and action. Secondly, ethical analysis always begins *de nepantla*, from the borderlands (de la Torre 73). Because *nepantla* is a place of conflict and suspension, Chicanas/os live continually *en la lucha* or "in the struggle" (de la Torre 74). Disenfranchisement and the psychological experience of homelessness drive this struggle. Thus, according to de la Torre, "This daily *lucha* for survival causes any ethical Latina/o reflection to stress and emphasize identity – an identity shaped by a history of cultural, political, and economic conquest and subjugation. This self-definition is never individualistic, but a communal endeavor, a self-understanding of a people" (75). This struggle to establish identity, though rooted in the particular, is always undertaken *en conjunto*, together, in community (de la Torre 76). The struggle is not simply for individual flourishing but for the advancement of the entire community. These qualities coalesce in what de la Torre calls "an "ethics *para joder*" (92). The mildly vulgar Spanish verb *joder* "basically means 'to screw with'" (de la Torre 92). The paragon of such an ethics is the figure of the trickster, a figure present in many mythological and religious traditions, including Christianity. The trickster "screws" with dominant power structures in order to destabilize them, operating a realm beyond conventional morality: "Although the means used by the

trickster to achieve liberative ends may not be considered moral by the dominant culture, the trickster is ethical, operating in a realm that moves beyond good and evil – what society defines as being right or wrong" (de la Torre 114). Castillo does not intend for Chicanas to achieve self-definition by means of a spirituality that is wholly otherworldly and that thus tacitly sanctions the status quo. Castillo eschews any spirituality that reinforces the body-spirit dualism that she finds so objectionable in certain expressions of Catholicism. Castillo believes that any defensible spiritual discipline must issue in social activism. De la Torre defends his practice of *jodiendo* by affirming a *certain form* of hopelessness: the lack of belief in the capacity of the current system to deliver on its promises. As I have shown above, Castillo shares de la Torre's conviction of (qualified) hopelessness. But for both, this hopelessness generates not despondency but activism. De la Torre's work demonstrates how ethical reflection must guide spiritual mestizaje, a conviction which Castillo emphatically conveys through characters who meet with disaster. Castillo insists that hybridity is never an end in itself; it must always serve the ends of liberation and fulfillment.

Castillo's Holy Joderones

De la Torre's theoretical explanation of the trickster ethics helps us understand many of Castillo's characters and how to interpret their actions in terms of their social and spiritual significance. Clear reflections of de la Torre's method of ethical analysis emerge from examining the depictions of spirituality in Castillo's work. First, spiritual development always begins *en lo cotidiano*, in the particular. The American ideology I have been examining in this study, while it enthrones individualism, ultimately fosters consensus. This dual emphasis, on the individual and on the ideal collective, ends up

ignoring the local, communal, and particular. Castillo clearly suggests that the pursuit of the American Dream comes at great cost to local communities and to individuals, as we see in the characters of Fe and Esperanza mentioned above. As Cornier Michael states, Castillo echoes the feminist assertion that "agency is always 'coproduced,'" insisting that Chicana identity must be constructed in community, "retain[ing] a notion of the individual while moving past a narrow version of American individualism" (13). Castillo reifies through her fiction de la Torre's assertion that "[o]ur liberation will be discovered only when we begin to construct our own ethical and moral foundation rooted within our social location and using our cultural symbols" (63). The hybrid spirituality that Castillo advocates functions as a gateway to greater agency for the individual and the community, offering new forms of subjectivity and sources of knowledge. A condition of agency is the capacity to embrace plurality (multiple subjectivities) and "to accept such culturally and sociohistorically specific ambiguities and contradictions in positive, constructive terms" (Cornier Michael 115). Yet this foundation is never static; it is constantly reassessed and revised according to individual and communal experience and testimony. The remainder of this chapter focuses on individual texts to illustrate different ways that spiritual hybridity and the kind of ethical reflection de la Torre envisions create a uniquely Chicana order of bandit saints.

Jodiendo En Conjunto: *The Particular and the Communal in* So Far from God

Castillo's novel, *So Far from God*, follows the individual spiritual enlightenment of Sofia only to insist that authentic spiritual development is inherently communal. The ethical dimension of Sofia's spiritual journey reflects all the elements of de la Torre's theory, beginning with an emphasis on *lo cotidiano* (daily experience). In the novel's first

chapter, conflict erupts as the Catholic priest, Father Jerome, makes demands of the newly bereaved Sofia that convey greater concern for ritual and tradition than for human beings. During the funeral procession for her youngest daughter, Sofia's manic wailing prompts the priest to insinuate that her lack of funeral decorum implies a lack of faith. The priest refuses to acknowledge as legitimate Sofia's questioning of divine purpose in her daughter's death. Then when the deceased miraculously resurrects from her coffin, the priest subtly accuses her of demon possession (*SFFG* 22-23). When the resurrected girl, thereafter known as La Loca, tells the priest that *she* has come back to pray for *him*, we begin to see that "it is not the priest or the Catholic hierarchy who determine what faith is nor how it is practiced" (Delgadillo 894). Sofia begins to critically assess her spiritual beliefs based on her own mundane experience. Sofia remains a Catholic throughout the novel, but she gradually comes to reject patriarchy and hierarchy, looking to indigenous traditions for alternative spiritual resources.

The focus on *lo cotidiano* both inspires and governs exploration of spiritual resources alternative to the dominant or inherited religious tradition. Castillo's characters pursue what Theresa Delgadillo calls "spiritual mestizaje." Delgadillo defines this as, "The transformative renewal of one's relationship to the sacred through a radical and sustained multimodal and self-reflexive critique of oppression in all its manifestations and a creative and engaged participation in shaping life that honors the sacred" (*Mestizaje* 1). Castillo believes that for Chicanas this "transformative renewal" comes through reconsidering their indigenous heritage. However, Castillo cautions against using cultural symbols uncritically. *Lo cotidiano*, the personal and particular, must also guide one's appropriation of indigenous traditions as well as culturally dominant traditions. Castillo

presents various spiritual practices through different characters in her work, affirming that spirituality is subjective and that multiple valid expressions of spirituality exist. But the recognition of a subjective aspect of spirituality is not a mask for solipsism, and hybridity is not to be confused with capriciousness or the will to power. Subjectivity is grounded and shaped by one's personal experience – for Castillo, life as a female and a Chicana – and by life in community.

Castillo emphasizes the necessity of this communally-grounded hermeneutics by creating characters who embrace a hybrid spirituality that is corrosive rather than liberating. Daniel C. Alarcón recognizes this in the character Francisco, who "becomes a penitente, whose blend of folk Catholicism and pious, ascetic behavior provides him neither comfort nor salvation. Instead, he becomes a violent, guilt-ridden, obsessed stalker of Caridad" (151). After returning from the war, Francisco becomes an apprentice *santero*, a saint-maker, one who carves figures out of wood. He comes to view Caridad in the way one might view a wooden likeness of a saint: a fixed, ideal figure. Caridad becomes like a goddess to Franciso, so much so that he dehumanizes her. Francisco returns from Vietnam with PTSD, but he does not find the solace he seeks in the spiritual discipline he embraces. Instead, he becomes increasingly fanatical and obsessive, and he is ultimately responsible for Caridad's death. Francisco's life ends in suicide.[8]

In contrast, we see a clear example of what Castillo believes is an authentic Chicana spirituality in the character of Sofia. The legacy of her daughters – their fate at the hands of the American Dream and the excesses of patriarchy – leads her toward a

[8] Castillo does not suggest that the Penitente sect is essentially pernicious. (There are positive references to the group and their social activism in the novel.) Rather, it is the way Francisco practices the discipline. And, we must also consider the psychic wounds Francisco received from his combat experience, being forced to kill or be killed, and the racism of his platoon in Vietnam.

spirituality that is both woman-centered and which incorporates her ethnic heritage. Sofia's spiritual development is holistic, encompassing all aspects of her life, and it is only possible *en conjunto*, in community. She becomes the unofficial mayor of her community, explicitly citing her faith as her motivation (*SFFG* 138). At her mayoral initiative, the community embarks on a course of community revitalization and improvement. Sofia and her "vecinos" start a community cooperative, raising sheep and selling wool (*SFFG* 146). She also finally acquires the mettle to remove herself from a self-destructive marital arrangement, finally divorcing her feckless gambler husband and banishing him from her house (*SFFG* 218-19). The clearest example of Castillo's hybrid spirituality is the Way of the Cross Procession that takes place on Holy Friday at the end of the novel. Instead of hymns, there are protest songs; instead of bearing crosses, participants carry "photographs of their loved ones who died due to toxic exposure hung around the necks like scapulars" (*SFFG* 242); at each station they pray about all of the forces that are decimating their land and killing its people. As they recite their story of Jesus' *via dolorosa*, the afflictions of Christ are the sins of corporations and the government against the land and the people. Sofia takes the stand to speak about the American military's meaningless war (the Persian Gulf War) and their cover-up of the death of her daughter Esperanza. Indigenous Indian influence is also present, as they frame environmentalist values in terms of "the responsibility we have to 'Our Mother'" (*SFFG* 242). This unique version of the traditional ritual reflects the implementation of the elements of de la Torre's system of ethical analysis. The character of the procession reflects the rooting of spirituality in the particular (*lo cotidiano*). The protest components demonstrate that spirituality is inextricably connected to one's environment and,

furthermore, that spiritual traditions are to be interpreted communally (*en conjunto*). Finally, the protest and laments all reflect life *en la lucha*, in the struggle. This community fights for its very existence. All the elements of the procession are subversive. In suggesting that spirituality must be interpreted communally, Castillo subverts the notion of hierarchy and clerical authority that traditionally characterize the Catholic Church. Women assume most of the leading roles in the procession – giving the speeches (liturgy) and singing songs. As Delgadillo observes, Father Jerome, the Catholic priest with whom Sofia and La Loca have been in conflict, is conspicuously absent from the proceedings (894). Throughout her work, Castillo develops her vision of Chicana feminist spirituality. She offers "holy [female] *joderones*" like La Loca and Sofia, whose spirituality, tied to the land and to their community, compels them to challenge authority.

Visionary Archaeology: Going Native in The Mixquiahuala Letters *and* Sapogonia

Castillo exhorts Chicanas to embrace hybridity and reconsider their Mexic Amerindian roots, but she cautions against doing so uncritically. Castillo warns,

> an attempt at obtaining such direction from our past simply by imitating or inventing ritual is not necessarily the clearest path or, rather, does not guarantee an evolved spirituality. Many women have found just as many disturbing contradictions in ancient practices with regard to their womanhood. Therefore, a synthesis of old forms with goals that aim to restore the feminine as a prominent component is required. Above all, our applications must correspond to our contemporary needs and concerns. (*Massacre* 168)

The concept of *lo cotidiano* plays a central role in spiritual formation for Castillo. She depicts the pitfalls of the attempt to recapture the past without critical consideration in her first novel, *The Mixquiahuala Letters*. In the novel, a Chicana character, Teresa, makes a pilgrimage to Mexico, intent upon recapturing her ethnic roots. Teresa has been unable to

find a spiritual or cultural home in the U.S. But just as she feels herself to be "othered" as Mexican when in the U.S., in Mexico Teresa also experiences feelings of homelessness as some Mexicans view her as a "*gringa*." Teresa herself bears part of the responsibility for this experience, as she idealizes and tokenizes the indigenous population in Mexico. As Szeghi claims, "It is her location of indigenous Mexicanidad in a nostalgic past . . . that impedes Teresa's desired recovery and impairs her ability to represent indigenous peoples in a more nuanced manner" (433). Teresa idealizes the ancient Indian culture and measures the contemporary Mexico she encounters against her ideal. This not only disappoints her own expectations and alienates her, but also perpetuates "a historically located indigeneity that has been used by Mexico and the United States to justify and sustain indigenous dispossession" (Heide 448). Teresa's sense of selfhood is fractured and her inability to critically engage totalizing structures leaves her depressed: "As a fundamental proponent of truth, the Church fails. As a mythical homeland with the potential for reestablishment, the pre-Columbian culture of Mexico fails as well. And pervasive in the modern cultures of both the U.S. and Mexico is the deceptive system of the strangulating patriarchy, ostensibly promoting yet actually oppressing individualism" (Long Bennett 468). Teresa fails to engage in the "interpretive ethnography" that Alvina Quintana argues is necessary for developing Chicana identity: the process of "mediating and negotiating between two cultural systems, constructing a cultural and feminist identity as she works to deconstruct the predominantly male cultural paradigms that have worked to suppress a female perspective" (74-5).

What Castillo finds most liberating in the Chicana's indigenous heritage is the "feminine connection" (*Massacre* 10). She looks to recover the elements of

Mother/goddess worship. In the afterword to *Massacre of the Dreamers*, Castillo discusses how seeing the Virgen de Guadalupe as divine as well as human is crucial for recognizing the true humanity and strength of Chicanas.

> If we do not view the female figure as divine, we surely do not see the worthiness of the female human. Imago Dei was the Latin term for men being made in the image of God. Where was I, a member of half of the human race whose monthly menses announced how the human race continued? . . . I searched for woman to speak to me through the surviving teachings of my indigenous ancestors. From Maya to Mexíca, there is no shortage of female divine figures.
>
> A goddess is not a token title. To be a goddess implies that the deity has a realm of power. (*Massacre* 241)

Castillo finds in goddess worship a way to recuperate the qualities of the "feminine principle." The feminine principle, which Castillo emphasizes is present in all genders, is characterized by "noncategorical compassion and acceptance of all" (*Massacre* 94). This reclamation of the feminine, made possible in part by looking to indigenous traditions, not only counters the fear, powerlessness, and rejection many women have experienced at the hands of patriarchal religion, but also leads to redefining in an affirmative way traditionally female roles and practices.[9] However, Castillo conveys that even goddess worship can be a source of denigration when it is not reflected upon. In *Sapagonia*, Máximo offers us a negative example – his use of indigenous myth, seeing Pastora as an avatar of the Aztec goddess Coatlicue, robs Pastora of her humanness and results in violence rather than acceptance and compassion (Lynch 134). For Max, to view Pastora as goddess is simply to equate her with an ideal, having nothing to do with the acknowledgment of female strength and dignity and everything to do with the luster of an object of conquest. This is evident in the way Max's view of Pastora changes after she

[9] These include uniquely female roles like childbirth and motherhood, as well as roles and practices like cooking, nursing, and keeping house that have often been gendered as feminine but that may be fulfilled by one of any sex.

bears a child: for him, "Pastora ceased to be the exalted celestial being. Pastora now labored and toiled like every woman. . . . Máximo was enraged. Had he wanted her wings weighed down; it would've been with him, riding on her spirit, energy, and compassion—because now he knew she was capable of self-sacrifice. He would've used her for his own purposes, wrung her" (302). For Pastora, childbirth links her the deity Earth mother, allows for a reclamation of motherhood as role of power and authority. For Máximo, an idol has been shattered. It is no coincidence that Máximo has also dedicated himself fanatically to the pursuit of the American Dream, trading on his own Sapogonian heritage in a way that he and his art are commodified.

At the end of *Sapogonia*, the narrator's indictment of Máximo for his objectification of Pastora (and all women) shifts to a direct address that includes the (male) reader. We read, "She was an invention to make your world tolerable" (254). Pastora stands in for all of the images and roles in which women have been trapped and essentialized. Yet, reflecting the situation of all women, Pastora's character is multivalent: we see her as she sees herself, we see her as a woman with agency, and we see her through the objectifying gaze of the men and women in her life. She is the goddess of men's imaginations; she is a "witch"; and she is a *femme fatale*. Yet she is also mother, wife, lover, musician, social activist, prisoner, and parolee. In the way she handles all of these roles, she remains perhaps Castillo's purest example of a "Xicanista," as the notion is outlined in *Massacre of the Dreamers.*

Castillo asserts that Xicanistas (her neologism for Chicana feminists) "must simultaneously be archaeologists and visionaries of our culture" (*Massacre* 226). Archaeology – drawing from traditional sources – must be informed by an acute

awareness of one's present context (*lo cotidiano*) and a vision for the future. In *Sapogonia*, Pastora Aké Velásquez embodies this form of archaeology, which instils in her the "noncategorical compassion and acceptance of all" that is characteristic of the feminine principle as understood by Castillo (*Massacre* 94). Pastora's spiritual practices heighten her awareness of the ensnaring nature of the American Dream and the spiritually damning results of pursuing it.

Pastora is a musical artist whose songs are driven by her social conscience. She is also a great beauty, and her looks and musical ability sometimes find a greater audience than her social message. Some men like Máximo never even consider her lyrics, being too enamored of her aura (*Sapogonia* 139). With Pastora's success come opportunity and danger. A moral stalwart throughout most of the story, Pastora allows herself to be seduced by a businessman who "had the looks of the all-American hero, the contemporary Hollywood movie star, Aryan, well built" and who "regarded her with sentimentality flourished in romance, his first true love" (*Sapogonia* 189). It is Pastora's religious practice and spiritual awakening that reinvigorates her social and moral commitments.

Pastora demonstrates the moral resources and female empowerment that Castillo links to goddess worship. Pastora practices a hybrid spiritual ritual that combines elements of Catholicism and Indian religion: "She began her requests for guidance by addressing Santa Clara, who was not represented by any image before her. Then she prayed to her spirit guides, whom she had not paid heed to undeservedly for too long. Pastora had forsaken those guides who watched out for her welfare for the sake of tentative things" (*Sapogonia* 185). Santa Clara (St. Clare of Assisi) founded a Franciscan

order for women and was the first woman to write a monastic rule. In the Franciscan tradition, Clara was known for exhorting joy in poverty. Presumably, Pastora addresses Santa Clara as one who embodies both female empowerment and the rejection of "tentative things" for those more durable. Welfare, Pastora knows when she is spiritually attuned, is neither an individual state nor a primarily financial one. It is only through this prayer and meditation that she comes to reflect on how she has become focused unduly on herself and been sucked into "dominant society" with its empty materialism and lack of regard for the welfare of others:

> Dominant society was closing again. The youth was interested in individual achievement, financial success. No one wanted to hear about their neighbor's starvation, rape and pillage in American cities. No one joined hands and together raised them up like chains of fists.
>
> And she was no different, susceptible to the same illusive temptations invented by those few who had power. She allowed herself to be persuaded by the finer things in life. . . . In actuality, however, this new lifestyle held less stability than when she struggled to pay the rent. (*Sapogonia* 186)

Pastora's spiritual reflection grants her insight into the shallow nature of the American Dream. Unlike Máximo, Pastora perceives the importance of spiritual formation for a sense of wholeness. Max's vitriolic reaction to Pastora's "pantheon" is revealing: "Don't you understand? All of that is what holds one back. Worshipping idols! It doesn't matter the name you put on it, what religion it is, it's nothing but a method employed to make common people understand their place" (*Sapogonia* 180). Max's self-absorption manifests itself in his attitude toward religion. His solipsism proves that he knows little of Marx and that he cares nothing about the common people other than himself. Max sees religion as a flaw: "For a woman as sophisticated as you, it is very disappointing to see your flaw is the weakness of common people" (*Sapogonia* 180). Max fails to consider

any possible connection between spiritual disciplines and selfhood, which is further evident in the way he loops all religions into one category. Pastora's defense of her religious practice reveals her conviction that such a connection exists and is vital to a fulfilling sense of self:

> No one is a common person. . . . All persons are complex. What I have been doing over the years is separating parts of myself, the so-called energies that my soul has carried into this life, and given them names, manifested them into clay figurines, not unlike the Mayas or the Greeks. Yes, this is my pantheon, and when I need courage, I call upon the figure that symbolizes courage, and when I need strength or patience, I do likewise. (*Sapogonia* 180)

Pastora's words validate her indigenous religious heritage and attest to the conviction that spirituality is an important part of wholeness. Yet when Max sees Pastora's "pantheon" and hears of her religious practices, he responds sardonically, "Why don't you just kneel before a mirror and pray to yourself?" demonstrating both his rejection of their shared indigenous religious heritage and his ignorance of it. Max ironically accuses Pastora of idol worship: he is the one guilty of idolatry in the shallow way he views women as goddesses. Max's accusation here further demonstrates the same shallow view of both women and goddess worship that he shows in his reaction to Pastora's new motherhood, quoted above. As Pastora mocks his ignorance about spirituality and religion, Max backpedals: "I was raised Catholic but I've talked at length with the Indians of my country about the beliefs they've preserved despite the imposition of the national religion. . . . My grandmother is Mayan" (*Sapogonia* 180). But Max clearly has ignored all that grandmother tried to teach him.

Pastora derides Max for his facile Marxist rhetoric, calling him the "Pinochet of the art world," to which Max responds: "No me compares con ese cabrón . . . . He's a

despot. Whom do I have to dictate" (*Sapogonia* 180). But Pastora's indictment is well founded, for Max is something of a despot, having repeatedly demonstrated a willingness to exploit anyone for the sake of self-aggrandizement and "success." The biting irony is that Max's own homeland is being terrorized by a dictator, and his own family murdered, while Max trades on his ethnic heritage in a crazed pursuit of what he perceives to be the American Dream. Max treats everyone, even his wives and paramours, as objects for self-advancement. He marries Laura and later Maritza for their influence in the art world and ability "to make sure it was *my* work that remained on top of the stack and was selected in the end" (*Sapogonia* 317). Max's ruthlessness is epitomized in this passage: "It never hurt to be courteous to people who in the future could then be called on by you for a small favor, a recommendation, a piece of advice, or a contact, because no matter what vehicle one needed to meet his objective, there was always someone there to serve as a stepping stone" (*Sapogonia* 333). Max's attitude is even reflected paratextually, as his wife Laura is reduced to a pronoun for entire chapters.[10]

In contrast to Max's view, Pastora's relation to her pantheon and her saints is one that bridges humanity and divinity in a way that allows women to reclaim traditional female roles and activities as roles of power and agency:

> She was the personification of the deity Earth Mother, tied to the land by vastness, umbilical cords, penises. She had given birth to a man. From her body had come forth a being with testicles and brain, with heart and hands. Yes, that might still qualify her as a goddess, but not the objective one of before, not of the heart of granite detached from mundane mortality. For she had given birth to a male child and from then on she could no longer see into the eyes of a man and look upon a stranger (*Sapogonia* 301)

[10] See, for example, chapter 30 (183-4).

Here we see that Pastora's spiritual discipline has shaped her view of childbirth and her relation with other people. The process of childbirth links Pastora with the goddess Earth Mother, but such a connection reinforces rather than severs her ties to the earth and to her fellow human beings.

Early on in *Sapogonia,* a brief chapter is dedicated to a narratorial digression, wholly italicized and the only one of its kind, on the soul. This brief discourse sets up a dichotomy which frames the entire novel as well as the ongoing relationship between Pastora and Máximo. According to this chapter, advanced souls "could be observed by the purity with which they regarded their lives as they interacted with others. It was not a matter of humility or a sense of servility that marked the pure spirit. It was the inborn awareness of equality with other living things on earth" (*Sapogonia* 15). In contrast there are *intellectually* advanced souls who "could have led twisted, dark lives" (*Sapogonia* 15). Of the two Sapogonians, only Pastora proves herself a pure spirit.

For Pastora, *jodiendo* means resisting both patriarchy and cruel immigration policies. Pastora's spiritual discipline not only engenders in her a social and moral awareness but also galvanizes her to action. It is Pastora's interaction with others and the way she treats them that makes her an "advanced soul." Immediately following the scene in which we encounter Pastora in prayer and reflection, we find her at a late-night gathering of volunteers for an underground railroad for illegal Sapogonian immigrants who are fleeing their war-torn country. Compelled to back up with concrete actions the social message of her songs, Pastora makes clandestine overnight trips out of Chicago to various parts of the Midwest in order to ferry recently arrived, illegal immigrants from Sapogonia to Chicago. This activity will eventually earn Pastora over a year in prison.

Bandit Hagiography: Saintmaking in The Guardians

Gail Pérez, in her analysis of *So Far From God*, has characterized Castillo as a *santera*, an artisan who creates images, carvings, or figures of saints. Pérez cogently argues that, "[l]ike a loving *santera*, Castillo resemanticizes the existing logic of martyrs and saints, not as ways to dignify female powerlessness through Christian suffering, but to reveal the goddesses beneath such images who are capable of exerting agency" (67). I turn now to Castillo's novel *The Guardians* in order to extend Pérez's argument and further consider the kind of agency Castillo's saints exert. Drawing upon de la Torre's work, outlined above, I argue that Castillo's saints (or guardians) are *joderones*, "bandit saints."

In *The Guardians*, Castillo again assumes the role of *santera*, appropriating Catholic tradition and fashioning her own Chicana/o saints. Each chapter of the novel is narrated in first-person by one of four speakers: Regina, Gabo, Miguel, and El Abuelo Milton. Excepting Milton, whose near-blindness links him to John Milton, the narrators and several other characters are named for saints and angels. Gabo (Gabriel) and Miguel (Michael), along with minor characters Uriel and Rafa (Rafael), are four of the traditional archangels. Regina, whose middle name is Ana, is linked with both Saint Regina, the queen of heaven, and Saint Anne, the "patroness of late-in-life mothers" (152). Of the narrators, Gabo is the only orthodox Catholic; Castillo's emphasis is on the saintly activity of living human beings. The novel expands the practice of hyperdulia (veneration of saints) to include the living and unrecognized as well as the officially acknowledged Catholic saints.

Castillo's depiction of saintly characters in *The Guardians* expands the scope of spiritual *mestizaje* in her work. Sainthood in this novel is characterized by compassion for others and care of the earth, and the saints are formed from varying religious backgrounds, including orthodox Catholicism. While *Sapogonia* reincorporates aspects of indigenous Indian religion, Miguel alone of the cast of *The Guardians* observes any Indian religious rituals. While Miguel is part of a sweat lodge and prays to the Great Spirit, Gabo and Regina both follow, to different degrees, the Catholic tradition. Yet like Sofía in *So Far From God*, their Catholic spirituality takes a nonhierarchical, earth-centered form.

Regina's symbolic associations notwithstanding, she is not a flat, symbolic stand-in. In Regina, Castillo plays on the common idiom, "she's no saint." Regina, like most of Castillo's leading ladies, exhibits her own contradictions and problems. Regina dedicates herself to environmentalism, organic gardening, and social activism on behalf of illegal immigrants, yet she persists in the crudest kind of American dreaming: "I've never been very good at get-rich-quick schemes anyway. But it don't stop me from trying" (*Guardians* 7). She has tried her hand peddling products like Avon and Mary Kay and even hosted Tupperware parties (*Guardians* 51). Yet Regina's perspective and realistic awareness separates her from characters like Máximo and Fe: Regina tempers her dreams of grandeur with the recognition that one cannot allow the quest for financial gain to consume or blight one's soul. She tells Gabo, "what we'd never do with our dollars . . . because we got our priorities straight, I tell him, is nothing that would be harmful to our bodies or our souls" (*Guardians* 8). Notably, the novel equates Regina's doomed "small business ventures" with her involvement in American politics. Regina routinely pens

complaint letters to the American President and goes to the polls to "vote like everyone else" (*Guardians* 7). She knows her letters likely go unread and certainly make no difference, but, like hosting Tupperware parties, they make her feel American "like everyone else." Castillo suggests that all of these pursuits are equally hopeless, especially for a marginalized woman like Regina. The novel's events only strengthen Regina's inchoate sense that efficacious actions issue not from elected officials but from saints and guardians like her and her nephew Gabo.

Regina, like La Loca and Sofía in *So Far From God*, is Castillo's own version of a saint. Regina both exhibits many of the female virtues and qualities esteemed by traditional Catholic Latino/a culture and serves as the focal point for interrogating them. Though once married and widowed shortly thereafter, Regina remains a virgin. Her late husband, Junior, was a childhood friend whom she married the day before he was deployed to Vietnam, where he died in combat. Her husband's military service garnered Regina American citizenship and a small pension. Here Castillo takes aim at the process of granting citizenship, which is often marked by bureaucracy and arbitrariness. Regina is granted citizenship because she was married for one day to a teenager who went on to serve briefly in the military. Meanwhile, Regina has lost many family members, mostly migrant workers who labor in the United States, to the hardships and dangers of having to cross the U.S.-Mexico border illegally. Regina, by sheer chance, has become a legally recognized American, which is "all every immigrant in the world wants, to get her papers in order. To officially become a person" (*Guardians* 116).

Through Regina's character, Castillo playfully mocks the cultural expectations regarding female virginity, including the expectation that women continue to *appear*

chaste (i.e., hide their sexuality) even after marriage. While the norms of Regina's culture would insist upon female virginity until marriage, when Regina insists upon her own virginity after her marriage, no one, not even her priest, believes her. Such incredulity suggests a skewed view of sexual appetites and the rules and taboos surrounding them. More central to the story, Regina's virginity is one of several Marian identifiers. Details throughout the text link Regina to Our Lady of Guadalupe (also referred to as La Lupe or La Virgen de Guadalupe). Regina's nephew Gabo, who believes his aunt is "blessed," refers to the "small plaque of la Virgen de Guadalupe" hanging over her bed (*Guardians* 21). Guadalupe is a Mestizo incarnation of the Blessed Virgin Mary who figures centrally in Mexican and Mexican-American Catholicism. She is almost always referred to by a geographically defining title in order to preserve her indigenous identity. The "Mexican Madonna," as Castillo refers to her, is especially important for Chicanas because she appeared dark-skinned and speaking the native language (*Massacre* 243). Castillo explains her significance as an embodiment of "the feminine principle":

> The feminine principle to which I refer would be concerned with preservation, protection— especially of the young and less fortunate— and affiliations of communities for the common good. This feminine principle, which lies within both man and woman, is exemplified for Chicanos especially in the model of la Virgen de Guadalupe. Since the Conquest Mexicans have also worshipped Jesus Christ, the incarnated God and revolutionary, while the Omnipotent Father, whom we fear, reminds us to stand guard against men and sin. By calling forth la Virgen de Guadalupe— the feminine principle within ourselves— we have hope. It comes from her noncategorical compassion and acceptance of all her children versus the fear of inadequacy people may feel in "the eyes of God." As we, who have been rendered powerless by the church, state, and men's movements except to serve their cause, receive ánimo from her, we are able to give to ourselves, those around us, and to the world. (*Massacre* 94)

Regina embodies the vigilance and ministrations traditionally ascribed to Guadalupe, and her guardianship, extending well beyond the care of her nephew Gabo, is one of the references of the novel's title. *The Guardians* reaffirms Gail Pérez's argument about *So Far From God*, that Castillo revises sainthood so as "not . . . to dignify female powerlessness through Christian suffering, but to reveal the goddesses beneath such images who are capable of exerting agency" (67). Castillo's saints are activist saints, *joderones* or "bandit saints" who disrupt social order on behalf of the marginalized.

Miguel De la Torre writes that *joderones* are people's saints, as distinguished from the church's saints. These *joderones* "are individuals who emerge from struggling communities and whose intercession is sought by the people, even though the official church does not recognize them" (117). Castillo transfers the responsibility of guardianship to living saints. Without dissolving the role of the divine and the importance of traditional hyperdulia, Castillo eschews expressions of religious faith that disenfranchise women and that tend toward quietism or passivity. Castillo conveys this attitude through the contrast between Regina's view of saints and her mother's view. Regina recounts her mother's habit of importuning Saint Anthony of Padua every time she misplaced something:

> No sooner was something missing, she'd cross herself and say a prayer to el santito. San Antonio, saint of the poor, kept busy by people like my mother—who was even capable of asking him to help her find a parking space—was a great man in his life. He made Milagros happen even while he was still alive, appearing in two places at the same time in order to heal a very sick person.
>
> I believe in the saints as people. I can't speak for them once they've passed. (171)

The key difference in the way that Regina's mother approaches the saints and the way that Regina, and especially Gabo, approaches them is that her mother's prayers (if

"answered") yield strictly material results. For Regina, and especially for Gabo, the saints' lives shape their values and guide their spiritual formation – the way they see the world and how they should act in it. Everything Regina tells us about her mother suggests a woman resigned to demanding very little out of life, a woman who, for example, taught her daughter not to "expect too much from life" by throwing away all of the letters Regina had received from her late husband (*Guardians* 207). In contrast, Gabo prays to the saints to give him strength and guidance so that he may act upon and influence the world around him. The chapters narrated by Gabo are actually private addresses to "Su Reverencia, el Santo Franciscano, Padre Pío," asking for strength to remain holy and care for the souls of those around him and for guidance as he searches for his father. Gabo's father, Regina's brother, is missing, presumably at the hands of the *coyotes* who traffic people across the border.

The contrast between Regina and *los curos* (priests or clerics) further clarifies Castillo's saintly criteria. In a moment of frustration with her parish priest, Regina recounts her experience of clerics as being "hard to decipher": "When he wore his collar . . . a priest would look like trustworthiness incarnated. You could surrender yourself entirely to him . . . . He would understand you. He would help you. . . . But not Father Juan Bosco and not the ones I knew growing up. They were men. Just men. And a couple of them had been good and a few had been bad. El cura was not always a good man but not always a bad one, neither" (99). Regina's statement indicates a clear conception of the priestly office, which, significantly, has yet to be fully satisfied by any actual cleric she has known. She should not have to struggle as she does to "decipher" the character of her priest. In contrast, Padre Juan Bosco and Gabo, Regina's nephew, have no trouble

"deciphering" Regina. Regina is a nominal Catholic: she attends Mass irregularly, but refers to Padre Juan Bosco as her confessor of over twenty years and relates her experience with clergy throughout her life (98-99). She also refers to herself as a skeptic, saying that she is "doomed to doubt everything" (147). And yet, the Padre and Gabo know undoubtedly that Regina, while a self-described skeptic, is, in fact, a saint. Gabo and the Padre cite her compassion and her unwillingness to abandon or neglect anyone as demonstration of her saintliness (*Guardians* 171-73). In a scene that is comic yet also symbolically meaningful, Gabo publicly serenades Regina on her birthday, singing a rendition of "Salve, Regina" so moving that it silences the entire rowdy crowd at the local rodeo. "Salve, Regina," meaning "Hail, Holy Queen," is one of the most well known Marian hymns of the Catholic Church. The hymn addresses the Holy Queen as merciful advocate for the exiled and forgotten. While Regina considers herself a skeptic, her care for the forgotten makes her a saint. And it is this care that makes her a "holy *joderone*," willing to provoke and test the powers that be.

Regina's association with La Virgen de Guadalupe reinforces her "bandit sainthood." De la Torre argues that while Guadalupe is not a traditional trickster figure, "she still disrupts and turns the traditional church hierarchy on its head" (113). According to tradition, Guadalupe appeared in 1531 to an impoverished Indian peasant named Juan Diego, and she spoke to him in his native Aztec tongue, Nahuatl. Guadalupe appeared not to a cleric or to a person of power or wealth, but to the oppressed, and she came speaking the language of the pagans; thus, "Salvation, rather than coming from the official colonized church to the presumed infidels, came from these so-called nonbelievers to the church" (de la Torre 113).

One such method of Regina's subversion is her defiance of patriarchal religious figures. While Regina's nephew Gabo revers the parish priest, Regina, like Sofía in *So Far From God*, upbraids the cleric for his shortcomings both religious and personal. Unintimidated by the clerical collar, Regina excoriates Padre Juan Bosco for dallying with a woman in his parish and especially for disappointing his nephew Gabo. She makes a scene outside of the Padre's house, and she recites his shortcomings directly to him when he comes to her own home. However, unlike the priest in *So Far From God*, Padre Juan Bosco proves himself penitent and humble, and he proves himself to be a dedicated social activist: he badgers growers and foremen to ensure that migrant workers are being treated well and receiving proper medical care (196), and he risks jail time and even his life on behalf of Regina and Gabo and their family.

Gabo offers another picture of sainthood. Gabo's chapters all consist of written prayers to "*el Santo Franciscano, Padre Pío*." Padre Pio (Pio of Pietrelcina) was an Italian priest of the Order of Friars Minor Capuchin. Several details of Gabo's life mirror Padre Pio's, especially his experience of the stigmata, his meager diet, and his mystical visions. Gabo also shows the great concern for nature and the environment traditionally associated with Saint Francis, the priestly tradition to which Padre Pio also belonged (the Capuchins are an offshoot of the Franciscans). Regina recounts what seems to her to be a miraculous episode in which Gabo restores life to a dead hawk. Gabo picks up the dead hawk from the road, telling Regina he plans to bury it, but Regina later sees the hawk sitting on her fencepost (*Guardians* 9-10). Gabo even chastises his aunt for wanting to kill moths and scorpions that have invaded her home, accusing her of cruelty to insects (*Guardians* 105-6).

Castillo devotes detailed attention to the way that Gabo's Catholicism shapes his life. We glimpse how Gabo's spiritual disciplines of prayer, fasting, and receiving the Eucharist, all orthodox Catholic practices, inform his social and political consciousness. Gabo has been an acolyte of Padre Juan Bosco, until the priest enters a wayward period in which he abandons his parish. During the priest's absence, Gabo enters the sacristy to pray and experiences a deep longing for the Host, having not partaken for several weeks. Committing what he knows to be an offense, he places a wafer on his own tongue, then dons "the humble robes of a Franciscan brother" that he finds in a closet (*Guardians* 164). So adorned, he experiences an apocalyptic vision in which the vials of wrath poured out upon the earth by the seven angels in Revelation are identified with current political and environmental happenings. The following day, discalced and wearing the Franciscan robes, Gabo stands upon a lunchroom table at his school and pronounces his vision to a room full of jeering peers.

Several notable aspects of this scene convey Castillo's picture of sainthood. First, while Gabo is an orthodox Catholic, his spiritual vision comes to him directly, without the mediation of a cleric. It occurs just after Gabo has administered the sacrament of the Eucharist to himself, suggesting that the official cleric has become dispensable. While the priest will later return to his flock as a humbled and truly compassionate leader, Gabo here recognizes the philandering priest as a "false apostle." Secondly, Gabo's spiritual vision engenders an environmental awareness and concern. He proclaims to his fellow students that the vials poured upon the earth translate to environmental contamination and global warming and to widespread war, disease and famine. Third, Gabo's spiritual disciplines contribute to his political awareness. He announces, "No darker hour could we

be living in than this one, when a great nation sets upon declaring wars in the name of peace," and interprets the unclean spirits that issue from the mouth of the beast in Revelation to be the lies told by the president during his latest speech "to placate the public" (*Guardians* 165). Finally, looking directly at a table of female gang members, he says, "*And I saw the dead . . . and the dead were judged, every person according to their works*," before his palms begin to bleed and he passes out (*Guardians* 165-66, italics original). This pronouncement, harsh as it sounds, is rooted in compassion. Gabo is directly addressing one girl in particular, over whose soul he anguishes, with "arms . . . still outstretched, waiting for her to be embraced by the light of El Espíritu Santo" (*Guardians* 166). The girl, who goes by Tiny Tears, is a gang member whose help Gabo has enlisted on account of gangland connections she might use to gain information about his missing father. Gabo has learned of the sexual abuse she has endured and the murder she been enjoined to commit by her gang leaders, and he wants to save her from that life. This happens, in a way, but not before Tiny Tears becomes the instrument of Gabo's death, as he attempts a perilous mission to save her as well as his own father from human traffickers.

Gabo and Regina both, with help from Miguel and Milton, take it upon themselves to locate their missing family member Rafa, Regina's brother and Gabo's father. With local authorities both incapable and unwilling to help locate Rafa, Regina and Miguel begin to track the activities of the cartel they believe to be likely responsible for Rafa's disappearance. Regina finds herself, a middle-aged teacher's assistant, sitting watch on stake-outs of a suspect's house, a venture which could easily result in her disappearing like her brother. Eventually, Miguel's ex-wife goes missing as well. Gabo,

along with Miguel and Padre Juan Bosco, finally decide to take matters into their own hands and break into the house where they suspect Rafa and Crucita are being held. They do not find Rafa (the police find him several days later in another house owned by the same cartel, dead from being forced to make methamphetamine without protection from the chemicals), but in the house they find Crucita and Tiny Tears, where they have been kept for days naked, starved, and forcibly drugged with heroin. Regina and the police arrive shortly after, just in time to see Tiny Tears, in a drug-addled rage, drive a jagged piece of glass through Gabo's heart.

According to de la Torre, a theological ethics for Chicanos/as must be an ethics *en conjunto* ("in conjunction"), meaning that *la lucha* (the struggle for survival) is never simply an individual quest but rather is always communal (77). It means that the community analyzes and interprets *lo cotidiano* (their reality or particular situation) together, and reflects together on how their spiritual convictions bear on this reality (77). This communal effort is rooted in what de la Torre calls "the relational imperative," which, as opposed to the categorical imperative, is based not on any transcendental but on the kind of "reflection that can only occur when one is in relationship with the oppressed and marginalized" (99). Regina and her fellow guardian angels act with and for others. The final thrust of *The Guardians* is that human beings must be saints to and for one another. The guardian angels in the novel are emphatically human. Regina confesses, "I believe in the saints as people. I can't speak for them once they've passed" (*Guardians* 171). After Gabo, the novel's Christ figure, is murdered at the end of the novel, Regina finds herself reading the Gospel of Matthew in order "to find Gabo": "Maybe it don't make sense to no one else. But it does to me. Gabo talking to me through Matthew. 'For

if ye forgive men their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you'" (*Guardians* 210). Earlier in the novel, Gabo revealed his belief in Regina's saintliness on account of her hospitality and compassion and the fact that she glimpsed "an official milagro of the Church" (*Guardians* 173, 175); now Gabo becomes a saint to Regina. It is Gabo's influence which compels Regina to do the hardest thing possible: adopt the now-orphaned child of her nephew's murderer. Just as Gabo's concern for "la Tiny Tears" was a concern for her soul and the spiritual damage inflicted by her gang life, rather than any form of erotic interest, Regina too summons the compassion to care for the very one who murdered her nephew. In adopting the little girl, whom she names Gabriella, Regina becomes a living medium of her patroness Saint Anne by becoming a "late-in-life" surrogate mother. Gabo speaks to Regina just as Regina's life spoke to Gabo and many others. And these saints galvanize others to spiritually informed acts of compassion and charity.

Gabo and Regina both are "people's saints"; others have recognized them as saints and venerated them on account of their actions and values. Though the two differ markedly in their attitude toward the organized Catholic church, they share the qualities of compassion for all, especially the disenfranchised, and care for the earth. These saints, along with Castillo's other successful protagonists, embrace spiritual disciplines that honor their Chicano/a identities and grant them the spiritual sight to see the futility of chasing the American Dream. Regina relates her own early border crossings into America as a migrant worker, and her view of a factory near her current home:

> The sleeping giant is Asarco, a smelter company, which was closed down in 1999 after more than a century of belching fumes into our skies. When I was a girl and came up to work in the fields, I'd see the humongous swirls of smoke coming up from the smelter. I'd feel like the way immigrants

> must've felt seeing the Statue of Liberty. Those puffing chimneys were a pair of lamps, calling the huddled masses. I didn't know no better. (51)

Regina now "knows better" not only the environmental threat of such an enterprise and also the false light of the promise of good jobs and working conditions. She is resigned now to a certain form of hopelessness, a hopelessness that America will embrace the "huddled masses" of Chicanas/os as Chicanas/os and that Chicanas/os will find that hard work brings success. But such hopelessness is geared toward activism and results in a resolution no longer to contribute to one's own disenfranchisement. According to de la Torre, "The semblance of hope becomes an obstacle when it serves as a mechanism that maintains rather than challenges the prevailing social structures" (92). Such hopelessness enjoins Chicanas/os to the process of spiritual *mestizaje*, in which realizes a relation to the transcendent that honors one's own ethnic and gender identity.

Conclusion

Castillo (with some intended irony) selects a statement from Porfirio Diaz, Dictator of Mexico during the Mexican Civil War, as the epigraph for *So Far from God*: "So far from God—So near the United States," a phrase that Miguel repeats in *The Guardians* (151). This quote has many valences in the novel, one of them being the contention that the more a Chicana/o believes in the transcendence of the United States, the further she is from an authentic spirituality. Castillo advocates what Roland Walter calls the "politics of dislocation and relocation," which engenders a process of asserting one's "otherness" for oneself and not at another's hand, forging "an identity based on difference with the capacity to relocate" (92). In other words, she believes it is possible for Chicanas/os living in borderlands physical and spiritual to flourish, to forge their own

integrated identities, by adopting an approach of hybridity and exploiting the multiple subjectivities inherent in a borderlands state. Yet she is no starry-eyed utopian idealist. She is clear that there is no easy model and that there is no perfect religious or cultural past to be recovered and imported seamlessly into the present. Castillo exhorts Chicanas to a clear-eyed mining of their Mexic Amerindian heritage, subjecting all archaeological discoveries to a critical assessment. She conveys the fraught nature of this enterprise, and she insists that it must always be grounded in concrete experience and undertaken in, and on behalf of, a community of others.

CHAPTER FIVE

"Creeds Fall Away": Marilynne Robinson's Democratic Individualism

Marilynne Robinson is an anachronism to some, but her highly decorated work occupies a unique place in the contemporary fiction landscape. She seems to have no anxiety of influence and no penchant for novelty. She is also an outspoken Christian, a Congregationalist to be exact, and has made it abundantly clear she believes Christianity should have more influence on American democracy, as she argues it once did. Robinson has demonstrated that fiction may still engage religion and captivate secular readers and prize panels, which has made her something of spokeswoman for contemporary Christianity. She has embraced her role as a public intellectual, proving herself a prolific and polemical essayist. Her views on religion in America today, and on the relation of religion to politics, find a wide audience. Given the fact that her religious vision has resonated greatly with Christians and non-Christians alike, it is important to consider how she understands Christianity and its relevance to American politics and social ethics.

The other authors in this study see a religious faith in American ideology as a bar to authentic spirituality. Like the other authors, Marilynne Robinson laments the spiritual anemia of America today and seeks to expose the root of our spiritual malaise. But Robinson worries not so much that American ideology assumes the role of a spiritual discipline and thus corrodes true spirituality and religious expression, but rather that a lack of religious underpinnings is corroding American ideology. She believes that the problem with American ideology today is that is has forsaken its theological roots.

Robinson maintains that America *is* a religious nation, in a way that contravenes her own well-intended concerns for the vitality both of religion in this country and the country itself.

In the essay "Fear," which is part of her newest collection, *The Givenness of Things* (and which ran in the September 2015 edition of the *New York Review of Books*), Robinson offers a welcome challenge to the ultra-nationalistic, (purportedly) embattled stance of those who believe that America must defend its Christian citizens and Christianity itself by recourse to military aggression. Robinson's essay writing style tends toward the juxtapositional, and, in characteristic fashion, Robinson turns to historical examples to illuminate our current situation: what she sees, accurately I think, is a climate of fear, much of it rooted in Islamophobia. Robinson recalls the persecution of Protestant groups in France by other religious groups to shed light on current religious persecution, namely of Muslims, in the name of Christianity. She trenchantly reveals that underneath all of the high-flown rhetoric and seething pride is not a Christian impulse at all but a cultural, and racial, ideology. This essay is ostensibly about the separation of church and state, for the authenticity of the church and the welfare of the state. Robinson unequivocally eschews the notion of making America a "Christian 'establishment,'" a thing she believes it has never been.

However, for all the commendable points of this essay– and there are many, especially that strident does not mean right – Robinson reveals a circular logic that confutes her own argument. Robinson's argument, for all of its insistence on the separation of Church and State, lambasts a *certain version* of the notion of America as a Christian nation, *in the name of* America as a Christian nation. Her problem is not that we

consider America a Christian nation but rather how we apply the title. Her argument, and her appeal, rests on the audience granting this premise. Robinson states, "When Christians abandon Christian standards of behavior in the defense of Christianity, when Americans abandon American standards of conduct in the name of America, they inflict harm that would not be in the power of any enemy" (*Givenness* 134). But Robinson separates these two terms – American and Christian – only theoretically. She effectively addresses Americans as Christians and Christians as Americans. The "standards of conduct," for Robinson, are indistinguishable. Robinson calls us to a higher standard in the name of Christian America. Robinson's essay says, in effect, that any country that calls itself a Christian nation, *if* it were a Christian nation, would not be cowed by such fear and anxiety. (And, there is no need to call ourselves a Christian nation, because we are a nation of Christians.)

While Robinson convincingly reveals the fact that nationalistic attitudes that tout themselves as religious (Christian) are nothing more than cultural or racial ideologies that make America itself their transcendent reality and thus as their divinity, her own arguments ultimately reinforce this mentality, in spite of her best intentions. Furthermore, she explicitly affirms the notion of American exceptionalism, which is very dangerous proposition.[1] To fully expose Robinson's (mostly) tacit assumptions, however, will require further proof. It is no light charge to contend that Robinson effectively conflates Christianity with American democracy. This is why I will examine Robinson's other works in depth and in comparison with other American public intellectuals – Reinhold

[1] Of course, there are benign strains of this idea: most Americans believe that democracy as a governmental system is preferable to fascism. But the benign forms generally do not go by the term American exceptionalism, but rather some version of liberalism. On the other hand, the cultural and even racial attitudes that often parade under the title of American exceptionalism are precisely those which Robinson targets.

Niebuhr, Jeffrey Stout, and George Kateb – in order to better situate her thought among other major thinkers who consider the role of religion in democratic practice.[2]

Robinson, like the other authors in this study, sees as problematic the religious strand of American ideology, the kind of belief in America as Christian nation that distills finally to faith in America itself, a religion of American exceptionalism. None of the authors I discuss – DeLillo, Pynchon, Castillo, and Robinson – holds democracy to be a misguided enterprise. All four are concerned with the revitalization and preservation of America, not with abandoning it. However, all of them are convinced that a political ideology – one that is embraced *as* a form of religion or spirituality – is not sufficient for the spiritual health and identity of human beings. Yet, I argue in this chapter that, of the four authors, Robinson offers the least convincing spiritual alternative. Her fiction beautifully renders ways that spiritual vitality contributes to human flourishing and enriches communal life, while also highlighting the ways that religion defers to culture at the expense of its own authenticity. However, in spite of numerous riches to be found in Robinson's work, the corrective spiritual vision she offers in her essays proves an inadequate alternative, one that is rooted in an individualist notion of the representative self and is thus virtually indistinguishable from her understanding of American political practice. While for the other authors, faith in America bars the way to a fuller spiritual life, for Robinson a fuller spiritual life is required *for the sake of* a richer America. In other words, Robinson places religion in the service of national interest, at the price of religion.

---

[2] There are, granted, countless other thinkers who consider the role of religion in American politics and in the public square, many of whom are better known than Stout and Kateb if not Niebuhr. These three have been chosen intentionally: Niebuhr, because Robinson recurs to him and because she has been characterized as his modern heir, and Stout and Kateb, because they draw from the same Transcendentalist sources as Robinson does to answer similar questions.

Jeffrey Stout, ethicist and Princeton professor of religion, argues that democracy *is* a tradition and a practice, with its own norms and commitments. Even granting this premise, the four authors in this study all insist that some kind of spiritual mooring is required to form the kind of people capable of democratic practice. When "democratic practice" *subsumes* spiritual practice, the result is spiritual poverty and the narrow view of human life that Robinson so vehemently and rightfully decries. Spiritual formation is, of course, what Robinson claims that Calvinist Christianity has historically offered in this country, and what it will continue to do if we recover our Calvinist/Puritan roots. However, it is one thing to affirm that a distinctive religious/spiritual tradition shapes individuals in ways that are conducive to living in community, especially a pluralistic one. It is quite another thing to espouse a particular religious tradition *for the purpose of* political ends. I submit, without questioning Robinson's own religious commitments and beliefs, that the Calvinist faith she portrays and espouses in her work is easily understood as "democracy as a spiritual practice."

The argument of this chapter proceeds through several moves to demonstrate the inadequacy of Robinson's spiritual vision. I turn first to Robinson's fiction, commending her portrait of Christianity as a lived religion and arguing that Robinson's strongest critique of culturally coopted religion is found in her fiction, not her essays. I then proceed to a comparison of Robinson to Reinhold Niebuhr. A few scholars have cited Niebuhr as one of Robinson's closest peers as a public intellectual. Robinson herself has cited Niebuhr as an exemplary model of a public theologian, a role that Robinson occupies herself to some degree. I draw this comparison to highlight certain assumptions the two share about the proper relation of religion to American politics. For both thinkers,

Christian theology should (and, historically, has) play not just a leavening role, but a *foundational* role. Finally, I compare Robinson to Jeffrey Stout and George Kateb. These comparisons shed light on the nature of her spiritual vision, demonstrating its severe limitations. I attempt to show that in terms of its relevance for American democratic practice, the Calvinist religion that Robinson presents is indistinguishable from the Emersonian Transcendentalism from which Stout and Kateb largely draw their views of democratic practice. (Robinson also appeals to the American Renaissance in addition to Calvinist Christianity.) The comparisons with Kateb and Stout will help validate and extend Christopher Douglas's contention that Robinson depicts Christianity as a form of cultural identity. The result is that Robinson offers no distinguishable spiritual tradition but rather unwittingly reinforces an ersatz spirituality that, as we have seen in DeLillo, Pynchon, and Castillo, can result in marginalization, oppression, and spiritual inertia.

Robinson's reception has been decidedly positive overall, as she has garnered lavish praise for her feminism and her vision of community. The slim minority of dissenting critics have focused mostly on her theology and her treatment of race. My argument joins the former, extending critical work in this area by scrutinizing the coherence and theological distinctiveness of her theologically-rooted politics.

Marilynne Robinson's first novel, *Housekeeping*, was received enthusiastically by most critics, many of whom interpreted it as a beautifully wrought attack on the strictures of dominant society. The novel's interrogation of domesticity prompted many to claim *Housekeeping* as a feminist manifesto. Especially as Robinson did not publish another novel for nearly twenty-four years, her categorization as counterhegemonic writer dominated for the better part of two decades. Maureen Ryan argues that in *Housekeeping*

Robinson "presents her rejection of the traditional female story" (85). Ryan highlights the way Robinson creates a composite of female experience by interweaving stories of "nameless women" while abandoning any fidelity to a traditional narrative arc that would measure the growth of the female character according to the standards of a male-dominated society. Ryan contends that Robinson writes the tale of the American Eve, eschewing individualistic independence for community. As Ruth and Sylvie flee the town of Fingerbone, "[t]heir flight from the other world of normalcy is an affirmation of female solidarity" rather than an affirmation of rugged individualism (85). Joan Kirkby recognizes in *Housekeeping*'s motif of a return to nature the influence of 19th century writers like Dickinson, Poe, and the Transcendentalists.[3] But for Kirkby, Robinson offers a decidedly feminist innovation of the 19th century return to nature. In the way of her literary forbearers, Robinson rejects "the activities of *homo faber*," the human being as maker, and exhorts one to submit to nature rather than attempting mastery over it. With this process of devolving and becoming "un-civilized," Robinson signifies a repudiation of "the patriarchal values that have dominated American culture and a return to values and modes of being that have been associated in myth and imagery with the province of the female" (Kirkby 92). Thomas Foster also takes a feminist approach, reading *Housekeeping* as an instantiation of Julia Kristeva's notion of "Women's Time," a kind of "prefigurative" consciousness which by imagining a different reality brings it to bear on the present. Ruth's capacity for prefigurative imagination thus offers an exemplary, productive response to the confines of patriarchal culture.

[3] Galehouse 130 also recognizes Emerson's view of nature in *Housekeeping*. I will argue that this Transcendentalist resonance extends throughout Robinson's work.

Paula Geyh argues that Robinson brings together two streams of feminist writing – those who seek to redefine the notion of domesticity and those who envision a kind of permanent vagrancy. Geyh concludes that in *Housekeeping*, Robinson suggests that women must combine the two, that "[w]e must continually cross and recross the bridge in both directions, for we can no longer really stay 'at home,' but neither can we depart to some utopian realm beyond all "patriarchal structures" (120-21). Similarly, Christine Wilson argues that Robinson "challenge[s] the very foundations of domesticity and its relation to habitability" (300). Wilson looks at Sylvie's practices of "keeping house" to argue that it is not the space one occupies that matters but one's relationship to that space. The upshot is that "women do not have to choose domestication or liberation—traditional spatial roles within the home or unconventional vagrancy" (Wilson 304). Any home, traditional or not, can be made habitable with a measure of flexibility and a much broader definition of domesticity. Jacqui Smyth makes a similar argument by examining *Housekeeping* in the larger American *Bildungsroman* tradition. Smyth observes that in this literary tradition the hero typically must leave or escape the home in order to mature and develop independence. Here, Robinson departs from the tradition: "[any] text that depicts a simple escape from the domestic leaves the nineteenth-century cult of domesticity unaltered; home continues to be aligned with traditional constructions of domesticity and mothering. To posit the home as a constraint to be escaped—or, in other words, to posit home as an opposition to vagrancy—is to continue defining vagrancy in domestic terms" (282). Smyth argues that *Housekeeping* is not simply a novel about escaping home but about redefining domesticity. She points out that Sylvie and Ruth continue to be subject to societal strictures even after they set their house ablaze and flee

the town: the townspeople can only assume that the pair have died, finding it unfathomable that they would abandon domestic life of their own accord. Thus, Smyth concludes that Robinson "suggests that it is the ideology of home, not the homeless, that must be remedied" (290).

Laura Tanner shows how Robinson's novel *Home* critiques dominant notions of domesticity by taking a tack opposite of that in *Housekeeping*. Unlike *Housekeeping*, *Home* unfolds mostly within and around the confines of a traditional home in the American Midwest. Tanner argues that Robinson's text exposes and critiques the "limiting parameters of domesticity" by "locating the reader uncomfortably within its circumscribed fictional world" and forcing the reader to *experience* this discomfort through her reading (37). *Home* follows the conventions of a traditional domestic novel and subtly deconstructs them. Robinson shows that the work of the main character Glory "to sustain not just the family home but its story necessitates the constant erasure of her embodied and articulating presence" (40). However, Robinson refuses any easy binaries: Glory ultimately elects to remain in the house she inherits, with all of its patriarchal baggage, but the choice she makes is her own, made in full awareness. Thus, "*Home* acknowledges the pressure of normative categories that structure experience even as it resists the simple binaries that recent feminist criticism has begun to dismantle" (Tanner 50).

Tony Magagna considers Robinson's approach to domesticity in light of the larger mythology of the American West. Magagna argues that in *Housekeeping* Robinson attempts revisionist history, taking on the myths that have typified the American west and "representing a version of the West that is beyond such myths, particularly in relation to

western womanhood" (357). Magagna trenchantly reads Robinson's depiction of Fingerbone's local parades and rituals, unearthing entrenched notions of rugged individualism and the heroic tales of (masculine) bravery from which this desolate Northwestern town has constructed its history as a way to grant itself pride of place. Magagna argues that "these anxious attempts to inhabit a sense of local identity often result in physical and social boundaries that enforce exclusionary definitions as to what people and which actions *belong* and whose experiences *matter"* (345-6). The fragile community stability ultimately rests on the weary shoulders of the uncelebrated women of the town: the "actual acts and roles of 'housekeeping' that are foisted upon the women are those acts of proper domesticity – at least in their traditional forms – which serve to maintain the order of place and the comforts of normal life" (Magagna 360-1). Robinson creates a female cast of characters and recasts these Western myths in order to write a larger, more inclusive story of the West.

Many critics have noted Robinson's absorption with the notion of limits – limits of domesticity, limits of language, limits of imagination, and limits of theological formulae. An outlier in this conversation, Maria Moss (rather unaccountably) turns to the anthropological theory of philosopher Hans Blumenburg to argue that Ruth's way of life is an utter failure because it rejects the universal human need for sanctuary. Most critics, however, see Robinson's engagement of limits as constructive. Thomas Gardner, reading *Housekeeping* through the lens of Emily Dickinson, argues that Robinson, like Dickinson, uses language to draw attention to places where language itself strains, cracks, and shreds, in order to "remind us that something hovers just outside [the] mind's circumference" (16). This realization results in the individual being impelled to

reconsider her own place in the world, the reality she knows, and her relation to it. Thus Ruth uses language – metaphor and analogy – to redefine her relationship to her own home and to create for herself a place in the world even as she flees her home for a life of transience. According to Maggie Galehouse, Robinson redefines transience by "[a]scribing formal, historical, physical, and temporal dimensions" to it (135), in order to gesture at a way of rejecting stasis while still incorporating one's own traditions and heritage into one's present life. Galehouse argues that for Robinson, "Movement . . . encourages a constant upheaval of the self, eliciting, paradoxically, both reflection and protection. By inhabiting a 'millennial present,' a transient can filter experience and still—unlike Ruth's mother and grandfather—keep her head above water" (135). However, Karen Kaivola is unconvinced that Robinson extols the virtues of transience so unequivocally. Kaivola insists that the novel is not so easily categorized as "univocally or unproblematically feminist" (670). Rather, "the text asks us to consider whether Ruth's decision to follow Sylvie and become transient, to exist without community and beyond rituals of nurturing and sustenance, is indeed just about the 'worst possible thing' that could have happened" (672). Kaivola concludes that the compensations Ruth receives in return for abandoning her home community are, while not negligible, not sufficient to be taken as an exemplary model for a new female subjectivity (689-90). While agreeing that *Housekeeping* offers much for feminists to admire and claim, she insists that women must look beyond the text for an adequately rich model of female subjectivity.

As Robinson's Gilead trilogy has been published over the last twelve years, the number of critical studies of her work has slowly increased, and other facets of her work have absorbed critics' attention. Her proud pronouncements of her Christian faith and her

nationalistic political liberalism have endeared her to new audiences (and alienated some of her original admirers). Critics and layreaders have been drawn to Robinson on account of her vociferous insistence on the sacredness of human beings as ensouled persons. Robinson's essays and fiction plumb and celebrate the complexity of every individual and the mystery of life lived in relation to others. Critics, including those who do not share Robinson's religious commitments, have widely lauded her vision of community. Michael Vander Weele argues that in *Gilead*'s form and content Robinson models a constructive approach to "the difficult gift of human exchange" (217). Drawing from Walter Benjamin, Vander Weele posits that Robinson ascribes both a moral and an aesthetic dimension to the process of communicating our personal experiences to others. In spite of the fact that parts of our lives will always remain inscrutable to others, the way that we share our experiences and ideas with others, along with the fact *that* we elect to share them, expands our subjectivity and builds community: "It gives us access to a different way of being in, or of apprehending, the world than we usually experience. It makes a new form of life imaginable" (Vander Weele 234). Robinson's fiction models a way of sharing between people of differing views and loves that draws them into community through the act of exchange, regardless of any consensus reached, and this makes Robinson's novel "not only a personal and aesthetic but also a social and ethical act" (Vander Weele 237).

Jeffrey Gonzales reads Robinson's Gilead novels as portraying an "ontology of interdependence" that responds to the neoliberalism that understands human identity in strictly material or economic terms. While Gonzales considers *Housekeeping* a work of "deconstructive mysticism," he argues that in her later works, "Robinson's depiction of

domestic spaces and relationships within small communities dramatizes the necessity of interdependence and the precariousness of human life" (374). While Judith Butler and Robinson may make an odd couple, Gonzales maintains that Robinson follows Butler in mounting a case for divorcing ontology from autonomy on the grounds that human being is fundamentally social. Our sense of being always rests to some extent on our consciousness of others, yet the other is always shrouded in a degree of mystery. According to Gonzales, Robinson insists on "this unknowability as axiomatic" for two reasons: First, the subject needs to recognize the limitations of her ability to perceive and understand, and second, she must recognize the sacredness of the other" (380). Out of this notion of unknowability, Robinson constructs an "ethics of limitations," an ethics rooted in forgiveness as a precondition for better understanding the other and in a "non-hierarchical, non-merit-based vision of love" (Gonzales 382). Robinson is concerned that American society is shaping citizens who "find self-abnegation impossible," which she believes will make democracy untenable (Gonzales 386); accordingly, we must return to national roots and realize that America was founded upon a vision of ontological interdependence. Aaron Mauro also focuses on Robinson's response to reductive economic policies. Mauro argues that Robinson seeks to counter the binary market logic of debt and exchange through her depiction of domestic life in the home (150). Mauro shows how Robinson creates a revisionist picture of home life to show that in spite of family strife and tragedy home life is a rich if complex source of pleasure and stability. Mauro reads Robinson as attempting a corrective to psychoanalytic theories that have rendered "such simple comforts highly suspect" and inadvertently driven people to seek security and pleasure in conspicuous consumerism and amassing wealth (152).

Justin Evans posits that *Gilead* is best read as an example of spiritual autobiography, a genre Robinson adopts in response to another form of reductionist thought: the so-called "New Atheism" (132). Evans' central point is that Robinson crafts *Gilead* as a defense of human subjectivity against "the New Atheists' demand for a radically reductionist, naturalistic understanding of human beings" in which there is no place "for human responsiveness to norms, only for natural law" (143). The spiritual autobiography narrates and encourages self-reform, insisting on the possibility of change and showing change to be dependent upon the "'super-natural,' norm-granting character of autonomous human subjectivity and morality" (143-44). Again here, the insistence on human potential is connected to Robinson's investment in national health and the preservation of democracy. In a similar vein, Christina Bieber Lake argues that Robinson's work contributes to the current bioethical debate about transhumanism. Transhumanism is a movement intent on transcending existing human limitations, an aim which Lake faults for its lack of any clear telos or definite conception about what the good is that we should be seeking. *Gilead* counters the narrow view of transhumanism by insisting on contemplation as a central component of the good life, suggesting that not everything must have immediate material results to prove worthwhile. Lake praises *Gilead's* acknowledgment that hope as a virtue really relies on recognizing our status as created beings (176), which includes admitting and honoring our limitations. From this foundation of createdness, Robinson insists on our capacity to love our fellow human beings in all of their frailty, which Lake believes has momentous consequences for bioethics.

Another group of critics has focused on the spiritual and theological facet of Robinson's work. Robinson has openly articulated her Congregationalist Christian faith commitments in her essays and interviews, and her Gilead novels focus on the families of two Christian pastors in the small-town American Midwest. Andrew Stout praises Robinson's appropriation of John Calvin's theology to develop a "distinctly American Protestant sacramental vision" (571). Stout traces the influence of Calvin in Robinson's work and shows how her artistic depictions of quotidian life and the natural world suffuse the mundane with the divine. Anthony Domestico makes a similar argument, citing the way Glory in Robinson's *Home* invests the "most seemingly banal activities" with sacredness ("Blessings"). June Hadden Hobbs examines the uses of typology and memorialization in *Gilead* to show how the narrator John Ames finds peace and comfort as he approaches death. Ames uses Christian (and in some instances, secular) typologies to memorialize his own life, to place the events and acts of his life within the larger narratives of family lineage and the Christian story of salvation (235). This typological practice, with a long history stretching back to the Puritans and to the earliest interpreters of the Scriptures, grants Ames peace through the knowledge that his acts of burial and baptism and his acts of love toward his family will long outlive him, and, furthermore, through the realization that his small town Iowa life has always been a participation in the larger world, that "the wonders of the world are not spatially bound" (Hobbs 258).

The majority of critics have found Robinson's treatment of spirituality to be sensitive, edifying, and commendably subtle, but a few critics have accused Robinson of cowing to popular sensibilities and offering a sanitized version of Christianity. Todd Shy was one of the first and strongest critics of Robinson's treatment of Calvin. Shy argues

that Robinson ironically presents Calvinist Christianity in terms that are dictated not by theology but by modern sensibilities. Shy finds much to praise in Robinson's work, but he insists "that what is central to her is a product of religious crises spawned by industrialization, urbanization, scientific advance, modem textual studies, political reform, and other nontheological developments" (255). In other words, Robinson ultimately offers a Christian-*ish* humanism rather than a recognizably Reformed theology. Shy applauds Robinson's efforts to remind Americans of Calvin's continuing relevance, but he contends that in this pursuit she has given away too much of what makes Reformed theology distinctive. Anthony Domestico takes issue with Todd Shy's criticism. Domestico returns to Robinson's first novel, *Housekeeping,* in order to show how Robinson structures the novel using a series of creedal statements – the kind of dogmatic statements that lend a tradition its distinctiveness. Domestico maintains, against Shy, that Robinson's character Ruth uses creedal statements as a means to a larger and richer existence. These creeds are both mooring, "offer[ing] a stable ground, brought into being by an act of faith, on which a particular worldview can be built," and liberating, "posit[ing] a worldview, a vision of reality that takes account of past, present, and future, that proclaims belief in compensation and resurrection, liberating its narrator" ("Imagine" 95, 106). While Domestico offers a compelling argument, the way the "creeds" function in *Housekeeping* does not diminish any of the force of Shy's argument.

Christopher Liese also contends that Todd Shy "misses the point" because he fails to see "that Robinson is consciously reading the Puritan tradition against itself" (350). Leise argues that Robinson follows in the path of "death of God" philosopher Mark C. Taylor in considering a religious tradition as a vital, changing, and "actively

destabilizing" thing (350). Like Andrew Stout, Leise argues that in John Ames Robinson creates a character who learns to devote such an intense "aesethic attention" to mundane life that he is able to live "the experience of the miraculous in the everyday" (349). Leise argues that Robinson here appropriates the Calvinist tradition in a very nontraditional fashion, flying in the face of her theological ancestors, the "Puritans, whose brand of Calvinism was so deeply inflected with neo-Platonic idealism as to necessitate a near outright refusal of earthly beauty's positive qualities in its own right and for its own sake" (350). Leise concludes that Robinson effectively separates Calvin the humanist from Calvin the theologian. Thus, Ames is content to postpone consideration of the eschatological and transcendental for when he meets his Maker, in the meantime glorying in the miraculous mundane. Responding to Christopher Leise, Haein Park argues that the separation of the humanist and theological Calvin is problematic because the two are mutually informative and cannot be separated (103). Park develops his argument by comparing Robinson to theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer and his famous prison letters, maintaining that "the vibrancy of their theology resides precisely in their commitment to 'this-worldly transcendence'" (103). For Bonhoeffer, as for Robinson, "this-worldly transcendence" means demonstrating one's spirituality and theological conviction through recognizing sacredness in this world; such a practice "is demonstrated through a kenotic response to the other, an act that requires an emptying of the self to receive the other in love" (Park 103).

Building on the work of Todd Shy, a few critics have further considered the way Robinson uses theology and religious belief. Amy Hungerford readily grants that Robinson holds a religious "belief that is anything but contentless," but she insists that

when one scrutinizes how belief functions in Robinson's work one finds that form is at least as central to religious imagination as content (108). Thus, Hungerford posits that "religious writers in the late-twentieth and into the twenty-first century imagine belief – abstract, articulated often in the language of theology or piety – as itself a practice, something as much like a set of rituals as it is like a set of doctrines" (108). Thomas Haddox has offered what is to my mind the most compelling criticism of Robinson's religious vision, taking Shy's best insights and pushing them in a slightly different direction. Haddox is not as concerned that Robinson's orthodoxy looks exactly like Calvin's but rather that Robinson's commitments are more to a "use of orthodoxy" for political ends rather than to the religious tradition itself.

Finally, one other area of critical focus, relevant to my argument here, has divided Robinson's scholarly readers: her treatment of race. While many have seen Robinson as attempting to call Christianity to task regarding race, other critics have found Robinson's treatment of race as incomplete or lacking, if not disturbingly problematic. Unquestionably, Robinson deeply laments the legacy of race in America and seeks a better way forward. The question critics ask is whether her treatment of race is adequate and sufficiently informed. William Deresiewicz accuses Robinson of an "Anglo-Saxon tribalism" that he believes results to some extent from the fact that her "imagination appears to have advanced no further" than 1956 ("Homing"). The problem is not that Robinson displays any racism towards non-whites but that her world does not really seem to include them. Deresiewicz's is a rather tendentious accusation, needing a much larger context and more support. Jess Row has lodged a similar complaint, grouping Robinson in with a cadre of white authors, including Richard Ford and Annie Proulx, who are

"fervent adherents of the cult of Elsewhere." These writers are fascinated with the notion of deracination or "white flight," which Row argues is a fantasy in which race is absent. According to Row, "deracination is a long-lived and nearly universal trope in white American literature, and it remains an ideal and a covert fantasy in a country which today is about as far from racially homogeneous as has been possible in the history of humankind" ("White Flights"). However, as Briallen Hopper has noted, Row's argument can only be applied (as he does) to one of Robinson's works: her first, *Housekeeping* ("Montgomery"). Lisa Siefker Bailey offers a counterargument to Jess Row, arguing that Robinson does engage racial conflict in much of her work (271). Bailey traces the image of fire throughout *Gilead*, demonstrating how it functions as a metaphor both for spirituality and for civil rights. Christopher Douglas, drawing heavily from Deresiewicz's argument, suggests that Robinson adopts a perspective of Christian multiculturalism that ultimately treats religion as a cultural identity. This multiculturalist perspective, according to Douglas, allows Robinson to be selective in her historical portrait of American Christian identity and to ignore any real connections between Christianity and slavery (343-4). Thus Robinson can suggest that true Christianity opposes slavery while disavowing the historical existence of any defense of slavery rooted in Christianity itself.

Robinson *does* engage racial conflict in her work, but some critics believe she does not do so constructively. Perhaps the most damning criticism of Robinson's treatment of race is Briallen Hopper's essay on *Lila*, a piece so devastating because it is one of most nuanced, considerate, and otherwise laudatory considerations of Robinson's work. Hopper posits that much of Robinson's great appeal in our hyper-connected, digital age is her "deeply spiritual vision of loneliness, of ecstatic and resigned and despairing

and meaningful disconnection" ("Montgomery"). Robinson tends to focus on the spiritual lives of individuals who are isolated, even among family, and Hopper argues that this places severe limits on Robinson's religious vision, a major limit being "the marginalization of embodied, literal community as a reliable source of solace and ethical vision" ("Montgomery"). Hopper extols the mystical vision of Robinson's work, but she then asks whether this mystical insight is worth the attendant faults with regard to political and community. Acknowledging that Robinson does not ignore racism, Hopper notes that Robinson portrays racial tension and violence in Montgomery, Alabama in a way that misrepresents what actually happened and the people involved. Hopper attributes this not to any intentional deception or mixed motives on Robinson's part but to "something much closer to the core of her tragic, individualistic theology . . . the perilous political tendencies of her particular version of Calvinism" ("Montgomery"). Hopper contends that Robinson's religious vision can never transmit into communal change because it focuses on individuals and individual encounters: "Robinson represents religious faith less as a spur to action and more as a beautiful individual reckoning with inevitable loss and anguish" ("Montgomery"). For Robinson, religion is about reckoning with loss through contemplating divine sovereignty and mystery, as Robinson's work repeatedly insists "that lack is its own fulfillment; loss its own restoration; sorrow its own solace" ("Montgomery").

In spite of Hopper's compelling case, Robinson's essays proclaim her concern for America as a nation. Successful or not, Robinson *intends* to enact a democratic vision of community, elaborating what she understands to be the fitting norms for engaging one another. But Hopper's insights help us see what is potentially problematic in Robinson's

religious vision – its individualism. Robinson's spiritual vision bears remarkable similarity to the notion of the representative self, in its original context of Puritan theology. As I will demonstrate, her vision of the individual as spiritual being existing in community owes much to Emerson's Transcendentalism.

The Perils of Culturally Encrusted Religion: Robinson's Fiction

The key things Robinson finds in Calvinism are the notion of the *imago dei* as the safeguard of human dignity, the humility that results from the notion of total depravity, and the primacy given to personal experience in fostering spirituality. I turn first to Robinson's fiction in order to examine how these facets of Christianity shape the lives of her characters, before returning to her depiction of Calvinism in her essays. This treatment of her fiction is intended to accomplish two things. First, it details key theological tenets of Robinson's Calvinism that take on a different role in her nonfiction. Second, it highlights and praises the theological strengths of Robinson's fiction which are then contradicted by her nonfiction.

Thomas Haddox argues that while in her essays, Robinson "emphasizes the deficiencies of contemporary life that might be remedied if Christianity were taken more seriously," in her novels "*Gilead* and *Home*, she creates a fictional world in which Christianity is the norm, a quietly sustaining reality" (188). This is an accurate description, I think, and thus her fiction should offer some sense of how Christianity mitigates those "deficiencies of contemporary life." Yet, because Christianity is the norm for most of her fictional characters, we cannot approach Robinson's depiction of religion in the same way as with the other three authors of this study. In a milieu so saturated with Christianity, it is difficult to distinguish between ethic and identity, between religiously

informed attitudes and actions and simple adherence to regnant liberal American heartland values. It is perhaps easier to identify the glaring failures of Christianity (or at least of Robinson's Christians), which it would seem that Robinson intends us to observe. Because Christianity is an accepted part of the social fabric in her fictional worlds, Robinson can give us some sense of Christianity's leavening influence while also drawing attention to the deficiencies and stagnation of Christianity.

Critics like Jess Row have accused Robinson of indulging in nostalgia, of depicting an America that never really existed or at least only existed for a privileged white segment of the population ("White Flights"). Yet, as Anthony Domestico argues, "Such criticism makes sense only if you think that fiction lives or dies by its explicit engagement with contemporary life. Relevance isn't the only aesthetic criterion, and social realism isn't the only defensible literary style. . . . Not every writer has to be Jonathan Franzen" ("Blessings"). The spiritual resources of Christianity which were relevant and valid in the 1950s should be no less so in the twenty-first century, so, at least for my purposes, it is not problematic that Robinson's work is set in an era which many understand to be bygone. Another criticism is that Robinson's fiction tends, as Briallen Hopper has noted, toward the individualistic, offering a "deeply spiritual vision of loneliness, of ecstatic and resigned and despairing and meaningful disconnection" ("Montgomery"). Hopper identifies the limitations of Robinson's individualistic vision, but Hopper's criticism, while accurate, can be overstated. Robinson, especially in *Lila*, clearly conveys that solitude, for all of its attractions, "comes at a cost" (Domestico, "Blessings"). *Gilead*, as well as *Lila*, shows us how Ames mined beauty and grace out of the decades of loneliness following the early death of his wife and newborn daughter due

to childbirth complications (*Gilead* 70-1). But Ames and Lila both clearly find their life together as family, despite the difficulties of sharing life with another, superior to solitude. It remains the case that Robinson's novels, while they do they do center around family dynamics (the story of the prodigal son figures centrally in *Gilead* and *Home*), tend to engage the Christian faith primarily, though by no means exclusively, from the perspective of individuals and their individual experience. Perhaps another way to say it is that Robinson's fiction is so very Protestant, embodying the notion of the priesthood of all believers and Robinson's (perhaps idiosyncratic) understanding of Calvin. I will focus here on the two aspects of Christianity, as both a belief and a practice, upon which Robinson focuses most in her fiction, before moving on to examining the shortcomings and implicit criticism of Christianity that Robinson also clearly portrays. These two aspects, individual experience and the notion of the *imago dei*, are inextricably related: the basis for community *is* the *imago dei* present in every individual.

Over the course of her Gilead trilogy – three novels set mostly in the same Midwestern town, with significant overlap in terms of the events covered – Robinson adopts three different primary narrators (though only Ames narrates in true first person), who give their respective accounts of life in Gilead. While Faulkner's Yoknapatawpha novels may share reference (with varying attention) to the same event or person, Robinson's three novels overlap more often than not in terms of the events narrated. While it would not be accurate to say that the three novels tell the same story, one may well wonder why Robinson seems to rehash the same events thrice over. Anthony Domestico posits that one reason is theological, a form of insistence on the divinely-secured worth of every human individual:

> This analogy between physical and divine grace is even more important in *Home*, Robinson's 2008 follow-up to *Gilead*. *Home* centers on the same town at the same time, but it takes as its main character Glory Boughton, the daughter of Ames's best friend and fellow preacher, the Rev. Robert Boughton. Glory makes a brief, inconspicuous appearance in *Gilead*; in *Home* Robinson shifts her to the center, and this decision makes an aesthetic and theological point. Every character, Robinson suggests, is both a potential fictional protagonist and a being that has been created in the image of God. ("Blessings")

Domestico's comment is illuminating, especially as it hints at a key dynamic in Robinson's work: the mutually informing relation of commonality to individuality. As I discuss below, the cumulative effect of this recalls the effect of Whitman's plural yet individual "self," as best articulated in *Leaves of Grass*. We are connected on account of bearing the image of God, and yet each of us is singular, an expression of human potential that is conditioned by her own experience. In understanding this, we must recognize that we could easily have turned out differently – like someone else. We could easily have led other lives. It is a religious vision that is thoroughly, perhaps foundationally, democratic. Of the three narrators of Robinson's three respective Gilead novels, only one, John Ames, has not been socially marginalized in some fashion. Ames (narrator of *Gilead*), though no stranger to tragedy, is well respected man in a position of authority in his town. Lila Ames (narrator of *Lila*), was abused, essentially orphaned, and rescued (kidnapped, technically) by a woman with whom Lila would live as a drifter and migrant laborer for many years before becoming a prostitute then a maid. Lila marries John Ames, but her past becomes a source of embarrassment and produces tension and confusion in their marriage and in the town of Gilead. Glory Boughton (narrator of *Home*), has been jilted by a man who was already married and comes home to Gilead only to assume a scripted role of dutiful daughter waiting hand and foot upon her aging,

ailing father without receiving any affirmation or gratitude. Yet each of these three characters is depicted as a worthy focalizing character whose perspective and experience of life is as worthy of attention as anyone's. By focusing on the experiences of these characters, we see how their experiences differ and how they correspond, and we see that for each, it is personal experience that validates or invalidates spiritual inklings.

Spirituality and Personal Experience

In her fiction and essays Robinson dwells on the central role of personal experience in religion. One way in which this concern surfaces in Robinson's fiction is the subtle erasure of any easy dichotomy of the spiritual and the material/physical. Robinson seeks to imbue the whole of life with a quality of sacramentality.[4] Anthony Domestico has argued that in her fiction Robinson sets about redeeming commonplace activities and rituals as spiritual. Domestico cites the character of Glory in Robinson's *Home* as an example of one who understands mundane tasks as spiritually expressive: "For Glory, the way to grace is through hospitality, through caring even for those who resist her care. Especially for those. Glory tends to her father's dying body and to her brother's broken spirit. The most seemingly banal activities—cooking dinner, bathing her father—become ways of acknowledging the sacredness of this world and of her difficult family" ("Blessings"). One could also point to John Ames in *Gilead* as a character who embodies this sacramental approach to the quotidian. Some of Robinson's most luminous prose comes in describing the ways characters understand the import of their daily activities, and she clearly conveys that her characters' spiritual awareness correlates with their quality of life.

[4] Robinson does this in her essays as well. See especially "Experience" and "Proofs" in *The Givenness of Things*.

In *Gilead*, an epistolary novel written by aging father John Ames to his young son Robbie, Ames writes that there are two treacherous modern notions from the perspective of the Christian: "One is that religion and religious experience are illusions of some sort . . . the other is that religion itself is real, but *your* belief that *you* participate in it is an illusion. I think the second of these is the more insidious, because it is religious experience above all that authenticates religion, for the purposes of the individual believer" (*Gilead* 145). Ames, like Robinson herself, has little use for logical proofs given to establish the truth of religion.[5] Ames thinks the very attempt to defend God is typically fruitless and misguided:

> I have had a certain amount of experience with skepticism and the conversation it generates, and there is an inevitable futility in it. It is even destructive. Young people from my own flock have come home with a copy of *La Nausée* or *L'Immoraliste*, flummoxed by the possibility of unbelief, when I must have told them a thousand times that unbelief is possible. And they are attracted to it by the very books that tell them what a misery it is. And they want me to defend religion, and they want me to give them "proofs." I just won't do it. It only confirms them in their skepticism. Because nothing true can be said about God from a posture of defense. (*Gilead* 177)

Lived experience, and the sacramental dimension of earthly life, offers the best apology for Christianity according to Ames. In his fulsome letter to his son, Ames recurs in numerous passages to earthly experiences in which the spiritual or religious imbues the material, bestowing upon mundane life a transcendent quality. Knowing that his years are numbered, Ames dwells on "the gift of physical particularity and how blessing and sacrament are mediated through it," writing, "I have been thinking lately how I have loved my physical life" (*Gilead* 69). Existence itself is cause for wonder; Ames tells his son, "it's your existence I love you for, mainly. Existence seems to me now the most

[5] See her essay "Proofs" for a fuller account of her views on this matter.

remarkable thing that could ever be imagined" (*Gilead* 53). Yet Ames warns of abstracting experience so much that one fails to be present in the moment:

> I have been thinking about existence lately. In fact, I have been so full of admiration for existence that I have hardly been able to enjoy it properly. As I was walking up to the church this morning, I passed that row of big oaks . . . and I thought of another morning, fall a year or two ago, when they were dropping their acorns thick as hail almost. There was all sorts of thrashing in the leaves and there were acorns hitting the pavement so hard they'd fly past my head. All this in the dark, of course. I remember a slice of moon, no more than that. It was a very clear night, or morning, very still, and then there was such energy in the things transpiring among those trees, like a storm, like travail. I stood there a little out of range, and I thought, It is all still new to me. I have lived my life on the prairie and a line of oak trees can still astonish me.
>
> I feel sometimes as if I were a child who opens its eyes on the world once and sees amazing things it will never know any names for and then has to close its eyes again. I know this is all mere apparition compared to what awaits us, but it is only lovelier for that. There is a human beauty in it. And I can't believe that, when we have all been changed and put on incorruptibility, we will forget our fantastic condition of mortality and impermanence, the great bright dream of procreating and perishing that meant the whole world to us. (*Gilead* 56-7)

Such mystical encounters with the physical world, like watching the tossing branches of the oaks, impress upon Ames the conviction of "a thing existing in excess of itself, so to speak, a sort of purity or lavishness, at any rate something ordinary in kind but exceptional in degree" (*Gilead* 28). Similarly, watching his son and another boy jumping gleefully through the sprinkler, or witnessing the joyfully feigned disgust of a young woman as her lover showers her with water, Ames finds that "it is easy to believe in such moments that water was made primarily for blessing, and only secondarily for growing vegetables or doing the wash" (*Gilead* 28). Earthly life itself is so full of wonder and pleasure that Ames believes that the world must be more than itself, and he imagines that any sort of heaven must surpass without annihilating earthly life and experience.

As physical creatures, anything we can really know and experience of the spiritual *must* come to us through the material world. Ames also speaks of sacraments proper, and how they give the spiritual a material quality of greatest value. It is thus that Ames wishes that in his own Congregationalist tradition "there were more shimmer and splash involved in the way we go about [baptism]" (*Gilead* 63). He used to go and watch the Baptists baptizing in the river, convinced that there should be as great a physical dimension to the sacrament as possible. Ames recalls a time when he and some friends christened a kitten (a proper sacrament, though perhaps not properly applied). Ames writes:

> I still remember how those warm little brows felt under the palm of my hand. Everyone has petted a cat, but to touch one like that, with the pure intention of blessing it, is a very different thing. It stays in the mind. For years we would wonder what, from a cosmic viewpoint, we had done to them. It still seems to me to be a real question. There is a reality in blessing, which I take baptism to be, primarily. It doesn't enhance sacredness, but it acknowledges it, and there is a power in that. I have felt it pass through me, so to speak. The sensation is of really knowing a creature, I mean really feeling its mysterious life and your own mysterious life at the same time. (*Gilead* 23)

For the "cosmic significance" of his act to be "a real question" for Ames is to affirm that this physical experience has real spiritual significance and that it may effect ontological change. *Acknowledging* the putative sacredness of a physical being is, in some mysterious way, to effect that sacredness. The intention behind the action transforms the nature of the action.

In another passage, Ames describes walking out onto the porch and glimpsing a profusion of fireflies as an occasion for thinking about the reflexive connection between the physical and spiritual/religious:

> [T]here were more fireflies out there than I had ever seen in my life, thousands of them everywhere, just drifting up out of the grass, extinguishing themselves in midair. We sat on the steps a good while in the dark and the silence, watching them. Finally Boughton said, 'Man is born to trouble as the sparks fly upward.' And really, it was that night as if the earth were smoldering. Well, it was, and it is. An old fire will make a dark husk for itself and settle in on its core, as in the case of this planet. I believe the same metaphor may describe the human individual, as well. Perhaps Gilead. Perhaps civilization. Prod a little and the sparks will fly. I don't know whether the verse put a blessing on the fireflies or the fireflies put a blessing on the verse, or if both of them together put a blessing on trouble, but I have loved them both a good deal ever since. (*Gilead* 72)

In Ames, we see a rather Emersonian approach to personal experience, a belief in the spiritual resonance of the natural world. As I develop more later on, this is characteristic of Robinson's own view as well.

In *Lila*, too, we see individual experience as the measure of the truth of religion. Lila emerges from a world vastly different from Ames' religion-saturated heartland town; largely uneducated, Lila was rescued from an abusive family by a kind drifter and spent her youth as a migrant laborer and her adult life working odd jobs to get by, including a stint in a brothel. Gilead is for Lila only a wayside stop as she hitchhikes to the vague destination of "Iowa," a place chosen at random for its lack of associations. Lila enters Ames's church for the first time simply to get out of the rain. As she absorbs some of Gilead's religious atmosphere, Lila is initially frustrated and skeptical of Ames's sacramental view of life: "She had a habit now of putting questions to him in her mind. What do you ever tell people in a sermon except that things that happen mean something? Some man dies somewhere a long time ago and that means something. People eat a bit of bread and that means something. Then why won't you say how you know that? Do you just talk that way because you're a preacher?" (*Lila* 34). Even as she judges Ames's religious practices from an outsider's perspective, Lila further confirms the view that

Robinson conveys through Ames in *Gilead*, which holds that the nature of existence is a source of awe and that the sacraments, like the act of baptism, are physical acts that carry spiritual and metaphysical weight.

In the following passage, Lila affirms both of these tenets. Lila here contemplates the meaning of existence, trying to comprehend Ames's sacramental view of mundane human life, and she concludes that if existence itself can be gratuitous yet meaningful then religious belief and practice, though extraneous and even unreasonable from the perspective of her own past life, may be meaningful after all:

> So if you don't need to exist, then there is no reason to think about other things you don't need as if they didn't matter. You don't need somebody standing beside you. You don't, but you do. Take away every pleasure—but you couldn't, because there can be pleasure in a sip of water. A thought. There was no reason for Doane to tie a ribbon on Marcelle's wrist, and that was why she laughed when he did it, and loved him for it. Why they all loved them both. There was no reason to let an old man dip his hand in water and touch it to your forehead, as if he loved you the way people do who would touch your face and your hair. You'd have thought those babies were his own. All right, she thought. All right. (*Lila* 76)

Lila comes to a decision about baptism based on a kind of natural theology or reasoning. Here, the gratuitous love of God and of the pastor is compared to the gratuitous love of two nonreligious acquaintances. Her thinking is rooted in her own experience, which Ames has insisted is the ultimate test of the truth of something. Lila sees that there is a purity of intention and a spiritual weight to the act that imbue yet also transcend the act itself. Lila wrestles with the concept of sacrament as she tries to wash off her baptism not long after the event, as she is uncertain of what she has committed herself to. (Ames later affirms what she has already intuited, that baptism cannot be washed off precisely because of its spiritually freighted nature.)

Lila brings this same homespun discrimination to her reading of Scripture. Lila can read and write but rudimentarily, and she seeks to improve her literacy by reading and copying passages from the only book she has, a Bible taken surreptitiously from Ames's church. Lila artlessly considers the biblical texts she copies, measuring them by her common sense, survivalist worldview. Lila first begins with Ezekiel, and she finds that her own experience makes even the most phantasmagoric passages somewhat intelligible:

> She wrote, *And I looked, and, behold, a stormy wind came out of the north, a great cloud, with a fire infolding itself, and a brightness round about it, and out of the midst thereof as it were glowing metal, out of the midst of the fire.* Well, that could have been a prairie fire in a drought year. She had never seen one, but she had heard stories. *And out of the midst thereof came the likeness of four living creatures. And this was their appearance: they had the likeness of a man. And every one had four faces, and every one of them had four wings.* Well, she didn't know what to make of that. A dream somebody had, and he wrote it down, and it ended up in this book. (*Lila* 68)

Lila recalls the origin of her own name, Lila Dahl, given to her on account of a misunderstanding, and she locates her own experience in the passage she has copied:

> . . . there was no one anywhere alive or dead with her name, since the first one belonged to the sister she never saw of a woman she barely remembered and the second one was just a mistake. Her name had the likeness of a name. She had the likeness of a woman, with hands but no face at all, since she never let herself see it. She had the likeness of a life, because she was all alone in it. She lived in the likeness of a house, with walls and a roof and a door that kept nothing in and nothing out. And when Doll took her up and swept her away, she had felt a likeness of wings. She thought, Strange as all this is, there might be something to it. (*Lila* 68)

Lila is gradually convinced that there is, indeed, "something to it." Reading of the barrage of calamities suffered by Job, Lila finds a sad but familiar tale in the great wind that flattens the house inhabited by Job's family: "She'd heard of that happening, plenty

of times. A wind could hit a town like Gilead and leave nothing behind but sticks and stumps. You'd think a man as careful as this Job might have had a storm cellar" (*Lila* 175). As to the loss and misery caused by a tornado, she thinks, "Nobody knew what to say about sorrow like that," presumably, remarking on the inadequacy of the responses of Job's interlocutors (*Lila* 176). Lila finds the congruence between the biblical stories and her own life surprising: "She never expected to find so many things she already knew about written down in a book" (*Lila* 176).

Lila comes to review her entire personal history in dialogue with her reading of the Scriptures. She reflects on her own birth while the reading the metaphor of birth employed by the author of Ezekiel to invoke God's covenant with Israel. Lila sees her own neglected childhood in the description of a child abandoned at birth and her own rescue in the description of the child's divine adoption. Lila reflects further on this passage later as she prepares to give birth to her own child, which she has conceived by Ames, a birth fraught with additional anxiety since Ames lost his first wife and child to complications of the birth. Lila, now pregnant and reflecting with gratitude on the fact that her child will be born into a loving family, thinks,

> *Then washed I thee with water; yea, I thoroughly washed away they blood from thee, and I anointed thee with oil*. The blood is just the shame of having no one who takes any care of you. Why should that be shame? A child is just a child. It can't help what happens to it, or doesn't happen. . . .
>
> Why did it matter? Doll had washed away her shame, some part of it, when she took her as a child. (*Lila* 135)

When Ames, now her husband, finds out Lila has begun her copying of the Bible with Ezekiel, he asks, "Why Ezekiel? That's a pretty sad book, I think. I mean, there's a lot of sadness in it. It's a difficult place to begin" (*Lila* 124-5). Ames's description of Ezekiel is true of Lila's own life, as well, and why she identifies so much with it. Scripture is, at

least initially, descriptive rather than normative for Lila. And her dialogic reflection on her own life impels her to a greater awareness of the awe and blessedness that mark life along with the sorrow and misfortune. While her experience departs greatly from that of her husband Ames, Lila, too, acknowledges that the very nature of existence is a source of awe on account of its own gratuitousness. Lila arrives at the insight that, "It could be that the wildest, strangest things in the Bible were the places where it touched earth," and surmises that Ames would see her in this light: "Then it might be that she seemed to him as if she came straight out of the Bible, knowing about all those things that can happen and nobody has the words to tell you" (*Lila* 226-7). This "biblical strangeness" comes to include her own life: its sorrows and tragedies as well as the unexpected joy of marriage and procreation. When the strangest parts of the Bible seem to make perfect sense in light of one's experience, the implication is that life itself is so wonderful and mysterious that nothing "supernatural" should seem that farfetched. Thus, in her own way, Lila understands the birth of her son as miraculous: "I could see your eyes behind your eyelids, and veins through the skin of your belly, and they were that blue that was never meant to be seen. It is so strange that it belongs in the Bible, with the seraphim and the dry bones" (*Lila* 250).

Spirituality and Community

The fruits of reflection upon personal experience extend beyond individual spirituality to life in community. Personal experience is, somewhat paradoxically, not only the source of affirmation of spiritual truth, but also the cause for humility on account of human fallibility. This humility, coupled with the notion of *imago dei*, informs the other-regarding perspective central to true community. Reflecting on a memory of his

father sharing with him an ash-covered biscuit, Ames explains to his son how the memory of an experience accrues layers of significance, as well as nuance and distortions, over time. Ames writes, "My point here is that you never do know the actual nature even of your own experience. Or perhaps it has no fixed and certain nature" (*Gilead* 95). This fluid nature of experience allows for the rousing character of memory but also gives cause for modesty in light of our proclivity for making experience conform to our flawed notions.

At another point in the novel, Ames, feeling inadequate and intellectually cornered in a conversation about American Christianity and its shortcomings, thinks,

> I was sitting there in my church, with the sweet and irrefragable daylight pouring in through the windows. And I felt, as I have often felt, that my failing the truth could have no bearing at all on the Truth itself, which could never conceivably be in any sense dependent on me or on anyone. And my heart rose up within me—that's exactly what it felt like—and I said, 'I have heard any number of fine sermons in my life, and I have known any number of deep souls. I am well aware that people find fault, but it seems to me to be presumptuous to judge the authenticity of anyone's religion, except one's own. And that is also presumptuous.'
>
> And I said, 'When this old sanctuary is full of silence and prayer, every book Karl Barth ever will write would not be a feather in the scales against it from the point of view of profundity, and I would not believe in Barth's own authenticity if I did not also believe he would know and recognize the truth of that, and honor it, too.' (*Gilead* 172-3)

Here again, we see that individual experience is both the measure of the truth of religion and that the *experience* of failure and inadequacy is also the basis for humility and generosity in evaluating the beliefs and practices of others. Anthony Domestico writes, "*Gilead* puts the lie to those critics who say that contemporary fiction doesn't engage seriously with religion. It shows how Christianity is both a lived practice and a system of belief, a deposit of artistic riches and an endless source of intellectual exploration" ("Blessings"). In her fiction, Robinson is very, if not primarily, interested in the way

characters experience God's grace through the world, more so than with Christianity as a practice. However, the humility to which I have referred above, that which is rooted in the recognition of fallibility, is one example of Robinson's engagement with Christianity as a lived practice.

This humility is where Robinson's rather individualistic Christianity achieves a communal dimension. Understanding, as Ames does, that one cannot lay claim even to an infallible grasp of one's own experience correlates with a respect for and generosity towards others. Gonzales rightly attributes to Robinson's work an insistence on the "axiomatic unknowability" of the other (380). This is borne out by a conversation between Ames and Lila, in which the two confess the inability to know fully even one's own spouse. This measure of unknowability need not lead to division or estrangement; rather, "our inability to completely know [the other] assures us of his value by reminding us of his singularity" (Gonzales 382). Again, we see Robinson's stress on the wondrous uniqueness of personal experience, here as the basis for the sacredness of the other, and "[t]he imperative that follows from recognition of this innate worth demands that we greet and welcome the other precisely because he is so different from us" (Gonzales 382). While "the impossibility of achieving certainty should not close off the subject's desire to ponder or consider" (Gonzales 380), it bids one to evaluate the words and deeds of others with a measure of grace.

The humility that is engendered by one's personal experience is also connected to the discipline of forgiveness, which Robinson suggests is foundational for true community. In her Gilead trilogy, Robinson suggests that forgiveness is indeed a discipline, as opposed to a singular or occasional act. Understanding other persons, to the

degree that we are capable, is predicated upon forgiveness. In *Home*, Glory thinks, "There is a saying that to understand is to forgive, but that is an error, so Papa used to say. You must forgive in order to understand. Until you forgive, you defend yourself against the possibility of understanding" (45).

If difference and singularity constitutes one component of a love ethic, the notion of the *imago dei* constitutes another component. Ames combines both components in his exegesis of the line from the Lord's Prayer, "Forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors":

> Jesus puts His hearer in the role of the father, of the one who forgives. Because if we are, so to speak, the debtor (and of course we are that, too), that suggests no graciousness in us. And grace is the great gift. So to be forgiven is only half the gift. The other half is that *we* also can forgive, restore, and liberate, and therefore we can feel the will of God enacted through us, which is the great restoration of ourselves to ourselves. (*Gilead* 161)

In terms of how Christianity shapes community and interpersonal relations in Robinson's work, Christianity most informs the practice of forgiveness, which is rooted in the notion of *imago dei*. In *Gilead* (and in the subtext of *Home* and *Lila*), Ames wrestles with forgiving and embracing his namesake, John Ames "Jack" Boughton. Jack, we come to learn, is a complicated man who means well and wants to act honorably, but his personal history includes some despicable acts, some of which have gravely offended Ames. In his continuing letter to his son, Ames writes of his resolve to view and embrace Jack as his own son, "I fell to thinking about the passage in the *Institutes* where it says the image of the Lord in anyone is much more than reason enough to love him, and that the Lord stands waiting to take our enemies' sins upon Himself. So it is a rejection of the reality of grace to hold our enemy at fault" (*Gilead* 189). For Ames, as for Calvin, even the

depraved (which includes all of us) carry the image of God, and while every human being boasts a singularity worthy of our wonder, every human being is likewise due our love and respect on account of carrying the image of God which is common to us all. Each individual is singular and yet universal on account of the *imago dei* he or she carries.

The Perils of Culturally Encrusted Religion

It is in the scenes that depict a failure to recognize the *imago dei* in the Other that Robinson exposes and censures what I will call culturally encrusted Christianity. While some of her essays outline a problematic view of the relationship between Christianity and American culture, Robinson's fiction highlights the dangers of a Christianity that is thoroughly culturally encrusted, by lovingly and humbly depicting failures of otherwise generous and exemplary individual characters. It is in these instances that Robinson most successfully critiques an anemic religion.

One example is the way Glory Boughton is treated by her father, Reverend Robert Boughton and the expectations she is burdened by. Laura Tanner writes that *Home* "unveils the invisible force of inscribed gender roles even as it exposes the connection between culturally maintained structures of gender, religion, and family. In locating the structural definitions of those categories outside the realm of articulation, Robinson encourages us to read the novel not only for what it represents but for what it fails to say" (39). The character of Glory, a late-thirties woman who has come home to care for her aging father and personally regroup after being jilted by her fiancé, finds herself taking on a thankless, culturally prescribed role of caretaker and dutiful daughter. Her father, a retired Presbyterian minister, seems hardly to notice her steady, faithful attentions while indulging her hapless, prodigal brother who has also come home for the first time in

twenty years. The novel's critique of the religio-culturally sanctioned gender roles foisted upon Glory is delivered subtly, by placing the reader directly into Glory's experience and compelling him or her to experience the constricting nature of Glory's life. As Tanner writes, "Glory's work to sustain not just the family home but its story necessitates the constant erasure of her embodied and articulating presence. By highlighting that erasure, Robinson documents historical realities of mid-century family life even as she locates the 'familially situated subject' within cultural and textual systems of representation" (40).

The novel, *Home*, links the shape of family life with religious tradition, highlighting the connection to expose its precarious and even insidious nature. The Boughton house has been the home of generations of ministers. In a sense, Glory is working to preserve that churchly environment, and it engenders her own eclipse, as the Boughton family's "genuflection to 'creeds and synods' assumes its secular counterpart in the scripted production of a domestic tableau meant to testify to the coherence and stability of the family" (Tanner 42-3). Tanner argues that by "rendering Jack's 'exile' from domestic life as the single challenge to their happy home, the Boughtons reinscribe the hegemonic force of a domestic ideal that the novel denaturalizes as it highlights the labor necessary to uphold the 'ordinary world' in which the family story is set" (Tanner 42-3). The sense of self and the peace that Glory gradually recovers is gained in spite of her inherited religious atmosphere.

Race and the struggle for equal civil rights constitute another area in which Robinson shows any potentially prophetic voice of Christianity to be stifled by its cultural bindings. Both Robert Boughton and John Ames prove themselves ignorant of racial dynamics and, in Boughton's case, downright racist. The Reverend Robert

Boughton eagerly identifies the image of God in his wayward favored son, Jack, but shows himself less capable of empathy toward the black community and their struggle for civil rights. Boughton's lack of empathy proves to be one of the factors that drives Jack away from him and away from Gilead once again. In one scene in *Home*, as Jack and his father watch as on the television police unleash dogs and truncheons upon black demonstrators, the Reverend notes Jack's look of indignation and remarks, "There's no reason to let that sort of trouble upset you. In six months nobody will remember one thing about it" (*Home* 97).

The elder Boughton is more perturbed by Jack's subsequent exclamation of "Jesus Christ!" at the sight of the excessive force being used in Montgomery than by the violence itself. He tells Jack, "I do believe it is necessary to enforce the law. The Apostle Paul says we should do everything 'decently and in order.' You can't have people running around the streets like that" (*Home* 98). Robert Boughton is a highly educated minister and a thoughtful man, yet here he repeats a common but pernicious platitude, ostensibly rooted in biblical reasoning. Jack, who has never been able to embrace his father's Christian faith, though he wishes he could, finds such callous thinking a further stumbling block to faith. Jack tries to initiate an honest conversation about race with his father and another minister, longtime family friend John Ames, by prompting them to read an article about the state of religion in America. Of the article, Jack says, "I thought he made the point in here somewhere that Americans' treatment of the Negro indicated a lack of religious seriousness" (*Gilead* 147), but his remark is dismissed, along with the rest of the article, by the two elder men. Jack's father reveals in several places throughout the novel his belief that segregation is the best and easiest thing for America, that with

"[s]o much bad blood . . . . we had all better just keep to ourselves" (*Home* 147). Every time that Jack broaches the subject, his father resorts to some form of popular conservative logic, insisting that while he has "nothing against the colored people," they are causing unnecessary trouble and bringing trouble upon themselves and that they will "need to improve themselves" if desegregation is to work (*Home* 155-6). Boughton even places moral censure upon the Montgomery protests for their violent nature, responding to Jack's assertion that the protests are non-violent by claiming that they provoke violence nonetheless (*Home* 204).

The reader learns by the end of the novel that Jack, the prodigal son, has been in a common law marriage to a black woman, with whom he has a young son, for nearly eight years. Jack has returned to Gilead to discern whether the town would be receptive to a biracial family. There is thus an additional layer of significance, unknown to his father Robert, when Jack asks him at dinner if he thinks the long-term consequences of the violence in Montgomery would be important and his father answers, "I don't believe there will be any consequences to speak of. These things come and go. The gravy is wonderful, by the way" (*Home* 183-4). Not only is the Reverend ignorant of the momentum and resolve of the civil rights movement, his insensitivity will have the consequence of making a prodigal once again of a son who might have returned home for good. Jack's experience upon his return to Gilead, and his conversations with his father and namesake, convince him that the former bastion of abolitionism would now be inhospitable to his family. Robinson's novel makes it clear that the way Christians like Boughton and even Ames handled race was a most egregious failure, and that it was

rooted in a lack of critical thinking due, at least in part, to an easy acceptance of popular American cultural attitudes.

Unable to have any productive conversation about racial equality with his father, Jack makes several attempts to discuss the subject with his namesake, John Ames. At one point, Jack asks Ames, "Do you ever wonder why American Christianity always seems to wait for the real thinking to be done elsewhere?" (*Gilead* 172). Ames finds himself backpedaling, becoming defensive and objecting to Jack's judgment, even though he recalls to himself having had the exact same thought before. Ames's response includes a half-hearted bromide about not judging another's religion. Ames berates himself afterward, for thwarting an honest conversation and implying unwarranted reproach in his response to Jack. Robinson conveys that a Christianity that becomes too comfortably situated in American culture loses its critical purchase, resulting in a failure of charity not only among larger segments of culture but even within one's own household, driving a wedge between friend and neighbor as well as between father and son.

From the perspective of this study, Robinson is at her best in these instances in which she clearly conveys the peril of allowing Christianity to become culturally encrusted. However, cultural cooptation seems to be a very real danger for the Christianity that Robinson presents in her essays. The remainder of this chapter moves through a series of comparisons, measuring Robinson against Reinhold Niebuhr, Jeffrey Stout, and George Kateb, in order to demonstrate that her democratic Christianity does not differ significantly from Emersonian perfectionism. These comparisons help to establish the similarities between Robinson's Calvinism and Transcendentalism, primarily as filtered through Emerson and down to Whitman. This step is necessary

because, while Transcendentalism broadly speaking may be considered a religious movement, Transcendentalism of the Emersonian variety bears certain qualities that have enabled Emerson's inheritors to adapt his political vision while dispensing with his religion. I aim to show that because Robinson's Calvinist vision offers little that cannot be found in Transcendentalism, there is no compelling reason that one cannot hang on to the political practices while letting go of the religious backing, as Stout, Kateb, and others have done with Emerson.

Robinson and Niebuhr: The Relevance of Christianity For a Democratic Society

Robinson's fiction subtly renders Christianity as a leavening force in American society, but her essays publicly declare the Calvinist Christianity to be not only relevant but foundational to American democracy. It is this stance has led critics to link her to Reinhold Niebuhr. Critic Michael Moats claims that Reinhold Niebuhr is Marilynne Robinson's "nearest predecessor in a line that traces back to Whitman and Emerson," because both are "deeply fascinated with the nature and destiny of human kind, and what we tell ourselves about those things at our moment in history" ("Review"). Robinson recognizes Niebuhr as one of the most influential theologians of his time, along with Barth and Tillich, and has stated repeatedly that theology has not progressed much since their day ("Interview"). She sees a lack of seriousness in American theology since Niebuhr and Tillich and states, "The loss of seriousness seems to me to be, in effect, a loss of hope" ("Gilead's Balm"). The fact that Robinson sees Niebuhr as the apex of American theology reveals quite a lot, especially as the most enduring criticism of

Niebuhr, at least by theologians, has been that his "Christian realism" is not distinctively Christian in any real way.[6]

Both Niebuhr and Robinson insist the Christian faith is relevant to politics, specifically American democracy. Both claim Christianity is foundational to democracy, and that democracy may easily slide to tyranny without its influence. Yet they differ in how they understand Christianity to be relevant. Niebuhr believed that the reason for "the rejection of the Christian drama of salvation lies in the modern conception of human nature," which refuses to view life as tragic, "rather than in any rejection of theological absurdities" (*Tragedy* 18). The Christian narrative lost traction because human beings bought into the notion of their own perfectibility and thus no longer needed a savior. Niebuhr saw Christianity as affirming the tragic, on one hand, and as redeeming human history and enabling it to transcend tragedy, on the other.

The relevance of the Christian faith for Niebuhr thus turns on his understanding of tragedy. Christianity alone lies "beyond tragedy." Tragedy as Niebuhr understands it is "the notion that human misery has its chief source in life's own contradictions, and chiefly in sin and rebellion" (Wood 7). Ultimately sin infiltrates even the noblest acts, but because we sin out of freedom rather than necessity, "Christianity does not regard the inevitability of guilt in all human creativity as inherent in the nature of human life" (*Tragedy* 165-66). Human complicity renders our situation finally ironic. We are not embroiled in tragedy merely in the effort to be human, nor are the necessities and contingencies of nature inherently evil. Contrasts are only ironic "if they are not merely

[6] Further proof evidence of this comes from President Obama's subscription to Niebuhr's thought. Obama has appealed to Niebuhr on several occasions, and it is clear that the Niebuhr Obama has in mind, the moral realist, requires no theological foundation. See E. J. Dionne, Jr., "Obama & Hiroshima's Moral Lessons: Ambivalence Is Not Always Weakness," in *Commonweal Magazine.* (https://www.commonwealmagazine.org/obama-hiroshimas-moral-lessons)

absurd, but have a hidden meaning" (*Irony* 54). Only the Christian vision, with the hope of the resurrection, prevents irony from sliding into despair. While ironic humor may "avoid the mistake of reducing the surrounding world into an easily explainable model" and thus provide a way of handling life's incongruity, when pushed to do real explanatory work it becomes a means to despair (Erwin 127, 135).

Niebuhr maintains that religion plays a positive and essential role in society. It is the fragrance of religion that piques the appetite for justice (*Moral Man* 80). Whenever religion involves itself with societal problems, in engenders a "millennial hope," which finds current conditions wanting and furnishes the courage to persist in redeeming society and eradicating injustice. This courage is indispensable, "for the task of building a just society seems always to be a hopeless one when only present realities and immediate possibilities are envisaged" (*Moral Man* 61). Religion imbues society with "ultrarational hopes and passions," without which we will never attempt the impossible, because "the vision of a just society is an impossible one, which can be approximated only by those who do not regard it as impossible" (*Moral Man* 81). The only alternative is despair.

Christian faith and love are always imperfect, but the faith of individuals is necessary to shape the hopes of society. Equal justice is the best alternative to the law of love as a political system because it is an attempt to check and neutralize the egoisms that ineluctably seep into love and social relations. The law of love is finally "involved in all approximations of justice, not only as the source of the norms of justice, but as an ultimate perspective by which their limitations are discovered" (Niebuhr, *Interpretation* 85). Niebuhr's realism is rooted in the idea that only by an awareness of our own fallenness can we attain the humility necessary to begin to work toward love. Forgiveness

does not require transcendence to an absolute perspective but a recognition of an absolute perspective from which we are all filthy sinners.

Robinson affirms Niebuhr's assessment that modern Americans have dispensed with the notion of original sin; she contends that we have attempted to liberate ourselves from the doctrine out of fear that it is a self-fulfilling prophecy. If we think ourselves better, we will be better. She notes that Tocqueville said America was great because Americans were good, then points out the paradox that those "good" Americans held a higher view of sin (*DOA* 157); thus the rejection of the concept of original sin has actually made Americans worse people. We remain convinced we should achieve perfection, yet we experience profound anxiety because we cannot ascertain why we continue to err. "Anxiety has taken on a life of its own," and so we lower the bar (*WWC* 41). We got rid of original sin, but, unlike Niebuhr's targeted audience, retained the pessimism. As a consequence, austerity has become both practical necessity and moral ideal. Robinson believes Americans *can* be better, and that religion endows us with the resources. The problem is not that we refuse to recognize the tragic view but that we accept it too readily and absolutely. She sees Christianity as salvific differently than Niebuhr: it accounts for humanity's fallen state, but it also affirms human dignity and provides resources for living democratically. If Niebuhr can say religion should inspire skepticism about even our loftiest social values, Robinson proclaims that religion fosters such values and indicts us for doubting them.

Without religion, human beings are prone to an exceedingly narrow understanding of what it means to be human. Robinson is well known for her insistence that science and religion are not enemies or mutually exclusive options but serve different

ends. *Absence of Mind* is her book-length dismantling of Neo-Darwinism and the "scientism" of Richard Dawkins and his ilk. In opposition, Robinson argues that the notion that religion is a primitive attempt to explain things better explained by science is a blatant misappropriation of religious texts and a confusion about the nature of religion (*WWC* 15). Religion helps keep science in its proper place, serving as a bulwark against deterministic theories of human nature and behavior that confront us with a stultifying and "diminished" picture of human experience. Without the grammar of religion, the mystery of human experience cannot be rightly named and described. Science cannot translate its findings into any larger frame of meaning or morality. Religion alone can account for human shortcomings and excessive pride that we all experience and perpetrate but refuse to recognize in ourselves. Calvinism, with its doctrine of predestination, entails a great sense of mystery, which Robinson says comports with our experience (*DOA* 157). This mystery, which comes from the fact that our fate rests with God alone and that all of us rely on grace, inculcates a spirit of generosity and humility: "The belief that we are all sinners gives us excellent grounds for forgiveness and self-forgiveness, and is kindlier than any expectation that we might be saints, even while it affirms the standards all of us fail to attain" (*DOA* 157). Our fallenness, for Robinson, holds the possibility of liberation. Along with Niebuhr, she sees such humility as foundational for democracy, but she sees democracy more in terms of love than in terms of justice: "Democracy, in its essence and genius, is imaginative love for and identification with a community with which, much of the time and in many ways, one may be in profound disagreement" (*WWC* 21, 27-8). This "imaginative love" is, for Robinson, foundational for community and for democratic life.

Furthermore, religion endows us with a higher estimation of human dignity and worth. Robinson claims that the doctrine of *imago dei* compels her to view the denigration of humanity as a sin ("Americans" 72). She turns to Jefferson and the founding fathers and emphasizes their conviction that "lacking the terms of religion, essential things cannot be said," explaining that the Constitution adopts Judeo-Christian language "to assert a particular form of human exceptionalism, one that anchors our nature, that is to say our dignity, in a reality outside the world of circumstance" (*WWC* 162-3). This aligns with Niebuhr's assertion that we can only know ourselves in relation to the absolute. To claim that we are made in the image of God is to ascribe a certain dignity to human beings, and the nebulousness of the deity as mentioned in the Constitution retains a degree of openness with regard to both human nature and God. A limited knowledge of the Creator is implied, so that we are free to work out this "image" as we go along, but our human worth is preserved.

Democracy is crucial to both thinkers. According to Niebuhr, "Man's capacity for justice makes democracy possible; but man's inclination for injustice makes democracy necessary" (*Children* vi). The pluralism entailed in democracy felicitously obviates any tyrannical consensus regarding the historical destiny of a nation, and the dispersal of power precludes any monopoly of it (*Irony* 11). For Robinson, democracy is actually more of a tradition, thoroughly shaped by its Calvinist heritage but with its own provenance. Although Robinson sees Christianity as relevant to democracy in many of the same ways as Niebuhr, when examined closely, her view of democracy is closer to that of Emersonian perfectionists like Jeffrey Stout than to Reinhold Niebuhr's.

Niebuhr holds that "The crown of irony lies in the fact that the most obvious forms of success are involved in failure on the ultimate level" (*Irony* 160). Robinson contends that the most obvious forms of success are evident in our tradition of democracy (rooted in Calvinism) and that we have simply abandoned them and are worse for it. Robinson and Niebuhr both believe it ironic that we are ultimately responsible for our own failures as a nation. The difference is that Robinson believes that we were once great and that we may regain that greatness, that by returning to our own historical resources we will be more just and more loving. Robinson sees the Calvinist tradition as the root of this glorious past and embarks on a revision and rediscovery of American history "to highlight what she perceives as a suppressed link between political liberalism and Christian faith" (Haddox 166).

Robinson points to our current education system as an example of how we have effectively dumbed ourselves down, intellectually and morally. She censures the form of capitalism that asks liberal arts departments and institutions to account for themselves in terms of financial gain, contending that such a mentality proves "that our idea of what a human being is has grown oppressively small and dull" (*WWC* 159). Robinson argues that if we examine our own American democratic tradition we will find "the unacknowledged fact that America has never been an especially capitalist country" (*WWC* 50). If we examine our history, we will find, "Western society at its best expresses the serene sort of courage that allows us to grant one another real safety, real autonomy, the means to think and act as judgment and conscience dictate. It assumes that this great mutual courtesy will bear its best fruit if we respect, educate, inform, and trust one another. This is the ethos that is at risk" (*WWC* 44-45). This ethos, according to

Robinson, is present in Calvinism. The biggest cause of our current situation is that we are severing ourselves from our Calvinist roots.

American Calvinist: A Tautology

Robinson is a Christian writer and a staunch Calvinist, and that is evident in her work. But some have charged Robinson with employing liberal values to interpret her religious tradition rather than demonstrating that liberal values may be traced to and rooted in Calvinism, as she claims. Todd Shy argues that Robinson's depiction of Calvinism is "ironically modern," framed by the concerns of liberal democracy – equality, social justice, and generosity (254). One way she takes a modern approach is by transferring attention "away from the majestic heights of Calvin-style revelation to the local authenticity of the individual" (254). While the liberal values she finds in Calvin are there in places, the concerns she brings to her mining of Calvin are shaped by later political developments.[7] Certainly Robinson's reading exemplifies the Transcendentalist attitude of transforming anything that is constraining. For my purposes, I am not concerned with the exact extent to which Robinson captures the original spirit of Calvin's work, though I recognize that this is a legitimate scholarly inquiry. I am concerned not with how modern Robinson's Calvinism is but with whether or not she coopts it. The most pressing question here is raised by Thomas Haddox: whether Robinson offers "a use

[7] Shy ultimately argues that Robinson's Calvinism is more a version of the classical humanism exemplified by Montaigne. He argues that ironically, "the same pressures driving Marx and Darwin, Nietzsche and Freud to articulate new ideas also pushed Christianity to redefine itself in more humanized terms – the terms Robinson is using" (254). Shy raises important issues, such as whether in a theological corpus as vast as Calvin's, one may not find the textual support for various, conflicting theological notions and worldviews. And it is curious that, while Robinson grounds her arguments in Calvin's own writings and successfully debunks caricatures of Calvin, she also ignores centuries of responsible criticism and interpretation of Calvin and has found no compatriots for her reading of him. I am not wholly convinced of Shy's argument on account of his own evidence; however, I am convinced that he makes a valid point about Robinson watering down a religious tradition until it becomes something else.

of orthodoxy more than a commitment to it" (188). Which brings us to the crux of the matter: is her "use" of orthodoxy one that compromises and corrodes its spiritual vitality? Haddox argues that in her essays, Robinson "emphasizes the deficiencies of contemporary life that might be remedied if Christianity were taken more seriously" (188). But her depiction is open to the question of whether Christianity need be taken more seriously. I aim to demonstrate in what follows that by Robinson's own terms Emerson and Whitman offer as valid a vision as Calvin.

In many of her essays, Robinson traces the tradition of American democracy back to Calvinist Christianity. Yet, her portrayal of the Calvinist tradition is exceedingly similar to Emersonian Transcendentalism in emphasizing primarily the role of personal experience and the divinely secured worth of the individual. While Jesus occasionally enters Robinson's essays, she seldom refers to the cross. The more one presses, the more Robinson's Calvinism lacks Christian distinctives, to the point that, as Amy Hungerford notes, it becomes as much or more of a *practice* than a belief (108). As a practice, Robinson's Calvinism aligns curiously closely with secular ethicist Jeffrey Stout's notion of democracy as a practice, which is grounded theoretically in an Emersonian form of Pragmatism. It is no coincidence that Robinson and Stout share American heroes in Whitman and Emerson. Robinson begins her essay collection, *When I Was a Child I Read Books*, by excerpting Whitman's *Democratic Vistas*: "America, if eligible at all to downfall and ruin, is eligible within herself . . . . these savage, wolfish parties alarm me" (qtd. *WWC* ix). This quotation sets the tone for the bulk of the volume; Robinson intends to persuade Americans that the responsibility for any current regress in national life rests upon them, and she believes, as Whitman did during the Gilded Age, that Americans live

now "in a political environment characterized by wolfishness and filled with blather" (qtd. *WWC* x). But it is not only demagogues and talking heads who are to blame; it is all of us, the American people, among whom Robinson proudly counts herself.

Robinson's primary subject of concern when turning to Calvin is more often than not Democracy (a proper noun as she uses it). Robinson conveys that she has much faith in Democracy, that in it lies the fullest potential of America. Lamentably, "In the desperations of the moment, . . . certain among us have turned on our heritage"; we have disowned our history (*WWC* x). This history rests in the Calvinist tradition, which Robinson contends is waning correlatively to American culture. According to Robinson, the resources of this tradition – the resources of America's history – hold the cure for our currently ailing democracy, which she claims is attacking itself. Robinson parallels the current condition of democracy and religion in America:

> There is a disturbing lack of confidence in democracy in the frightened resistance to the workings of democracy and its continuous evolution beyond the old constraints of traditional society and authoritarian government. It resembles nothing so much as the disturbing lack of faith in Christianity that puts the darkest interpretation on social change, religious diversity, foreign influence, the implications of science, and so much else besides. If Christianity expresses the nature and will of God, and if Christ will be with us even to the end of the age, why all this fear? If the United States is the greatest country on earth, why so little respect for its culture and people?" (*WWC* 138)

Robinson is here concerned with what Sacvan Bercovitch calls "federal eschatology" (*Origins* 161), as Emerson was in his call to Self-Reliance, which, as we will see, was not a call to *individualism* but to democratic individuality. While Robinson does not explicitly correlate Christianity and democracy in the above passage, she does so amply elsewhere in her work, and what emerges from Robinson's work is a tautology in which American and Christian are defined, to a large degree, in terms of one another. As a

result, Robinson's Calvinist Christianity not only lacks distinctiveness, it forfeits its prophetic purchase. Consider the use of "we" in the following passage:

> Where would we be if the Hebrew God had not said and insisted that human beings share his image and are sanctified by it? Do we have any other secure basis for belief in universal human dignity? There is no evidence at all that this is anything we know intuitively. We would not now have a sizable part of our own population walking around prepared to engage in homicidal violence if they truly believed that that young man in the hoodie was an image of God. If Christianity is thought of as a religion of personal salvation that allows one to sin now and repent at leisure, it is, one must say, almost limitlessly permissive. It virtually invites the flouting of Jesus' teachings. We can ignore what Jesus says and does, however we may admire it—with a few reservations—and love him most of all for the certainty that he will take us back, poor sinners, no matter what harm we may have done to those others he presumably loves just as much as he does us, or a little more. What protections he may have intended for them in his preachments he thoughtfully makes null and void in his ready forgiveness of those who violate these protections.
>
> But if Christianity is instead a metaphysics that resolves all reality at every moment into holiness, whether honored or offended against, then its demands are of a higher order entirely. This second, utterly sacred cosmos is the splendid old home of liberal Christian thought. (*Givenness* 170-1)

It would seem that "we" refers to Christians, likely those "unaccountably silent" old mainline Christians Robinson chastises at points in the essay. But pronominal ambiguity becomes apparent as throughout the essay she veers into a broader American viewpoint. She starts out the essay by discussing the differences between the American North and South, insisting that should the US fracture (again), "the fault line will lie along the old Mason-Dixon line" (*Givenness* 157). Two possibilities emerge: Robinson's essay is technically deficient in vacillating between audiences, or Robinson assumes that by writing to Christians she addresses all Americans. Robinson knowns that many Americans are not Christians; she says so in many places, and she demonstrates immense respect for all religions and those of none. Yet so often her writing reveals the tacit

assumption that American and Christian, at least *essentially* American and Christian overlap exceedingly in definition and character.

In an essay in which she portrays the Civil Rights Movement as the "Third Great Awakening," Robinson makes reference to an "essential America," characterized by "generosity and optimism." This she defines by the tenet of the *Declaration of Independence*, "We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights," a statement full of "explicitly religious language, of course, based on a reading of the creation narratives in Genesis" but which "functions as a powerful ethical statement for vast numbers of Americans who have no investment whatever in the authority of Scripture" (*Givenness* 95-6). This essential America, Robinson conveys, is not always actual America. The Civil Rights Movement, Robinson writes, she understood as "an essential America bursting the bonds that had distorted and constrained it" (*Givenness* 97-8). Robinson understands the Civil Rights Movement as a religious one, and she suggests that at this point in American history, as the "essential America" emerged, there existed an authentic and benignant American civil religion:

> If American civil religion can be said to have a congregation, I was a member in good standing—until certain shifts became apparent in the meaning and effect of religion in America. These changes made me realize that I had indeed allowed my culture to instruct me in my religion—to my benefit, during a period that was singularly worthy of the confidence I placed in it. This is to say, it was worthy as other periods, quite reliably, are not. (*Givenness* 97-8)

The implication of this passage is a conception of a true, "essential America," one that *by definition* contains a religious dimension. The litmus test of this true America is that it is characterized by a vision of equality and generosity.

Robinson is not naïve or ignorant; she does not view the notion of America as Christian nation to be unproblematic:

> We are all familiar with the assertion that America is a Christian nation. Obviously, I am not always sure what the people most inclined to say this actually mean by it. Those looking on from the outside are aware that we Christians have our factions, our rivalries, our quarrels. The fact is, however, that, demographically, we do preponderate. Demographically, America is Christian enough that what we do matters. We have a shared moral and ethical language that takes a particular authority from its origins—ideally, at least, or in principle. It has been pointed out many times that Christian morality is profoundly indebted to Judaism, and that it bears a strong likeness to the teachings of the other great religions. Well and good. This means that if we act as we ought to we will act consistently with the values of Americans at large, since even those Nones that show up in statistics now are alienated not by our ideals but by our hypocrisies. If an accident of history has made us a dominant presence here, the consonance of religions could make us worthy agents of values held in other terms and anchored in traditions other than our own. Conversely, as often as we fail to be their agents, every culture or faith with which we share these values suffers defeat. (*Givenness* 162-3)

And, elsewhere, in "Realism," Robinson makes a much more forceful point, arguing that America is a Christian nation by happenstance not by constitution:

> The stereotype of the population, in any significant part, as homogeneous enough to justify generalization is basically a version of racism and inverted ethnocentricity. If the census reveals patterns that seem to characterize us generally—Americans are more religious than Europeans, for example—this is certainly a consequence of our being populated in large part by minorities who identify with their communities—by our heterogeneity, in other words. Dutch Calvinists and Libyan Muslims check the same box. This may indeed represent a deep consensus, the benign and ironic consequence of the fact that there is no national religion, no Church of America. (*Givenness* 285)

Yet these passages belie what the preponderance of Robinson's essays suggest: America, at least *essential* America is a Christian nation. More specifically, we should say Calvinist-American, for Robinson acknowledges in several places that there are multiple senses of the word "Christian," and she takes care to distance herself from some of them:

"To my utter chagrin, at this moment in America [saying I am a Christian] can be taken to mean that I look favorably on the death penalty, that I object to food stamps or Medicaid, that I expect marriage equality to unknit the social fabric and bring down wrath, even that I believe Christianity itself to be imperiled by a sinister media cabal" (*Givenness* 159). Those uses of Christian with which she takes issue are portrayed as un-American. Calvinist comes to mean generosity, optimism, and equality. Robinson distinguishes between Christianity as an ethic and Christianity as an identity:

> Still, in the last few decades a profound, if relative, change has taken place in American society. No doubt as a consequence of a recent vogue for feeling culturally embattled, the word 'Christian' now is seen less as identifying an ethic, and more as identifying a demographic. On one hand I do not wish to overstate the degree to which these two uses of the word 'Christian' are mutually exclusive, and on the other hand I think it would be a very difficult thing to overstate how deeply incompatible they can be. This drift is the American version of a phenomenon that is clearly widespread throughout old Christendom. A ferocious secularism can carry on its internecine wars under the names Catholic and Protestant. (*Givenness* 98)

She is no doubt right that purely secular agendas have been and are pursued under the guise of religion. But, we have here "Christian" as an ethic and as a demographic, two uses which may or may not align. The important question is what Robinson understands to be constitutive of a Christian ethic, for this is the sense of "Christian" by which she would measure America. And it seems to recur always to some version of two things: equality and generosity. Here is the contradiction in Robinson's thought: she effectively says that if everyone would adopt *her* brand of Calvinism, then humility and equality would reign. She suggests that her Calvinism is the stay *against* crude nationalism or tribalism. Robinson rightly distinguishes between Christianity as an ethic and as an identity, but she then propounds the Christian ethic as a way of rescuing America from

the tribalism fostered by clinging too tightly to Christianity as a cultural identity. For example:

> I have mentioned the qualitative difference between Christianity as an ethic and Christianity as an identity. Christian ethics go steadfastly against the grain of what we consider human nature. The first will be last; to him who asks give; turn the other cheek; judge not. Identity, on the other hand, appeals to a constellation of the worst human impulses. It is worse than ordinary tribalism because it assumes a more than virtuous *us* on one side, and on the other a *them* who are very doubtful indeed, who are, in fact, a threat to all we hold dear. Western civilization is notoriously inclined to idealize itself, so it is inclined as well to forget how recently it did and suffered enormities because it insisted on distinctions of just this kind. If the claims to Christian identity we hear now are rooted in an instinctive tribalism, they are entirely inappropriate, certainly uninformed, because in its nature the religion they claim has no boundaries, no shibboleths, no genealogies or hereditary claimants. (*Givenness* 104-5)

Robinson seeks to rescue Christianity from association with politically extreme right-wing hyper-evangelicalism, but in so doing, she subordinates Christianity once again, to a different political vision: liberalism. Robinson recalls "the good that has been done, and has since been ridiculed and abandoned, by generosity as a social and moral ethic, by openhandedness as a strategy of wealth creation, material as well as social and cultural. By liberalism" (*Givenness* 161). Robinson confesses her loyalties to liberalism and seeks to defend it. In her attempt to do so, she enlists the Calvinist tradition as the original source of these values and the necessary current path for sustaining them. It seems that Robinson is primarily committed to an idea of America – a myth of America – and she adduces Calvin in support of that ideal. Her America of course is rooted in the historical America, but it transcends that history and enters the realm of myth. Robinson's idea of America is one founded by Puritans on a Calvinist foundation, but what it becomes, and what she stresses that Calvin offers us now to support it, boils down to a set of liberal

values. This reinforces the notion of an American civil religion, and compromises the vitality of religion by approaching it pragmatically.

Robinson and Jeffrey Stout: Democracy as a (Religious) Tradition

Robinson insists that "lacking the terms of religion, essential things cannot be said," explaining that the Constitution adopts Judeo-Christian language "to assert a particular form of human exceptionalism, one that anchors our nature, that is to say our dignity, in a reality outside the world of circumstance" (*WWC* 162-3). All the reasons Robinson argues that religion is relevant to democracy are said to be found in Calvinism, which has succored this nation for several centuries. But Robinson turns not only to Calvin and the Puritans but also to Whitman and Emerson. When pressed, the Calvinism Robinson asks us to return to is a very modern, liberal version of Calvinism, indeed one that is scarcely distinguishable from Emerson's vaguely theistic Transcendentalism. The outlook of Emersonian perfectionism, as held by Jeffrey Stout, suggests that we can keep the religious terminology and attitude and dispense with the divinity. We need to ask what Robinson's account offers that Emersonian perfectionism does not.

Emersonian perfectionism is the fruit of Emerson's notion of Self-Reliance filtered down through the American Pragmatists, and it is part of theoretical foundational for the mode of life George Kateb calls "democratic individuality" (which I explain below). This is a view that is religious by William James's definition but requires no supernatural or theological backing. It retains a concept of the soul that accords with Robinson's, affirms individual dignity, and posits ontological interdependency. In other words, it sounds a lot like Calvinism, as Robinson has it. Jeffrey Stout shares Robinson's belief that a religious attitude is fundamental to democracy. But for him, the religious

attitude is akin to the Emersonian understanding of piety, with its "virtuous acknowledgement of dependence on the sources of one's existence and progress through life" (J. Stout 30). Stout's *Democracy and Tradition* examines the relationship between the religion and democracy. Responding largely to Alasdair MacIntyre, who argues that the plurality of moral traditions competing in a democracy, each with its own vocabulary and grammar, hinders productive debate in the public sphere, Stout argues that democracy itself is a tradition, one sufficient to the civic unity necessary to sustain a nation. The ethical substance of this tradition, however, is reflective of "the enduring attitudes, concerns, dispositions, and patterns of conduct" rather than rooted in a conception of justice supposedly arrived at behind a veil of ignorance as John Rawls proposed (3). Stout's notion of a civic nation is one constituted by citizens bound together through shared practices and "normative commitments" to these practices (5).[8]

Stout is an atheist who nonetheless, in contrast to John Rawls and Richard Rorty, contends that religious voices should be heard in the public forum, although he also maintains that they are not fundamental to democracy and qualifies what sort of religious voices should be heard. Stout calls for a certain type of religious voice: one committed to what he sees as democratic ideals. He maintains that, "There is also something self-deceptive, and implicitly threatening, in the appeals to religion as a source of civic unity" (1). Robinson, however, makes exactly this appeal; she seeks to demonstrate a connection between Calvinist Christianity and political liberalism. Comparing her conception of religion with Stout's here will help us see that Robinson's religion differs from the type

[8] George Kateb, whose notion of democratic individuality has much in common with Stout's view, makes a very similar claim, arguing that "democratic culture is (or is becoming) a particularist stylization of life— that is, a distinctive set of appearances, habits, rituals, dress, ceremonies, folk traditions, and historical memories" ("Whitman" 19).

Stout views as undemocratic. While this makes her idea of religion more compatible with Stout's democratic tradition, it also raises questions about the nature of her religion.

Stout singles out "religious traditionalists" who believe that one must be rooted in a tradition to acquire the resources for ethical and political thinking and who wrongly "imagine modern democracy as the antithesis of tradition, as an inherently destructive, atomizing social force" (11). Stout distinguishes between two types of Augustinians and between "Emersonian and Augustinian religiosity" (20). There are those Augustinians like Niebuhr, whom Stout reservedly affirms, who see democracy as necessary, the best of a flawed set of options. Stout finds this form of Augustinianism compatible with democratic hope because it is an outlook that asks how things could and should be, rather than measuring the potential of democracy by the way things are. On the other end are "Augustinian traditionalists," who "take modern democracy to be vitiated through and through by its prideful and disastrous secularization of the political sphere" (27).[9]

Stout finds the piety of Augustinian traditionalists hostile to democracy and seeks to distinguish between the piety of this group and Emersonian piety. Emersonian piety is not a feeling but a virtue, consisting "in just or appropriate response to the sources of one's existence and progress through life" (20). "Just or appropriate" is central to this conception of piety, as it allows for due reverence for our influences and tradition but appraises critically so that it is not inherently conservative. While "Augustinian traditionalists" conceive of piety as allegiance to the powers that be, Emersonian piety constantly strives for ascension. There is no "fixed telos of perfection"; Emersonian perfectionism "is *always* in the process of projecting a higher conception of self to be achieved and leaving one's achieved self (but not its accumulated responsibilities)

[9] Stout has in mind here primarily Stanley Hauerwas.

behind" (29). This kind of piety – Emersonian piety – Stout argues is fundamental to democracy in that it recognizes the sources out of which the tradition is constructed and yet claims the right to continuous critical evaluation of those sources.

Stout sees the three quintessential American virtues as piety, hope, and love (or generosity). These virtues require no theistic beliefs but do entail commitment to a tradition. Stout draws these virtues from Whitman and Emerson, to whom Robinson also appeals; in fact, Robinson and Stout employ these two Transcendentalists in remarkably similar ways. Both point to Whitman as one who identified the problems facing American democracy in his time and who believed that the tradition is ongoing and must be constantly renewed and reconfigured. He was focused on the potential for American democracy, given its available resources and current state, rather than on what it was. Robinson appeals to Whitman and Emerson's "vision of the soul, all souls, realizing itself in the course of transforming everything that has constrained it and them . . . . [as] creeds fall away and consciousness has the character of revelation" (*WWC* xiv). Human experience is Robinson's starting point, as is for Stout. She intimates here that religious creeds may be put to bed when felt to be constraining, while she aligns with Emersonian piety requiring a continual weighing and measuring of its object. It "means that one is, at least implicitly, employing one's own standards of worth," which are informed by the sources of existence but finally determined by one's own context and values (Stout 31).

From Emerson and Whitman, Robinson, too, draws a vision of democracy: "To identify sacred mystery with every individual experience, every life, giving the word its largest sense, is to arrive at democracy as an ideal, and to accept the difficult obligation to honor others and oneself with something approaching due reverence" (*WWC* xiv). And

Robinson understands her vision of democracy, based on the mystical and sacred character of human experience, as religious: "It is a vision that is wholly religious though by no means sectarian, wholly realist in acknowledging the great truth of the centrality of human consciousness, wholly open in that it anticipates and welcomes the disruption of present values in the course of finding truer ones" (*WWC* xiv). This is virtually identical to Stout's Emersonian pragmatism.[10] A closer look at the similarities Robinson has to Whitman and to Emerson will give us a fuller picture of the identification between her Calvinist Christianity and Emersonian perfectionism.

The Transcendentalist Robinson

In the following section, I aim to make explicit the (Emersonian) Transcendentalist bent of Robinson's Calvinism. I attempt to establish a rough genealogy from Transcendentalism to Pragmatism to the contemporary Emersonian Perfectionism that requires no religious backing, in order to demonstrate that Robinson's Calvinism bears a strong family resemblance to Emersonian Perfectionism. And I posit that this has two implications for Robinson's work. First, it compromises her argument that American national health rests on our recuperation of the Calvinist Christian tradition. Second, her account of Calvinism is subjected to a Pragmatist accounting and is thus co-opted by American culture.

I must begin by broadly sketching the religious character of Transcendentalism. While there has been debate about Emerson's religiosity (he was religious at least by Williams James's standards), Transcendentalism was an essentially religious movement originating in the Unitarian church (Buell, *Transcendentalism* 4-5). While it was also an

[10] Stout uses the terms Emersonian pragmatism and Emersonian perfectionism interchangeably.

aesthetic movement, as Lawrence Buell has demonstrated, its art and aesthetics were rooted in and shaped by its theology (*Transcendentalism* 39). There were within the movement varying religious views and degrees of religious fervor. Some members remained within the Unitarian denomination, a few, like Theodore Parker and W. H. Channing as ministers. Orestes Brownson eventually converted to Catholicism. Thoreau and Emerson were heterodox by the most generous of estimates. What united them all was their belief in a "higher Reason" and the emphasis they placed on the role of personal experience in communing with the divine. According to Buell, the central principle of Transcendentalism was "the affirmation of man's ability to experience God firsthand," and the "central message of Transcendentalism itself [was] the idea of divine immanence" (*Transcendentalism* 45). This brief sketch of Transcendentalism covers much of what Robinson has to say about Calvinism; she takes care to paint a picture of Calvinism as a religious faith in which personal experience and divine immanence play key roles. Robinson also appeals to this side of Calvinism as underwriting American democratic practice, and thus I want to focus primarily on Emerson and to lesser extent Whitman, of the Transcendentalists, because 1) we see in them the intersection of religion and politics very explicitly, and 2) because some thinkers who share Robinson's democratic concerns have found it possible with Whitman and, especially, Emerson to keep the politics and lose the religion, a danger I believe inheres in Robinson's work.

It should be no surprise that Robinson's thought bears much in common with Emerson and Whitman, as the latter two were both immersed in the Calvinist tradition (as were many American artists and thinkers of the time). Robinson insists that Whitman "was a Quaker and he wrote like one" (*WWC* xiii). What is important for my argument is

how Emerson and Whitman appropriate the religious tradition from which they came, and the ways in which Robinson mirrors them. I turn now to two concepts that are central to Robinson's vision of democratic community – the soul and religious experience – and compare her views to Whitman's and Emerson's in order determine whether Robinson's Calvinism contains anything that we cannot find in Emerson and Whitman. And if not, as I suggest, we must address how that affects Robinson's contention that the Calvinist tradition is fundamental to American culture and political practice. In addition to the fact that Robinson draws upon their work, I turn to Emerson and Whitman because they serve as the bridge between religion and politics in America, bringing a religious vision to bear on democratic culture in such a way as to impute to it transcendence. Moreover, theirs is a vision that Jeffrey Stout, George Kateb, and others like Stanley Cavell argue can be sheered of its religious dimension.

Emerson and Religious Experience

The *imago dei* is a major part of the foundation of Robinson's religious vision, underwriting charity, humility, and a wonder. Robinson stresses the importance of the notion of *imago dei* for living in community, where its primary function is to secure the dignity of the individual and foster equality. Robinson writes, regarding one of the many instances of violence resulting from racial profiling, "we would not now have a sizable part of our own population walking around prepared to engage in homicidal violence if they truly believed that that young man in the hoodie was an image of God" (*Givenness* 170). (Her fiction reveals the problem to be more insidious, ensnaring even otherwise upright men of the cloth.) Robinson's statement is doubtless true, but the question remains whether we must look to Calvinism as the anchor for this idea, as Robinson

insists that we should. The humanist vision Robinson paints so movingly in her fiction, which includes an ontology of interdependence and the conviction of the divine worth of every individual, she underwrites in her essays with a humanist reading of Calvin. Here is a representative passage on Calvin:

> Calvin constantly distinguishes between merit, a theological concept important in his time that he and the Reformation vehemently rejected, and the objective fact that we are made a little less than God and crowned with glory and honor. To worship God in the Creation is to celebrate as well the fact that we ourselves are created, and strangely and wonderfully made. Our honor and glory are not our own doing, and are only more precious, more to be enjoyed and explored, for this reason. (*Givenness* 201)

As with this passage on the *imago dei*, Robinson typically appeals to Calvin in support of a humanist, even anthropocentric, vision of the relation between God and human beings. (I do not mean anthropocentric pejoratively here. As Thomas Haddox has suggested, Robinson does a service to Calvin by offering a corrective to the facile caricature he has often been made into (187): the pessimist who delights in God's indiscriminate assignation of some souls to eternal perdition.) Robinson does not deny that Calvin wrote much about sin, but she takes care to establish that Calvin was not atypical of his era in his insistence upon our depravity: "Then there is the other side, of course, our thoroughgoing sinfulness. . . . Calvin's sense of human depravity, however honestly come by, is by far the most conventional aspect of his thought. He is unique, so far as I can tell, in rescuing out of the general ruin the whole human being, body, mind, and spirit" (*Givenness* 227-8). Robinson unveils the side of Calvin who delights in the wonders of physical being and the beauty of creation, the Calvin who values individual religious experience. In another passage, she writes,

> My particular saint, John Calvin, says that our brilliance, our inventiveness, our imagination, our need to understand the movements of the stars and the planets, are unmistakable proofs of the existence of the soul. He says that in descending into ourselves we find God, we being the products of such exquisite workmanship. In his praise of humankind, of God therefore, he makes no distinction between the body's intricacy and adeptness and the mind's or soul's agility and fluency. (*Givenness* 227)

The line of thought evinced in this passage is a form of natural theology, one that is not distinctively Christian. That is not to say Robinson *must* be distinctively Christian always; I only wish to point out, for now, that Robinson adduces Calvin to make a point that is far from unique to Calvin. Robinson's appeal to Calvin here could as well be an appeal to Emerson or Whitman, both of whom also thought, in their way, that "by descending into ourselves we find God."

The role of personal experience within religion was central for Emerson. Perhaps no one has drawn more attention to the character and role of religious experience than one whom Emerson influenced, William James, whom Robinson cites a number of times and explicitly claims as an influence on her understanding of the role of experience in human life. Robinson affirms "the Jamesian view" of the relation of experience to knowledge, concurring "that what we know about anything is determined by the way we encounter it, and therefore we should never assume that our knowledge of anything is more than partial" (*Givenness* 229). Because of Robinson's adoption of James, a consideration of the influence Emerson had on James is instructive for grasping Robinson's work. Buell has shown that Emerson heavily influenced James's understanding of religion as experience, writing that "Emerson serves James . . . as an entering wedge to justify broadening the concept of 'the divine' into 'any object that is god*like*, whether it be a concrete deity or not' and for identifying spiritual activity as the

site of the religious rather than dogma, church, or transcendent domain" (Buell, *Emerson* 181-2). James comes to define religion as essentially "the feelings, acts, and experiences of individual men in their solitude, so far as they apprehend themselves to stand in relation to whatever they may consider the divine" (*Varieties* 36, qtd. Buell 181). This is religion as a sociological phenomenon, reduced to empirical data; religious experience here is something that may be separated from truth claims and from theology. The other authors in my study suggest that it is a matter of importance "whatever [one] may consider the divine," in terms of the content of the "feelings, acts, and experiences," which may be fulfilling or enervating. James is simply describing here what he understands religious experience to be, not writing theology. But the isolation of religious experience as a phenomenon can lead to the normativization (or standardization) of the "feelings, acts, and experiences" in a way so that they may be directed toward a putative Transcendent of virtually any kind, one that may be "godlike" but not considered divine at all.

Considering the influence of Emerson on James, it is an important question, who or what was Emerson's god? What did he "consider the divine"? Lawrence Buell, after surveying statements about God that Emerson made at points throughout his life, concludes, "The rough answer is that Emerson's god is an immanent god, an indwelling property of human personhood and physical nature, not located in some otherworldly realm" (*Emerson* 162). While this account of divine immanence seems like an adaptation (or perversion) of the Puritan concept of the inner light, Emerson did not understand the divine as wholly reducible to human conscience and subjectivity: there is a sense in

which Emerson's god is transcendent, and that is his understanding of the "impersonality" of the divine.

Buell identifies a dichotomy in Emerson's thought that scholars have never fully accounted for: "We have yet to grasp the full significance of this, his most contrarian act of intellectual radicalism: his insistence both on a God-in-me and on the 'impersonality' of the divine" (*Emerson* 162). Buell posits that Emerson simultaneously affirmed a monism and an individualism which were interdependent, arguing that "[w]hat counted most for [Emerson] was individual spiritual experience, but 'impersonality' was what authenticated it" (Buell 164). William James offers an enlightening account of this paradox in Emerson's thought:

> [Emerson's] metaphysics consisted in the platonic belief that the foundation of all things is an overarching Reason. Sometimes he calls this divine principle the Intellect, sometimes "the Soul," [elsewhere] the One. Whate'er we call it, we are at one with it so far as our moments of insight go. But no one moment can go very far, and no one man can lay down the law for others, for their angles of vision may be as sacred as his own. Hence two tendencies in Emerson, one towards absolute Monism; the other towards radical individualism. They sound contradictory enough; but he held to each of them in its extremist form. ("Emerson 1905," qtd. Buell 163)

These two poles of Emerson's thought – monism and individualism – are evident in this passage from his journal: "The height of Culture, highest behavior, consist[s] in the identification of the Ego with the universe," but such a one "shall be able continually to keep sight of his biographical *ego*," indenturing it "as rhetoric, fun, or footman, to his grand & public *ego*, without impertinence or ever confounding them" (*JMN* II: 203, qtd. Buell 76-77). Emerson's belief in this higher Reason, his monism, was ultimately a safeguard against the "whim" he fancies of writing on his doorpost in *Self-Reliance* (Buell, *Emerson* 168-9). Emerson's monism allows him a means of calling forth

everyone to his or her genius; it is the standard for what has come to be known as his "perfectionism." Thus Stanley Cavell writes,

> Emersonian perfectionism—place it as the thought that "the main enterprise of the world for splendor, for extent, is the upbuilding of a man"—is not an elitist call to subject oneself to great individuals (to the "one of two men" "in a century, in a millennium") but to the greatness, the thing Emerson calls by the ancient name of the genius, in each of us; it is the quest he calls "becoming what one is" and, I think, "standing for humanity." (184)

Emerson thought that in realizing one's full potential one "stands for humanity" or proves the potential latent in all of us. For Emerson, this call to greatness was bound up with American destiny; in correlating the individual and the collective, Emerson is tying individual citizens to America as a nation. This connection, what Bercovtich calls the "The Emersonian triad [of] American nature, the American self, and American destiny" (*Origins* 178), rests upon a democratization of the Calvinist notion of predestination. Emerson's religious vision and his political vision (political in the broad sense of the word) are intimately connected.

According to Lawrence Buell, Emerson held the

> conviction that though everyone falls short of self-realization much of the time, everyone has self-transformative capacity. "The American Scholar" significantly holds up as the two definitive signs of the times the importance attached to the individual person and the importance attached to ordinary life. Capping Emerson's celebration of the first is the image not of isolated heroes but of a nation of men in which "each believes himself inspired by the Divine Soul which also inspires all men" (*W* I: 70). The Puritan doctrine of a predestined elect is here stretched to include potentially everyone, in a democratized vision of the inherent equality and value of persons. (Buell 62-3)

The "elect" no longer refers to a certain segment of humanity or to a religious group but to all Americans and to America as a nation. Emerson has been accused of being elitist, and certainly in places he derides the hoi polloi. Yet, Emerson also writes "there is

somewhat spheral and infinite in every man," and, "Rightly, every man is a channel through which heaven floweth, and, whilst I fancied I was criticising him, I was censuring or rather terminating my own soul" (*Works* 3: 142, qtd. Buell 76). Robinson applies the Puritan (Calvinist) tradition analogously, in her use of the notion of *imago dei* and her connection of the soul to personal experience: she, too, turns to religion for a framework which affirms the worth and potential of every human being while also positing an ontological interdependency, and this framework is used to ratify democratic practice. Buell highlights the political import of Emerson's "democratized" Puritan vision: "It's especially at this point, the celebration of the latent capacities of *all* individual persons, that Self-Reliance begins to look most like 'democratic individuality' as against liberal individualism" (*Emerson* 76).

"Democratic individuality," which I discuss in depth below, is a political theory rooted in Emersonian pragmatism, and it is the modern fruit of a lineage that runs from Emerson through William James and John Dewey to George Kateb and Jeffrey Stout. It is Emerson's belief that each individual is both sovereign and connected to others that has led George Kateb to consider Emerson as *the* founder of American political thought and practice. According to Lawrence Buell, "If Emerson relativized Christianity in order to authorize religious sentiment, James relativized religion in a still more 'democratic' direction in order to assure more equal respect for temperamental difference" (*Emerson* 184). At the risk of generalization, this democratization of religious experience paves the way for the view of religion held by the Pragmatists, whose "impression of Emerson [is that of] preparing the way for James's and Dewey's understanding of moral and spiritual 'truth' as justified by its productive value for individual lives and (for Dewey, especially)

the amelioration of community and society" (Buell, *Emerson* 221). It is in this vein that Robinson presents Calvinism:

> The activism, even radicalism, of this [Calvinist] tradition is inscribed very deeply on modern and American history. At the same time it was characterized by a striking inwardness, based on an immediate, an unmediated, conversation between the Lord and the individual soul. God's language in his discourse with humankind was taken to be experience, personal and historical, intellectual and sensory, emotional. All this yielded some good novels and some fine poetry. It created a number of excellent universities. I put it in the past tense because I no longer see much trace of it in American culture. Perhaps I am too close to the situation to be a reliable judge. (*Givenness* 100-1)

Robinson recurs often to the Calvinist tradition as the source of much, if not all, that is praiseworthy in American culture. Unsurprisingly, Robinson writes, "I have been impressed for some time by American philosophical pragmatism, at least as I understand it, or as I find it useful in my own thinking" (*Givenness* 73). Robinson even argues for James's kinship to Jonathan Edwards, on account of their shared assertion "that a kind of experience felt as religious and mediated through the emotions does sometimes have formidable and highly characteristic effects on personality and behavior that are available to observation" (*Givenness* 73). Buell notes that John Dewey, founder of American Pragmatism along with William James, "admired Emerson immoderately" but "had no interest in what, if anything, Emerson thought about God" (*Emerson* 158). Robinson justifies Calvinist Christianity by its salutary influence on American society. In doing so, she seems to subordinate it to the larger aim of sustaining American culture, and she runs the risk that her *religion becomes parochialized*.

Whitman And The Soul

George Kateb maintains that Whitman, along with Emerson and Thoreau, is one the founding philosophers of what he calls democratic individuality and of American democratic culture. These three accomplished "[t]he invaluable work of glimpsing evidences of democratic extraordinariness and democratic transcendence in the United States (then the only democracy), and of proceeding to theorize them in order to encourage them" (Kateb, *Inner Ocean* 32). It is Whitman's account of the human soul that most interests Kateb, and in this section I intend to show how closely Robinson's account of the soul parallels Whitman's.

Robinson, following Calvin, cites personal experience as witness to the existence of the soul (*Givenness* 227). Robinson aims to rehabilitate the notion of the soul, to reestablish reverence for the natural world and the worth of the individual self by combatting the longstanding divorce of soul from body, which she argues "has spiritualized the soul out of meaningful existence and de-spiritualized the world into an object of contempt at worst, or, more typically, a thing defined by its difference from anything called spiritual, which includes, as I have said, almost everything that is distinctively human" (*Givenness* 232). Similarly to her use of *imago dei*, Robinson stresses the need to recognize the existence of the human soul, which she correlates to personal experience, because this, too, leads us to an awareness of our connectedness to others. She writes, "the concept 'soul' allows us to acknowledge the richness and variety of the experience of the self," and, "A more considered understanding of the soul, as an experience that I think we do share, would put an end to these mystifications about its physical locus" (*Givenness* 228). "Soul" here functions as a way of recognizing both

individual selfhood and universal humanity. Affirming the soul is also a means of affirming a higher moral order: "Surely no skeptic could doubt that a sound intuition lies behind the recognition of a profounder moral reality than any we have attained to. Grant it reality in an ontological sense—is there another one?—and there are important interpretive consequences, cosmologically speaking" (*Givenness* 234). Robinson presents this "moral reality" as an ontological reality, rather than a transcendental one, but the key point here is that we *intuit* its existence, based on our personal experience and the acknowledgement of individual worth.

The concept of soul is important to Robinson's understanding of how, and if, we may live in community. But, again, her notion of soul, taken from Calvin, is hardly unique to Calvin. Let us turn, momentarily, to Whitman's concept of the soul. In an essay on Whitman as "philosopher of democratic culture," political theorist George Kateb provides a careful, trenchant analysis of Whitman's understanding of individuality, including the self and the soul. "Soul" occurs frequently throughout Whitman's work, and Kateb argues that it has for Whitman both a secular and a religious sense, which do at times overlap. The secular soul is essentially human potentiality, the vast catalogue of all that one might do, believe, become, and desire. In its religious sense, "soul is unique and unalterable individual identity; one's genius or 'eidolon'; the 'real Me' . . . . It seems to be untouched by experience, and it survives death to find numberless incarnations" (Kateb, "Whitman" 24). To both senses of soul, the body is of the greatest value, especially to the secular soul which is inextricably connected to the body. The self (the ego), for Whitman, is the author of one's personality. It "is active self-consciousness and disciplined creative energy" that "realizes one or another potentiality of the soul (and

body). The personality is what is immediately recognizable by others" (Kateb, "Whitman" 24-5).

Whitman often speaks of the soul in his poetry. In "Starting from Paumanok" he writes, "And I will not make a poem nor the least part of a poem but has reference to the soul, / Because having look'd at the objects of the universe, I find there is no one nor any particle of one but has reference to the soul" (175-176). These lines suggest a correspondence between the soul, which is common to all human beings as a reservoir of potentiality, and everything in the universe. The following movement of the same poem offers a similar view:

> Was somebody asking to see the soul?
> See, your own shape and countenance, persons, substances, beasts,
> the trees, the running rivers, the rocks and sands.
>
> All hold spiritual joys and afterwards loosen them;
> How can the real body ever die and be buried?
> . . . . . .
>
> Behold, the body includes and is the meaning, the main concern,
> and includes and is the soul;
> Whoever you are, how superb and how divine is your body, or any
> part of it! (177-180, 187-188)

Again, the soul is linked both to the body and to all that one experiences that is outside the self. In *Song of Myself*, the mutual connectedness of human beings becomes the basis to affirm the equality of all individuals: "I believe in you my soul, the other I am must not abase itself to you, / And you must not be abased to the other" (82-83). In his great catalogue of Americana, Whitman does more than ascribe equal dignity to all walks of life. His aim is more complex and difficult than simply suggesting that everything is beautiful: Whitman wants nothing less than to make the reader see that she is connected to everything outside of herself because all of it *is* a part of her soul. Thus, "the

unbeautiful are not just unbeautiful and that the wicked are not just wicked," because both are integrally connected to the beautiful and the good (Kateb, "Whitman" 32). In the following stanza from *Song of Myself*, Whitman links body and soul, and well as oneself and all other selves, by defining them in terms of each other:

> I have said that the soul is not more than the body,
> And I have said that the body is not more than the soul,
> And nothing, not God, is greater to one than one's self is,
> And whoever walks a furlong without sympathy walks to his own
> funeral drest in his shroud,
> And I or you pocketless of a dime may purchase the pick of the
> earth,
> And to glance with an eye or show a bean in its pod confounds
> the learning of all times,
> And there is no trade or employment but the young man following
> it may become a hero,
> And there is no object so soft but it makes a hub for the wheel'd
> universe,
> And I say to any man or woman, Let your soul stand cool and
> composed before a million universes. (1269-1277)

Though Whitman places the self at the pinnacle of worth, any self that lacks sympathy is no self at all; the unsympathetic individual is *essentially* lacking. Kateb is primarily interested in Whitman as a philosopher of democratic culture, (which is how Robinson uses Whitman as well, we will see), and is therefore most absorbed by Whitman's view of the "secular" soul, which Kateb believes is the basis for democratic individuality. Kateb defines democratic individuality as characterized by three tenets: "self-expression, resistance in behalf of others, and receptivity or responsiveness (being 'hospitable') to others," ("Whitman" 20). Kateb says that the last of the three is easily the most critical for Emersonians and that there is where Whitman's greatness lies: in fostering a vision of individuality characterized essentially by such receptivity. The foundation of receptive living is an understanding of the potentiality common to every individual or, in other

words, a sense of the (secular) soul possessed by all. The particular virtue of this kind of receptivity or responsiveness is that it inspires a "connectedness [that] is not the same as nationhood or group identity" (Kateb, "Whitman" 21).

In Whitman's view of the "secular" soul, the soul harbors all human potentiality, and, while the individual personality that one becomes constitutes only one, inherently limited and selective, expression of potentiality, one understands that *all* human beings are partial expressions of the same vast human soul. With this conception of the soul, Whitman implies two crucial ideas: "All the personalities that I encounter, I already am: That is to say, I could become or could have become something like what others are; that necessarily means, in turn, that all of us are always indefinitely more than we actually are. I am potentially all personalities, and we equally are infinite potentialities" (Kateb, "Whitman 25). By Kateb's insightful reading, Whitman impels us to see ourselves in others and to see others in ourselves: "Every individual is composed of potentialities. Therefore, when I perceive or take in other human beings as they lead their lives or play their parts, I am only encountering external actualizations of some of the countless number of potentialities in me, in my soul" ("Whitman" 23). There is a correspondence between others and oneself that foster receptivity; we understand the actions, choices, and instincts of others to be our own, in that, even if we have done or felt otherwise, we recognize the potential to have acted or felt likewise. This has great ramifications for democratic life, as "[t]he deepest moral and existential meaning of equal rights is this kind of equal recognition granted by every individual to every individual. Democratic connectedness is mutual acceptance. Rejection of any other human being, for one reason or another, for apparently good reasons as well as for bad ones, is self-rejection" (Kateb,

"Whitman" 26). This receptivity imbues our judgment of others with clemency and tempers the desire to punish.

In *Gilead*, Robinson gives us a picture of the receptivity engendered by this understanding of soul, as John Ames speaks of the "incandescence" he senses in others, especially during vulnerable conversations like confession or "unburdening":

> When people come to speak to me, whatever they say, I am struck by a kind of incandescence in them, the "I" whose predicate can be "love" or "fear" or "want," and whose object can be "someone" or "nothing" and it won't really matter, because the loveliness is just in that presence, shaped around "I" like a flame on a wick, emanating itself in grief and guilt and joy and whatever else. But quick, and avid, and resourceful. To see this aspect of life is a privilege of the ministry which is seldom mentioned. (*Gilead* 44-45)

As I argued above, Robinson's fiction, through her choice of focalizing characters and her insistence on the role of personal experience in shaping selfhood, impresses upon the reader that one could very easily have been someone else and led another life entirely. Robinson appeals to the *imago dei* to encourage this view of others as ensouled individuals. Her aim (or at least an aim) closely resembles Whitman's here, and it is in the service of extolling and reinforcing democratic culture, a very particular form of individualism. Both figures see an integral connection between experience and equal recognition.

At the same time, a view to our own composite nature (our connectedness) bestows a concomitant sense of one's own strangeness. To a degree, one becomes alien or "unknowable" to oneself because one's own personality is so incomplete of a picture of the soul. The more one realizes himself to be composite, the stranger he becomes to himself. But this, too, serves a moral end: "[t]he ideas of the individual as composite, and of the individual as honestly unfamiliar to itself, are ways of awakening all of us to

human equality on the highest moral and existential plane. To admit one's compositeness and ultimate unknowability is to open oneself to a kinship to others that is defined by receptivity or responsiveness to them" (Kateb, "Whitman" 31). Robinson, too, emphasizes this mystery of human life. She claims, "There is at present a dearth of human imagination for the integrity and mystery of other lives" (*WWC* 45), and she believes this lack of imagination, which is connected with a paucity of other-regard, contributes to the waning of Western culture.

Whitman and Robinson believe that democratic individuality is a heroic way of life because "[t]o live democratically, to live receptively and responsively, is risky, and therefore the invitation to it is easily resisted" (Kateb, "Whitman" 32). Democratic individuality differs sharply from liberal individualism in positing that all democratic individuals are radically connected; there is a contingency that requires courage to sustain. Robinson writes, "Western society at its best expresses the serene sort of courage that allows us to grant one another real safety, real autonomy, the means to think and act as judgment and conscience dictate. It assumes that this great mutual courtesy will bear its best fruit if we respect, educate, inform, and trust one another" (*WWC* 44-5). Robinson and Whitman both affirm a religious conception of the soul that mitigates the risk involved in democratic living and offers a sense of stability. Kateb (begrudgingly) writes that Whitman is not satisfied that the whole of one's identity consists in "the simple fact that one's stream of consciousness — the mingling of self and soul on the terms of neither — is one's own and no one else's"; rather, as guarantor of individual uniqueness, "Whitman wants to affirm his faith that deep down in the person is something that is both

distinctive and unchanging. What is involved is a religious conception of soul as unique and unalterable identity, whether immortal or not" ("Whitman" 35).

Yet Kateb argues that Whitman's religious notion of the soul is not only extraneous but is inimical to the radically democratic nature of his vision. Kateb writes,

> I think that such substantialist talk about the person or the soul gets in the way of Whitman's most democratic teaching. I much prefer to stay with his idea that what is left inside oneself when one is filling a function or playing a part is an infinite reservoir or, better, repertoire. Unexpressed potentiality rather than an indestructible core (that must remain hidden or can show itself only specially) suits the idea of 'a great composite democratic individual,' which is the idea to be preserved. ("Whitman" 36)

Kateb believes that we can keep Whitman's secular soul and cut loose the religious soul. He contends that the receptivity that is central to democratic individuality can be inculcated without religion. One need not agree with Kateb's views on religion to accept that he (along with Jeffrey Stout, as I show below) finds the resources for democratic life in a secular version of Emersonian perfectionism.

I emphasize these similarities between Robinson and Whitman and Emerson because the later reception and use of Emerson and Whitman's work has implications for how Robinson's work may be received. Democratic individualism, which is founded upon Emersonian perfectionism/pragmatism (which I outlined above in discussing Jeffrey Stout), is characterized by an insistence on profound equality and on the infinite worth of every living being and thing, which as we have seen are Robinson's primary concerns. It is "a belief in radical equality made aesthetic," which beholds the other (whether human or not) with generosity and is unique in "the conviction that one can make the sense of one's infinitude a bridge to other human beings and perhaps to the rest

of nature" (Kateb, *Inner Ocean* 33-34). This mode of existence aspires to a form of transcendence:

> Beyond the experience [of connectedness] at even the extraordinary level lies a rare moment, mood, or episode of transcendence. This highest level is contemplative and consequently only impersonal: an evanescent loss of the sense of one's unique self in favor of everything outside it. I think that on all its levels democratic individuality is not egocentric, that the democratic ego is not sharply defined, grasping for more than its share, sure of its identity and therefore sure of its wants and desires. . . . But democratic transcendence makes this tendency to free self-loss qualitatively different [from Plato or Tocqueville]." (Kateb, *Inner Ocean* 34-5)

Yet, while drawing heavily from Whitman and Emerson, and affirming a form of transcendence, democratic individualism is, by Kateb's measure, a thoroughly secular way of life. Kateb writes,

> Emerson, Thoreau, and Whitman all give voice to the need to bless existence in its entirety, not only to bless particulars as they come along. . . . I try to understand this need and to connect it to the will to take the moral and existential meanings of democracy seriously. But that will is too religiously dependent. All these writers are given to religiousness, unorthodox as it is, for they do not appear to take the last step and renounce the will to have supernatural sponsorship and authentication. . . . For me, Emersonian religiousness cannot be allowed to spoil a transcendence that the Emersonians inspire and that requires no more-than-human agency above or behind the world as it is. . . . These three writers deliver formulations that can be severed from their religiousness and set up as the consummation of democratic individuality. (Kateb, *Inner Ocean* 34-5)

Jeffrey Stout differs from Kateb in that he believes democratic individuality is not necessarily incompatible with religion, but Stout agrees that it does not require religious backing.

Kateb insists that the "consummation of democratic individuality" comes when it is shorn of all religion. But his democratic individuality *is*, by William James's definition at least, religious. Its moments of transcendence demand from the individual a forfeiture

of self to the whole. And the striking similarities between his view and Robinson's makes Robinson's all the more problematic. What becomes "godlike" is democracy itself, or the demos perhaps. The transcendent, then, is this great human web. I want to acknowledge that the transcendence that Kateb envisions is not reducible to vulgar nationalism. It is rather a radical vision of human connectedness and equality. But it is a religious expression, and one that is inextricably bound up with national politics. If Robinson's Calvinist religion bears strong resemblance to Kateb's "religion," then questions arise regarding how tied to political practice Robinson's religion is.

The point I wish to make is that Robinson's Calvinism is virtually entirely identified with a vision of democratic individuality which, while it is noble and moving, requires no religion but itself becomes religious. Kateb argues that democratic individuality attains to a kind of transcendence of its own, with no supernatural backing. Robinson contends that democratic life does require religious or supernatural backing, but resources that she claims are offered (exclusively, in some cases) by Calvinism are not, according to Kateb and others, found only there. And since her religious vision so closely resembles that of Whitman and Emerson, I contend that Robinson's Transcendent is much closer to Kateb's than she thinks. Robinson, ultimately, fails to offer a compelling account of Transcendence that is distinct from the transcendence of which Kateb writes. There is no remainder to Robinson's Calvinism; it is wholly invested in democratic practice and loses the capacity to speak prophetically.

Conclusion

For Jeffrey Stout, a faith claim is a "conversation-stopper" only if it is presented as a "cognitive commitment without claiming entitlement to that commitment" (87).

Stout would likely affirm Robinson's entitlement to her commitment, but there is little in her essays that would make a theist, much less a Calvinist, out of him. For, while the notion of double-predestination as Robinson delivers it may be bound to equality, "it does not follow that those who affirm the political or moral value of equality must ground their arguments on its behalf in Calvin's work, even if it can be historically demonstrated that in the United States, Calvinism contributed much to creating a climate in which such values could thrive" (Haddox 192).[11]

The only major point on which Stout and Robinson finally differ is that Robinson would see God as one who is due reverence. Stout, following Dewey and Emerson, inveighs against "arrogant traditionalism," the notion that we all practice piety in the same way and agree on its proper object (*Democracy* 31-2). Robinson grants Stout's concern, and claims that this allowance is one of the benefits of Calvinism's mystery and the recognition that we are all sinners. Robinson claims, "Since we are human beings, turbulence is to be expected" but insists that any attempt toward homogeneity nullifies the "moderating effects of broader identification," which can lead to the ruin of community (*WWC* 26). Both agree that homogeneity is dangerous and that tolerance forbids anyone from defining who and what another should revere, so the difference seems finally inconsequential.

Robinson's polemics bring a welcome reminder of the beauty, complexity, and fragility of human life. And it may well be that she has been so awarded and decorated, in spite of the fact that her fiction lacks the irony of postmodernism and the overwrought

[11] William Deresiewicz makes a similar argument, accusing Robinson of making a faulty syllogism and suggesting that because religion is a moral force in society that it is the only possible moral force in society ("Homing").

artifice of much modern fiction, because she proved a welcome change, a needed voice. But it is not clear how distinctive her voice is, at least her theological voice. Robinson quotes this from Whitman's *Leaves of Grass*: "I say the real and permanent grandeur of these States must be their religion" and puts it alongside this one: "All parts away for the progress of souls, / All religion, all solid things . . . falls into niches and corners / before the procession of souls" (qtd. Robinson xiii). But the question remains whether the religion of these States is not the States themselves, or a form of democratic individualism. Robinson fails to make it clear why Calvin too cannot fall away into a corner, given his due reverence for the grandeur of his vision and set aside for the procession of liberal democracy. One of the most common and most significant criticisms of Niebuhr was that it was not necessarily clear whether the Christian faith as he presented it offered something that irony did not (Erwin 135). Robinson has not made it clear whether Calvinism offers something democracy as a tradition does not, and thus it is not clear that Robinson's spiritual vision can offer the vitality and richness (the cure for spiritual anemia) that these other authors in this study see as missing in American society.

Robinson's intention is to recall us to our best collective self, which she describes by appealing to the place of religion in American history. But Robinson's religious vision emerges as little more than an American Jeremiad, a call to reaffirm the qualities, traditions, and practices that have characterized and perpetuated democracy and democratic culture. Robinson's fiction highlights the dangers for religion of becoming culturally encysted, and her newest collection of essays, *The Givenness of Things*, contains essays in which she sets out distinctively Christian theological positions in a way she has not before. But even in places in *Givenness*, and especially in her other essay

collections, she offers a religious vision that seems only to buttress a nationalistic one. When one reads the body of Robinson's essays, one gradually sees that Robinson enjoins Americans to be better Americans (by her standards of Americanness) and asks Christians to be better Christians (again by her standards) on behalf of a better America. Robinson has been, much more eloquently than Donald Trump, pleading "make America great again" since long before the presidency was a gleam in Trump's eye.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

"*Against the Day* 219-242." *Pynchon Wiki,* against-the-day.pynchonwiki.com/wiki/index.php?title=ATD_219-242. Accessed 5 May 2016.

"*Against the Day* 821-848." *Pynchon Wiki,* against-the-day.pynchonwiki.com/wiki/index.php?title=ATD_821-848. Accessed 18 May 2016.

Alarcón, Daniel Cooper. "Literary Syncretism in Ana Castillo's *So Far from God*." *Studies in Latin American Popular Culture,* no. 23, 2004, pp. 145-52.

Aldama, Frederick Luis. *Postethnic Narrative Criticism: Magicorealism in Oscar 'Zeta" Acosta, Ana Castillo, Julie Dash, Hanif Kureishi, and Salman Rushdie*. U of Texas P, 2003.

Allen, Glen Scott. "The End of Pynchon's Rainbow: Postmodern Terror and Paranoia in DeLillo's *Ratner's Star*." *Critical Essays on Don DeLillo*, edited by Hugh Ruppersburg and Tim Engles, G.K. Hall, 2000, pp. 115-34.

Bailey, Lisa M. Siefker. "Fraught with Fire: Race and Theology in Marilynne Robinson's Gilead." *Christianity & Literature,* vol. 59, no. 2, 2010, pp. 265–280.

Baker, Jeff. "Politics." Dalsgaard, *Cambridge Companion,* pp. 136-145.

---. "Plucking the American Albatross: Pynchon's Irrealism in *Mason & Dixon*." Horvath, *Pynchon,* pp. 167-188.

Bawer, Bruce. "Don DeLillo's America." *The New Criterion*, vol. 3, no. 8, 1985, pp. 34-42.

Bennett, Tanya Long. "No Country to Call Home: A Study of Castillo's *Mixquiahuala Letters*." *Style*, vol. 30, no. 3, 1996, pp. 462-78.

Benton, Graham. "Daydreams and Dynamite: Anarchist Strategies of Resistance and Paths for Transformation in *Against the Day*." Severs, *Corrupted Pilgrim's Guide*, pp. 191-213.

Bercovitch, Sacvan. *The American Jeremiad*. Anniversary ed. U of Wisconsin P, 2012.

---. *The Rites of Assent: Transformations in the Symbolic Construction of America*. Routledge, 1993.

---. *The Puritan Origins of the American Self.* Yale UP, 2011.

Berressem, Hanjo. "Coda: How to read Pynchon." Dalsgaard, *Cambridge Companion,* pp. 168-177.

Blackford, Holly. The Spirit of a People: The Politicization of Spirituality in Julia Alvarez's *In The Time Of The Butterflies,* Ntozake Shange's *Sassafrass*, *Cypress & Indigo*, And Ana Castillo's *So Far From God*." *Things of the Spirit: Women Writers Constructing Spirituality*, edited by Kristina K. Groover, U of Notre Dame P, 2004, pp. 224-55.

Bryant Paula. "Discussing the Untellable: Don DeLillo's *The Names*." *Critical Essays on Don DeLillo*, edited by Hugh Ruppersburg and Tim Engles, G.K. Hall, 2000, pp. 157-70.

Buell, Lawrence. *Emerson*. Belknap Press of Harvard UP, 2003.

---. *Literary Transcendentalism: Style and Vision in the American Renaissance.* Cornell UP, 1973.

Caminero-Santangelo, Marta. "'The Pleas of the Desperate': Collective Agency Versus Magical Realism in Ana Castillo's *So Far from God*." *Tulsa Studies in Women's Literature*, vol. 24, no.1, 2005, pp. 81-103.

Carson, Benjamin D. "The Chicana Subject in Ana Castillo's Fiction and the Discursive Zone of Chicana/o Theory." *Bilingual Review/La Revista Bilingüe*, vol. 28, no .2, 2004, pp. 109-26.

Castillo, Ana. *Massacre of the Dreamers: Essays on Xicanisma*. Twentieth anniversary updated ed. U of New Mexico P, 2014.

---. *Peel My Love Like an Onion.* Double Day, 1999.

---. *Sapagonia: An Anti-Romance in 3/8 Meter*. Anchor, 1990.

---. *So Far from God.* W. W. Norton & Company, 1993.

---. *The Guardians.* Random House, 2008.

---. *The Mixquiahuala Letters.* Bilingual Press/Editorial Bilingüe, 1986.

Cavanaugh, William. *Being Consumed: Economics and Christian Desire.* Eerdmans, 2008.

Cavell, Stanley. *Emerson's Transcendental Etudes*. Edited by David Justin Hodge. Stanford UP, 2003.

Chambers, Judith. *Thomas Pynchon.* Twayne, 1992.

Coffman, Christopher K. "Bogomilism, Orphism, Shamanism: The Spiritual and Spatial Grounds of Pynchon's Ecological Ethic." Severs, *Corrupted Pilgrim's Guide*, pp. 91-114.

Conte, Joseph M. "Conclusion: Writing amid the ruins: 9/11 and *Cosmopolis*." Duvall, *Cambridge Companion,* pp. 179-192.

Cowart, David. "The Lady Vanishes: Don DeLillo's *Point Omega*." *Contemporary Literature*, vol. 53, no.1, 2012, pp. 31-50.

---. *The Physics of Language.* U of Georgia P, 2002.

---. "The Luddite Vision: *Mason & Dixon*." *American Literature*, vol. 71, no. 2, 1999, pp. 341-363.

---. *Thomas Pynchon & the Dark Passages of History.* U of Georgia P, 2011.

Dalsgaard, Inger H., Luc Herman, and Brian McHale, editors. *The Cambridge Companion to Thomas Pynchon*. Cambridge UP, 2011. *Cambridge Companions Online*, http://dx.doi.org/10.1017/CCOL9780521769747.013

Dalsgaard, Inger. "Readers and Trespassers: Time Travel, Orthogonal Time, and Alternative Figurations of Time in Against the Day." Severs, *Corrupted Pilgrim's Guide*, pp. 115-138.

DeCurtis, Anthony. "The Product: Bucky Wunderlick, Rock 'n Roll, and Don DeLillo's *Great Jones Street*." Lentricchia, *Introducing*, pp. 131-42.

De La Torre, Miguel A. *Latina/o Social Ethics: Moving Beyond Eurocentric Moral Thinking*. Baylor UP, 2010.

Delgadillo, Theresa. "Forms of Chicana Feminist Resistance: Hybrid Spirituality in Ana Castillo's *So Far From God*." *Modern Fiction Studies*, vol. 44, no. 4, 1998, pp. 888-916.

---. *Spiritual Mestizaje. Religion, Gender, Race, and Nation in Contemporary Chicana Narrative.* Duke UP, 2011.

DeLillo, Don. *Americana.* Houghton-Mifflin, 1971.

---. "An Interview With Don DeLillo." Interview with Antonio Aiello. *PEN.* Pen American Center 15 September 2010. https://pen.org/an-interview-with-don-delillo/. Accessed 27 April 2015.

---. “An Outsider in This Society.” Interview with Anthony DeCurtis. Lentricchia, *Introducing*, pp. 43-66.

---. *Cosmopolis.* Scribner, 2003.

---. *End Zone.* Houghton-Mifflin, 1972.

---. *Falling Man.* Scribner, 2008.

---. “In the Ruins of the Future.” *Harper’s* Dec. 2001, pp. 33-40. http://harpers.org/ archive/2001/12/ in-the- ruins-of-the-future/. Accessed 2 Feb. 2015.

---. Interview with Robert McCrum. *The Guardian* 7 Aug. 2010. https://www.theguardian .com/ books/2010/aug/08/don-delillo-mccrum-interview. Acessed 2 Feb. 2015.

---. *Libra.* Viking, 1988.

---. *Mao II.* Penguin, 1992.

---. *Point Omega.* Scribner, 2010.

---. "Take Five: Don't call Don DeLillo's fiction 'postmodern'." Interview with Dale Singer. *St. Louis Beacon* 17 Sep. 2010.

---. *Underworld.* Scriber Paperback, 1998.

---. *White Noise.* Penguin Classics, 2009.

---. "'Writing as a Deeper Form of Concentration': An Interview with Don DeLillo." Interview with Maria Moss. *Sources: Revue d'Etudes Anglophones*, no. 6, 1999, pp. 82-97.

Deresiewicz, William. “Homing Patterns: Marilynne Robinson’s Fiction.” *Nation* 13 Oct. 2008, pp. 25–30.

Dewey, Joseph. *Beyond Grief and Nothing: A Reading of Don DeLillo.* U of South Carolina P, 2006.

---. “The Sound of One Man Mapping: Wicks Cherrycoke and the Eastern (Re)solution.” Horvath, *Pynchon,* pp. 112-131.

Domestico, Anthony. “Blessings in Disguise: The Unfashionable Genius of Marilynne Robinson.” *Commonweal*. Commonweal Magazine. 3 Nov. 2014.

---. "'Imagine a Carthage Sown with Salt': Creeds, Memory, and Vision in Marilynne Robinson's *Housekeeping*." *Literature and Theology*, vol. 28, no.1, 2014, pp. 92–109.

Douglas, C. "Christian Multiculturalism and Unlearned History in Marilynne Robinson's *Gilead*." *Novel: A Forum on Fiction*, vol. 44, no. 3, 2011, pp. 333–353.

Dupré, Louis K. *Passage to Modernity: An Essay in the Hermeneutics of Nature and Culture*. Yale UP, 1993.

---. *Religion and the Rise of Modern Culture*. U of Notre Dame P, 2008.

---. *Transcendent Selfhood: The Loss and Rediscovery of the Inner Life.* Seabury, 1976.

Duvall, John N., editor. *The Cambridge Companion to Don DeLillo.* Cambridge UP, 2008. *Cambridge Companions Online,* https://doi.org/10.1017/CCOL978052 1870658.

Duyfhuizen, Bernard. "'Hushing Sick Transmissions': Disrupting Story in *The Crying of Lot 49*." *New Essays on The Crying of Lot 49*, edited by Patrick O'Donnell. Cambridge UP, 1991, pp. 79–95.

Eddins, Dwight. *The Gnostic Pynchon.* Indiana UP, 1990.

Elias, Amy J. "History." Dalsgaard, *Cambridge Companion,* pp. 121-135.

---. "Plots, Pilgrimage, and the Politics of Genre in *Against the Day*." Severs, *Corrupted Pilgrim's Guide*, pp. 29-46.

Erwin, Scott R. *The Theological Vision of Reinhold Niebuhr's* The Irony of American History: *"In the Battle and Above It*." Oxford UP, 2013.

Evans, Justin. "Subjectivity And The Possibility Of Change In The Novels Of Marilynne Robinson." *Renascence*, vol. 66, no. 2, 2014, pp. 131-50.

Floyd-Thomas, Stacey M. and Laura Gillman. "*Con Un Pie a Cada Lado*/With a Foot in each Place: Mestizaje as Transnational Feminisms in Ana Castillo's So *Far from God*." *Meridians - Feminism, Race, Transnationalism*, vol. 2, no. 1, 2001, pp. 158-75.

Foster, Dennis. "Alphabetic Pleasures: *The Names.*" Lentricchia, *Introducing*, pp. 157-74.

Foster, Thomas. "History, Critical Theory, and Women's Social Practices: 'Women's Time' and Housekeeping." *Signs*, vol. 14, no. 1, 1988, pp. 73-99.

Franke, William. *A Philosophy of the Unsayable*. U of Notre Dame P, 2014.

Freer, Joanna. *Thomas Pynchon and American Counterculture*. Cambridge UP, 2014.

Frow, John. "The Last Things Before the Last: Notes on *White Noise*." Lentricchia, *Introducing*, pp. 175-92.

Galehouse, Maggie. "Their Own Private Idaho: Transience in Marilynne Robinson's *Housekeeping*." *Contemporary Literature*, vol. 41, no. 1, 2000, pp. 117-37.

García-Caro, Pedro. *After the Nation: Postnational Satire in the Works of Carlos Fuentes and Thomas Pynchon.* Northwestern University Press, 2014.

Gardner, Thomas. "Enlarging Loneliness: Marilynne Robinson's *Housekeeping* as a Reading of Emily Dickinson." *The Emily Dickinson Journal*, vol. 10, no. 1, 2001, pp. 9–33.

Geyh, Paula E. "Burning down the House? Domestic Space and Feminine Subjectivity in Marilynne Robinson's *Housekeeping*." *Contemporary Literature*, vol. 34, no. 1, 1993, pp. 103-22.

Gleason, Paul. "Don DeLillo, T. S. Eliot, and the Redemption of America's Atomic Waste Land." *Critical Essays on Don DeLillo*, edited by Hugh Ruppersburg and Tim Engles, G.K. Hall, 2000, pp. 130-43.

Gonzalez, Jeffrey. "Ontologies of Interdependence, the Sacred, and Health Care: Marilynne Robinson's *Gilead* and *Home*." *Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction*, vol. 55, no. 4, 2014, pp. 373–388.

Greiner, Donald J. "Thomas Pynchon and the Fault Lines of America." Horvath, *Pynchon,* pp. 73-83.

Haddox, Thomas F. *Hard Sayings: The Rhetoric of Christian Orthodoxy in Late Modern Fiction*. The Ohio State UP, 2013.

Harris, Michael. "Pynchon's Postcoloniality." *Thomas Pynchon: Reading From the Margins,* edited by Niran Abbas, Fairleigh Dickinson UP, 2003, pp. 199-214.

Heide, Markus. "The Postmodern 'We': Academia and Community in Ana Castillo's *So Far from God* and Denise Chávez' *Face of an Angel.*" *U.S. Latino Literatures and Cultures: Transnational Perspectives*, edited by Francisco A. Lomelí and Karin Ikas, C. Winter, 2000, pp. 171-180.

Heim, S. Mark. *The Depth of the Riches: A Trinitarian Theology of Religious Ends.* William B. Eerdmans, 2003.

Hewitt, John P. *Dilemmas of the American Self.* Temple University Press, 1989.

Hite, Molly. *Ideas of order in the novels of Thomas Pynchon*. Ohio State UP, 1983.

Hobbs, June Hadden. "Burial, Baptism, and Baseball: Typology and Memorialization in Marilynne Robinson's *Gilead*." *Christianity & Literature*, vol. 59, no.2, 2010, pp. 241–262.

Hopper, Briallen. "Marilynne Robinson in Montgomery." *Religion & Politics.* Religion & Politics, 22 Dec. 2014. http://religionandpolitics.org/2014/12/22/marilynne-robinson-in-montgomery/. Accesed 19 Sep. 2015.

Horvath, Brooke and Irving Malin, editors. *Pynchon and* Mason & Dixon. U of Delaware P, 2000,

Howe, Daniel Walker. *Making the American Self: Jonathan Edwards to Abraham Lincoln*. Harvard UP, 1997.

Hume, Kathryn. "Mason & Dixon." Dalsgaard, *Cambridge Companion,* pp. 59-70.

---. "The Religious and Political Vision of *Against the Day*." Severs, *Corrupted Pilgrim's Guide*, pp. 167-190.

Hungerford, Amy. *Postmodern Belief: American Literature and Religion since 1960.* Princeton UP, 2011.

Hutcheon, Linda. *The Politics of Postmodernism.* New York: Routledge, 1989.

Ingraffia, Brian D. "Is the Postmodern Post-Secular? The Parody of Religious Quests in Thomas Pynchon's *The Crying of Lot 49* and Don DeLillo's *White Noise*." *Postmodern Philosophy and Christian Thought*, edited by Merold Westphal, Indiana UP, 1999, pp. 44-68.

Jameson, Fredric. *Postmodernism, Or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism.* Duke UP, 1991.

Johnson, Kelli Lyon. "Violence in the Borderlands: Crossing to the Home Space in the Novels of Ana Castillo." *Frontiers: A Journal of Women Studies*, vol. 25, no. 1, 2004, pp. 39-58.

Johnston, John. "Generic Difficulties in the Novels of Don DeLillo." *Critique*, vol. 30, no. 4, 1989, pp. 261-75.

---. "Toward the Schizo-Text: Paranoia as Semiotic Regime in *The Crying of Lot 49*." *New Essays on The Crying of Lot 49*, edited by Patrick O'Donnell, Cambridge UP, 1991, pp. 47-78.

Kaivola, Karen. “The Pleasures and Perils of Merging: Female Subjectivity in Marilynne Robinson’s *Housekeeping*.” *Contemporary Literature*, vol. 34, no. 4, 1993, pp. 670-90.

Kateb, George. *The Inner Ocean: Individualism and Democratic Culture*. Cornell UP, 1992.

---. “Walt Whitman and the Culture of Democracy.” *A Political Companion to Walt Whitman*, edited by John E. Seery, UP of Kentucky, 2011, pp. 19-46.

Kavadlo, Jesse. *Don DeLillo: Balance at the Edge of Belief.* Peter Lang, 2004.

Keesey, Douglas. *Don DeLillo.* Twayne, 1993.

Kellman, Steven G. “Don DeLillo’s Logogenetic *Underworld*.” *UnderWords: Perspectives on Don DeLillo's* Underworld, edited by Joseph Dewey, Steven G. Kellman, and Irving Malin, U of Delaware P, 2002, pp. 68-78.

Kirkby, Joan. “Is There Life After Art? The Metaphysics of Marilynne Robinson’s *Housekeeping*.” *Tulsa Studies in Women’s Literature*, vol. 5, no. 1, 1986, pp. 91-109.

Knight, Christopher J. *Omissions are Not Accidents: Modern Apophaticism from Henry James to Jacques Derrida*. U of Toronto P, 2010.

Knight, Peter. "DeLillo, Postmodernism, Postmodernity." Duvall, *Cambridge Companion,* pp. 27-40.

---."Everything is Connected: Underworld's Secret History of Paranoia," *MFS: Modern Fiction Studies*, vol. 45, no. 3, 1999, pp. 811-36.

Kohn, Robert. “Seven Buddhist Themes in Pynchon’s *The Crying of Lot 49*.” *Religion & Literature*, vol. 35, no. 1, 2003, pp. 73-96.

Lake, Christina Bieber. *Prophets of the Posthuman: American Fiction, Biotechnology, and the Ethics of Personhood*. Notre U of Notre Dame P, 2013.

Lanza, Carmela Delia. "'A New Meeting with the Sacred': Ana Castillo's *So Far from God*." *RLA: Romance Languages Annual*, vol. 10, no. 2, 1998, pp. 658-63.

---. "Hearing the Voices: Women and Home and Ana Castillo's *So Far from God." MELUS*, vol. 23, no. 1, 1998, pp. 65-79.

Larkin, Lesley. "Reading as Responsible Dialogue in Ana Castillo's *The Mixquiahuala Letters*." *MELUS*, vol. 37, no. 3, 2012, pp. 141-166.

LeClair, Tom. *In the Loop.* U of Illinois P, 1987.

Leise, Christopher. "'That Little Incandescence': Reading the Fragmentary and John Calvin in Marilynne Robinson's *Gilead*." *Studies in the Novel*, vol. 41, no. 3, 2009, pp. 348–367.

Lensing, Dennis M. "Postmodernism at Sea: The Quest for Longitude in Thomas Pynchon's *Mason & Dixon* and Umberto Eco's *The Island of the Day Before*." *The Multiple Worlds of Pynchon's* Mason & Dixon: *Eighteenth-Century Contexts, Postmodern Observations*, edited by Elizabeth Jane Wall Hinds, Camden House, 2005, pp. 125-43.

Lentricchia, Frank, editor. *Introducing Don DeLillo*. Duke UP, 1991.

---. "*Libra* as Postmodern Critique." Lentricchia, *Introducing*, pp. 193-215.

Lewis, R. W. B. *The American Adam: Innocence, Tragedy, and Tradition in the Nineteenth Century*. U of Chicago P, 1955.

Lynch, Joy M. "A Distinct Place in America Where All Mestizos Reside": Landscape and Identity in Ana Castillo's *Sapogonia* and Diana Chang's *The Frontiers of Love*." *MELUS,* vol. 26, no. 3, 2001, pp. 119-144.

Madsen, Deborah L. *The Postmodernist Allegories of Thomas Pynchon*. St. Martin's, 1991.

---. *Understanding Contemporary Chicana Literature*. U of South Carolina P, 2001.

Magagna, Tony R. "Erased by Space, Ignored by History: Place and Gender in Marilynne Robinson's West." *Western American Literature*, vol. 43, no. 4, 2009, pp. 345-71.

Maltby, Paul. *Dissident Postmodernists: Barthelme, Coover, Pynchon*. U of Pennsylvania P, 1991.

---. "The Romantic Metaphysics of Don DeLillo." *Contemporary Literature*, vol. 37, no. 2, 1996, pp. 258-77.

Manríquez, B. J. "Ana Castillo's *So Far from God*: Intimations of the Absurd." *College Literature*, vol. 29, no. 2, 2002, pp. 37-49.

Mauro, Aaron. "Ordinary Happiness: Marilynne Robinson's Tragic Economies of Debt and Forgiveness." *Symploke*, vol. 22, no. 1, 2014, pp. 149–166.

McCarthy, Cormac. *The Road.* Vintage, 2006.

McClure, John A. "DeLillo and Mystery." Duvall, *Cambridge Companion,* pp. 166-178.

---. *Partial Faiths: Postsecular Fiction in the Age of Pynchon and Morrison.* U of Georgia P, 2007.

---. "Postmodern Romance: Don DeLillo and the Age of Conspiracy." Lentricchia, *Introducing*, pp. 99-116.

McHale, Brian. "Pynchon's postmodernism." Dalsgaard, *Cambridge Companion,* pp. 97-111.

---. "Genre as History: Pynchon's Genre-Poaching." Severs, *Corrupted Pilgrim's Guide*, pp. 15-28.

Mermann-Jozwiak, Elisabeth. "Gritos Desde La Frontera: Ana Castillo, Sandra Cisneros, and Postmodernism." *MELUS*, vol. 25, no. 2, 2000, pp. 101-18.

Michael, Magali Cornier. *New Visions of Community in Contemporary American Fiction: Tan, Kingsolver, Castillo, Morrison.* U of Iowa P, 2006.

Moats, Michael. Rev. of *When I Was a Child I Read Books*, by Marilynne Robinson. *FictionAdvocate.* Fiction Advocate, 18 May 2012. http://fictionadvocate.com /2012/05/18/review-when-i-was-a-child-i-read-books-by-marilynne-robinson/. Accessed 12 Nov. 2013.

Morgan, C. E. "I Want Soul." Interview with Anthony Domestico. *Commonweal,* 8 July 2016, pp. 16-19.

Moss, Maria. "The Search for Sanctuary: Marilynne Robinson's *Housekeeping* and E. Annie Proulx's *The Shipping News*." *Amerikastudien / American Studies*, vol. 49, no. 1, 2004, pp. 79-90.

Naydan, Liliana M. "Media Violence, Catholic Mystery, and Counter-Fundamentalism: A Post-9/11 Rhetoric of Flexibility in Don DeLillo's *Point Omega*." *Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction*, vol. 56, no. 1, 2015, pp. 94-107.

Niebuhr, Reinhold. *An Interpretation of Christian Ethics.* Wipf and Stock, 1998.

---. *Beyond Tragedy.* Scribner, 1979.

---. *Moral Man and Immoral Society: A Study in Ethics and Politics*. Charles Scribner's Sons, 1952.

---. *The Children of Light and the Children of Darkness: A Vindication of Democracy and a Critique of its Traditional Defense.* Nisbet, 1945.

---. *The Irony of American History*. U of Chicago P, 2008.

---. *The Nature and Destiny of Man: A Christian Interpretation.* 2 Vols. Westminster John Knox, 1996.

Nel, Philip. "DeLillo and modernism." Duvall, *Cambridge Companion,* pp. 13-26.

Olster, Stacey. "White Noise." Duvall, *Cambridge Companion,* pp. 79-93.

Osteen, Mark. *American Magic and Dread.* U of Pennsylvania P, 2000.

Park, Haein. "The Face of the Other: Suffering, Kenosis, and a Hermeneutics of Love in Dietrich Bonhoeffer's *Letters and Papers from Prison* and Marilynne Robinson's *Gilead*." *Renascence*, vol. 66, no. 2, 2014, pp. 103-18.

Parrish, Timothy. "Pynchon and DeLillo." *UnderWords: Perspectives on Don DeLillo's* Underworld, edited by Joseph Dewey, Steven G. Kellman, and Irving Malin, U of Delaware P, 2002, pp. 79-92.

Patell, Cyrus K. *Negative Liberties: Morrison, Pynchon, and the Problem of Liberal Ideology*. Duke UP, 2001.

Pearce-Gonzales, Bryan R. "Sabotaging Patriarchy: La Locura as Feminist Countersociety in Ana Castillo's *So Far from God*." *Label Me Latina/o*, no. 3, 2013, pp. 1-14.

Pérez, Gail. "Ana Castillo as Santera: Reconstructing Popular Religious Praxis." *A Reader in Latina Feminist Theology: Religion and Justice,* edited by María Pilar Aquino, Daisy L. Machado, and Jeanette Rodriguez, U of Texas P, 2002, pp. 53-79.

Pynchon, Thomas. *Against the Day.* Penguin, 2006.

---. *Gravity's Rainbow*. Penguin Classics, 2006.

---. *Inherent Vice.* Penguin, 2009.

---. "Is It O.K. to Be A Luddite?" *The New York Times* On The Web. 28 Oct. 1984. https://www.nytimes.com/books/97/05/18/reviews/pynchon-luddite.html. Accessed 13 May 2015.

---. *Mason & Dixon*. Picador, 1997.

---. "The Deadly Sins/Sloth: Nearer, My Couch, to Thee." *The New York Times* On The Web. 6 June 1993. https://www.nytimes.com/books/97/05/18/reviews/pynchon-sloth.html. Accessed 13 May 2015.

---. *V.* Harper Perennial Modern Classics, 2005.

---. *Vineland*. Penguin, 1997.

Quintana, Alvina E. "Ana Castillo's *The Mixquiahula Letters*: The Novelist as Ethnographer." *Criticism in the Borderlands: Studies in Chicano Literature, Culture, and Ideology*, edited by Héctor Calderón and José David Saldívar. Duke UP, 1991, pp. 72-83.

Robinson, Marilynne. "Americans." *Theology Today*, vol. 58, no. 1, 2001, pp. 72–81.

---. *Gilead.* Picador, 2006.

---. "Gilead's Balm: Interview." By Jennie Rothenberg Gritz. *The Atlantic.* The Atlantic Monthly Group, 17 Nov. 2004. http://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2004/12/gileads-balm/303644/. Accessed 13 Nov. 2013.

---. *The Givenness of Things: Essays.* Picador, 2016.

---. *Home.* Picador, 2009.

---. Interview. *Religion and Ethics Newsweekly.* Religion and Ethics Newsweekly, 18 Mar. 2005. http://www.pbs.org/wnet/religionandethics/2005/03/18/march-18-2005-interview-marilynne-robinson/4226/. Accessed 14 Nov. 2013.

---. *Lila.* Picador, 2015.

---. *The Death of Adam: Essays on Modern Thought*. Houghton Mifflin, 1998.

---. *When I Was a Child I Read Books*. Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2012.

Rose, Jane E. "Negotiating Work in the Novels of Ana Castillo: Social Dis-ease and the American Dream." *CLA Journal*, vol. 54, no. 4, 2011, pp. 387-409.

Row, Jess. "White Flights: American Fiction's Racial Landscape." *Boston Review*. Boston Review, 5 Aug. 2013. http://bostonreview.net/us-fiction/white-flights. Accessed 6 Sep. 2015.

Ryan, Maureen. "Marilynne Robinson's *Housekeeping*: The Subversive Narrative and the New American Eve." *South Atlantic Review*, vol. 56, no. 1, 1991, pp. 79-86.

Saltzman, Arthur. "'Cranks of Ev'ry Radius': Romancing the Line in *Mason & Dixon.*" Horvath, *Pynchon,* pp. 63-72.

Sauer, Michelle M. "'Saint-Making' in Ana Castillo's *So Far From God*: Medieval Mysticism as Precedent for an Authoritative Chicana Spirituality." *Mester*, no. 29, 2000, pp. 72-91.

Schaub, Thomas Hill. "The *Crying of Lot 49* and other California novels." Dalsgaard, *Cambridge Companion,* pp. 30-43.

Seed, David. "Mapping the Course of Empire in the New World." Horvath, *Pynchon,* pp. 84-99.

Sells, Michael A. *Mystical Languages of Unsaying.* U of Chicago P, 1994.

Severs, Jeffrey and Christopher Leise, editors. *Pynchon's* Against the Day: *A Corrupted Pilgrim's Guide.* U of Delaware P, 2011.

Shy, Todd. "Religion and Marilynne Robinson." *Salmagundi*, no. 155/156, 2007, pp. 251-264.

Sirias, Silvio and Richard McGarry. "Tradition and Rebellion in Ana Castillo's *So Far from God* and Sylvia López-Medina's *Cantora*." *MELUS*, vol. 25, no. 2, 2000, pp. 83-100.

Smith, Kyle. "'Serving Interests invisible': *Mason & Dixon*, British Spy Fiction, and the Specters of Imperialism." *Thomas Pynchon: Reading From the Margins,* edited by Niran Abbas, Fairleigh Dickinson UP, 2003, pp. 183-198.

Smyth, Jacqui. "Sheltered Vagrancy in Marilynne Robinson's *Housekeeping*." *Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction*, vol. 40, no. 3, 1999, pp. 281–291.

Socolovsky, Maya. "Borrowed Homes, Homesickness, and Memory in Ana Castillo's *Sapogonia*." *Aztlán: A Journal of Chicano Studies*, vol. 24, no. 2, 1999, pp. 73-94.

Stout, Andrew C. "'A Little Willingness to See': Sacramental Vision in Marilynne Robinson's *Housekeeping* and *Gilead*." *Religion and the Arts*, vol. 18, no. 4, 2014, pp. 571–590.

Stout, Jeffrey. *Democracy and Tradition*. Princeton UP, 2005.

Strandberg, Victor. "Dimming the Enlightenment: Thomas Pynchon's *Mason & Dixon*." Horvath, *Pynchon,* pp. 100-111.

Szeghi, Tereza M. "Indigeneity and Mestizaje in Ana Castillo's *The Mixquiahuala Letters* and Leslie Marmon Silko's *Almanac of the Dead*." *Comparative Literature*, vol. 65, no. 4, 2013, pp. 429-49.

Tanner, Laura E. "' Looking Back from the Grave': Sensory Perception and the Anticipation of Absence in Marilynne Robinson's *Gilead*." *Contemporary Literature*, vol. 48, no. 2, 2007, pp. 227–252.

---. “Uncomfortable Furniture: Inhabiting Domestic and Narrative Space in Marilynne Robinson’s *Home*.” *Contemporary Women’s Writing*, vol. 7, no. 1, 2013, pp. 35–53.

Tanner, Tony. "Afterthoughts on Don DeLillo's *Underworld*." *Raritan*, vol. 17, no. 4, 1998, pp. 48-71.

Tanner, Tony. “Caries and Cabals.” *Mindful Pleasures: Essays on Thomas Pynchon*, edited by George Levine and David Leverenz, Little, Brown and Company, 1976, pp. 49-68. Originally published in Tony Tanner, *City of Words: American Fiction 1950-1970,* Harper and Row, 1971, pp. 153-173.

Taylor, Charles. *A Secular Age*. Belknap Press of Harvard UP, 2007.

---. *Sources of the Self: The Making of the Modern Identity*. Harvard UP, 1989.

Thomas, Samuel. *Pynchon and the Political.* Routledge, 2007.

Thoreen, David. “The Fourth Amendment and Other Modern Inconveniences: Undeclared War, Organized Labor, and the Abrogation of Civil Rights in *Vineland*.” *Thomas Pynchon: Reading From the Margins,* edited by Niran Abbas, Fairleigh Dickinson UP, 2003, pp. 215-233.

Vander Weele, Michael. “Marilynne Robinson’s *Gilead* and the Difficult Gift of Human Exchange.” *Christianity & Literature*, vol. 59, no. 2, 2010, pp. 217–239.

Walter, Roland. "The Cultural Politics of Dislocation and Relocation in the Novels of Ana Castillo." *MELUS*, vol. 23, no. 1, 1998, pp. 81-97.

Weisenburger, Steven. "Gravity’s Rainbow." Dalsgaard, *Cambridge Companion,* pp. 44-58.

Whitman, Walt. *Leaves of Grass and Other Writings*. Edited by Michael Moon, W. W. Norton, 2002.

Will, George F. “Shallow Look at the Mind of an Assassin,” *Washington Post*, 22 Sept. 1988, pp. A25.

Williams, J. P. *Denying Divinity: Apophasis in the Patristic Christian and Soto Zen Buddhist Traditions*. Oxford UP, 2000.

Wilson, Christine. "Delinquent Housekeeping: Transforming the Regulations of Keeping House." *Legacy*, vol. 25, no. 2, 2008, pp. 299-310.

Wood, James. “Atoms of Paranoia.” Rev. of *Underworld,* by Don DeLillo. *The Guardian* 8 Jan 1998, pp. 11.

Wood, Ralph. *The Comedy of Redemption*. Notre Dame UP, 1991.

Yardley, Jonathan. "Don DeLillo's American Nightmare." Rev. of *White Noise,* by Don DeLillo. *Washington Post Book World* 13 January 1985, pp. 3.