Introduction:
The Sacred in the Secular in European Literature

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Most aesthetic concepts are theological ones in disguise. — Terry Eagleton

Senti il mancare di ogni religione | vera. — Pier Paolo Pasolini

The theme for this issue came into being prior to October 2017, which heralded the second postgraduate and early career conference held by the Modern Humanities Research Association (MHRA) at Senate House in London. The subject of ‘The Sacred in the Secular in European Literature’ was kindly proposed by the MHRA’s President for 2017, Professor Judith Ryan, and the conference began with her keynote address; her perceptive and chronologically wide-ranging contribution is included in amended form in this volume under the title of ‘Time, Space, and Sacred-Secular Configurations in Modern European Poetry’. The excellent papers presented by conference delegates encompassed a multitude of topics, such as the fragile line between faith and doubt, the experience of living in the sacred, epiphanic moments, and the political and ethical implications arising from such questions. This special issue of Working Papers in the Humanities takes its inspiration from that conference.

As Terry Eagleton’s remark astutely suggests, the origins of much of the rhetoric, imagery and ideas which characterize a literary text can be traced back to religious notions and traditions. This heritage constitutes a pressing demand upon the reader and critic: the aesthetic experience compels an evaluation of one’s own relationship to the sacred, the secular, and the interaction between them. European literary texts are one privileged site for an exploration of this intersection, and, alongside it, a re-examination of modern narratives of secularization. Volume 13 of Working Papers in the Humanities considers the intertwining of the sacred and the secular across eight different contexts, ranging from the end of the eighteenth century to the present day. Across a multitude of literary genres in its broadest sense, including hymn, poetic parable, fairy tale


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and novella, to name but a few, and often poised at the intersection of philosophy and literary studies, this collection of articles both answers and raises questions about sacralization and secularization. In particular, it celebrates the work being done by early career researchers on questions of Christianity and atheism, epiphany and experience, and contemporary transformations of the ethical.

Spirituality in modernity is sometimes framed as a question of preservation: what can the critic justifiably preserve or retain of historical conceptions of the sacred? The novelist Gustave Flaubert (1821–80), for instance, rejects organized religion in favour of a highly ironized but nonetheless preserved sense of sacred feeling and aspiration: ‘Chaque dogme en particulier m’est répulsif, mais je considère le sentiment qui les a inventés comme le plus naturel et le plus poétique de l’humanité’. Textual irony is a technique which might preserve the heart of the sacred whilst simultaneously defending against the charge of naivety. As Jonathan Culler puts it in his Flaubert: The Uses of Uncertainty, ‘The sacred, one might say, is the sentimental purified by irony, emptied of its content, so that it may come to represent in the allegory of interpretation the formal desire for connection and meaning’. Without indulging in dogmata, then, Flaubert stands up for the sacred, reinterpreted as a natural human sentimentality which animates belief and communication.

Alongside the notion of preservation come other spatio-temporal formulations of the relationship between the sacred and the secular. Sacred spaces or clearings can be carved out through rituals, festivals, myths and holy ceremonies. Mircea Eliade argues for a vision of the sacred as configurations of space and time that confirm and renew originary forms of connection with the divine. Such configurations connect with the ‘transcendent times of “the beginnings”’; as such, they create a ‘sudden breakthrough of the sacred’ into the ordinary space/time of everyday, profane existence. This structure of cosmic renewal reoccurs in apparently secularized rituals such as annual New Year celebrations, and even in the ritualized hermeneutics of the modern art world. The sacred appears as an irruptive experience within time and space, rather like that of the witching hour.

Since the so-called ‘sacred canopy’ has ceased to cover the entirety of human existence, as it used to do in the heyday of Christian monotheism, European modernity has experienced an increasingly fluid and fractured reality. Its citizens are asked to choose their own identity repeatedly, since it is no longer fixed in given forms, spaces and times. Religion participates in this fluid — or

3 Gustave Flaubert, Correspondance: nouvelle édition augmentée (Paris: Arvensa, 1926), p. 840. ‘Each dogma in particular is repulsive to me, but I consider the feeling that engendered them to be the most natural and poetic expression of humanity’, Frederick Brown, Flaubert: A Life (London: Pimlico, 2007), p. 350.
6 Ibid., p. 50: p. 189.
7 We are here referring to the foundational essay by Peter L. Berger, The Sacred Canopy: Elements of
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...liquid, in Zygmunt Bauman’s famous formula — identity, which both authors and critics are asked to take into consideration when writing and reading.\textsuperscript{8} When Pier Paolo Pasolini (1922–75), in his imaginary dialogue with Antonio Gramsci’s ashes, talks about feeling the loss of proper religions, what seems to be at stake is precisely a process of secularization.\textsuperscript{9} Whether it be necessary but destabilizing, or indeed positively challenging, this shift implies the sunset of institutional \textit{religions} in favour of plural forms of \textit{religiousness}, subjective faith, and individual spirituality. This issue of \textit{Working Papers in the Humanities} sheds light on the wide variety of outcomes of this epochal change, often linked to the process of modernization (although chronology is a highly delicate matter, as we shall see below).

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In its combination of natural landscape, the Christian cross, ancient heroes, heavenly beings and even an ‘evening being’, Hölderlin’s hymn ‘Mnemosyne’ is a prime example of syncretism at its most captivating.
— Judith Ryan

Judith Ryan (Harvard University) opens this volume with an appraisal of sacred/secular syncretism as it appears in the last two centuries of European poetry. Beginning with the German writers associated with the syncretic thinking of ‘Das älteste Systemprogramm des deutschen Idealismus’ (‘The Oldest Systematic Program of German Idealism’), Ryan examines polytheism and multiplicity in the poetry of circa 1800. For instance, in Friedrich Schiller’s ‘Der Spaziergang’ (‘The Walk’), the walker traverses space and time, nature and self, just as Friedrich Hölderlin’s ‘Mnemosyne’ effects a synthesis between the Christian, the classical and the pagan. Ryan’s analysis emphasizes the role of place in the German poets, seeing the twentieth-century poet Johannes Bobrowski’s quasi-mythic geography as their natural successor. This salience of place is also found in William Wordsworth’s and Alphonse de Lamartine’s lyrical fusions of natural, spiritual and psychological elements. Pressing on chronologically, Ryan’s argument culminates in an examination of Seamus Heaney’s 2005 poem, ‘The Tollund Man in Springtime’, which, she argues, develops an even deeper understanding of the intertwining of sacred and secular traditions. Ryan alludes here to Talal Asad’s anthropological approach to poetry, which relates the physical body and the senses to the sacred or religious experience. The Tollund Man’s physical location in the peat bog affects his state of preservation and his ongoing connection to nature, thanks to which


\textsuperscript{9} See the quotation from Pasolini in the epigraph.
he undergoes a Christ-like resurrection. Heaney’s ‘Tollund Man’ is shown to cross both past and present, both ancient and modern worlds, and both pagan and Christian beliefs — perhaps heralding a resurgence and renewal of the syncretic method in poetry.

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Hymns are still sung in the Millennium Stadium but, in a way, they have become secular. — Nathan Munday

Nathan Munday (Cardiff University), in his essay entitled ‘The Welsh Hymn: Sacred or Secular?’, takes as his starting point a reflection about the significant number of dead or dying signs and symbols in British languages, most of them associated with Britain’s Judeo-Christian past. It is precisely in this forgotten past that the Welsh hymn is rooted, despite its largely secular character today. This framework connects aesthetics to spirituality, psychology, and politics. Munday recalls the scholarship that has already been done on the Welsh hymn, delineating the context in which his analysis of the secularization of this poetic form carves out a niche. As Munday explains, it is of the utmost importance to understand that the Welsh hymn has shifted from a vertical and personal realm, often related to the individual soul, to a horizontal and collective one, where social exercises prevail over spiritual practices. Munday illustrates this path by means of a threefold narrative. First, the reader is brought to a late-eighteenth-century Seiat in which the hymn still features highly personal, intimate, and experiential traits. Then, one enters a nineteenth-century square where Temperance hymns are sung in the context of an ethicized religion. Finally, one proceeds into an early-twentieth-century Cymanfa Ganu (Singing Festival), in which the hymn becomes more poetic, more cerebral, and musically superior to its earlier counterparts. The Welsh hymn is therefore followed until the final stages of its secularization, when it becomes much more an indicator of culture than a sacred act of worship.

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Why does Dumas stage a Christian in a secularized setting and an anti-Christian in a religious setting? Undoubtedly, this technique of inversion conveys Dumas’s own anticlerical and Republican views. — Steffie Van Neste

The jewel in the crown of the next article by Steffie Van Neste (Ghent University) is an incisive and original close reading of a passage from Alexandre Dumas père’s novella Un Cas de conscience (A Question of Conscience, 1866). Paying careful attention to the critical reversals and sleights-of-hand that Dumas performs in this text, Van Neste demonstrates the latent tensions that subvert his treatment of the sacred and the secular. In her investigation of the intersection of these two elements, Van Neste emphasizes Dumas’s striking
use of connotation; she analyses, for example, the narrator’s decision to sit in a garden filled with climbing plants over a Voltairean armchair in a drawing room. An analysis of allegory and metaphor also features prominently. In particular, Dumas’s inclusion of a fictionalized Giuseppe Garibaldi points to a political reading. Dumas’s characterization of religious tensions, as Van Neste deftly illustrates, is indicative not only of a Romantic blending of sacred and secular features but also of the socio-political context of the French Second Empire. In France, debate raged around the unification of Italy and the Roman Question. Van Neste’s nuanced approach to Dumas’s novella reveals Dumas’s criticism of the proselytizing of reactionary Catholic ultramontanes, but also his enduring convictions and affiliations with a natural religion that privileges human happiness.

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An individual may realize the presence of the divine just by encountering it, but this experience has no authority over other minds, and like any personal state of feeling is subject to delusions and relapses. — Valeria Taddei

In ‘The Sacred Mind: William James and Modernist Epiphany’, Valeria Taddei (University of Oxford) raises questions regarding epiphany and narrative, complicated by both William James and the literary modernists in ways that show the confluence, and in some cases direct influence, of James’s writings and modernist literary writing. In particular, the author analyses Katherine Mansfield’s story ‘The Escape’ (1920) and Federigo Tozzi’s ‘Tregua’ (‘Truce’, 1911) in view of a Jamesian interpretation of epiphany, which downplays the narrative-driven idea of religious epiphany as analogous with conversion. Taddei notes that in his Varieties of Religious Experience James inventories mystical states as mental experiences independent from an institutional sense of the divine. Similarly, the two modernist authors — who read James, as Taddei suggests in her analysis — are said to retain a desire for transcendence, but this is presented as intrinsically problematic and problematized by a modernity that, whilst retaining a quasi-mysticism, is distant from the axiomatic religions of classical antiquity and Christian theology. Thus, across different cultural and political contexts, Mansfield’s and Tozzi’s narratives are exemplary in demonstrating the potential of James’s view of mystical experiences, thanks to its fascinating ambiguity and appealing sense of possibility.

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The ‘frame’ of secularism is only immanent insofar as it admits no religious transcendence. Yet it simultaneously fails to get rid of atheistic forms of transcendence, as well as to accommodate immanent religions. — Marie Chabbert
Returning to a French context, Marie Chabbert (University of Oxford) sets out to provide a new understanding of contemporary secularism in the light of Gilles Deleuze’s ontology. In her article, entitled ‘On Becoming-Secular: Gilles Deleuze and the Death of God’, Chabbert examines Deleuze’s engagement with Friedrich Nietzsche’s death of God and Nietzschean pluralism. For Deleuze, the death of God in question here is the death of transcendence itself. Chabbert guides her reader through an investigation of Christian theology, humanistic atheism, and a Heideggerian reading of Nietzsche in turn. With each new step in our understanding of the sacred and the secular, the transcendent place which was conventionally occupied by God is nonetheless retained in some form. The same is true within secularism itself, as Chabbert convincingly argues: at first glance, secularism privileges an immanent framework, but it often continues to borrow from the notion of transcendence. Deleuze’s atheism, by contrast, draws from Nietzsche a pluralist ontology in which difference is primary. A Deleuzian re-reading of Nietzsche’s will-to-power supports this interpretation. Fixed identities are replaced with a creative, affirmative process of becoming. Chabbert characterizes this radical, immanent secularism — which she terms becoming-secular — as a positive force that works in favour of freedom in both artistic and religious realms.

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Literary language can make suggestions that a more functional presentation of reality cannot perceive. — Emily Holman

In ‘“No great statement about reality [...] can be static, like simple information”: Literary Language and Reality’, Emily Holman (The Van Leer Jerusalem Institute) undertakes an exploration of the kernel of any literary process, that is to say, language and its capacity to shape reality. With reference to theoretical pronouncements made by F. R. Leavis and Marilynne Robinson, Holman assesses language’s mediated relationship to the particular sense of reality conveyed in a text. If language assists thinking and can expand one’s mind beyond conventional patterns of thought, it is to a non-conventional language that a writer must turn to in order to express the sacred depths of reality. Analysing Rowan Williams’ approach to themes such as opening and embodiment, and her own figure of enabling, Holman examines how they participate in art’s creation of conceptual worlds. Rhetorical figures, style, syntax, and punctuation are but a few among the elements that Holman considers in this context. In a meta-analysis, readers are led to question their current ways of reading and thinking, alongside their potential acts of writing and talking. Given that this issue of Working Papers investigates the interfolding of the sacred and the secular, Holman’s proposal is utterly relevant. An unconventional language engenders in the secular realm a complexity whose traits, both deep and elevated, cannot but be conceived as sacred.
In place of socio-political critique, [these texts] evoke the negative pleasure of the sublime, the passive form of wonder rather than its active and activist double. — Sara Helen Binney

In her article entitled ‘Creating a “space for the mystery”: The Sacred in the Twenty-First Century’, Sara Helen Binney (University of East Anglia) gives an insight into contemporary fiction inspired by folkloric narratives. Compared to the works of the ‘fairy tale generation’ of writers, such novels might seem to be detached from political critique. *The Crane Wife* by Patrick Ness (2013) and *The Snow Child* by Eowyn Ivey (2012) are chosen as case studies in order to propose the element of the unknown as a form of the sacred that compensates for the apparently apolitical turn in twenty-first-century novels. Binney’s reassessment of the role of enchantment (as it is found in the titular ‘space of the mystery’) reveals that this so-called apolitical turn actually demonstrates political and ethical implications. The sense of stoppage that these novels often suggest is supported by literal pauses created by blanks; these linguistic stoppages, both *de dicto* and *de re*, allow for the representation of mystery in post-secular spirituality. The author scrupulously elucidates four different terms that critics have used to refer to mystery: ‘wonder’, the ‘sublime’, the ‘sacred’, and ‘enchantment’, each of them offering interesting nuances that inflect the aforementioned pause, whose value lies not only in the ability to question, but also to scrutinize and to access reality.

Reversing comparison’s direction into double affirmation, [...] this world must be *like the world*, poetry’s object divided, *semblable* to itself. — Sam La Vedrine

In the final article of the issue, entitled ‘A Bit of Faith in Ecology: Paradox in Michel Deguy’s Poetic Parables’, Sam La Vedrine (University of Nottingham) offers a magisterial tour of contemporary French poet Michel Deguy’s recent collections. La Vedrine’s analysis situates itself within current debates regarding the destabilization of ontological identity and the viability of dialectical resolution. He argues that the unresolved contradictions raised by such debates inform Deguy’s philosophical poetics. La Vedrine’s analysis turns on the notion of the poetic comme (meaning ‘like’ or ‘as if’), which takes centre stage. Identity is irreducibly and parabolically doubled, and thus becomes expressible through analogy. Applied to the notion of paradox, this move in Deguy’s *oeuvre* allows one to think of difference without effacement; La Vedrine explores how the paradox becomes a technique of analogy, rather than performing an operation of negation or replacement. As this article rigorously demonstrates, Deguy’s work creates a locus for a non-transcendental form of the sacred, based around
analogy and double affirmation. In this way, the poet not only transforms Christian figurations; he also paves the way for a terrestrial, ecologically focused poetics. La Vedrine highlights this secular core at the heart of a poetics that is nonetheless imbued throughout by a deconstructed sacred.

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Given the multifaceted character of the debate, we must remark on the absence of religions other than the Christian in this special issue. In our view, this is largely ascribable to the slow pace of Europe’s turn towards a deep comprehension of non-Christian confessions, especially when compared to the inherently plural tradition of the United States. Narratives of secularization adopt the same bias. Indeed, in Charles Taylor’s landmark publication *A Secular Age*, to which a number of the articles here refer, Taylor defines the secular age as a development that has taken place within ‘Western Christendom’.10 Hans-Michael Häußig goes so far as to state that the very concept of religion has a Eurocentric value, given the European character of the assumption that links religion to monotheism.11 As Ulrich Beck points out, it is precisely this view which has prompted sociologists, such as Georg Simmel, John Esposito and others, to endeavour to distinguish between ‘religion’ as a noun, which involves an *aut aut*, and ‘religious’ as an adjective, which takes on the logic of a *vel vel*.12 The authors represented in this issue perform precisely an operation that, albeit rooted in that singularity that is almost inevitable when dealing with the *religion* of European writers, expands beyond it and opens up to *religious* matters that have social, political, and cultural relevance in our present day.

A complex play of seemingly dialectical oppositions runs through this issue as a *fil rouge*. At times, the sacred is derived precisely from the clashing of dyadic opposites, a productive tension that paves the way for a secularized vision of the sacred in which conflicting elements are somehow held together. This is certainly the case in La Vedrine’s theoretical framework, which addresses the oppositions between *tout* (all) and *rien* (nothing) in Deguy’s paradoxes. La Vedrine’s emphasis on the a-logical over the illogical finds a parallel in Taddei’s analysis of the a-logical Jamesian epiphany. Taddei contrasts and juxtaposes the heights of the spirit with the depths of the subconscious, finding elements of the sacred in both. Holman’s essay, too, explores the productive interchange

between circumstance and experience in Denis Donoghue’s categorization of human acts and narratives. Binney examines the interplay between binaries such as rationality and the senses; indeed, according to Marina Warner’s definition of wonder, this doubling of opposites is what characterizes moments of wonder.

In Munday’s piece, the liminal gesture proves essential in a rather different way: the sacred is attenuated but nonetheless retained as a sort of shadow or ‘relic’ within the secular canopy. Munday tracks how personal spirituality and collective religiosity both find expression over time. Munday’s historical approach chimes with Stephen Bullivant’s observations regarding the diminution of the collective self of the parish and the church in favour of individual beliefs: ‘the rise of the non-religious is arguably the story of British religious history over the past half-century or so’, says Bullivant. In particular, Bullivant’s report identifies the phenomenon of ‘nonversion’ in modern Britain, describing people who have been brought up in a religious household and who make the choice to ‘convert’ to atheism. Once again in a Christian context, Chabbert’s, Ryan’s and Van Neste’s accounts speak less of the sacred in the secular and more of the sacred and the secular. In her discussion of secularism, Chabbert dismantles the fault-lines between negation and affirmation, immanence and transcendence, whereas Van Neste emphasizes the tensions that raged between Republican values and ultramontane Christianity in nineteenth-century France. Each article in turn poses the possibility of reconciliation, without promising false resolutions to the enduring interaction that maintains both sacred and secular alike.

Talal Asad proposes in *Formations of the Secular* that modern anthropology is different to philosophical thinking in its ‘comparison of embedded concepts (representations) between societies differently located in time or space’. Asad makes the case that the diverse spatio-temporal dimensions of secularism in all its forms cannot be simply elided. Furthermore, as was alluded to above, the process by which human beings question their position in space/time through examining their relationship with the sacred and the secular is not clearly ascribable to definite dates or places. The authors in this issue return time and time again to the problem of time and space as slippery and shifting dimensions.

On the one hand, the secular is not simply a destination that can be arrived at, but rather involves a collaboration of active forces in the here and now. Indeed, Chabbert introduces the matter of time in her title by discussing the becoming-secular (rather than post-secular) dimension of Deleuze’s challenge to religious transcendence. Ryan’s article also imagines space/time as an

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element within textual syncretism; consequently, both time and place become warped and reconfigured in a poetic work, creating consonance and dissonance between syncretic elements. On the other hand, La Vedrine invokes the dawn of secularization as a present phenomenon, referring to our modern-day ‘post-theological community’. Likewise, Munday offers the reader a guided tour through three places and times which attest to secularization as a social zeitgeist.

On the more restricted scale of individual attitudes towards the sacred and the secular, Binney’s linguistic stoppages and Taddei’s transient moments present the sacred as a sudden transcendence within time and space, one which thereby stands outside of ordinary temporality. In a similar vein, Van Neste demonstrates the extent to which contemporaneous religious arguments can be crystallized artistically through the symbolism of a secluded garden; and Holman argues that the artistic task gains glimpses of entirely different dimensions and realities, opening up knowledge that would otherwise be unavailable. In these cases, the space/time of the text stands aside from ordinary life, if only temporarily, to highlight the crossing point where the secular meets the sacred.

Indeed, the sacred and the secular are not simply philosophical concepts, but rather they have social and political relevance. Binney and Munday grant sacred writing a political responsibility by underscoring the social value of the act of reading and its effect on people’s values, be they personal or national. Holman emphasizes language’s power to determine which ideas and experiences people are able to grasp, thereby creating different social and theological realities. In the closing pages of her article, Chabbert advocates for the social importance of the coexistence of all possible forms of religiosity. La Vedrine’s cultural and political ecology, and Van Neste’s analysis, imbricated as it is in the topical issue of papal sovereignty, also engage contemporary debates.

The articles that comprise this volume respond to unresolved questions and scholarly interest in the theme of the sacred and the secular, with a particular focus on how European literature has developed this theme, and on the enduring relevance of the sacred to the so-called secular age. The responses collected here reveal that the sacred can be located within the secular — as a shadow on the secular canopy or a bright spark that punctuates it — or can find itself newly incorporated alongside the secular in a levelling and transformative move. Chabbert’s and Holman’s approaches are primarily theoretical, while Ryan, Munday, Van Neste, Taddei, Binney and La Vedrine pay close attention to textual rhetoric and the specificities of their chosen literary form. Taken together, their versatile and multifaceted contributions are precious for their intertextual and critical value. It is our hope that these eight articles may stimulate further research and serve as a valuable reference point in the wider discussion.
Time, Space, and Sacred-Secular Configurations in Modern European Poetry

Judith Ryan

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Abstract. Syncretic religions are often the result of cultural overlap, either between proximate geographical areas or because one culture comes to dominate another. Sometimes, however, a writer or a group of writers deliberately sets out to create a new form of syncretic belief. In Germany around 1800, a small cluster of thinkers and poets conceived a new experiment: what they envisaged was to be a fresh way of making abstract ideas more palatable to a broader audience. A two-page document written in Hegel’s handwriting, but incorporating ideas of at least two other fellow students, Hölderlin and Schelling, urged that idealist philosophy might be enlivened by mythology, with its long poetic tradition. I adduce two poems from the period, Schiller’s ‘Der Spaziergang’ (1795) and Hölderlin’s ‘Mnemosyne’ (1803), to serve as examples of the syncretism espoused in that document. The special syncretic character of such poems stands out against the ‘greater Romantic lyrics’ in other European languages, as in the case of texts by Wordsworth and Lamartine, which do not employ mythological allusions. Nonetheless, in the mid-nineteenth century, we find Nerval making his texts a crucible for an eclectic combination of beliefs; and in the aftermath of World War II, Johannes Bobrowski develops a new kind of syncretism in which ancient Slavic divinities from Latvia and Lithuania seem to exist beneath natural landscape formations. In conclusion, the paper turns to a reading of Seamus Heaney’s poem ‘The Tollund Man in Springtime’ (2005/06), in which anthropological empathy becomes a vehicle that brings an over-2000-year-old culture into a palimpsestic relation with the present day.

A sibylline remark in the anonymous and untitled text subsequently designated as ‘Das älteste Systemprogramm des deutschen Idealismus’ (‘The Oldest Systematic Program of German Idealism’)\(^1\) may give some insight into the strange mixture of polytheism, Christianity, and pantheism that, in varying...

\(^1\) Franz Rosenzweig, who first published this text, gave it this rather hyperbolic title, although its disjointed form can scarcely be called systematic.
proportions, characterizes European poetry of the period around 1800 and beyond: ‘Monotheismus der Vernunft und des Herzens, Polytheismus der Einbildungskraft und der Kunst, das ist’s, was wir bedürfen!’ What justifies this dual approach? Philosophers, the text explains, will deprecate mythology as long as it remains incompatible with reason; while ordinary people (‘das Volk’) require an appeal to the senses: they will have no interest in ideas unless these are made ‘aesthetisch, d.h. mythologisiert’.

Three fellow-students at the Tübinger Stift, F. W. J. Schelling, Friedrich Hölderlin, and G. W. F. Hegel (in whose handwriting the extant text was found) have been considered as possible authors. All three can be seen as sharing many of the ideas presented in the piece. It may have been a collaborative project for which Hegel was the amanuensis, or the text we have may be a copy he made of a text drafted by another. Eckart Förster, in a 2004 essay on ‘Das älteste Systemprogramm’, makes a vigorous, if somewhat circumstantial case for Hölderlin as the author. Corroborated by ideas of a ‘new mythology’ in various forms, not only in the writings of the three seminarists, but also in Friedrich Schiller and Novalis, the ‘Systemprogramm’ indicates that allusions to ancient Greek and Roman divinities in the period around 1800 go beyond mere rhetorical devices or decorative remainders. Rather, polytheistic elements are a purposeful element in the poetry of the period.

Turning to Schiller, for instance, we might think of his famous poem ‘Der Spaziergang’ (‘The Walk’, 1795), composed in 100 elegiac distichs in a metre adapted from classical antiquity. Starting out as if it were simply a nature poem, the opening lines present a detailed description of natural phenomena perceived as the walker climbs up a mountain. Gradually, however, suggestions of classical antiquity emerge: first, the four elements of Greek philosophy (earth, fire, air, water) appear in oblique as well as more overt forms, such as ‘Äther’ (aether) instead of air (l. 34). Joining them are references to Demeter, Ceres, Hermes, Minerva, and Mount Olympus, etc. The ‘gods’ are specifically plural (in the phrase ‘altars of the gods’). The walker shapes his climb as an

2 G. W. F. Hegel, ‘Das älteste Systemprogramm des deutschen Idealismus’, in Werke. Band 1, ed. by Eva Moldenhauer and Karl Michel (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1979), pp. 235–336. ‘Monotheism of reason and the heart, polytheism of imagination and art, that’s what we need!’ All translations are my own, unless otherwise noted.

3 ‘Systemprogramm’, p. 235. ‘[A]esthetic, i.e. mythologized’.


5 Bernd Witte interprets Hölderlin’s aim rather differently in his essay ‘ChristosDionysos: Hölderlin als Stifter einer neuen Religion’, Arcadia, 51.2 (2016), 344–62. He regards ‘Das älteste Systemprogramm’ as a manifesto written by Hegel and Hölderlin for a counter-religion they hoped would prevail against both monotheism and pantheism. Witte sees Hölderlin’s late poem ‘Mnemosyne’ as an admission of failure in achieving this aim (pp. 354–58); in contrast, I am not fully convinced of this interpretation: see my reading below.

allegory of human civilization from antiquity to the present, and we begin to sense that the ancient gods are not truly absent. Suddenly, however, the experiencing self enters a dark fantasy where he loses his sense of location: ‘Aber wo bin ich?’ (l. 173).7 We are not shown precisely how he comes down from the mountain peak; perhaps he is only imagining this expedition. Or, to adopt Kate Rigby’s formulation in connection with a similar descent into a mountain by the protagonist in Novalis’s Heinrich von Ofterdingen, Schiller’s walker may be understood as ‘slipping, as it were, beneath its [the mountain’s] skin’ in order to experience what Rigby terms the ‘inner, subjectival dimension of the material realm’.8 We can infer that Schiller’s walker loses not only his sense of place, but also of self. The walker does not awaken from this loss of awareness until the last lines, where, in a gesture characteristic of elegy, he finds a consolation: ‘die Sonne Homers […] lächelt auch uns’ (l. 200).9 In traversing space, he also travels through time, creating a vision of unity that momentarily transcends the divide between self and nature.

A poem like Schiller’s ‘Spaziergang’ implicitly raises a question that is still relevant today: does the period around 1800 suggest the beginning of a new understanding of the sacred? If so, it would fine-tune the long period from the Middle Ages to the present in a somewhat different way from Charles Taylor’s discussion of chronological shifts in his book A Secular Age, where his title derives from a broader question: ‘why was it virtually impossible not to believe in God in, say, 1500 in our Western society, while in 2000 many of us find this not only easy, but even inescapable?’10 In the introduction to his book, he speaks of ‘three senses’ of secularity: the first, where churches have largely separated from political structures; the second, when public spaces altogether are regarded as ‘emptied of God, or of any reference to ultimate reality’; and the third, a stage when ‘belief in God […] is understood to be one option among others’.11 I think we can agree that in Western culture today, religion tends to appear as ‘one option among others’. Taylor is, to be sure, only one of many scholars writing in the twenty-first century about issues of secularity.12 Talal Asad represents another recent approach to these matters by exploring the problem of the secular from an anthropological perspective, asking, for instance: ‘How do attitudes to the human body (to pain, physical damage, decay, and death, to physical integrity, bodily growth, and sexual enjoyment) differ in various forms of life? What structures of the senses — hearing, seeing, touching — do these

7 ‘But where am I?’
9 ‘Homer’s sun smiles for us, too’.
11 Taylor, A Secular Age, pp. 2–3.
12 For an excellent overview, see Craig Calhoun, Rethinking Secularism, ed. by Mark Juergensmeyer and Jonathan van Antwerpen (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011).
His view that ‘anthropology is more than a method’ allows him to pay attention to myth, mysticism, and such phenomena as the *homo sacer.* His brief section on ‘myth, poetry, and secular sensibility’ is basically a sketch of an anthropological approach to poetry. Writing about the use of myth by modernist poets such as T. S. Eliot, he also considers a modern Arab poet who publishes under the pseudonym Adonis. Adonis is motivated, Asad claims, by the idea that ‘myth is plural, even anarchic, while the religious law is monotheistic and totalitarian.’ It is, of course, coincidental that Asad’s formulation of the difference between myth and religion appears so similar to the point about polytheism and monotheism in ‘Das älteste Systemprogramm des deutschen Idealismus’ quoted at the beginning of this essay.

In addition, Asad’s view of an anthropological approach to poetry — an approach that would attend to the growth and development of a human being — can, I would suggest, be used very effectively in connection with the last of the poems I will be discussing here, Seamus Heaney’s ‘The Tollund Man in Springtime’ (2005/06).

There, questions of the physical body come together with a consideration of religious beliefs about which we can only speculate, since they belong to a prehistoric period. Yet, by means of an empathetic approach to the life of the senses — that which Asad defines as ‘hearing, seeing, touching’ — the poet allows us to approximate the experiential situation of a long-dead prehistoric man whom we are asked to imagine as having come back to life in the present.

In Hölderlin’s late hymns, attempts to insert Greek mythological figures into modern landscapes, as Schiller does, have all but vanished. A notable exception is his free-rhythm hymn ‘Mnemosyne’ (1803), where place takes on a varied role. The title refers to the Greek personification of memory, a daughter of the Titans and mother of the nine graces. Not an actual goddess, she is nonetheless one of the panoply of figures in ancient Greek mythology. The poem consistently

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14 Ibid., p. 17.
15 Ibid., p. 53. According to Asad, Adonis uses Western myth to respond to what he regards as the Muslim failure to secularize (pp. 54–56).
16 Ibid., p. 56.
17 Ibid., p. 56.
18 We will look primarily at the first published, shorter version of this poem in *Metre* and *The Guardian* (both 2005; see <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2005/apr/16/poetry.seamusheaney> for the Guardian text). That version, consisting of three 14-line stanzas, contrasts with the version published in Seamus Heaney’s volume *District and Circle* (London and New York: Faber and Faber, 2006), pp. 55–57. Four words are transposed in st. 1, l. 3: ‘Lapping time in myself’ becomes ‘Lapping myself in time’ in the longer version in *District*, st. 1, l. 3, p. 55.
20 Friedrich Hölderlin, *Sämtliche Werke und Briefe, Volume 1*, ed. by Günther Mieth (Munich and Vienna: Carl Hanser Verlag, 1989), pp. 394–95. This is the third version of the poem. Further references are given after quotations in the text.
associates mythology with place. The opening lines speak of ripe fruit and of a 
natural law that everything goes in, ‘Schlangen gleich, | prophetisch, träumend 
auf | den Hügeln des Himmels’ (ll. 3–5).21 The word used here for ‘to go in’ 
is ‘hineingehen’, and it is usually understood as signifying death. Whether 
this image is simply an allusion to pagan beliefs in general, where snakes are 
frequently seen in terms of transformation and rebirth, or to ancient Greek 
thought more specifically, where they may be guardians of the underworld, the 
complex syntax of these lines are an effect based on Pindar, whose odes were 
much admired by writers around 1800 for their difficult style.

The three-section poem is difficult throughout, but place is an important 
element in it, and it seems to be frequently associated with death. The second 
section, for example, presents a puzzling Alpine scene, complete with a 
wanderer, but it also alludes to ‘ein Himmlisches’ (l. 24)22 and to the wanderer 
who speaks ‘vom Kreuze | Das Gesetzt ist unterwegs einmal | Gestorbenen’ 
(ll. 29–31).23 In the last section of the poem, heroes from Homer’s Iliad are 
mentioned: Ajax, Achilles, and Patroclus. Significantly, the deaths of the first 
two are connected with natural phenomena: the fig tree for Ajax, the grottoes 
of a lake and brooks near the river Scamander for Achilles. Patroclus’ death is 
not located in a place, but rather ‘in des Königs Harnisch’ (l. 44), i.e. wearing 
the armour of his friend Achilles.24 None of the three heroes is a god, of course, 
but they have certainly become part of Greek mythology. ‘Eleutherä’, the name 
of the city of Mnemosyne, suggests a new mythological figure. Like a female 
figure in ancient Greek art or sculpture, the city Eleutherä wears a cloak (her 
name is the feminine form of Greek eleutheros, meaning ‘free’). The last seven 
lines of the poem present an eclectic combination of divine or allegorical 
beings: a singular ‘Gott’ (God) who takes off the city’s cloak, a figure called 
das Abendliche (the evening one), and a reference to plural ‘Himmlische’ 
(heavenly ones). In its combination of natural landscape, the Christian cross, 
ancient heroes, heavenly beings and even an ‘evening being’, Hölderlin’s hymn 
‘Mnemosyne’ is a prime example of syncretism at its most captivating.

Perhaps because of the expectation that many readers had enjoyed a classical 
education, Hölderlin’s form of syncretism may have appeared relatively natural 
at the time. Novalis’s version was more daring in certain respects, especially in 
his novel Heinrich von Ofterdingen, where mythic modes of thinking mingle 
with contemporary philosophy and science. A different approach to syncretic 
belief is evident in Gérard de Nerval’s work, again not only in his poetry but 
also in his prose narratives Sylvie and Aurélia.25 In his search for an ideal

21 ‘Like snakes, | Prophetically, dreaming on | The hills of heaven’.
22 ‘A heavenly one’.
23 ‘The cross that has been erected at some time along the path in memory of the dead’.
24 ‘In the king’s armour’. In contrast to the indications of place in the cases of Ajax and Achilles, the 
manner of death is given in the case of Patroclus, doubtless to highlight the fact that he was engaged 
in carrying on Achilles’s role in battle.
25 See Max Milner, ‘Religion et religions dans le voyage en Orient de Gérard de Nerval’, Romantisme,
religion, Nerval aimed to draw on what he regarded as the best elements of Christianity, classical antiquity, Egyptian, and Islamic ideas. In this way, he anticipates Salomon Reinach’s study of comparative religion later in the nineteenth century.26

In this respect, the meditative poetry of Schiller, Hölderlin, Novalis and Nerval differs from what M. H. Abrams terms the ‘greater Romantic lyric’.27 By this, Abrams means the major reflective poems of William Wordsworth and Samuel Taylor Coleridge. These English poets do not subscribe to an eclectic mixture of different religions, but they do develop a synthesis in which memory, place and belief come together; their approach has also come to seem ‘natural’ to readers today. Although Wordsworth’s ‘Lines Composed a Few Miles above Tintern Abbey, On Revisiting the Banks of the Wye during a Tour, July 13, 1798’ is the best example of the ‘greater Romantic lyric’, Alphonse de Lamartine’s ‘Le Lac’ (‘The Lake’, 1820) fits Abrams’ description of the genre equally well, since it, too, turns on a place, the Lac du Bourget in the south of France, which he had visited a few years earlier.28 The structure of ‘Tintern Abbey’ involves a second visit to a place that the poet had first visited five years earlier; Lamartine’s poem reflects on a personal experience of 1817 from the perspective of a later visit. In contrast to the German poems from the years just before and after 1800, where the traces of ancient divinities and their haunts can be seen just below the surface of the natural geology, Wordsworth’s and Lamartine’s poems combine a belief in divine immanence in nature with the idea that certain features of nature operate on human consciousness, not only bringing back individual memories, as in ‘Tintern Abbey’, but also becoming, as it were, storage places for such memories, as the lake becomes in Lamartine’s poem.

Moving to a much later period, we can identify one poet writing in German as a closer successor to the German tradition of meditative poetry in which individual experience is brought into conjunction with ancient deities: the post-World War II poet Johannes Bobrowski, who creates a quasi-mythic geography to which he gives the ancient name of Samartia (it comprises postwar Latvia and Lithuania). This territory, as Bobrowski imagines it, is imbued with a subliminal presence of the Old Prussian or Borussian gods who were worshipped there in early times. Three gods in particular, Perkunas (god of thunder and fire), Pikoll (god of the underworld), and Prtrimpas (god of agriculture and fertility) play a


major role in Bobrowski’s poems and novels. In some of Bobrowski’s poems, the shape of the gods’ bodies seems to be almost visible beneath the surface of the land; in other poems, they seem to have emigrated into the bodies of cattle. Although Bobrowski can rightly be regarded as a bridge between Hölderlin and present-day German poetry, he is not well known outside the German-language tradition.

Finally, I would like to show how Seamus Heaney’s ‘The Tollund Man in Springtime’ functions as a culminating point in the attempt to combine Christian and pagan traditions, while ultimately going beyond them. I focus mainly on the three-stanza version of the poem’s publication in The Guardian in April 2005. Consisting of the first, fourth and sixth stanzas of the longer version published in District and Circle (2006), it is, to my mind, more elegant than the longer version. It presents a highly sophisticated understanding of the sacred in the secular that may shed new light on this issue in today’s world.

The Tollund Man is named after his place of discovery: a bog in Tollund, Denmark. In May 1950, when two peat cutters came across what looked terrifyingly like the body of a recent murder victim, they first called the police; yet the condition of the body was baffling. Summoned as a consultant, the archaeologist Professor P. V. Glob examined the body and declared that the cause of death was probably an act of ritual sacrifice that had been performed over 2000 years ago. The tanned, leathery skin of the corpse was the result of its long rest in the acidic water of the bog. Glob was inclined to believe that the death and submersion of victims in a peat bog suggests something like a marriage between the dead man and an earth goddess. But because the bog people and their contemporaries had left no written traces, we do not really know what role these deaths played in their culture. When the Tollund Man was found, archaeologists lacked experience in preserving bog bodies, and so the only part that could be saved was the head, which bears an uncanny resemblance to people living today. Before the body was disposed of, an autopsy of the stomach contents was performed. This, together with autopsies of other

30 See Sabine Egger, ‘Between Hölderlin and Heaney: Thresholds and Boundaries in Johannes Bobrowski’s Poetry’, Germanistik in Irland: Jahrbuch der Yearbook of the Association of Third-Level Teachers of German in Ireland, 8 (2013), 102–23. The title of Egger’s article suggests a more direct connection than is in fact the case: both Bobrowski and Heaney were familiar with Hölderlin’s poetry, but Heaney does not seem to have read Bobrowski.
31 Seamus Heaney, ‘The Tollund Man in Springtime’, The Guardian, 16 April 2005. The Guardian version represents the poem’s overall line of thought very nicely and is more subtle in its allusions to aspects of Christian belief. The stanzas are sonnets (with many half- or near-rhymes, and some lines that lack a rhyme word). Further references are given after quotations in the text.
32 For the longer version, see Seamus Heaney, District and Circle (London and New York: Faber and Faber, 2006), pp. 55–57.
34 Ibid., pp. 190–91.
bog bodies, showed that the victims’ last meal had been one of grains and seeds. Following a recipe similar to the mixture found in the bog bodies, two distinguished archaeologists found the gruel so unpleasant that they could only swallow it by drinking a good chaser of modern brandy.\(^{35}\)

The second stanza of the shorter version (the third stanza in the longer version) begins with a gnomic statement: ‘“The soul exceeds its circumstances”’ (st. 2, l. 1).\(^{36}\) Although this phrase is often attributed to Czeslaw Milosz, it is actually drawn from Leon Wieseltier’s obituary of the Polish poet, as Heaney notes in his acknowledgements to *District and Circle.*\(^{37}\) Heaney’s text continues with an elaboration from another angle: ‘History not to be granted the last word | Or the first claim...’ (st. 2, ll. 2–3: ellipsis in original). Following his removal from the bog and preliminary study by specialists, the Tollund Man’s body had been visible only as a reproduction in a museum display case. Heaney’s poem omits reference to the severing and preservation of the head and the reproduction of the body in lieu of its preservation. Instead, the Tollund Man, gradually awakening as if from a long sleep, hopes that the small amount of peat in which he has been transported to the museum (the ‘heather bed’ is a poetic way of referring to the layer of peat) will exercise healing powers on his body, wounded by the turf-cutters’ spades. He does not know that his preserved head has been severed from his original body, which we might imagine he still senses in the phantom form as an amputee might still experience a missing limb. His ‘webbed wrists’ (st. 2, l. 5) suggest an adaptation to the watery environment from which he was wrenched, while the fibrous surface on which he rests mimics the natural forms of birch trees and young grass. Such tracery can be seen very clearly in photographs reproduced in Glob’s book.\(^{38}\) There is a sense in which he still remains a part of nature.

With his spirit ‘strengthened’ by the ritual he underwent thousands of years ago, the Tollund Man is able to tell himself a story of healing and revival. Belief is in many ways what we tell ourselves. In that context, the wounds of the bog body appear as a version of the wounds of the crucified Jesus, and the ‘reawakening’ of the Tollund Man after 2000 years (‘late as it was’, to use Heaney’s phrase: st. 2, l. 8) as an extraordinarily extended adaptation of the three-day period before the resurrection of Christ as depicted in the Bible. The longer version in *District and Circle* makes more explicit the Christian elements in the

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\(^{36}\) Quotations come from the shorter version of the poem, unless otherwise stated.

\(^{37}\) Leon Wieseltier, ‘Czeslaw Milosz, 1911–2004’, Sunday Book Review, *New York Times*, 12 September 2004. Although Heaney acknowledges this source in *District and Circle*, he fails to acknowledge another borrowing from Wieseltier’s obituary of Milosz, which he includes following the gnomic statement. Wieseltier writes: ‘Milosz’s teaching was that history was no more to be granted the last word. One does not live entirely, or even mainly, for one’s time. The soul exceeds its circumstances. So even in his dissent, history did not command Milosz.’ Heaney rearranges the order of his paraphrase.

poem. Phrases like ‘scone of peat’ hint at the divine creation of the human body out of clay (District: st. 2, l. 13). As the turf-cutters turn up the Tollund Man’s body, his first encounter with the air since his submersion is expressed in terms of God’s creation of the earth (‘on the sixth day’; District: st. 2, l. 13) and the resurrection of the body (‘me, so long unrisen’; District: st. 2, l. 13).

In the shorter version, we see the Tollund Man inhabiting both the ancient and the modern world. Still lying on a soft layer of peat in the glass museum case while also escaping from it into the modern world, he finds himself confronted with the world of modern machines, including automobiles and jet aircraft. Stubborn questions arise from this juxtaposition of the older, more natural world and the modern industrialized world: sights and sounds of the older world — the song of an ‘early bird’ (st. 2, l. 9) and the sight of meadow hay ‘still buttercupped and daisied’ (st. 2, l. 10) — seem to be overlaid by the noise of traffic from a nearby roundabout, polluting fumes from modern vehicles, and the repugnant stench of silage. Bog bodies, preserved in the acidic water that results from peat deposits, do not have a foul smell, whereas some crops, when converted by anaerobic processes for use as winter fodder for animals or as biofuel, smell like carrion. Just as the word ‘reawoke’ in the first stanza (st. 1, l. 9) suggests the theological concept of resurrection, so here, the presence of planes high in the sky (‘transatlantic flights stacked in the blue’: st. 1, l. 14) hints at a kind of transport that goes beyond the aerial transportation of people and freight.

The third and final stanza of the Metre and Guardian version is retained as the final stanza of the longer version in District and Circle. Ingeniously extending the interplay between the spirit world of the Tollund Man’s past and the virtual world of computerized modern life, this stanza presents some interesting consequences of transporting the ancient world into the modern. Once the protective powers of peat and bog water have performed their rejuvenation of the Tollund Man, he is led astray when he imagines that the ‘bunch of Tollund rushes’ (st. 3, l. 2) will survive and allow themselves to be transplanted in the new environment. Instead of retaining their initial freshness, the rushes turn musty in the ‘old stairwell | Broom cupboard’ (st. 3, ll. 3–4) and the speaker is forced to acknowledge their decay. It is hard to think of the voice here as solely that of the Tollund Man: surely, we also hear something of Seamus Heaney in the witty pun and the half-rhyme of the final lines: ‘As a man would, cutting turf, | I straightened, spat on my hands, felt benefit | And spirited myself into the street’ (st. 3, ll. 12–14).

The grandson of a modern-day turf-cutter (Heaney himself) and the pre-historical peat-bog man from Tollund, with his face accidentally injured by a turf-cutter, are superimposed here. Lightly sceptical as it is, this final appreciation of a shared humanity between the poet and his ancient precursor is shaped in the second version in District and Circle by tropes of creation, incarnation, and resurrection. These ideas, also part of Christian tradition, may
or may not have been at work in the unknowable set of beliefs that obtained during the time when the Tollund Man was sent to his death in the bog. Stating that ‘they chose to put me down | For their own good’ (st. 1, ll. 10–11), the text concurs with Glob’s suggestion that the Tollund Man’s death was part of a sacrificial nature ritual practised by a pre-historic community.39 The quotation and paraphrases from Wieseltier’s obituary of Czesław Milosz would then be part of a meditation on the relation between violence and the sacred.

Bringing Christian beliefs together with a pagan practice that can only remain a conjecture on our part, Heaney creates an imaginary place that conflates aspects of Denmark and Ireland. This place is truly a lieu de mémoire (site of memory) in the sense of Pierre Nora, a place where ‘memory crystallizes and secretes itself’ but where at the same time ‘consciousness of a break with the past is bound up with the sense that memory has been torn’.40 Reaching deeply into the pre-historic past, while also activating an empathetic approach to imagined sensory and emotional responses called forth by transposing that past into the present, Heaney’s ‘The Tollund Man in Springtime’ invents a polysemantic method of incorporating the sacred in today’s secular age.

The Welsh Hymn: Sacred or Secular?

Nathan Munday

Abstract. Wales has long been stereotyped as a land of song. One of the reasons for this recurring image is its historic love for the hymn—a privileged entity within Wales’s unique choral tradition. Hymns are still sung in Wales; male voice choirs, rugby internationals, pubs, funerals, weddings, and the box-like chapels retain this ancient form like a spectral ghost dance. In light of this curious afterlife, we can ask: when does a hymn become secular and what can we learn from this process if it happens at all? This essay asks these questions by visiting three typical scenes from Welsh history. These imaginary vignettes show how the crucible of the hymn was also where they were sung as well. The first is the eighteenth-century Seiat or experience meeting; the second is a nineteenth-century North Walian square, where the Temperance Movement are singing one of their hymns; and the final destination is a large, early-twentieth-century Cymanfa Ganu (Singing Festival), where hundreds of people celebrate this kinetic form in a chapel. Arguably, Welsh hymns are no longer worship songs but cultural indicators; they are residues and echoes of a former spirituality to which only a small percentage in Wales now adhere.

In an article on contemporary poetry and belief, Michael Symmons Roberts writes that a lexical ‘impoverishment’ has affected poets and readers in recent years.¹ He recalls the Anglo-Welsh poet David Jones’s words when discussing dead, or dying, signs and symbols in the preface to The Anathemata. For Jones, a sacramentalist, this was a tragedy:²

> It would mean that that particular word could no longer be used with confidence to implement, to call up or to set in motion a whole world of content belonging in a special sense to the mythus of a particular culture and of concepts and realities belonging to mankind as such.³

² ‘Sacramentalism’ is, according to the OED, a ‘“high” doctrine in regard to the sacraments’. Aesthetically, to be ‘sacramental’ is a state whereby the artist is constantly identifying symbol and object in a unified sensibility. See David Jones, ‘Art and Sacrament’, in Epoch and Artist, ed. by Harman Grisewood (London: Faber and Faber, 1959), pp. 143–79.
The British languages ‘are littered with dying signs and symbols, specifically the signs and symbols associated with our Judaeo-Christian past’.

Welsh hymns were constructed from this rich quarry of religious material. How many rugby fans fully understand ‘Guide me o Thou Great Jehovah’, which they sing when one of their players scores a try? E. Wyn James called this sonic outburst a ‘feature of Welsh life’ but, paradoxically, it appears to be a cluster of dying symbols, associated with Wales’s forgotten past.

For Saunders Lewis — a Welsh nationalist and eminent literary figure — these hymns are one of the great highlights of historical Welsh literature. He argues:

The greatest Welsh lyrics of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries are certainly hymns. Their grandeur and intellectual power make them major poetry. These are national characteristics that a literary historian, be he Christian or unbeliever, must in loyalty to objective truth maintain.

The hymn was ‘major’ in the sense of its ability to express a collective ethnie but also its ability to transcend mere aesthetic value, and enter the realm of spiritual, psychological, and national value. According to Alan Luff, the hymn became ‘the folk-song of the Welsh’; its distinct four-part harmony became an indicator of an innate ‘Welshness’. The evidence for this is that hymns are still sung in Wales; male voice choirs, rugby internationals, pubs, funerals, weddings, and the box-like chapels retain this ancient form like a spectral ghost dance. In light of this curious afterlife, we can ask: when does a hymn become secular and what can we learn from this process?

Defining the hymn

A hymn is, very simply, a ‘song of praise to God’. According to Rivers and

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9 Humphreys, The Taliesin Tradition, p. 97.
10 Alan Luff, Welsh Hymns and their Tunes (London: Stainer and Bell, 1990), p. 26. Luff also quotes Gerald of Wales who, in 1188, noted: ‘When they come together to make music, the Welsh sing their traditional songs, not in unison, as is done elsewhere, but in parts, in many modes and modulations’, p. 86.
11 OED. Interestingly, the Greek noun hymnos can refer to a song, poem, or speech. St. Augustine, in his commentary on the 148th psalm, defines the hymn as ‘a song with praise to God’, and this is so far justified that many of the best-known and most popular hymns are derived, directly or indirectly, from the praising psalms. See M. Pauline Parker, ‘The Hymn as a Literary Form’, Eighteenth-Century Studies, 8 (1975), 392–419 (p. 399).
Wykes, the hymn is one of the most kinetic forms of poetry; it transcends one religious tradition and becomes an umbrella term for numerous types of praise. The Greek word *hymnos* (ὕμνος) originally meant a song of praise for gods, heroes and conquerors. New Testament Greek uses other nouns such as *psalmos* (ψαλμοίς) and *ōdē* (ᾠδήν), all coming under the umbrella of *ainesis* (αἰνεῖτε) or praise. In Paul’s epistle to the Ephesians, he even exhorts them to speak to one another in ‘psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs’.

Some work has already been done on the Welsh hymn. A. M. Allchin and Tony Conran have identified the ancient tradition of praise in Welsh poetics. Even though some elements of both Brythonic (c. 6th century) and medieval praise poetry were secular, Allchin importantly notes that ‘Praise, like all worship [...] is that which is due to God. All other forms of praise directly, or more often indirectly, refer back to him.’ Therefore even secular praise poetry uses that persistent religious idiom. More recently, E. Wyn James has written about the evolution of the Welsh hymn. He states:

> It is difficult to over-emphasize the importance of the Welsh hymn, not only to the religious life of Wales, but also to many other aspects of Welsh cultural life and as a badge of Welsh national identity.

Its importance, James suggests, is not merely historical. The privileged position of the hymn can be traced back to the ‘established’ and ‘dissident’ hegemony of Calvinistic Nonconformist culture which intensified following the Methodist Revival of c. 1730. As a result of this dominance, the boundaries between sacred and secular became increasingly difficult to apprehend. The historian R. Tudur Jones writes that in 1890 being a member of Welsh-language culture was almost the same as being a Christian, at least in name, and it was difficult to describe Wales’s national characteristics without referring to its Christianity: ‘By 1890, Christianity and Welsh-language culture were joined so closely that not even a wizard could discern the seam.’ These are the words of a practicing Christian and a Welsh nationalist. However, the relationship between Welsh-language culture and Christianity did come under strain, eventually leading to what the author calls a national ‘crisis of faith’, with a loss of language going side-by-side

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13 The ancient Greek ψάλμος meant a twitching (of the strings of the harp) or the sound of the cithara or harp. In Hellenistic Greek, it denoted a song sung to the harp. A psalm in the Septuagint and New Testament (ψάλλειν) meant to twitch, twang, or play with the fingers. An ᾠδήν is a song of praise from ancient Greece.
14 Ephesians 5. 19.
16 Allchin, *Praise Above All*, p. 4.
with the loss of Welsh religion during the early part of the twentieth century.\(^{19}\) According to Jones, the lack of Welsh-language education and institutions made the chapels ‘cultural centres’, rather than sacred spaces, ‘which people attended because they conducted their affairs in Welsh rather than through faith in Jesus Christ’.\(^{20}\) It seems that the hymn too, like the chapel, evolved into an indicator of culture rather than a sacred act of worship.

The secularization of the ‘hymn’ cannot be wholly blamed on outside secularizing influences. Dominic Erdozain’s work on ‘the secularisation of sin’ shows how the Church — in his particular case Evangelicalism — created its own ‘mechanism[s] of secularisation’.\(^{21}\) He demonstrates how much of the so-called success of Victorian religion was achieved at the cost of the soteriology that fired the religious boom. Erdozain’s theory argues that the shift from the internal concept of sin to an external notion of vice meant that Evangelicalism caused this mechanism to exist. Taking a cue from Erdozain, we can see how theological changes also manifested themselves in the Welsh hymn, especially in the shifting emphasis from the ‘personal’ to the ‘collective’. M. Wynn Thomas suggests that this preoccupation engulfed Welsh Nonconformity as a whole:

As the nineteenth century progressed, emphasis within Welsh Nonconformity shifted from a preoccupation with the spiritual state of the individual to a concern for the welfare of the collective.\(^{22}\)

During the second half of the nineteenth century, the watering down of key evangelical doctrines, such as the Atonement (a doctrine concerning the reconciliation between man and God through the redemptive blood of Christ) and personal repentance, would inevitably result in the secularization of the hymn.

For the purposes of this essay, we will now visit three scenes in Welsh history. They are imaginary but useful when looking at the gradual secularization of the hymn.

**The Seiat hymns**

Firstly, imagine a scene in the late eighteenth century. We are walking into a Methodist house. A group of about twenty people cluster around a large kitchen table. They are commencing a society meeting or a Seiat.\(^{23}\) A Seiat was a Methodist experience meeting where Christians gathered and shared their spiritual experiences under the careful eye of a Seiat leader who would have been a more experienced Christian.\(^{24}\) After the prayer and some conversation,
one of the attendees sings a hymn:

Tros bechadur buost farw,
Tros bechadur, ar y pren,
Y dyoddefais haelion llymion
Nes it' orfod crymu 'th ben;
Dwed i mi, ai fi oedd hwnw
Gofiodd cariad rhad mor fawr?
Marw tros un bron a suddo
Yn Gehenna boeth i lawr!25

[For a sinner Thou didst suffer
For a sinner on that tree,
Suffering nails and cruel fear
Bowed Thy head for all to see.
Tell me now! Was I that sinner?
Tell me if, for me, he died?
Thou didst stoop so low to pluck me
From Gehenna's fiery tide!]

The first thing to notice about the hymn is how personal it is: ‘Tell me was I that Sinner?’ This intimate, experiential dialogue with God seems to be the fruit of intense religious experience. Parker, in her discussion of English hymns, is too general when she states that ‘[t]he I of the hymn is I-Humanity, not I-Individual, the voice of the hymn is the voice of oneness, not the voice of one’.26 In Calvinistic Methodism, the experiential spirituality of the hymn-writer was the crucible of the hymn.27 The speaker/hymn-writer wants Christ to assure them:

Dwed i mi, a wyt yn maddeu
Cwympo gan'waith i’r un bai?
Dwed a ddeui fyth i galon
Nas gall gynyg ’difarhau?
Beth yw pwysau’r beiau mwyaf
Wyt yn faddeu, o bwy ri’?
Pa un drymach yw fy mhechod
Ai gruddfanau Calfari?28

[Tell me, Lord, is there forgiveness
For the hundredth time I fell?
Tell me, Lord, wilt Thou now enter
Hearts of darkness, set for hell?}


What’s the weight of all my failure
Thou forgivest? Of what count?
Which is heaviest, my transgressions
Or the groans from Calvary’s mount?]

The author of this hymn was the father figure of Welsh hymnody, William Williams Pantycelyn (1717–91), and these stanzas, although Christ-centred, depict his own personal interlocution with Christ.

Eryn White has shown how women played a major role in these experience meetings. A generation after Pantycelyn, the equally great Ann Griffiths (1776–1805) wrote these lines:

Gwna fi fel pren planedig, O! fy Nuw,
Yn ir ar lan afonydd dyfroedd byw,
Yn gwereiddio ar led, a’i ddail heb wywo mwy
Ond ffrwytho dan gawodydd dwyfol glwy. 30

[God, make me like a tree well-planted grow
In fertile ground where living waters flow,
Wide-rooting, ever green, and fruitful free
‘Neath showers from that dire wound on Calvary.]

These words were written by a Christian as a result of her own intense religious experiences. In this hymn, she performs the role of a female ‘New Testament’ Psalmist. David’s poetry is re-uttered through the lips of a Christian woman post-Calvary:

And he shall be like a tree planted by the rivers of water, that bringeth forth his fruit in his season; his leaf also shall not wither; and whatsoever he doeth shall prosper. 31

The difference between the first psalm and her hymn is evident in the last line which includes blood, water, and wounds. This tree is bursting with both sap and fruit because of Calvary (that is if David could delight in the law, how much more should Ann delight in the gospel). What results is spiritual confidence: ‘Gwna fi’ (‘Make me’), Griffiths says to God, not only a living tree, but a tree bursting with life and love. The use of the imperative form of the verb portrays a confident interlocutor. Griffiths may do this because her theology allows it; she may come ‘boldly to the throne of grace’ because she has a ‘great High Priest’ who has given her this access. 32 This is her plea: that she will be filled with grace and that the Holy Spirit will give her such growth that she will keep on growing until she reaches heaven. The tree is watered in a twofold way — by the rivers of grace and by the atoning blood of Jesus.

29 See White, Praidd Bach y Bugail Mawr.
31 Psalm 1. 3.
32 Hebrews 4. 16.
These are two examples of early Calvinistic Methodist hymns. They are personal, bibline, experiential, and ‘major poetry’.33

Temperance hymns

We leave the farmhouse and the Seiat meeting. Fifty years or so later, you are following me to a scene in a typical North Walian town. In the main square, we hear more hymns being sung by members of the Temperance Movement.

As a concern for over-indulgence, the Temperance or ‘Teetotal’ Movement rapidly gained traction in Wales from the 1830s onwards.34 At first, the emphasis was on moderation, but it soon led to total abstinence with the first teetotal society being founded in Wales in 1835.35 Temperance hymns reveal how alcohol became the sin. What resulted was an ethicized religion where conversion — which had been the primary focus of earlier and more orthodox evangelicalism — had subliminally been replaced by ‘signing the pledge’.36 The drunkards, and even those who were not teetotal, were now the unregenerate ones; they needed salvation. Ieuan Gwynedd’s (1820–52) hymn is an example of this subliminal theological shift:

Byddin Dirwest sydd yn awr
Yn wynebu’r frwydr fawr;
Boed ei milwyr oll yn un
Am ddyrchafu Mab y Dyn!37

[See how the Army of Temperance
Faces the great battle,
May their soldiers all be one
In glorifying the Son of Man!]

This first stanza echoes Charles Wesley’s famous hymn on Christian warfare:

Soldiers of Christ, arise,
And put your Armour on,
Strong in the Strength which God supplies
Thro’ his Eternal Son;
Strong in the Lord of Hosts,
And in his mighty Power,
Who in the Strength of JESUS trusts
Is more than Conqueror.38

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33 Lewis, ‘Welsh Literature and Nationalism’, p. 142.
35 The first temperance society established in Wales was a branch of the British Foreign and Temperance Society, which formed in Holywell in North Wales in 1832. The first total abstinence society was formed at Llanerch-y-Medd on Anglesey in 1835.
36 People were encouraged to pledge an oath stating that they would abstain from alcohol.
They are not called ‘Soldiers of Christ’ in Gwynedd’s hymn, as they are in II Timothy 2. 3, but ‘Soldiers of Temperance’ who worshipped Christ. These subtle changes reflect a shifting theology. Gwynedd’s hymn continues:

Pechod creulon golla’r dydd,
Caethion medd’dod ddônt yn rhydd.39

[Cruel sin will lose the day,
Drunkard slaves will be set free:]

The enemy is named: ‘sin’ is synonymous with drunkenness. The speaker then echoes one of Wesley’s most famous conversion hymns ‘And can it be’ with the imprisoned sinner:

Long my imprison’d spirit lay
Fast bound in Sin and Nature’s Night;
Thine Eye diffus’d a quick’ning Ray,
I woke; the Dungeon flamed with Light;
My Chains fell off, my Heart was free,
I rose, went forth, and follow’d Thee.40

In Gwynedd’s hymn, Wesley’s ‘imprisoned spirit’ is transformed into a drunken convict. He presents us with an image taken from Genesis:

Nac edrychwn byth yn ol —
O! na fydded neb mor ffol!
Awn yn mlaen yn fyddin gref,
Awn yn mlaen yn nerth y nef. Amen.41

[May we never turn and look back
O! that no one would be so foolish
Let’s go forward, one strong army,
Let’s go forward in heaven’s strength. Amen.]

The speaker refers to Lot’s wife who foolishly looked back at Sodom after God had sent angels to rescue them. She was judged by being turned into a pillar of salt.42 The message is clear: if you return to alcohol, you too will be judged. Unity with Christ is conditional on being sober. This is a long way from the scriptural emphasis of an individual sinner coming to Christ in his sinful state like we saw in the Seiat meeting.43

42 See Genesis 19.
43 For example, see Luke 5. 32.
Let us leave the singing of the Temperance Movement and proceed into the twentieth century. We are entering through the door of a large chapel. Somebody hands you a hymn-book and the number of people is overwhelming. The organ accompanies the singing and everybody starts singing in four parts.

The second half of the nineteenth century had seen significant theological changes which went hand-in-hand with the growth of Nonconformity in Wales. Increasing industrialization also resulted in denominationalism and the erection of grander chapel buildings. Subsequently, great singing festivals called *Cymanfa Ganu* were formed which meant that the hymns too became more poetic, more cerebral, and musically superior to their earlier counterparts.

Theologically, the popularity of the Social Gospel and the advancement of Socialism resulted in a general shift from the emphasis on the individual soul to the collective mass. One hymn-writer wrote that ‘a hymn is not a solo of the soul [any more], but part of the chorus of a choir which no-one can number or see together — except God’. This is a long way away from the ‘passionate rejoicing or deep conviction of sin in the first person singular’ observable in the hymns of Ann Griffiths or Pantycelyn.

This shift is evident in the structure of the hymn-books. For example, the section on ‘Heaven’ in the Calvinistic Methodist hymn-book of 1896 is replaced by a section on ‘Social and National Hymns’ in the 1927 hymnal. Liberal Theology ‘was increasingly horizontal in orientation, speaking much of “brotherhood” with both God and mankind’ — the spirit of the *Cymanfa*. This ‘horizontal’ shift — the vertical orientation being a hymn focussed purely on the supernatural relationship with God — is visible in the 1927 hymnal. The first hymn in the collection’s section on society is ‘Achub ein Gwlad’ (‘Save our Land’) written by Howell ‘Elfed’ Lewis (1860–1953). Elfed longed for a Christian Wales; this is depicted as a heaven on earth rather than a supernatural realm:

Rhag colli gras Sabbathau’r nef,
Rhag sathru deddfau’n Tad,
Gwna rymus waith mewn gwlad a thref,
Ac achub Di ein gwlad.

45 Ieuan Gwyllt organised the first *Cymanfa Ganu* in Aberdare in 1859. The *Cymanfa Ganu* still occurs today and one is even broadcast every Sunday night on S4C’s *Dechrau Canu, Dechrau Canmol*.
48 See *Llyfr Hymnau y Methodistiaid Calfinaidd* (Caernarfon: Llyfrfa y Cyfuneb, 1896) and *Llyfr Emynau y Methodistiaid Calfinaidd a Wesleiaidd* (Caernarfon: Llyfrfa’r Methodistiaid Calfinaidd, 1927).
[Lest we lose the grace of heavenly Sabbaths
Lest we trample our Father’s laws,
Do a mighty work in town and village,
And save our land, my Lord.]

It is not ‘save me’ or ‘save my soul’ but ‘save our land’. These sentiments culminate in Elfed’s most famous hymn ‘Gweddi dros ein Wlad’ (‘Prayer for our Nation’):

Gwna’n Sabbathau’n ddyddiau’r nefoedd,
Yng ngoleuni d’eiriau glân;
Dyro’r gwylith i’n cymanfaoedd —
Gwna ein crefydd fel ein cân:
Nefol Dad, boed mawrhad
Ar d’efengyl yn ein gwlad.51

[Make our Sabbaths heavenly days,
In light of thy holy words;
Water our congregations with dew
And make our religion like our song:
Heavenly father, magnify
Thy gospel in our land.]

Through the nation, people could contribute uniquely on the world’s stage for the sake of all humanity. Christ is no longer central; the hymn expresses a longing that the nation’s religion would be like its singing: communal, loud, and ultimately more a social than a spiritual exercise, horizontal in orientation rather than vertical. The speaker mentions ‘efengyl’ (‘gospel’) but he never explains it with the evangelical fervour of his ancestors.

In conclusion, these temperance and nationalist hymns subtly reveal how the old evangelical theology was adjusted — the vertical emphasis rapidly became horizontal, with a noticeable shift from the individual sinner to the collective mass.52 What resulted was a dying lexicon and songbook which became a relic from Wales’s past. Hymns are still sung in the Millennium Stadium but, in a way, they have become secular. Welsh hymns are no longer worship songs but cultural indicators; they are residues and echoes of a former spirituality to which only a small percentage in the crowd now adhere.

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52 It should be noted that other types of hymn developed alongside nationalist and temperance ones such as Missionary hymns, Arminian Revival hymns, and gospel hymns, which were heavily influenced by the American hymnal. See James, ‘The Evolution of the Welsh Hymn’, pp. 258–64.
The Intersection of the Secular and the Sacred in

_Un Cas de conscience_

by Alexandre Dumas Père

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Abstract. ‘[E]ntre la foi et la negation [...] il reste le doute’, states Alexandre Dumas père (1802–70).2 This sceptical attitude not only embodies Dumas’s own hesitancy between the sacred and the secular, it is also emblematic of the entire French nineteenth century. This article investigates the intersection of the sacred and the secular in Dumas’s 1866 novella _Un Cas de conscience_ (A Question of Conscience). _Un Cas de conscience_ not only epitomizes the major (anti-)religious tensions of the 1860s, but also offers a privileged understanding of Dumas’s view on religion. As in his pamphlet _Le Pape devant les Evangiles, l’histoire et la raison humaine_ (The Pope in View of the Gospels, History and Human Reason), Dumas criticizes the hypocrisy of the reactionary Catholic ultramontanes. Yet Dumas has not abandoned faith. Like several French Romantic prophet-writers, Dumas subtly intertwines secular thoughts and religious elements in his work.

To whom did Alexandre Dumas père (1802–70) address his work? To devout Christians, to atheists, to both, or perhaps, to moderate or indifferent Republicans? It is a difficult question: Dumas’s oeuvre is remarkably contradictory. Maxime Prévost rightly points out that Dumas’s work stands poised between pure atheism and unstrained mysticism.3 Julie Anselmini, too, observes that religious thought remains perceptible in Dumas’s work, even though it contains many secularized ideas.4 If Dumas’s fictional work embodies a sustained tension between the secular and the sacred, his autobiographical work also encompasses a fundamental form of hesitancy. In his texts on Nerval, for example, Dumas

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1 This work is supported by the Special Research Fund (BOF) at Ghent University.
writes that his faith is ‘chancelante’. This results in a fundamental form of doubt: ‘entre la foi et la negation [...] il reste le doute’.

The aim of this article is to explore the intersection between the secular and the sacred in Alexandre Dumas’s novella *Un Cas de conscience* (1866). Firstly, this paper will assess how Dumas’s novella epitomizes the major tensions between the sacred and the secular during the French Second Empire. Heavily censored for its anticlerical passages on ultramontane Catholicism, *Un Cas de conscience* provides an excellent platform from which to study the tensions: it shows how ultramontane Catholics and anticlerical Republicans came into conflict with each other in the 1860s.

On the other hand, secular and sacred tendencies often converged in nineteenth-century French literature and culture, especially in the Romantic era. Gérard Cholvy, for example, points out that the French nineteenth century was marked by a constant ‘flux et [...] reflux du sentiment religieux’. Paul Bénichou, too, notes that ‘le flux et reflux de la religion ont été en conflit avec la raison et l’art’.

Accordingly, in the second part of the paper, I will show that the secular and the sacred are not rival conceptions to Dumas. Although Dumas criticizes, as do several French Romantic writers, a Catholic view of the sacred, he brings his secular, anticlerical views together with sacred elements and tries to establish a new kind of synthesis.

**Two *cas de conscience*: the secular versus the sacred**

First, a few words about Dumas’s plot. One evening, Giuseppe Garibaldi relates his military exploits to an assembly of noble ladies. The Comtesse d’Argyle indiscreetly asks him: ‘Général [...] quelle est l’action que vous vous reprochez le plus sévèrement?’ Surprisingly, Garibaldi confesses that he deeply regrets forgetting to honour a dog called Mustang: the dog saved his life during a battle after the Expedition of the Thousand. Soon after the clash, the dog disappeared with its master, Edward Syton. It is the vanishing of the dog that leads eventually to a real *cas de conscience*. In an inserted story, Alexandre Dumas, the author who appears as the narrator, reveals that a priest gave him

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10 For the summary of the plot, I took inspiration from the back flap of *Un Cas de conscience*.
11 Dumas, *Un Cas de conscience*, p. 26. ‘General, [...] what is the action for which you reproach yourself most severely?’
12 During the Expedition of the Thousand (1860), Garibaldi, accompanied by a thousand men, overthrew the Kingdom of the Two Sicilies, which was dominated by the Bourbons.
a manuscript concerning the truth of Mustang’s fate. The priest explains in the manuscript how the Marquise de Blairey, a Catholic ultramontane lady, came to him in order to pose a moral question: can a crime, she asked, be justified in the eyes of God when it is committed in the name of the faith? By asking this, she confessed to being Mustang’s killer. Over the course of the story, the reader discovers that the marquise wanted to convert a melancholic lady called Lady Anna to Catholicism. Lady Anna had lived in sadness ever since she had to abandon her son, Edward Syton. Her whole life, she had been desperately waiting for her son, until one day his dog, Mustang, suddenly appeared. Mustang’s arrival had an enormous impact on Lady Anna: she became joyful, and she refused to listen any longer to the proselytizing preaching of the marquise. Moreover, she then openly expressed her admiration for the Republican ideals of the anticlerical Garibaldi, on whose side her son and his dog had fought: ‘Cette femme [...] désespérée [Lady Anna] semblait ressuscitée depuis que ce misérable chien était entré dans la maison; elle portait un Garibaldi rouge et un bonnet aux couleurs italiennes’.\(^\text{13}\) When the marquise establishes a link between the heretical transformation of Lady Anna and the sudden appearance of Mustang, the dog that saved Garibaldi, the marquise decides to kill it.

Dumas’s cas de conscience mirror the turbulent religious and political tensions of the 1860s, both in Italy and France.\(^\text{14}\) Indeed, the novella needs to be read in the light of the unification of Italy, and more precisely in the light of the Roman Question.\(^\text{15}\) When Garibaldi overthrew the reactionary Bourbon Kingdom of the Two Sicilies during the Expedition of the Thousand (1860), the entire Italian peninsula came close to being politically united. However, until 1870, the temporal sovereignty of Pope Pius IX over Rome remained the main obstacle to the complete unification of Italy, as Napoleon III protected the independence of Rome from Italy, impeding, for example, Garibaldi’s attempts to liberate Rome.\(^\text{16}\) Hence, the French intervention in the Papal States provoked a strong division in France: while the French ultramontanes aggressively defended the temporal power of the Pope (they aimed for a centralized Church controlled by the authority of the Pope), the Republican opposition claimed a sharp separation between the spiritual and the temporal power of the Pope.\(^\text{17}\) Even though Catholicism regained an institutional power during the Second Empire, the anti-modern attitude of the reactionary ultramontanes reinforced a strong sentiment of anticlericalism in France.\(^\text{18}\)

\(^{13}\) Dumas, Un Cas de conscience, p. 93. ‘That [...] desperate woman [Lady Anna] seemed resurrected since that terrible dog entered the house; she wore a red Garibaldi shirt and a bonnet in Italian colors’.

\(^{14}\) See Claude Schopp, ‘Préface’, in Un Cas de conscience, pp. 7–21.

\(^{15}\) A nineteenth-century dispute between the Roman Catholic Church and the Italian State regarding Rome, which was physical territory of the Pope as well as the (desired) capital of Italy.

\(^{16}\) In addition to his spiritual power, the Pope also exercised sovereign, worldly power as ruler of the Papal States.

\(^{17}\) Cholvy, La Religion en France, p. 56.

\(^{18}\) On ultramontanism and the anti-modern attitude of the Church (1850–70), see Claire Fredj, La
particular among a new positivist Republican generation, who were influenced by the theories of Emile Littre.\textsuperscript{19}

Dumas’s characters Garibaldi and the Marquise de Blairey embody these religious tensions of the 1860s in an allegorical way. Whereas Garibaldi stands for a Republican, anti-clerical worldview that clearly implies a secularization of political institutions, the Marquise de Blairey represents a sacred, ultramontane worldview relying on a reactionary vision of God and society. At first sight, the setting of the story underlines these incompatible worldviews (the secular versus the sacred): while Garibaldi utters his confession in an entirely secularized setting, a salon where he exchanges Enlightenment ideas with noble ladies through conversation, the marquise expresses her confession in a religious setting, that is, in front of a priest.

Nonetheless, Dumas goes beyond strictly opposing the sacred and the secular: he uses a technique of inversion. Remarkably, Dumas represents the anticlerical Garibaldi as a Christian who humbly expresses a sincere admission of guilt: ‘J’avais tant de choses à faire que je ne pensai ni au maître ni au chien. A Caprera, seulement, en songeant qu’on était [...] ingrat envers moi, je me rappelai que j’avais été ingrat envers les autres’.\textsuperscript{20} Considering the acts of an animal equal to those of a human, Garibaldi carries out the Christian ideas of charity: ‘j’ai commis l’injustice de ne pas nommer Mustang colonel’\textsuperscript{21} Similarly, Mustang, supporter of Garibaldi, is represented as an intelligent, Republican dog that has been sent by God (Mustang is ‘le doigt de Dieu’) to disturb the projects of the marquise.\textsuperscript{22}

The very Catholic marquise, by contrast, is represented as an anti-Christian. Turning into a furious Medea, she transgresses the Christian laws of charity and love and the prohibition against killing.\textsuperscript{23} Furthermore, when the priest insists that she misused God to commit an illegitimate and cruel murder, she denies his authority: ‘J’ai servi Dieu [...] ce sera une affaire à régler entre Dieu et moi!’\textsuperscript{24} In this way, she contradicts a fundamental principle of the Catholic Church: the priest as a representative of the Church is a necessary intermediary between God and the individual Christian. Lastly, Dumas inverts the act of granting forgiveness: whereas the audience does not condemn Garibaldi’s act — he shows true remorse — the marquise does not receive absolution. Indeed, the marquise

\textit{France au XIX\textsuperscript{e} siècle} (Paris: PUF, 2016), pp. 201–03.


\textsuperscript{20} Dumas, \textit{Un Cas de conscience}, p. 35. ‘I had so much to do that I did not think of the dog nor of his master. Only in Caprera, when I was thinking about how some had shown […] ingratitude towards me, did I remember that I had shown ingratitude towards others’.

\textsuperscript{21} Ibid. ‘I committed the injustice of not appointing Mustang colonel’.

\textsuperscript{22} Ibid., p. 64. ‘The finger of God’. On the role of dogs in Dumas’s \textit{œuvre}, see Charles Grivel, \textit{Alexandre Dumas, l’homme 100 têtes} (Villeneuve d’Ascq: Presses Universitaires du Septentrion, 2008), pp. 240–53.

\textsuperscript{23} Dumas, \textit{Un Cas de conscience}, p. 94.

\textsuperscript{24} Ibid., p. 100. ‘I have served God […] it is a matter that needs to be settled between God and me!’
The Secular and the Sacred in Un Cas de conscience
does not show remorse at all: she states that she has no ‘remords’ and that she has acted out of pure ‘vengeance’.\(^{25}\) Why does Dumas stage a Christian in a secularized setting and an anti-Christian in a religious setting? Undoubtedly, this technique of inversion conveys Dumas’s own anticlerical and Republican views. In the words of Claude Schopp, Dumas puts his ‘virtuosité narrative [...] au service d’un profond engagement politique’.\(^{26}\) Indeed, Garibaldi’s ideals were a matter very close to Dumas’s heart. Having fought for the ideals of liberty in the French Revolution of 1848, Dumas did not hesitate to support Garibaldi during the Expedition of the Thousand.\(^{27}\) He was eager to follow Garibaldi, ‘l’apôtre de la liberté universelle’, who ‘a reçu de la Providence mission de surveiller ce reveil des peuples’\(^{28}\) Dumas assigns a messianic, providential role to the general: he represents Garibaldi as the ‘messie de la liberté’, liberating the Italian people from the yoke of tyranny.\(^{29}\)

Not surprisingly then, Dumas considers Pope Pius IX, the anti-modern pope who impedes the movement of ‘liberté contre tyrannie’, as the Anti-Christ: ‘Garibaldi a dit: le pape est l’Antechrist. En vérité, Garibaldi n’avait-il pas raison?’\(^{30}\) In his pamphlet Le Pape devant Les Evangiles, l’histoire et la raison humaine (1861), Dumas strongly criticizes his temporal sovereignty: ‘aujourd’hui, aux yeux de la raison et du progrès de la philosophie [...], c’est un inconcevable et monstrueux paradoxe que de voir un souverain, juge temporel et spiritual en même temps’.\(^{31}\) Similarly, Dumas disparages ultramontane Catholicism in Un Cas de conscience by judging the actions of the Marquise de Blairey, as Schopp points out: ‘Cette figure [...] est une façon de poursuivre par la fiction son combat contre le catholicisme ultramontain réactionnaire’.\(^{32}\) Rather than fulfilling her Christian duties, the marquise is interested only in material benefits for the Church, in prestige and power:

Mon amour-propre [de la marquise de Blairey] s’épanouissait [...] chaque fois que je touchais pour mes chers catholiques l’argent de cette huguenote [Lady Anna] [...] pour la gloire de l’Église, pour les nécessités du Saint-Père, mon espoir était immense.\(^{33}\)

\(^{25}\) Ibid., p. 62. ‘[R]emorse’; ‘vengeance’.

\(^{26}\) Schopp, ‘Préface’, p. 21. ‘[N]arrative virtuosity [...] at the service of a deep political commitment’.

\(^{27}\) For a detailed introduction to Dumas and Italy, see Henri Troyat, Alexandre Dumas: le cinquième mousquetaire (Paris: Grasset, 2008), pp. 539–68.

\(^{28}\) Alexandre Dumas, Causeries (Paris: Michel Lévy, 1860), pp. 257–58. ‘[T]he apostle of universal liberty [...] received from Providence the mission to watch over the people’s awakening’.

\(^{29}\) Dumas, Un Cas de conscience, p. 24. ‘[M]essiah of freedom’.

\(^{30}\) Dumas, Le Pape devant les Evangiles, l’histoire et la raison humaine, ed. by A. Craig Bell (Villers-Cotterêts: Ressouvenances, 2009), p. 192; p. 107. ‘[L]iberty against tyranny’; ‘Garibaldi said: the pope is the anti-Christ. [...] Was Garibaldi not right?’

\(^{31}\) Ibid., pp. 180–81. ‘In the eyes of reason and progress of philosophy [...] it is nowadays an inconceivable and monstrous paradox to see a sovereign being temporal and spiritual judge at the same time’.

\(^{32}\) Schopp, ‘Préface’, p. 14. ‘This character [...] is a way to pursue through fiction his fight against ultramontane reactionary Catholicism’.

\(^{33}\) Dumas, Un Cas de conscience, p. 91. ‘[M]y [the Marquise de Blairey’s] self-respect grew [...] every time I was able to use the Huguenot’s [Lady Anna’s] money for my dear Catholics, for the glory of the
Dumas thereby reveals the hypocrisy of the reactionary ultramontane French Catholics. Yet, as I will show in the second part of this paper, Dumas’s anti-clerical, secular points of view do not necessarily imply that he has abandoned faith.

**Intertwining the secular with the sacred**

If *Un Cas de conscience* epitomizes the major tensions between sacred and secular forces during the Second Empire, the novella also shows how the secular and the sacred can harmoniously converge. Indeed, although Dumas clearly rejects the Catholic view of the sacred, the author subtly intertwines secular thoughts with new sacred values.

A close reading of a passage in *Un Cas de conscience* sheds light on Dumas’s understanding of the sacred and the secular. When Dumas, the narrator figure, explains that a priest gave him a manuscript concerning the truth of Mustang’s fate, he also mentions that the priest left him the choice to read it either in a Voltairean armchair in a drawing room or in a garden under an arbour of clematis and jasmine:

>L’abbé Marsolier [...] me laiss[a] le choix de le lire [le manuscrit] soit au salon [...] dans un grand fauteuil à la Voltaire, soit dans le jardin sous une tonnelle de clématite et de jasmin. Je préférai la clématite, le jasmin, la tonnelle et surtout le grand air; je descendis et m’installai dans un de ces ustensiles de jardin qui sont à la fois des fauteuils et des balançoires.

This choice between the armchair of Voltaire and the garden with climbing plants can be considered as two different readings of the manuscript: that is to say, a secularized one (Voltaire) versus a religious one (the climbing plants). Voltaire can certainly be considered as an Enlightenment thinker traditionally associated with secularism (he rejects, for example, formalized religion and aims for religious tolerance). Equally clematis and jasmine are both linked to Christianity. Clematis, on the one hand, evokes the Latin word *clamans*, which recalls the voice of the Saint John the Baptist crying in the wilderness (*vox clamantis in deserto*). The jasmine, on the other hand, is associated with the Virgin Mary, as the flowers blossom in May, the month devoted to her. Its whiteness indicates her purity and innocence.

At first glance, Dumas might seem to opt for an orthodox reading, as he decides to read the manuscript in the garden with climbing plants. Nonetheless,

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35 Dumas, *Un Cas de conscience*, p. 40. ‘The priest Marsolier [...] [left] me the choice to read it [the manuscript] in the drawing room, [...] in a huge Voltairean armchair or to read it in a garden under an arbour with clematis and jasmine. I preferred the clematis, the jasmine, the arbour and above all the fresh air; I descended and installed myself in one of these garden tools that are armchairs and swings at the same time’.
36 John 1. 22–23.
I argue that a close reading of the fragment shows a remarkable degree of secularization. The focus on the climbing plants shifts towards the fresh air and then ends with a second armchair: ‘Je préférai la clématite, le jasmin, la tonnelle et surtout le grand air; je descendis et m’installai dans un de ces ustensiles de jardin qui sont à la fois des fauteuils et des balançoires’. This armchair in the garden is undoubtedly an implicit reference to the armchair of Voltaire. How can we interpret this shift from the climbing plants to the fresh air? And why does Dumas abandon the first Voltairean armchair, only to retrieve it in the fresh air? There are several steps we must take to answer this question.

I believe that the shift from the climbing plants to the fresh air draws upon a shift from Christian (revealed) religion to natural religion. As I have already mentioned, Dumas’s *Un Cas de conscience* can be considered as a plea against ultramontane Catholicism. Unlike Catholic dogma, natural religion relies on the conviction that the existence of God can be understood through the observation of nature and reason: it returns to a simple common truth with universal principles, a truth that does not depend on external ecclesiastical authorities. Indeed, for Dumas, the adoration of God draws upon an inner attitude, as evidenced by his *Mémoires*: ‘je me suis toujours senti, en dehors des pratiques extérieures, un sentiment profondément religieux […]. Je ne fus point l’homme de la pratique religieuse’.

Several utterances in his *Mémoires* indicate that Dumas’s natural religion takes the form of Providential Deism. As Taylor states, Providential Deism is based on the idea that God has no further purposes in his creation beyond the simple realization of his plan, which means that we owe him ‘essentially the achievement of our own good’. Dumas represents God as an architect of the universe who has created the natural order for our benefit: ‘toutes les choses créées […] doivent contribuer au bien-être de l’homme, au bonheur de l’humanité’. And in *La San Félice* (*The San Felice*) he emphasizes the human need to flourish in order to fulfil God’s plan, which implies that reason and religion are in harmony:

> Dieu, en douant l’homme d’intelligence et en lui laissant libre arbitre, l’a chargé incontestablement de cette grande et sainte mission de s’améliorer […] afin qu’il arrivât au seul résultat qui donne aux nations la conscience de leur grandeur, c’est-à-dire à la liberté et à la lumière.

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38 Dumas, *Un Cas de conscience*, p. 40. ‘I preferred the clematis, the jasmine, the arbour and above all the fresh air; I descended and installed myself in one of these garden tools that are armchairs and swings at the same time’.


42 Dumas, *Mémoires*, p. 552. ‘[A]ll created things […] are meant to contribute to the well-being of humans, to the happiness of humanity’.

I argue that the idea that God created the universe for man’s happiness and well-being might also elucidate Dumas’s use of the world ‘ustensiles de jardin’. Indeed, the word *ustensiles* is linked to the concept of utilitarianism (< *utilitas*), both derived from the verb *uti* (‘make use of’). In this way, the word *ustensiles* is associated with the idea that human actions should maximize utility, that is, happiness and well-being.

We return now to where it all began: the Voltairean armchair. One should bear in mind that the first armchair stands in a drawing room: ‘L’abbé Marsolier [...] me laiss[a] le choix de le [le manuscrit] lire [...] au salon’. This drawing room (‘le salon’) recalls undoubtedly the secularized setting of Garibaldi’s confession, the exclusive gathering of aristocratic ladies in the salon. Thus, Dumas abandons an entirely secularized setting (the drawing room with Voltaire’s armchair) in favor of a pure religious setting (the fresh air) freed from its orthodox connotations (in the shift away from the clematis and the jasmine). This pure religious setting (natural religion), however, is compatible with secularized ideas (the second armchair of Voltaire, the garden tools or *ustensiles*): it takes the form of Providential Deism.

This strange union of secular, humanitarian ideas and spiritual reflections in *Un Cas de conscience* can be retraced in several texts of French Romantic writers. In his *Le Sacre de l’écrivain (The Consecration of the Writer)*, Bénichou shows how the Romantic era created the figure of a secular spiritual authority assumed by the poet as a response to a spiritual vacuum left behind in the wake of the Enlightenment and the French Revolution, tending in this way to dispossess ‘l’Église traditionnelle au profit d’une autorité laïque’. Born out of a paradoxical synthesis between Enlightenment progressivism (secular tendencies) and the counter-revolution (religious revival) at the end of the Restoration (1830), the figure of the poet-thinker claimed to be endowed with a ‘quasi-divine capacity to understand and guide humanity’. Possessing ‘une inspiration d’en haut’, he was able to offer an authentic form of human spirituality outside formalized religion, while remaining compatible with intelligence and by leaving him free will, God has unquestionably charged him with this great and holy mission of improving himself [...] so that he may arrive at the only result which gives the nations the consciousness of their greatness, that is, liberty and light’.  

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45 Ibid. ‘The priest Marsolier [...] [left] me the choice to read it [the manuscript] in the drawing room’.
46 This might also better explain the link with Voltaire. Although Voltaire expresses a lot of secularized ideas, he also refuses an entire abnegation of God. Indeed, Voltaire is known to be a Deist. See Paul Pelckmans, ‘Une âme naturellement chrétienne? A propos de l’article “Providence”’, *Cahiers Voltaire, Société Voltaire*, 6 (2007), 165–71.
Enlightenment philosophy.\textsuperscript{49} In short, the Romantic poet-thinker was ‘un inspiré porteur des lumières modernes en même temps que de mystère’.\textsuperscript{50}

Like Lamartine, Hugo and Vigny, Dumas belongs to the great Romantic prophetic poet-thinkers — he is, as Prévost rightly points out, ‘le grand absent de la somme critique de Paul Bénichou’\textsuperscript{51} As in his other texts on the Italian Unification, Dumas professes in \textit{Un Cas de conscience} the typical progressive, humanitarian \textit{credo} of Romanticism. Seeing God as the source of human flourishing (Providential Deism), Dumas diffuses the widespread, optimistic Romantic belief in a Progress (the secular) guided by Providence (the sacred): both Garibaldi (the Messiah) and his adept Mustang (the finger of God) are represented as elected subjects realizing Providence’s plan of Progress (that is to say, the liberation of Italy — and France — from reactionary politics and ultramontanism). If several French Romantic writers turned to pessimism after 1848, Dumas did not cease to believe in the writer’s divine mission to guide humanity in its fight for liberty against tyranny. Indeed, \textit{Un Cas de conscience} emblematizes the revolt of the writer against the anti-modern, ultramontane Church that regained its official spiritual authority during the French Second Empire. Yet, the novella does not praise the anti-clerical, positivist Republicans of the 1860s either: it glorifies an anti-clerical Garibaldi with spiritual features. Hence, \textit{Un Cas de conscience} incarnates the great Romantic paradox. Refusing both a sacred view offered by the priest as well as an entirely disenchanted view offered by the philosopher, Dumas transcends, like most French Romantic writers, the classical dichotomy: he refuses spirituality without a body and materialism without a spirit.


\textsuperscript{51} Prévost, \textit{Alexandre Dumas mythographe et mythologue}, p. 229. ‘[T]he most notable absentee of Paul Bénichou’s critical list’. 
The Sacred Mind:  
William James and Modernist Epiphany  

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Abstract. The modernist age in Europe (1890s-1930s) is often regarded as a time of spiritual crisis, yet at the outset of the twentieth century religious sentiment enjoyed a renewed attention fostered by contemporary science. William James’s *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (1901–02) proposed a study of religious feeling in a modern psychological perspective that became widely known in England and beyond. This paper considers the substantial affinities between James’s description of religious experiences and the critically accepted definition of literary epiphany, suggesting that his work might have inspired the way in which some modernists across Europe conceived and portrayed their ecstatic moments. Two case studies, from the Anglophone author Katherine Mansfield and the Italian Federigo Tozzi, are considered in close reading. Finally, a reflection is proposed about how James’s conclusions can illuminate some important reasons for the popularity of epiphanies in modernist times.

Readers who are familiar with the concept of literary epiphany are very likely to have encountered the words of James Joyce: ‘by an epiphany he meant a sudden spiritual manifestation, whether in the vulgarity of speech or of gesture, or in a memorable phase of the mind itself’.¹ Joyce’s formula is the most popular definition, but this type of illumination has been independently noticed by other authors before and after him. One of the reasons why the Joycean definition was so successful is that it foregrounds the physiognomic affinity between this type of insight and a deeply rooted aspect of the human psyche: the religious sentiment.

Epiphanic moments are sudden insights, triggered a-logically by commonplace occurrences, which arouse in the subject a sense of truth, often accompanied by the impression of transcending time and space, and by a temporary self-oblivion. Their literary lineage within Western culture is usually traced back to classical antiquity, on the one hand, and Christian theology on the other, and their evolution is understood as a progressive abandonment of supernatural

However, authors and critics continue to put a substantial emphasis on the spiritual aspect of the epiphanic experience, leading some to talk of the modernist epiphanic vogue in terms of a quasi-mysticism. In light of this, it is striking that William James's psychological study of religious experience, composed at the beginning of the twentieth century, has not attracted significant critical attention. This article will address this gap, first by outlining how James's study hits the core of the epiphanic question, secondly by suggesting how he might have directly influenced two epiphanic authors who read him, and finally by observing how his conclusions can illuminate some reasons why epiphanies became so popular in modernist times.

James's essay and the epiphanic question

From 1901 to 1902, William James delivered twenty lectures at the University of Edinburgh on the subject of ‘natural theology’, the field of study that examines religious questions outside their supernatural explanation. The lectures were immediately collected in book form as *The Varieties of Religious Experience* and, as Matthew Bradley reports, sold extremely well. They were translated and discussed widely in Europe, extending their influence well beyond Anglo-American culture.

In his study, James takes religion as a ‘total reaction upon life’ that goes beyond the specific relationship with a divinity. It is generated by the feeling of going ‘behind the foregrounds of existence and reach[ing] down to that curious sense of the whole residual cosmos as an everlasting presence [...]', which in some degree everyone possesses. Epiphanies, often defined precisely as moments of insight into a deeper universal truth, can indeed belong to the realm of religious feeling in this non-institutional and non-divine acceptation.

It is critically acknowledged that epiphanies share their phenomenology with...
two mainstays of religious experience: conversion and mysticism, both of which enjoy a rich literary tradition from the Middle Ages onwards. Conversion has been supposed to be the main religious model for epiphanic experiences, either on the grounds that, unlike epiphany, mysticism requires a mortification of the senses, or that mystical writing does not focus on the contrast with the everyday as epiphanic texts do. James’s analysis of both experiences, however, suggests a reconsideration of this position.

Conversion is described by James as the psychological transformation that happens when an experience is strong enough to change the subject’s centre of personal energy. This change can develop progressively or can mature below the threshold of consciousness for a long time before becoming manifest all of a sudden. It is thus a clear inspiration for epiphany, which can boast St. Paul and St. Augustine as authoritative literary models. In fact, recent psychological studies have applied the word ‘epiphany’ precisely to instances when a profound and permanent change in personality comes to awareness all of a sudden, de facto proposing epiphany as a modern, non-religious variant of conversion.

This analogy is appealing, in literature and beyond, as it allows for a precise narrative of situation — revelation — transformation whose focus is on the change and its effects. Unfortunately, however, this reassuringly triadic structure applies to a limited range of modernist epiphanies: in a significant number of cases, epiphanies in modernist texts do not offer any real clue as to the consequences of their happening. This is evident in short stories, where the focus on the moment often cuts off its aftermath, but it is also noticeable in novels when instants presented as spiritually momentous do not end up having lasting effects. James’s account, in fact, solves the problem of the conversion’s unassured permanence by shifting its focus from the importance of the outcome to the relevance of the moment itself: ‘that it should for even a short time show a human being what the high water mark of his spiritual capacity is, this is what constitutes its importance, — an importance which backsliding cannot diminish, although persistence might increase it’.

Indeed, for James, conversion is only one possible outcome of the more primordial form of religious experience constituted by mystical states. It is with the latter, on closer look, that epiphany appears primarily aligned. The medieval obliteration of the senses and renunciation of the self are not listed by James as required identifiers of mystical states. Instead, four markers may justify us in calling an experience mystical:

1. Ineffability: mystical states are states of feeling, difficult to decipher for the intellect, and therefore difficult to articulate in language.

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11 James, *Varieties*, pp. 200–01.
2. Noetic quality: they are also states of knowledge, ‘insights into depths of truth unplumbed by the discursive intellect’.12

3. Transiency: their intensity cannot be sustained for long. They can feel ‘unbearable’ even when joyful, and usually fade in a matter of hours.

4. Passivity: during the experience the mystic feels seized by a superior power.

Far from being superficial similarities, these sufficient conditions of mysticism are perfectly consistent with those that, in critical literature, identify epiphanic experiences: difficulty to express, sense of insight, momentariness, and involuntariness.13 In particular, epiphanies appear as instances of what James calls sudden mystical experiences — as opposed to those cultivated through meditation.

The obvious distinction between mysticism and epiphany would be that while mystical experiences are the ‘root and centre’ of personal religion,14 literary epiphanies do not usually claim a religious significance. However, through the criteria above, James identifies a whole ‘mystical group’ of states of consciousness which includes phenomena that are very distant from any sense of the divine.15 He lists a few examples in order of increasing religious aspiration, from the rediscovery of a familiar perception that leads one to exclaim ‘I’ve heard that said all my life [...] but I never realized its full meaning until now’ up to religious mysticism pure and simple, a ‘consciousness of the cosmos, that is, of the life and order of the universe’.16 Many of these examples can be strikingly related to different versions of epiphany explored by modernist writers. By inventoring mystical states as mental experiences independent from an institutional sense of the divine, James was thus also unknowingly offering a typological survey of literary epiphanies.

Two case studies

The physiognomic affinity between epiphanies and mystical states can be best observed in authors who read James, and who may have been inspired by his work. A case in point is Katherine Mansfield, whose acquaintance with Jamesian philosophy can be felt both in her fiction and non-fiction.17 Her awareness of James’s studies on religion, in particular, is indicated by a quotation from his

12 James, Varieties, p. 291.
14 James, Varieties, p. 290.
15 Ibid., p. 291.
16 Ibid., p. 293; p. 304.
early essay ‘The Will to Believe’ in a 1920 review.\textsuperscript{18} Mansfield would not have identified herself as religious in an institutional way (‘not a personal God or any such nonsense’).\textsuperscript{19} However, her private writings attest to a strong personal spirituality, precisely of the kind James singled out as the primary foundation of religion, which led her to conceive her individual existence as part of a greater whole:

the fact of [...] having suffered, each in our own way \textit{cannot} make Life — the Life of the Universe — what we mean when we stand looking up at the stars or lie watching the ladybird in the grass — or feel — talking to one we love — less marvellous. I think that we — our generation — ought to live in the consciousness of this huge, solemn, exciting, mysterious background. Its[sic] our religion — our faith. Little creatures that we are we have our gesture to make which has its place in the scheme of things.\textsuperscript{20}

This is probably part of the reason why she became interested in esoteric doctrines: ‘to get even a glimpse of the relation of things, to follow that relation & find it remains true through the ages enlarges my little mind as nothing else does. It’s only a greater view of psychology. It helps me with my writing’.\textsuperscript{21} James’s idea that the religious feeling of connection with the world is due to the emergence of new fields of consciousness which expand the ordinary waking perception can indeed find an echo in the ‘vastation of spirit’ described in esoteric texts. James himself did not spurn spiritualism as a mean of psychological research.\textsuperscript{22}

How the combination of these sources helped Mansfield with her writing can be seen in her 1920 story ‘The Escape’. The story’s protagonists are in a moment of tension. Towards the end, the woman drops her parasol and walks away to fetch it, leaving the man alone in the silent countryside:

It was then that he saw the tree, that he was conscious of its presence just inside a garden gate. [...] As he looked at the tree he felt his breathing die away and he became part of the silence. It seemed to grow, it seemed to expand in the quivering heat until the great carved leaves hid the sky, and yet it was motionless. Then from within its depths or from beyond there came the sound of a woman’s voice. A woman was singing. The warm untroubled voice floated upon the air, and it was all part of the silence as he was part of it. Suddenly, as the voice rose, soft, dreaming, gentle, he knew that it would come floating to him from the hidden leaves and his peace was shattered. What was happening to him? Something stirred in his breast.

Something dark, something unbearable and dreadful pushed in his bosom, and like a great weed it floated, rocked... it was warm, stifling. He tried to struggle to tear at it, and at the same moment — all was over. Deep, deep, he sank into the silence, staring at the tree and waiting for the voice that came floating, falling, until he felt himself enfolded.23

Mystical traits are prominent: the suddenness of the experience, which at one point becomes unbearable, the unaccountable knowledge (he knew that the music would come floating to him), the passivity of the subject that feels ‘enfolded’, and particularly the struggle against ineffability. The passage is loaded with expressions of vagueness and paradoxes (the tree growing but motionless, the voice that is part of the silence). In his study, James noticed precisely the abundance of oxymora and contradictions in mystical literature, observing that ‘they prove that not conceptual speech, but music rather, is the element through which we are best spoken to by mystical truth’.24 As evidence of this claim, he quotes a passage from Helena Petrovna Blavatsky, the founder of Theosophy:

He who would hear the voice of Nada, ‘the Soundless Sound,’ and comprehend it, [...] when he has ceased to hear the many, he may discern the ONE — the inner sound which kills the outer.... [...] And then to the inner ear will speak THE VOICE OF THE SILENCE.... And now thy Self is lost in SELF, thyself unto THYSELF, merged in that SELF from which thou first didst radiate....25

At this stage, Mansfield had heard of Blavatsky herself, possibly having read these same lines. The man in her story definitely hears a woman’s song which, whether or not is the ‘voice of Nada’, is certainly characterized as an oxymoronic voice of silence, an ‘inner sound’ opposed to the outer sound of his wife’s continuous ranting. We as the readers are not given access to the truth which this sound conveys, but it moves something in the character’s soul, and initiates a process of cosmic fusion in which the self becomes one with the silence.

The story, however, does not culminate in a straightforward reconciliation of the self, as the Theosophical text might suggest. Its brief epilogue does not reveal whether the stir in the man’s bosom — which seems to bring up to the threshold of his awareness subconscious feelings that he had, until then, repressed — was enough to effect any permanent change in him (a sort of psychological ‘conversion’), or whether it only granted him a momentary relief. The focus of the story dwells entirely on the epiphanic experience, rather than on its consequences, thus harmonizing with James’s remark that ‘the mystical feeling of enlargement, union, and emancipation has no specific intellectual content whatever of its own’, and can lead to different outcomes in the mind.

24 James, Varieties, p. 321.
25 Ibid., p. 321.
who lives it. The epiphany in this story can thus be read as a psychological experience that borrows spiritual features from esoteric mysticism to achieve ‘a greater view of psychology’, but retains the open-ended character that James attributes to religious experiences as empirical states of mind.

A different example of the way James directly influenced an epiphanic aesthetics is offered by the Italian writer Federigo Tozzi, a peer of Mansfield, Joyce and Virginia Woolf. Tozzi read James passionately from early on, including an Italian translation of the Varieties in 1904. His friend Giovanni Papini was one of the most enthusiastic promoters of Pragmatism in Italy, but Tozzi encountered James directly, and elaborated his thought in a personal way. The Jamesian connection between mysticism and pathology fascinated him, giving him a new key to read his favourite Christian mystics. If, however, for James the main psychological effect of faith was constructive, capable of giving coherence and purpose to personality, Tozzi was rather concerned with the alienating potential that lies in the discovery of a ‘beyond’. Accordingly, his epiphanic moments take particular advantage of James’s reference to specific mystical states, typical of youth, in which a subject gains the impression that everything has a sense beyond his understanding. An example can be found in a 1911 story called ‘Tregua’ (‘Truce’):

Emilia voleva andare incontro al marito, che doveva tornare dalla città. Sembrava che il suo essere cominciasse a tremare per una musica nascosta, ch’ella non riusciva ad udire. Era lieta. Poi il senso della musica dispars. Allora la sua anima sembrò una volta colorata di sangue giovanile, un’eco profonda di quella infinità a cui siamo attaccati. Perché la nostra anima si inebria, ad istanti, di ciò che vede attraverso una sua finestra. E tutte le forme pure dello spirito si fanno evidenti. Pare che percepiamo il peso della carne trascinata da esso. Allora abbiamo una violenza nuova di eludere il segreto che ci martella, una voglia di perforare nel di là, da cui ci separa una membrana piena di sangue. E i nostri orecchi non odono più. Ma è sonoro soltanto lo spirito.

Here, as in Mansfield, the metaphor of the hidden music, which the protagonist feels but cannot hear, leads to a mystical experience. In giving shape to his

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26 Ibid., p. 324.
28 Ibid., pp. 29–44.
29 Ibid., p. 170.
30 Ibid., p. 173.
31 Federigo Tozzi, Opere: romanzi, prose, novelle, saggi, ed. by Marco Marchi (Milan: Mondadori, 1999), p. 1080. ‘Emilia wanted to go meet her husband, who must have been on his way from the city. It seemed her whole being was starting to tremble for a hidden music, which she couldn’t hear. She was merry. Then the sense of music vanished. Now her soul seemed a vault coloured with juvenile blood, a profound echo of that infinity to which we are connected. Because our soul is inebriated, at instants in time, with that which it sees through her window. And all the pure forms of the spirit become apparent. We seem to perceive the weight of the flesh dragged by it. Now we have a new force to elude our thumping secret, a wish to pierce through to the other side, from where we are separated by a membrane full of blood. And our ears hear no longer. But only the spirit resonates.’ All translations are mine.
juvenile poetic prose, Tozzi appears to have treasured James’s remark that ‘lyric poetry and music are alive and significant only in proportion as they fetch these vague vistas of a life continuing with our own [...] yet ever eluding our pursuit’.32 Emilia has indeed an intuition of a greater law that connects her spirit to an ‘other’ level: an ‘infinity’ in which she is held, protected, and to which she is connected, but without being able to understand it. As the imagery strongly suggests, she experiences the condition of a foetus, who is part of the maternal body, joined to a greater life that is the source of its own life and that can be felt but not comprehended from its perspective, a greater body through which the foetus at once exists within the world and is secluded from it. From Tozzi’s perspective, this ‘membrane full of blood’ can equally be our flesh, which encloses the soul separating it from the otherworldly dimension that is the proper realm of the divine.

At this stage, Tozzi had officially converted to Catholicism. The intellectual debate with his future wife, and the circumstances of an eye illness which, in 1904, forced him into darkness and isolation for several months, had prompted him to shelve his juvenile socialist-anarchist ideology and brought out his religious anxiety. Despite officially embracing traditionalist Catholicism, however, Tozzi appears to have conceived God much more as the stern Father-King of the Old Testament, detached and revengeful, than as the forgiving figure of the Gospels.33 His writings, accordingly, convey a dramatic awareness of fall and damnation rather than a perspective of salvation. The embodied spirit is, for Tozzi, not a condition of wholeness, but a limbo in which the perception of transcendence always highlights the inescapable barrier that separates us from it. His discovery of a beyond does not evoke the reassuring presence of a greater design, but the anguish of being separated from its meaning. This sense of blindness becomes more drastic as Tozzi’s later works leave out holistic mysticism:

Bastava che restassi una mezz’ora solo e non avessi niente da fare, perché mi venisse una specie di sospetto che mi faceva paura. Io non ero né meno sicuro di vivere. [...] Lei sognando, qualche volta, ha certamente avuto nello stesso istante una sensazione vaga [...] che le impediva di credere al suo sogno; e avrebbe voluto che fosse stata la realtà, invece. Ma quella sensazione staccava il suo sogno, lo teneva discosto, senza riescire però a fare di lei stesso e del sogno una cosa sola. Ebbene [...] io non sapevo se quel che vedeva era un sogno più vasto, continuo, a cui mi ero abituato; e del quale soltanto poche volte avevo coscienza. [...] il presente stesso era per me il senso d’una realtà convenzionale.34

32 James, Varieties, p. 293.
34 Tozzi, ‘Tre croci’, in Opere, p. 238. ‘Being half an hour alone, with nothing to do, was enough to give me a sort of suspicion that scared me. I wasn’t even sure that I lived. Sometimes, while dreaming,
Here, even the mere desire to cross the boundary that separates us from the beyond has vanished. Loneliness and silence open the way to another possibility in the scale of Jamesian mystical states: the moments of dissolution when space, time, sensation, and self, seem to be obliterated, making room for a realisation of the unreality of reality. The paragon that Tozzi’s character establishes with a dream state is not naïve: dreams are precisely moments when the waking consciousness gives way to the deeper states of mind where a connection with the whole can be felt more strongly. Again, however, the perception of this other dimension, perhaps truer than reality itself, does not culminate in a discovery. It is strong enough to put reality into question, but not to provide an alternative centre of personal energy. Thus, Tozzi also denies his epiphanies the status of conversions, granting them the physiognomy of a mystical experience, but not the power to change the life of his characters for the better.

**Conclusion**

The study of mysticism in the *Varieties* sheds new light on modernist epiphanies, and the work of Tozzi and Mansfield points out some important ways in which James’s contributions to the study of spiritual events could have inspired an aesthetics of illumination. The angle itself from which James approaches his quest is a significant starting point. Treating religious experience as a psychological phenomenon in the private dimension, he presents it as a way to get closer to the primary elements of psychic reality. For authors who were using literature to explore the mind, this possibility of a greater depth of excavation into the self was particularly appealing, even if it meant advancing on uncertain ground. Renouncing the traditional interpretive structure of institutional religions means, indeed, also opening a way to ambiguity and doubt. If mystical experiences are felt to be authoritative for their inexplicable sense of reality, whereby ‘you cannot help regarding them as genuine perceptions of truth’, James is also careful to keep the significance of this revelation personal.\(^{35}\) An individual may realise the presence of the divine just by encountering it, but this experience has no authority over other minds, and like any personal state of feeling is subject to delusions and relapses.

This resonates deeply with the aesthetics of authors like Tozzi and Mansfield, where the desire for transcendence is strongly felt, but an actual unison with the supernatural is presented as problematic and unstable. In their hands, James’s mystical experiences lend their phenomenology to ambiguous epiphanies, manifesting an unknown that can be terrifying, and which in no case lays down

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\(^{35}\) James, *Varieties*, p. 62.
a univocally intelligible revelation. A modernist mistrust of absolutes denies these episodes the neat development and permanence of successful conversions, preferring to detach the importance of the event from the importance of its consequences, as James himself did.

On the other hand, this open-endedness and lack of institutional guarantees do not rule out an equally appealing sense of possibility. “If this is all then Life is not worth living”. But I know it is not all. How does one know that? [...] there have been moments, instants, gleams, when she has felt the possibility of something quite other’, Mansfield writes.\(^{36}\) This, in the end, is the deeper significance that James himself attaches to religion: ‘Not God, but life, more life, a larger, richer, more satisfying life, is, in the last analysis, the end of religion. The love of life, at any and every level of development, is the religious impulse’.\(^{37}\) Even when this love of life is troubled, as in Tozzi, epiphanies still count as genuine mystical experiences because of the sense of transcendence that they bestow on the receiver. Through the formal affinity with a well-known religious pattern, they cling to the perspective of meaning offered by the inexplicably authoritative cognizance of ‘the reality of the unseen’, even if they avoid linking it to a definite interpretation. Whether they inspire an intimate reconciliation or evoke an anguished alienation, what counts is that they respond to our anxiety of meaninglessness by putting us in contact with something ‘more’.

This way, a possibility of traditional religious interpretation is also left open, in agreement with James’s suggestion to reconcile the scientific and the spiritual within the psyche itself: ‘let me then propose, as a hypothesis, that whatever it may be on the farther side, the “more” with which in religious experience we feel ourselves connected is on its hither side the subconscious continuation of our conscious life’.\(^{38}\) If a supernatural power really moves us, James suggests, it is likely through the subconscious that its force operates. The instances in which hidden psychic content emerges and seemingly expands our perception of existence enable Tozzi, Mansfield, and their modernist colleagues to explore at once two crucial areas of interest — the obscurities of consciousness and the ‘luminous halo’ of life.\(^{39}\) In this sense, modernist epiphanies can be regarded as the manifestation of a modern, Jamesian mysticism sitting at the intersection between the heights of the spirit and the depths of the subconscious.

\(^{36}\) Mansfield, Diaries, p. 436.

\(^{37}\) James, Varieties, pp. 383–84.

\(^{38}\) Ibid., pp. 387–88.

On Becoming-Secular:
Gilles Deleuze and the Death of God

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Abstract. Gilles Deleuze is not traditionally thought of as a philosopher of religion, and for good reasons. Throughout his works, Deleuze repeatedly stresses that he is a ‘peacefully godless philosopher’, someone for whom God’s inexistence or death is not a problem but rather a given. In this article, I wish to draw attention to Deleuze’s engagement with Nietzsche’s proclamation of the death of God in Nietzsche et la philosophie (Nietzsche and Philosophy), and suggest that the latter can be of crucial use in understanding problems and issues relating to the so-called secular age. Deleuze’s ‘tranquil’ atheism has indeed little to do with mainstream atheism. In fact, it even challenges the main tenets of Western secularism. As such, I argue that Deleuze’s reading of Nietzsche’s thought opens new horizons which cannot be described as postsecular, but rather correspond to a becoming-secular.

In Qu’est-ce que la philosophie? (What is Philosophy?), philosophers Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari remark, not without half-veiled exasperation, that many of their contemporaries still lament over the death of God. ‘On s’étonne’, they write, ‘que tant de philosophes encore prennent au tragique la mort de Dieu. L’athéisme n’est pas un drame, mais la sérénité du philosophe et l’acquis de la philosophie’.1 For Deleuze and Guattari, the death of God should appear unproblematic to modern-day thinkers insofar as it was achieved more than a hundred years ago. As Deleuze suggests in ‘Sur la mort de l’homme et le surhomme’ (‘On the Death of Man and Superman’), while forces external to man were traditionally thought of in terms of infinity and thereby sustained an idea of God, the nineteenth century marked the emergence in philosophy


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of forces of finitude external to man, such as Life, Labour, and Language. That which in human existence and the world used to be thought of in infinite terms, referring to a transcendent God, started to be perceived in finite terms. Thus God died in Western philosophy, accelerating the development of atheism in the so-called modern West and thereby facilitating the advent of what Charles Taylor would later term the secular age. Accordingly, following Deleuze, the only acceptable philosophical reaction to the death of God after a century of mourning is that which he calls athéisme tranquille, une philosophie pour qui […] l’inexistence ou même la mort de Dieu ne sont pas des problèmes, mais au contraire des conditions qu’il faut considérer comme acquises.4

For Deleuze, the most emblematic example of such a peacefully godless philosophy is that of Friedrich Nietzsche. Throughout his works, Deleuze repeatedly argues that Nietzsche was less concerned about God, and God’s death, than about the death of Man.5 As Deleuze insists in ‘Sur la mort de l’homme et le surhomme’, ‘on défigure Nietzsche quand on en fait le penseur de la mort de Dieu’.6 One may oppose Deleuze here and cite one of Nietzsche’s many texts which condemn God’s mastery over humanity and stage violent confrontations between the former and Dionysus or the Antichrist.7 These texts apparently contradict Deleuze’s argument: far from taking the death of God for granted, Nietzsche seems to actively attempt to kill a still very much living God. One could therefore wonder how Deleuze justifies his reading of Nietzsche’s approach to the death of God. Olivier Tinland rightly points out that Deleuze’s engagement with Nietzsche’s work is ‘tout sauf une étude raisonnée de la pensée de Nietzsche’,8 and rather consists in a Deleuzian rewriting of Nietzsche’s philosophy. Yet why would Deleuze strive to tune down Nietzsche’s interest in the death of God and align him to a supposedly peaceful form of atheism?

What this paper achieves, therefore, is to unfold the main tenets of Deleuze’s ‘tranquil’ atheism by examining his engagement with the Nietzschean death of God. In so doing, I hope to lead to the recognition that Deleuze radically breaks with mainstream atheism and opens thought to new horizons which,

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4 Gilles Deleuze, Périclès et Verdi: la philosophie de François Châtelet (Paris: Éditions de Minuit, 1988), p. 7. ‘[T]ranquil atheism, a philosophy in which […] the nonexistence and even the death of God are not problems, but rather conditions that should be treated as givens’, my translation.
as we will see, cannot be described as postsecular, but rather correspond to a becoming-secular.

The deaths of God

In Nietzsche et la philosophie (Nietzsche and Philosophy), his second published book and most sustained engagement with Nietzsche’s work, Deleuze argues that one should speak of the deaths of God rather than the usual singular death of God. For Deleuze indeed, quoting a passage from Nietzsche’s Also sprach Zarathustra (Thus Spoke Zarathustra): ‘Lorsque les dieux meurent, ils meurent toujours de plusieurs sortes de morts.’ Chapter 5 of Nietzsche et la philosophie indexes these multiple deaths of God. For the purpose of this article, two of them are worth examining in more detail.

On the one hand, based on his reading of Nietzsche, Deleuze highlights that God’s death was first thoroughly theorized as part of the Christian doctrine. The death of God constitutes not only the birth-act of Christianity — what distinguishes it from Judaism — but also the very heart of its dogma. The core Christian values of love, self-sacrifice, and redemption depend on Christ’s death on the cross, for it is only by exposing Himself to the possibility of His negation that Christ may resuscitate and that His sacrifice redeems humankind. Christ’s death is, therefore, not a threat to the Christian God; rather the opposite, it takes part in and reinforces His moral order. As Hegel remarks on several occasions in Phänomenologie des Geistes (Phenomenology of Spirit), the Christian death of God is thus profoundly dialectical in nature, that is, it involves a movement of negation — here, death — that preserves that which it was supposed to undermine — here, God.

As Deleuze however remarks, by staging for the first time the putting to death of God by humankind, Christianity opened thought to a world in which God is not. For Deleuze, the Christian dogma ‘sécrit son propre athéisme’, atheism which has now become mainstream in the so-called modern West. In other words, Christianity paradoxically initiated a second — atheistic — death of God. Yet, as Deleuze explains in ‘Sur la mort de l’homme et le surhomme’, the latter threatened to exhaust the external forces of infinity — and by extension, the higher values — that traditionally supported human existence. In the nineteenth century, thinkers such as Immanuel Kant, Auguste

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11 Deleuze, Nietzsche et la philosophie, pp. 175–77.
13 Deleuze, Nietzsche et la philosophie, pp. 177–78.
On Becoming-Secular

Comte, and Ludwig Feuerbach therefore modelled new values, new external forces, based on human finitude. Thus was born the humanistic idea of Man in Western philosophy. Yet as Deleuze rhetorically asks, ‘en mettant l’homme à la place de Dieu, supprimons-nous l’essentiel, c’est-à-dire la place?’ According to Deleuze, the atheistic death of God merely replaced traditional theological values with humanistic ones, the God-Man with the Man-God. It dialectically negated the Christian God, opposed His infinity with forces of finitude, but nevertheless preserved something of His transcendence at the heart of its own structure. As Christopher Watkin suggests in Difficult Atheism, the atheistic death of God can thus be called ‘imitative’ insofar as it ‘merely replaces “God” with a supposedly atheistic placeholder [...], explicitly rejecting but implicitly imitating theology’s categories of thinking’.  

The death of Man

As far as Deleuze is concerned then, both the Christian and imitative deaths of God follow a dialectical logic and therefore always result in ‘un bizarre mélange [...] d’athéisme et de théologie’. Yet for Deleuze, Nietzsche’s pronouncement of the death of God has nothing to do with these two deaths. In fact, according to Deleuze, Nietzsche is much less concerned about God’s death, which was effectivly achieved by the end of the nineteenth century with the advent of Man-God, than about the death of this very Man-God and, more generally, of the transcendent ‘place’ he occupies. Here, Deleuze meets Martin Heidegger’s reading of Nietzsche’s thought in ‘Nietzsches Wort “Gott ist tot”’ (‘Nietzsche’s Word: God is Dead’). For Heidegger, Nietzsche’s project of revaluation of values functions as a systematic denial of transcendence in favour of immanence, of all that is suprasensory in favour of that which is strictly sensory. Thus, Heidegger argues that the living God whom Nietzsche opposes throughout his works — sometimes by means of violent confrontations with its rival, Dionysus or the Antichrist — is just as much the Christian God as transcendence itself, including all higher truths and values.

The parallel between Deleuze and Heidegger’s readings of Nietzsche however ends here. Unlike Deleuze indeed, Heidegger argues that Nietzsche’s project
to kill Man is doomed to fail insofar as, by proceeding by means of binary oppositions, it too plays in the hands of dialectics. According to Heidegger, Nietzsche defines the sensory by contrast with the suprasensory, which means that, even after he denies the latter, its shadow remains within the very structure of the former.\textsuperscript{22} As Watkin elucidates in \textit{Difficult Atheism}, ‘In limiting itself to the sensory world \textit{as opposed to} the suprasensory, the immanent \textit{as opposed to} the transcendent, [this] residual [form of] atheism finds itself — just like imitative atheism — defined in terms of that which it seeks to escape’, that is, transcendence.\textsuperscript{23} For Heidegger, then, Nietzsche’s death of Man is no different than the Christian and imitative deaths of God: by approaching immanence \textit{negatively}, as that which is opposed to transcendence, it dialectically leaves a theological space unchallenged. God is not preserved per se — as with the Christian death of God — and his place is not occupied by an atheistic placeholder — as with the imitative death of God. His place is simply left empty.\textsuperscript{24} Moreover, as Heidegger remarks, leaving the place empty means running the risk of a new contamination by Man-God, Reason, or any other transcendent placeholder, for ‘die leere Stelle fordert [...] dazu auf, sie neu zu besetzen und den daraus entschwundenen Gott durch anderes zu ersetzen’.\textsuperscript{25} As far as Heidegger is concerned, then, Nietzsche’s residual atheism not only fails to destroy God’s transcendent ‘place’, it is also complicit with filling it anew.

\textbf{The (not so) immanent frame}

At this point, I would like to suggest that Heidegger’s critique of Nietzsche’s dialectical engagement with the death of God also applies to secularism. In \textit{A Secular Age}, Taylor remarks that secularism is generally understood as a political organization of society — the separation of religion from the public spheres of human reality in order to guarantee both the neutrality of the State and the freedom of cult — and as a social phenomenon — the fact that religion has lesser importance for social life.\textsuperscript{26} However, Taylor argues that secularism also corresponds to a lived experience of existence and the world in terms of immanence.\textsuperscript{27} With the progressive disengagement from Abrahamic religions and their transcendent divine in secular societies, Taylor argues, ‘we come to understand our lives as taking place within a self-sufficient immanent order’.\textsuperscript{28} Taylor compares this change in perspective to the closing of an ‘immanent

\textsuperscript{22} Ibid., p. 209.
\textsuperscript{23} Watkin, \textit{Difficult Atheism}, p. 6.
\textsuperscript{24} Heidegger, ‘Nietzsches Wort “Gott ist tot”’, p. 225.
\textsuperscript{25} Ibid., p. 225. ‘[T]he empty space demands to be occupied anew and to have the god now vanished from it replaced by something else’, Martin Heidegger, ‘Nietzsche’s Word: God is Dead’, in \textit{The Question Concerning Technology and Other Essays}, ed. and trans. by William Lovitt (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1977), pp. 53–114 (p. 69).
\textsuperscript{26} Taylor, \textit{A Secular Age}, pp. 1–2.
\textsuperscript{27} Ibid., pp. 3–4.
\textsuperscript{28} Ibid., p. 543.
frame’ over Western minds. Just like Nietzsche’s philosophy, secularism functions as a denial of transcendence in favour of immanence. Of course, in secular societies, the immanent frame is rarely hermetically closed in the way Nietzsche called for. Rather, it is kept ajar, so long as transcendence and its religious manifestations are securely contained within the private sphere. In the most part of human daily experience, then, immanence must still prevail.

In the last few decades, however, a number of anthropologists have remarked that secularism remains dialectically dependent on an idea of transcendence. On the one hand, the atheist neutrality imposed by secularism upon the public sphere tends to be colonised by transcendent placeholders, such as Reason or Man, which lead to the emergence of quasi-religious — or, to use Watkin’s term, imitative — humanist or rationalist currents in many Western countries. On the other hand, as with Nietzsche’s residual atheism, secularism cultivates a binary opposition between immanence and transcendence by separating spiritual matters from earthly ones. Naturally, such a separation requires that spiritual matters be of transcendent nature, and by extension, relatively detachable from this-worldly concerns. This is how religion has been defined in social sciences for the past hundred years. Yet anthropologists such as Talal Asad, Bruce Kapferer, and Martin Holbraad have accused such definitions — and, by extension, Western secularism — of ethnocentrism, for they fail to accommodate the wide variety of immanent spiritualities found across the world and throughout history. Animist and perspectivist peoples, for instance, admit a sense of the sacred which is absolutely undistinguishable from this-worldly matters. Their spirituality is, therefore, incompatible with secularism. One may wish to criticize Taylor for using the term ‘immanent frame’ to define secularism, then. The ‘frame’ of secularism is only immanent insofar as it admits no religious transcendence. Yet it simultaneously fails to get rid of atheistic forms of transcendence, as well as to accommodate immanent religions. In fact, secularism proves unable to admit that something might exceed its binary categories, such as be religious and immanent — for immanence is, again, only defined negatively, as that which is opposed to transcendence. Secularism is thus twice dialectical: the atheist neutrality it imposes upon the public sphere is both imitative and residual. And so is Nietzsche’s thought, at least according to Heidegger.

29 Ibid.
The eternal return of difference

Deleuze, on the other hand, makes a completely different reading of Nietzsche's death of Man. The thrust of *Nietzsche et la philosophie* is that Nietzsche's death of Man is profoundly *anti-dialectical* insofar as it affirms the ontological primacy of difference over Being-as-such. As a movement of negation, dialectics indeed posits the ontological primacy of Being-as-such.

To justify this claim, Deleuze appeals to Nietzsche's pluralism. According to Deleuze, Nietzsche's thought is pluralist insofar as it approaches all that is — phenomena, organisms, and so on — as a state of forces. Of course, Deleuze acknowledges that ‘[l]e pluralisme a parfois des apparences dialectiques’, especially when such a pluralism relies on binary oppositions as those identified by Heidegger in Nietzsche's philosophy. The first step of dialectics — negation — does require pluralism. However, Deleuze suggests that Nietzsche’s forces admit a differential element within their own structure which prevents the establishment of any fixed state of force, of any Being-as-such and, by extension, of any binary opposition between two of such beings. This differential element is that which Nietzsche calls the will-to-power, the accomplishment of which is supposed to announce the death of Man. Historically, the concept of will-to-power has been wrongly associated with a thirst for (political) power. Yet, following Deleuze’s reading, the will-to-power rather designates the creative thrust of willingness — creative insofar as, in a world where all that is reflects a state of forces, it continuously proposes new such states. As Deleuze explains, ‘la puissance est ce qui veut dans la volonté. La puissance est dans la volonté l’élément génétique et différentiel. C’est pourquoi la volonté de puissance est essentiellement créatrice’. The accomplishment of the will-to-power, therefore, marks the death of Man through the advent of a most originary difference, one that precedes and indeed undermines the concept of Being-as-such on which dialectics depend.

According to Deleuze, then, Nietzsche does not simply reject transcendence by preferring its binary opposite, as Heidegger has suggested. Rather, the will-to-power prevents the establishment of any fixed identity. Transcendence, as well as its binary opposition to immanence, are rendered unthinkable. All that remains is difference-as-such, which is nothing but an eternal repetition, ‘la répétition du coup de dés, la reproduction et la re-affirmation du hasard lui-même’. This is the meaning Deleuze gives to Nietzsche’s concept of the eternal

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33 Deleuze, *Nietzsche et la philosophie*, p. 223.
34 Ibid., p. 9. ‘Pluralism sometimes appears to be dialectical’, *Nietzsche and Philosophy*, p. 8.
35 The manipulation of Nietzsche’s theses by the Nazis to accommodate their racist and bellicose worldview is most particularly to blame.
37 Ibid., pp. 96–97. Deleuze’s emphasis. ‘Power is the one that wills in the will. Power is the genetic and differential element in the will. This is why the will is essentially creative’, *Nietzsche and Philosophy*, p. 85.
38 Ibid., p. 32. ‘[T]he repetition of the dicethrow, the reproduction and re-affirmation of chance
return. While the latter has traditionally been understood as the return of the identical, Deleuze describes it as the ontological expression of the will-to-power, which is not Being-as-such but rather becoming. Here, Deleuze touches on ‘la formule magique que nous cherchons tous: PLURALISME = MONISME’. Deleuze’s Nietzsche is neither strictly pluralist, for a singular — monist — idea of being remains within his thought in the form of becoming, nor strictly monist insofar as that which makes the unity of being is the eternal return of difference-as-such. What Deleuze finds in Nietzsche is therefore nothing but a way of — finally — approaching immanence in itself as the eternal return of difference-as-such, and not through its opposition with transcendence.

**Becoming-secular**

It will probably be clear by now that Deleuze never wished to deny Nietzsche’s engagement with the death of God. He simply wanted to indicate that the latter has implications far beyond the limits of theological discourse. The Nietzschean death of God, according to Deleuze, inaugurates a most radical form of atheism, one which announces the death of Being-as-such, undermines dialectics, and therefore radically breaks with the imitative and residual forms of atheism found in modern secular societies. In fact, Deleuze argues that Nietzsche’s differential immanence is ‘seul principe d’un violent athéisme’. Is the atheism which Deleuze finds in Nietzsche violent or tranquil, then? I contend that it is both. Nietzsche’s atheism is most violent insofar as it not only denies God, but undermines the ontological assumptions that supported the very concept of transcendence. In other words, Nietzsche’s ontology takes the inexistence or death of God — by extension, of transcendence — for granted. As far as Deleuze is concerned, Nietzsche’s atheism is tranquil, and this is what makes it so violent, so radically godless.

Crucially, if being secular consists of experiencing life and the world independently from any reference to transcendence, as Taylor has suggested, one may go so far as to suggest that Deleuze’s Nietzsche is more secular than secularism itself. By developing an ontology in which difference is prior to Being-as-such, Nietzsche proposes a most radical — differential — immanent frame, one that is not dialectically dependent on its transcendent opposite. Nietzsche’s thought — as read by Deleuze — carries the seeds of a differential or tranquil secularism. I suggest that the latter would consist of a daily effort

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39 Ibid., p. 28.
41 Deleuze, *Nietzsche et la philosophie*, p. 4. ‘[T]he only principle of a violent atheism’, *Nietzsche and Philosophy*, p. 4.
42 See Deleuze, *Périclès et Verdi: la philosophie de François Châtelet*, p. 7.
to affirm the ontological primacy of becoming by excavating and indeed cultivating the will-to-power deep at the heart of that which is apparently dependent on transcendence, or Being-as-such. This is the thrust of Deleuze’s political thought, as developed in *Mille Plateaux* (*A Thousand Plateaus*). In the face of an existing majority, that is, a standard that comes to be defined in terms of Being-as-such, everyone — including members of this majority — should strive to creatively challenge the standard, in other words, to *become-minority* or to become as such. ⁴⁴ Similarly, being most violently — or peacefully — secular would mean striving to open religion to the flux of becoming by creatively challenging its transcendence, in other words, to *become-secular*.

As discussed above in ‘The (not so) immanent frame’, this is arguably what a number of anthropologists have been trying to do over the past few decades. By acknowledging the inability of traditional definitions of religion to accommodate non-transcendent spirituality, anthropologists such as Kapferer and Holbraad open thought to a less essentialist, more creative understanding of religion, one that exceeds the binary opposition between transcendence and immanence. ⁴⁵ Asad even goes a step further, suggesting that approaching religion as a transhistorical and transcultural phenomenon is, in itself, an essentialist move. ⁴⁶ Not only should religion be freed from any systematic association with transcendence, as this contradicts the ethnographic reality, it should not be reduced to a fixed essence at all by means of a definition. This is also what Deleuze seems to suggest in *Nietzsche et la philosophie*, acknowledging that ‘[l]a religion a autant de sens qu’il y a de forces capables de s’en emparer’. ⁴⁷ Depending on the actors involved and the forces at stake, a religion such as Christianity might indeed turn out to be a moralistic regime to which humanity is enslaved or a reserve for creativity actively fostering the will-to-power. Looking at the history of philosophy and the arts, for instance, Deleuze highlights that the idea of infinity and of a transcendent God have proven to be less of a constraint than an occasion for artists and thinkers to emancipate themselves from all codes, concepts, and forms. ⁴⁸ Thinkers such as Baruch Spinoza and Henri Bergson, as well as the painter Francis Bacon, used religious themes as a starting point to promote creativity and movement. According to Deleuze, then, ‘l’athéisme n’a jamais été extérieur à la religion: l’athéisme, c’est la puissance-artiste qui travaille la religion’. ⁴⁹ *Becoming-secular*

⁴⁵ See Kapferer, ‘Outside All Reason: Magic, Sorcery and Epistemology in Anthropology’; Holbraad, *Truth in Motion: the Recursive Anthropology of Cuban Divination*. Other ethnographic studies refer to Deleuzian concepts, as these were deemed to better fit the ethnographic reality than traditional essentialist concepts.
⁴⁷ Deleuze, *Nietzsche et la philosophie*, p. 165; ‘Religion has as many senses as there are forces capable of taking possession of it’, *Nietzsche and Philosophy*, p. 143.
⁴⁹ Ibid. ‘[A]theism was never exterior to religion: atheism is the artistic-power at work within
would precisely consist in cultivating such an artistic-power at the heart of that which is traditionally defined as religion, thereby restoring the latter to the flux of becoming and emancipating it from all essentialist definitions and concepts.

I therefore argue that becoming-secular promises to be more efficient than Western secularism at guaranteeing the freedom of cult and protecting the public sphere from religious truth-claims. Indeed, by making space for immanent spirituality and opening all that is transcendent to creativity, becoming-secular allows for a coexistence of all possible forms of religiosity, whatever this might mean. Only the return of transcendence in the form of a fixed morality or truth-claim remains ethically unacceptable, for it would counter the creative movement of the will-to-power. As Deleuze stresses, quoting Nietzsche, ‘seul le Dieu moral est refuté’. Unlike — transcendence-dependent — secularism, therefore, becoming-secular not only guarantees a genuine freedom of cult, it also protects the public sphere from religious truth-claims. By proposing an ontology that affirms the primacy of becoming over Being-as-such, then, Deleuze’s Nietzsche opens thought to a most tranquil form of secularism, one which is not so much about being secular or ‘postsecular’, for the prefix ‘post’ carries a sense of overcoming and, with it, the seeds of a dialectical logic, but rather about becoming-secular.

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‘No great statement about reality [...] can be static, like simple information’:
Literary Language and Reality

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Abstract. This paper sets out the implications of Marilynne Robinson’s statement of the title, with reference to the work of former Archbishop of Canterbury Rowan Williams. It is notable that Robinson and Williams are themselves creative writers — Robinson a novelist and Williams a poet — as well as academics who write on language, Christian theology, and aesthetics. I claim in this paper that Robinson’s statement is suggestive for thinking about the kind of language required to articulate, intimate, and imagine or conceive of ‘reality’. Robinson takes as assumed that ‘reality’ ought to have a ‘great statement’ made about it, indicating that such reality bears on what we might think of as, and what Robinson would no doubt call, the sacred — a term she believes necessary to human life. Such ‘reality’ resists a ‘static’ or simply informative definition or description, meaning that the functional, transactional terms of everyday language are neither adequate nor appropriate. What kind of language can achieve or point towards recognition of reality, such that the rich mystery of that reality, too, be acknowledged?

Writing of Shakespeare in 2015, Marilynne Robinson declared that ‘no great statement about reality [...] can be static, like simple information’. The idea is that only a particular mode of using language is able to communicate or to give a sense of reality; further, that whatever form such language takes, it cannot be ‘static’. What is ‘static’ language? It is the language of ‘simple information’: language that is purely propositional and functional, whose role and purpose is to inform. Language that is not ‘static’ will not only have purposes other than the informative: not being static also means that the form the language assumes is vital to what is communicated, such that the resonances of the language themselves have a communicative function. Robinson’s claim is therefore about both language’s relationship to reality and the form it is necessary for such language to take.


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The way language is used is of the utmost importance for thinking about and imagining reality. We do literature an injustice if we think of it as representing reality (an impossible task); rather, it creates a mode of relating to reality that would not otherwise exist. How one thinks about reality, and the kind of attitude one has towards it, can be changed and shaped through language. Denis Donoghue argues that there is a movement from ‘circumstance’ to ‘experience’: ‘The test of an experience is that it indeed alters the structure of our feeling: if it doesn’t, it hasn’t been an experience, merely a circumstance.’ Donoghue is not distinguishing between circumstance and experience as if they are objectively different; he is saying that the difference between them depends on us. Circumstance can become experience, but in order for that to take place, it must alter the structure of our feeling. For something to become ‘experience’ requires self-awareness and understanding, while ‘circumstance’ refers to something that remains merely a happening, which does not have an internal impact at all. Further, the way that feeling is altered is never uniform and will always be in some manner creative, not ‘static’. There is an aspect of agency in Donoghue’s words, for one chooses, however unconsciously or unintentionally, the kind of experience that a circumstance is able to become; one determines the narrative of its impact, which also means that it is possible, though it might take much work (therapeutic or otherwise), to change that narrative, and so to alter the impact.

The role of language here is powerful. The articulation (written or spoken) of one’s accustomed or habitual modes of relating to experience can enable one to assess and evaluate them, and, eventually, also to change them. Words therefore form an important element of what Donoghue is talking about. They can form a practice of grappling with and gaining a deeper understanding of one’s response to a particular event or happening. F. R. Leavis wrote in the 1930s that

> What we diagnose in expression, as inadequacy in the use of words, goes back to an inadequacy behind the words, an inadequacy of experience; a failure of something that should have pressed upon them and controlled them to sharp significance.  

It would be a mistake to interpret this as a bald, and evidently incorrect, assertion that failure to express is failure to experience. Leavis’s criticism, as I have argued elsewhere, is deeply invested in the role that a work assigns to its words and in analysing the conception of language that such a role suggests. For him the role implicitly ascribed to words by an author’s work is as important a subject of critical investigation as what the words actually do. His literary criticism, that is, investigates attitude to language as well as

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language itself. Here he is talking about what he believes to be the writer’s task: using words specifically for the purpose of relating to reality. Not all writers would accept this as their undertaking, but Leavis’s criticism concerns itself fundamentally with how words and experience relate, and what he captures here about how language works and why we are invested in it is significant. Leavis sees the precise use of language as itself a practice, an act of engaging with one’s ways of seeing and of conceiving. The careful and deliberate use of language is what enables something to have ‘sharp significance’: to become meaningful, even constitutive. The ‘experience’ that he alludes to here is akin to Donoghue’s experience, something that has developed out of and significantly exceeds circumstance. What Leavis calls ‘an inadequacy of experience’ is an inadequate attention to one’s relationship to reality, to the kinds of attitude one has towards it, and to the kinds of impact upon one it has. He conceives of language as a means to, as much as a mode of, becoming aware of how one relates to reality, and therefore also a means to and mode of potentially changing that relationship.

Another way of putting this is that what is given in a poem or prose work is always a relationship to reality that is mediated in some form or another: a relationship that is attitudinal. I take the deepening of one’s sense of ‘the way things have significance’, as Charles Taylor puts it, as a morally significant gain: one that can determine the kinds of senses of reality we have, and so also affect how we live. In attending to literature’s relationship to reality, what we are really attending to is the attitude to living that a text generates. Literature, through its language, creates and enables a mode of relating to reality that would not otherwise exist, because it depends on that particular use of language, on what Wittgenstein called ‘these words in these positions’. When René Wellek observed that Leavis, in his criticism, ‘very quickly leaves the verbal surface to which he is committed to respond, in order to discuss the leading sentiment, the attitude, the morality, and the philosophy of his author’, he was both identifying and missing something vitally important. For Leavis, the ‘verbal surface’ is ‘the leading sentiment, the attitude, the morality’. The investigation of the attitude a text generates is not separate from the examination of the words, as a key remark in Leavis’s essay on Jonathan Swift reiterates. He speaks of the ‘arrangement of words on the page and their effects, the emotions, attitudes and ideas that they organize’. Both words and what they ‘organize’, Leavis is saying, are ripe for analysis, precisely because of the inextricability of their relationship. When we examine words, we are also examining the emotions, ideas, and attitudes that they generate, because these things do not exist separately from the words themselves. Attending to the language entails a

scrutiny of the sense of reality the words of a text engender, which is to say, the kind of attitude they create. What is the mode of a text’s relation to life; what idea of life does it generate; how does the reality it presents persuade us of its reality, or fail to do so; how does it deepen or fail to deepen our ideas of our emotions, concepts, and experiences; how does it communicate its thought and the pattern of its thinking?

A vision of one’s mode of using language as inextricably bound up with conveying a particular sense of reality brings us closer to what Robinson is getting at. Language assists thinking and performs an important clarificatory role: so much is commonly accepted. But literary language does more than clarify: it can expand one’s mind beyond conventional known patterns of thinking, operating as it does through evocation, association, and suggestion, rather than statement or counter-statement. Repetition, momentum, rhythm, and the numerous components of what is called ‘form’ or ‘style’, including sentence- and paragraph-length, syntax, and punctuation, not to mention point of view and tense, are fundamental to the way literature works and to the way it generates its felt meaning. As Rowan Williams puts it, art can ‘open up’ realms of imagining not otherwise available. 10 Purely functional or representational language is likely to engender a purely functional or representational, a ‘static’, sense of reality. The way language is used, in other words, matters deeply; it can prompt the realest of effects. Williams associates change in language with a change in personhood altogether, asking ‘what if conversion meant not just taking on a new vocabulary and new ideas but a new style of talking?’ 11 Note that a change in content-properties only (vocabulary and ideas) would not be sufficient; the true mark of a change is one of a property of form (‘style’). Only that kind of change would betray the change in attitude that marks a genuine shift, a genuine movement. The attitudinal change itself constitutes the real transformation in perception of meaning, and so also in mode of relating to reality.

Williams argues that one must always try to be ‘looking or listening here for speech that will affirm and open the way to life, for speech that can be playful and not just useful, for words that disturb and change us not because they threaten but because they “fit” a reality we are just beginning to discern’. 12 He suggests that the connection between language and reality is so close that if language is altered, the kind of reality one is ‘just beginning to discern’ may be lost. That is, part of the process of discerning a new reality takes place through attention to language and usage of ‘open[ing]’ modes of speech: a new relationship to reality might be enabled through a new usage of language. For Williams, this ‘new style’ of language is found most commonly in creative literature, particularly scripture and poetry. In his Clark lectures on aesthetics,

12 Ibid.
he quotes Jacques Maritain’s assertion that ‘Poetry is ontology’, glossing the
French Thomist as saying that poetry ‘has to do with our knowledge of being
itself’.13 Art ‘is inescapably a claim about reality’, says Williams; it ‘set[s] out
to change the world’, by ‘chang[ing] it into itself’.14 That enigmatic-sounding
statement is, I believe, suggesting that art generates a sense of what the world is
like that continues to influence how one thinks about the world and about experi-
ence even when the art is no longer present. Art does not aim, Williams says,
at the stimulating of particular felt response: it speaks to intelligence,
inviting intelligence to recognize its truth. It demands — in an extended
but still exact sense — contemplation, the intellect being shaped by the
impress of truth in such a way that the impress of truth on the artistic mind
or imagination is continued through the work (but only through the work,
not through an idea that can be abstracted from the work or through the
artist’s gloss on their own production). And in all these ways, the work not
only challenges appearances; it challenges pre-existing assumptions about
knowledge itself. It makes claims about being but also about how being is
adequately known.15

Note Williams’s care in emphasising the essential role of the work itself —
‘only through the work’ — in prompting contemplation and enabling an
understanding of its truth. He is highlighting the fact that abstractions of the
work’s meaning, like paraphrases of its content, end by forfeiting meaning,
because they overlook form, which is where meaning in its specificity is found.
Such abstractions disregard attitude (the ‘way’ things are), and therefore subtler,
more intricate meanings, the kind of meanings that are suggested rather than
stated, accumulating resonance rather than declaring their power. Williams
writes: ‘The signification of the words is neither conceptual nor representational;
it is the positing of a world in which these words “catch” and establish certain
relations or resonances’.16 The words themselves create the attitudinal and
atmospheric context that can recognise their importance and distinctiveness.
Change the words, and the meaning is changed, because the experience of
meaning is changed. Focusing on a work itself and not on its propositional
content means attending to things such as tone, pace, punctuation, syntax, and
voice, even where the semantic content of two sentences might appear to be
identical. A paraphrase will lose important attitudinal nuances that, far from
being additional or decorative, are paramount to the felt generation of meaning.
In terms of mode of relating to experience, the variations between one way and
another will depend on and derive from these more intangible but nevertheless
significant aspects of how meaning is created. ‘[C]ertain relations or resonances’
will not be established in a different formulation of words.

For Williams, ‘the artistic task [...] is to open up knowledge otherwise

14 Williams, Grace, pp. 16–17.
15 Ibid., p. 22.
16 Ibid., p. 31.
unavailable’.17 ‘[O]rdinary realism’ fails in that task because it merely represents or reproduces, ‘in a way that takes for granted where [the world’s] boundary lines are drawn by our ordinary conceptual mapping’.18 Ordinary realism does not generate anything new. The idea that it is not just art’s role, but its essence, to ‘open up’ beyond the ‘boundary lines’ suggests that art has the most intimate of relations with the way we perceive and conceive of the world. Art, if it is art, should be touching one’s modes of thinking and of feeling (not just one’s thoughts and feelings), as well as prompting previously unimagined, uninhabited attitudes towards experience.

Speaking specifically of poetry, Williams describes its ability ‘to bring out relations and dimensions that ordinary rational naming and analysing fail to represent’.19 Literary language can make suggestions that a more functional presentation of reality cannot perceive, let alone ‘bring out’. The breaking of customary habits of perception is something that literary language can accomplish, as Viktor Shklovsky famously recognised in ‘Art as Technique’.20 Shklovsky speaks of literature as defamiliarizing; he offers the well-known formulation that literature can make the stoniness of a stone felt again, in ways that ordinary reality fails to provide. But Williams, like Robinson, goes further than Shklovsky. Language can make the stone stonier, perhaps: felt more fully than it would usually be, in ways that have a permanent effect on one’s way of seeing stones thereafter. Maritain writes that ‘things are not only what they are; they give more than they have’.21 A different kind of vision must be enabled in order to allow such giving to take place and to bear fruit. Williams describes Geoffrey Hill’s long poem Tenebrae (1978), which is on the extinguishing of candles on Good Friday, the day of Christ’s crucifixion, as presenting the ‘ontology [...] of a universe that is inextricably both material and significative, where things matter intensely, but matter in ways that breach boundaries and carry significance beyond what they tangibly are’.22 Carrying significance beyond something’s tangibility is the speciality of literary language, through the attitude it generates and the experience of meaning it creates. The deepening of reality created by the artist’s vision, the mode of seeking it prompts in the reader, is what enables things to ‘give more than they have’.

What does Williams mean by ‘open[ing] up’? He uses the term to refer to the relationship between words and thought, words and knowledge, or words and meaning. He repeatedly uses the language of opening as if another term might misrepresent those relationships, denying both how words work and how their

18 Ibid.
19 Ibid., p. 28.
22 Williams, Grace, p. 75.
meanings are formed. In literary scholarship, there are two prevalent terms for invoking this relationship. One is ‘enactment’. Here is part of John Donne’s ‘Satire 3’:

On a huge hill,
Cragged, and steep, Truth stands, and he that will
Reach her, about must, and about must go;
And what the hill’s suddenness resists, win so; 23

Donne is speaking of truth that is reached only in roundabout ways: ‘about must, and about must go’ is a well-known instance of words enacting meaning, the repetition, numerous clauses, and inverted syntax being as roundabout as what is spoken of. Yet the idea of words enacting meaning, though suggestive, is not especially helpful for thinking about how words and meaning relate to each other. There is not an existing meaning which words then imitate. Enact suggests sequence: that first one exists, then the other: that a known meaning is reflected in, or amplified by, an ingenious use of words — however expertly that might take place. Yet we do not know what the meaning is until we hear or read the words. To say that they are enactive of meaning is actually to say that word and meaning are separate, which is not the case in any usage of words that is not straightforwardly referential or representational (and, I believe, is a key feature distinguishing good from less good creative writing).

A more current term in literary scholarship is embody. The term is useful because of the aspect of physicality it stresses. Yet the problem with embodiment is similar; it, too, suggests a sequential relationship. Language, as Williams writes, is ‘an embodied phenomenon, rooted in physical negotiations and transactions, both internal and external’. 24 The word embodiment is less useful for capturing what literary language does and how it operates. The kinaesthetic aspect of language justifies us talking of an embodied experience in reading literature, but not of literature itself embodying a particular idea. For literature to embody an idea suggests that the idea is well expressed and conveyed in these words, that it is well captured, that the idea has found the right form. It obscures the role form might have in creating the idea, such that something new is generated through particularities of form. For something to be embodied in form is quite different. Embodiment closes, a perfect fit of word to thing, rather than presenting the possibility that ideas and concepts might be, as Williams says, opened through expression. The term does not break radically enough with the idea of form as external, even though it speaks of form as body and not as decoration. An idea embodied is still an idea whose body is conceptually, if not physically, separate.

Williams’s invocation of poems ‘open[ing] up knowledge otherwise unavailable’ is analogous to what I call enabling, with words enabling meanings that

do not otherwise exist.\textsuperscript{25} This is not to say that word creates reality, but that a particular meaning generated by a sequence of words unfolding in time is \textit{sui generis}. \textit{Enable} not only describes how word and meaning relate, but how literature might relate to knowledge of reality. Understanding literature in this way itself stimulates thought about how a new use of language can open up space in perceptual and conceptual worlds, such that we might be able to experience in fresh and unforeseen ways because of what language enables for us and opens in us.\textsuperscript{26}

Poems, says Williams, ‘change the landscape of language so that space appears’.\textsuperscript{27} For Robinson too, literary language is something essentially enabling:

When I wrote \textit{Housekeeping} [...], I made a world remote enough to allow me to choose and control the language out of which the story was to be made. It was a shift forced on me by the intractability of the language of contemporary experience — which must not be confused with contemporary experience itself. [...] The language of present experience is so charged with judgment and allusion and intonation that it cannot be put to any new use or forced along any unaccustomed path. The story it wants to tell I do not want to tell.\textsuperscript{28}

Robinson sees language as having an obligation to allow the richness of reality, especially the richness of one’s lived experience of reality, to emerge, and, more so, to be felt. Her 2008 Terry lectures focused on ‘the exclusion of the felt life of the mind’ from contemporary public modes of speaking.\textsuperscript{29} Robinson fears that a ‘systematically reductionist conceptual vocabulary’, that of positivism, has overwhelmed public discourse, something that results in a ‘truncated model of human being’.\textsuperscript{30} In ‘Reclaiming a Sense of the Sacred’, she focuses on the ability to ‘feel reality on a set of nerves’, reality ‘in all its mystery and distinctiveness’: terms far removed from what is suggested by ‘static’.\textsuperscript{31} Repeatedly, Robinson’s work suggests that a use of language that is ‘static’ impinges on our sense of, and even our capacity to imagine and to experience (in Donoghue’s sense), reality itself — including being able to perceive daily reality as itself sacred. To intimate something of the depths of reality, for both Williams and Robinson, is a duty, one which entails using language not only responsibly, but creatively. \textit{Creatively} does not necessarily mean poetry or fictional prose, but it does mean language that ‘open[s]’ reality, rather than taking it for granted or closing

\textsuperscript{25} Williams, \textit{Grace}, p. 26.
\textsuperscript{26} For a more extensive discussion of these three terms, see Holman, ‘Literature, Language, and the Human’, pp. 147–59 and \textit{passim}.
\textsuperscript{29} Marilynne Robinson, \textit{Absence of Mind} (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2011).
\textsuperscript{30} Robinson, \textit{Absence of Mind}, p. xiii; p. xiv.
\textsuperscript{31} Marilynne Robinson, ‘Reclaiming a Sense of the Sacred’, \textit{The Chronicle of Higher Education}, 12 February 2012.
down its possibilities: language that enables the mystery of reality also to be felt.

For Robinson, the great statement about reality ‘implies a profound relationship that unfolds continuously and compels, among other things, extraordinary self-awareness’.\(^\text{32}\) What drives and requires ‘extraordinary self-awareness’, that is, is fresh language: language that operates differently to the functional language of convention, proposition, and ‘simple information’. ‘Static’ language is not language that ‘unfolds continuously’, working through intimation, evocation, and atmosphere as much as through semantics. The continuous ‘unfold[ing]’ — note the emphasis on activity — is not gestural or flimsy. It is not insubstantial, as Pope Pius XII indicated it might be in a crude contrast of the strong language of proposition with the weak language of suggestion.\(^\text{33}\) To the contrary: the unfolding ‘compels’. Compelling through suggestion is important for Robinson. She writes that

> Shakespeare gives grace a scale and aesthetic power, and a structural importance, that reach toward a greater sufficiency of expression — not a definition or a demonstration of grace or even an objective correlative for it, but the intimation of a great reality of another order, which pervades human experience, even manifests itself in human actions and relations, yet is always purely itself.\(^\text{34}\)

The Jamesian-Wittgensteinian idea that authors show, rather than tell or say, has become axiomatic. But Robinson seeks something different, neither definition, demonstration, nor T. S. Eliot’s objective correlative: rather, ‘intimation[s]’ that accumulate into meaning. Such meaning has the advantage of not being final or closed; it is something ‘that presents itself, reveals itself, always partially and circumstantially, accessible to only tentative apprehension, which means that it is always newly meaningful’.\(^\text{35}\) What Robinson’s ‘great statement about reality’ asserts is that the kind of language used to intimate reality has the utmost significance in determining which ideas and experiences of reality, and what attitudes towards it, we are able, emotionally, intellectually, and spiritually, to begin to grasp.

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\(^\text{32}\) Robinson, *Givenness*, p. 45.


\(^\text{34}\) Robinson, *Givenness*, p. 34.

\(^\text{35}\) Ibid., p. 241.
Creating a ‘space for the mystery’: 
The Sacred in the Twenty-First Century

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Abstract. In the wake of postmodernist fairy tale fiction, with its strong emphasis on socio-political critique, more recent folklore-inflected fiction is turning away from political engagement and risking what Josh Toth and Neil Brooks have called ‘reactionary and conservative blindness’.1 This article argues that, while such fiction does retreat from its predecessors’ feminist reworking of traditional narrative and often has recourse to tired ideas of the unknowable feminine, its alternative focus on mystery still has important political implications. Using The Crane Wife by Patrick Ness (2013) and The Snow Child by Eowyn Ivey (2012) as my examples, I examine the ways in which twenty-first-century folklore-inflected novels foreground the unknown, which has been referred to by various commentators as ‘wonder’, the ‘sublime’, and ‘enchantment’, and make the case for this apparently apolitical turn as a form of the sacred. I take the word ‘sacred’ not only in its religious sense but also in the OED’s most suggestive definitions, as something ‘dedicated, set apart’ and ‘regarded with or entitled to respect or reverence similar to that which attaches to holy things’,2 and examine the relationship between this form of the sacred and reworked folkloric narrative in contemporary fiction. Drawing on the work of Jane Bennett, I will ultimately make a case for these novels as sites of ethical enchantment with the contemporary world.

The ‘fairy tale generation’ of writers imbricated with postmodernism — Angela Carter, Margaret Atwood, Salman Rushdie, and others3 — used folkloric forms including the folk or fairy tale to perform political critique of their late-twentieth-century world.4 Their fictions ‘displac[ed] the truth of traditional

1 The Mourning After: Attending the Wake of Postmodernism, ed. by Neil Brooks and Josh Toth (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2007), p. 11.
4 I deliberately link folk tales and fairy tales by their shared formal features (which can be usefully opposed to other folkloric forms such as legends or myths) to undo some of the culturally imperialist work done by preserving the historical distinction between them. For more detail, see Cristina Bacchilega, Fairy Tales Transformed? Twenty-First-Century Adaptations and the Politics of Wonder (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2013), p. 21, and Sara Helen Binney, ‘How “the Old Stories
narratives, making marginalized subtexts central, and reversing intertexts’ norms or ideologies.\(^5\) In comparison, twenty-first-century reworkings of similar folkloric narratives can seem woefully, even dangerously, disengaged. Eowyn Ivey’s *The Snow Child* (2012) rewrites ‘The Little Daughter of the Snow’, in which an American family long for a daughter; *The Crane Wife* by Patrick Ness (2013) tells and retells the titular folktale of a man who loves a woman trying to keep her feathery secret hidden; *Orkney* by Amy Sackville (2013) works with Celtic and Victorian narratives of water-bound, magical women: all these recent fictions and more feature liminally fantastic female characters presented as unknowable objects of desire. There is minimal reversing of norms or ideologies here, and a frequent recourse to tired ideas of the unknowable feminine and exoticized ‘other’. This is part of a broader turn away from socio-political critique which many see as part of the shift from postmodernist to twenty-first-century fiction, and it has caused some critical consternation. Neil Brooks and Josh Toth warn that ‘we must be wary of reactionary and conservative blindness, of irresponsible rejections of critical and theoretical doubt’.\(^6\) Irmtraud Huber is less partisan in her description of recent novels which ‘[i]n their rejection of subversion, [...] are reconciliatory rather than oppositional, reconstructive rather than revolutionary’.\(^7\)

In recent folklore-inflected novels, this ‘reconciliatory’ political stance requires a reassessment of the role of enchantment, or what John Burnside has called ‘a space for the mystery’.\(^8\) My hesitancy over naming here is deliberate. This ‘mystery’ is a point of crossover between several terms — ‘wonder’, the ‘sublime’, the ‘sacred’, and ‘enchantment’ — which, while related, have distinct critical histories and uses. As I examine commentators’ uses of these terms and sketch out their common ground below, I attempt to get at some of the political and ethical implications of this apparently apolitical turn in contemporary fiction. In doing so I am not seeking to elide the distinctions between these terms, nor to provide comprehensive histories for any of the ideas to which they refer. Rather, I am searching, alongside the novels under discussion, for the most appropriate language to describe the textual gestures towards the unknown which many contemporary folklore-inflected novels foreground at the expense of direct critique.

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\(^6\) *The Mourning After*, p. 11.


Wonder and sublimity

I will begin with the most common of the four terms in fairy-tale studies: ‘wonder’. ‘Fairy tale’ is often considered synonymous with ‘wonder tale’, a translation of the German *märchen*, and Cristina Bacchilega defines contemporary fairy-tale adaptations as creating wonder, using Marina Warner’s definition:

> Wonder has no opposite; it springs up already doubled in itself, compounded of dread and desire at once [...]. It names the marvel, the prodigy, the surprise as well as the responses they excite, of fascination and inquiry; it conveys the active motion towards experience and the passive stance of enrapturement.9

Here is both fear and delight, associated respectively with stoppage and a movement forwards, both characteristics which, according to Lorraine Daston and Katharine Park, were integral parts of the pre-Enlightenment concept of wonder. ‘Wonder fused with fear (for example, at a monstrous birth taken as a portent of divine wrath) was akin but not identical to wonder fused with pleasure (at the same monstrous birth displayed in a *Wunderkammer*), a cabinet of curiosities.10 While Bacchilega acknowledges this duality, she places more emphasis on the positive, active side: the wonder of fairy tales is a spur to curiosity, questioning, and, often, critique. She describes how fairy-tale tellers and adaptors through the ages have been ‘looking to renew wonder in its complexity as both state and action, in response to the unfamiliar, the unexplained [...], and calling for our own active — and, even more so, activist — responses to and participation in the process of storytelling and interpretation’.11 Bacchilega claims wonder as a response to the unexplained, and action — activism, even — as a response to the state of wondering, and she sees this active response to wonder not only in the fairy-tale fiction of postmodernist writers but also in more recent adaptations.

In contradistinction to this, it is the ‘passive stance of enrapturement’ with what is not understood which is given more space in twenty-first-century folklore-inflected novels. Rather than using wonder as a spur towards explanation and further comprehension, these novels use it to pause with what they do not understand. Often, what is not understood is problematically represented by a female character: both Faina, the eponymous snow child of Ivey’s novel, and Ness’s character Kumiko, who may or may not be the titular crane wife, are linked with the novels’ folkloric intertexts. Both characters are represented as unknowable through the fantastic mode of each text, and too great a desire to know them fully is part of what leads to each one disappearing.12

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12 I have gone into the mechanics of the fantastic mode in contemporary fiction in more detail...
While this pausing can be seen as simply one half of the doubled wonder Warner describes, the duality of active or activist wonder and passive, static wonder has been described in slightly different terms by Philip Fisher. He draws the same distinction between delight and fear as do Bacchilega and Warner, but he uses the term ‘wonder’ only for that which causes delight. The other half of this binary he associates with the sublime: for Fisher, wonder is the aestheticization of the ‘pleasure principle’, Warner’s delight, while the sublime is that of the ‘death principle’ — what Warner calls dread.13 This is a useful distinction, but just as wonder is ‘doubled in itself’, the sublime, too, has been described as containing both the positive (active, activist, delight-ful) and negative (passive, pausing, dread-ful) elements described above. For Immanuel Kant, the sublime is a ‘momentary checking of the vital powers and a consequent stronger outflow of them’, a short-lived pause marked by a feeling of both terror and delight.14 This sensation, which he considered to be produced by the sight of something vast or infinite, like a far-off mountain or a distant thunderstorm, was one of pleasurable pain, or ‘negative pleasure’.15 It diminishes but does not exclude the joy and delight which is proper to wonder, just as Warner’s wonder contains an element of the stoppage caused by the sublime.

While Warner’s definition of wonder is crucial for understanding how ‘wonder tales’, fairy tales, interact with the conventions of the European novel, the Kantian sublime seems a more precise description of the orientation of twenty-first-century folklore-inflected novels. This is most clearly seen in its function as a temporary pause of ‘passive enrapturement’, or what Neil Hertz has called a blockage.16 In _The Crane Wife_, George’s discovery of a crane in his back garden is experienced as a moment of sublime pause, as ‘one of those special corners of what’s real, one of those moments [...] where the world dwindled down to almost no one, where it seemed to pause just for him, so he could, for a moment, be seized into life’.17 This is Kant’s ‘momentary checking’, Hertz’s blockage, leading to ‘a consequent stronger outflow’ of energy, but on a much smaller scale than Kant describes. The similarity between Kant’s description of the sublime and Ness’s description in _The Crane Wife_ is striking, but the novels do more than describe the sublime from the outside. In allowing the unexplained to be just that, the folklore-inflected fiction of the twenty-first century makes space for the sublime within the text, representing it as a literal pause: a stoppage of language.

elsewhere: see Binney, ‘How “the Old Stories Persist”’.

15 Ibid., p. 102.
Creating a ‘space for the mystery’

Art and silence

The starkest example of this literal pause comes in Sackville’s *Orkney*, where Richard’s wife’s absence is made textual. When Richard loses sight of her on the beach, he says:

I will go out to her. Out on the beach, she

she is gone.\(^{18}\)

The woman’s absence from view is not only an absence from the text, but an absence of text; she is represented through blank space. The text literally stops, for a moment, to contemplate something it cannot represent, before continuing: this is the textual version of Kant’s ‘momentary checking of the vital powers and consequent stronger outflow of them’.\(^{19}\) *Orkney* is an extreme example, but the same association between textual silence, fantastic folkloric characters, and sublimity is present in other examples of contemporary folklore-inflected fiction. In *The Crane Wife*, too, the unknowable, folkloric character inspires silence. When George first meets her, he says:

‘I didn’t hear the door —’
‘...’
‘...’
‘...’
‘Can I...?’
‘My name,’ she said, ‘is Kumiko.’\(^{20}\)

This is not the narratorial silence of a blank page, as in Sackville’s novel, but a moment of wordlessness between characters. Rather than narrate the moment, and put words to the characters’ instant connection, Ness uses ellipses to gesture towards it. The dialogue which surrounds this moment is itself incomplete: George cuts himself off with a dash when he sees Kumiko, and falters into silence when he tries to speak to her. Only Kumiko herself is sure of her language, and only after a moment of pause; she is the catalyst for silence in others. In *The Snow Child* it is Faina who is herself silent, or potentially so. While the dialogue is generally placed in quotation marks, there are none when Faina is involved in a conversation:

Do you want me to stay? he asked Faina. Maybe you should come in now, anyways?

No, she said gently. Go inside.\(^{21}\)

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\(^{19}\) Kant, *Critique of Judgement Part I*, p. 102.


The contrast is especially stark here, at the end of the novel, when Faina disappears:

Faina. Aren’t you here, at my side?
But she wasn’t.
‘She must be in the cabin, tending the baby.’
‘No, she isn’t there.’

Demarcating the dialogue like this gives an otherworldliness to Faina and the conversations other characters have with her. It also puts Faina’s dialogue on the same textual level as internal thoughts. Later on: ‘Mabel saw the wedding quilt buried in snow. How could she be so negligent? She picked it up’. Mabel’s thought — of her own negligence — is staged in the same way as Faina’s dialogue, implying that perhaps Faina’s speech is all in Mabel’s head, too. This simple trick of punctuation deepens the fantastic hesitation surrounding Faina, but it is not the lack of quotation marks itself which does this. Rather, it is the change between the two styles which causes Faina’s dialogue to seem imagined in contrast with the marked dialogue of the other characters. Faina may not inspire silence in the other characters like Kumiko does, or textual silence as Richard’s wife does, but her words are only tentatively real within the world of the novel; all three of these characters inspire or enact a form of wordlessness, or silence.

This silence can be seen as the ‘momentary checking of the vital powers’ of the sublime, but the ‘consequent stronger outflow of them’ is bound up with the visual art which these characters also all inspire or produce. These artworks are all linked directly to the novels’ folkloric intertexts: in *The Crane Wife* Kumiko makes and inspires George to make what the novel calls tiles, collages of feather and paper, which retell the titular folktale; in Ivey’s novel Mabel draws her own snow child, Faina, and the landscape of which she is a part. Rather than straightforwardly representing the second part of the Kantian sublime, the moment of being ‘seized into life’, these artworks are also bound up in the characters’ and often the novels’ moments of silence. Not only are the artworks visual and therefore wordless themselves, but they are also catalysts for silence in each novel’s characters. In *The Snow Child*, Mabel puts away her drawings of Faina once she has completed them: ‘never would she speak’ of the images again. Her husband Jack comes across them by accident, and notices that ‘[i]n the soft pencil marks something was captured that he had sensed but never could have expressed. It was a fullness, a kind of warm, weighted life that had settled into Faina during her last days’. What is ‘captured’ here is not Faina herself, nor what Jack sees as the wild, unknowable landscape of Alaska; the feeling evoked is not fully explained or described beyond Jack’s

22 Ibid., p. 393.
23 Ibid., p. 393.
24 Ibid., p. 347.
25 Ibid., p. 399.
vague description, and not specified any more than that ‘a kind of’. Jack will not interpret in words what the pictures evoke for him, and remains in this moment of silent refusal. While Ivey gestures towards his silence and the art’s wordlessness by using words here, in *The Crane Wife* Ness uses ellipses to stand for these silences, as we have seen. Here the characters attempt, but fail, to describe their reactions to Kumiko’s artworks:

‘It’s...’ George said.
‘Holy...’ Mehmet said.
‘That’s...’ the man in the suit said.26

The response to her art is not described, except by a gesture towards something holy — sacred — which cannot quite be articulated. George’s initial response to Kumiko’s work is not the total speechlessness of Ivey’s characters, but a failure to grasp the words he is reaching for:

‘Your pictures are...’ George started, and faltered.
‘And again, the sentence you cannot finish.’
‘No, I was going to say, they’re...’ Still the word failed him.
‘They’re...’.27

As Kumiko points out, the tiles are described precisely by an unfinished sentence, by a wordless ellipsis, and in this way they evoke the sublime stoppage.

As in Kant’s sublime, the stoppages caused by these novels’ silences lead directly to the ‘consequent stronger outflow’ of ‘vital powers’ described by Kant. In *The Snow Child*, this return to life retains some of the silence of the ‘momentary checking’: ‘[w]hen Mabel called out to [Jack], asking when he was coming to bed, he had carefully folded the drawings back among the pages of the book and returned it to the shelf, where it remained, unmentioned’.28 The drawings have been a catalyst for a pause of silence and lead to reverent, ‘careful’ action. While the structure of the sentence places emphasis on the stoppage, Jack’s silent moment of reverence does lead him back to life, and to Mabel. In *The Crane Wife*, George’s return to life is marked by a more immediate return to speech: Kumiko asks him again what he is trying to say, and: ‘[h]er face [...] was so beautiful and kind and somehow looking right back at George that to hell with it, in he went, “They’re like looking at a piece of my soul”’.29 George, like Jack, is forced to pause by the sublimity of the artwork; unlike Jack, he reaches with difficulty for words to describe how it makes him feel. The fragmented, visual image he reaches for — it is only a piece of his soul, he says, not his whole soul — does not make any claim to totality. Instead, Ness uses the Kantian sublime created by gaps or stoppages of language to gesture towards a form of the sacred.

27 Ibid., pp. 71-72.
The sacred in the twenty-first century

Part of what Andrew Tate has called a ‘now widely recognised [...] “sacred turn” in contemporary literature’, this form of the sacred is not connected with organized, mainstream religion, but takes account of the variety and uncertainty of post-secular spirituality. While religion is the main association of the term, the OED offers more suggestive definitions as well. Something sacred is ‘dedicated, set apart, exclusively appropriated to some person or some special purpose’ and ‘regarded with or entitled to respect or reverence similar to that which attaches to holy things’. As we have seen, this ‘respect or reverence’ is created in the novels under discussion by their silences, those sublime pauses which gesture towards but do not encompass something unnamed or unknown. This is what these texts do: in place of socio-political critique, they evoke the negative pleasure of the sublime, the passive form of wonder rather than its active and activist double. This form of the sublime generates the textual silences and wordless art explored above, and these pauses allow for and gesture towards the sacred.

Folkloric intertexts are key to this. Tate reminds us that the current ‘sacred turn’ is one in which ‘encounters with the uncanny, the unexplained and, occasionally, the divine have slipped their generic boundaries and quietly crossed the threshold into the predictable world of everyday, mimetic realism’. The generic boundary here is the always porous one between folkloric narrative and the European novel. While the folklore in these novels is not bound up with belief in the way myths and even legends are, these folktales still bring to the novel something magical which is beyond the knowledge and understanding of the characters. This fantastic mode, like Daston and Park’s wonders, ‘register[s] the line between the known and the unknown,’ making up ‘a distinct ontological category, the preternatural, suspended between the mundane and the miraculous’. This ‘suspension’ is not only the antimony of the fantastic but the pause of the sublime, too, and the response to these pauses, as to the novels’ silences, is the art described by both novels and what happens afterwards: in The Snow Child through Jack and Mabel’s increased closeness and in The Crane Wife through George’s faltering speech. In both cases, these texts enact what McClure called ‘a form of reaching’, not only towards the unknowable and lost Kumiko and Faina, but between characters, for each other.

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30 Andrew Tate, Contemporary Fiction and Christianity (London: Continuum, 2010), p. 3.
31 ‘Sacred, adj. and n.’ in OED Online.
32 Tate, Contemporary Fiction and Christianity, p. 3; p. 10.
Creating a ‘space for the mystery’

Ethically ever after?

This ‘space for the mystery’ — a space created by the sublime for what I have called sacred — is more politically substantial than it may initially appear. A stance of passive enrapturement and reverence can be, and often is, enabling of problematic hegemonies, and the folkloric, fantastic characters’ unknowability is coded along gendered and to an extent racial lines: there is much more work to be done here. Despite this, the ‘reactionary’ politics Brooks and Toth warn of are not necessary conditions of this reverence or the fantastic mode which facilitates it. Jane Bennett associates what she calls enchantment with ethical living, and it is her argument for enchantment which best describes what I see as the ethical implications of the novels under discussion and of possible future iterations of fantastic, folklore-inflected fiction.

‘To be enchanted,’ Bennett writes, ‘is to be struck and shaken by the extraordinary that lives amid the familiar and the everyday’. As Kant’s sublime causes a temporary stoppage, enchantment here is a break in one’s everyday life: ‘[t]o be enchanted, then, is to participate in a momentarily immobilizing encounter’. The nature of this stoppage is as doubled as Warner’s description of wonder, as ‘[c]ontained within this surprised state are (1) a pleasurable feeling of being charmed by the novel and as yet unprocessed encounter and (2) a more unheimlich (uncanny) feeling of being disrupted or torn out of one’s default sensory-psyche-intellectual disposition’. As in Kant’s description of the sublime, and as in the definitions of the sacred cited above, enchantment here is a momentary effect. Bennett claims to ‘pursue a life with moments of enchantment rather than an enchanted way of life’, occasional brief encounters with enchantment rather than enchantment as a constant state. This is because the choice to lead an ‘enchanted life’ has often attracted the same charges of political disengagement as the novels I have discussed. Enchantment can ‘temporarily [eclipse] the anxiety endemic to critical awareness of the world’s often tragic complexity’. As a result of this, Bennett writes, for many commentators, ‘the quest for enchantment is always suspect, for it signals only a longing to forget about injustice, sink into naivety, and escape from politics’. Bennett, however, sees enchantment as imperative for ethical living: ‘in small, controlled doses, a certain forgetfulness is ethically indispensible’ as ‘the will to social justice’ is in fact ‘sustained by periodic bouts of being enamored of existence’, of being enchanted. This is because, ‘to some small but irreducible extent, one must be enamored with existence and occasionally even enchanted

36 Ibid., p. 5.
37 Ibid., p. 5.
38 Ibid., p. 10.
39 Ibid., p. 10.
40 Ibid., pp. 9–10.
41 Ibid., pp. 10–12.
in the face of it in order to be capable of donating some of one’s scarce mortal resources to the service of others’. It is by encountering such moments of enchanted pause, of sublime checking or fantastic hesitation, that one can continue to act ethically and usefully in the world. Enchantment, in Bennett’s formulation, acts as an energizing ‘shot in the arm’; it is not a turn away from the impulse towards social justice, but an ethical choice in its favour.

This ethical enchantment is what I see as the function and effect of the work of Patrick Ness, Eowyn Ivey and others, precisely because of the silences at their hearts. Such ethical enchantments are staged in the novels, leading to an ethical turn in the characters’ relationships each other: Jack and Mabel learn to listen to each other and therefore to work together successfully on their isolated farmstead; George comes to understand clearly that his quest to uncover all of Kumiko’s secrets is driving her away from him, and begins to repair his relationship with his daughter. Ethical enchantments are also enacted by the novels. If ‘moments [of enchantment] can be cultivated and intensified by artful means’, then the novels can be seen to function as Bennett’s enchantment-driven ‘shot in the arm’, potentially sustaining the impulse towards ethical living in their readers. To read a novel is to pause in your daily life for a moment; if that novel is a sublime encounter with the fantastic which stages the silent reverence of these novels, then perhaps it can generate and encourage reverence in its readers. As George finds after his love-story with Kumiko ends, these novels leave their readers ‘ready to speak [...] of astonishment and wonder’; ready, that is, to engage once again with the world. Having read novels such as these is to have found ‘one of those special corners of what’s real, one of those moments [...] where the world dwindled down to almost no one, where it seemed to pause just for him, so that he could, for a moment, be seized into life’. In our current political climate of division and suspicion, perhaps art like this, which both stages and engenders a sense of the sacred, can better equip us to engage with rather than retreat from the increased polarization of our twenty-first-century societies.

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42 Ibid., p. 4.
43 Ibid., p. 6.
44 Ibid., p. 10.
46 Ibid., p. 11.
A Bit of Faith in Ecology: Paradox in Michel Deguy’s Poetic Parables

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Abstract. For contemporary French poet Michel Deguy, ecology is a new epistemology capable of replacing a deconstructed Christianity. In his theology-inflected lexis, Deguy’s poetic parables create an ontological and cultural logic seeing the paradox of difference rooted in poetic comparison and its analogical signifier, comme (like). With implications for the language of Western metaphysics and precepts inherited from Christian identity and its image of the human, Deguy also challenges the Hegelian dialectic with his poetic figures the end in the world (la fin dans le monde) and the flesh made word (la chair se fait Verbe) expressing analogy’s profanation of revelation. This essay argues that in locating a secular core in a sacred poetics, Deguy has drawn out serious questions for post-theological community. By affirming literature’s textual production and poetry’s creative imagination, he tentatively expresses answers for the mutable meaning of terrestrial habitation.

In recent essay collections — La Fin dans le monde (The End in the World, 2009), Écologiques (Ecologicals, 2012), and L’Envergure des comparses: Écologie et poétique (The Reach of Accomplices: Ecology and Poetics, 2017) — the French poet-philosopher Michel Deguy (1930) has advanced career-long concerns with planetary space and literature’s meaning to create intersections between critical poetics and cultural and political ecology. Supplementing prior questions of ontological identity destabilizing Western poetry’s prevailing metaphysics, this poetic ecology was preceded by a text quartet concentrated on Christian faith which I interpret as Deguy’s trêves (truces).1 For Deguy, defying its Latin etymons of the faithful (treue), the true (true), and the conventional (tregua), shared speculation in the trève aims at a leap beyond (au-delà). But describing this as the ‘suspension volontaire des croyances mortellement affrontées, en vue de mesurer l’abîme qui nous disjoint’,2 through poetry’s flattened auxesis,

1 The poetry collection À ce qui n’en finit pas (To That Which is Never-Ending, 1995), following the premature death of Deguy’s wife, Monique; Un Homme de peu de foi (A Man of Little Faith, 2002), addressing the culturalization of religion; Sans Retour (Without Return, 2004), a response to an attack from Jewish existential philosopher Benny Lévy; and Desolatio (2007), autobiographical meditations on friendship, love, and mourning. All translations my own unless otherwise stated.

he asserts, we can be ‘a-thées et raisonnables, rapatriant les oxymores divins comme le programme du meilleur ici-bas’. In this ‘programme’, his interests in phenomenology, poetic rhetoric, and deconstruction’s response to religious discourse integrate three debates: 1. French phenomenology’s ‘theological turn’ commonly conceived in the work of Emmanuel Lévinas, Paul Ricoeur, and Jean-Luc Marion; 2. Western poetics’ production of identity through dialectical negation — Giorgio Agamben’s ‘primordial situation of signifier and signified’ where almost all modern poems after Mallarmé are fragments, in that they allude to something (the absolute poem) that can never be evoked in its integrity, but only rendered present through its negation, and 3. poststructural thought desacralizing the ethics of Christian doctrine.

This essay focuses on the latter two debates and how Deguy’s poetry and poetic thinking measure and intersect precepts of presence and absence, (in)visibility, and meaning. In this, he has sought — and, I will argue, located — a secular locus in the poetics of the sacred.

Poetry’s comme and secular figures of the parabolic

Since Aristotle’s ontological law of non-contradiction, poetry’s desire for identifying and tentatively naming its elusive object through affirmed negation is a hallmark of Western thought. During the past century, however, anxiety over absent origins has highlighted how the referent of poetry’s signification remains caught between appearance and essence, sensible and intelligible. Negation is a defining problem for its expression, the pull between materialism and idealism comprising Stéphane Mallarmé’s unrealized, perfect objet-livre, and a post-war French poetry including Yves Bonnefoy’s agnostic ambivalence — for Jean-Pierre Richard, his ‘catégories sensibles de la présence’ — and Jacques Dupin’s lost world of ‘ressemblance, | Blanche écriture tendue | Au-dessus d’un abîme approximatif’.

As one of Deguy’s first collections Ouï dire (Hearsay, 1966) concisely noted, poetry encounters dual-contingencies of identity and meaning given how


3 Deguy, L’Énergie du désespoir, p. 4. ‘[A]-theists and reasonable, repatriating divine oxymorons as the programme of the best here-below’.


5 Agamben, Stanzas, p. 32.


7 Agamben, Stanzas, pp. 156–57.


its subject can always declare ‘[m]a vie | Le mystère du comme’.10 Adapted from the German als (as) and wie (like), Deguy’s analogical signifier comme (parallel with the English ‘like’, the ‘same as’ and ‘as much as’) has re-evaluated singular meaning for both the human and beyond-human figure. This was a doubleness that Deguy defined as the parabolic — religious and geometrical; for Henri Meschonnic, it was an ‘exercice de la parabole’ which narrowed distinctions between the poet and prophet, poetry and the sacred.11 Challenging conceptions of poetry as oracular vision, however, Deguy’s first writings described corporeality conjoined with géo-poétique (geopoetic) figures of geological formations — the rimaye (bergschrund), the Dupin-invoking moraine,12 and the recurring lisière (edge). This configured the human subject’s comparative status with their environment as separate but similar entities in a non-mystical form of analogy.13

Deguy’s poems then became allegorical parables where identity existed only figuratively through analogical expression. Affirming its contingent presence, this viewed the world figuratively comme si (as if). Tout (everything) prefigures the later importance of its antimony for Deguy, rien (nothing),14 but initially, after Paul Valéry’s assertion on poetry’s hesitation between son (sound) and sens (meaning),15 the poetic parable carried meaning’s irreducibility. Deguy’s collection Biefs (Canal Locks, 1964) asserted the non-continuity of temporal poetic identity, ‘longtemps poète et pas encore, jamais’.16 In this line, Jean-Luc Nancy saw the displaced poetic subject as only ‘à venir’,17 and in later calling for a poetic reason, Deguy reminded that poetry’s work is never finished, rather suspended in the present tense, ‘imageant plutôt qu’imagé’.18 Poetic reason’s autotelic identity and mutable imagery then appear quasi-theological.

For Nancy, religion’s apostrophe and image are only designated to those who have already understood and seen them. Accordingly, he asserts, all modern literature in the West inherits Christianity’s parables and grapples with the event that they may have no message but their message itself.19 Deguy’s Figurations (1969) then deconstructed tropes of Western metaphysics so as to reverse its

14 In 2017, Deguy stated “Le XXIe siècle sera poétique... ou rien”. Rien n’est plus urgent que cet “ou rien”. Michel Deguy, L’Envergure des comparses: Écologie et poétique (Paris: Hermann, 2017), p. 9. “The twenty-first-century will be poetic... or nothing”. Nothing is more urgent than this “or nothing”.
poetics into secular space. This stressed poetry’s indeterminate figuration, wherein negation’s transcendental potential to sublate identity is held in reserve as analogy’s signs carry difference(s) without effacement. This was so, he urged, because ‘si l’on parle de trans-figuration, cela ne peut s’entendre que comme passage à la figuration, comme si le trans(port) donnait figure’ — a relocation of meaning deemed the ‘statut de métaphoricité’. Whilst questioning the poetic imagination’s shared figuration with theological perception — the empirically visible carrying invisible, transcendental meaning — Deguy recognized how the ‘vue poétique’ carries its own proof and ‘nous permettait d’habiter cette terre’. Poetry’s comme then became akin with, whilst strictly opposed to, the transposition of Christianity’s human in the image of God — Deguy adding that ‘le comme de la poésie n’est pas le comme-si de la philosophie’. Raising an inclusive, terrestrial, poetic vision, Deguy used comme to produce figures of ontology-as-analogy. Ouï dire had already explored modernity’s absences — a common doxa, a shared ontology, and communal discursive space. Their defining spatial orientations concluded its central long poem, asserting that

Le monde avait besoin d’être annoncé
‘Le royaume est semblable au chemin par exemple
Extérieur au mur bas de château grillagé
Le royaume est semblable à ce lieu
Qui a besoin de parabole pour demeure

Connoting defining lines of Christian exegesis from Matthew’s gospel (‘Thy will be done on Earth as it is in heaven’), Deguy’s figuration inverted the Pauline tensor of as if not into ‘est semblable’. Rather than preparing identity’s suppression through affirmed negation (what it is not), poetry’s as if accompanies identity’s perennial incompletion. Reversing comparison’s direction into double affirmation, this indicated that, as created meaning, this world must be like the world, poetry’s object divided, semblable to itself.

Poetic affirmation as meaning in common

To identity’s Pauline suppressions, resolved neither by Marxist-communism nor G. W. F. Hegel’s Aufhebung (sublation), poetry’s parables speculatively affirm
differences held separately through analogy. Modifying Martin Heidegger’s ontology of beingness whilst challenging Hegel’s negative dialectic (neither–neither) of sublation — opposites preserved in determinate negations annuling contradiction — analogy’s parabolic affirmations (and–and) advanced Deguy’s ontological comparativism of l’être-comme (being-like-it). In their spacing, poetic parables create meaning by interconnecting but simultaneously separating contraries, a paradox deemed poetry’s fortune. Deguy applied this rule to monotheism’s scripture — where the Earth ‘est et n’est pas celle que le livre révèle’ — asserting language’s discordant but generative power of mutable truths, ‘la paradoxalisation, au est-et-n’est-pas’. Coterminal to the waning guarantees of faith, technology’s image of being was also deemed to have devalued writing’s letter. Deguy’s trêves then offered hospitable rather than hostile alterations to religion’s common doxa — immortality — with poetry’s transitions later considered proportional to ‘l’écologie fondamentale’, which must equally prendre une autre direction, et pas simplement quelques mesures de protection [...] [plutôt] chercher à inflectir la direction ‘fatale’ [...] continuer à inventer un sens à l’’habitation terrestre’.

Increasingly, human habitation on Earth is technologically disoriented and estranged from sacred certainties — a deity as creator — leading Deguy to state for the new millennium that ‘nous devons “aller” où nous n’avons jamais été: sans retour’. However, this fatalism, as such, does not invoke nor identify a negative dialectic in the eradication of religious values. Rather, it stipulates that humanity’s lack of salvation be teleologically suppressed, transcendent possibility substituted for meaning’s affirmed immanent circulation and, through analogy, the paradoxes of its common carrying. However, ontologically separate from its affirmed world, poetic identity confronts what Theodor Adorno described as the jargon of authenticity. Critiquing existentialism like Heidegger’s, this is the artifice of a ‘true and revealed language’ transcending the word-thing dialectic, whereby ‘profane language could only approach the sacred one by distancing itself from the sound of the holy’. Heidegger’s essay, ‘Der Ursprung des Kunstwerkes’ (‘The Origin of

25 Deguy, L’Envergure des comparses, p. 75.
28 Ibid., pp. 183–85. ‘[I]s and is not what the book reveals’.
30 Michel Deguy, La Fin dans le monde (Paris: Hermann, 2009), p. 45. ‘[The] fundamental ecology [which must] take another direction, and not simply certain protective measures [...] [instead] seeking to inflect the “fatale” direction [...] continuing to invent meaning for “terrestrial habitation”’.
31 Deguy, L’Énergie du désespoir, p. 103. ‘[W]e must “go” where we have never been: without return’.
32 Theodor Adorno, The Jargon of Authenticity, trans. by Knut Tarnowski and Frederic Will
the Work of Art’, 1950–60), imitated sacred language to posit art’s unveiling of truth, clarifying a terrestrial totality that is already there. Martin Rueff describes how Deguy’s portents on an equivalent planetary imagery render poetic language responsive to the apocalyptic whole of late capitalism — where a technological tekhnē eclipses its original Greek sense of ‘craft’ with an all-consuming ‘cultural’ totality. After Heidegger’s Earth-World duality, in which art modifies the technology of the phusis (nature) of terrestrial matter and ‘work moves the earth itself into the Open of a world’, Deguy challenges cultural capitalism with terrestrial habitation sustained by the restored mutable logos of language, the craft of poetry’s radical measures defined by ‘la paradoxalité oxymorique, l’endurance de l’aporie, l’exercice de la contrariété et de l’impossibilité’. To religion’s culturalization, these measures seek relation to a material and ontological difference, with an a-logical phusis-tekhnē paradox of separate affirmations existing without dialectical resolution. Although initially grounded in Heidegger’s lexis of dwelling, rather than clarifying terrestrial presence through impossibly neutral identity assertions, Deguy used signs of the sacred to invert the speculation of Pauline theology and Hegelian dialectics into poetry’s singular as if.

Without affirming any totality, as is its paradox, this worked to logically deconstruct hyperbolic existentialism. Where Christopher Watkin has defined imitative atheism as any thinking which replaces the divine with a ‘placeholder’ (reason, history, or man), Deguy’s work does not correlate precisely with Watkin’s alternative, residual atheism, ‘truly without God’. By holding identity’s paradoxes in meaning’s logos, where the placeholder is analogy, poetry facilitates terrestrial habitation by creating mutable figures between the hypervisibility of technological scopics and the hyperinvisibility of mystagogy. For Deguy, this is because language ‘conserve les apparitions du monde apparaissant […] autrement dit du sens’. As its ‘communication de sens possibles, indéterminés, inachevables’, Nancy exalts literature’s transposition of immutable images back into mutable language held to an absent object and meaning’s displacement. As poetry captures meaning’s visible reappearance


35 Heidegger, Poetry, p. 43.

36 Deguy, La Fin dans le monde, p. 34. ‘[O]xymoronic paradoxicity, the endurance of aporia, the exercise of contradiction and impossibility’.

37 Deguy, Choses de la poésie, pp. 214–16.


— in the poem, its timeless appearing — Deguy asserted how the sacred exists now only in language’s reliques. Accordingly, poetic parables reverse the residuals of a Christian lexis and identity potentially omnipresent in Western culture.

Following his early deconstructionist work on Edmund Husserl’s presencing of the subject’s intentional sign, and Western phenomenology’s repetition of metaphysics’ photology, Jacques Derrida’s discussion of a post-communist crisis of Europe’s Christian identity asserted that ‘le propre d’une culture, c’est de n’être pas identique à elle-même’, hinting at a corrective to Hegelian sublation shared with Deguy’s subject formation through ‘le non-identité à soi’. For Deguy, neither-neither remained an amputation that analogy can repair by holding ‘l’un-avec-l’autre’, and Nancy’s essay “Prière démythifiée” (“Demythified prayer”) later read Deguy’s poetics to stress how oxymoron’s power is only language’s ‘puissance de présenter’. However, siting Deguy’s relics within a paradoxical dialectic — ‘impossible à y replacer, mais porteuse ou opératrice d’une exigence qui ne se laisse pas congédier’ — Nancy overlooks the detail of a paradoxical poetic. Deguy does not aspire to destroy theology, but with a deliberate contronym urges that

ce qui nous vient du sacré, et qui est conservé dans la langue, les paroles de la langue, les œuvres, notre responsabilité d’artiste est de le déposer, et le transférer à la transmission culturelle elle-même pour empêcher sa disparition.

Deguy’s use of déposer (meaning both depose and deposit) appears ambivalent, and in its indicated ‘transmission’, dialectical. But, removing it to safeguard its cultural value, retreat from the sacred finds paradoxically secular meaning in poetry’s analogical expression. What Deguy termed sublime paradoxes then carry nihilism’s affirmation of annihilation and theology’s affirmation of immortal life beyond Earth. Three relics express the ecology of poetry’s paradox: la fin dans le monde (the end in the world), la chair se fait Verbe (the flesh made word), and together, their profanation of revelation.

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42 According to which, operating by metaphors of darkness and light, the hidden and shown, every philosophy is a photonology. See Jacques Derrida, L’Écriture et la différence (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1967), p. 45.
46 Nancy, La Déclusion, p. 195. ‘I]mpossible to replace, but carrier or operator of an exigence that cannot be dismissed’.
47 Deguy, La Fin dans le monde, p. 45. ‘[W]hat comes to us from the sacred, preserved in language, its words, its works, our responsibility as artists is to de-posit [déposer] it, and transfer it to cultural transmission to prevent its disappearance’. 
A poetics of paradox

Adapted from Charles Baudelaire’s incomplete final work ‘Fusées’ (‘Rockets’), pronouncing ‘le monde va finir’, la fin dans le monde retains eschatological anxiety and the ecological event of humanity’s self-destruction.⁴⁸ In Tombeau de Du Bellay (Tomb of Du Bellay, 1973), Deguy posited it as modernity’s junction of exhausted metaphysics and capitalist expansion,

mué en une pensée du monde disparaissant, en l’inquiétude de l’abîme où le monde peut paraître, croissante à la mesure de la ‘fin de monde’ où nous vivons,

declaring the poet ‘celui qui croit à un monde qui ne sera sans cette croyance’.⁴⁹ Whilst indicting collective abdication of responsibility for the fate of its (present and future) subjects or objects, la fin dans le monde also indicates ‘world’ as an inoperative signifier. Removed from theological discourse, humanity’s finite potential for Earth habitation means

l’athéisme nous confie à un monde à demi transparent: à une révélation ou manifestation à demi engagée, continue, pré-babélienne, dialectale, ‘comme si/comme ça’. Saint Paul espérait une vision enfin face-à-face, sans figure. Le visible n’est pas translucide; la transcendance désigne une autre traversée [...]. Ce qui est manifeste, c’est le poème, qui n’est pas un manifeste de l’auteur, mais des choses.⁵⁰

Reinforcing separation between word and thing, and with the fin du monde a grammatical impossibility corrected by the end in the world, poetry’s transported figuration of meaning within logos holds Earth-World, theist-atheist differences through paradoxical relation.

It is in this sense that la chair se fait Verbe instigates withdrawal from haptic certitude with Deguy’s communal ecology founded on the always divided logic of logos. Taken to the letter, ecology requires this different dualism:

une catastrophe sans doute [...] mais salvatrice: il n’y a pas d’autre monde; ni Au-delà; ni altermondialisé, qu’ici-bas [...] Vie, sans mysticisme; la vie-mort repensée, ou chair se faisant verbe.⁵¹

Mortal creation and human life-in-language cultivate the invariant meaning (singular) of meanings (plural), recognizing that truth is only a mutable,

⁴⁹ Michel Deguy, Poèmes II 1970–1980 (Paris: Gallimard, 1986), p. 160. ‘[M]utated into a thought of the disappearing world, into the anxiety where the world may appear, growing in the measure of the “end of the world” in which we live [...] one who believes in a world that will not be without this belief’.
⁵⁰ Michel Deguy, Écologiques (Paris: Hermann, 2012), pp. 52–53. ‘[A]theism entrusts us to a semi-transparent world: a half-engaged revelation or manifestation, continuous, pre-Babelian, dialectal, “as if/like that”. Saint Paul hoped for a vision finally face-to-face, figureless. The visible is not translucent; transcendence means another crossing [...] What is manifest is the poem, which is not an author’s manifesto, but that of things.’
⁵¹ Deguy, Écologiques, p. 188. ‘[D]oubtless a disaster [...] but salvational: there is no other world, nor Beyond, neither alterglobalized, than here-below [...] Life, without mysticism; life-death re-thought, or flesh become word’.
language truth — but transferable. As the opening poem of *La Vie subite* (*The Sudden Life*, 2016), ‘Passible’, puts it:

Il n’y a d’autre révélation
Que de la chair se faisant verbe
Le corps prend langue se fait pensée.\(^{52}\)

Accordingly, art’s space represents a possible fraternity (like the speculation of the *trêve*), and flesh attains significance through speaking. Given that a body is not what we have in common, Deguy argues, poetry hosts a new sense of non-haptic revelation touched by language.\(^{53}\) In *Arrêts fréquents* (*Frequent Stops*, 1990), revelation was related to profanation as

l’homme de l’art représente la relation symbolique au monde par quelque
figuration de son rapport local à la terre. La ‘métaphore’ est l’opération qui
fait passer le sacré en profane. Cet amour-là est sans cesse à réinventer.
L’œuvre, par son passage, (re)pratique une traduction: une relation à la
terre, une promesse de terre promise. Le sacré sera avec nous jusqu’à la fin
du monde — en profanation.\(^{54}\)

Reconciling the irreconcilable without destruction (Hegel’s synthesis), profanation’s expression updated Deguy’s poetic parables for ecological meaning.

Signalling the presence of elevation in revelation, transcendence’s ascension and fall become polarities sharing sublime movement. Although we are initially in a position of ‘n’avoir rien en commun, sauf le rien’,\(^{55}\) because truth is pragmatic as well as paradoxical, through *and-and* atheism and faith form an exemplary, contemporary oxymoron.\(^{56}\) In atheism’s poetic reason, we pass through despair and affirm it, having faith, non-nihilistically, in the absence of faith. As poetry enunciates terrestrial-objects-for-subjects through secular *logos*, paradox and the mutability of *trans* transpose and translate new conceptions of transcendence and transfiguration. In *Un Homme de peu de foi*, accordingly, literature must translate faith because otherwise cultural capitalism will subsume the subject’s desire. Poetic analogy then turns away from negation:

[ils] se relaient, se relèvent chacun de la possibilité-impossibilité de l’autre.
Apodictique est le paradoxe; qui roule sur lui-même, se rétablissant de se
renier [...] inventer des paradoxes ‘sublimes’.\(^{57}\)

\(^{52}\) Michel Deguy, *La Vie subite* (Paris: Galilée, 2016), p. 15. ‘There is no other revelation | Than flesh made word | The body takes language made thought’.


\(^{54}\) Michel Deguy, *Arrêts fréquents* (Paris: Éditions Métailié, 1990), p. 92. ‘[A]rt’s human represents the symbolic relation to the world by some figuration of their local relation to the Earth. The “metaphor” is the operation which moves the sacred to the profane. This love is constantly reinvented. The work, through its passage, (re)practices a translation: a relationship to the land, a promise of the promised land. The sacred will be with us until the end of the world — in profanation’.


\(^{57}\) Michel Deguy, *Un Homme de peu de foi* (Paris: Bayard, 2002), p. 150. ‘[T]aking turns, each rising from the possibility-impossibility of the other. Apodictic is the paradox; which rolls on itself, restoring
Reversing Aristotle’s law of non-contradiction into ontology-as-analogy, poetry’s specific affirmative reason is a contrary sublimation, a non-dialectical separation of the human and non-human correcting a monistic, anthropic mastery of the Earth. Its paradoxical movement rebuilds figurative, finite attachment to the Earth, its analogy standing as ‘le movement de monter du logos, ou “transcendence”, qui doit gagner — parce qu’il le peut — une hauteur; ‘une élévation qui lui permet de se retourner, de considérer, de comprendre; a ‘vue élevée, ou vision, qui coïncide (comme le littéral et le figurant dans tout vocable). As a series of beloved’s deaths portended planetary destruction, Deguy’s little quantity and quality of faith confirmed retreat from theology’s certainties, but Christopher Elson describes how his revivifying of relics do ‘not constitute a simple refusal’ nor its ‘rationally overconfident refutation’.

For Wilson Baldridge, a(n) (un)veiling of attachment-detachment is always oxymoronic, and for Rueff, Deguy’s relic reinvention translates the desired object’s past identity and meaning into contemporary cultural resemblance.

Poetry’s parabolic revelation then renders ‘inéffacable ce qui est devenu incroyable’. In its paradox, a figure can always signify less than what it means and mean more than it says, for Deguy, meaning that ‘l’écologie est une vision [...] une (trans)figuration — not a substitute for religion, but a separation which ‘compare pour penser [...] une géopoéthique’. In Deguy’s elegy for Derrida, reversing negation into speculative affirmation so that ‘ce qui n’est pas de ce monde | est de ce monde’, or in evoking an éco-po-éthique (eco-po-ethic) ‘pour conserver l’attachement terrestre au monde de la terre en la transformant’, in Deguy’s sublime paradoxes, he compares, translates, and transfigures faith, poetry appearing on Earth as it will be on Earth, a truce where ‘entre la vie et la mort | Il y a la parabole’.

from renouncing [...] inventing “sublime” paradoxes’.

59 Deguy, Un Homme, pp. 171–72. ‘[T]he ascending movement of logos, or “transcendence”, which must gain — because it can — a height [...] an elevation which allows it to turn, to consider, to understand [...] view, or vision, which coincides (like the literal and the figurative in any word)’.
62 Deguy, Le Sens de la visite, p. 43. ‘Ineffaceable what has become incredible’.
63 Deguy, Ecologiques, p. 9. ‘Ecology is a vision [...] a (trans)figuration’.
64 Ibid., p. 31. ‘Compares for thinking [...] a geopoetic’.
65 Michel Deguy, Desolatio (Paris: Galilée, 2007), p. 85. ‘What is not of this world | is of this world’.
66 Deguy, La Vie subite, p. 226. ‘Preserving terrestrial attachment to the Earth’s world by transforming it’.
67 Michel Deguy, N’était le cœur (Paris: Galilée, 2011), p. 22. ‘Between life and death | There is the parable’.