

BLASPHEMOUS MODERNISM:
PROFILES IN PROFANATION, FROM *ULYSSES* TO *NIGHTWOOD*

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Steven George Pinkerton

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Steven George Pinkerton, Ph.D.

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In his 1934 book *After Strange Gods*, T. S. Eliot declared blasphemy obsolete. There could be no blasphemy worth the name, he reasoned, in a world that had lost its faith in God. Yet recent scholarship in sociology and across the humanities has sharply questioned the once-dominant narrative of modern secularization on which Eliot's thesis depends. More importantly, the writers of Eliot's own generation contested that thesis persistently in their poems and fictions. Far from obsolete, that is, blasphemy was in fact a driving force behind literary modernism, and not just in the figurative sense in which scholars have long described the period's artistic provocations as "heretical" or "iconoclastic." This dissertation reveals the extent to which blasphemy, in its full religious sense, accounts for the aesthetic and ideological content of works by writers such as James Joyce, Mina Loy, Langston Hughes, Richard Bruce Nugent, and Djuna Barnes.

These and other writers of the period tended to view their modernist experiments as blasphemously godlike efforts to unite Word, Spirit, and Flesh – which helps to explain why the Black Mass and related sacrilegious rites carry such currency in the modernist imagination. It also accounts for the pervasive presence of Christ figures in these texts, usually rendered in highly heterodox forms: as Irish Jews, as lesbian prophets, as lynched black bodies and messianic "New Negroes." Apart from their aesthetic functions, these personae suggest a politics of irreverence that has been largely neglected by studies of religion in modernism. Respecting no division of church and state, modernist writers commonly use the language and

tropes of religious desecration to profane all manner of repressive dogmas – including prevailing secular ideologies of race, class, nation, empire, gender, and sexuality. Their blasphemies thus acquire special resonance in the context of broader cultural and ideological concerns that in recent years have enriched the scope of modernist studies. By concluding with a survey of postwar literary blasphemy – and with a look at blasphemy’s role in twenty-first-century geopolitics – this study proposes still further ways in which the legacies of modernism continue to resonate in the present.

BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Steve Pinkerton was born in Long Beach, California, and raised in Salem, Oregon. He holds degrees in English from Pepperdine University, the University of Colorado, and Cornell. His articles on twentieth-century literature have appeared in *Studies in the Novel*, *Hypermedia Joyce Studies*, *Paideuma*, *The Explicator*, the *Journal of Modern Literature*, and the *African American Review*.

for Cassie

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ABBREVIATIONS

Works by James Joyce:

- FW* *Finnegans Wake* (Penguin, 1999)
PA *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, ed. Chester Anderson (Viking, 1968)
U *Ulysses*, ed. Hans Walter Gabler (Vintage, 1986)

Works by Mina Loy:

- “HRE” “History of Religion and Eros,” Yale Collection of American Literature
Last *The Last Lunar Baedeker*, ed. Roger Conover (Jargon Society, 1982)
Lost *The Lost Lunar Baedeker*, ed. Roger Conover (Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1996)
SE *Stories and Essays*, ed. Sara Crangle (Dalkey Archive Press, 2011)

Works by Djuna Barnes:

- A* *The Antiphon*, in *Selected Works* (Faber and Faber, 1998)
LA *Ladies Almanack* (New York Univ. Press, 1992)
N *Nightwood* (New Directions, 1961)
R *Ryder* (Dalkey Archive Press, 1995)

Other works:

- ASG* T. S. Eliot, *After Strange Gods* (Harcourt, Brace, 1934)
BM Carolyn Burke, *Becoming Modern: The Life of Mina Loy* (Univ. of California Press, 1996)
CW Langston Hughes, *The Collected Works*, Vol. 1, ed. Arnold Rampersad (Univ. of Missouri Press, 2001)
D Phillip Herring, *Djuna* (Viking, 1995)
F Wallace Thurman, ed., *Fire!!* 1, no. 1 (1926)
GJ Richard Bruce Nugent, *Gentleman Jigger*, ed. Thomas H. Wirth (Da Capo, 2008)
IS Wallace Thurman, *Infants of the Spring* (Northeastern Univ. Press, 1992)
JJ Richard Ellmann, *James Joyce*, rev. ed. (Oxford Univ. Press, 1982)
NN Alain Locke, ed., *The New Negro* (Touchstone, 1997)

TO your blushing we shout the obscenities, we scream the blasphemies, that you,
being weak, whisper alone in the dark. . . .

THUS shall evolve the language of the Future.

—Mina Loy, “Aphorisms on Futurism” (1914)

INTRODUCTION

God exists, in language if nowhere else. “Whether or not there is a realm of the ‘supernatural,’” Kenneth Burke reminds us, “there are *words* for it.”¹ The Bible rather strikingly encourages this discursive emphasis: the Creator creates through language, then redeems that creation, for Christians, through language embodied. “And God said, Let there be light: and there was light”; “And the Word was made flesh, and dwelt among us” (Gen. 1:3, John 1:14). It is a further testament to Christianity’s special concern for the linguistic that “blasphemy against the Holy Ghost” stands as the one unforgivable sin – for blasphemy, too, is essentially rhetorical, as its suffix suggests (Matt. 12:31).² It is the word we use to denote religious offenses or desecrations that are verbal in nature; we have other words (heresy, sacrilege) for other categories of offense.

That is why the traditional European punishment for blasphemy was to bore through the offender’s tongue.³ It is also why, in the present day, blasphemy tends to arise with urgency as an issue of free speech: the religious believer pits the texts that he or she holds sacred against the “human right” of unhindered expression that others hold sacred. One sacred discourse – a discourse *about* discourse – combats another. It would be wrong to see such combat as exclusively rhetorical; too much blood has been spilled, through the ages and in very recent memory. Yet it is, at bottom, a question of words, of texts, and of the affective and political power that attaches to them. We find ourselves, then, at the intersection of these discourses, the theological and the blasphemous, and a third, literary modernism. For blasphemy is a signal

¹ Burke, *The Rhetoric of Religion*, 7.

² Blasphemy is an inherently “verbal crime,” “a linguistic act” (Levy, *Blasphemy*, 10; David Lawton, *Blasphemy*, 17). Aquinas thus affirms Christianity’s privileging of discursive over other transgressions when he writes that “blasphemy, which is a sin committed directly against God, is more grave than murder. . . . In comparison with blasphemy, every sin is slight” (qtd. in Levy, *Blasphemy*, 52).

³ David Nash, *Blasphemy in the Christian World*, 13.

modernist discourse – indeed, it is hard to imagine modernism without it – and while hardly the exclusive property of modernist writers, it does acquire in their works an exceptional resonance and force. That blasphemy “demands fine-grained literary analysis,” as Joss Marsh has argued, is perhaps never so evident as in the case of modernism and its characteristic stake in the materiality of language.⁴ But as worldly blasphemies inevitably carry implications that exceed the linguistic, so too do the texts we shall encounter here. Among other things, this study attends to the close relationship in blasphemous modernism between words, the Word, and the flesh – a relationship that illumines the interrelations of form and content, textuality and the body – and to the ideological contests that blasphemers wage against each other and against both sacred and secular power.

Such an undertaking demands that we pay close attention to the enduring authority of religious language in an epoch that has traditionally been viewed as post-religious, as though the ascendance of various secular realms of human experience – reason, science, art – had succeeded unconditionally in displacing God’s no longer requisite place in the order of things. The standard assumption has been, in Charles Taylor’s paraphrase, that “Modern civilization cannot but bring about a ‘death of God,’” and that modernism reflects that death in its literary texts.⁵ As James Joyce’s own Buck Mulligan states the case, “Jehovah, collector of prepuces, is no more” (*U*, 9.609). If we follow Burke, however, in finding the Judeo-Christian God to be an inherently linguistic deity, we will discover that for the works of blasphemous modernism God is very much alive.

Modernist writers thus complicate the popular narrative of religion’s inexorable decline in the modern world. “In this process there is no stopping,” Freud wrote; “the greater the num-

⁴ Marsh, *Word Crimes*, 12.

⁵ Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 21.

ber of men to whom the treasures of knowledge become accessible, the more widespread is the falling-away from religious belief.”⁶ Freud’s striking confidence that the religious neurosis cannot possibly survive the accumulating pressures of secularization is typical of his contemporaries’ prevailing assumption in these matters, even if many contemplated God’s death with far less satisfaction. Yet Freud’s prophecy of a wholly secular future left, ironically, no room for a return of the repressed. Like many other social observers, he was unable to foresee God’s comeback in a twenty-first century where religion remains a powerful cultural force, even, with some important exceptions, in the world’s most “developed,” “modernized” nations – a century in which perfectly sane thinkers have declared a “death of the death of God.”⁷

Such reconsiderations of modernity and secularity have accompanied the humanities’ renewed interest in religion generally. This ongoing “religious turn” has been motivated largely by trends in postmodern thought that emerged in the mid-1990s, including the recognition that modernity itself has an obscured but deeply theological core. Michael Allen Gillespie has brought out with striking clarity the theological origins of modernity, in his book of that title, and such influential thinkers as Talal Asad, Richard Rorty, Giorgio Agamben, and Gianni Vattimo have drawn similar inferences about the religious core of the ostensibly secular.⁸ With as much confidence as Freud evinced in *The Future of an Illusion*, most are now prepared to affirm, with Asad, that “a straightforward narrative of progress from the religious to the secular is no longer acceptable” – and even to consign the very concept of secularization “to a relatively short and particular period of European history which still assumed (amongst other things) that

⁶ Freud, *The Future of an Illusion*, 49.

⁷ Caputo and Vattimo, *After the Death of God*, 19.

⁸ Rorty finds that secular positivism and religion “are products of the same urge,” while Vattimo has gone so far as to insist that Nietzsche and Heidegger speak “above all from within the biblical tradition,” that the hermeneutics associated with these philosophers represent “the development and maturation of the Christian message.” In retrospect, it seems inevitable that the Nietzschean critiques of positivism and Enlightenment would reopen the doors to the religious, but this does not seem to have been felt as inevitable by many of poststructuralism’s earlier practitioners or opponents. Gillespie, *The Theological Origins of Modernity*; Rorty, *Philosophy and Social Hope*, 157; Rorty and Vattimo, *The Future of Religion*, 46-47.

whatever characterized Europe's religious life today would characterize everyone else's tomorrow."⁹ In short, as Callum Brown observes, secularization theory has become "a narrative in crisis" amid a growing consensus that modernity is not, by definition, secular – that at its root it may even be quite the opposite.¹⁰

Yet literary studies have been slow to catch up with the religious turn, and studies of the modernists in particular continue "anachronistically to read back into them a blithely secular point of view."¹¹ Important exceptions include recent work on modernism and religion undertaken by Pericles Lewis and other scholars whose efforts generally accord with my own sense of modernism's religious underpinnings.¹² Together, such scholarship makes a compelling case for the fundamental importance of religious discourses to literary modernism, and I share a common aim with these critics in my effort to contest the conventional view of modernist secularity. I take, however, a *via negativa*, arguing that literary blasphemies of the period – writers' self-conscious thematic and rhetorical deployments of religious irreverence – are in a perverse way the surest proof of religion's continued importance among the moderns.

Blasphemy is double-edged, as we shall have many occasions to consider. Even as it profanes institutions of the sacred, in other words, it also tacitly affirms those institutions' status as objects worthy of such profanation. Here my argument follows the logic, if not the diagnosis,

⁹ Asad, *Formations of the Secular*, 1; Grace Davie, *Religion in Modern Europe*, 1. Others have sought to complicate even these revisionist accounts; see, for instance, Vincent Pecora, *Secularization and Cultural Criticism*.

¹⁰ Brown, *The Death of Christian Britain*, 30. Even Peter L. Berger, once one of the more persuasive exponents of the secularization thesis, has recanted (Berger, ed., *The Desecularization of the World*, 1-18).

¹¹ Pericles Lewis, *Religious Experience and the Modernist Novel*, 7. As Tim Armstrong observes, it remains an all too common assumption "that spiritual values and religious belief do not find a ready place within modernist aesthetics" ("Loy and Cornell," 204). More generally, a recent *PMLA* overview concludes that "the field of literary studies has not witnessed a corresponding breadth of scholarship" on religious topics (Gauri Viswanathan, "Secularism in the Framework of Heterodoxy," 466).

¹² Noting the allure for many modernists of Catholicism and other forms of Christian worship, Ellis Hanson has suggested that the period associated with high modernism witnessed "the last great efflorescence of Christianity in English literature" (*Decadence and Catholicism*, 366). Other recent studies have argued that modernism remains "part of a Christian epistemology," that God is in fact "serially resurrected" in the very textures of modernist texts (Gregory Erickson, *The Absence of God in Modernist Literature*, 8; Jennifer Hardy Williams, "Modernism's Religious Other," 69). See also Amy Hungerford's *Postmodern Belief*, an important study of the religious concerns of post-1960 American literature and literary theory.

of T. S. Eliot's theorization of blasphemy in a series of lectures published in 1934 under the title *After Strange Gods*. Now best remembered for a particularly ugly sentence about "free-thinking Jews," these lectures identify blasphemy as an index of religious sensibility while also claiming that modernity provides infertile soil for that sensibility, and hence for blasphemy of any genuine form, to take root (*ASG*, 20). The current reappraisals of modern secularism noted above give us ample reason to take seriously the first of these claims and to put some much-needed critical pressure on the second.

Blasphemy, Faith, and Modernity

We can begin with Ezra Pound's negative review of *After Strange Gods*, in which he concisely articulates the conventional modernist viewpoint on religion: "The fact is that 'religion' long since resigned. Religion in the person of its greatest organized European institution resigned. The average man now thinks of religion either as a left-over or an irrelevance."¹³ Pound's remarks imply that Eliot has not sufficiently recognized this, but the author of *After Strange Gods* is if anything hyper-aware of what he perceives to be religion's diminished importance—a state of affairs Eliot mourns, somewhat counter-intuitively, as "the obsolescence of Blasphemy" (*ASG*, 10). Because "no one can possibly blaspheme in any sense except that in which a parrot may be said to curse, unless he profoundly believes in that which he profanes," for Eliot the moderns have mostly "ceased to be capable of exercising that activity or of recognizing it" (*ASG*, 55-56). As G. K. Chesterton had stated the case some years before, "Blasphemy depends upon belief, and is fading with it. If any one doubts this, let him sit down seriously and try to think blasphemous thoughts about Thor."¹⁴ On views such as these,

¹³ Pound, "Mr. Eliot's Mare's Nest," 277.

¹⁴ Chesterton, *Heretics*, 20.

blasphemy's extinction follows logically from God's. So it is that any remaining trace of "genuine blasphemy" is for Eliot "a way of affirming belief," "a symptom that the soul is still alive" – and that "first-rate blasphemy," in particular, deserves to be treasured as "one of the rarest things in literature."¹⁵

For Eliot, blasphemy is important primarily for what it signals about the well-being of "therapeutic" religion, in Slavoj Žižek's terms: a Christianity that "helps individuals to function better in the existing order." For me, blasphemy's import lies in its service to what Žižek calls a "critical" faith, one that "tries to assert itself as a critical agency articulating what is wrong with this order as such, a space for the voices of discontent."¹⁶ My own sense of blasphemous modernism's worth has less to do with what it says about the blasphemer's own soul than with the critiques it enables of the institutions of power that Eliot would likely, for the most part, have wished to shore up. His thoughts on blasphemy are nonetheless crucial; as Raymond Williams once observed, "if Eliot is read with attention, he is seen to have raised questions which those who differ from him politically must answer, or else retire from the field."¹⁷ Eliot is of course right to insist that for blasphemy to matter at all, it must be grounded in and even motivated by an acknowledgment of religious authority and of the affective and rhetorical force of spiritual feeling and traditions. He is also right to suggest that this acknowledgment not only can but must be accompanied by a profound skepticism and a willingness to face equally religion's goods and ills, a condition he defines as "spiritual sickness" – one of three criteria for first-rate blaspheming, the others being "literary genius and profound faith" (ASG, 56).

Worth recuperating among Eliot's delineations of the first-rate is his insistence that faith and blasphemy cannot be sundered completely. Surely, though, we can do without his recourse

¹⁵ Eliot, *Selected Essays*, 337; ASG, 56. See also Ronald Schuchard, *Eliot's Dark Angel*, 131-47.

¹⁶ Žižek, *The Puppet and the Dwarf*, 3.

¹⁷ Williams, *Culture and Society*, 227.

to pathology; what blasphemy requires is not “spiritual sickness” but rather a commitment to playful and critical reworkings of orthodoxy, coupled with a reverence and respect, not for God, or scripture, or the church, but for religious belief itself and its enduring cultural sway. As Eliot said of his favorite blasphemer, Baudelaire, “His business was not to practise Christianity, but – what was much more important for his time – to assert its *necessity*.”¹⁸ Likewise, when Eliot judges James Joyce to be “the most ethically orthodox of the more eminent writers of my time,” he means not that the Irish author succeeds at achieving a fully “orthodox sensibility” – scarcely possible by Eliot’s standards – but that his works, like Baudelaire’s, “recognize” the “necessity” of Christianity as the proper soil in which a philosophically and artistically meaningful blasphemy can take root (ASG, 41). As Georges Bataille memorably put it, irreverence would sink to irrelevance “if the blasphemer denied the sacred nature of the Good that Blasphemy was intended to despoil.”¹⁹

One of Bataille’s own contributions to blasphemous modernism, his pornographic *Story of the Eye* (1928), is exemplary here. Having exhausted just about every secular form of transgression and irreverence, this novella reserves its most powerful desecrations for its final pages, where an orgy inside a cathedral develops into a eucharistic travesty of extreme proportions: its climax is marked by a Catholic priest being choked to death, in his own church, while enjoying and suffering a “little death” at the hands of the other celebrants. As the priest’s subsequently uprooted eyeball undergoes an alarming series of defilements, we may be tempted to ask: *Is nothing sacred?* But that is the wrong question altogether. What makes this text so troubling (and, perhaps, titillating) is its insistence that the church, and the various objects defiled under its roof, *are* sacred – and, for this reason, are worthy of the blasphemer’s

¹⁸ Eliot, *Selected Prose*, 231.

¹⁹ Bataille, *Erotism*, 128.

“despoiling.” Like Eliot, Bataille insists that blasphemy requires not a secularist dismissal of religious matters but rather a recognition of the sanctity that still attaches to the institutions, scriptures, and sacraments of the West’s predominant religious faiths.

As Bataille’s critical and creative practices suggest, the concept of blasphemy is ripe for thinking through and untangling modernism’s uses of religion and of the Bible in particular. Such untangling marks, moreover, a significant distinction between my own approach and those recent scholarly studies of modernism and religion that I noted above, since they have tended to focus in on authors’ transpositions of religiosity into narrative or aesthetic principles—so that what emerges as “sacred” in these texts (for example, Virginia Woolf’s “moments of being”) is generally unrecognizable as sacred in any Christian or other doctrinal sense. Such criticism bears the traces of an Arnoldian impulse, examining the ways literature creates its own versions of religion and even can *become*, as Arthur Symons suggested, “a kind of religion, with all the duties and responsibilities of the sacred ritual.” But blasphemous modernism is not a form of “spilt religion,” as T. E. Hulme said of Romanticism, nor is it a variant of “natural supernaturalism.”²⁰ Rather than stress modernists’ sublimations and personalized secularizations of the religious, in other words, I attend primarily to the ways they assimilate scripture and exploit orthodox constructions of the sacred. To be sure, there is much to be said about how they transform these constructions. It is worth considering, though, how the resultant depictions of sacred and profane continue to function in recognizably Christian ways, drawing on the cultural durability of scripture and sacrament.

²⁰ Symons, *The Symbolist Movement in Literature*, 9; Hulme, *Speculations*, 118; M. H. Abrams, *Natural Supernaturalism*.

Critics have long used a theological lexicon of transgression (“heresy,” “iconoclasm”) to explain modernism’s seemingly impious breaks with “orthodoxies” of various kinds.²¹ In doing so, these scholars have demonstrated their own assimilation of a key modernist strategy, the exploitative channeling of religious language and concepts for persuasive force. But they have done so, typically, in service to worldly notions of assault on secular authority and tradition, notions largely divorced from theological contexts and hence divested of religious signification. In claiming blasphemy as an important modernist idiom, I want to insist on the full religious valence of that term in order to respect modernism’s imaginative investments in, and often subversive reworkings of, Christian scripture and theology. The term *heresy*, for example, recognizes certain of the moderns’ idiosyncratic forays into heterodox visions of the sacred – D. H. Lawrence comes readily to mind – but it elides the majority’s marked investments in both assimilating and profaning orthodox Christian traditions.

Additionally, recent studies of modernism and religion have concentrated on “the mainstream of high modernism”; Pericles Lewis even concludes that “only by sublimating religious experience into formal concerns have works qualified for [modernist] canonization.”²² With the expansion of this canon to include, among others, the voices of minority modernists and women other than Woolf, such an assertion seems far harder to defend than it might have twenty years ago. Where Lewis and others (Robert Alter, Gregory Erickson, Jennifer Hardy Williams) tackle the old high-modernist canon (James, Conrad, Proust, Woolf, Kafka), I look primarily to the outliers – the Others, to borrow the title of Alfred Kreyborg’s important little

²¹ Peter Gay’s recent effort to consolidate a dizzyingly wide range of modernist art and culture under the title *Modernism: The Lure of Heresy* suggests the continued currency of such pseudo-theological narratives. For more substantive studies of heresy, modernity, and modernism, see Benjamin Lazier, *God Interrupted*, and Damon Franke, *Modernist Heresies*.

²² Lewis, *Religious Experience and the Modernist Novel*, 7, 18. “Some readers,” Douglas Mao observes in a review of the book, “will be surprised to find Lewis making such sweeping pronouncements . . . on the basis of so restrictive a sample, given the radical proliferation of definitions of modernism in recent years” (Review, 1141).

magazine. Joyce represents an exception here, from the standpoint of the traditional canon – but, as Enda Duffy notes, *Ulysses* “has always been seen in some sense as an exception among the masterpieces of patriarchal modernism,” staging as it does “a different kind of intervention within the realities of nation, race, class, even gender.”²³ In Chapter One, I show how Joyce marshals the language of blasphemy to challenge prevailing assumptions about these matrices of identity – “even gender.” (And sexuality, too.) For Joyce is crucial to the story of blasphemous modernism, *Ulysses* in particular providing a template for the literary profanations to be found in the works of Mina Loy, Richard Bruce Nugent, Wallace Thurman, and Djuna Barnes – writers alternately overlooked and underappreciated for the better part of a century and thus far still neglected by studies of modernism and religion.

Blasphemy and modernism do more than coexist in these writers’ fiction and poetry. They are in fact mutually constitutive, as can be seen perhaps most readily in texts such as Loy’s 1914 poem “Parturition,” or Nugent’s 1926 short story “Smoke, Lilies and Jade”: two works as blasphemous as they are unprecedented in their formal and thematic experimentations. In such cases, modernism and blasphemy prove as difficult to separate as form and content. Thus do these authors discharge the duties of what a young James Joyce, writing in 1904, had ironically termed the modern artist’s “Holy Office”: the imperative to transgress orthodoxies both literary and theological, or, let us say, to be at once both blasphemous and modernist.

The Politics of Blasphemy

That imperative carries political as well as aesthetic implications. For blasphemy is a barometer and a mechanism of power, a discourse governed by the powerful but also occasionally usurped by the marginalized in politically significant ways. I have suggested

²³ Duffy, *The Subaltern “Ulysses,”* 1.

already that blasphemy provides the language appropriate to what Žižek terms the critical, as opposed to therapeutic, role of religion – a language by means of which Christianity’s “subversive core” can find expression.²⁴ Let us add that blasphemy respects no division of church and state; alongside its religious subversions it inevitably transgresses secular authority. As these modernist writers critique and reinscribe religious orthodoxy, they also expose the ideological complicities of ecclesiastical and more worldly institutions of power. Further, they evolve blasphemous ways of addressing such inevitably ideological issues as race, gender, class, sexuality, and religious orientation – and use blasphemy as a means to articulate novel and potentially liberating ways to conceive these very categories, giving voice to the subaltern, the unrecognized, the unnatural.

Here we encounter one way to resolve the supposed incommensurability of a literary criticism that attends to such overtly political issues with a criticism that tackles the topic of religion – an opposition implied, for instance, by a much-remarked 2005 article in which Stanley Fish named religion as the topic most likely to supplant “the triumvirate of race, gender, and class as the center of intellectual energy.” This must have been welcome news to J. Hillis Miller, who had, just a few years earlier, lamented literary critics’ inattention to “the religious or ontological dimension of writers’ and cultures’ ideologies in favor of a more or less exclusive infatuation with the three mythological graces of contemporary humanistic study: Race, Class, and Gender.”²⁵ One of *Blasphemous Modernism*’s foundational questions is: why must we choose between one approach and the other? Why not discuss these mythological graces, with all their pressing political import, in the context of the religious? In particular, why not discuss the ways that often transgressive religious discourses enable confrontations with the taboos of Race,

²⁴ Žižek, *The Puppet and the Dwarf*, 3-4. As S. Brent Plate writes, blasphemous art and expression have historically functioned as “modes of resistance, whereby people with limited cultural power (especially in terms of race and gender) consciously enact blasphemous portrayals as a mode of subversion” (*Blasphemy*, 66).

²⁵ Fish, “One University under God?”; Miller, *The Disappearance of God*, ix.

Class, and Gender? And why not the fourth grace, Sexuality? That category, I know, would have spoiled Miller's neat trinity – but sexuality is crucial to understanding spiritual ecstasy, and blasphemy has always offended most when it has had to do with religion's putative corruption at the hands of profane Eros.

Accordingly, the chapters that follow propose readings of blasphemy as both an artistic and a political mode of expression. When I speak of blasphemy's political aims and consequences, however, I mean something quite different than Giorgio Agamben's utopic vision of a politically liberative "profanation" – a term he defines, idiosyncratically, as an effort "to abolish and erase separations" between sacred and profane, "to return to common use that which has been removed to the sphere of the sacred."²⁶ I am concerned not with this idealized praxis of neutralizing all distinction, but rather with the subversive, blasphemous uses to which literary representations of the sacred and profane are put. To that end a sense of distinction must remain – albeit in decidedly transformed ways – so that the blasphemer can partake of the authority inherent in notions of the sacred, even as she upends those notions and illumines their repressive political uses. This is a perhaps necessary and certainly transgressive move on the part of modernists who need to point up, in order to critique, the functionally sacral nature of modernity's new gods, and by writers – especially women writers, queer writers, and writers of color – who seek ways to make their voices heard.

Exemplum: The Good News in Langston Hughes

Consider Langston Hughes's 1932 poem "Goodbye Christ." Repudiating "Christ Jesus Lord God Jehovah" in favor of "A real guy named / Marx Communist Lenin Peasant Stalin Worker ME," the poem aroused a storm of protest both from evangelicals, angered at its

²⁶ Agamben, "In Praise of Profanation," 87, 82.

blasphemy, and from American nationalists who objected to its blatantly pro-Communist message (CW, 228-29). (To say nothing of *The Saturday Evening Post*, which the poem derides, and which mischievously reprinted “Goodbye Christ” without permission in 1940.) Of course – and this is the point – one cannot dissociate the poem’s religious transgressions from its political ones. The political cause of “godless Communism” was inseparable, in the minds of many detractors, from its rejection of religious faith. According to an anti-Hughes flier from the time, distributed by a group dedicated to the cause of “Christian Nationalism”: “‘HATE CHRIST’ Is the Slogan of the Communists.”²⁷ For such readers, Hughes’s poem was both treasonous and blasphemous; the writer of “Goodbye Christ” knew well the potency of such an irreverent mixture. Or perhaps it is more correct to say that Hughes recognized that treason and blasphemy are at some level inextricable offenses.²⁸ What made “Goodbye Christ” so dangerous was the explosive directness with which it framed its indictments of both the political and the religious.

In some “Draft ideas” he jotted down in December 1964, Hughes nonetheless warns his fellow poets against the snares of the political: “Politics can be the graveyard of the poet. And only poetry can be his resurrection.” Yet later in the same draft he writes,

Concerning politics, nothing I have said is true. A poet is a human being. Each human being must live within his time, with and for his people, and within the boundaries of his country. Therefore, how can a poet keep out of politics?

Hang yourself, poet, in your own words. Otherwise, you are dead.²⁹

Notable is the way that the figure of poetic “resurrection” remains even in Hughes’s *volte face* at the end of this passage, indeed becomes much more forceful. The poet must hang herself in

²⁷ “A Right-Wing Anti-Hughes Flier.”

²⁸ As Leonard Levy writes, “the blasphemer incurs punishment because society regards his scandalous crime as a form of high treason against the highest powers in the universe” (*Blasphemy*, 3).

²⁹ Hughes, quoted in Rampersad, *The Life of Langston Hughes*, Vol. II, 385.

order to live, must lose her life to find it. And for Hughes, despite his initial (rhetorical) hesitation, that resurrection is ultimately as politically charged as it is inherently religious.

As a poet, at any rate, Hughes's poetic evocations of religion are invariably political, often in the least subtle of ways. In *A New Song* (1938), his radical socialism leads him to visions that can only be called apocalyptic, imagining "The song of the new life triumphant" emerging from the blood sacrifice of innocents: "the kids who die" in the struggle for economic and social justice (CW, 140). Like works by James Joyce and Mina Loy, *A New Song* depicts an oppressive complicity of religion and patriotism, suggestively envisioning a fascist American leader "Waving a flag and mouthing rot / And dropping bombs from a Christian steeple / On the people" (143). The poem appropriately concludes with a call to arms rendered in forcefully religious language: combating the ideological weight of repressive religious institutions – memorably iconized here as bombs dropping from steeples – Hughes imagines an integrated, multiracial "Union" that must "shake the pillars of those temples / Wherein the false gods dwell / And worn-out altars stand / Too well defended" (150).³⁰

For Hughes, blasphemy is perhaps above all a medium in which to express outrage at economic inequality. In the opening stanza of his "Drama for Winter's Night (Fifth Avenue)," a homeless man in search of shelter is kicked out of a rich man's car and then is denied a place to sleep even on the streets; but the first institution to kick him to the curb is the church: "You can't sleep here. / This is the house of God" (CW, 162). In the face of these difficulties the man begins "raving," and imagines that even in the afterlife there will be no room for him – that

³⁰ There is no more acid condemnation of the "Christian" West's economic and imperialist policies than Hughes's "Merry Christmas." This 1930 poem imagines "righteous Christian England" and its "Yankee" partner-in-righteousness sending season's greetings to recipients around the world: to "Gandhi in his cell," to China ("Ten-inch [gun]shells for Christmas gifts, / And peace on earth forever"), to Africa ("Ring Hallehuhiah! Praise the Lord! / (For murder and for rape)"), to Haiti ("We'll rob you to the Christian hymns / Until the next Christ comes"), and to all the "down-and-outers" at home, with their "bread-line Santa Claus": "While holy steel that makes us strong / Spits forth a mighty Yuletide song: / SHOOT Merry Christmas everywhere! / Let Merry Christmas GAS the air!" (CW, 199-200).

even God, in heaven, will tell him, “Bums can’t stay” (163). Such is heaven, Hughes implies, as imagined by Christians whose visions of the hereafter leave as little room for the truly destitute as does the church usher in the first stanza. As the white God Himself explains, speaking in the other Hughes poem to appear in the same issue of *Workers Monthly* (March 1925), “I made the world for the rich / And the will-be-rich / And the have-always-been-rich”; speaking to a “hungry child,” this God appears less a god of mercy and justice than a kind of heartless robber baron: “You didn’t buy any stock in my railroad. / You didn’t invest in my corporation. / Where are your shares in standard oil?” (163-64). Hughes thus links religious notions of divine Providence, whose mysteries are impenetrable, with capitalist notions of free enterprise; regardless what the scriptures say, God continues to be a god for the rich and the white. So, in another poem, he asks “the white Lord,” “What was the use of prayer.”³¹ As we will see further in Chapter Three, blasphemy is for Hughes – as for other Harlem Renaissance writers – the preferred idiom in which to express resistance to this white God and to the worldly injustices perpetuated in his name.

Of Typology and Sacrilege

In attending to the neoteric, modernist strategies that Hughes and others use to articulate such resistance, we shall be concerned always with what Rachel Blau DuPlessis calls “the intersection of two ‘news’ – the rhetorical/stylistic (modernism) and the ideological/political (modernity).”³² The language of blasphemous modernism emerges at that

³¹ *CW*, 107. In his memoir *The Big Sea*, Hughes mocks the preference in many Christian quarters for prayer over praxis. Recalling a student conference he attended on race relations at Franklin and Marshall College, where he proposed that the attendees address that school’s “unwritten rule barring Negro students from attendance,” Hughes recalls the cool response he received, summed up by the white director of the conference, a YMCA leader: “There are some things in this world we must leave to Jesus, friends. Let us pray!” (303).

³² DuPlessis, *Genders, Races, and Religious Cultures*, 26. My methodology shares much in common with DuPlessis’s “social philology,” “a reactivation of close reading to examine . . . the textual traces and manifestations of a variety

intersection, and it takes, I argue, two predominant channels of expression – channels that follow the two predominant forms of blasphemy as it is understood in Christian tradition. One of these, of course, is the act of defiling or desecrating the sacred. The other entails arrogating divinity to oneself – an act of willful appropriation that typically involves declaring oneself the fulfillment of a prophetic typology. In literature, for reasons I explain below, the former mode of blasphemy tends to constitute an *aesthetics of sacrilege*; the latter let us call *transgressive typology*, and let us appreciate that for Christians this is blasphemy’s most pertinent meaning. For without this form of blasphemy, the New Testament suggests, there would be no Christ and no religion in his name.³³

In the gospels of Matthew and Mark, the Jewish high priest Caiaphas asks Jesus directly “whether thou be the Christ, the Son of God.” Both Caiaphas and the gathered crowd declare the prisoner guilty of blasphemy when he responds, “I am: and ye shall see the Son of man sitting on the right hand of power, and coming in the clouds of heaven.”³⁴ Historically, Jesus’ promise has not yet come to pass, though believers might at least take some consolation from its parodic fulfillment in Joyce’s *Ulysses*. For at the close of that novel’s “Cyclops” episode, finding himself charged, like Jesus, with blasphemy, Leopold Bloom eludes his violent accuser by ascending to the clouds on a biblical chariot – where he sits, fittingly, at the right hand of

of ideological assumptions, subject positions, and social concepts concerning gender, race, and religious culture” (1).

³³ As Alain Cabantous rightly asserts, “blasphemy *founded* Christianity,” since Jesus’ subversive claim to divinity “led him to the cross and, for Christians, to the Resurrection” (*Blasphemy*, 5). For an account of Jesus’ putative blasphemies, and of the long theological debate surrounding them, see Levy, *Blasphemy*, 15-30. Regardless of whether Jesus was really ever formally accused of blasphemy (unlikely, in Levy’s view), all four of the gospels insist that such a charge was made. The historical Jesus may never have been charged with blasphemy – but the biblical Jesus certainly was.

³⁴ Matt. 26:63-65; Mark 14:61-64. Another passage, from the book of John, likewise specifies that Christ’s presumed blasphemy lay in his alignment of himself with God: after Jesus claims his divinity outright (“I am the Son of God” + “I and my Father are one”), the men and women in attendance begin to stone him – “a symbolic execution for blasphemy,” as Leonard Levy notes (*Blasphemy*, 16) – and when Jesus asks for an explanation, the people charge him specifically with “blasphemy . . . because that thou, being a man, makest thyself God” (10:30-36).

Power. Jack Power, that is: Bloom's fellow Dubliner.³⁵ Such playful typology is one of the most notable narrative components of *Ulysses*, which Joyce structures as much by biblical parallels as by the novel's more famous Homeric correspondences. *Ulysses* thus exemplifies blasphemous modernism's interest in transgressive typologies, the way such texts create meaning from unorthodox, unauthorized, and often subversive exploitations of the Bible and its tropes.

Typology for Christians involves a hermeneutic appropriation of the Hebrew scriptures; more broadly, typology is a matter of linguistic appropriation and re-appropriation. It is a matter of colonization, even, though with the word *transgressive* I mean to signal a reverse colonization, as when a marginalized artist imaginatively stakes his or her claim to a hegemonic religious discourse. Observe the female Jehovahs and Christs that populate Mina Loy's poetry; the black Christs and other biblical figures strewn throughout African American modernism; and Djuna Barnes's sly parody, in *Nightwood* (1936), of the Virgin Birth: an irreverent rewriting that typifies blasphemous modernism's approach to scriptural typology. In this novel, the character Robin Vote produces a son for her husband, Felix Volkbein, who holds decidedly messianic expectations for his new heir – at one point defining him as “the central point toward which life and death are spinning” (N, 117). (The son's name, Guido, derives from the Latin *Vito*, or “life.”) Felix, though, seems to have little to do with conceiving him, and Robin herself disavows any penetration by man, as *Nightwood* hints that Guido may be the product of a modern-day miraculous conception. Not for nothing will he later fondle the Virgin that hangs from his neck and call it “mother” (162).

With the stoic faith of Christ's mother obeying the Annunciation, “Robin prepared herself for her child with her only power: a stubborn cataleptic calm, conceiving herself pregnant before she was” (45). The conspicuous pun on *conceiving* here suggests a willed auto-

³⁵ Declan Kiberd notes the “right hand of Power” connection in “*Ulysses*” and *Us*, 303.

reproduction on Robin's part, again in echo of the Blessed Virgin — albeit without the influence of the Spirit. When her labor pains arrive, the nativity she has fostered with “monstrous” prayers and inspired with “the memoirs of the Marquis de Sade” soon becomes a travesty of the biblical precedent: “Amid loud and frantic cries of affirmation and despair, . . . cursing like a sailor, she rose up on her elbow in her bloody gown, looking about her in the bed as if she had lost something. ‘Oh, for Christ’s sake, for Christ’s sake!’ she kept crying like a child who had walked into the commencement of a horror” (47-48). Like the birth scene in Loy’s “Parturition,” whose speaker hears “the gurgling of a crucified wild beast” as her child emerges from her womb, Guido’s virgin birth travesties the birth that truly was “for Christ’s sake” (*Lost*, 5). Robin has given life, not to the Christ-child, but to what she can only interpret as “a horror” — and not long afterward she threatens, having defiled his Nativity, to effect little Guido’s premature Crucifixion, “holding the child high in the air as if she were about to dash it down” (48).³⁶

If this example from *Nightwood* suggests the allure for modernist writers of transgressive typologies, it also exemplifies the other mode of blasphemy, distinct but related: the rhetorical desecration of the sacred. Modernist strategies of this kind aspire, often, to the condition of actual physical or embodied profanation — in accordance with what I call an “aesthetics of sacrilege,” whose ideal, it seems, would be somehow to literalize or reify the conventional Christian figuration of blasphemies as words that “injure and rend the body of Christ.”³⁷ Here some brief definitions are in order. While for most practical purposes the terms “blasphemy” and “sacrilege” are interchangeable, there is nonetheless a semantic distinction that proves fruitful for theorizing literary irreverence. Both blasphemy and sacrilege are profanatory, which

³⁶ It must be said that Guido, “born to holy decay,” largely disappoints his father’s messianic expectations (*N*, 107). Despite his interest in the Church, “in all probability the child would never be ‘chosen’” — and Felix’s strange heretical letters to the Pope seem unlikely to help matters (108-09). Yet this child of blasphemy, if no messiah, has emerged holy. “Guido’s shadow is God’s,” O’Connor explains, as if to confirm the logic that compels Guido to maternalize the Virgin that hangs from his neck (120, 162).

³⁷ David Lawton, *Blasphemy*, 10.

is to say that both are offenses against the sacred. What distinguishes them is that blasphemy, as I began by saying, is textual – a matter of rhetoric, form, and expression – while sacrilege denotes physical desecration. If the realm of the former is discourse or text, the realm of the latter is physicality, embodiment. Blasphemy thus lends itself as the more obvious term for religious irreverence that exists in or as literature, but literary profaners are rarely content with this distinction: their provocations inevitably test the boundaries between sacrilege and blasphemy, referent and sign, content and form, body and text. Literature’s most memorable profanations, after all, are those that forcefully usher forth the profane and profaning body within a context of the sacred, pressing blasphemy’s essential discursiveness as near as possible to the immanent materiality of sacrilege.

For a modernist paradigm of this operation, recall Faulkner’s Reverend Hightower in *Light in August*, “up there in the pulpit with his hands flying around him and the dogma he was supposed to preach all full of galloping cavalry and defeat and glory just as when he tried to tell them on the street about the galloping horses, it in turn would get all mixed up with absolution and choirs of martial seraphim.”³⁸ Such rhetorical mixing-up of profane and sacred is the stuff of blasphemy. But it is Hightower’s unique talent for evoking these profane bodies and ghosts, for rendering them virtually present in the house of God – to conjure, incarnate, resurrect them – that invites a slightly more dangerous suspicion in the minds of his parishioners, namely “that what he preached in God’s own house on God’s own day verged on *actual sacrilege*” (63; emphasis added). This actual sacrilege, of which Hightower’s oratory seems ever on the brink, is the unachievable but nonetheless persistent goal of the blasphemous writer.

Like Hightower’s sermons, the corporeal excesses of blasphemous modernism seem often to exceed the “merely” textual – often, as it happens, by asserting the sexual. Mina Loy,

³⁸ Faulkner, *Light in August*, 62-63.

for instance, puts the highly sexualized speaker of *Songs to Joannes* through her own Passion and Crucifixion as the poem itself begins to come apart at the seams, undergoing its own textual immolation; structurally and formally, this and other of Loy's poems mirror the somatic textuality of Joyce's self-described "epic of the human body," *Ulysses*.³⁹ In both Loy and Joyce, body and text conflate (Molly Bloom's "soliloquy" is only the best-known example), and with them sacrilege and blasphemy – making these authors' works the touchstones or ur-texts of modernism's sacrilegious aesthetics. But the vision they share also has special resonance for such writers as Wallace Thurman and Bruce Nugent, whose fictions bring the body very much to the fore – notably in their contributions to the little magazine *Fire!!* – and to writers like Djuna Barnes, whose fiction so often entwines the thematics of religion and of erotic embodiment.

While the pages that follow generally emphasize a complementary relation in modernist texts between the typological and the sacrilegious, Chapter Three locates an aesthetic tension between these blasphemous strategies – one that illuminates the competing politics and poetics of the Harlem Renaissance. In that chapter we shall consider, first, the large-scale exercise in imaginative modernist typology that is Alain Locke's *New Negro* anthology (1925). If white Americans had, historically, had their own political aims in presenting (often highly selective versions of) Christianity and its Bible to African Americans, *The New Negro* aims to reverse this paradigm. By presenting *their* Bible, the voices of the renaissance – as presented, organized, and edited by Locke – stake a new claim to control of a privileged discourse. *The New Negro* thus arrogates to itself the kind of sacred authority reserved, ordinarily, for divine revelation. From the vantage of Harlem's "promised land," and in the wake of a decades-long exodus of black Americans from the rural South to the urban North, *The New Negro* moves decisively away from

³⁹ Quoted in Frank Budgen, *James Joyce and the Making of Ulysses*, 21.

the Hebraic homology traditionally limned between African America and the Old Testament's "chosen people." Instead it invokes an updated messianic presence: no longer a Mosaic liberator, but a black Christ who will redeem an as-yet artistically and politically undeveloped black culture. *The New Negro's* rhetoric and poetics thus announce a realignment of traditional African American typology from Old Testament to New, forsaking the topos of exodus for that of redemption. It is against *The New Negro's* typological project that Harlem's younger writers, the self-styled "Niggeratti" – including Hughes, Thurman, Nugent, and Zora Neale Hurston – aim their own sacrilegious aesthetics.

This dialectic can be read profitably as one of those politically inflected, blasphemous contests that are "staged, often ritually, for control of a shared discourse."⁴⁰ In this case the contest is staged as a kind of "signifyin(g)," in Henry Louis Gates's formulation: an irreverent dialogue with, troping on, and transformation of *The New Negro's* own blasphemous strategies. These contexts also represent one form the divisions take between factions of the New Negro movement – with Du Bois and Locke at one extreme, and with writers such as Thurman and Nugent at the other – over competing valorizations of the "classical" and the "decadent," that is, of the discreetly and the openly homoerotic. And it is fitting that society's "inverts" – those who are thought to invert the natural characteristics of their sex – should turn to blasphemy as a way to turn inside-out society's ideas of what is natural or acceptable, given that blasphemy so often operates according to "painfully literal inversion[s]" of the sacred.⁴¹ Inversions of holy writ and sacred rite accordingly characterize the homoerotic content of such underexplored Harlem-Renaissance texts as Nugent's "Bible stories" and his novel *Gentleman Jigger* – as well as Barnes's *Nightwood*, which sounds tirelessly the motif of inversion, and which ends with a

⁴⁰ David Lawton, *Blasphemy*, 4.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 31.

sacrilegious ritual that replaces God with dog. For Barnes, as I demonstrate in Chapter Four, these profanely theological modes of inversion become a way to unsettle and critique the then-standard notion of homosexuality as congenital inversion: a concept promulgated most widely by sexologists such as Richard von Krafft-Ebing and Havelock Ellis.

Ellis, incidentally, subscribed as confidently as anyone to the death-of-God thesis, writing in 1897 that since “the problem of religion has practically been settled,” “the question of sex . . . stands before the coming generations as the chief problem for solution.”⁴² It is important to note that writers such as Joyce, Loy, Nugent, and Barnes keep both of these “problems” open, the former just as much as the latter. Their works acknowledge the aesthetic and political powers of the religious structures they profane, in order more meaningfully to assimilate and exploit them. The very profanability of the church implies its abiding sanctity; the seemingly total irreverence of a novel like *Ulysses* or *Nightwood* is in fact circumscribed by this tacit concession of Christianity’s power and symbolic necessity. Modernist blasphemies derive their force in large part *from* this necessity and from the transgressive possibilities its limitations make possible – reminding us that to blaspheme an institution without respect for its authority, its sanctity, would be not to blaspheme at all. In this and other ways, the modernists I discuss belie Eliot’s declaration that blasphemy had become obsolete in a faithless century. Their poems and fictions insist that both religion and its artistic subversions continue to matter, that by drawing fully on religion’s cultural authority blasphemy can achieve real literary and political significance. The pages that follow explore the various but always radical ends to which these writers put this shared understanding.

⁴² Ellis, *Studies in the Psychology of Sex*, Vol. 1, vi.

Chapter One

BLASPHEMY AS "SACRELIGION":
A JOYCEAN PRIMER

Dear Pappie,

. . . I have not seen the sun for four months. Nevertheless I believe it exists for it is in the Bible, a book which like *Ulysses*, no good Catholic should read. . . .

Jim¹

Shortly after the publication of *Ulysses*, James Joyce sat for an interview with a young journalist named Djuna Barnes. Her friend Mina Loy accompanied them, sketching a portrait of the artist in profile that would appear alongside Barnes's account in *Vanity Fair's* March issue. The Joyce we encounter in that article seems the very model of the messianic artist, with perhaps just a touch of the demonic; as he joins Barnes and Loy at a popular Parisian watering hole, he seems to emanate directly from a church across the way:

Sitting in the café of the Deux Magots, that faces the little church of St. Germain des Près, I saw approaching, out of the fog and damp, a tall man. . . . At the moment of seeing him, a remark made to me by a mystic flashed through my mind[:] "A man who has been more crucified on his sensibilities than any writer of our age," and I said to myself – "this is a strange way to recognize a man I never laid my eyes on."²

Strange, indeed, to recognize a man in this way – though not, in Joyce's case, atypical. "Christ capitalized," Loy describes him in a poem she will publish the following year; "God of Paris," she calls him elsewhere.³ So, for this meeting, Joyce slips readily into the role assigned him: that

¹ Quoted in *JJ*, 540-41. .

² Barnes, "James Joyce: A Portrait," 65. Conversation that afternoon appears to have turned often enough to Christianity and to "the instinctive genius of the church" – Barnes notes that Joyce "is never without" his "book of saints" – and on the whole it is difficult to resist seeing this occasion as a meeting of like minds on the topic of religion (104). Despite the disparities, of course: Joyce was an avowedly atheistic but God-haunted Catholic apostate, Loy a heterodox Christian Scientist raised by a Jewish father and repressive Protestant mother, Barnes irreligious though attracted to the aesthetics and rituals of both Catholicism and Protestantism.

³ *Lost*, 89; *BM*, 311.

of the messianic exponent, and sacrificial lamb, of the modernist experiment. And Barnes and Loy slip into theirs: journalist and illustrator, yes, but also acolytes, disciples.

The arrangement is suggestive. Joyce's work had a major impact on both of these writers, and his influence – "unsurpassed," in Barnes's case, "by any other literary forebear" – had much to do with his characteristically blasphemous breed of modernism (*D*, 103). In his 1904 poem "The Holy Office," Joyce had portrayed the truly modern artist as, in part, a spokesperson for the sacredly profane; his highest calling would be to articulate the obscene and unorthodox, to put into words "Those things for which Grandmother Church / Left me severely in the lurch."⁴ This rhetoric of religious transgression foretells the substance of Joyce's novels, in which he not only features blasphemy prominently as both discourse and theme – as a matter, that is, of both form and content – but also uses blasphemous discourses and thematics to construct his most trenchant satires of subjects both sacred and secular: faith and patriotism, sectarianism and nationalism, Pope and King, Church and Empire, spirituality and sexuality.

"The Holy Office" likewise articulates another of Joyce's novelistic projects, that of using the language of blasphemy to elevate the lowly, to bring to the fore those taboo subjects that had traditionally been passed over in silence by literature as well as by Grandmother Church. Joyce does so, significantly, across a series of profanely theologized bodies, including those of both Mr. and Mrs. Bloom in *Ulysses*, of Shem the Penman in *Finnegans Wake*, and even, at times, of the text itself. For the printed word in Joyce's novels itself emerges as a kind of Host, in a process that deserves closer scrutiny for its blasphemous implications. (So too does the character of Malachi Mulligan, *Ulysses'* resident profaner, and a character with whom we shall here deal in some uncustomary ways – his value to the novel looking rather different when we view his blasphemies as authorized rather than as evidence of some unregenerate malignity.) In

⁴ Joyce, "The Holy Office," 658.

short, Joyce's fictions demonstrate three central theses of *Blasphemous Modernism*: first, that for modernist writers blasphemy is as much a political weapon as a formal or stylistic device; second, that this discourse is always rooted in and expressed through figurations of the often emphatically sexualized body; and third, that this discourse relies upon and exploits an essential ambivalence, equal parts affirmative and profanatory, in its relation to the religious structures under its critique.

Joyce himself gives us a useful shorthand term when in *Finnegans Wake* he speaks of "sacreligion": a word that indexes the ambivalent, symbiotic relation between transgression and the sacred, as well as blasphemy's aesthetic aspirations to the sacrilegious – to the realm, that is, of material, embodied profanation (*FW*, 365.3). Joyce's oeuvre thus affords us a primer of the varieties of critical blasphemy we shall encounter in subsequent chapters, from the irreverent deconstructions of gender and sexuality we find in Loy and Barnes to the artistic rebellion undertaken by a coterie of young Harlem artists – Langston Hughes, Wallace Thurman, Richard Bruce Nugent – whose insistently iconoclastic works often telegraph their debt to the Joycean precedent.⁵ (The group's short-lived periodical, *Fire!!*, was to the New Negro Renaissance what Joyce's "Holy Office" had been to the Irish Literary Revival.) Joyce will serve in these pages, as he did for each of the writers just mentioned, as a paradigmatic figure. By his lights we may see most clearly and comprehensively how blasphemous modernism works, and to what ends.

⁵ *Ulysses'* influence on at least Thurman and Nugent is attested by references to that novel in these authors' own works – on one hand as literary influence and precedent, and on the other hand as a material artifact, an important form of cultural capital. In Nugent's 1930s-era roman à clef *Gentleman Jigger*, "Joyce's forbidden novel, *Ulysses*," is left conspicuously open in an apartment at "Niggeratti Manor" in order to set the scene properly for an exhibition of their own avant-garde art. Having proven as censorable by the law as it was redeemable "on artistic grounds," this forbidden novel provided an apt precedent and icon for the Niggeratti's own aspirations both to artistic merit and to shocking the bourgeois (*GJ*, 127, 34). As for Thurman, the central characters of his 1932 novel *Infants of the Spring* are "incontinently rhapsodic" over *Dubliners* and *A Portrait of the Artist*. Thurman's reference to *Ulysses* as "a swamp out of which stray orchids grew" is more equivocal, but given the explicitly Decadent aspirations of the Niggeratti, much remarked both here and in *Gentleman Jigger*, those stray orchids alone would seem to be worth the price of the swamp (*IS*, 35-36).

How Blasphemy Works

One of the perennial debates in Joyce studies concerns the question whether Joyce is best understood as a Catholic or atheistic writer.⁶ What should be obvious to Joyce's readers, though, is that as an author he is neither of these—and is, at the same time, both. Drawing as they do so ubiquitously on biblical and ecclesiastical tradition and tropes, his fictions can hardly be called secular in any common sense of that term; even the “profanity of Joyce's art,” as Eugene Goodheart rightly observes, derives its significance in large part from his “curiously unresolved struggle with his Catholic heritage.”⁷ Yet if Joyce's works are essentially “sacramental,” as Richard Ellmann and others have maintained, we must also recognize the extent to which these sacraments are inherently ironic, revisionist, and very often profanatory (*JJ*, 550). Roy Gottfried hits on something essential about Joyce's relationship to religion when he casts the author not as disbeliever or unbeliever, but as a creative, I would add blasphemous, *misbeliever*—a species Gottfried defines as “one who engages the issues and tenets, the figures and forms of dogma, from a distance. . . . Misbelief shares with belief the same terms, the same facts of history, the same forms of worship, but wants to handle them differently, wrongly, of course, by slightly misapplying or misdirecting them.”⁸ Joyce's mind, like that of Stephen Dedalus, was “supersaturated” with the Catholic faith—but also like Stephen's it functioned as a profane “cloister” in which “limp priestly vestments” were made “to sway and caper in a sabbath of misrule” (*PA*, 192).

In other words, as a writer Joyce is neither religious nor irreligious but “sacreligious.”

And to borrow another Joyce-term, one might say that the mode of expression proper to

⁶ The latter position tends to be pressed with more vehemence than the former, having been taken up most recently in a book-length study by Geert Lernout. Like that of William Empson before him, Lernout's polemic is guided by a supposedly urgent need to defend Joyce against the legions of readers who might otherwise think him a pious Catholic. Lernout, *Help My Unbelief*; Empson, *Using Biography*, 214-16.

⁷ Goodheart, *The Failure of Criticism*, 158-59.

⁸ Gottfried, *Joyce's Misbelief*, 4.

blasphemous literature is that of the “jocoserious,” a blend of comic and earnest, of reverent and profane (*U*, 17.369). Mina Loy’s own evocation of avant-garde artists as “sacerdotal clowns” distills the jocoserious portrait of the blasphemous modernist (*Lost*, 77): is there a fitter two-word description of the author of *Ulysses*’ catechistic “Ithaca” episode, wherein sacerdotal Joyce asks a long series of priestly questions and clown Joyce answers in typically playful, irreverent fashion? In reading *Ulysses* we must contend with its hieratic jester, the invisible fingernail-paring God looming disembodied above and beyond his creation, as well as the impish trickster who descends into that creation, cracking little inside jokes about himself and the book he has made. “O Jamesy let me up out of this,” calls Molly Bloom from her bed – her “monthlies” have just come on – and Jamesy the Father obliges (18.1128-29).

Let us turn, then, to a decidedly jocoserious moment in *Ulysses* that is also – no coincidence, in my view – the novel’s most affecting. I refer to the finale of “Cyclops,” where a set-upon Leopold Bloom, normally so reserved, bravely defends himself and his “race” against the anti-Semitic vitriol of the Citizen and his fellow drinkers in Barney Kiernan’s pub. Bloom even risks what seems the gravest of crimes in such a setting – the display of a sentimentality not wrapped in nationalist nostalgia, even if it is, to some ears, rather feebly expressed: “But it’s no use. . . . Force, hatred, history, all that. That’s not life for men and women, insult and hatred. And everybody knows that it’s the very opposite of that that is really life. . . . Love, says Bloom. I mean the opposite of hatred” (12.1481-85). Bloom seems, if only for an instant, to live up to what the Citizen glibly calls him, “A new apostle to the gentiles,” heroic proponent of “Universal love” – a more Christ-like figure, surely, than many of the nominal Christians who surround him (12.1489).

One’s admiration for Bloom continues to increase as he flees his persecutor, successfully eluding fisticuffs and biscuit-tin while managing a final appeal to reason and sympathy:

“Mendelssohn was a jew and Karl Marx and Mercadante and Spinoza. And the Saviour was a jew and his father was a jew. Your God. . . . Christ was a jew like me” (12.1804-09). This outburst leads to the heroic-comic climax of the episode – Bloom’s Ascension – in which Joyce tellingly and typically resorts to the resonant literary resources of the biblical:

When, lo, there came about them all a great brightness and they beheld Him in the chariot wherein He stood ascend to heaven. And they beheld Him in the chariot, clothed upon in the glory of the brightness, having raiment as of the sun, fair as the moon and terrible that for awe they durst not look upon Him. And there came a voice out of heaven, calling: *Elijah! Elijah!* And He answered with a main cry: *Abba! Adonai!* And they beheld Him even Him, ben Bloom Elijah, amid clouds of angels ascend to the glory of the brightness at an angle of fortyfive degrees over Donohoe’s in Little Green street like a shot off a shovel. (12.1915-18)

Like a shot off a shovel. Such are the ways of the mock-epic, of course a constant quantity in this novel: magnification, diminution; inflation, deflation. Bloom can hardly be allowed to ascend to heaven in the raiment of Elijah and Christ without having the wind taken out of his sails. So in “Circe” the new Bloomusalem will be described as “a colossal edifice,” complete with crystal roof and forty thousand rooms, that has been “built in the shape of a huge pork kidney” (15.48-49). Yet here in “Cyclops” the deflation is, thankfully, too little too late, not nearly enough to balance or mitigate Bloom’s triumphal opposition to ignorance and intolerance. In any case, the passage gains its pathos as well as its humor from the biblical precedent, which manages in this instance to be both apt and ridiculous.

Joyce has used the trappings of Catholicism to similarly ridiculous effect some pages earlier. When Bloom steps temporarily away from Kiernan’s pub, the Citizen reflects aloud that “Saint Patrick would want to land again at Ballykinlar and convert us . . . after allowing things like that to contaminate our shores”; the conciliatory Martin Cunningham attempts to cool this heated rhetoric, saying, “Well . . . God bless all here is my prayer”; and “Joe” responds, with the kind of mindless certitude so prevalent in this episode, “I’m sure He will” (12.1671-75). There

follows a two-page Joycean divagation that elaborately sends up the very notion that Kiernan's pub would ever find itself blessed by the Catholic God in whom these men profess their faith—the upshot of the joke being that the pub “is to be consecrated as the long-awaited permanent cathedral in Dublin.”⁹ While these men spend the episode turning Bloom into a joke, the episode itself ensures that the joke is in fact on them.

Yet while the Citizen and his ilk take the brunt of Joyce's satire in this chapter, the author reserves room also for some gentle satire of both Bloom and the Bible. If Bloom's paean to universal love moves us, after all, it does so in spite of its lame expression, and our exultation at his escape from a flying biscuit-tin is accompanied by a smile at the mental image of Bloom at full gallop, when much fun has already been made of his awkward gait in “Aeolus” (7.440-51). Similarly, Bloom's chapter-ending Ascension channels the style and affect of biblical precedent while also depicting the mundane mechanics of such an ascent as akin to a load thrown from a shovel. Bloom and Elijah, Bloom and Christ; fiction and religion, narrative and scripture: all are the objects here, and very often throughout the novel, of an ironic ambivalence, of an effect very like William Empson's concept of “double irony.”¹⁰ The pairs balance one another in ironic suspension, recipients equally of Joyce's satirical jibes and of his ethical generosity. So when Joyce does present his more solemn critiques of, say, the Catholic Church, those critiques demand our attention all the more for taking root amidst this framework. Catholicism must occasionally bear the brunt of Joyce's satire but never of his intellectual condescension.

To deal with the labyrinthine tangles of irony in a text like *Ulysses* we need to set a conception of the jocoserious alongside that of the mock-epic, especially in these moments of reverent yet playfully irreverent borrowings from the religious and the scriptural—moments as

⁹ Gifford, “*Ulysses*” *Annotated*, 377.

¹⁰ See Empson's essay on *Tom Jones* in *Using Biography*, 131-57.

numerous, surely, as the novel's Homeric and other literary borrowings. Such blasphemy stands in complex relation to the discourse from which it borrows. It indulges in the affective potential of Christianity's sacred figures even as it lampoons those conceptions – just as the mock-heroic both relies upon and lampoons the generic trappings of the heroic. At the same time it uses those figures as barometers by which the author alternately elevates and diminishes his characters. Bloom as Elijah or Christ engages our reverence and pitches Joyce's prose to a register it would not otherwise enjoy. The complementary depictions of Bloom as "really" a mortal Dublin ad canvasser intervene to balance and offset the sacralizing effect, highlighting a comic incongruity. And the moment of Bloom's greatest glory, his ascension to the heavens, is likewise the moment Joyce pulls out his shovel, burying and resurrecting Bloom in a single move.

Such ironic doubleness finds its corollary in an ambivalence at the heart of blasphemy itself. For Joyce's achievement lies partly in a talent for exploiting blasphemy's double-edged significance: on one hand the term denotes all "impious irreverence" and encompasses any "profane speaking of God or sacred things," but at its most extreme, and most relevant, it denotes the outrageous avowal of self-deification – the crime for which Christ was crucified, according to the New Testament.¹¹ Significantly, blasphemy is also Bloom's crime in "Cyclops," at least as the Citizen interprets it: "I'll brain that bloody jewman for using the holy name. By Jesus, I'll crucify him so I will" (12.1811-12).¹² Blasphemy's ambivalence is clearly at play here: Bloom blasphemes by virtue of what the Citizen perceives as his insolent transgression of the Third Commandment ("using the holy name" in vain, in his quite reasonable assertion that

¹¹ *Oxford English Dictionary*, s.v. "blasphemy," 1a.

¹² Evidently the Citizen has been less offended by blasphemies indulged in by the pub's other patrons: "Good Christ!," "Who said Christ was good?," "He's a bloody ruffian," and so on (*U*, 12.383-92).

“Christ was a Jew”) as well as by his subsequent assumption of the messianic role – which the Citizen unwittingly enables by assuming the role of crucifier (12.1808).

Mina Loy’s 1923 poem “Joyce’s Ulysses” captures the novel’s ambivalent relation to religion, characterizing *Ulysses* as “The word made flesh / and feeding upon itself / with erudite fangs” (*Lost*, 89). Here Loy aptly praises the nimble ironic modes with which Joyce succeeds in having his religion and eating it too. Insofar as Joyce emulates God as both Father and Son, and insofar as his literary creation is insistently eroticized and embodied, that creation is a “Word made flesh.” At the same time, in its irreverent satire and blasphemous appropriations of God and scripture, Joyce’s novel “feeds upon” the Word made flesh; such a cannibalistic enterprise is in fact not far removed from Joyce’s own avowed understanding of his book’s relationship to literary tradition, an understanding he built explicitly upon the cannibalistic implications of the Eucharist. “His mind longed,” Richard Ellmann tells us, “to adore and to desecrate,” and Joyce’s literary dealings with Christianity often evince both urges simultaneously (*JJ*, 48). Such cannibalism lends itself to an apparent rhetorical contradiction: Joyce’s blasphemous satires of Christianity and its God would seem to vitiate the effect of incorporating sacred biblical elements into his art, the first move demeaning the Christian mythos and thus diminishing the significance of the second. In Joyce, however, the two moves reinforce one another. His jocoserious prose tacitly reinforces Christianity’s privileged status as an object of veneration and, thus, of profanation, even as he blasphemes that religion in his by-turn playful and solemn manner, whether rendering Bloom’s ascension at the end of “Cyclops” or taking swipes at the Church’s grip on Ireland.

But I should instead say *Catholicism’s* privileged status as an object of veneration, a distinction that reminds us of the principle underlying Joyce’s outright dismissals of Protestantism – for example as expressed by Stephen in the *Portrait*, when he refuses to trade a

“logical and coherent” absurdity, Catholicism, for its “illogical and incoherent” counterpart (244). In other words, an absurd religion may nonetheless be respected and even venerated for its internal coherence, and there is evidence enough of Joyce’s profound respect for Catholicism during the many long years after he formally abnegated it—not least in the narrative logics of his own texts.¹³ Consider that “Circe,” *Ulysses*’ most memorably blasphemous and eyebrow-raising excursion into the profane, ends with a pious vision that draws its pathos from Christian typography of redemption and of the sacrificial lamb. In the final lines, Bloom’s lost Rudy is resurrected before Bloom’s “wonderstruck” eyes for a heartbreaking instant, “a white lambkin” showing from his pocket to suggest that for all this episode’s traffic among imagery of the damned, “Circe” remains, in the final instance, invested in a promise of redemption—a promise that finds its iconization in a spectral image of the sacrificial lamb and ever-innocent son reunited with the father (15.4962-67).¹⁴

Robert Alter holds that *Ulysses* de-sacralizes the Bible by absorbing it “into a modern textual promiscuity” in which “canon decline[s] into claptrap,” but this accounts for at most one half of the equation.¹⁵ Just as Joyce’s mock-heroic transformation of Leopold Bloom into Odysseus (and Abraham, and Moses, and Elijah, and Christ) can serve, often simultaneously, both to mock and to exalt his protagonist, so too does *Ulysses* extol and elevate—not merely mock and subvert—the Bible, a text that plays at least as important a role in the novel as does *Hamlet* or the *Odyssey*. He has a lot of fun at the Church’s expense in *Ulysses* and his other

¹³ For Joyce, God never became a fully settled issue; traces of the Catholic faith lingered (to use a Stephen-word) ineluctably. The fact that he never fully dispensed with the religion of his youth is evidenced by his reluctance, unlike many of his contemporaries, to entertain seriously any faith besides Catholicism; by his continued attendance at Church services, if ostensibly for aesthetic purposes; by his lifelong investment, to the betterment of his art, in theological rhetoric and logic and in the narrative resources of the Bible; and by his deadly fear of thunder and lightning as manifestations of God’s wrath. “‘Why are you so afraid of thunder?’ asked [Arthur] Power, ‘your children don’t mind it.’ ‘Ah, said Joyce contemptuously, they have no religion’” (*JJ*, 514). In “Oxen of the Sun,” thunder is God’s riposte to Stephen’s drunken blasphemies, his “hellprate and paganry” (14.408-11).

¹⁴ By Joyce’s account, the birth of his own son Giorgio was sufficient to move him to a wholly un-ironic recitation of the baptismal creed (*The Workshop of Daedalus*, 99).

¹⁵ Alter, *Canon and Creativity*, 156.

works, but it is serious fun, and at its most significant moments his blasphemous play rests upon a tacit contract with the God he has disavowed: for His parodic and satiric assimilations into Joyce's prose, God is rewarded with yet another monument to His, and His church's, cultural relevance. Joyce siphons Christianity's abiding authority into his religious appropriations, so that, for example, Bloom's ascension over Donohoe's in Little Green Street can be one of the novel's most affecting and comically absurd moments at the same time. Each of the novel's potential trivializations or travesties of religion is accompanied by an implicit and counterbalancing reinforcement of its status as worthy of Joyce's attention. For this reason, if for no other, it is also worthy of ours.

Battleships, Bibles, and Bishops: Blaspheming Empire

When the Citizen of "Cyclops" threatens to "brain that bloody jewman" with a biscuit-tin, he does so ostensibly because Bloom has blasphemed "the holy name" (*U*, 12.1811)—but this is just the stated component of the Citizen's more general animosity toward a man conceived as religiously, racially, sexually, and nationally alien. Here Joyce demonstrates an alignment, in the minds of Dublin's citizenry, between two classes of "criminal": blasphemers and outsiders. Bloom's preceding diatribe in the episode has affected the Citizen and others as blasphemous in the strictly religious sense that is our primary concern here, but also in several secular senses—a state of affairs that mirrors Joyce's use of specifically religious irreverence to construct his many ideological critiques of secular power. We have taken note of Joyce's artistic achievement at the end of "Cyclops," his complexly ironic and seriocomic uses of scriptural precedent, and of what this indicates about blasphemy's double nature as profanatory and affirmative. But this scene also figures centrally in *Ulysses'* larger polemical project of using blasphemy formally and thematically to combat the intolerances of both British imperial and

Irish nationalist ideologies, as well as those that issue from Ireland's other colonizer, in Joyce's view: the Roman Catholic Church. Joyce uses the language and raw materials of Catholicism in the same irreverent fashion in which he uses the English language and the English literary tradition, turning the rhetorical weaponry of church and empire against them. *Finnegans Wake's* Shem the Penman functions as an allegorical figure for Joyce in this regard, directing his "blasphematory spits" at these twin colonialisms as he denounces the crimes committed by the Church and by his own rival, Shaun, the British-like imperialist (183.24). "[A]lways blaspheming," Shem wields the "lifewand," as a priest might wield his mysterious powers of consecration – to lift it is to make "the dumb speak" – while the imperial Shaun "points the deathbone and the quick are still" (177.23, 195.5, 193.29). Like his creator, Shem deals equally with Ireland's "conqueror" and its "gay betrayer" (*U*, 1.405).

An earlier instance of blasphemy's positioning between religion and politics comes in the *Portrait's* celebrated Christmas dinner scene, which highlights a contest between politically inflected discourses of sacred and profane. In that scene, Simon Dedalus and his friend Mr. Casey object to what they perceive as a profanatory treatment of their idol, Charles Stewart Parnell. They object, in other words, to the rhetorical and other forms of desecration that Parnell has endured from the very people he was trying to lead and to save. For her part, Stephen's aunt Dante rejects Parnell as himself a profaner; as a pious woman, she follows the dictates of the Church, which denounced Parnell as "a public sinner," thus "no longer worthy to lead" (32). The rift caused by the Church's position in this matter has forced Irish Catholics to realign their own allegiances, to decide which authority they hold more sacred than the other: that of the Church, or that of the thwarted Parnell.

We are concerned here primarily with blasphemy in its full theological sense, rather than a diluted secularization of the term – but when discussing Joyce in the contexts of Irish

colonialism and nationalism, it is important to recognize the extent to which Joyce puts both discourses into dialogue: blasphemy as such, in one corner, and “blasphemies” against prevailing political orthodoxies in the other. One is struck in the Christmas dinner scene, for example, by the way political irreverence becomes inevitably implicated in the language of religious transgression. As the family argument escalates around the dinner table, Mr. Casey is moved to declare, “No God for Ireland! . . . Away with God!” (39). Dante’s response is swift and unequivocal: “Blasphemer! Devil!” (39). As always with the politics of blasphemy, opposing factions battle over control of blasphemy itself as a discourse – over who will wield it, and who will assert the authority to accuse the other of it. In a rather ingenious move, Simon even charges the Bible with using “bad language,” implying that scripture itself is blasphemous (32). Dante’s reaction is to lament that Stephen will never be able to forget “the language he heard against God and religion and priests in his own home,” and insofar as Stephen is an autobiographical character, her prediction proves true (33). For Joyce not only remembered these blasphemies well enough to enshrine them in literature; he also never forgot the mutual implications of blasphemy as both a religious and a political phenomenon, an expressive vehicle for polemics of church as well as of state.

Joyce’s critiques of both empire and nationalism build on profane rewritings of biblical typologies, including Ireland’s deep-rooted cultural identification with the Bible’s “chosen people,” the Israelites.¹⁶ (We shall see in Chapter Three that a strikingly similar Hebraic context informs the strategies of many Harlem Renaissance writers.) This is one of the foremost contexts determining Joyce’s decision to set an Irish Jew at the center of *Ulysses*; the Celtic-Israelite

¹⁶ As Neil Davison writes, “Joyce’s theory about an Irish-Jewish similarity,” dramatized at length in *Ulysses*, “drew on nationalistic rhetoric he had encountered in childhood. Utilizing Irish histories that claimed an Hebraic ancestry for the Milesian Celts, Parnell-as-Moses images influenced Joyce’s earliest political awareness” (*James Joyce*, 7). Not incidentally, Joyce also casts Shem the Penman – and, implicitly, himself – in the role of set-upon Jew, or “yude” (*FW*, 171.1). See Marin Linett, “The Jew’s Text: ‘Shem the Penman’ and ‘Shaun the Post.’”

identification also emerges in many other ways throughout the novel.¹⁷ The Ithaca episode's catechistical respondent cites, among other "points of contact" between Jews and the Irish, "their dispersal, persecution, survival and revival," and "the restoration in Chanah David of Zion and the possibility of Irish political autonomy or devolution" (17.745-60). In "Circe," in his role as messiah and civic reformer, Bloom warmly embraces John Howard Parnell and praises "green Erin, the promised land of our common ancestors" (15.1517-18). "Well, they're still waiting for their redeemer," observes Martin Cunningham in "Cyclops"; "For that matter so are we" (12.1644-45). Small surprise that the rhetorical highlight of the obsessively oratorical Aeolus episode should arrive when Professor MacHugh recites, from memory, a speech of John F. Taylor's which hinges on a figurative identification of the Irish with the Israelites and of Egypt with England – or that Joyce should have deemed this recitation the only portion of *Ulysses* that could be lifted from its context and recorded, for all posterity, by the author (7.828-79).¹⁸

Joyce puts this cultural identification, in part, to the uses that Professor MacHugh does, as a way of deriding British imperialism and of articulating colonial dissent. But Joyce is keener than MacHugh to turn the logic of the Hebraic homology back against many Irish citizens' own misguided perceptions of cultural otherness. As Andrew Gibson demonstrates in his book *Joyce's Revenge*, the rhetoric of Irish nationalism turned decisively against the figure of the Jew as the twentieth century approached, essentially repudiating the Jewish identification on which it had earlier drawn: "as Jews enter Ireland in greater numbers," Gibson writes, "the Irish-Jewish identification traditional within the culture breaks down. Griffith, Moran, and others

¹⁷ Stephen invokes it in the context of a celebrated Fenian leader ("They have forgotten Kevin Egan, not he them. Remembering thee, O Sion") and riffs again on this theme in "Oxen of the Sun": "Return, return, Clan Milly: forget me not, O Milesian" (*U*, 3.263-64, 14.371-72). Elsewhere Stephen makes the Hebraic identification at a more personal level; recalling the Jewish merchants he observed during his sojourn in Paris, he perceives a cultural imposition similar to that of the British over the Irish. If his own "soul frets in the shadow of [the English] language," Jews too must make their way using the languages and customs of alien cultures: "Not theirs: these clothes, this speech, these gestures" (*PA*, 189; *U*, 2.367).

¹⁸ For more on this audio recording, see Adrian Curtin, "Hearing Joyce Speak."

begin to identify the arriving Jews with invaders and thus with the colonizer.”¹⁹ This, of course, is exactly what Joyce depicts the Citizen doing in “Cyclops,” indiscriminately casting Jews and the British as alien invaders – to the extent, even, of comparing Bloom to Cromwell and to other English “canters,” the homophonic suggestion of “cantor” further insinuating the logical conflation of Jewish and imperialist (12.1506). The Jewish Irish Bloom, a doubled figure of colonization and homelessness, is Joyce’s answer to the Citizen’s warped identification of Jew and imperialist, and Bloom explicitly endorses the cultural homology that he himself embodies; in “Ithaca,” he imagines a “multiple, ethnically irreducible consummation” of the two “Zionisms,” chanting the Zionist anthem for Stephen’s delectation (17.761-64).

Meanwhile, *Ulysses* casts the British Empire as relying upon a different form of biblical rewriting. According to the Cyclops episode’s parody of the Apostles’ Creed, Britain believes in “rod, the scourger” instead of God the Father, creator not of heaven and earth but of “hell upon earth” (12.1354). In place of Jesus Christ the Son of God, the colonizer believes “in Jacky Tar, the son of a gun,” born not of a Virgin and the Holy Ghost but of the Navy and of “unholy boast” (12.1355). This creed comically conflates religion and patriotism in much the same way that the Citizen himself does, in all seriousness, by collapsing religious zeal and Irish nationalism into one dubious sentiment: “The blessing of God and Mary and Patrick on you” (12.1504). What is left out of such a blessing is the Christian sentiment Bloom endorses, that of love, “the opposite of hatred” (12.1485). To the Citizen, love is a farce, and he thus characterizes Bloom as complicit with all those British “canters” who preach love and peace as a way to excuse the very injustices they perpetrate (12.1506-09). Here we may well pause to marvel at the Citizen’s unconscious self-criticism. For he uses the language of religious and nationalist piety to promote his own intolerant and violent rhetoric, much as the British excuse their “battleships” with reference to

¹⁹ Gibson, *Joyce’s Revenge*, 50.

their “bibles,” placing less faith in Christ’s teachings than in the so-called British Beatitudes: “Beer, beef, business, bibles, bulldogs, battleships, buggery and bishops” (14.1459-60).

If Joyce here mocks empire by putting ludicrously blasphemous words into its mouth, elsewhere he more subtly satirizes the empire’s own often overblown rhetoric; Victoria is facetiously celebrated, at one point, as “defender of the faith, Empress of India, even she, who bore rule, a victress over many peoples, the wellbeloved, for they knew and loved her from the rising of the sun to the going down thereof, the pale, the dark, the ruddy and the ethiop” (12.296-99). Joyce habitually uses blasphemy in the service of such critiques, as when he has Britain’s monarch step onto the stage of “Circe”:

EDWARD THE SEVENTH

(levitates over heaps of slain, in the garb and with the halo of Joking Jesus, a white jujube in his phosphorescent face)

My methods are new and are causing surprise.
To make the blind see I throw dust in their eyes. (15.4475-79)

Edward VII appears here in the Joking Jesus role prepared by Malachi Mulligan’s ballad in the novel’s first episode, making a mockery of Britain’s religious as well as its political sovereignty, its straight-faced but absurd bearing of the white man’s burden. In a travesty of Christ’s ascension, Edward levitates, but he does so over “heaps of slain,” at once a specific reference to the Boer Wars and a more general denunciation of colonialist violence. The king’s jujube, sucked white, metaphorizes the empire’s bloodletting and the cultural “whitening” of its subjects. The lines he speaks adopt the rhyme scheme and meter of Mulligan’s ballad, but they constitute a less playful, more acid indictment of the empire’s Orwellian rhetoric: as war makes peace, so blinding and misdirection bring sight. These examples of British dissimulation, of self-serving rhetoric promulgated in the interest of suppression and of ideological consolidation, likewise borrow Christianity’s language of paradox – “For whosoever will save his life shall lose

it"; "So the last shall be first, and the first last" – as both the Joking-Jesus trappings and the logic of Mulligan's ballad imply.²⁰ (Stephen Dedalus offers a more comical reflection on Christian paradox in *Ulysses*: "He Who Himself begot middler the Holy Ghost and Himself sent Himself, Agenbuyer, between Himself and others," and now "sitteth on the right hand of His Own Self but shall come in the latter day to doom the quick and dead when all the quick shall be dead already" [9.493-99].)

Following "Circe"'s blasphemous portrayal of the sovereign as a jujube-sucking, imperially murderous "joking Jesus," another transgressively typological figure takes the stage: the Irish "Croppy Boy," subject of Ben Dollard's ballad performance in the Sirens episode (15.4475-77). The Croppy Boy returns here to figure once more as both an Irish Christ figure and a personification of colonial, anti-Catholic persecution. In the ballad version Joyce incorporated in "Sirens," the Croppy Boy falls victim to a betrayal both colonialist and religious: he enters a Catholic church and makes his confession to "a vested Priest in a lonely chair," only to discover that this "priest" is really a British soldier in disguise.²¹ The Croppy Boy is then arrested and led away to be hanged, a Christlike fate whose typological overtones are emphasized in macabre fashion. In one of the darker instances of Joycean humor, the crucified here suffers a spontaneous erection and emission, and three women "rush forward with their handkerchiefs" to clean up the Croppy Boy's semen – a morbid version of the three Marys who attend the Crucifixion in John's gospel (15.4548-52; John 19:25). *Ulysses'* far more central Christ figure, of course, is the man who in "Sirens" sits in an adjoining room at the Ormond Hotel bar, sipping cider and listening to the Croppy Boy's sad tale as sung by Ben Dollard. Like the ballad's hero, Leopold Bloom must suffer in "Circe" a variety of bodily humiliations. Unlike the Croppy Boy,

²⁰ Luke 9:24; Matt. 20:16. Cleanth Brooks makes this point about Christianity and the language of paradox in *The Well Wrought Urn*, 17-18.

²¹ Carroll Malone, "The Croppy Boy," 156-57.

though, Bloom's own Christ-identifications exceed the normal bounds of typology, approaching something like a literary re-Incarnation – at least given the logic of Joyce's fictional universe, which is, among other things, an irreverent exercise in transubstantiation.

"For This is My Body"

There are novelists for whom fiction is only secondarily an evocation of imagined worlds – for whom novels, first and last, are variable arrangements of words on pages. Hugh Kenner called such writers "stoic comedians," less storytellers than word-arrangers, and he placed James Joyce squarely among them: "He could not, we know, improvise a tale by the fireside, not to save his life; but he is enough the master of Gutenberg technology to fabricate the traces of a tale out of printed signs." While there is much truth in this, it is nonetheless also true that Joyce viewed his artist's vocation in more rarefied, sacerdotal terms than those of a tech-savvy Gutenbergian. The title of his verse manifesto "The Holy Office" was only partly ironic; Joyce's preoccupation with words found expression not in the words themselves but in the production of words made flesh, and he explicitly conceived of his texts as transubstantiated bodies. "Don't you think," he would ask, "there is a certain resemblance between the mystery of the Mass and what I am trying to do?"²²

This comparison ultimately became for Joyce less a matter of mere resemblance than of a strikingly literalized identification of literary production with the mystery of the Eucharist.²³ The logic of the Mass encourages such literalism, it being heretical to conceive of the Communion as only figurative, and Joyce's mind never ceased to obey the coldly Jesuitical logic in which it was steeped. Thus did he announce at his fiftieth birthday party, presented with a

²² Kenner, *Flaubert, Joyce, and Beckett*, xviii; Joyce, qtd. in Stanislaus Joyce, *My Brother's Keeper*, 103-04.

²³ Frederick Lang has developed an elaborate schema of correspondences between the events of *Ulysses* and of the Catholic Mass in "*Ulysses*" and *the Irish God*. For more on Joyce's creative uses of the Mass, see Dennis M. Shanahan, "The Eucharistic Aesthetics of the Passion," and Frances L. Restuccia, "Transubstantiating *Ulysses*."

cake decorated as a copy of *Ulysses*, “*Accipite et manducate ex hoc omnes: Hoc est enim corpus meum*” (“Take and eat you all of this, for this is my body”).²⁴ Part and parcel of *Ulysses*’ blasphemous aesthetic is the eucharistic textuality that constitutes it, and Joyce happily takes up the roles of Creator, martyr, and priest in offering that book for our reverent consumption. As William Franke rightly observes, “the core of the Bible as it is refracted in Joyce consists in the eucharistic celebration of the death of Christ, his offer of his flesh as nourishment for all.”²⁵ The ceremony of the Eucharist is in fact the predominant blasphemous figure in *Ulysses*, a novel that begins with a mock-Communion, climaxes with an elaborate Black Mass, and ends with the eucharistic embodiment of Molly Bloom. If *Ulysses* and *Finnegans Wake* are any indication, in other words, Joyce did not outgrow the eucharistic trope of the artist the way he outgrew other aesthetic notions of his own and Stephen’s youth.

Joyce’s characterization of Stephen in *A Portrait of the Artist* lays bare the theological impetus of his art in a way that reflects the impetus of Joyce’s own.²⁶ However, as suggested by Joyce’s subtly mocking attitude in the *Portrait* and more obviously critical depiction in *Ulysses*, Stephen never does fulfill the function of such a “priest of eternal imagination” – in large part, it seems, because of his constitutional repulsion from “the daily bread of experience” and, even more, from the “radiant body” of mortal flesh (*PA*, 218, 221). Joyce’s *Portrait* famously casts religious apostasy as the prerequisite for authentic art, but this is merely an early stage in

²⁴ Quoted in Eugene Jolas, “My Friend James Joyce,” 8. F. Scott Fitzgerald memorialized a similar dinner party of a few years earlier with a drawing, the “Festival of St. James,” that bears a cartoonish resemblance to Leonardo’s *Last Supper*. The sketch outfits Joyce with a halo, as befits his hypostatic role, and depicts Fitzgerald himself at Joyce’s side, on bended knee, in the attitude of a pious disciple (Fitzgerald, “Festival”).

²⁵ Franke, “Joyce and the Bible,” 642.

²⁶ Consider the composition of Stephen’s villanelle in that novel. After dreaming of “the ecstasy of seraphic life,” Stephen awakens to the task of transubstantiating Word into word, and word into flesh: “O! In the virgin womb of the imagination the word was made flesh. Gabriel the seraph had come to the virgin’s chamber” (*PA*, 217). (As he proceeds to indite his “eucharistic hymn,” he imagines “incense ascending from the altar of the world” [218]. Stephen is also fond, like Joyce, of equating his authorial persona with God the Father. In *Ulysses*’ Proteus episode, too, having jotted down some verses about a pale vampire, Stephen remarks, “*Et vidit Deus. Et erant valde bona*” (“And God saw. And they were good”); later, just before launching into his Parable of the Plums, he thinks, “Let there be life,” again equating his literary production with the Father’s creation (3.439-40, 7.930).

Joyce's evolving blasphemous project. Stephen Dedalus lacks the sensual awareness, the respect for the body, that Leopold Bloom and *Ulysses* both celebrate and manifest. *Ulysses* contends implicitly that transcendent art need not transcend the body, that furthermore the novel form can be used to express the one by means of the other. Thus it is Bloom's body, not Stephen's, that enjoys the eucharistic pride of place in *Ulysses*. It is Bloom who says, while envisioning an imminent bath and the quasi-Elevation of his floating penis, "This is my body": Jesus' words at the Last Supper, as he offers his flesh to the consumption of the faithful, much as Joyce offers Bloom's in *Ulysses* (5.566; Luke 22:19). Not incidentally, Bloom's bathing scene – an overdetermined religious image combining Eucharist, baptism, and an evocation of Bloom as an ironic Jewish patriarch, the "limp father of thousands" – is also completely incommensurable with everything we know about the hydrophobic Stephen, who last bathed in October 1903 (17.237-39). Bloom's body will be made to bear much of the novel's religious and typological freight; Stephen's cannot.

The elevation of Bloom over Stephen in *Ulysses*, like the Elevation of Bloom's organ in the bath, is a core component of Joyce's implicit commentary on the nature of Christ. For in conceiving of one's art as a Word made flesh, the blasphemous modernist must privilege the fleshly part of that equation as a weapon against the centuries of ecclesiastical identification of flesh with sin. Mina Loy, for one, undertakes this cause with a vengeance; Joyce too, in *Ulysses* and *Finnegans Wake*, rejects the kind of dualism that characterizes Stephen's thinking and which makes possible such rigid oppositions as flesh and spirit, sin and grace. Richard Ellmann writes that Joyce's writing was a means of "purification," "a continual rebaptism of the mind," yet the "baptismal" waters of something like "Penelope" or *Finnegans Wake* insist on impurity, or rather on the illusoriness and undesirability of purity (*JJ*, 110). If purification is what Joyce is after, it is an ironic cleansing by means of impure mixtures and bodily fluids – a Joycean project on

display from the punning title of his first published book, *Chamber Music*. (“Chamber music,” thinks Bloom. “Could make a kind of pun on that. It is a kind of music I often thought when she. Acoustics that is. Tinkling” [11.979-81].) As for *Ulysses*, the “mixedup things” Molly cites Bloom as knowing so well, and the “mixed middlings” that other Dubliners accuse Bloom of embodying, suitably reflect the mixed-up stylistic and thematic predilections of the novel (18.179-80, 12.1658-59). As John Paul Riquelme observes, *Ulysses*’ “styles resist being understood as unmixed or unadulterated language,” yielding “no coherent basis for accepting aesthetic, cultural, political, or racial purity as attractive or possible. Even Molly’s ‘Yes’ is mixed.”²⁷

Nowhere is this preference for the mixed, the impure, and the hybrid more pronounced than in *Ulysses*’ treatments of the sacred and the profane, as emblemized by such unexpected interpolations as “Christicle” and “Christass” (14.1579, 15.4141) and by such lewd parodies as this, in “Oxen of the Sun”: “O lust our refuge and our strength. . . . Of John Thomas her spouse. . . . Through yerd our lord, Amen” (14.1520-27; “John Thomas” and “yerd” are slang for *penis*.) Such is the nature of Joyce’s art, the profane always dogging the sacred and vice versa – so that when Stephen’s soul is made to cry “Heavenly God!” in the *Portrait*, it does so “in an outburst of profane joy” (171). So it is that in “The Holy Office” Joyce proclaims his ironically Christlike mission as that of redeeming his literary elders and contemporaries from their own soulless and fleshless art, and by revealing in his own the full body and soul of human experience, word and Word, Eros and *agape*, flesh and spirit:

Thus I relieve their timid arses,
Perform my office of Katharsis.
My scarlet leaves them white as wool:
Through me they purge a bellyful.²⁸

²⁷ Riquelme, “Preparatory to Anything Else,” 11.

²⁸ Joyce, “The Holy Office,” 658.

Joyce's "scarlet" writing here conflates Joyce/Christ's redeeming blood with a naked textuality of the flesh. Such are the terms of his (un)holy office, his calling as randy Redeemer and cloacal Christ.

Buck and Other Body-Texts

In the world of *Ulysses* this office, the blasphemer's burden, is shouldered most conscientiously by Malachi "Buck" Mulligan – a consideration which requires that we reappraise this character and his value to the novel. *Ulysses* after all opens by invoking, not the Muse – as would seem to be dictated by the novel's Homeric trappings – but rather a transgendered Christ, "the genuine christine" (1.21). That it does so in the voice of Buck Mulligan, as he intones the opening phrase of the old Latin Mass, says something about the novel's imaginative investments and also about the character who does the invoking. Rather than the author beseeching the Muse's inspiration, we have a character, the bawdy Buck, conjuring a female Redeemer in his trademark mock-solemn fashion. We begin, that is, with the "prelate" Mulligan and his series of blasphemous invocations, and we are unable as yet to determine whether the author endorses or disdains the irreverence of their utterance (1.32). Certainly the adult Joyce, "notable for his avoidance of blasphemy and foul language," had as little appreciation for such casual irreverence as does the Stephen Dedalus of *Ulysses*, who now ascends "displeased and sleepy" to the foot, not of God's altar ("*Introibo ad altare Dei*"), but of Mulligan himself (1.13, .5).²⁹ Stephen "looked coldly at the shaking gurgling face that blessed him" (1.14-15), but does Joyce look on so coldly? Are we to interpret Mulligan as the "usurper" that Stephen and, later, Bloom perceive him to be, or might Joyce have a more significant role for him to play?

²⁹ Roy Gottfried, *Joyce's Misbelief*, 8.

Mulligan has often been taken for a malignant character, either a villain within the novel's scheme of values or, at best, the cautionary foil and bad influence for a troubled Stephen. It has been easy enough to write this character off, in the words of that other Bloom (Harold), as "The obscene Buck Mulligan, Joyce's black beast."³⁰ When we reflect, however, that *Ulysses* is structured by the very ceremony over which Mulligan presides in the opening scene, we are impelled to other reflections, including the recognition that Mulligan is the resident blasphemer of a richly blasphemous text. It may be, in other words, that Joyce endorses Mulligan's playful recycling of Christianity and Scripture – this, after all, is what *Ulysses* itself does with them – over Stephen's morose denial.

Stephen identifies Mulligan as belonging to "the brood of mockers," associating him with such Catholic heresiarchs as Photius, Arius, and Sabellius (1.657). But his casting of Mulligan in this fashion suggests that Stephen has emphasized what is at most the lesser portion of his friend's irreverent character: the heretical, that is, instead of the blasphemous. Mulligan, a mocker indeed, has far less in common with such infamous Catholic heretics than he does with those serial blasphemers of the nineteenth century, such as George William Foote, whose crimes included publishing ribald cartoon depictions of the Bible's more comical moments – for instance, God's posterior as revealed to Moses.³¹ It is much easier to imagine Mulligan joining in such jocularly blasphemous company than it is to imagine him holding forth on heretical doctrine along with a Photius or an Arius. It is likewise hard to imagine an earnest heretic performing the many "rather blasphemous" functions, as Haines understates the case, that Mulligan performs in this episode and throughout the novel – from the Communion-style breakfast he dispenses to the gathered trinity of Martello Tower inhabitants ("*Patris et Filii*

³⁰ Bloom, Introduction, 5.

³¹ Founder of *The Freethinker* and printer of many such irreverent cartoons and commentaries, Foote was sentenced to a year's imprisonment, which he documents in the 1886 work *Prisoner for Blasphemy*. On Foote's career as a blasphemer, see Leonard Levy's *Blasphemy*, 479-94, and Joss Marsh's *Word Crimes*, 127-214.

et Spiritus Sancti”) to the perpetual recitations of his “Ballad of Joking Jesus” (1.605, .351, .584-599). Mulligan is particularly fond of travesty scripture – Matthew 26:75 and Proverbs 19:17 are favorites – and the Stations of the Cross (1.527, .727; 1.510, 15.4170). His pet name for Stephen, “dogsboddy,” is, as Robert Bell notes, “a characteristically blasphemous inversion.”³² And later we will find him “praying,” with “pious eyes upturned,” “Blessed Margaret Mary Anycock!” (9.645-46).

In sum, Mulligan’s jokes and jibes yield scant evidence of heterodox belief. What they instead evince is a blasphemous willingness to toy with Catholic Christianity on its most orthodox terms. There is much, of course, that the Stephen of 1904 has yet to learn in order to grow into something more like the adult Joyce, and his misidentification of Mulligan as heretic – despite Stephen’s formidable theological prowess – signals, perhaps, one of his more urgent deficits of understanding, taking its place alongside his naivety with regard to the opposite sex and his lack of a proper appreciation for the body. Stephen, as we know him in *Ulysses*, could never have written *Ulysses*, a fact in part attested by his failure to understand the nature of blasphemy as such or to appreciate the virtues of blasphemous play. His relationship to blasphemy may indeed have been one of the more significant reasons that Joyce felt, after the *Portrait*, that Stephen had “a shape that can’t be changed,” and so could not be cast as *Ulysses*’ central figure.³³ That central figure ended up being Bloom, but perhaps Joyce also had in mind a more central and valorized role than is generally recognized for the character of Mulligan. Robert Bell’s work on *Ulysses* is a useful precedent here. Since “Malachi” is Hebrew for messenger, Bell wonders, might we rightly see him as *Joyce*’s messenger? Mulligan does seem

³² Bell, *Jocoserious Joyce*, 36.

³³ Quoted in Frank Budgen, *James Joyce and the Making of Ulysses*, 105.

preternaturally gifted with authorial insight.³⁴ I would add that Malachi in the Old Testament prophesies the return of Elijah or, according to Christian typology, the coming of Christ: not an insignificant precedent, given that Joyce casts Bloom as a quasi-Christ and has him ascend in Elijah's chariot at the end of "Cyclops" (Elijah 4:5).

Stephen thinks, as Buck enters the library, "Hast thou found me, O mine enemy?": the question Ahab asks Elijah at 1 Kings 21:20 (9.483). Mulligan here is figured not only as the prophet of Elijah's return but as Elijah himself, an identification normally reserved for Bloom. More broadly, the notion that Mulligan is in some sense the novel's "messenger" is attested by the way his own particular blasphemous and literary performances mirror those of *Ulysses* itself. "The Lord has spoken to Malachi," he announces in the Scylla chapter as he begins to write his play "Everyman His Own Wife" – thus not only echoing his Old-Testament namesake but also invoking God instead of the Muse for literary creation, much as *Ulysses* itself has done in its first lines (9.1056). Appropriately, when the divinely inspired Mulligan later reads the play aloud, he does so from "his tablet," as though like Bloom and Moses he bears "in his arms the tables of the law, graven in the language of the outlaw" (9.1170, 7.868-69). Buck's is indeed the language of the outlaw, of the blasphemer, and his sacred tablets appropriately yield "a national immorality in three orgasms": an extended riff on masturbation (9.1174). But Mulligan's blasphemies most significantly mirror those of *Ulysses* itself in the novel's very first scene. As he transubstantiates his shaving lather into "the genuine christine" – whose corporeality he emphasizes by remarking her "white corpuscles" and "blood and ouns" – he is performing in microcosm the service *Ulysses* performs as a whole, making of words and of the

³⁴ Bell points to Mulligan's seemingly "supernatural insight" in the Scylla-and-Charybdis episode, "as though he were endowed with some divine or authorial knowledge" – or as though "Buck has discussed the novel's schema with Joyce" (*Jocoserious Joyce*, 16).

Word a text that is also determinedly a body, and a body that will finally overwhelm the novel in its final episode, as distinctions between flesh and text recede almost entirely (1.21-32).

We must at any rate ask whether *Ulysses*, Joyce's self-described "epic of the human body," does not privilege this bawdy Buck over the body-phobic Stephen.³⁵ Jonathan Greenberg has observed that Mulligan habitually "reverses the process of transubstantiation, reducing spirit to body," and he is right to identify Mulligan as the locus of *Ulysses*' satirical energies; I take issue only with the word "reducing."³⁶ For Joyce's novel *raises* the body. Here the "Spirit," in the words of Mina Loy's *Ulysses* poem, is ever "impaled upon" the Flesh, subordinated to its sanctity (*Lost*, 88). Mulligan thus finds himself, with Mr. and Mrs. Bloom, on the winning side of *Ulysses*' valorizations of the body, while Stephen seems if anything to have devolved in this regard from where we left him in the *Portrait*. Cranly was well within his rights when, in that novel, he contested Stephen's claim to "freedom" from the Church: "But you are not free enough yet to commit a sacrilege" (246). *Ulysses* is the inscription and embodiment of that sacrilegious temerity for which the young Stephen is not yet prepared. Unlike Stephen, *Ulysses* is less interested in the spirit as such than in the spirit made flesh, in the figures of Leopold and Molly Bloom and in the textures of the novel itself.

The first acquaintance Bloom meets in his day's travels greets him appropriately: "How's the body?" (5.86). For Bloom *is* body, a body with much more definite desires than Stephen's has.³⁷ Watching an attractive woman in silk stockings, Bloom thinks, "*Esprit de corps*,"

³⁵ Quoted in Frank Budgen, *James Joyce and the Making of Ulysses*, 21. In the Linati schema, Joyce notes that Stephen "non soffre ancora il corpo" ("does not yet bear a body") (Richard Ellmann, *Ulysses on the Liffey*, 189). In contrast, we meet Buck immediately as a "plump" and highly visible body, covered only by an "ungirdled" dressing gown tossed about by the mild morning air. The narrator lingers over Mulligan's corporeal details in a way it never does for Stephen: we see Buck's "light untanned hair, grained and hued like pale oak," his "even white teeth glistening here and there with gold points," his "plump shadowed face and sullen oval jowl"; we watch him shave, and soon we will see him swim, without so much as an untied gown to cover him (1.15-32).

³⁶ Greenberg, *Modernism, Satire, and the Novel*, 34.

³⁷ From the first sentence of "Calypso," Joyce underscores the corporeal chasm separating Stephen and Leopold. The author refrained, in his schemata, from indicating a symbolic organ for Stephen's star-turn in "Proteus"; here we

a pun suggesting that where Stephen accepts a dualism of flesh and spirit, Bloom is ready always to celebrate the spirit of the flesh (4.135). Even when Joyce makes us privy to Bloom's privy at the close of "Calypso," it is as though we are attending a sacred rite; "Ithaca" remembers the occasion as a "holy of holies" (17.2045). Bloom's holy orifice falls well within the purview of Joyce's holy office, his maculate defecation reminding us that *Ulysses'* characteristic blasphemies come always in and through and of the human body. Which is why, as Robert Bell argues, the novel "absorbs" Mulligan's mocking, playful, and – I would add – blasphemous spirit, his scatological irreverence and sacrilegious aesthetic.³⁸ It is also why Mulligan leaves us halfway through the book, his services no longer necessary.

No longer necessary, that is, because another blasphemous presence steps in to take his place, most notably in the Nausicaa, Circe, and Penelope chapters: the Joycean Arranger. Postulated by David Hayman and promptly adapted by Joyce critics everywhere, "the Arranger" is a name for that playful presence in *Ulysses* – "something between a persona and a function, somewhere between the narrator and the implied author" – that is responsible for such prose effects as the newspaper headlines in "Aeolus," the sudden interpolation of iambic pentameter in "Scylla and Charybdis" (with its terminating "Woa!"), and for all those textual pyrotechnics – which become increasingly pronounced as *Ulysses* progresses – that can be neither attributed to nor allied with any known narrator or character. Another way to understand this arranging presence is to think of it, in Richard Pearce's words, as a "body-text," a subversive voice generated not from a narrator or character but "from the physical text itself,

meet a man who relishes organs of all sorts, and this is the first thing Joyce tells us about him. A little later we find him contemplating his wife's "ample bed-warmed flesh" with similar relish (4.238-39). As a poet, at any rate, Bloom is far too "kinetic" to satisfy the terms of Stephen's Thomist aesthetic theory (17.410), and Molly confirms her husband's inordinate knowledge of "the body and the inside," the sort of knowledge Joyce elsewhere satirizes Dubliners as lacking utterly – most pathetically in Stephen Hero's mother's attempt to describe "that hole we all have . . . here" (*U*, 18.180; *Stephen Hero*, 163; ellipsis in original).

³⁸ Bell, *Jocoserious Joyce*, 21.

the printed page.” It is a voice of rebellion: “Countering the authorial voice is the voice of the body-text, functioning like voice in speech as it modifies, contradicts, or adds meaning that goes beyond the meaning of the words. . . . The voice of the body-text makes itself felt rather than heard by intruding the materiality, or physicality, of the print.”³⁹

Pearce’s concept reflects an understanding of the text itself as a body that moves independently of the novel’s semantic significations. Worth emphasizing for our purposes, moreover, is that it is specifically a blasphemous voice and a blasphemous body. Its affinity for an aesthetics of sacrilege is inherent in its own somato-textual form, a form that finds its perfect expression in the novel’s final chapter. Its corporeality, finally, is wholly appropriate given that this is the blasphemous voice that picks up where Buck leaves off, asserting its presence more and more as Mulligan’s presence recedes farther and farther from view. *Ulysses’* fifteenth episode, the first following Mulligan’s final departure from the novel (even when he appears in “Circe” it will be in metamorphosed form as Father Malachi O’Flynn), is thus likewise the blasphemous Arranger’s time to shine. It is this presence, not Mulligan or any other character, that will replace Christ’s face with that of “Sweny, the druggist” in a parodic invocation of the end of Flaubert’s *The Temptation of St. Anthony*, and who will give us “Shitbroleeth” in place of the “Shibboleth” of Judges 12:6 (15.340, .770). It is also this presence that will instigate the phantasmagoric effects of *Ulysses’* most bizarre and most blasphemous chapter.

At Circe’s Altar

Commentators have tended to share Richard Ellmann’s interpretation of the Blooms’ coupling and of their sharing of the seedcake on Howth Hill – that Edenic ur-moment so

³⁹ Hayman, “*Ulysses*”: *The Mechanics of Meaning*, 122; Pearce, *The Politics of Narration*, 50, 60. For more on Joyce’s somatic textuality, see Laura Doyle, “Races and Chains”; Katherine Mullin, “Joyce’s Bodies”; and Derek Attridge, *Peculiar Language*, 168-70.

centrally important to *Ulysses*' emotional content—as essentially “a eucharistic occasion” (*JJ*, 379). In which case, it is remarkable that this scene is attended by a third party, a goat: emblematic, in Christian symbolism, of lust and sin and the Devil, the beast to be damned when the sheep are saved. This is the symbolism at work in Stephen's strange vision in *A Portrait of filthy, concupiscent goat-men, figures for his own lust and guilt* (137-38). Yet here at the moment of Poldy and Molly's first communion we find a goat “walking surefooted, dropping currants” (8.911-12). The obviously positive content of the scene perhaps implies a reevaluation of the goat figure and thus of sexuality, of lust and that which issues from it. Yet this goat's presence inevitably also lends something of a satanic element to the eucharistic, paradisaical tableau—subtly presaging the Black-Mass antics of “*Circe*,” whose riotous pages culminate the Howth Hill scene's interrelated themes of Communion, sexuality, and the demonic.⁴⁰

One finds in “*Circe*” a microcosm of *Ulysses*' profanely eucharistic structure. The Mass here begins with Private Compton's announcing the entrance to Bella Cohen's brothel of “the parson,” our own Stephen Dedalus, who duly begins to chant the “*introit*” as Mulligan did at the novel's opening (15.74). He then starts in on the *Vidi aquam*, blasphemously metaphorizing a prostitute's open arms as the healing, purifying waters of the faith (15.77-84). (His companion Lynch likewise chants from the Mass as he embraces one of the prostitutes on a couch [15.3640].) The episode's Benediction comes later, presided over, as in “*Nausicaa*,” by Canon O'Hanlon. Communion itself will be celebrated in sacrilegious form at the height of “*Circe*”; led by a funhouse version of Malachi Mulligan, this Black Mass mirrors the whole chapter's placement and function in *Ulysses* as both narrative climax and metanarrative distortion.

⁴⁰ In an abandoned note for *A Portrait of the Artist*, Joyce writes that Stephen wanted to believe that his friend Doherty's (i.e., Gogarty's, or Mulligan's) “coarseness of speech was not a blasphemy of the spirit but a coward's mask, but in the end the troop of swinish images broke down his reserve and went trampling through his memory, followed by his laughter . . .” (*The Workshop of Daedalus*, 107). If this unused note recalls the herd of swine into which Jesus cast unclean spirits (Mark 5:8-13), it also suggests a symbolic association between *Circe* and blasphemy that Joyce magnifies and explodes in *Ulysses*' fifteenth episode.

Informing Stephen's blasphemous, mock-pastorly discourse throughout this episode are his memories of certain "heaven and hell show[s]" witnessed in Paris, with their pornographic depictions of debauched nuns, angels, and "holy apostles big damn ruffians" (15.3889-902). The more salient precedent for Stephen's reductive blaspheming in "Circe," however, is his very own usurper; Mulligan is the obvious model for Stephen as the latter vacillates between perversions of the liturgy and "Pornosophical philotheology," playing mischievously on the exalted "horns" of Psalms 75:10 and earning the proprietress's censure for such willful irreverence: "None of that here. Come to the wrong shop" (15.109, 3864-71).⁴¹ Stephen thus continues to pattern his blasphemies after Mulligan's as he did in the previous episode, drink having given him the requisite courage: "Greater love than this, he said, no man hath that a man lay down his wife for his friend. Go thou and do likewise. Thus, or words to that effect, saith Zarathustra, sometime regius professor of French letters . . ." (14.360-63). This is pure Mulligan – the biblical parody (John 15:13), the Zarathustra, the French letters (condoms) – and it is he who presides, in the guise of Father Malachi O'Flynn, over the tumultuously sacrilegious climax of "Circe" and of *Ulysses* as a whole.

Joyce here portrays a Black Mass of earth-sized proportions, attended by iconic imagery of the Crucifixion, Last Judgment, and Resurrection of the dead:

Brimstone fires spring up. . . . Pandemonium. . . . The midnight sun is darkened. The earth trembles. The dead of Dublin from Prospect and Mount Jerome in white sheepskin overcoats and black goatfell cloaks arise and appear to many. A chasm opens with a noiseless yawn. . . . On an eminence, the centre of the earth, rises the fieldaltar of Saint Barbara.⁴² Black candles rise from its gospel and

⁴¹ When we recall Stephen's earlier definition of God as a "shout in the street," we can see that when Stephen says, in "Circe," "Damn that fellow's noise in the street," he is blaspheming in the strictest sense according to the Law as given in the Hebrew Bible, which requires that the offender has both invoked God's name in vain *and* insulted or defiled Him, as in "Damn God" – which is essentially what Stephen says here (*U*, 2.386, 15.2119-20). Compare 15.3998: "Hark! Our friend noise in the street."

⁴² St. Barbara, as Don Gifford notes, is "the only female saint to bear the attribute of the sacramental cup and wafer"; it is also notable, given Joyce's fear of lightning and his association of it with God, that St. Barbara's "intercession was invoked as protection against lightning, explosives, and fire" ("*Ulysses*" *Annotated*, 527).

epistle horns. . . . On the altarstone Mrs Mina Purefoy, goddess of unreason, lies, naked, fettered, a chalice resting on her swollen belly. Father Malachi O'Flynn in a lace petticoat and reversed chasuble, his two left feet back to the front, celebrates camp mass. (15.4661-95)

This is traditional Black Mass staging, with the naked woman's body taking the place of altar, but the rite is here elevated to biblical heights; "Ithaca" will call this episode "Armageddon" (17.2056). Similarly, the principle of irreverent inversion is taken to dramatic lengths: Father O'Flynn stands on backward feet and wears a reversed chasuble, while his attendant, the Reverend Mr. Haines Love, wears his head and collar backward. Soon the Voice of All the Damned – of those Dubliners who have emerged from their graves wearing "black goatfell" instead of "sheepskin overcoats" – responds to the ceremony with a reversal of Revelation 19:6: "Htengier Tnetopinmo Dog Drol eht rof, Aiulella!" (15.4707-08).

The placement of the chalice on the woman's belly compels us to read Mulligan's "omphalos" – both as creative concept and as nickname for the tower from which he operates, and indeed as the resonant center of his body, so often exposed to view – as emblematic of his blasphemous and sacrilegious characterizations in the novel. Over the course of *Ulysses*, the *omphalos* has accrued meanings both reproductive and biblical, meanings which undergo a diabolic transvaluation in this Black Mass: Mulligan has proposed to establish on Lambay Island "a national fertilising farm to be named *Omphalos*," where he will graciously facilitate "the fecundation of any female"; for his part Stephen has imagined the human *omphalos* as an umbilical telephone capable of dialing all the way back to Adam and Eve in "Edenville" (14.684-87, 3.38-40). Now, although Mulligan has morphed into Father O'Flynn, he essentially repeats his priestly duties from atop "the *omphalos*" of Martello Tower on *Ulysses*' opening page (1.544). Here, however, his *Introit* takes on a more explicitly devilish character ("Introibo ad altare

diaboli"), and in place of his shaving bowl and cream he draws from a chalice a "blood-dripping host," declaring "*Corpus meum*" (15.4699-703).

This Mass inverts and distorts the already-mock Communion that opened the novel, while also lampooning and, in a reverse, blasphemous fashion, celebrating *Ulysses*' eucharistic structure and thematics. At this instant, and to a subtler extent throughout the episode, Joyce's arranging body-text performs an auto-sacrilegious critique. Given Joyce's own conception of *Ulysses* as a eucharistic novel, in other words, this scene represents an extraordinary moment of reflexive profanation. It is as if, at the climax of a Mass, the presiding priest were diabolically to begin a blasphemous inversion of the ceremony. "Circe" thus has the effect, not only of simultaneously profaning and tacitly reinforcing the traditions of the Church (as any blasphemy worth the name must do), but also of profaning and reinforcing Joyce's own eucharistic project, satirizing it while also throwing that project into relief. By profaning his own text, as it were, Joyce announces *Ulysses* as worthy of the act, thus affirming the sanctity of his art by incorporating its own blasphemous inversion and would-be negation.

During this High Black Mass, Father O'Flynn's attendant praises "the devil which hath made glad my young days," echoing Stephen's earlier praise of the prostitute Georgina Johnson, "*ad deam qui laetificat iuventutem meam*": "the goddess who has gladdened the days of my youth" (15.4701, .122-23). Recalling Mulligan's invocation of a "genuine christine," Stephen effectively has a woman take God's place in the language of the Mass. And although at the height of "Circe" God's altar will be replaced by Mina Purefoy, it is this other exchange, that of God's *body* for that of a woman, that more centrally dominates the novel from first page to last.

Ecce Molly

I have argued for Mina Loy's affinity with Joyce in integrating religion, body, and text — what she commemorates as “The Spirit . . . impaled upon the phallus” — and we shall see in Chapter Two that Loy's poetry performs a similar integration while repudiating the implicitly phallocratic subtext, disentangling Spirit from phallus (*Lost*, 88). Yet Joyce himself knows a thing or two about unmanning the Spirit, and he does so in much the same ways Loy does, namely through radically blasphemous depictions of female embodiment. Loy habitually uses figurations and depictions of female embodiment to evoke women's subjectivity, in diametric opposition to masculinist strategies of stressing that embodiment to *objectify* women. A similar process occurs in *Ulysses'* Penelope episode, where the female body emerges, in a way Loy would surely appreciate, as an inherently sexual, life-sustaining, and polyamorous body. More, it emerges as the telos of *Ulysses'* transubstantiative project. The result is a blasphemous transgendering of Christian ritual, one of the more significant ways “Penelope” rejects “the fallaciously inferred debility of the female” (17.2215-16). It is not only that Joyce creates, in *Ulysses*, a eucharistic, incarnational text in which words, the Word, and the flesh all meet. It is that where they meet, ultimately, is in the discursive body and embodied discourse of a woman, a body and words that effectively displace the male body and masculinist Word of Catholic ritual and dogma.

Buck Mulligan's initial substitution of christine for Christ has prefigured the final ascension of this body and voice. As Molly's soliloquy makes emphatically clear, the end of Joyce's eucharistic project is not the body of Christ but of a genuine Christine, whose incarnation finally arrives in the flesh and word of Marion Bloom.⁴³ “[A]nd he came out,” says

⁴³ Whether Joyce intended “christine” or “Christine” is a matter of debate. The word went un-capitalized in the *Little Review* (Joyce, “*Ulysses*: Episode 1,” 3) but was capitalized in *Ulysses'* first and subsequent editions, including the 1961 Random House edition. Hans Walter Gabler's edition of the novel is the first to de-capitalize it, based upon

Molly of her pedantic husband, “with some jawbreakers about the incarnation he never can explain a thing simply the way a body can understand” (18.566-67). Bloom’s jawbreakers in “Calypso” had nothing to do with the Incarnation, of course – unless we interpret that event as a Christian theological version of divine “metempsychosis” – but in this final episode, by confusing her husband’s words, Molly unwittingly gets at the heart of *Ulysses’* scriptural typology, which is indeed metempsychotic but is also something more. Bloom may have been Odysseus in a past literary life, that is, but insofar as he is this novel’s Christ he is more than a reincarnation; he is a re-Incarnation. As though the voice and body of a man is ultimately insufficient, however – even so “womanly” a man as Leopold Bloom – Joyce reserves for *Ulysses’* final chapter its irreverently eucharistic culmination and the quintessential incarnation of the novel’s core values. For here sacred and worldly converge, word and flesh conflate, and they do so not, as in the gospels, in the teachings and sacrificial body of a divine man, but in the voice and body of a woman.

“Penelope” is a text, above all, of desire: of desires fulfilled and frustrated, of desires for the future and desires for the here-and-now. Same-sex desire, too, and self-love. “[W]hat else were we given all those desires for I’d like to know,” Molly wonders (18.1397-98). These desires occasionally take on religious trappings, as when she recalls the frisson of her petticoat “slip[ping] down” during the Elevation at Mass – with the suggestion that she was stimulated by the elevated body of Christ – and when she imagines a dalliance with a man of the cloth: “I’d like to be embraced by one in his vestments and the smell of incense off him like the pope” (18.862, 118-20). Elsewhere, however, she raises vaguely feminist objections to the Church’s “senseless” teachings: “that old Bishop that spoke off the altar his long preach about womans

what appears to be a lower-case *c* in Joyce’s manuscript – but it deserves mention that the errata-hunting Joyce took no issue with its capitalization in the published novel.

higher functions about girls now riding the bicycle and wearing peak caps and the new woman bloomers God send him sense and me more money" (18.837-40). Her irreverence also takes more secular but inevitably related forms. She does not hesitate, for instance, to claim her superiority over men, or to reflect on the unfairness of patriarchy: "man man tyrant as ever. . . . and they always want to see a stain on the bed to know you're a virgin for them all that's troubling them they're such fools. . . . it'd be much better for the world to be governed by the women in it . . . I knew more about men and life when I was 15 than they'll all know at 50" (18.1245-46, .1125-27, .1435-36, .886-87). Nor does she remain silent on her indignation at having to exchange her professional life for the traditional division of labor ("I could have been a prima donna only I married him," 18. 896). Nor, for that matter, is she willing to abide by such traditional norms for much longer: "were to be always chained up they're not going to be chaining me up no damn fear once I start I tell you" (18.1390-92).

In spite of Molly's irreverence, however – or, perhaps, because of it – her bed is a sacred place, to be approached "reverently, the bed of conception and of birth, of consummation of marriage and of breach of marriage, of sleep and of death" (17.2119-21). Moreover, this sacred place is cast in the lineaments of Christian mystery, the blood and water Molly releases into her chamber pot recalling the blood and water that pour forth from Christ's wound on the cross. As flesh and word, as all-body and logorrhea, as an embodiment of sexuality and of textuality, Molly incarnates *Ulysses'* "sacreligious" gospel.⁴⁴ "Penelope" replaces the body and theology of Christ with a female body and a female voice – and given Joyce's evolving but consistently eucharistic conceptions of art and literature, from *A Portrait* to *Finnegans Wake*, such substitution is far from negligible.

⁴⁴ Citing a well-known letter from Joyce to Frank Budgen, Jane Goldman writes that the Penelope episode finds Joyce "blasphemously inscribing the Christian gesture of the sign of the cross" onto Molly's body (*Modernism, 1910-1945*, 201). (Joyce had described Molly's "four cardinal points" to his friend as comprising her "breasts, arse, womb and cunt" [*Selected Letters*, 285].)

Among other things, then, a consideration of *Ulysses*' blasphemous modernism necessarily complicates critical views of "Penelope" as an instance of blatant misogyny or, at best, of a male author's perversely androcentric projection. As Bonnie Kime Scott has observed, this episode occasions "greater critical anxiety than all the rest" of Joyce's fictions.⁴⁵ That statement was published in 1984, and the critical anxieties have only continued to accrete. My own opinion in the matter chimes, more or less, with Vicki Mahaffey's recuperative viewpoint:

Which is the more misogynist stance, the one that celebrates the full experience of female flesh, or the one that censors even the mention of intimate articles of female clothing? . . . And when Molly starts to speak, the reader learns that she is far more than the "2 lumps of lard" to which she fears Bloom has reduced her (18.1404). . . . Unlike so many women who think of themselves even in the third person, she speaks for herself: powerfully, lyrically, sometimes crudely, and without inhibition.

Mahaffey reminds us of Joyce's uniqueness among prevailing novelistic standards of the time while also rightly extolling Molly Bloom's continued relevance for feminist study. In addition, as Laura Doyle argues, with "Penelope" Joyce gives voice not only to a woman but to a decidedly "other" woman—for Molly is "polyracial" as well as "'impure' . . . both sexually and racially. Yet Joyce gives this other woman a voice. In fact he gives her the last word."⁴⁶ The last Word, I would add, at least in this novel. For in the beginning was the Word, in this case a blasphemously feminized Word—"the genuine christine"—that at last has found its genuine Incarnation in a body and voice that are equal parts sacrilegious and sacred. Within the context of *Ulysses*, Molly Bloom represents the full flowering of that seedling whom Buck Mulligan invoked from atop Martello Tower—a flower that blooms and unfurls still further as it metamorphoses into Anna Livia Plurabelle, "haloed be her eve, her singtime sung, her rill be run, unhemmed as it is uneven!" (FW, 104.2-3).

⁴⁵ Scott, *Joyce and Feminism*, 157. For more on the fraught questions of Joyce, feminism, and "Penelope," see especially Richard Pearce, ed., *Molly Blooms*; Henke and Unkeless, eds., *Women in Joyce*; Wawrzycka and Corcoran, eds., *Gender in Joyce*; and Christine Van Boheemen, "Molly's Heavenly Body," 268.

⁴⁶ Mahaffey, "Ulysses and the End of Gender," 165; Doyle, "Races and Chains," 182.

Blasphemy, "Nature," and Difference

Anna Livia is of course "the Mosthighest" of *Finnegans Wake*, a novel that also makes room at the inn for highly profane versions of the male eucharistic body, notably Humphrey Chimpden Earwicker and Shem the Penman (104.4).⁴⁷ Together with the Blooms, these insistently sexualized and scatologized Hosts embody wholly unorthodox and even, by the standards of their time and place, *unnatural* ways of thinking and desiring. Molly, for one, shares the general opinion that there is something unnatural about her husband. He would "kiss anything unnatural," she supposes; "he wanted to milk me into the tea well hes beyond everything. . . . I suppose there isnt in all creation another man with the habits he has . . . but of course hes not natural like the rest of the world" (18.1402-03, .267-78, .1197-98). Joyce himself, who after all shared many of Bloom's predilections, would surely appreciate our questioning Molly's conception here of what is "natural." In fact, it is one of *Ulysses'* great successes to put pressure on ideological assumptions about what is natural and what is not—assumptions that dictate one's criteria for what constitutes a man, or a woman, or a Jew or a Christian, an alien or kin, sacred or profane. Combining sacramental Communion with the heterodox, profane communions these bodies alternately imagine and enact, Joyce's "sacreligious" art in fact drives at the very heart of conventional assumptions about the natural and unnatural, exposing and dismantling the normative ideologies of gender and sexuality.

Joyce's novels are replete with emphatic disavowals of the heteronormative. One aspect of such disavowal is their toleration and even celebration of aberrant sexualities, of the range of sexual experience that falls outside "complete carnal intercourse, with ejaculation of semen

⁴⁷ HCE's initials invoke the liturgical *Hoc corpus est*; the celebrants at his wake even "partake of his very body, as of a eucharist" (William York Tindall, *A Reader's Guide*, 6; Campbell and Robinson, *A Skeleton Key*, 5).

within the *natural* female organ" (*U*, 17.2278-79.)⁴⁸ We are not encouraged, for example, to judge Bloom negatively for what appears to be the habitually un-reproductive nature of his intercourse with Molly (18.76, 18.1538). We are in fact encouraged to feel, as Bloom does, "with wonder women's woe"; to sympathize with the plight of women, such as Mina Purefoy, who are made to endure with painful regularity the burdens of reproduction (14.119). *Ulysses* even makes a strong case for both the reasonableness and the pleasures (see "Nausicaa") of non-reproductive sexuality. (Derek Attridge puts it mildly when he observes that Blazes Boylan's "punctual phallic insemination of Molly's body is less valorized by the novel than Leopold's disseminative play on its surfaces."⁴⁹) Joyce in fact makes same-sex desire a pointed dimension of such central characters as Stephen Dedalus, Leopold and Marion Bloom, and *Finnegans Wake's* HCE, "that homogenius man" of "the old Middlesex party" (34.14, 523.27-28). Following Joseph Valente, then, I strongly question the critical tendency "to assume that contemporary sexual schemes and taxonomies, and the homophobic energies they galvanized, constitute a decisive structural impetus of [*Ulysses*], rather than, as with virtually every other ethico-political attitude that Joyce entertained, a focus of literary interrogation, negotiation, and reformulation."⁵⁰

Among *Ulysses's* "queerities" are the homoerotic undertones at work in Stephen and Mulligan's relationship, not least in their mutual appreciations of Whitman and Wilde, and of

⁴⁸ Emphasis added. Of course, Joyce's adoption of prophylaxis as "sin" in "Oxen of the Sun," along with that episode's elaborate development of the gestation-birth metaphor for literary production, might be seen as a denigration of non-reproductive intercourse – but it seems more or less obvious that Joyce is as little invested in the form his "sin" takes for this episode as Homer was invested in the sanctity of Apollo's cattle. As is often the case with *Ulysses's* Homeric parallels, the choice seems equal parts playful, arbitrary, and contingent – not a statement of absolute values. As Richard Brown observes, there is plenty of evidence not to read the Oxen episode's ostensible thematic and moral economy (where contraception and non-reproductive sex are taken as "crimes") as authorized: "On the contrary, Joyce's purpose seems to be to give us a strong taste of militantly and rather oppressively 'reproductive' doctrines and show characters like Bloom and Mina Purefoy on the receiving end of such views" (*James Joyce and Sexuality*, 78).

⁴⁹ Attridge, *Joyce Effects*, 115.

⁵⁰ Valente, "*Ulysses* and Queer Theory," 92.

Shakespeare's own "Love that dare not speak its name" – intertexts foregrounded from the opening chapter (14.528, 9.659). Stephen likewise recalls his unspeakable "love" for his quondam companion, Cranly (3.451). Molly Bloom, for her part, is no stranger to Sapphic sexuality; her husband recognizes the erotic nature of her relations with Josie Powell, and Molly herself testifies to such erotic encounters and fantasies (13.814; 18.641-73, .1146-47). Then, of course, there is Poldy himself, full name Leopold Paula Bloom (17.1855). "One of those mixed middlings," Bloom exhibits many conventionally feminine characteristics.⁵¹ Indeed, perceptions about his masculinity and sexuality alienate him from other Dubliners in the same way that his "race" and perceived religious identification do. "Queer kind of chap," this Bloom, "so foreign from the others" (15.3231, 13.1210); "a perverted jew," "Greekier than the Greeks," "too beastly awfully weird for words" (12.1635, 9.614-15, 15.832-33). His doctors in the Circe chapter confirm him to be "bisexually abnormal," "a finished example of the new womanly man" (15.1775-99). (The more disinterested narrator of "Ithaca" confirms Bloom has a "firm full masculine feminine passive active hand" [17.289-90].) That Bloom functions in *Ulysses* as simultaneously hero and "new womanly man" implicitly devalues masculinity and also parodies conventional ideologies of race, gender, and sexuality. Through this womanly Jewish hero, Joyce makes an appeal for the virtues of the sexually ambiguous as well as of the Jewish people, who are said, by the likes of Otto Weininger, to unite traits of the feminine and the masculine in a racialized androgyny.

Moreover, Bloom's heroization has everything to do, as we have seen, with *Ulysses'* transgressive typologies – with Bloom's ironic yet forceful (and occasionally literal) elevations

⁵¹ For one thing, he seems to suffer from monthly menstruation (*U*, 12.1658-59, 13.824, 15.210). For another, he sits to pee ("really it's better the position"), a habit Molly confirms in "Penelope" (15.3019-20, 18.1197). When they met, Molly thinks, Bloom was a bit "too beautiful for a man" – but "that was why I liked him because I saw he understood or felt what a woman is" (18.210, .1578-79). As Maud Ellmann writes, "Bloom can only write his name in womantalk, the language of flowers"; he "supplants the phallus with the omphalos" ("To Sing or to Sign," 67).

as framed in the discourses of Jewish and Christian scriptures. In keeping with *Ulysses'* inveterate polysemy, he is also a multiply typological figure, variously evoking Abraham, Moses, Isaac, Elijah, Christ, and Wandering Jew. It is, however, the Christ association that stands out as the most significant and developed of these, and it is here that Joyce most powerfully stakes a claim for the virtues of the non-normative.⁵² Like Jesus, moreover – the “most female of men,” in Luce Irigaray’s formulation – Bloom is a womanly man, eschewer of violence, denouncer of hatred, Jewish-born: “*Ex quibus . . . Christus* or Bloom his name is” (“From that race [i.e., the Israelites] is Christ, or Bloom his name is”).⁵³ Bloom is an alternately ironic and earnest messiah of goodwill, of peace, of love (“the opposite of hatred”), and, at bottom, of difference – racial, sexual, religious, and otherwise. Like Jesus, he is “a man misunderstood,” as readily “made a scapegoat of” in Catholic Dublin as Christ was in Roman Judaea (15.775-76). And his “blasphemy” – a crime of which he is explicitly accused in both “Cyclops” and “Circe” – lies in his difference: in his presumed status, that is, as eccentrically “mixed middlings,” and as racially and religiously Other.

Proponent of universal love and equality for all, herald of a new day and a New Bloomusalem, Bloom is a Jesus for the twentieth century. “I resent violence and intolerance in any shape or form,” he proclaims. “It’s a patent absurdity on the face of it to hate people because they live round the corner and speak another vernacular, in the next house so to speak” (16.1099-1103). Here is a messiah for the womanly men and the manly women, for the Jews and for the Gentiles, for the adulterers and the cuckolds. He literally offers the other cheek at one

⁵² “Christ was a Jew like me,” Bloom announces, arriving at only the tip of an iceberg of affinities (*U*, 12.1808-09). Stephen perceives Bloom’s “concealed identit[y]” to be the “traditional figure of hypostasis,” while Mulligan recognizes the Christ in Bloom by the latter’s “pale Galilean eyes” (17.782-83, 9.615). Bloom identifies explicitly with Christ by way of a painting in “Lotus Eaters”; in “Cyclops,” he delivers a paraphrastic Sermon on the Mount; his enigmatic “I AM A” in the Nausicaa episode suggests “I am Alpha,” as in Alpha and Omega; and he is accompanied throughout *Ulysses* by a Christic iconography of fish and panther (5.289-99, 12.1237-38, 13.1258-64). For more on *Ulysses'* Christ-typologies, see Stephen Sicari, *Joyce's Modernist Allegory*, 165-92.

⁵³ Irigaray, *Speculum of the Other Woman*, 199; *U*, 16.1091-93. Cf. Romans 9:5.

point (15.1109), bringing out, in a fictional version of turn-of-the-century Dublin, the core Christian message of tolerance – without adhering, it must be added, to the bloody economics of martyrdom and salvation, being “reluctant to shed human blood even when the ends justified the means” (17.293-94).⁵⁴ In “Circe” Bloom becomes apotheosized as a Christlike Messiah named “Emmanuel,” working miracles and inaugurating “year 1 of the Paradisiacal Era” (15.1841-69, .1632). Asked what sort of Messiah he is, he answers, “(*darkly*) You have said it,” in echo of Jesus’ response to Pilate (15.1834; Luke 23:3). His genealogy likewise parodies Christ’s in the opening verses of Matthew, and the writing on the wall – “Bloom is a cod” – continues the identification of Bloom with the fish symbolism that attends Christ (15.1854-71). So it is that “[w]omen press forward to touch the hem of Bloom’s robe” (15.1585; cf. Matt. 9:20-22). Of course, Bloom is also denounced in “Circe” as a “false Messiah,” indeed an Antichrist, but these things go with the territory (15.1907). For his pretensions to both civic and spiritual sovereignty, Dublin’s citizens act out the biblical punishment for blasphemy, hurling “soft pantomime stones” at him (15.1902). In doing so they mime, more specifically, the stoning of Christ in the gospels by those who charge him with “blasphemy . . . because that thou, being a man, makest thyself God” (John 10:30-36).⁵⁵

Again Joyce depicts an equation in Dubliners’ minds of blasphemy and otherness, as well as of blasphemy and sexuality. Among the reasons for Bloom’s punishments at the hands of his fellow citizens in “Circe,” after all, is his insistence on the suitability of erotic embodiment as a component of the sacred: “If there were only ethereal where would you all be, postulants

⁵⁴ When a printed advertisement reminds him that “All are washed in the blood of the lamb,” Bloom correctly identifies with his typological forerunner but then rejects the violent implications, signaled by a chain of associations that includes martyrdom and war: encountering the first four letters of the phrase “blood of the lamb,” he thinks, “Bloo . . . Me? No” (*U*, 8.8-12).

⁵⁵ But also like Jesus, after his figurative “crucifixion” at the hands of the people, he is resurrected. Wearing “a seamless garment marked I.H.S.” (a traditional cryptogram for Christ), Bloom “stands upright amid phoenix flames,” saying, “Weep not for me, O daughters of Erin” (*U*, 15.1935-36; cf. John 19:23, Luke 23:28). Said daughters respond with their Litany of Bloom (15.1941-49).

and novices?" (15.3449-50). When a nun proceeds to attack his "loins" for the apparently profanatory implications of his question ("Sacrilege! To attempt my virtue! . . . Sully my innocence! You are not fit to touch the garment of a pure woman"), a "large moist stain appears on her robe," and Bloom goads her on suggestively: "What do you lack with your barbed wire? Crucifix not thick enough?" (15.3449-65). This last and highly irreverent gibe plainly implies masturbation on the nun's part while also intimating that to be the bride of Christ is not nearly enough, that the bridegroom is not "thick enough" to satisfy. Underlying this prurient insinuation of Christ as insufficient phallus, moreover, is Bloom's more general critique of the notion that the "ethereal" can ever suffice, on its own, to account for the sacred dimension of human experience. Indeed, throughout "Circe" Joyce summons blasphemy and sacrilege as formal equivalents to the episode's outrageous and equally subversive evocations of gender and sexuality. (One wonders what contemporary readers must have made of Bella/Bello, the brothel's sex-shifting madam, plunging an arm "elbowdeep in Bloom's vulva" [15.3089].)

It is typical of *Ulysses'* sacrilegious aesthetics, and of its use of blasphemy to critique insular, repressive ideological assumptions, that the Circe episode uses a mock-eucharistic frame—beginning and ending with iterations of a Black Mass—to contain, at its center, a whirligig of gender reversals, sudden erotic metamorphoses, fetishism, masochism, sadism, coprophilia, same-sexuality, exhibitionism, voyeurism, cross-dressing, adultery, fisting, bigamy, buggery, onanism, and "a form of clandestine marriage with at least one woman in the shadow of the Black church" (15.3028-29). More especially, Joyce suggestively aligns the episode's thoroughgoing inversions and perversions of sacred ritual with sexual "inversion" and other ostensible perversions of normative sexuality—a strategy Djuna Barnes will also take up. "Circe" thus highlights a congruity between religious law and the effectively sacral character of

modern sexual norms, the transgression of which, for the Catholic Dublin of 1904, might well be seen as a doubly sacrilegious trespass both of Catholic orthodoxy and of nature.

Vladimir Nabokov, in his justly celebrated lectures on *Ulysses*, nonetheless seems to have missed this critique of nature, of assumptions about the natural and unnatural, and the way Joyce expresses that critique in the person of Leopold Bloom. In Nabokov's judgment, Bloom is, "if not on the verge of insanity, at least a good clinical example of extreme sexual preoccupation and perversity," indulging as he does "in acts and dreams that are definitely *subnormal* in the zoological, evolutionary sense."⁵⁶ This otherwise keen reader of *Ulysses* stopped short of questioning those norms that the novel begs us to reevaluate, along with the ideological assumptions that create them; it would appear that he took at face value Molly's sense of Bloom as "not natural like the rest of the world" (18.1197-98). To be sure, Bloom's tastes tend toward the masochistic, voyeuristic, and "cloacal," and we do have evidence aplenty of potentially compromising behaviors. He carries on love affairs by post; masturbates in public; inspects a statue for evidence of an anus; facilitates, passively, his wife's tryst with Blazes Boylan; toys with the possibility of pimping Molly to Stephen Dedalus; keeps pornographic pictures in his desk (including one depicting a nun and a priest in flagrante); fetishizes, like his creator, women's underwear and excrement; and, in his last act as hero of *Ulysses*, kisses his wife triumphantly on the "plump mellow yellow smellow melons of her rump," as well as "in their mellow yellow furrow, with obscure prolonged provocative melonsmellonous osculation" (17.2241-43). Nabokov regarded all such "very special pathological stuff" as "artificial and unnecessary," dismissing it as evidence of Joyce's "special preoccupation" and thus eliding the very possibility of a rational motivation behind Bloom's ostensible pathology (287).

⁵⁶ Nabokov, *Lectures on Literature*, 287; emphasis added.

In fact, such motivation is much in evidence throughout the novel. When *Ulysses* goes to the lengths it does in depicting Bloom's supposed subnormality, it effectively leaves us, as literature tends to, with an altered understanding of the assumptions that corral our thinking and our living. One of the jobs of "Circe" in particular is, by means of its abstracted and exaggerated relation to the novel that contains it, to extend *Ulysses'* critiques of normativity beyond all "normal" bounds, and for that matter to push its critique of the natural beyond the narrative constraints of naturalism. Further, the episode's predominant equation of these hyperbolic displays of sexual inversion and perversion with blasphemous language and sacrilegious imagery implies an equation of Church orthodoxy on matters of the flesh with secular ideologies of sexual normalcy – and thus proposes blasphemy and the sexually non-normative as allied strategies of resistance.

Ulysses on the whole resists and unsettles "natural" categories, not least by featuring a protagonist whose very identity is, by the usual measures, extraordinarily indeterminate. Bloom is as liminal a character in his religious identifications as in his sexual ones: a Jew who isn't Jewish, who has moreover been baptized as both a Protestant and a Catholic but appears to know as much about Christian ritual and traditions as he does about Judaism. Which may be the reason he can detect elements of the gospels that elude the understanding of more confirmed believers; among the myriad "mixedup things" Bloom knows, according to Molly, is that Jesus was "the first socialist" – a recognition of Jesus' political radicality that Bloom presumably shares with at most a small minority of his Irish compatriots (18.178). *Ulysses* mocks those compatriots, especially the Irish nationalists among them, right alongside their imperial subjugators – and alongside the Roman Catholic Church in whom most of those nationalists profess their faith. Joyce finds no shortage of irony in that allegiance, since he views the Church

as itself a colonialist presence in Dublin. Britain, as Stephen remarks in *Ulysses*, is but one of Ireland's "two masters" (1.638).

Ricorso

As self-appointed scourge of those masters, Joyce embodied his opposition most extravagantly in the character of Shem the Penman, the cloacal transubstantiator of *Finnegans Wake*. Shem serves, moreover, not only as a figure for Joyce's blasphemies against church and state, but also as the apogee of Joyce's "sacreligious" aesthetics, the final and most extreme embodiment of his profanely transubstantiative art. Shem is the inheritor of the "I AM" of Yahweh, of Christ and of Bloom; thus his declaration, in the beginning, is "mishe mishe," or "I am I am" (3.9).⁵⁷ Equal parts God of the Creation and punning Christ,⁵⁸ "scourging / incontrite usurers of destiny" (as Mina Loy's Joyce does), Shem is also the graven image of Joyce as noisome, filthy apostate, "always blaspheming" and spewing "blasphematory spits" (*Lost*, 89; *FW*, 177.23, 183.24).

The source of those "spits," insofar as we conceive them to be the illicit, sacred-profane texts Shem writes, is the ink he makes of his own excrement. In a passage rendered in Latin, the language of the Church, Joyce describes the process by which Shem converts his excrement into "indelible ink," singing a psalm all the while (185.14-26). (The Latin, Joyce writes, is for the kindly protection of the Protestant, Latin-less reader, who may thus continue to "behold the brand of scarlet on the brow of her of Babylon and feel not the pink one in his own damned cheek" [185.11-13].) From this excremental ink, Shem proceeds to write "over every square inch

⁵⁷ Joyce explained in a letter to Harriet Shaw Weaver, "Mishe = I am (Irish) i.e. Christian" (*Selected Letters*, 315).

⁵⁸ One of Joyce's apologies for the *Wake* was that the "Holy Roman Catholic Apostolic Church was built on a pun. It ought to be good enough for me" (*JJ*, 546). (The pun in question concerns the identification of the Aramaic and Greek words for "Peter" and "Rock," which allows Jesus to be interpreted as founding his church upon his disciple Peter [Matt. 16:18].)

of the only foolscap available, his own body,” and what he produces, evidently, is *Finnegans Wake*: “till by its corrosive sublimation one continuous present tense integument slowly unfolded all marryvoising moodmoulded cyclewheeling history” (185.35-186.2). Like “Jesus Mundane,” the worldly Christ who narrates the first chapter of Djuna Barnes’s *Ryder* (1928), Shem presents an image of Creation as coterminous with bodily evacuation – in Barnes’s words “the loosening and the tightening that was among the bowels of Him who gave [humankind] birth and who gave them death in the selfsame dream. For thou knowest nothing of the mighty rains of Heaven that come down of Him and that return to Him.”⁵⁹ With Shem, Joyce makes plain the *Wake*’s eucharistic impetus in a way that partakes of, indeed revels in, the basest ingredients of material existence. Even as he works the wonders of his Creative art, he does so with “crap in his hand” while “[doing] a piss” (185.17-23).

Shem the “national apostate” is introduced as “*sacer*,” both sacred and accursed, one of those “blasphorus blesphorous” types invoked on the previous page (171.33, 167.13). His very existence is equivocal. A figure of the kinds of blasphemous doublings Joyce evokes elsewhere, he instantiates a profane ambiguity quite distinct from the singular authority of his rival, Shaun, whose “unchanging Word is sacred” (167.28). Shaun’s discourse is official, legal, licit. Shem’s is that of the subversive blasphemer, the illicit counterdiscourse that is both truer and unacceptable: *sacer* rather than sacred, and fluid rather than “unchanging.” In the Penman we witness both the degradation and culmination of Joyce’s urge to mingle and conflate word and flesh. Shem also reminds us of the extent to which Joyce’s evocations of sacred and profane are ever a two-way street; the author and his texts remain, like Shem, “of twosome twiminds

⁵⁹ *R*, 4. Later in *Ryder*, Barnes offers yet another dung-centric portraiture of Creation: “In the beginning was the jungle, and there you had turds of some account, beasts paying back the earth in coin new minted” (115). The metaphor of that last clause speaks aptly to the currency of bodily excretions in Barnes’s work, as well as their insistent entangling with religious economies.

forenenst" God and the Church, both for and against, affirmative and critical, equally indebted and disputative beyond all measure (188.14-15).

Gian Balsamo rightly finds that Shem is "the flesh-made-word that makes the Word perennially carnal," that he "has incarnated himself into the stercoraceous and desecrated species of Scripture."⁶⁰ I question, however, Balsamo's conclusion that Shem's is "a most secular liturgy enacting the end of Christian eschatology and the affirmation of base, scatological, perennial human reproduction" (116). For "secular" is the one thing this homo "sacer" is not, and Joyce's affirmation of the base and human here need not imply a denial or rejection of the eschatological, transubstantiative, and otherwise scriptural investments of this section or of the *Wake* as a whole. What Joyce has done is to put the scatology in eschatology, not to announce the end of eschatology or the death of God or any such thing. *Finnegans Wake's* indebtedness to Church and Bible is extensive, from its Mamalujo chorus (i.e., Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John) to the Old-Testament narratives of Creation, of Paradise and Fall, of Cain and Abel, of Jacob and Esau. The text begins where the Bible does, with "Eve and Adam," and its first four paragraphs mimic the first four verses of Genesis (3.1).⁶¹ The author of *Finnegans Wake* is still believer enough in the Christian theological implications of Original Sin and Redemption, of Fall and Resurrection, to make them the lynchpins of a book that endeavors to encompass all history and human experience: "Phall if you but will, rise you must" (4.15-16). Joyce interweaves these theological themes and structuring principles with those of other religious traditions, and with the philosophical bases of Vico, Bruno, and the rest – but none of these intertexts compares to

⁶⁰ Balsamo, *Joyce's Messianism*, 119, 115.

⁶¹ See Campbell and Robinson, *A Skeleton Key*, 23. There is also, as Richard Brown remarks, "the passage in Book III Chapter 4 where Earwicker and spouse are graphically depicted in four successive copulatory positions, blasphemously analogous to the four-fold narrative of the gospel writers of the New Testament" (*James Joyce and Sexuality*, 68).

the centrality of the Bible and of Catholic theology to this last of Joyce's novels, no less than in *A Portrait* and *Ulysses*.⁶²

With the advent of Shem, in any case, Joyce's textual selves have progressed from Stephen's morose ethereality to Bloom's sacred worldliness, and now to this final figure of the subaltern, the exiled, the subversive. Shem combines word and flesh at once more literally and more fantastically than any of Joyce's other experiments in transubstantiation. He is also Joyce's final figuration of Creator and messiah, yet it is hard to imagine a more degraded messiah than this; his depiction resonates little with the grand and gilded monuments of the Church, but one might well perceive echoes of the beaten, violated, and execrated body of Christ. Shem's body marks the terminus of Joyce's jocoserious yoking of contraries – of sacred and profane, affirmative and desecratory, solemn and comic, pious and “blasphematory.” Even as he embodies Catholic tropes, he blasphemes the Church for its historical persecutions and, specifically, for what it did to Parnell: “Saint Ignaceous Poisonivy, of the Fickle Crowd (hupon the sixth day of Hogsober, killim our king, layum low!)” (186.13-14).

This indictment of the Church for “killim our king” brings us full circle – as the *Wake* must ever do – back to that Christmas dinner in the first chapter of *A Portrait of the Artist*, when Stephen's father denounces the Church for having defiled his “dead king” and even accuses holy writ itself of blasphemy for lending sanction to the Church's acts:

– *Woe be to the man by whom the scandal cometh!* said Mrs Riordan. . . . That is the language of the Holy Ghost.
– And very bad language if you ask me, said Mr Dedalus coolly. (32)

It is worth recalling that this pivotal passage, this primal scene of dueling blasphemies that plays out before young Stephen's “terrorstricken face,” is initiated by its own “blasphematory

⁶² For a brief but brilliant exegesis of Joyce's uses of Christianity in this “extraordinarily blasphemous” novel, see William Franke, “Joyce and the Bible” (645). See also Beryl Schlossman, *Joyce's Catholic Comedy of Language*, 69-180; Robert Boyle, *James Joyce's Pauline Vision*; and Gian Balsamo, *Scriptural Poetics in Joyce's “Finnegans Wake.”*

spits," a pair of them (39). First, Mrs. Riordan informs the men that she "will defend my church when it is insulted and spit on by renegade catholics" (34). Mr. Casey responds by affirming his own Catholicism, then relates the tale of a prior spit: the gob of tobacco juice he projected into the face of a Parnell-denouncing woman in the street for using, Casey says, the sort of language that he refuses to "sully this Christmas board . . . by repeating" (36).

His spit has been "blasphematory" in part because its provocation was a woman's "bad language," her profanation of Casey's sacred, fallen hero – but also because, in the eyes of Stephen's pious aunt, Casey himself must be held to account for assaulting a woman who was only espousing her Church's unequivocal position in the matter. From the perspective of the devout Catholic, only one word applies to a man who would do such a thing, and Mrs. Riordan screams it at Casey now: "Blasphemer!" (39). To be spat upon by a blasphemer is to be defiled in a uniquely verbal and physical way, and Mrs. Riordan here imagines both Casey's victim and her own Church as having been so desecrated ("spit on by renegade catholics"). Mr. Casey's spittle, like Shem's, is a material substance that blurs the bounds between verbal blasphemy and physical sacrilege – so it is fitting that Joyce, whose texts so often blur this distinction in analogous ways, should find room in his first novel and his last for both the material and the discursive implications of such irreverent discharge.

The sources of that discharge, the mouth and its tongue, constitute the thresholds dividing and uniting body and discourse. They are the mortal nexus of Word and flesh – and in that sense can even be seen as analogues to the body of Christ. The space that Joyce devotes to them in contexts of the sacred and the profaned underscores both the discursive and the corporeal nature of blasphemy, its essence as text or utterance as well as its tendency always toward the emphatic embodiment of sacrilege. We have not seen the last of such blasphemous tongues; later we will deal with Djuna Barnes, whose 1928 work *Ladies Almanack* concludes with

a highly eroticized evocation of the Pentecost and its “tongues like as of fire” (Acts 2:3) – and whose novel *Nightwood* (1936) likewise concludes with an image of the tongue as “a stiff curving terror” at the center of another profanely sacramental rite (*N*, 170). We shall encounter still more burning tongues in the sermonic foreword to Wallace Thurman’s short-lived little magazine *Fire!!* (1926), which evokes the transgressive literary and artistic efforts of the “Niggeratti” as “poking livid tongues between stone apertures and burning wooden opposition with a cackling chuckle of contempt” (*F*, 1). And before that we will consider the “two-edged tongue” that protrudes from the mouth of an imagined female Redeemer – a tongue of righteously blasphemous retribution, imagined by a poet, Mina Loy, who throughout her career was fascinated by “trickle[s] of saliva” and “the tattle of tongueplay.”⁶³ Such imagery in fact suffuses Loy’s poetry and prose. Like the rest of these writers, Loy speaks in tongues, which is to say that she borrows the miraculous tongues of holy writ – the rhetorical instruments of scripture, liturgy, and theology – and puts them to her own, highly profanatory uses. More specifically, she conscripts those tongues into the service of her irreverent feminism and equally idiosyncratic faith, a pair of heterodoxies that find their expression in Loy’s often startlingly blasphemous poetry – to which subject we now turn.

⁶³ Mina Loy Papers, box 6, folder 159; *Lost*, 53; *Last*, 89.

Chapter Two

BLASPHEMY AS LOGOPOEIA: MINA LOY'S PROFANE COMMUNIONS

"Mina Loy," wrote Gertrude Stein in *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas*, "has always been able to understand."¹ Thus did she reward, in a work not otherwise notable for its kindnesses, the *futurismo* alumna and dada fellow-traveler who in the *Transatlantic Review* had compared Stein's prose favorably with that of Ecclesiastes and Job.² Indeed, Loy's early appreciation of Stein and other avant-garde writers, along with her prescient championing of the "insufficiently heeded" Joseph Cornell, betrays an uncommon perspicacity (*Last*, 300). And so, too, does Loy's fascinating 1923 poem "Joyce's Ulysses" – for instead of trotting out the more conventional approvals of *Ulysses'* Homeric parallels, or its use of *monologue intérieur*, this perceptive poem instead highlights the novel's scriptural and theological character, its blasphemous investments in "the Spirit and the Flesh" (*Lost*, 88). Joyce himself appears here as "Christ capitalized," evidently more Christ-like than Christ himself; it is his mission, as Loy depicts it, to drive the insipid arbiters of cultural opinion ("incontrite usurers of destiny") from the "temples" of art, just as Jesus drove the money changers from the temple (89). If he is Son, though, he is also father, not only Christ capitalized but also a creative deity forging "the voice and offal / of the image of God" – of his own image, that is – from within his "Empyrean emporium" (88, 90).

This is likewise Loy's vision of the appropriately modern artist, a vision she conveys always in words and images borrowed from Genesis – notably in such works as "'The Starry Sky' of Wyndham Lewis," "Brancusi's Golden Bird," "The Pamperers," and the concluding

¹ Stein, *The Autobiography*, 132.

² *Last*, 289, 296. This assessment of Stein's work, published in two parts in 1929, remains useful even today – as much for its sensuous close readings of Stein's texts as for its assertion that their meaning is often to be found precisely in their polysemous elusion of fixed meaning.

section of her long poem *Anglo-Mongrels and the Rose* (*Last*, 172-75). Her 1922 poem “Apology of Genius” also belongs to this camp; brimming with biblical language (“flesh,” “soul,” “spirit,” and, least subtly, “the passion of Man”), “Apology” renders the artist in language that echoes not only Genesis but also Stephen Dedalus’s avowed intention to “forge . . . the uncreated conscience of [his] race” (*PA*, 276):

In the raw caverns of the Increate
we forge the dusk of Chaos
to that imperious jewellery of the Universe
– the Beautiful – (*Lost*, 77-78)

Loy thus aligns religion and art, God and artist in a way that reflects her own exultation in the writing process. “I am the book,” she wrote to Carl Van Vechten of her finished *Songs to Joannes* (1917), echoing the Whitman of *Song of Myself* and also, like Whitman, claiming a godlike equation of her Word and flesh. “I have,” she continued, “that esoteric sensation of *creating!*” (*Lost*, 188). Lest we doubt the theological character of such creation, in her prose works Loy assigns the label “esoteric” to the kinds of religion she values over “exoteric,” mainstream varieties.³ It is also worth recalling that *creation* is foremost a theistic term; as Raymond Williams notes, the term as used by Romantic artists and writers was “at first thought blasphemous.” (Coleridge’s definition of the creative imagination as replicating “the eternal act of creation in the infinite I AM” certainly strives for blasphemous effect.⁴) Like Joyce, Loy retains and wonderfully exploits the blasphemy inherent in artistic creation as it strives to rival that of God Himself, Who, in Genesis 1:2, surveys an earth “without form” and sets about the modern artist’s task of bringing form to the formless, of molding “the dusk of Chaos” from “the

³ In what is at first glance a paradoxical formulation, for Loy the esoteric is the version of faith that is “available to man.” What makes it esoteric is that so few people ever learn to access it, largely because so many religious institutions are hell-bent on obscuring its ready availability. “Religion is a lost word,” Loy writes, “having come to mean millions of rows of pews. . . . There are two religions – the esoteric and the exoteric, the exoteric is the row of pews. The esoteric is the power of God, available to man” (“HRE,” unpaginated). Maeera Shreiber discusses this aspect of Loy’s “History of Religion and Eros” but unfortunately reverses Loy’s terms (“Divine Women,” 469).

⁴ Williams, *The Politics of Modernism*, 52; Coleridge, *Biographia Literaria*, 304.

raw caverns of the Increate” into art. In so doing the artist repeats Eve’s transgressive gesture, yielding to the original temptation to “be as gods” (Gen. 3:5).

That temptation, for Loy, was in evidence as early as the four “Love Songs” that graced the first issue of Alfred Kreymborg’s *Others* magazine (July 1915) – the publication that sealed her reputation as a provocative poet and quintessential “New Woman.” As Kreymborg later recalled, Loy’s verses “horrified our gentry and drove our critics into furious despair.”⁵ This response was prompted by the poet’s novel technique as well as her irreverent subject matter – by Loy’s modernism, that is to say, as well as her blasphemies. “We might have coupled,” she wrote,

In the bed-ridden monopoly of a moment
Or broken flesh with one another
At the profane communion table
Where wine is spilled on promiscuous lips

We might have given birth to a butterfly
With the daily-news
Printed in blood on its wings⁶

These lines offer a transgressive enactment of Holy Communion that takes itself as earnestly as its orthodox counterpart. The participants break flesh, not bread or wafer, and the wine they spill on each other’s lips literally becomes, through this un-immaculate copulation, the blood on their progeny’s wings. (Or “might have” become, had Loy’s speaker had her way.) If, as Julia Kristeva argues, the Eucharist functions as the catharsis for a Christian fantasy that combines “a lust for swallowing up the other” with a “fear of impure nourishment . . . revealed as deathly drive to devour the other,” then the literalization of such devouring at Loy’s profane communion table embraces the divine impurity of such lust and mutual “nourishment,” exposing the Communion’s eroto-cannibalistic implications. As often in her poetry, Loy here

⁵ Kreymborg, *Our Singing Strength*, 488.

⁶ Loy, “Love Songs,” 7. These lines also became the third section of *Songs to Joannes* (*Lost*, 54).

unites sexuality and sacrament in profane communion. In the words of Maera Shreiber and Keith Tuma, Loy's is a "pugnacious poetics of the body crossed by eroticism, spirituality, and irony all at once": a richly blasphemous mixture.⁷

All of Loy's major poetic achievements, in fact – *Songs to Joannes* (1917), *Lunar Baedeker* (1923), and *Anglo-Mongrels and the Rose* (1923-25) – are characterized by blasphemous invocations of scripture and sacrament. *Lunar Baedeker* stresses these dynamics from the start, commencing with the image of a "silver Lucifer" who beckons the reader to partake of forbidden fruit ("cocaine in cornucopia") and forbidden bodies ("adolescent thighs"), to sate those sinful cravings whose indulgence must ultimately "lead / to mercurial doomsdays" (*Lost*, 81). Lucifer, the archetypal blasphemer, thus introduces a thematic of irreverence that will wend its way through Loy's one fully realized book of verse, and indeed through the rest of her poetry and prose. Yet while critics unfailingly remark the blasphemous quality of Loy's early work, few have considered its range of aesthetic and polemical implications. By bringing together Loy's poetic evocations of religion, sexuality, and transgression with her musings in unpublished manuscripts and in such rarely discussed works as her "History of Religion and Eros," the pages that follow seek to elucidate Loy's blasphemous poetics: her rewriting of religion and theology as a means to critique and re-imagine the gendered hierarchies of both church and state, orthodoxy and patriarchy.

That poetics takes root in a discourse of the body. She may have praised Gertrude Stein for giving us "the Word, in and for itself," but the Word, in and of itself, is not what Loy is after (*Last*, 298). Loy is infinitely more interested in a Word made flesh, as suggested by her own heterodox, erotic Christianity; employing a spiritual lexicon pitched somewhere between those of Whitman's *Song of Myself* and Cixous's "Laugh of the Medusa," she insists on a fleshly

⁷ Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, 118; Shreiber and Tuma, eds., *Mina Loy: Woman and Poet*, 12.

approach to the religious. It is such an intertwining of the sexual and the sacramental that Loy celebrates in her poem on *Ulysses*, affirming her compatibility with Joyce on the score of their mutual commitment to what Maeera Shreiber calls “a generalized effort to repair the rupture between body and text.”⁸ Loy addresses this affinity in describing Joyce’s religious thematics as inseparable from his attention to the erotic body: in *Ulysses*, she proclaims, “The Spirit / is impaled upon the phallus” (*Lost*, 88). Yet for all her affinities with Joyce, in much of her poetry Loy sets herself the task of disengaging Spirit from Phallus, of liberating her erotic theo-corporeality from the phallocratic subtext that dogs the major ecclesiastical institutions of her day and ours.

Loy does so most memorably in her literary reinscriptions of Logos, the divine creative principle that resides, she wrote, at the heart of “Modern art”: “And there is no renaissance without breath – / The breathing upon of the logos” (*SE*, 262). It was Ezra Pound who coined the term *logopoeia* to account for the cerebral poetics of Loy and Marianne Moore – “poetry which is akin to nothing but language . . . a dance of the intelligence among words and ideas” – and discussions of logopoeia with regard to Loy have been de rigueur ever since.⁹ The term derives from the twin meanings of *logos* as “word” and “reason,” and seems not to account at all for the bodily concerns and textures of Loy’s poetry – which so often reveals, in Peter Nicholls’s words, “the ‘logos’ of ‘logopoeia’ to be embedded in the very body it was supposed [by Pound] to rise above.”¹⁰ I propose nonetheless a revival of the concept in newly capitalized form: a Logopoeia that accounts for the theological aspect of Logos, its biblical sense as the word of the Father made incarnate in the Son. Loy’s poetry, however, typically replaces these male embodiments of Logos with the female body. Logopoeia becomes, in her hands, a nakedly

⁸ Shreiber, “Love is a Lyric,” 147-48.

⁹ Pound, *Selected Prose*, 242.

¹⁰ Nicholls, “Arid Clarity,” 64.

theological version of the *écriture féminine* that other feminist admirers of Joyce would theorize over half a century later. In poems such as “Parturition” (1914) and *Songs to Joannes*, she refigures Father and Son as a pro-creative Mother and a crucified female Christ; she completes this Trinity in an apocalyptic prose work, untitled and unpublished, that imagines an avenging goddess who mischievously manifests both the Holy Spirit and the Second Coming. Tracing the cosmic and often deific dimensions of a New Womanhood, Loy upends both sacred and secular dogmas of gender and sexuality in works that continue to resonate with the blasphemer’s full subversive force. Before turning to her literary profanations, however, it behooves us to consider the heterodoxies that motivate them, rooted as they are in an idiosyncratic version of Christian Science – one whose doctrine holds that religion, like life itself, “is generally reducible to sex” (*Lost*, 189).

In Praise of Xes

In *The Gender of Modernism*, Bonnie Kime Scott cites Loy as one of several modernist women writers who “write the erotics of the female body,” and various critics before and since have linked this observation to the performative erotics and corporeality of the texts themselves.¹¹ If men have traditionally objectified the female body, for Loy that body instead becomes a counterintuitive means of subjectification, while the male body becomes objectified and debased. In the first three lines of *Songs to Joannes*, for example – where phallic pigs’ snouts sow “wild oats in mucous membrane” – Loy nakedly de-sacralizes what Peter Brooks has called the “*mysterium tremendum*,” patriarchy’s “most sacred object,” the penis.¹² Loy’s unflinching attention to the erotic body, male as well as female, coincides with her rewritings of

¹¹ Scott, *The Gender of Modernism*, 13.

¹² *Lost*, 53; Brooks, *Body Work*, 279. “To display the penis,” Brooks writes, “is to turn subject into object”; “in a culture where patriarchy is the basis of knowledge and power, and the gaze is phallic, [the penis] must be veiled” (279).

scripture and sacrament to condemn such varieties of sexual repression as proceed from both religious dogma and secular ideology. In the autobiographical long poem *Anglo-Mongrels and the Rose*, for example, she appropriates Christ's "they know not what they do" to describe the lackluster consummation of her parents' passion (Luke 23:34). Loy here re-contextualizes the phrase, shifting our attention from Jesus to Eros, while simultaneously implying that the ecclesiastical institutions erected in the former's name are responsible for an ideological stymieing of the latter:

 they pursued their conjugal
dilemmas as is usual
with people
who know not what they do
but know that what they do
- - is not illegal (*Last*, 127)¹³

"To know," in both the usual and the biblical sense, is for Loy no idle pun. The use of blank space in this stanza points up the dual meaning: the lovers "know," which is to say that they have sex, but it is equally clear that they "know not" – and such ignorance, for Loy, constitutes a transgression of the truly sacred. No real knowledge of Eros or of self is forthcoming in this spiritually and erotically bankrupt union of the travestied flesh. Indeed, the legality of the act – surely something of a surprise for the participants, given the lifelong inculcation of negative associations with sex – appears to be its sole virtue.

Loy's repressive upbringing at the hands of these parents taught her to equate conventional Christianity with the stifling of women's intelligence and the prohibition of self-expression, an equation that would later inform her blasphemous critiques of religion as well as the development of her own adult faith. The "gentle Jesus" of the New Testament, whom Loy

¹³ I cite page numbers for this long poem as it appears in *Last*. Throughout, however, my quotations follow the more expressive typography of *Anglo-Mongrels'* original piecemeal publication in two issues of the *Little Review* (1923-24) and in Robert McAlmon's *Contact Collection of Contemporary Writers* (1925).

encountered as a child during Bible study with a sympathetic maid, became a weapon in the hands of a mother who “inflict[ed] / Him upon her / as a spiritual bludgeon” (*Last*, 148, 167). The household regime forbade any display of creativity or self-knowledge, and any combining of the two was cause for especial parental indignation. A passage from *Goy Israels* vividly recounts her mother’s reaction to the young Mina’s writing a poem about a gnat’s “marriage” to a daisy:

a pretty thing I declare for a child of your age to write about a wedding;
positively immoral! But far be it from you to get *down* on your knees to God for
Him to make you a better girl Oh *dear* me no We can do very well without God
or our Mother too for the matter of that. . . . Where on earth’s your modesty?
You certainly never got such ideas from *me*. Nice girls never think about
weddings until after they’re married.¹⁴

That Loy’s mature poetic blasphemies insist so adamantly on liberative inscriptions of what, in her mother’s faith, were “the vaguely disgusting / inquietudes of the flesh” attests to her rejection of this repressive Christian past—but not, importantly, to a rejection of Christianity *per se* (*Last*, 168). As Keith Tuma has argued, *Anglo-Mongrels* manifests Loy’s “struggle to articulate a Christianity opposed to her mother’s evangelical Christianity.”¹⁵ Loy’s adult commitment to her own selective version of Christian Science, from 1909 to the end of her life, makes clear her continued investment in a comparatively egalitarian and liberated alternative to the religion that Loy’s mother had wielded like a club; Christian Science’s “feminized ‘Father-Mother-God,’” as Richard Cook notes, attracted adherents who felt “alienated from patriarchal images of Deity,” and in Carolyn Burke’s words struck Loy as “the one spiritual practice that promised to bridge the gaps between mind and body.”¹⁶ It was only “through the indefatigable helping

¹⁴ Loy, *Goy Israels*, 49-50.

¹⁵ Tuma, “Mina Loy’s ‘Anglo-Mongrels and the Rose,’” 183.

¹⁶ Cook, “The ‘Infinitarian,’” 458; *BM*, 131. For more on Loy and Christian Science, see Tim Armstrong, “Loy and Cornell.”

hand of C. S.," Loy later wrote, that she had managed to elude her upbringing's "logical dénouement of lunacy" (*BM*, 375).

As her "History of Religion and Eros" and other writings demonstrate, the figure of Christ is very much at the center of Loy's faith—the fully fleshed, erotic, "gentle Jesus" that most dogmas paper over. This embodied Christ is the poetic Word made flesh, a Jesus on whose cross are nailed a "poet's feet . . . neat- / ly crossed / in anguish" (*Last*, 169). Contrasted with the religious instruction of Loy's youth and its emphasis on a coercive Old-Testament God of "butcherly chastisement," Christ stands among the butchered, not the butchers, and his message, too, is the refreshing one of "Fear / not" (*Last*, 169). Indeed, for Loy, the most pertinent aspect of Christ's gospel was an invitation to pleasure: "Put in the simplest words, the divine mission of Jesus was to invite us to a party."¹⁷ He embodies, as orthodox representations of him do not, Eros itself. He is the fleshly tie that binds "Religion and Eros" in Loy's formulations, because "[t]he *Flesh*," in the case of both the religious and the erotic, is the "instrument" of the body's access to the divine (*SE*, 250). This is not T. S. Eliot's Christianity, nor the Catholic Church's; it is a Christianity that brooks no distinction between Agape and Eros, seeing them as inseparable manifestations of that love which, the scriptures tell us, God is—and that love which God is *not*, in such versions of Christianity on which Loy was raised (1 John 4:8). For Loy, desire is a key component of "esoteric" (good) religion, whereas the "exoteric" shuns it. Humankind's "quarrel with 'Desire' coincides with the incipience of Exoteric Religion," a religion of the letter, which kills; only the fully erotic, "esoteric" Spirit gives life (*SE*, 247).

¹⁷ "HRE," unpaginated. Two folders' worth of manuscripts, notes, and a twenty-page typescript are filed under this title in the Mina Loy Papers at the Yale Collection of American Literature (box 6, folders 158-59). The typescript has very recently been published in *SE*. Where possible, I cite this published essay as it appears in *SE*; the still unpublished materials I cite as "HRE."

What mainline churches and their adherents need, Loy insists, is “a Christianly clarification,” and sacralization, of sexuality: “In an ideal Society . . . ‘Sex’ would be consecrated by the church” (“HRE”; *SE* 372). This church would do well, she writes, to heed Freud’s teaching that “Religion and Sex are interchangeable” (*SE*, 226). It is not too much to say that whenever she uses the one term she implies the other, and that this knowledge is one of the keys to understanding her written works from early to late. Accordingly, sexual intercourse often emerges in her poetry as a truly religious experience, as when she echoes Adam’s “flesh of my flesh” to describe the delights of Eros: “Flesh from flesh / Draws the inseparable delight / Kissing at gasps to catch it” (*Gen. 2:23; Lost*, 57). Or when she evokes two lovers communing at an altar, breaking flesh and spilling both wine and blood in a tableau that suggests a sacrilegious version of transubstantiation. For God is made present, those lines suggest, not in the distribution of wine and wafer, but in the commingling flesh and fluids of wholly human bodies (*Lost*, 54). Elsewhere Loy expresses her belief that in the sexual merging of bodies, human beings can become electric, sublime, apotheosized. Love, she affirms, “is not of the body / love is of bodies,” bodies moving “in musical rhythm / with the cosmic duet” (*Last*, 233)—a duet in which the singular body melts away to a more meaningfully embodied, religious merging.

Sex for Loy represents a holy merging of intellects, souls, and bodies. If this triadic erotico-mystical conflation calls to mind the Christian doctrine of the Trinity, Loy has drawn that conclusion already, in *Songs to Joannes*, where in the coming-together of two bodies (“or three,” she suggests), human beings “shall become god” (*Lost*, 58). In this scheme of values, one contributes the singular body to the superior union of two (or three) bodies. Having thus “broken flesh with one another / At the profane communion table,” those bodies, along with their associated intellects and souls, are then subsumed into the one godhood just as Father,

Son, and Spirit become one in Catholic orthodoxy (*Lost*, 54). Notably, Loy's lines – "Where two or three are welded together / They shall become god" – recall Christ's "where two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I in the midst of them" (Matt. 18:20). Again Loy seeks to one-up the biblical source. Her lovers join together, not with God, but *as* God. And in her 1917 poem "Human Cylinders," Loy depicts coitus again as a "communion" in "Concordance of respiration" (*Lost*, 40). Her final polysyllable here only half-conceals an etymological play on the Latin for "breath," *spiritus*; concordance of breath is also concordance of Spirit. Indeed, toward the end of "Human Cylinders" Loy pointedly describes sexual coupling as "Receiving the holy-ghost" (*Lost*, 41).

No profane communion, this. Or, more precisely: it is sacred, by Loy's standards, to much the same extent that it is profane by orthodox standards. Sex here becomes a divine merging that Loy charges Christian dogma itself with defiling in its "war against the flesh" – a war whose logic is one of "dissubstantiation," a term she introduces in the final section of *Anglo-Mongrels and the Rose* (*SE*, 248; *Last*, 173). With reference to con- and transubstantiation, Rachel Blau DuPlessis reasonably glosses this term as indexing the Jewish refusal to believe in the divine embodiment of Jesus.¹⁸ Context, however, indicates that this is not the meaning Loy attaches to the word. True, dissubstantiation as DuPlessis understands it would make a fit "problem" for Loy's "Theological tinkers / and serious thinkers" to tackle (*Last*, 173). But dissubstantiation as Loy presents it is a far more basic and even universal theological problem, that of religion's accounting for and dealing with the desires of the flesh – religions' seeming compulsion to dissubstantiate our fleshly substance. The preceding stanza addresses the purported

¹⁸ DuPlessis, *Genders, Races, and Religious Cultures*, 163.

incompatibility
with his dignity
of exposing man
to the contemplation
of the insignia
of his origin
and continuity (172)

– that is, the contemplation of the vulva, presumably during or preparatory to a sexual encounter. The stanzas that succeed the word “dissubstantiation” continue in this vein, documenting the uses of asceticism and theological prestidigitation for eliding the question of desire: one can sleep on beds of nails in order to “forget it,” or leave it to the “Spiritual drapers / Popes and fakirs and shakers” to shroud the question in “oblivion / and let it / appear / to disappear” (173). Certainly what is at issue in these stanzas has little to do with the Jewish rejection of Christ’s embodiment, and much to do with Loy’s typical interest in “Eros-Bliss” and its deformations by religious dogma (*SE*, 249).

Following these and other stanzas that address religion’s suppressions of erotic desire, Loy observes that, nonetheless, “absurd / as it may seem / the ‘unprintable word’ / is impossible to erase from a vocabulary” (*Last*, 173). DuPlessis’s interpretation leads her to read this reference to “the ‘unprintable word’” as an allusion to God, or “G-d.”¹⁹ Again plausible, were it not for the context established by the immediately preceding stanzas; the unprintable word here is doubtless “sex,” or as Loy often renders it, “Sex.” Or, as she writes it at least once in her manuscripts for “History of Religion and Eros,” deploying the strategy of inversion so central to blasphemous expression: “Xes.”

Xes, as if in acknowledgment of the word’s powerful unprintability. As if, conversely and at the same time, the word has, like “God,” become so diffuse and vacuous by overuse that it requires a Steinian recasting, a typographic rearrangement that will temporarily obscure and

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

then revivify the word's meaning.²⁰ There is "sex," a term that in legal, literary, scientific, and popular discourses "is used in reference to nothing at all"; but then there is Eros, or Xes, the divine pulse, humankind's most direct means of access to the sacred ("HRE"). It is also Molly Bloom's famous affirmation, but with the Y replaced by an X: the chromosome common to both sexes. Xes is Loy's trigrammaton. Pronounce the word, taking some liberties, and you wind up with something like *excess*, a happy signifier of Loy's seemingly excessive treatments of the subject in her poetry – but in truth Xes is as unsayable as it is unprintable, as ineffable a signpost as the unspeakable YHWH. Which is to say that Xes is Loy's G-d, and what matters more than my quibbling with DuPlessis's speculation is that, when reading Mina Loy, the distinction between Sex and God does not matter much. It is one of her achievements, in fact, to use the language of poetry to evoke religious and sexual ecstasies as both wholly compatible and compatibly holy. When she portrays, for instance, a nun's flesh as a "virgin apple to angels' offering," she sings the praises of a fleshly mysticism and an ethereal eroticism, at once a knowing innocence and an innocent lust, the sort of union Loy addresses in a brazen assertion of her own guiltless erotic knowledge: "There are already / So many ignorances / I am not guilty of" (*Lost*, 260, 26).

Blasphemy and "Social Consciousness"

To read such poetic moments in light of Loy's "History of Religion and Eros" is to recognize aspects of her better-known works that have been overlooked – for example, just how essentially religious is her declamation in the "Feminist Manifesto" that "there is nothing impure in sex" (*Lost*, 156). Such a statement is not, as it might seem, a secular flouting of

²⁰ "[I]nversion," Loy writes in her essay on Stein, is one of the ways the latter achieves "her unsheathing of the fundamental" (*Last*, 289).

religious values. It is instead sanctioned, for Loy, precisely by the Creator who made sex the basis of human life and propagation. Christianity, she writes, should “never have snubbed the Creator with derogation of ‘the Flesh’ – for also our desire, not of our own contriving, is from the Creator broadcast to us. . . . He would have no more imposed chastity on the common man than would Bach have forbidden him to play the concertina” (*SE*, 248). Indeed, sexuality is not only sanctioned by the Creator but is also closely related to Loy’s ideas of artistic creativity, as suggested by the reference to Bach. Once the artist has “at last tuned in on / THE CREATIONAL OVERTURE,” she writes, she will have full access to “the source of presensate ecstasy whereof, to earth life, Eros alone brings some intimation” (*SE*, 243). Over and against this erotic cosmogony, Loy writes that sex, in the church’s hands, has become merely “a debris of sadism” (251). “Morality” has served organized religion as a “pretense” for cruelty, just as “the scapegoat personification of Satan” has changed “all God’s beneficencies to man” – fleshly pleasures included – “to menaces” (250-51).

In turn, what would strike most believers as the Church’s “beneficencies” can appear rather as menaces in Loy’s poetry. Her early poem “The Prototype” (1914), for example, employs such a subjective inversion in its dramatic engagement with doctrinal Christianity’s denials of the flesh. The poem describes two babies seen in the Duomo on midnight at Christmas Eve. The first, made of “cold wax,” is “quite perfect, of that perfection / which means immunity from / the inconsistencies of Life” (*Lost*, 221). It is intended as a doll-like icon of the infant Christ, but according to this poem’s logic it really iconizes a religiosity separated from life’s vicissitudes, a product of a Church that divorces the sphere of the sacred from such ostensibly impure, imperfect human phenomena as fleshly desires. “Worship him,” a voice tells us in the poem’s third stanza – Loy is facetiously channeling what she takes to be an unspoken underpinning of Catholic dogma – “for his infinitesimal / mouth has no expansiveness for a

puck- / ering to the heart-saving wail of the / new-born Hungry One" (221). The phrase "no expansiveness," coming from so expansive a poet, who writes as expansively as Loy does about the cosmically elastic contours of the self ("the smallest person, potentially, is as great as the Universe"), signals Loy's reservations about this cold wax Christ-child, who goes un-capitalized in contrast to the living, flesh-and-blood Hungry One at stanza's end (149). Likewise, the syllable "puck," emphasized by an eye-catching caesura ("puck- / ering"), recalls the Puckish pleasures of the flesh that orthodoxy and its wax icons deny.

But it is not only the flesh's pleasures that this wax Christ denies. There is also the highly visible and diseased flesh of the other baby Loy sees in the Duomo,

a horrible little
baby – made of half warm flesh;
flesh that is covered with sores – carried
by a half-broken mother.

And I who am called heretic,
and the only follower in Christ's foot-steps
among this crowd adoring a wax doll
– for I alone am worshipping the poor
sore baby – the child of sex igno-
rance and poverty. (221)

"Igno-" conjures *ignoble* and *ignominious*, while also directing one's attention to the ambiguity of these final lines. Are there implied commas between the last four words (sex, ignorance, and poverty), or is the child a product of "sex ignorance," that is, of a Church-promulgated ignorance of reproductive realities? In which case this sick baby, needless to have been born, serves as emblem of the maternal martyrdom that for Loy makes all mothers Madonnas, all deserving of canonization, even if their own conceptions have been less Immaculate than "Felicitous" – or infelicitous, as the case may be:

Madonnas are everlastingly mothers in ecstasy.
Their alcove arms
retire the Felicity of their conception

.....
Omitted omen of Calvary!
Uncarved Crucifixion! (*Lost*, 115)

These last two lines go further in suggesting not only that mortal mothers are Madonnas, but also that Mary's own suffering consists, in large part, in her having to birth humanity's sacrificial victim at the behest of God the Father — one of many biblical endorsements of women's capitulation to male authority, and a kind of martyrdom whose analogue is undergone by all mothers who submit to the often thankless, and often religiously enforced, maternal task.²¹

Eyeing the "half-broken mother" and her diseased child, Loy's speaker in "The Prototype" proceeds to pray to "humanity's social consciousness" that it might "do for that mother & that child in the light, what / the priests have tried to do in the dark" — that is, to aid them by *seeing* them, by recognizing and facing their worldly existence (*Lost*, 222). Instead, what the priests offer is obscured vision, providing in the form of a wax Christ-child "an inebriating glimpse of / something that a baby is supposed to look / like" (222). Here is Christianity in its role as opiate of the masses, a mollifying intoxicant dispensed as much through its unreal icons as through its teachings, confessions, and Communions. And just what is Loy's solution to the Church-perpetuated problems of poverty, enforced motherhood, blurred vision, and the repression of meaningful erotic fulfillment?

Blow out the candles —
Throw away the wax-baby
Use the churches as night-shelters
Come into the Daylight & preach
a New Gospel

Let them eat —

²¹ "That's in their theology," Leopold Bloom observes in his inimitable way, "or they won't give the poor woman the confession, the absolution. Increase and multiply. Did you ever hear such an idea? Eat you out of house and home" (*U*, 8.31-34).

O let them love—
And let their babies be
pink & white. (222)

“The Prototype” is merely the earliest of Loy’s poems to link ecclesiastical repression to repressive secular ideologies of gender and sexuality. In fact, Loy draws frequently on the imagery of profanation both to figure such ideologies as sacrilege and to cast as blasphemy their vocal promotion in the rhetorics of political propaganda and church dogma. Deploying forceful biblical language, she blasphemes these frequent objects of her critique and also renders them, in specifically religious terms, as themselves blasphemies against what for her is the true spirit of Christianity.

Consider the pointed satire of “Der Blinde Junge” (1923), which begins by invoking “The dam Bellona,” goddess of war, who has “littered / her eyeless offspring / *Kriegsopfer* / Upon the pavements of Vienna” (*Lost*, 83). Always one for puns, Loy outdoes herself in this first stanza, leaving no potential connotation unexploited. *Dam/n*, *litter*, *eyeless/I-less*, *Kriegsopfer* (“war victim” but also an “opfer[ing]” to the war goddess): all contribute to the condensed irony and rage of the poem, with an economy that any Imagist would envy.²² The portmanteau “*Kriegsopfer*,” in conjunction with the poem’s German title, leaves little doubt which nation-state Loy blames primarily for the blinding of the young war veteran. Yet it is Bellona, war itself, that Loy explicitly indicts for the existence of “this slow blind face / pushing / its virginal nonentity / against the light” (83). That word “virginal,” and the metaphors of light and sight, link this poem to many of her others, which often lament the occlusion of vision, sexuality, and knowledge—for example in the case of those housebound women and girls who trim their

²² “Bellona” holds a dual personal significance for Loy, who elsewhere cited the Italian town of Bellona (in order “to show more clearly what the modern woman is not” — her interviewer’s words) as a prime example of the sexual repression and patriarchal mores against which the New Woman defines herself (quoted in Marisa Januzzi, “Mongrel Rose,” 430). As in so many of her poems, Loy works here to expose the mutual determinations of militarism abroad and of the political suppression of women and Eros at home.

lanterns' wicks, "Virginal to the bellows / Of Experience"; women whose "last little lust / Lost itself in a saucer of gruel," and whose most "passionate breath" comes from "the bronchitis-kettle" (*Lost*, 53, 24, 10).

Such repression is an inevitable consequence – as Loy writes in the early poem "Virgins Plus Curtains Minus Dots" – of allotting agency of desire to men only, while women are kept objectified and cloistered, allowed only to peep at the broader world from behind curtained windows. For "Somebody who was never / a virgin / has bolted the door" (*Lost*, 22). "Der Blinde Junge" rehearses a similar theme. Here is yet another case of the powers-that-be, the patriarchal governors of the world, enforcing "virginity," this time through the onslaught of war and the literal deprivation of vision. They have "bolted the door" on this young soldier's life and left him a "virginal nonentity"; his eyes, worse off than those of Loy's virgin women, are not allowed even to "look out" (*Lost*, 83). As ever in Loy, both vision and sexuality are metonyms for knowledge.²³ Like the girls and women blinded to self and sex and body by a British ethos of chastity and virtue, here is a young man blinded most literally, as well as figuratively, by the ideologies of war and empire. Loy thus begins in this poem to convey the linkage between the cultures of sexual repression, imperialism, and militarism that she will develop further in *Anglo-Mongrels and the Rose*.

But what is most interesting for our purposes is the precise imagery Loy uses in "Der Blinde Junge" to suggest the extent of the blind youth's deprivation and the culpability of those who contributed to it – "the black lightning," in her words, that "desecrated / the retinal altar" (83). Here Loy draws on the imagery of specifically religious transgression to figure war as sacrilege – of which altar-desecration is the quintessential expression – and to suggest that war's

²³ Virginia Kouidis emphasizes this aspect of Loy's epistemology, arguing that "the shaping I-eye" molds her poems and that they equate knowledge with "sexual experience and vision" (*Mina Loy*, 59, 33).

vocal promotion, in propaganda, militarism, and the rhetorics of nationalism and patriotism, is blasphemy. And because blasphemy against the Spirit is the unforgivable sin, the blind youth's street music issues a forceful "damnation" of the sinners – of the purblind "illuminati," that is, who are to blame for his, and the world's, blindness:

Listen!
illuminati of the coloured earth
How this expressionless "thing"
blows out damnation and concussive dark

Upon a mouth-organ (84)

We begin to see here the way that Loy ushers discourses of religious transgression – blasphemy, desecration, damnation – into the service of her ideological critiques, a strategy we can see at work more blatantly in a similarly vituperative poem, "The Black Virginity" (1918). In this case the object of Loy's critique is the Catholic priesthood and, by implication, institutional religion in any form. From her vantage point, the hierarchies and dogmas that attend organized Christianities are anathema to real religious experience – yet her satires never lose sight of these institutions' formidable power, their enduring ability to "put us," as she says in this poem, "in our places" (*Lost*, 43). Like "Der Blinde Junge," "The Black Virginity" angrily indicts a form of patriarchal power, depicting the Church as complicit in the same complex of imperial aggression and sexual repression that she critiques elsewhere.²⁴ The poem begins by characterizing the priesthood as "Evangelical snobs" who find their "Union in severity" and "Intimidation," and who pass their nights in

Uneasy dreaming
In hermetically-sealed dormitories

²⁴ In her pamphlet touting "International Psycho-Democracy," for instance, Loy denounces religious institutions as complicit in the repressive governance of society, contributing to those "inhibitive social and religious precepts that ordain that man must suffer and cause to suffer and deny the validity of Man's fundamental desires" (*Last*, 279). Her Psycho-Democratic "Party" aims to win over and rehabilitate "the *Dummy Public* originated by the Press, financed by the Capitalist: / For whom the politician legislates, / The army fights, / The church collects" (*Last*, 278).

Not of me or you Sister Saraminta
Of no more or less
Than the fit of Pope's mitres (*Lost*, 42)

What grates on Loy, in addition to the priesthood's apparently misplaced priorities (the Pope's miters, of all things, disturb its dreams), is its impudent hubris in claiming special theological knowledge—for example, of “what ‘He’ is,” or of the nature of “the world flesh and devil” (43). Again this poem bears comparison with “Der Blinde Junge” for its indictment of sexual repression and, ipso facto, of the repression of knowledge—especially religious knowledge, which according to Loy comes to us always through our experience of the flesh. The priests' celibacy, like the blind youth's enforced virginity, symbolizes their lack of access to full human experience and to genuine knowledge, theological and otherwise.

Loy concludes her thought in this poem with an allegorical image of the priests' lust for unattainable knowledge—an image that reminds us of humankind's original sin, and which also provokes us to wonder at the notion that of all sins, this first and most fundamental of them all is the one the Church insists on repeating endlessly:

The last [priest] with apostolic lurch
Tries for a high hung fruit
And misses
Any way it is inedible

It is always thus
In the Public Garden (43)

The Public Garden replicates, in corrupted fashion, the original Garden; worth comparing with this vision of pompous priests jumping for apples is the speaker's lament in *Songs to Joannes* that she and her lover missed their opportunity to go “apple stealing under the sea” (*Lost*, 59). Note the difference: for Loy, theological and, what is the same, erotic knowledge is accessible not to a privileged and celibate few but to all those who intuit bodily where to seek it, and how, and with whom. Such seeking is better undertaken by lovers, diving into an erotically suggestive

sea, than by a solitary celibate striving comically to grasp the unreachable. Hence institutional Christianity's inability to impart genuine knowledge of self, sex, world, and God. When it claims to, it is really blaspheming against what for Loy is Christianity's actual Spirit, which has much more to do with the flesh than these priests will acknowledge. Accordingly, this poem damns a blaspheming priesthood as forcefully as Loy's blind veteran damns the secular "illuminati," designating the Church as culpable in the larger matrix of aggression and repression that she finds at work in the ideological rhetorics of nation and empire.²⁵ Hence that "imperial eye" at the center of the facetious prayer that concludes a section of *Anglo-Mongrels*:

O may the hot-house purity —
 essence
 of English childhood —
 prolong itself
 into autumnal adolescence —

O may the fuddled blue
 of the imperial eye

 muddle through
 bright with its bland taboo
 from the nursery to the cemetery

Amen (*Last*, 155-56)

This passage's closing word outdoes even the irony of the "Thank God" that ends Loy's 1914 poem "Parturition" (*Lost*, 8). Rarely has "Amen" sounded so caustic, or with greater reason; the bland taboos and orthodoxies that seek to prolong into a superannuated adolescence, even unto the grave, the stifling "purity" of Britain's subjects — its literal and metaphorical virgins and soldiers — are for Loy a defilement of both flesh and spirit.

²⁵ Echoing both this poem and "Der Blinde Junge," in her unpublished "History of Religion and Eros" Loy interprets institutional Christianity's whole "approach to Eros" as equivalent to military warfare. There she writes that the Church's orthodoxy on sexual matters takes the form of a "savage terror, begetter of sadism," in flagrant disregard for God's having "endowed man with the Eros possibility" ("HRE").²⁵ The Church's "tatters of tradition" "choke" the human mind, preventing it from recognizing its body as "a covered entrance to infinity" — in the process perpetuating what Loy calls "the filth-bliss confusion of the sin-centuries" (*Lost*, 71; *SE*, 249).

Loy's literary eviscerations of British imperialism mark another of her affinities with Joyce that she acknowledges in her poem on *Ulysses* – a novel, in her words, that “satirize[s] / the imperial Rose / of Gaelic perfumes,” as “England / the sadistic mother / embraces Erin” (*Lost*, 89). It is striking how well these lines describe the figural matrix of Loy's own critiques of empire; in her autobiographical poetry and prose, Loy casts her own “sadistic mother” as an “imperial Rose,” “often sadistic, always disdainful. . . . a Briton colonizing the alien attributes of her race”: “Imperial / trimmed with some travestied flesh / tinted with bloodless duties dewed / with Lipton's teas.”²⁶ For the English Rose, sexuality is associated with grime, pregnancy with “herd-housing”; she is a “Rose of arrested impulses / self pruned / of the primordial attributes” (*Last*, 121). The flesh is itself a travesty, the body “bloodless” in being duty-bound, acquainted with tea – that exemplary colonial export – but not with the body's own more impelling fluids; Loy thus continues to hint at a homology or even a complicity between England's imperial lust and its ideological suppression of actual lust, particularly that of English women.

The English Rose remolds Nature, for Loy elsewhere an “irate pornographer” (*Lost*, 63), into

the post-conceptual
virginity of Nature
Wiping
its pink paralysis
across the dawn of reason
A World-Blush
glowing from
a never-setting-sun (*Last*, 121-22)

This World-Blush is the transcendent blush of empire. It is the never-setting sign of its suppression of other cultures, the sign of its “post-conception” of their lands as “virgin” and

²⁶ Loy, *Goy Israels* (quoted in Aimee L. Pozorski, “Eugenicist Mistress and Ethnic Mother,” 47); *Last*, 121.

also of the eternally innocent blush of erotic *self*-suppression – all in all a supposed innocence that subsequent lines expose as something else altogether, casting Rose as a “storage / of British Empire-made pot-pourri / of dry dead men” (122). Rose is depicted, moreover, not only as a subject and symptom of Empire but also as its authoritative representative in the home, reigning with “ineludable claws of dominion” (136). Analogous to British patriarchy’s ideological policing of its subjects, she exhibits “an agency / for . . . turning to shame / the nucleus / –in infantile impotence– / of Primeval Right” (136). Such is the context in which Loy casts her own championing of women’s erotic empowerment as not only a sexual matter but an urgent political and moral one. To lift the chains of repression, she suggests quite forcefully, would be to undo a complex of ideological subjugations and to counter patriarchy’s quelling of mind and body, of artistic expression, of Primeval Right, both in the metropolis and in the Empire’s farthest reaches.

- - - and for
 Empire
 what form could be superior
 to the super-imposed
 slivers
 of the rose? (129)

Pro-Creation Narratives

Apart, however, from these acid depictions of her own mother and of the British motherland, Loy drew on her own reproductive experience – expressed in often starkly blasphemous terms – to depict maternity in a far more positive, indeed sacred, light. In accordance with her faith in “Xes,” the act of reproduction itself becomes for Loy the most significant form of production; procreation, the most significant form of creation.

Demonstrative of reproduction’s centrality to Loy’s literary output and personal mythology is

the section of *Anglo-Mongrels* that narrates the young Loy's own Fall, the loss of her Edenic innocence:

The garden
the child's
first place of purity
is become defiled

An egg is smashed
a horrible
aborted contour
a yellow murder
in a viscous pool (*Last*, 164)

Her loss of innocence, the "defilement" of her "purity," occurs appropriately enough in a garden – the same garden which, in the poem's previous section, was the sight of this child's apparently religious "ILLUMINATION." Importantly, Loy stages this Fall as an encounter with an abortion – that motif that will haunt her poetry, especially *Songs to Joannes*, and which is the ugly underside of what Loy views as women's sacred capacity as procreators. The young Loy identifies with the egg (as her name in the poem, *Ova*, rather unsubtly suggests), and the lasting impact of this moment is made explicit in subsequent lines:

She knows not Time yet
it lies there
for a thousand years
of return to puzzle
over a defrauded race of chickens
pecking the gravel in unconcern (*Last*, 164)

The millennial "return" here augments the tableau's theological resonance, while the implied possibility that the chickens may be cannibalizing their own broken egg among the gravel conveys Loy's disgust at the unthinking, unrecognizing, or, worse, uncaring behavior of the hens, perhaps suggestive of Loy's own uncaring mother.²⁷ But the imagery of abortion itself is

²⁷ It also resonates with one of Loy's uglier evocations of orthodox Christianity's God, that god of blood-lust and sexual denial whom Joyce's Stephen Dedalus has such difficulty exorcising: "The cannibal God / shuts his lids

that of the defilement of what Loy calls “cosmic reproductivity,” an equation of sexual reproduction, artistic production, and the godlike power of Creation that recurs throughout her poetry and other works – as in “Apology of Genius,” where Loy conflates the artist’s “Legerdemain of God” with “Birth-Breaths and orgasms” (*Lost*, 7, 73).

Julia Kristeva has reflected on the possibility for “maternity” to become “a true *creative* act, something that we have not yet been able to imagine”; Loy’s poetry and prose belie such imaginative failure.²⁸ She defines the sexual act as “the creational caress,” and its issuance in reproduction as “the creative moment”: “the creation of a new being is the creation of a universe (a universe in reduction, yet one as mysteriously complex and, could we conform to other dimensions, as vast as the one in which we are at large)” (*Last*, 253; “HRE”). Such cosmic procreativity bears comparison with the “procreative truth of Me” in *Songs to Joannes*, where the capitalization of “Me” underscores the deific dimensions of reproduction as well as the wasting of that divine potential: “We *might have*” spilled and mingled our eucharistic blood at the profane communion table, “We *might have* given birth to a butterfly” that would have borne these lovers’ blood on its ascendant and transcendent wings (*Lost*, 62, 54).

If in *Songs to Joannes* no such offspring has been allowed to take flight, Loy’s early poem “Parturition” imagines what this birthing process might look like – although what emerges from the womb in this text is no butterfly but rather an ambiguous embodiment both of a bestial crucifixion and of the messianic fulfillment and redemption that crucifixion inevitably implies in Christian iconography. In “Parturition,” blasphemous language and imagery elevate the speaker’s twin roles as mother and poet to the distorted, blasphemous planes of Madonna – who here gives birth to “a crucified wild beast” – and Creator, producer of the poem that calls

of night on the day’s gluttony / the partially devoured humanity / warms its unblessed beds with bare prostrations” (*Last*, 113).

²⁸ Kristeva, *New Maladies of the Soul*, 220.

that beast wildly into being (*Lost*, 5).²⁹ That procreation here approaches such godlike creation *ex nihilo* is suggested by the poem's strikingly neoteric venturing into uncharted formal and thematic regions. Its pseudo-Futurist typography and innovative use of spacing are unprecedented in English-language verse, as is the subject matter; both Roger Conover and Thom Gunn have argued that it is the first known poem to depict labor and childbirth from the woman's point of view.³⁰ To put the radical nature of its subject matter into perspective, it is worth recalling that the year Loy wrote and published "Parturition," 1914, was the same year Margaret Sanger was indicted for the "obscenity" of her pamphlets on human reproduction. In later years, Alfred Kreymborg would remember fondly the stir caused by Loy's "lewd and lascivious writing, in the same class as the pamphlets of Margaret Sanger or the lectures of Emma Goldman."³¹ That the poem achieves these thematic and formal innovations in concert with its profane Christological imagery exemplifies how blasphemous modernism can work to articulate radically new kinds of poetic content and form. And as it takes poetry into new modernist directions, it also fuses Loy's procreative concerns to her quintessentially modernist obsession with artistic production and deific creativity.

"Parturition" represents Loy's most sustained meditation on the figure, in Janet Lyon's words, of "the experiential female body as a laboratory of creativity."³² It is especially fascinating when considered alongside Loy's own involvement with the Futurists, who, as she memorializes in the poem "Lion's Jaws," entertained their own notions of womanless auto-reproduction, fantasies "of Man's immediate agamogenesis," "Insurance / of his spiritual

²⁹ Loy's syntax is ambiguous enough that one can also reasonably read the parturient mother as the "crucified wild beast" – yet another example of the Christic Mother-martyr. Alex Goody reads it this way, in fact (*Modernist Articulations*, 47). But certain of Loy's notes, which resemble and evidently precede "Parturition," clearly feature the newborn baby as "a massacred incubus" – an early version of the crucified beast that finally emerges in the published poem. See Aimee Pozorski, "Eugenicist Mistress," 59.

³⁰ Conover, *Notes to Lost*, 177; Gunn, "Three Hard Women," 48. Conover adds that it is "the first poem in English to use collage as a texturing device" (177).

³¹ Kreymborg, *Our Singing Strength*, 488-89.

³² Lyon, "Mina Loy's Pregnant Pauses," 382.

integrity / against the carnivorous courtesan" (*Lost*, 47). "Parturition" likewise merits comparison with the discourses of other prominent modernists (notably Eliot, Pound, and Joyce) who habitually figured literary production, often with surprising literalness, as the bringing to term and delivery of a child.³³ Loy's determinedly embodied poetics press this equation even further – as Alex Goody argues, the poem "attempts a linguistic enactment of childbirth, rather than a simple reflection or mimetic reproduction" – so that what is birthed in the poem coincides with the poem itself as an artistic product.³⁴ Reproduction becomes the figure for production, as procreator rivals Creator and mother shoves aside God the Father.³⁵

At the very climax of the poem, the speaker begins to birth her child and to reach a pain-fueled "climax in sensibility" (*Lost*, 5). Characteristically, Loy equates childbirth with another sort of climax, describing this birth in much the same language that she will use in *Songs to Joannes* and elsewhere to describe the sexual act: "the ego succeeds in unifying the positive and negative poles of sensation / Uniting the opposing and resisting forces / In lascivious revelation" (6). There is something "blasphemous," in a loosely secular sense of the word, about this equation of the erotic and the maternal, as well as the speaker's frankly unsentimental distancing from her own child; its gurgling "Comes from so far away / And the foam on the stretched muscles of a mouth / Is no part of myself" (5). But the poem's real blasphemies inhere in the speaker's willful adoption of the roles of Madonna and Creator and in her evocation of the baby as "a crucified wild beast," some amalgam of the crucified Christ

³³ Eliot wrote that the poet "is oppressed by a burden which he must bring to birth in order to obtain relief" (*On Poetry and Poets*, 98). Joyce used the birthing metaphor to describe his own literary efforts – see, for instance, a 1912 letter to Nora Barnacle – and of course took the trope to unprecedented lengths in *Ulysses*' "Oxen of the Sun" episode (Joyce, *Selected Letters*, 57). And in a December 1921 letter, Pound wrote some playful verse depicting *The Waste Land* as sired by the "Uranian Muse" and birthed by a maternal Eliot, while "Ezra performed the Caesarian Operation" (Pound, *Selected Letters*, 170).

³⁴ Goody, *Modernist Articulations*, 47.

³⁵ And where is the father while Loy's speaker exercises her pro-creative powers? "Running up-stairs to a[nother] woman's apartment," singing, "All the girls are tid'ly did'ly / All the girls are nice" (*Lost*, 5).

and the “rough beast” of Yeats’s “Second Coming” that here stands startlingly, lasciviously revealed (5).

The speaker’s blasphemous climax additionally metaphorizes her role as both “mistress” and “mother,” a binary division that Loy’s “Feminist Manifesto” calls for women everywhere “to abolish” (*Lost*, 154).³⁶ Much converges in this moment – structural climax and thematic climax, form and content, body and text, conception and childbirth – as the parturient woman assumes godlike dimensions. Her climax constitutes both an intensely erotic and a theological event, indeed a blasphemous replay of the Christ event, here rendered appropriately as an irruption of the divine into the mundane, or of kairos into chronos:

Mother I am

Identical
With infinite Maternity
.....
The was – is – ever – shall – be
Of cosmic reproductivity (*Lost*, 7)

“Every woman has a right to maternity,” proclaims Loy’s “Feminist Manifesto”; here, by exercising that divine right, the woman becomes “identical” with the infinite, with the procreative spheres of the sacred, joining the ranks of those women who “wipe the nose of the universe and push it out to play while they attend to infinity in detail” (*Lost*, 155; “HIRE”). She is the bearer not just of a child but of a cosmic reproductivity to rival the creation in Genesis, a procreativity that enlarges the deific sphere of the artist, “Exceeding its boundaries in every direction” (*Lost*, 4).

³⁶ In another poem, a decorative Madonna keeps “a man / hidden beneath her hoop,” suggesting that even the most paradigmatic embodiment of maternity is no stranger to the role of mistress (*Lost*, 37). As Suzanne Churchill points out, this Madonna wears both red and blue, combining the iconographic colors of Mary Magdalene with that of the Virgin (*The Little Magazine* “Others,” 204).

“Parturition” holds a central place in Loy’s erotically charged, divinely suffused universe, synced always to “the accoupling and germinal throb of the corporeal world” (“HRE”).³⁷ In her early poem “Ignoramus,” Loy evokes this world as

the heart-beating
Accoupling
of the masculine and feminine
Universal principles
Mating (*Lost*, 44)

Men and women serve as the principles in this universal drama; their heartbeat, the very source of life, becomes here merely a participle to the apparently more fundamental fact of Accoupling. These lines immediately succeed a stanza that reduces the *Book of Common Prayer’s* hieratic grandeur of “dust to dust” to literal dust that gets shaken from the trousers of a Chaplinesque tramp and “dribble[s] out of his trouser-ends / In dust-to-dust / Till cock-kingdom-come-crow” (*Lost*, 44). The momentousness of Kingdom Come here finds itself squeezed between the more pressing, more predictable arrival of cock-crow. “Cock” and “come,” meanwhile, finding themselves in suggestive proximity, index the erotic and procreative principle that in Loy’s cosmology suffuses and drives the universe; it is as much a part of everyday chronos (cock-crow) as of eternal kairos (Kingdom Come).

The often startling poetic products of this sex-centric cosmology, those “gelatinous erogenous quiverings” that offended Conrad Aiken, stand in stark contrast to any “impersonal” variety of modernist poetics.³⁸ Consider, for example, Pound’s representation of sexual love in the seemingly mistitled poem “Coitus,” which features “gilded phaloi . . . thrusting at the

³⁷ “Urge and urge and urge,” wrote one of Loy’s most pertinent predecessors; “Always the procreant urge of the world” (Walt Whitman, *Leaves of Grass*, 30).

³⁸ Quoted in Carolyn Burke, *Becoming Modern*, 7. Christina Walter persuasively traces Loy’s interest in and evolution toward a poetics of impersonality, culminating in *Insel*, “a novelized reflection on aesthetic impersonality” (“Getting Impersonal,” 665). But while this point is a useful corrective to critics’ tendency to focus solely on Loy’s investment in the personal, even Walter dates Loy’s impersonal turn only to the late 1920s, sometime after the years of her most significant poetic output and of the works I examine here.

spring air.”³⁹ These lines celebrate only the phallic dimension of sexuality, depicting a futile but safely detached vision that conflicts wholly with Loy’s coital sense of the erotic. Given Pound’s apparent anxiety over the female body – his *Cantos* memorably depict “the female” as unassimilably abject, “a chaos / An octopus / . . . A biological process” – and his assessment of Whitman’s portrayals of the erotic body as “disgusting” and “exceedingly nauseating,” it should hardly surprise us that he privileges an open-air pelvic thrusting over the messy intermingling of bodies that characterizes Eros in Loy’s poetry.⁴⁰

His uneasiness over Whitman makes Pound again worth comparing to Loy, who expressed in a letter to Carl Van Vechten her belief that “we’ll get more ‘wholesome sex’ in American art – than English after all,” precisely because the English “haven’t had a Whitman.”⁴¹ Virginia Kouidis rightly sees Whitman as a crucial influence on Loy, not only for his portrayals of the “essential sexual dimension of selfhood” but also for “his deification of the self” – a pair of concerns that become inexorably intertwined in Loy’s blasphemous poetry.⁴² That her shockingly direct treatments of human sexuality are as important to Loy’s works as her figurations of the messianic artist-creator makes Whitman a doubly relevant precursor. For in addition to deifying “the self” in the abstract, Whitman memorably messianizes “the Me myself,” grandiosely capitalizing the personal pronoun as Loy does in *Song to Joannes* – a service he does not extend to Christ even as he “accept[s] him that was crucified, knowing assuredly that he is divine.”⁴³ Whitman also anticipates Loy’s troubling of distinctions between profane

³⁹ Pound, *Personae*, 113

⁴⁰ Pound, *The Cantos*, XXIX/144-45; Pound, *Selected Prose*, 146. In his Introduction to *Ezra Pound: Selected Poems*, T. S. Eliot too dismisses “the clap-trap in Whitman’s content” and writes of having “had to conquer an aversion to his form, as well as to his matter,” in order to read him (xi, viii-ix).

⁴¹ Quoted in Virginia Kouidis, *Mina Loy*, 27.

⁴² Kouidis, *Mina Loy*, 26.

⁴³ Whitman, *Leaves of Grass*, 32, 69. Like Christ, Whitman has suffered his “own crucifixion and bloody crowning,” and in echo of Christ’s return he “shall come again upon the earth after five thousand years” (64, 69). Whitman presents himself, in short, as the fulfillment of Emerson’s messianic call in “The Poet” for the “liberating god,” “the timely man, the new religion, the reconciler, whom all things await” – the Poet who will harness “Logos” to reveal

and sacred, flesh and spirit: "Divine am I inside and out, and I make holy whatever I touch or am touched from; / The scent of these arm-pits is aroma finer than prayer, / This head is more than churches or bibles or creeds."⁴⁴ Loy's poetry is thus markedly Whitmanian in its channeling of the voices of godlike creator and Christlike savior as well as in its championing of "cosmic reproductivity." Her texts harbor "no nostalgia," as Eric Selinger puts it, "for what Whitman aptly dubbed 'this tepid wash, this diluted deferential love' in which the body stayed unspoken."⁴⁵ Like Whitman's, Loy's is an erotic universe, one whose sunrises are so many "little rosy / Tongue[s] of Dawn . . . Licking the Arno" (*Lost*, 63).

Equally erotic are Loy's poetic bodies, both the bodies of her texts and the bodies depicted therein. Her poem "One O'Clock at Night" even makes a claim for the virtue of being, at times, "a mere woman / The animal woman / Understanding nothing of man" save "the security of imparted physical heat" (*Lost*, 15). In effect the poem gives a positive turn to Marinetti's public pronouncements on the essential subhumanity or animality of women; Loy asserts women's intellectual equality while at the same time implying the inferiority of masculinist intellection to an animal embrace of "physical heat." From such a perspective the "cerebral gymnastics" of boastful men – with their masturbatory "theories of plastic velocity" – can be safely regarded as "the self-indulgent play of children" (*Lost*, 15).⁴⁶ There are times, the poem implies, when physical heat – even for this famously cerebral writer – must take a strategic precedence over intellectualism run amok, as embodied by the self-important phallogocentrism of Futurist discourse.

"the secret of the world" (*Essays*, 34-35, 40, 43, 19). Hence Whitman in "Song of Myself," the self-proclaimed "poet of the body" and "poet of the soul" (*Leaves* 45); "acme of things accomplish'd," "encloser of things to be" (71); worker of "the celestial laws" (47); "a creator" (68).

⁴⁴ Whitman, *Leaves of Grass*, 49.

⁴⁵ Selinger, "Love in the Time of Melancholia," 26.

⁴⁶ "The genie of the womb," Loy affirms elsewhere, need cede "no whit of instinct to the genie of the phallus" ("HRE"). Tellingly, although "the male initiative is set to the tempo of the phallus" ("HRE"), it is a tempo to which *Songs to Joannes's* speaker is decidedly "not paced" (*Lost*, 54).

“Phallogocentrism” recalls a stage of feminist history whose time, perhaps, has largely passed. So too does the women’s writing, or *écriture féminine*, that Hélène Cixous called for in her 1975 essay “The Laugh of the Medusa.” But in the 1910s and early ’20s, when Loy was actively producing an embodied, erotic, and stridently “feminine” form of writing, such a vision of writing and of womanhood was far from passé, was indeed startlingly new – was as crucial to her modernism, and to her modernist identity as a New Woman, as were her many neoteric forays into the experimental regions of poetic genre and form. In this as in so many ways, Loy was decidedly ahead of her time. Just as French theory provided a lexicon with which to understand Joyce’s deconstructive texts – and indeed his own version of *écriture*, in Cixous’s account – so does Cixous provide a way to understand Loy’s poetry. If we are to come to terms with Loy’s idiosyncratic feminism, it is necessary to consider that language of the body which, unbeknownst to each other, both she and Cixous have had occasion to speak.

Ecce Fe/Mina: Unmanning the Spirit

Loy’s poetry uncannily anticipates the performatively essentialist vision in “Laugh of the Medusa” of women’s profound embodiment and cosmically libidinous pro-creativity. Indeed, Loy’s most memorable blasphemies result from the textual commingling of this sexual embodiment with Christian themes. Her poems’ aggressive interpolation of the female body, her assertion of the body *as* poetry, proleptically answers Cixous’s injunction to “Woman” to “put herself into the text.”⁴⁷ Loy thus provides a potent example of “a feminist practice of writing” that “will always surpass the discourse that regulates the phallogocentric system” (883). As Tim Armstrong notes, Loy “offers up the de-objectified body,” one whose “presence

⁴⁷ Cixous, “The Laugh of the Medusa,” 875. I find it difficult to accept Cristanne Miller’s assertion of a “chasm between spirit and skin” in Loy’s texts; to me the “spirit” of such poems as “Parturition” and *Songs to Joannes* – poems that hardly exhibit the “nongendered speaking voice” that Miller attributes to Loy’s poems generally – is inextricable from the texts’ viscerally somatic quality (*Cultures of Modernism*, 120).

insinuates itself into the rhythms of the poetry.”⁴⁸ Her female voices speak through the medium of the body and become subjects precisely, if counter-intuitively, in and through their very embodiment. For Loy as for Cixous, “women are body,” an infinitely expansive body whose “libido is cosmic” (Cixous 886, 889). They are God-sized (their “eyelashes polish stars”), and so are their desires; accordingly, their “seismic orgasm[s]” can rend the earth (*Lost*, 72, 66).⁴⁹ In both *Songs to Joannes* and *Lunar Baedeker* Loy enacts textually the “passionate and precise interrogation of her own erotogeneity” that Cixous endorses, “each stage of rapture inscribing a resonant vision, a composition, something beautiful” (876) – in Loy’s terms, “A cosmos / Of coloured voices / And laughing honey” (*Lost*, 56).

Of course, Loy’s depictions of sexual intercourse are rarely as abstractly figurative as laughing honey and colored voices. The lines that immediately succeed these, in fact, give us “spermatozoa / At the core of Nothing / In the milk of the Moon” (*Lost*, 56). Abstract, still, but there is no getting away from those spermatozoa – just another messy component of Eros, Loy’s land of milk and (laughing) honey. Often the poet unflinchingly celebrates love’s corporeal and even abject qualities, its “wild oats sown in mucous membrane,” its “rivers [that] run no fresher than a trickle of saliva,” its “humid carnage” (*Lost*, 53). Loy keeps the body in sight always; elsewhere she emphasizes the physicality of love as the meeting of lovers’ eyes “Trailing the rest of the animal behind them” (*Lost*, 16). She does not flinch even from noting the “ample sex” of a two-year-old girl, “Precocious coquette,” or the desire expressed toward her mutely by a “Bad little boy” (*Lost*, 24-25). Nor from the “wanton duality” of a man’s “skin-sack” (*Lost*, 53). Kenneth Rexroth memorably noted the effects of such details for Loy’s readers: “As

⁴⁸ Armstrong, *Modernism, Technology, and the Body*, 120.

⁴⁹ Loy’s notes toward an essay on religion contain a fragment that conjoins religion and the body, creation and Eros, in a way that Cixous would surely appreciate: “Orgasm = the microcosmic projection of the Paroxysm of creation” (“Notes on Religion,” 16). Joyce offers much the same sentiment by equating sexual coupling with Creation in *Ulysses*: “They are entwined in nethermost darkness, the willer with the willed, and in an instant (*fiat!*) light shall flood the world” (14.1069-70).

one reads of Mina Loy's babies, one's sphincters loosen. Her copulators stay copulated. . . .

Mina Loy, in her best known work, dipped her pen in the glands of Bartholin, and wrote."⁵⁰

According to Cixous, the female writer dips her pen in a somewhat different well of the body: "a woman is never far from mother. . . . She writes in white ink" (881). And we have seen that the poem "Parturition" brings together what Loy similarly views as women's essential maternity with the act of procreation, the divine and supremely artistic power to bring new life into an otherwise stagnant world. What I have not stressed about this poem, however, is how fully it co-opts and subverts male-privileging discourses, both sacred and secular. One of these discourses is the oft-invoked metaphor equating literary composition and completion with human gestation and birth—in and from the body of the poet. Susan Stanford Friedman has suggested that in contrast to a traditional association of the pen and phallus, hence of poetic creativity with masculinity, women writers' use of the equally traditional parturition metaphor constructs not only a "discourse distinct from phallogocentric male use of the same metaphor but also a subversive inscription of women's (pro)creativity."⁵¹ Contrary to Maeera Shreiber's reading ("With *Love Songs*, Loy lodges an attack on this line of thinking, arguing that these two kinds of making are absolutely distinct"), I would argue that Loy, like the women writers Friedman discusses, "unites motherhood and authorship into a new whole"; like male writers' use of the childbirth metaphor, "her comparison of motherhood and authorship reminds the reader of their historical separation. But unlike the male metaphor, her analogy subverts that contextual resonance instead of reinforcing it."⁵² Loy thus subverts a traditional division of labor—men produce, women reproduce—that has been licensed, in part, by Jewish and Christian theology; Adam and Eve's punishment dictates the division of manual and mental

⁵⁰ Loy, *Lunar Baedeker & Time-Tables*, 12-13.

⁵¹ Friedman, "Creativity and the Childbirth Metaphor," 49, 51.

⁵² Shreiber, "Love is a Lyric," 147; Friedman, "Creativity," 60.

work (“the sweat of his brow”) from the pains of reproductive labor, so that in the Judaic and Christian traditions, “where God the Father supplanted the Goddess as Mother, the [masculine] mind became the symbolic womb of the universe. . . . The power of the Word became the paradigm of male creativity, indeed the foundation of Western patriarchal ideology” (52). It is precisely this Word, I suggest – the divine sanction of male authority – that Loy overthrows in works such as “Parturition” and *Songs to Joannes*.

With “Parturition” Loy offers a gendered reversal of male writers’ appropriation of women’s fecundity to valorize their own forms of literary creation. In an act of transgressive tropology, Loy appropriates the traditionally male trope and offers as superior the combined force of artistic production and the uniquely female progenitive force, the Alpha and Omega, first and last, the “was – is – ever – shall – be / Of cosmic reproductivity” (*Lost*, 7). This displacement willfully subverts gendered religious hierarchy. The poem as a whole turns the gendered dynamics of Genesis and the gospels on their head, constituting a dramatically feminist reenactment of the biblical; Loy underlines this reenactment by appropriating both Jehovah’s and Christ’s declarative “I am” in the line “Mother I am” – a syntactic inversion that highlights the line’s coadunation of Word and mother, God and woman (*Lost*, 7). The phrase “I am” appears seven times in “Parturition,” replicating Christ’s sevenfold such assertions in John’s gospel, as in such “blasphemous” of statements as “Before Abraham was, I am” (John 9:58). (In Exodus, God gives His name to Moses as “I AM,” a construction that echoes pregnantly across the gospels [Exodus 3:14].) These Christic depictions of the female body also echo her characterization in “Brancusi’s Golden Bird” of the “Alpha and Omega” as a feminine “breast of revelation” and, in *Songs to Joannes*, of her female speaker’s spilling of the transubstantiated sacramental wine (*Lost*, 79, 54). *She* spills Christ’s blood; she writes in Red Ink.

“I am,” she writes, “Identical / With infinite Maternity,” and we are asked, I think, to recall Coleridge’s definition of the artist’s “primary imagination” – a duplication of “the eternal act of creation in the infinite I AM” – and to recognize this as a feminist trumping of such divine (pro)creativity.⁵³ Loy hints at another coadunation of woman and Christ with her self-depiction in *Anglo-Mongrels and the Rose* as

the rose
that grows
from the red flowing
from the flank of Christ
thorned with the computations
of the old
Jehovah’s gender (*Last*, 132)

Is it Jesus or is it she, “the rose / that grows” from Christ’s blood, who is thus “thorned”? The indeterminate syntax leaves us to weigh both potential meanings, reading Loy’s autobiographical character as both a product of His redeeming blood and, in the other reading, inseparable from Christ himself – as indeed Loy’s speaker will become at the climax of *Songs to Joannes*. (Of which more below.) In contrast with the ambiguity of these lines is the clarity with which Loy genders the nature of women’s and Christ’s real afflictors. Men, after all (“Jehovah’s gender”), decided Christ’s fate; and men’s computations continue to be a crown of thorns for modern women. The former allegation additionally highlights the absurdity of blaming, for instance, “the Jews” for the Crucifixion, as one of *Anglo-Mongrels’* characters does (*Last*, 158-59). One might with equal justice blame “the men.” If this latter inference is fallacious, though, it is a fallacy that Loy is more eager to commit – as when *Songs to Joannes* charges its male addressee with crucifying Loy’s female speaker, a transgressive embodiment of Christ:

Crucifixion
Of a busy-body
Longing to interfere so

⁵³ Coleridge, *Biographia Literaria*, 304.

With the intimacies
Of your insolent isolation

Crucifixion
Of an illegal ego's
Eclosion
On your equilibrium
Caryatid of an idea

Crucifixion
Wracked arms
Index extremities
In vacuum
To the unbroken fall (*Lost*, 67)

Instead of the flesh-breaking Communion Loy imagines in Section III, her speaker's flesh is broken by crucifixion. Like that of Jesus, her biblical predecessor, this woman's "crime" has been blasphemy, the sensuously irreverent, biblically inflected declarations of the preceding stanzas combining with her professed desire for self-deification. In what is both a cruelly ironic and a fundamentally subversive move, Loy fulfills her speaker's latter desire by *crucifying* her.

Loy's speaker here suffers the fate of the Son while Loy herself assumes the role of the properly deific artist, the god who creates—and who taketh away. Loy thus unmistakably stakes her claim to a position alongside not only Joyce but also such creators as Brancusi, Stein, and Wyndham Lewis, the order of artists for whom she reserves the appellation of Jehovah. Here it is illuminating to recall Loy's comments on Sigmund Freud, in a passage that distinguishes the merely messianic from the wholly creative: "When the gentile world . . . required a savior they nailed up a Christ. When it required a second savior to counteract the effects of the first, Freud was at its service."⁵⁴ Such an immensely influential (and, in Loy's own estimation, culturally redeeming) analytical mind as Freud's earns him this messianic

⁵⁴ Loy, "Notes on Religion," 15.

distinction; however, lacking the essentially Creative force of the artist, he will not bear comparison with God the Father.⁵⁵

As we have come to expect, the crucifixion sequence in *Songs to Joannes* specifically underscores the Passion's corporeal dimension. The same poet who in a 1920 closet drama invites us to "Observe the legs, the agony of the crucified . . . the tendons . . ." begins this earlier passage with the playful "busy-body" and ends tragically with the destruction of that body on the cross.⁵⁶ In such instances Loy's poem also betrays a remarkable self-consciousness, enacting a textual representation of blasphemy itself. For as David Lawton notes, blasphemy "insists on the corporeal body of the divine," a fact attested by such medieval constructions as "by God's arms" and "by God's bones."⁵⁷ Indeed, "a conventional representation is that swearers injure and rend the body of Christ himself in what is tantamount to a re-crucifixion, an anti-Mass" (10). Loy has already given us, in the third section of *Songs to Joannes*, an erotic anti-Mass held at a profane communion table. Now, three sections from the end, she presents the re-crucifixion, again substituting her speaker's own body for the body of Christ. In both cases Loy's desecrations assume a relentless corporeality; in a move that mirrors the eucharistic transvaluation of symbol into body, these defilements — graven in the mock-transubstantiative language of Logopoeia — threaten to cross over from the textual realm of blasphemy to the physicality of sacrilege.

In keeping with the principles of a somatic text, the poem sequence itself begins to splinter into fragments, the scattered limbs of a broken body. The next section reads, in full, "The moon is cold / Joannes / Where the Mediterranean — — — —" (*Lost*, 67), and the

⁵⁵ "Freud is unnecessary to the future," Loy writes elsewhere; "His utile achievement lay in his solution of the problem, 'To mention or not to mention.' By making it, aided by the scientific aegis - - - fashionably polite to mention. Clearing a way out for inhibition" (*SE*, 252).

⁵⁶ Loy, "The Pamperers," 65; ellipses in original.

⁵⁷ Lawton, *Blasphemy*, 10.

following two, with which the poem ends, read as articulations that have been similarly interrupted or aborted. Like these final stanzas, the speaker's body has been mangled, her arms "wracked." Moreover, her "unbroken fall" suggests that, unlike Osiris, she has little chance of being fully reassembled. Yet like the reduced but still gloriously embodied Golden Bird – whose own "extremities" have been "lopped" off, as Loy writes in her hymn to Brancusi – she remains the Alpha and Omega of the alternative, profane space that Loy has created, a space that mirrors but inverts the sexual politics of Christian orthodoxy, demonstrating the potential for texts to be determinedly Logos-centric without being phallogocentric (*Lost*, 79). This is not to say that either *Songs to Joannes* or *Lunar Baedeker* provides any illusion that the Christian model can be so easily re-appropriated. The female Christ maintains her sanctity at great cost, and, she claims, was never anything but a "Caryatid" anyway; she is merely an icon (the female body-as-pillar) in a radical textual space, the new and blasphemous ideology she supports only "an idea" – and one unlikely to gain much traction in the real world of 1917.

A provocative statement from Christian Science founder Mary Baker Eddy may help to explain the religion's appeal for a poet who so innovatively deploys the trope of deific becoming: "Human philosophy has God manlike; Christian Science makes man Godlike."⁵⁸ Eddy's wording makes dangerously explicit one of Christian orthodoxy's central ambiguities, namely the fine line between the ultimate virtue of *emulating* God and the ultimate sin of desiring *to become* God – that is, the line between sanctity and blasphemy that Loy adroitly traverses. At the same time, Loy's feminist poetics transcend Eddy's radical notion of "making man Godlike" to make *woman* Godlike, rescuing the Spirit from the impaling phallus and granting it a new, and a wholly blasphemous, tongue.

⁵⁸ Quoted in Cook, "The 'Infinitarian,'" 459.

Coda: Return of the Oppressed

That tongue reemerges with a vengeance in another of Loy's unpublished manuscripts, an untitled draft that depicts an idiosyncratic Second Coming as sequel to both the seismic coming and the crucifixion of *Songs to Joannes*.⁵⁹ Likely a product of Loy's "Bowery period" of 1948-1953, this manuscript concludes with a scorchingly apocalyptic evocation of outraged Woman—a return of the oppressed. Not requiring the "sharp twoedged sword" that protrudes from Christ's mouth in Revelation 1:16, this vengeful demigoddess unleashes "a two-edged tongue in torrential indignation."⁶⁰ Her tongue "hollows its course through the lobes of man's brain and erodes the quick of his nerves with the acids of old agony"; "it spreads a lasting blight on the crop of life which springs from it." Here is Woman the Destroyer, rendered in the modernistic guise of the "one-woman-jazz-band of the female universe," apocalyptic counterpart to the Genesis-like deity of pro-Creation. She comes to plague, and the plague is her tongue, unleashed. "For the womb is built of a long patience," Loy writes, "but when the genie of it at last is weary of bearing together with its biological load the ghostly foeti of unsatisfied desires, it rouses from its apathy."

In the spirit of apocalyptic rhetoric, the temporality here remains enigmatic.⁶¹ Is this a vision of a time to come, for example, or a time that has come already? Such questions dog this passage as insistently as they do Revelation. And like Revelation, Loy's text tells a grand narrative of righteous retribution:

So in the everlasting cavern [i.e., "the Womb"] vast as the cave of the four winds, a cyclonic Voice in vengeance of the mute forbearing multitude of misspent women, blows up the dusts of life; the debris and detritus that man in helpless

⁵⁹ Loy has elsewhere affirmed that woman "rises as the sun [and as the Son?], smiles from her beads and sets on the hither side of love - - - to rise again" ("HRE"; emphasis added).

⁶⁰ This untitled manuscript is filed with Loy's notes and typescript for "History of Religion and Eros" in the Yale Collection of American Literature.

⁶¹ In the language of revelation, writes J. Hillis Miller, "Apocalypse is never now. It is always to come, a thing of the future, both infinitely distant and immediately imminent" (*Others*, 117).

emulation of sadistic Nature has tossed there of his ethical logic, in vertiginous spirals of recrimination.

The rubbish of centuries crashes into words as the volume of all women's Silence become audible, rolls upon us.

Jesus Christ was Word become flesh; here is Woman, Silence become audible. But what, after all, does that silence say? Its discourse is not rational, it refuses to make sense. It is "a preposterous music," "a fuge [*sic*] of irrefutable illogic," an "echoing indignation" that "persists unanswerable." It simply "flows on," leaving a "sentient wreckage in its wake." It is, in the familiar sexist accusation, decidedly unreasonable.

This long-repressed voice thus returns as an "incantation" that "like malefic secret rites of destructive magic strikes undertones in our social symphony omitted in orchestration." It speaks in tongues, a babble that conveys women's trials, inequities, subordinations. It descends upon deaf ears but with the force of the Holy Spirit's descent upon the Apostles, and in the same form, its speaker's "two-edged tongue" recalling the Spirit's "cloven tongues like as of fire" (Acts 2:3). We have seen Loy usurp the roles of Creator and Crucified, Father and Son; in this work she completes a trinity of feminist appropriations. The "Spirit" here becomes "the unconscious medium through whom the outraged spirit of the weaker sex pours forth an automatic monologue." Her oracular cacophony erupts from a seemingly "dormant volcano," voicing a long-delayed retribution for women's historical silencing. She loosens the tongue, that is, whose discourse has been all too readily dismissed as unreasonable, illogical, and which has so easily been "absorbed by sanatoria & asylums with the connivance of official discretion which never listens behind closed doors." Official discretion, and desecration: of woman, the body, the erotic, the holy.

In this enigmatic late manuscript, Loy brings the female voice and body, her blasphemous speech and sacrilegious embodiment, inextricably to the forefront. Behold the

final, the cumulative damnation, a frightening female music that refuses to play by men's orchestrations – a music made in part of those damning, unintelligible sounds that issue, for instance, from a blinded soldier's harmonica, or from the mouths of women in the throes of childbirth, of women being nailed to their crosses. And made, in part, of those unintelligible silences: the damning silences of women locked behind closed doors and curtained windows, women reduced to dolls with glassy eyes: a silent cacophony of pain, indignation, and reprisal. Here, then, is another incarnation of the female Logos. The Word is the Creative principle but it is also, in the Bible, a principle that becomes flesh, and a principle that *returns* to destroy and then make new. Women's special powers of creation remain for Loy a powerful force in her feminist poetry and prose, but what this unpublished manuscript adds is the polemical and inherently apocalyptic injunction to tear down before building up; to tear down patriarchy, that is, along with its discursive hegemony, so that women's biological and aesthetic powers of pro-Creation can issue in a *new* discourse and even, perhaps, a new social order. Such an aspiration may seem downright utopian, but it is not, I think, out of character – coming as it does from the writer of the "Feminist Manifesto" and the proponent of an International Psycho-Democracy, and a writer who knew as well as anyone the power of words to make sacred, to profane, and to accomplish both in one blasphemous breath.

Chapter Three

BLASPHEMY AS DIALECTIC: DEFINING AND DEFILING “THE NEW NEGRO”

If the chord of mutual Zionism is one of the last to be sounded in Joyce’s *Ulysses* – when Bloom imagines a “consummation” of both Irish and Jewish Zionisms – it is one of the first that Alain Locke strikes in his landmark 1925 anthology *The New Negro: An Interpretation* (U, 17.761-64). In his introduction to the volume, Locke interprets Harlem as “the home of the Negro’s ‘Zionism,’” then widens this observation’s scope and implications: “As with the Jew, persecution is making the Negro international” (NN, 14). Later, on the topic of American slavery and the “sorrow songs,” he writes that “the only historical analogy is the spiritual experience of the Jews and the only analogue, the Psalms” (200). Locke’s assessments here contribute to a deeply rooted cultural identification of African Americans with the “chosen people” of the Bible, a figuration of American slaves and their descendents as typological fulfillments of the biblical Israelites. Theophus Smith has termed the varied cultural and political uses of these Hebraic parallels “Exodus strategies” – imaginative identifications that allowed black Americans both during and after slavery to assemble their own sacred notions of peoplehood, in a process Werner Sollors calls “typological ethnogenesis.”¹

By arrogating and rewriting European interpretations and invocations of the Bible, Exodus strategies express African American resistance to white oppression. Such rewritings, moreover, figure centrally in the New Negro Renaissance of the 1920s and remain integral to our understanding of African American modernism. If, as Michael North argues, white

¹ Smith, *Conjuring Culture*, 67; Sollors, *Beyond Ethnicity*, 57. Characteristically, the black Baptist preacher Absalom Jones drew on these strategies when, in an 1808 sermon commemorating the United States’ recent abolition of the transatlantic slave trade, he declared that God “has, as in the case of his ancient and chosen people the Jews, *come down to deliver* our suffering countrymen from the hands of their oppressors” (“A Thanksgiving Sermon,” 75-76; emphasis in original). For more on African American “Exodus strategies,” see Albert J. Raboteau, *Canaan Land: A Religious History of African Americans* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001).

moderns appropriated African aesthetics and the African American vernacular as “the dialect of modernism,” black blasphemous modernism reversed this flow of appropriation. While writers such as Stevens, Eliot, Pound, and Williams were busy stealing black stereotypes and voices, black modernists seized the cultural, aesthetic, and political capital inherent in constructions of the biblical and the theological – constructions that are “normatively the property of white mythology.”² Examples abound in the *New Negro* anthology and in countless other Harlem-Renaissance texts, as well as in some of the period’s most memorable visual art: Charles Cullen’s drawings for Countée Cullen’s *The Black Christ*, for example, and Aaron Douglas’s illustrations for James Weldon Johnson’s *God’s Trombones*. The latter depict a variety of biblical figures, including Adam, Gabriel, the Prodigal Son, Simon of Cyrene, the Nativity shepherds, and the very hand of God – all portrayed as black.

Strategic revisions of existing typologies served African Americans as an important means of distinguishing and building their own intelligible nationhood. We nonetheless turn now to important fissures *within* black culture, in particular within the Harlem Renaissance community of artists, intellectuals, and writers. In one corner we find perhaps the most important document of the renaissance, Locke’s *New Negro* anthology. In the other we have that young coterie of avant-garde Harlem writers and artists who called themselves “the “Niggeratti,” including Douglas, Langston Hughes, Zora Neale Hurston, Wallace Thurman, and Richard Bruce Nugent. Excepting Thurman, who arrived in Harlem only after the anthology’s publication, all were *New Negro* contributors. Nevertheless, in the following months and years, several of these figures went on to oppose their politicized and often stridently blasphemous art to that anthology’s typological ethos – to its particular “interpretation,” as its

² Rachel Blau DuPlessis, *Genders, Races, and Religious Cultures*, 132.

subtitle declares, of what the New Negro was and would become, and to its prophecy of a messianic and specifically Christ-like racial redeemer.

Begin with two visual bookends to the Harlem Renaissance: “The Brown Madonna,” Winold Reiss’s frontispiece to *The New Negro* (1925), and “Mary Madonna,” a 1930 drawing by Bruce Nugent (Illustrations 1-2). Despite their similar titles, these pictures could hardly be more different. Reiss’s Madonna, clearly labeled as such in the picture’s caption, wears blue in keeping with traditional iconography of the Virgin. A pale nimbus, likewise rendered in blue, radiates from her figure, contributing to the portrait’s sacramental valence. She directs her gaze modestly away from the viewer and holds in her arms the (Christ)child who seems to incarnate that “New Negro” announced in large letters on the adjacent title page – herald of the race’s



Fig. 1. Winold Reiss, “The Brown Madonna,” 1925. Fisk University Galleries, Nashville, Tennessee. Reproduced by permission of Renate Reiss.

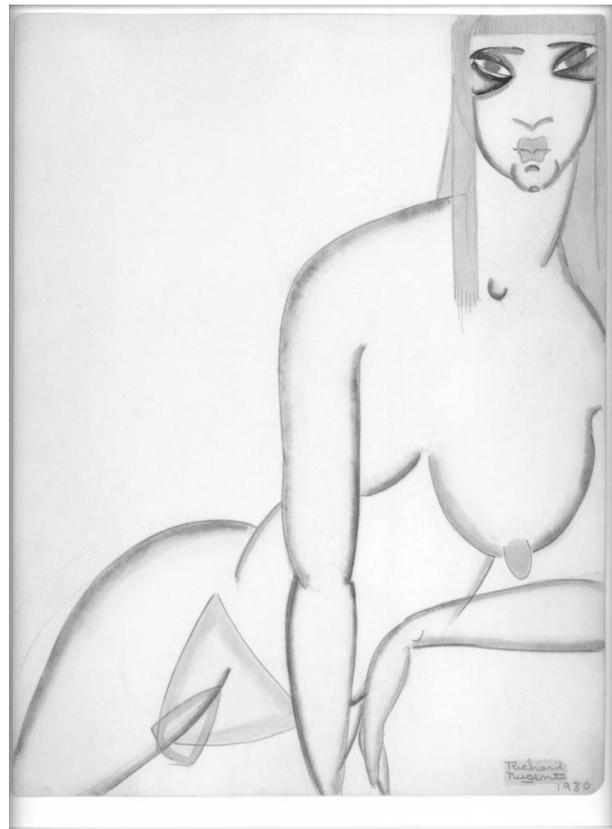


Fig. 2. Richard Bruce Nugent, “Mary Madonna,” 1930. Reproduced with permission from the collection of Thomas H. Wirth.

cultural renaissance in and through art. (Locke himself likely chose the image's typological caption.³) Nugent's *Mary*, in contrast, gazes directly and immodestly at us with weary, licentious eyes. Naked, languid, without child, this racially indeterminate woman seems more Magdalene than Madonna, more erotic than maternal; an exaggerated divot below her throat hints at a slightly misplaced Adam's apple, a suggestion of androgyny that accords with the sexual ambiguities inherent in many of Nugent's other works. A distended blonde nipple matches the subject's hair, and two colorful interlocking triangles call attention to what may or may not be a site of holy reproduction. In either case, this transgressive Madonna hardly conforms to the ideal of bourgeois respectability endemic to programs of "racial uplift" generally and to the ethos so carefully crafted five years earlier by Locke's anthology – not least by means of its frontispiece, what Marlon Ross has aptly called an "allegory of spirituality purified of suggestive sexuality."⁴

Nugent's drawing is just the opposite. Its suggestive sexuality is so insistent as to "purify" the image of its allegorical and spiritual freight, even if it does belong to his *Salome* series – a sequence of biblically inspired images that also includes "Mary Magdalene," "Mrs. Herod," "Mary Sister of Martha," and an untitled depiction of what appears to be John the Baptist.⁵ The whole series has been taken to be, as Ellen McBreen argues, "in keeping with Wilde's subversive project – to reveal queerness within the very pages of the Bible."⁶ One must ask, though, in what way this drawing can claim to depict the Madonna at all, especially given the perplexing absence of a child – a requisite complement, it would seem, to even a secularized Madonna figure. The baby that functions in the earlier Reiss portrait as emblem of the nascent

³ Locke appears to have provided the captions for Reiss's portraits, in response to a written request by Charles Boni, Jr., of October 21, 1925 (Alain L. Locke Papers, box 164-122, folder 12).

⁴ Ross, *Manning the Race*, 87.

⁵ Other drawings from this series include "Hagar," "Mrs. Lot," "Lucifer," and "Naomi and Ruth." See Nugent, *Gay Rebel of the Harlem Renaissance*, plates 1-7.

⁶ McBreen, "Biblical Gender Bending," 24.

New Negro has disappeared from Nugent's vision, in what we might read as a cynically allegorical depiction of that New Negro – of a certain orthodox vision, that is, of the anticipated racial redeemer.

That redeemer, as pictured by Reiss, has moreover disappeared from *The New Negro* itself; along with his sixteen other sketches and portraits that appeared in the anthology's first two printings (1925, 1927), "The Brown Madonna" has been expunged from subsequent editions, including the only one currently in print.⁷ One consequence of this erasure has been to vitiate the volume's originally insistent aura of messianic expectation – a messianism heralded by the "Brown Madonna" and her baby as well as by the beatific and oracular effect of many of Reiss's other portraits of prominent New Negro figures: Locke, Du Bois, Countée Cullen, Paul Robeson, James Weldon Johnson, Elise McDougald, Roland Hayes, and others. These lush, full-color plates create a veritable renaissance iconography, one that establishes an almost *sacred* iconicity. In some of the portraits, the subjects' heads float disembodied, evoking a spiritual transcendence; in many, foreheads gleam with accentuated effect, suggesting haloes. Jean Toomer glows with a radiance that exceeds even that of "The Brown Madonna," in keeping with the fact that he, more than any other *New Negro* contributor, is held to promise a fulfillment of its messianic hopes. (William Stanley Braithwaite concludes his *New Negro* essay by invoking Toomer as "the very first artist of the race" and, echoing Christ's own self-identification at the close of Revelation, as "a bright morning star of a new day of the race in literature."⁸)

As readers familiar with its first edition can attest, then, to encounter the *New Negro* anthology as it was originally conceived is an experience akin to that of perusing a lushly

⁷ George Bornstein discusses the way Reiss's work "has been airbrushed out of [*The New Negro's*] successive imprints" in *Material Modernism*, 149-52.

⁸ Braithwaite, "The Negro in American Literature," *NN*, 44. Compare *Rev.* 22:16.

illustrated Bible.⁹ It is also to wonder whether *The New Negro* offers itself, rather more literally than is commonly acknowledged, as “the Bible of the Harlem Renaissance.”¹⁰ A careful reading of *The New Negro* tends to confirm these suspicions, as though Locke’s anthology not only participates in scriptural typology but actually fulfills itself as an antitype of scripture, emulating a biblical tradition and adopting a biblical idiom as it compiles a highly selective canon of renaissance texts – in the process providing a kind of New Testament for African American culture. Accordingly, the volume’s messianic expectations simmer palpably beneath the surface of its words and images, coming to a boil in the concluding essay by Du Bois – a document whose Revelatory character was partly determined by Locke’s own editorial hand, as we shall see.

“The ideal anthologist,” wrote Laura Riding and Robert Graves in their *Pamphlet Against Anthologies*, “is a priest of Poetry to the people, ready to give them any acceptable god.”¹¹ Alain Locke was such an ideal anthologist. He was, however, less a priest of poetry than of a whole culture, partly existent and partly imagined; the god his anthology sets out to give its readers is both announced on its cover and pictured in the arms of its frontispiece Madonna. The Niggeratti will rework to their own ends *The New Negro*’s messianic tropes. In sum, they pit an aesthetics of sacrilege, calculated to shock, against the anthology’s more conservative but still transgressive typologies, its reworkings of scripture to herald the imminent arrival of a nonetheless ever-elusive New Negro.

⁹ A reviewer in *Opportunity* observed that *The New Negro*’s “physical side,” “utterly apart from its reading matter, makes the volume a valuable possession – one to be treasured” (quoted in Martha Jane Nadell, *Enter the New Negroes*, 178).

¹⁰ Purveyors of this timeworn phrase include Arnold Rampersad, Henry Louis Gates, Jr., and Nathan Irvin Huggins. Rampersad, *Ralph Ellison*, 79, and Introduction to *NN*, ix; Gates, quoted in Michael Soto, “Teaching *The New Negro*,” 169; Huggins, *Harlem Renaissance*, xviii.

¹¹ Riding and Graves, “A Survey of Modernist Poetry” and “A Pamphlet Against Anthologies,” 177.

We shall return to the meaningfully blasphemous character of Bruce Nugent's writings and art; "Mary Madonna" merely scratches the surface of a tenacious impulse to transgress the sacred. More particularly, we will consider how the works of Nugent's fellow "Niggeratti" engage and challenge both orthodox Christianity and the orthodoxy of the New Negro that Locke's anthology extols and exemplifies. The pages that follow explore *The New Negro's* auto-sacralizing bid to consolidate, through a forceful rhetorical appropriation of prophetic messianism and biblical revelation, this renaissance orthodoxy that the Niggeratti will so delight in defiling. To attend to these dynamics is to recognize a hitherto obscured theological core of Harlem Renaissance politics and poetics – to see, in short, how *The New Negro* and its less pious literary successors produce a cultural dialogue out of the dueling rhetorics of consecration and desecration, of prophecy and profanation.

The New Negro as New Testament

Leonard Harris and Charles Molesworth have recently interpreted *The New Negro* as a determinedly modernist, thus essentially "secular," document.¹² Such a ready identification of modernism with the secular makes this a problematic observation, to say the least; for one thing, African American modernism offers one of the more obvious refutations of the "secularization thesis" as applied to modernism and modernity generally.¹³ For another, *The New Negro's* privileging of a modernist aesthetic is inextricably bound up in its devaluing of the

¹² Harris and Molesworth, *Alain L. Locke*, 180.

¹³ Citing perceptive observations by Zora Neale Hurston, James Baldwin, Richard Wright, and others about the abiding political and social consequences of Christianity in the ostensibly secular West, Michael Lackey notes that "Black writers, in particular, have been rejecting the secularization hypothesis for some time" ("Zora Neale Hurston's *Herod the Great*," 117). According to E. Franklin Frazier's seminal study, religion remained for most of the twentieth century the "most important institution" in the lives of African Americans (*The Negro Church*, 74). And as Caroline Goesser has observed, "the experience of religion and spirituality formed an integral component of black modernism"; black modernists "denied normative polarities between religion and the modern world that began during the Enlightenment and continued into twentieth-century scholarship in art and cultural studies" (*Picturing the New Negro*, 209).

secular, the profane, and the material – categories better represented by the anthology’s predecessor, the March 1925 “Harlem number” of *Survey Graphic* – in favor of an emphasis on the sacred, the aesthetic, and the ethereal. More generally, *The New Negro’s* putative secularism is amply belied by its contents, whose investment in the biblical tradition as a fund of both inspiration and subject matter is extensive. Locke’s anthology in fact rehearses Christian themes throughout, in its nonfiction as well as its imaginative elements. Contributor Rudolph Fisher (who wittily christened his own son, b. 1926, “the new Negro”) makes perhaps the most sustained use of the Bible throughout his two stories in the volume.¹⁴ Then there are Aaron Douglas’s illustrations, which consistently foreground biblical themes, and the stories of John Matheus, Eric Walrond, and Zora Neale Hurston, all of which brim with scriptural quotations and allusions.

The New Negro’s biblical indebtedness can further be witnessed in its inclusion of the musical scores and lyrics of the spirituals “Father Abraham” and “Listen to de Lambs”; in James Weldon Johnson’s versified sermon, “The Creation”; in J. A. Rogers’s reflections on African American revival meetings; in Langston Hughes’s irreverent “Jazzonia”; and in the poetry of Claude McKay and Countée Cullen. (Years later, Wallace Thurman would caustically portray Cullen’s writing process thus: “eyes on a page of Keats, fingers on typewriter, mind frantically conjuring African scenes. And there would of course be a Bible nearby.”¹⁵) We have seen, too, that Locke himself opens the anthology by invoking the historical African American identification with the biblical Israelites. Such sentiments are not surprising; throughout African American history, as Theophus Smith argues, “all corporate liberation efforts can be configured, in the manner of ritual performances, as dramatic reenactments of Exodus, and their leaders

¹⁴ John McCluskey, Jr., Introduction to Fisher, *The City of Refuge*, xv.

¹⁵ Thurman, *Infants of the Spring*, 236.

envisioned as approximate types of Moses.”¹⁶ What bears remarking is that, in *The New Negro’s* cultural moment—in the wake, for one thing, of a decade-long and continuing Exodus of African Americans from the rural South to the urban North—an updated messianic presence appears to have been called for. If God, in the words of one of Jean Toomer’s narrators, had “left the Moses-people for the nigger,” Locke’s anthology likewise left Moses behind in favor of another biblical leader (*NN*, 96). The *new* New Negroes, especially those African American writers and artists who had already established themselves in “the promised land” of Harlem, were through with needing a Moses (*NN*, 281). They desired a Christ.

The New Negro is not entirely alone here. An air of messianic expectation—no longer of a Moses to free them from bondage, but of an artistic Christ who will *redeem* a putatively underdeveloped African American culture—is an insistent presence in the period. Reverdy C. Ransom’s 1923 poem “The New Negro” casts its eponymous figure as being charged with “a sacred trust” that sounds not a little like Christ’s redeeming mission:

To wear God’s image in the ranks of men
And walk as princes of the royal blood divine. . . .
He is the last reserve of God on earth,
Who, in the godly fellowship of love,
Will rule the world with peace.¹⁷

Similarly, at a 1925 gathering of the New York Urban League, Heywood Broun prophesied the coming of “a supremely great Negro artist, who could catch the imagination of the world.”¹⁸ Such expectation suffuses *The New Negro*, as in Locke’s own deceptively cautious avowal that “the Negro may well become what some have predicted, the artist of American life,” or as in the

¹⁶ Smith, *Conjuring Culture*, 69. Given this tradition, it is hardly surprising that John Henry Adams would introduce “the real new Negro man,” in a 1904 essay, as having “a face as strong and expressive as Angelo’s Moses” (“Rough Sketches,” 67).

¹⁷ Ransom, “The New Negro,” 12.

¹⁸ Quoted in Henry Louis Gates Jr., “The Trope of a New Negro,” 148. “Brown concluded,” Gates writes, “by saying that this artist-redeemer could come at any time and asked his audience to remain silent for ten full seconds to imagine his coming!” (148).

book's telling epigraph—"O, rise, shine for Thy Light is a' com-ing"—which serves to dispel any doubts one might entertain about the Christological import of "The Brown Madonna" on the previous leaf (NN, 258, vii).

The redeeming artist also appears as an avatar of Jesus Christ in Montgomery Gregory's *New Negro* essay on "The Drama of Negro Life." Praising African American stage actor Opal Cooper for his early development of "serious" acting, Gregory observes that, "like John the Baptist, he proved to be only the forerunner of one who was to touch the peaks of histrionic accomplishment" (NN, 156). Gregory thus leaves little doubt about the intended biblical analogue of Cooper's successor, Charles Gilpin. In the ensuing discussion, Eugene O'Neill and Gilpin emerge as Father and Son, respectively (highlighting a focus on interracial collaboration that recurs throughout *The New Negro*), who with their play *The Emperor Jones* have produced a "tour-de-force of genius" that "will tower as a beacon-light of inspiration"—a city on a hill, as it were (156). O'Neill is the creator, his medium the Word; Gilpin the actor incarnates that Word, in the process redeeming black drama from its fallen minstrel state. (Gregory goes on to dismiss the "false gods" of the "old leadership," while proclaiming the younger artists' "divine plan" [159].)

The texts that make up *The New Negro* are not always so explicit, but Locke and other contributors return time and again to the New Negro's role as redemptive prophet. "The black scholar, seer, sage, prophet sings his message," declaims Albert Barnes in his prominently positioned essay (23).¹⁹ Du Bois's *New Negro* essay likewise calls forth "the black apostle" who must "devote himself to race uplift . . . by the lure of inner vision" (397). According to Locke, the new black cultural figure must serve as a "vehicle" to channel the "spiritual kinship" of his folk

¹⁹ Barnes in fact reads "the Negro" as embodying the very spirit of religion: "Poetry is religion brought down to earth and it is of the essence of the Negro soul. . . . The white man in the mass cannot compete with the Negro in spiritual endowment" (NN, 20).

art, offering “arresting visions and vibrant prophecies” in “rhapsodic Biblical speech” (207, 47, 52). (Hughes is praised in particular for his poems’ “Biblical simplicity” [52].) The redeemer promises to afford African America “a new soul . . . a fresh spiritual and cultural focusing . . . a renewed race-spirit . . . a spiritual emancipation”: in short, “a spiritual quickening and racial leavening such as no generation has yet felt and known” (xxvii, 4, 50).

This lexicon of the sacred offers a useful, if not wholly satisfying, way to understand the seemingly contradictory obligations with which Locke’s anthology burdens the shoulders of the New Negro: to express his or her stake in the direction of the race through a paradoxically *disinterested* art, and to be best “representative” of that race by *not* striving to be representative. “The newer motive, then, in being racial is to be so purely for the sake of art” (NN, 51). For Locke it is a matter of abandoning the artist’s profane materials and media — “the shambles of conventional polemics, cheap romance and journalism” — and embracing a sacred calling in “the domain of pure and unbiassed art” (49). The way Locke reconciles that seeming disjunction between, on one hand, the New Negro’s social and political functions of advancing the race, and, on the other, this figure’s necessary commitment to a “pure,” transcendent, disengaged art is to unite both commitments as a sacred cultural project; given the sacral character of the New Negro’s sociopolitical struggle, his or her art must likewise aspire to the conditions of the sacred. It must transcend, that is, precisely those worldly matters it is tasked with complementing.

Hence *The New Negro’s* near-biblical exhortations, the most insistent of which Locke reserves for last, in a further echo of the New Testament — for Du Bois’s contribution, “The Negro Mind Reaches Out,” is the anthology’s Revelation, its most overtly and hauntingly apocalyptic text. Granted its own special section (“Worlds of Color”), this concluding essay is also *The New Negro’s* most sustained discussion of international politics and race relations, and

an inherently prophetic one.²⁰ Du Bois fits perfectly the part of Revelator; a generation older than Locke, and a further generation removed from writers such as Hughes, Hurston, and Nugent, his prophetic voice trumpets alongside the younger voices as the movement's resident sage and seer. Signaling this prophetic character is the essay's portentous, vatic register: "With nearly every great European empire to-day walks its dark colonial shadow, while over all Europe there stretches the yellow shadow of Asia that lies across the world"; "What prophet can tell what world-tempest lurks in these cloud-like shadows?" (NN, 386, 389). Further, in asserting that "the day faintly dawns when the new force for international understanding and racial readjustment will and must be felt," Du Bois invokes the paradoxical temporality of revelation, the blend of imminence ("The day dawns") and elusiveness ("The day *faintly* dawns") that characterizes all apocalyptic texts.

Du Bois opens the piece by recalling his famous pronouncement in *The Souls of Black Folk*—"The problem of the twentieth century is the problem of the color line"—and by asking rhetorically whether this constitutes "prophecy or speculation" (385). His own answer, evidently, is "prophecy," for in the essay's closing words he will reiterate with confidence his vision of "the problem of the 20th century as the Problem of the Color Line" (414). Here at the outset, though, Du Bois already touches the prophetic chord that the genre of apocalypse demands. He goes on to warn of the false religion of white-governed industry and empire, whose doctrines make "even intelligent men . . . believe almost religiously that white folk are a peculiar and chosen people. . . . Color hate easily assumes the form of a religion" (407). That religion's purveyors—the essay's Antichrists—assume responsibility for "the salvation of the world," but theirs is a perverted salvation achieved through colonial subjugation and coercion

²⁰ As Gayatri Spivak writes, Du Bois's text "gives us the first taste of colonial discourse studies and even a preview of what was to follow from it—postcolonial criticism" (*Death of a Discipline*, 97).

(410). The future's hope, Du Bois proclaims, rests with a redeeming representative of the race who will be "the black apostle." Naturally gifted, and also nurtured by an educational and institutional effort that will avoid "the pitfalls of American and English race leadership," this apostle will "devote himself to race uplift not by the compulsion of outer hate but by the lure of inner vision" (397).

Du Bois, of course, has inner visions of his own to share. One of these, which first emerges in the opening paragraph, resonates with the apocalyptic tenor of the essay as a whole: "the great event of these great years, the World War" (385). That event, in words that ring tragically prophetic from this side of World War II, has left behind its "fatal seed," one destined to pullulate into further "world dissension and catastrophe" (385). The War returns in the essay's subsequent arraignment of France for its use of black men as "'shock' troops" who were thrown "ruthlessly into horrible slaughter" in a large-scale "blood sacrifice" (392-93). The subject returns most forcefully, however, in the unsettlingly eschatological vision of Du Bois's conclusion, which invokes a great cleansing holocaust and the heavenly city that lies just beyond it: "there came during the Great War, during those terrible years of 1917 and 1918, a vision of the Glory of Sacrifice, a dream of a world greater, sweeter, more beautiful and more honest than ever before; a world without war, without poverty and without hate. I am glad it came. Even though it was a mirage it was eternally true" (413). Itself prompted by the apocalyptic violence of a world war, this vision of a New Jerusalem that lies on the other side of yet another annihilation has been as fleeting, historically (merely "a mirage"), as it is "eternally true."

Though the vision itself is eternal, our access to it comes only in vague and intermittent spurts. Du Bois nonetheless senses its return: "To-day some faint shadow of it comes to me again" (413). He locates his prophesied Holy City in Liberia, the nation founded by freed

American slaves. It is a land of “Silver and Gold and Ivory” that echoes Christ’s Sermon on the Mount – and John Winthrop’s famous self-sanctifying trope – in being “a little thing set upon a Hill” (414; cf. Matt. 5:14).²¹ Though small, Du Bois writes, Liberia

represents to me the world. Here political power has tried to resist the power of modern capital. It has not yet succeeded, but its partial failure is not because the republic is black, but because the world has failed in the same battle; because organized industry owns and rules England, France, Germany, America and Heaven. And can Liberia escape the power that rules the world? I do not know; but I do know unless the world escapes, the world as well as Liberia will die; and if Liberia lives it will be because the World is reborn as in that vision splendid of 1918. (414)

That it has taken the violence of a horrific war to elicit this “splendid” vision of the world’s rebirth – a vision that itself anticipates and seems even to require another violent “cleansing,” a further letting of baptismal blood – is as chilling as it is true to the rhetorical tradition of apocalyptic eschatology.

It is worth comparing this essay with its initial version, an article entitled “Worlds of Color” that had appeared in the April 1925 issue of *Foreign Affairs*. Du Bois’s *New Negro* essay is notably different from this prior publication, and the differences are telling. Consider, first, the opening paragraph of each version of the essay, where Du Bois addresses the “catastrophe” of World War I:

- 1 How deep were the roots of this catastrophe entwined about the color line? And of the legacy left, what of the darker race problems will the world inherit?²²
- 2 Fruit of the bitter rivalries of economic imperialism, the roots of that catastrophe were in Africa, deeply entwined at bottom with the problems of the color line. And of the legacy left, the problems the world inherits hold the same fatal seed; world dissension and catastrophe still lurk in the unsolved problems of race relations. (*NN*, 385)

²¹ There is an “unintended irony,” as George Hutchinson has observed, in Du Bois’s invocation of Liberia as paradise: “For Du Bois, Liberia foretells African liberation. ‘Tribal’ Africans in Liberia might have told a different story” (*The Harlem Renaissance in Black and White*, 432).

²² Du Bois, “Worlds of Color,” 423.

The metaphor of roots remains, but it, and the passage as a whole, have dilated noticeably in the *New Negro* version. At the same time, the mode of address has changed from query to assertion, and from uncertainty to the total certainty we expect of our prophets. The register has also changed considerably, with the addition of some nice apocalyptic touches (“that same fatal seed”; “world dissension and catastrophe still lurk”). Then, to the end of his section on “The Shadow of Portugal,” a similarly apocalyptic sentence has been appended that has no precedent in the earlier version: “What prophet can tell what world-tempest lurks in these cloud-like shadows?” (NN, 389). Liberia, earlier merely “set upon a hill,” is in *The New Negro* “set upon a Hill,” emphasizing the biblical allusion and its grandiloquence. And whereas, in the earlier article, Du Bois warns that “world democracy as well as Liberia” may “die” (44), in the *New Negro* version it is “the world” itself that may die (414)—a more patently apocalyptic scenario.

Still more significant, perhaps, is a lengthy portion of the *New Negro* essay (409-13) that does not appear in the earlier published article, and which has gone unremarked by scholars of Locke as well as of Du Bois. Locke himself seems to have chosen to include this section from among the drafts and fragments Du Bois produced in preparation for the *Foreign Affairs* piece. (Or more precisely, from a typescript currently catalogued under “Articles not known to have been published, 1900-1930,” among the Du Bois Papers held by the University of Massachusetts.²³) Locke would later characterize his midwifery of “The Negro Mind Reaches Out” as an actual “rewriting”: “[Du Bois’s] article in *The New Negro* I rewrote for him from two old articles of his that he contemptuously tossed over his desk top to me, saying if you can find anything to use in either of these, go ahead and use it. He refused to write anything fresh.”²⁴ Certainly Locke revised “Worlds of Color” throughout, as evidenced by the numerous slight

²³ Du Bois, “(World Racial Developments) / 1924 / Fragments,” W. E. B. Du Bois Papers, series 3c, box 212, folder 20.

²⁴ Quoted in Harris and Molesworth, *Alain L. Locke*, 318.

and seemingly trivial emendations of Du Bois's prose – its punctuation, for example – as it appears in *Foreign Affairs* and in the drafts. Given that Du Bois's participation in the anthology was "somewhat clenched" – the two men were not on the best of terms in 1925, in part because of their differences over the production of the anthology – Locke's recollection of Du Bois's indifference to *The New Negro's* presentation of his own work deserves our attention if not our outright credulity.²⁵ In his Pulitzer Prize-winning biography of Du Bois, David Levering Lewis reaffirms Locke's version of events while also denigrating "The Negro Mind Reaches Out" as "a rehash of Du Bois's African travels."²⁶ Lewis says nothing more about the essay, perhaps unmindful of the fact that it was a revised version of Du Bois's "Worlds of Color," which Lewis praises elsewhere (116).

In any case, it is clear enough that Locke had final say – partly in his capacity as editor, partly as a result of Du Bois's indifference, and partly because of the mutually chary relationship that provoked that indifference – over the essay that would bring *The New Negro* to its close. And it is striking to reflect that much of this essay's most plainly apocalyptic language appears in the several pages that do not appear in Du Bois's *Foreign Affairs* article: "the day faintly dawns"; "a vision of a world greater, sweeter, more beautiful and more honest than ever before; a world without war, without poverty, and without hate"; "I am glad it came. Even though it was a mirage it was eternally true. To-day some faint shadow of it comes to me again" (NN, 413). In concert with the others mentioned above, these additions demonstrate a concerted effort on Locke's part to ratchet up the apocalypticism of Du Bois's article for its inclusion as *The*

²⁵ Harris and Molesworth, *Alain L. Locke*, 211. A decade later, Du Bois would again find his prose being manipulated by Locke. The former protested, in a letter of May 1936, against many of Locke's "corrections" of his manuscript "Social Reconstruction and the Negro" – a "booklet" solicited by Locke and the Association for Negro Folk Education as part of a series on "Adult Education" – and against certain revisions in which "my meaning has been toned down, and my style of writing unnecessarily changed." Locke wrote six months later to reject the booklet outright, citing "the additional trouble and work of the extensive revision that . . . would be necessary to make this manuscript appropriate for publication now." It would never be published. (Alain L. Locke Papers, box 164-26, folders 8-9.)

²⁶ Lewis, *W. E. B. Du Bois*, 162.

New Negro's Revelation. As elsewhere in his stewardship of *The New Negro*—his handling of Countée Cullen's "Heritage," his unauthorized inclusion of excerpts from Jean Toomer's *Cane*, and his equally unauthorized re-titling of a Claude McKay poem—Locke here took a heavy hand.²⁷ And no less than the suggestive placement of "The Brown Madonna" cradling the New Negro at the book's beginning, the apocalypticism at its end helped to ensure that the entire volume would cohere in New-Testament fashion.

That *The New Negro's* biblicization was intentional is further suggested by the ways it differs from its predecessor, the Harlem number of *Survey Graphic* that Locke also edited—but with far less latitude, given the overriding editorial policies of the magazine. At a fundamental level, *The New Negro's* departure from the *Survey Graphic* issue emerges in its downplaying of Harlem as a material and historically locatable space and time; James Weldon Johnson's Harlem piece remains, but otherwise the word "Harlem," and any reference to the place—"the city" or "the community," for example, phrases that recur in the *Graphic's* table of contents—drops out of *The New Negro's* titles.²⁸ Winthrop D. Lane's essay on "The Grim Side of Harlem" disappears altogether, as do Winold Reiss's "Harlem Types," and as do all of the photographs of Harlem life that appeared in *Survey*. Mahonri Young's drawing of "The Laborer" likewise disappears, as though *The New Negro* could accommodate only aesthetic forms of production (hence, for example, the inclusion of photos of art objects but not of people or places); there may be some

²⁷ See Jeremy Braddock, *Collecting as Modernist Practice*, on "the strongly mediating character of Locke's editorial presence" (195). Locke's controversial re-titling of McKay's "The White House" (as the more benign "White Houses") is well known, but "Locke was also an exacting editor of ['Heritage'], repeatedly returning Cullen's drafts for correction and revision. By the end of 1924, Cullen would pleadingly write to Locke for permission to cease his revisions" (185). On the evidence of the "substantially revised version of 'Heritage' that would be published in *Color*" the following year—and of a letter in which Cullen asked Locke to return a copy of "Heritage" "in the form in which he intended to use it"—Braddock speculates that Locke may have played an especially formative role in shaping the presentation of this particular poem, in many ways the centerpiece of *The New Negro* (186). As for Toomer's intended *New Negro* contribution, Locke rejected it in favor of the more ideologically useful *Cane* excerpts; see George Hutchinson, *In Search of Nella Larsen*, 186.

²⁸ Fisher's "City of Refuge" is an exception here—but Locke's own essay on "Harlem" from *Survey Graphic* is not included; W. A. Domingo's "The Tropics in New York" becomes "Gift of the Black Tropics"; and Charles S. Johnson's "Black Workers and the City" becomes "The New Frontage on American Life."

work going on in Douglas's woodcuts, but it is all work that has been safely aestheticized and sacralized as acts of "Creation." Reiss's distinctly profane "Interpretations of Jazz," two impressionistic sketches of Harlem's raucous nightlife, likewise fail to appear in the later volume; their presence would hardly accord, after all, with the lushly iconic Reiss portraits that dominate *The New Negro*. In these various ways Harlem itself, as an identifiable and quantifiable time and place, recedes in Locke's anthology, while a different Harlem emerges: a mythopoetic time-space, or, in Joseph Allen Boone's phrase, "a spatially realized spiritual goal" better suited to *The New Negro's* sacred undertaking – as well as to its efforts to produce what is an essentially messianic temporality.²⁹

For according to a somewhat convoluted logic, the New Negro's presence is felt throughout the anthology as both incipient and awaited, already in evidence but as yet unrealized: a Word not quite made flesh, even if its incarnation can be glimpsed in the arms of "The Brown Madonna" and in the promise of a Jean Toomer or a Langston Hughes. This temporally ambivalent logic actually abets *The New Negro's* messianism, since the literature of revelation always relies on a conjoining of imminence and deferral. Further, in proclaiming its subject as both brand-new and not-quite, *The New Negro* aligns itself with what Joseph J. Murphy calls the historical "double meaning of African American theology," according to which the "freedom promised in the scriptures . . . is 'already but not yet.'" Therein lies the rhetorical strength, as well as the frustrating limitation, of *The New Negro's* thesis. As Henry Louis Gates, Jr., eloquently states the problem, the very notion of a New Negro was a

culturally willed myth. . . . Just as *utopia* signifies "no-place," so does "New Negro" signify a "black person who lives at no place," and at no time. It is a bold and audacious act of language, signifying the will to power, to dare to recreate a race by renaming it. . . . [The New Negro] does not exist as an entity or group of

²⁹ Boone, *Libidinal Currents*, 221.

entities but “only” as a coded system of signs, complete with masks and mythology.³⁰

The problem with *The New Negro's* Good News is that it is still *only* prophetic. Practically speaking, it continues to await the Chosen One, the real flesh-and-blood New Negro. The referent of the anthology's title remains protean and elusive, a lacuna at the core of its own biography, which itself remains a proleptic, provisional invocation of the New Negro's nativity. *The New Negro* is a New Testament without (yet) a Christ, although it rhetorically makes its messiah's presence felt throughout. That presence is suggested so frequently – in the image of a brown Madonna's child, in the reiterated promise of certain young writers and talents, in the biblical parallels that its stories and poems rehearse – that many readers must have been sorely tempted, in 1925, to accept its glad tidings as an article of faith. Which, perhaps, is all they ever were.

Apostasy of the “Niggeratti”

From the Exodus strategies of American slaves to the biblically emulative *New Negro* anthology, black appropriations of the religious have sought to create from an institutionalized instrument of suppression and quietism a unique, liberative cultural mythology. Yet it is one thing for the black community in America to speak to itself, as it always had, in the biblical language of messianism, exodus, crucifixion, resurrection, and the rest. It is another thing altogether, in a work of such importance as Locke's anthology, to articulate a group identity by those means to a larger American and even international audience – and to do so as part of a conscious effort to introduce a *New Negro* that will (a) appeal to white and black readers alike, (b) impress the one and lift up the other, and (c) league itself artistically with broader trends in

³⁰ Murphy, *Working the Spirit*, 153; Gates, “The Trope of a New Negro,” 132-35.

aesthetic modernism. White Americans had, historically, had their own political aims in presenting (often highly selective versions of) Scripture and the Christian myths to black Americans; with *The New Negro* the direction of this discourse is reversed. By presenting *their* Bible, the voices of the renaissance—as presented, organized, and edited by Alain Locke—stake a new claim to control of a privileged discourse.

In doing so, the anthology presents the “New Negro” as a messianic but disembodied trope, policing or omitting a more controversial poetics of sacrilege in favor of a best-foot-forward claim to cultural recognition. The poetries and fictions of the “Niggeratti” respond by throwing bodies, often illicit ones, onto the contested terrain of Harlem-Renaissance politics and aesthetics. Additionally, works such as the little magazine *Fire!!* and the novels of Wallace Thurman and Bruce Nugent often denigrate rather than incorporate the notion of a messianic New Negro or black Christ, or else rework that notion to more radical ends. In sum, the Niggeratti proffer emphatic depictions of the body, of sexuality, and of satiric scriptural figures that blaspheme both organized Christianity and the New Negro enterprise as sacralized by Locke’s anthology.

Thurman’s 1932 roman à clef, *Infants of the Spring*, stands as one of the most memorable satires of the Harlem Renaissance and of its artistic and political aspirations. One passage in particular showcases the novel’s determined irreverence, both toward our “Father in heaven” and toward the carefully crafted ethos of *The New Negro*:

“Beloved, we join hands here to pray for gin. An aridity defiles us. Our innards thirst for the juice of juniper. Something must be done. The drought threatens to destroy us. Surely, God who let manna fall from the heavens so that the holy children of Israel might eat, will not let the equally holy children of Niggeratti Manor die from the want of a little gin. Children, let us pray.”

All heads were bowed, according to a familiar ritual. Reverently, Eustace patted his foot and rolled his head heavenward. . . .

“ . . . Father in heaven, we bend before thee. Hear, oh hear, our plea. Send us some gin, Lord, send us some gin.”

The prayer finished, the circle remained intact with bowed heads and joined hands. A low moan escaped, a moan such as is often heard at darky camp meetings. It grew in volume and swelled melodiously through the room. Abruptly it stopped. Eustace had spoken:
“And, Lord, send me a little sandwich too.” (IS, 102)

This passage recalls Mina Loy’s playful conflation of sacrament and gin-thirst – portraying an “abbess-prostitute” who dispenses “the gin-fizz eucharist” at a “Jazz-Mass” – in a poem published the year before *Infants of the Spring* (Lost, 98). More significantly, Thurman’s passage signals unmistakably that we are in a different Harlem altogether than the sanitized and mythopoeticized “promised land” of *The New Negro*. For one thing, there can be no doubt that this blasphemous plea for deliverance from sobriety is taking place at a geographically locatable site – 267 West 136th Street, “Niggeratti Manor” – a site, moreover, whose “various intrigues,” which “surrounded the house like a luminous halo,” caused not a little consternation for older renaissance figures such as Locke and Du Bois (GJ, 75). Locke’s published review of *Infants of the Spring* worries that Thurman has not fully accounted for the extent to which “the attitudes and foibles of Nordic decadence have been carried into the buds of racial expression.”³¹ Yet already in *Infants*, Thurman casts Locke’s counterpart Dr. Parkes as worrying incessantly over the impact on the renaissance of the Niggeratti’s “decadent strain,” their tendency to “wallow in the mire of post-Victorian license” (234). This is not the Harlem *The New Negro* wanted us to see; as J. Martin Favor has put it, “Thurman turns Harlem from an imagined site of redemption into a kind of sideshow.”³²

Characteristically, the above “prayer” plays on clever inversions and perversions of Christian values. The desert through which these “holy children” are condemned for a time to wander has afflicted them with a thirst, not of souls for grace, but of “innards” for their profane

³¹ Locke, “Black Truth and Black Beauty,” 16.

³² Favor, “George Schuyler and Wallace Thurman,” 206.

nectar. According to their blasphemous value system, gin is not a sin, it is manna; sobriety “defiles.” Richard Bruce Nugent’s own novel *Gentleman Jigger* – written contemporaneously, for the most part, with Thurman’s *Infants*, though not published until 2008 – presents a very similar picture of the irreverent goings-on at Niggeratti Manor. In Nugent’s telling, gin is a form of absolution: “Everybody brags about their sins here. And then absolves themselves in gin” (95). Compared to the baptismal blood invoked by Du Bois in his Revelatory conclusion to *The New Negro*, this absolving gin appears either a refreshingly unserious or a politically quietist alternative – but in any case an alternative.

As memorably depicted in *Infants of the Spring*, “the first and last salon” that Locke’s avatar Dr. Parkes organizes for the Niggeratti and other young artists descends almost immediately into a babel of bitter infighting and “blasphem[ies]” (234-35).³³ As in the biblical story of the Tower of Babel, this effort at triumphal cooperation – with goals comparable, at least in Parkes’s mind, to the aspirations of the tower’s builders – disintegrates into a cacophony of alien and untranslatable discourses: realist, modernist, Marxist, primitivist, militant, aestheticist, Decadent, “paganist” – to say nothing of Raymond’s (Thurman’s) derisive snorts.³⁴ It is not simply a matter of their having different opinions about their roles as artists and cultural figures; the point is that each tongue remains utterly incomprehensible to the others. Communication is impossible, because no one speaks the same language. “Pandemonium reigned,” Thurman writes, and the Miltonic echo is telling, for as Thurman recreates Babel he

³³ It is interesting to note how frequently the word *blasphemy* and its variants appear in *Infants of the Spring*, often in surprising contexts (64, 154, 162, 205, 244). Outmoded blasphemous oaths such as “god’s teeth” also make jarring appearances, recalling the origins of modern curses in the rhetorical rending of God’s body (36, 191).

³⁴ A brief sampler of the communicative failures: “you should develop your inherited spirit.” “I ain’t got no inherited spirit.” “That’s nothing to brag about.” “We must be militant fighters. . . .” “Remember, a beautiful sonnet can be as effectual, nay even more effectual, than a rigorous hymn of hate.” “Spoken like a true capitalist minion.” “why not let each young hopeful choose his own path?” “art holds a mirror up to nature. No mirror would reflect a man composed of angles.” “we must look at Matisse, Gauguin, Picasso and Renoir for guidance. They get the feel of the age. . . . They . . .” “Are all crazy and so are you” (*IS*, 237-44).

also restages another biblical narrative: the Fall of the Rebel Angels (242). It is an apt metaphor for the renegade Niggeratti's renunciations of Locke's New Negro vision.

That renunciation is made especially clear in Nugent's and Thurman's satirical re-inscriptions, in *Gentleman Jigger* and *Infants of the Spring*, of *The New Negro's* indebtedness to biblical rhetoric, structure, and trope; its casting of the Harlem Renaissance as a sacred undertaking; and, most especially, its announcement and expectation of the New Negro's messianic arrival. Thurman and Nugent send up Locke's sacramental project and exploit the notion of the New Negro as a Christ; indeed, both of their novels feature Christ figures prominently and unsubtly. And the way they do this—for both authors figure their Christs as real and specific, as already present rather than imminent, and, in the final analysis, as bathetic wastes of artistic potential—contrasts so stridently with Locke's vision as to profane the entire New Negro enterprise.

With an indeterminate blend of earnestness and satire, in *Gentleman Jigger* Nugent depicts himself and his fellow Niggeratti, especially Thurman, as deities. While their disapproving upstairs neighbor at the "Manor" keeps up a constant refrain of pious malediction ("Sin and destruction—sin and destruction. God's in his heaven. No good can come from it"), little does she know that beneath her feet are "gods" in their own right, "the Creators" (83-84, 86). "[T]he great god Rusty" (Thurman's avatar), the "godhead inspiration of the group," preaches in his "Godalmighty tone" to his fellow "leaders of the New Order" (109, 88, 100, 26). Thurman's *Infants* contributes to this mock-deification by casting Nugent's character, Paul Arbian, as a potential artistic messiah, "aglow with some inner incandescence" (44). In his bizarre letters to Gabriele D'Annunzio and the Shah of Persia, Nugent's character announces himself as an apostle whose coming is foretold and inevitable: "I await your answer. Ignoring me will not appreciably delay my coming. It is written" (224). And in his extravagant self-

sacrifice at novel's end – a purely fictional invention on Thurman's part, of course – Nugent fulfills his role as the novel's half-baked Christ. Having covered the bathroom floor with his novel manuscript (soon to be rendered illegible by overflowing bathwater), he cuts his wrists with "a highly ornamented Chinese dirk," so that his friends will later find him "a colorful, inanimate corpse in a crimson streaked tub" (283). He dies a decadent martyr to Art.

In *Gentleman Jigger*, Nugent also casts himself as an aestheticized Christ. Coupled with his "walking-on-the-waters attitude," "his grin was almost a benediction"; elsewhere he smiles "beatifically" (68, 107, 138). The "saintly-looking" Stuartt (Nugent's name in the novel) likes on occasion to call himself God and to intone Christ's words as given in scripture, sometimes verbatim – "by their works shall ye know them" – and other times in paraphrase: "But the blackest of these was Rusty" (57, 59, 66-67). The novel's more pertinent Christ figure, however, is Stuartt's brother and alter ego: Aeon, "the greatest of living American poets," whose "apostolic" gait gives him "the dignity of a priestly dancer" (63). Clearly modeled after the real-life Jean Toomer, Aeon has eyes that seem forever to be "beholding visions" (63, 67). With "glib sacrilege," Stuartt refers to Aeon as "God" and as "The Christ-tainted one whose drink seems a cup of blood" (62). Stuartt's sacrilege evidently inheres, not in the irreverence of deifying a mere mortal – a transgression of *God's* sovereignty – but rather in his irreverence toward Aeon himself (62). Nugent describes Aeon almost obsessively as "haloed with fine gossamer hair," hair "so soft it caught and held a nimbus of light around his head" (67, 149). And again:

a halo was cast about his head. . . . He accepted his drink with long, slender fingers, as though accepting a chalice. His face was saintly with calm and understanding, his eyes bright and soft with an almost universal love. . . . Myra thought he looked like – . But even her thoughts fumbled at the comparison, shutting her mind against its entrance. . . . But the man *did* look like Jesus. (62)

The Christ figuration becomes increasingly satirical and surprisingly explicit. Later, Aeon "confesses" to Myra, with much apparent gravity, that he is in fact the Son of God:

You see, Myra, as Jesus, it was the desire of God, my Father, that I, by my deaths, expiate the sins of the world. . . . God had me sin, and die, that I might be born again from the womb of the woman with whom I sinned. . . . To me was it a great thing that the hands that caressed me on that cross between thieves should give sensations that were the loving hands of a mother with her just-born babe. . . . And always was I afraid that at some time would I love a woman and in procreation die again. Always I knew that I could not suffer alone. And that is the way in which I atone for the sins of the world. (151-52)

Christ's story, transplanted onto this parodic figure of the messianic poet, becomes an erotic tale of love and death through countless generations. The savior's own "sin" begets his next incarnation in this irreverent conflation of mother-love, *agape*, and sexual desire. At the end of *Gentleman Jigger's* Part I—which corresponds to the story told in *Infants of the Spring*—Aeon dies in a "terrible traffic accident" (161). One wonders, though, whether the real cause of his death was his "sin" with Myra, the love that would cause Aeon "in procreation [to] die again." Whereas Locke's anthology cast Toomer as the most likely candidate for the fulfillment of a messianic New Negro, Nugent makes Toomer a figure of the doomed, failed messiah—one more likely to be crushed beneath the wheels of a car than to redeem his race through literature. Likewise, while Thurman's *Infants* casts Toomer as the *only* African American artist with "the elements of greatness," it also portrays him as one of the many "Negroes of talent [who] were wont to make one splurge, then sink into oblivion" (221, 62).

Thurman's and Nugent's separate invocations of Toomer as the model, yet failed, Negro redeemer are particularly telling, because by the time *Infants* was published, Toomer had not only apparently failed to make good on the promise he'd exhibited in *Cane* nearly a decade earlier; he had also essentially repudiated any racial affiliation with "Negroes," let alone New Negroes. If he was to be a messiah, he wanted to herald the dawn, not of a new day in the black

race, but of a brand-new “American” race at whose coming he had already hinted in *Cane*.³⁵ In their satirical treatments of Toomer, *Infants of the Spring* and *Gentleman Jigger* both participate in the tradition established by *The New Negro* of heralding *Cane*’s author as The One. But given all that had changed between 1925 and the early 1930s, their appropriations of Toomer take on a decidedly cynical and disillusioned flavor. By 1932, Thurman seems to be saying, the elusive New Negro can be pinpointed, but it is of the nature of a dying star: one that refuses to be tethered to any racial program, let alone a sacred African American calling. *Gentleman Jigger* takes the implicit commentary a step further by making its Toomer character, Aeon – the closest thing the novel has, artistically, to a messianic New Negro or “black apostle” – so light-skinned that he in fact “passes” with great success, writing “Negro poetry” as a visually and socially white man (64).

The fissures between Locke’s typological *New Negro* and the Niggeratti’s sacrilegious aesthetics occur along the fault lines dividing the two operative strains of Judeo-Christian blasphemy – appropriation of the Word, on one hand, and profanation on the other. *The New Negro* embodies the former strain, arrogating to itself the kind of sacred authority reserved, ordinarily, for divine revelation. It is against this kind of blasphemy that both *Gentleman Jigger* and *Infants of the Spring* aim their own version of derogatory blasphemy, denigrating and defiling the notion of a messianic New Negro or black Christ. To adapt the influential terms of Houston Baker’s *Modernism and the Harlem Renaissance*, if *The New Negro* “mastered the form” of scriptural typology – exploiting the Bible’s cultural, political, and literary capital in a carefully

³⁵ “That rumble comes from the earth’s deep core. It is the mutter of powerful underground races. . . . The next world-savior is coming up that way. . . . The new-world Christ will need consummate skill to walk upon the waters” (Toomer, *Cane*, 78). By 1931, Toomer would write, “Now is the time of the birth of a new order, a new vision, a new ideal of man. I proclaim this new order” (*A Jean Toomer Reader*, 105). The previous year he had refused James Weldon Johnson’s request to anthologize some of his work; the “Negro art movement,” he wrote to Johnson in response, “is not for me. My poems are not Negro poems. . . . they spring from the result of racial blendings here in America which have produced a new race or stock” (*ibid.*, 106).

calculated bid for cultural recognition – these novels work to “deform” that very mastery.³⁶ *The New Negro* typologically exploits the cultural, political, and literary capital of scripture but in a carefully calculated, elegantly unassuming way that rarely draws attention to its own blasphemous appropriation. Leaving it to others to describe it as the Bible of the Harlem Renaissance, *The New Negro* “conceals, disguises, floats like a trickster butterfly in order to sting like a bee” – as Baker characterizes “mastery of form” (50).

The Niggeratti, then, perform the second kind of blasphemy (profanation) and the second kind of modernism (deformation of mastery). If mastery of form emulates the praying mantis or rabbit – Baker’s examples – then deformation of mastery emulates the gorilla, “advertising, with certainty, his unabashed *badness*. . . . *Deformation* is a go(ue)rilla action in the face of acknowledged adversaries” – those adversaries being, in the case of the younger Harlem artists, the very hand that feeds (50). With an explicitness that is blasphemous in more ways than one, the Niggeratti expose the mantis-like strategies of Locke’s anthology, sending up its cagey scriptural investments and the barely muted messianism of its titular figure. What *The New Negro* tacitly exploits, the Niggeratti openly profane; where *The New Negro* plays black Christ, the Niggeratti play blaspheming trickster, “signifying” on the more earnest blasphemies of the New Negro project.³⁷ And where *The New Negro* presses its urbane appropriative blasphemy into the service of cultural and political recognition, the Niggeratti’s blasphemies are a form of irreverent iconoclasm. As Michael Cobb has argued, in their eyes Locke represented “the icon who needed to be broken.” Along the way we even find black writers willing to risk

³⁶ Baker, *Modernism and the Harlem Renaissance*, 15.

³⁷ The trickster is inherently, after all, a profaner, embodying “incest, murder, and the destruction of sacred property,” as Baker observes in *Blues, Ideology, and Afro-American Literature* (184). The African trickster god Esu, whom Henry Louis Gates, Jr., regards as a relative of the Signifying Monkey, is “master of that elusive, mystical barrier that separates the divine world from the profane. . . . Esu is the ultimate copula, connecting truth with understanding, the sacred with the profane” (*The Signifying Monkey*, 6). He is profanatory also in the sense of breaching thresholds between profane and sacred; the Esu figure marks “the penetration of thresholds, the exchange between discursive universes” (*ibid.*, 27).

blaspheming *white* Redeemers; Hughes's 1931 poem "Goodbye Christ," for example, produces such a critique in tandem with a politically irreverent embrace of Communism. Blasphemy is thus one way to chart the "upward" cultural progress, facilitated by mastery of form and deformation of mastery, that Baker identifies. In this case, blasphemous modernism is the form to be mastered *as well as* the discursive terrain on which one seeks to deform that mastery.³⁸

Locke's strategies may have been the stronger. The success of his endeavor at canon-formation, and of that canon's ability to quash heretical counter-discourses, can be measured by the relative popularity and availability in the decades since of *The New Negro* and of the Niggeratti's most notorious platform, the short-lived but incendiary little magazine *Fire!!*³⁹ The publication's one and only issue was helmed by Thurman and published in 1926 with the intention, said Nugent, to "shock the hell out of them."⁴⁰ *Fire!!* continues to beg descriptors such as "scandalous" and "outrageous," principally but not exclusively because of its inclusion of Nugent's story "Smoke, Lilies and Jade."⁴¹ As A. B. Christa Schwarz notes, while Thurman and Nugent receive the most attention for having "opted for the extreme of transgressive sexuality," it is also true that "[t]ransgression of moral and aesthetic boundaries linked most contributions" in their collaborative effort "to cause outrage among black critics."⁴² In his autobiography, Langston Hughes recalls the magazine's treatment as rank heresy by black intellectuals beyond the Niggeratti coterie:

³⁸ Cobb, "Insolent Racing, Rough Narrative," 330; Baker, *Modernism and the Harlem Renaissance*, 101.

³⁹ Michael Cobb remarks the seemingly inexplicable exclusion of *Fire!!*'s most noteworthy text, Nugent's "Smoke, Lilies and Jade" – and even of any editorial mention – from the *Norton Anthology of African American Literature*: "This editorial choice suggests that a literary object like Nugent's, important for its perceived groundbreaking engagement with a previously taboo queer theme, is not a special concern in the fraught, but nevertheless important, work of consolidating a canon of African American literature" ("Insolent Racing," 329).

⁴⁰ Quoted in Tyler T. Schmidt, "'In the Glad Flesh of My Fear,'" 161.

⁴¹ Bruce Kellner, "'Refined Racism,'" 126; Martha Jane Nadell, *Enter the New Negroes*, 77.

⁴² Schwarz, "Transgressive Sexuality," 144.

None of the older Negro intellectuals would have anything to do with *Fire*. Dr. Du Bois in the *Crisis* roasted it.⁴³ The Negro press called it all sorts of bad names, largely because of a green and purple story by Bruce Nugent, in the Oscar Wilde tradition. . . . Rean Graves, the critic for the *Baltimore Afro-American*, began his review by saying: "I have just tossed the first issue of *Fire* into the fire." . . . So *Fire* had plenty of cold water thrown on it by the colored critics.⁴⁴

Rusty, the Thurman character in *Gentleman Jigger*, argues that Locke and Du Bois "and that gang of outmoded reactionary tyrants have reigned long enough! This [magazine] is going to be ours. Body and soul" (28). In real life, Locke proclaimed *Fire!!* "a manoeuvre of artistic secession," while in his "Dark Tower" column in *Opportunity*, Countée Cullen—himself a *Fire!!* contributor, though a poet by no means wholly simpatico with the Niggeratti—obliged Thurman's desires by recognizing "a wish to shock in this first issue," adding that, "though shock-proof ourselves, we imagine that the wish will be well realized among the readers of *Fire*."⁴⁵

This shock value has much to do with the magazine's brazen use of biblical and other Christian materials, a strategy that conspicuously recalls while at the same time departing from Locke's strategies in *The New Negro*. *Fire!!* opens with a "Foreword" that moves swiftly from demonic imagery to a "pagan" invocation of flesh and soul—and finally to a quotation from a Langston Hughes poem that mines the language and cadences of the Spirituals and of the black church:

FIRE . . . melting steel and iron bars, poking livid tongues between stone apertures and burning wooden opposition with a cackling chuckle of contempt.

FIRE . . . weaving vivid, hot designs upon an ebon bordered loom and satisfying pagan thirst for beauty unadorned . . . the flesh is sweet and real . . . the soul an inward flush of fire . . . Beauty? . . . flesh on fire—on fire in the furnace of life blazing. . . .

⁴³ The remark about Du Bois is evidently inaccurate, as David Levering Lewis points out, although it does seem aptly to communicate the older intellectual's personal response to the magazine: "A friend wrote Countée Cullen that merely mentioning *Fire!!* to Du Bois hurt the editor's 'feelings so much that he would hardly talk to me'" (*When Harlem Was in Vogue*, 197, 194).

⁴⁴ Hughes, *The Big Sea*, 237.

⁴⁵ Locke, "Fire: A Negro Magazine," 563; Cullen, "The Dark Tower," 25.

“Fy-ah,
Fy-ah, Lawd,
Fy-ah gonna burn ma soul!” (F, 1)

The preacher’s traditional invocation of hellfire, a fire which the unsaved parishioner imagines will “burn ma soul,” undergoes in Hughes’s lyric a blasphemous transvaluation. This fire, or *Fire!!*, instead metaphorizes a heretical form of unabashed expression that will rage against the “wooden opposition” of bourgeois cultures both black and white. Its “livid tongues” of flame befit blasphemy’s long association with this organ of the body, both as the source of rhetorical profanation and as the site of the blasphemer’s traditional punishment. They also connote a nexus of flesh and Word, and of flesh and Spirit, that aptly conveys fire’s figuration in these lines as the element shared by the soul (as fire’s “inward flush”) and the flesh (“on fire in the furnace of life blazing”). Surely, too, the writer of these lines had in mind Acts 2:3, in which the Spirit descends upon Christ’s apostles in “tongues like as of fire.” Far from the idealized and fleshless messiah invoked by *The New Negro*—with its emphasis on the soul, minus the body, of African America’s new cultural dawn—the desire expressed in *Fire!!*’s foreword is to forge in some fiery smithy an uncreated amalgam of flesh, soul, spirit, and word.⁴⁶

Immediately following Hughes’s hymn to “Fy-ah!” is Thurman’s short story “Cordelia the Crude.” The very title signals that such a story could not have found a home in *The New Negro*; it is indeed, as Thurman and Nugent intended it, something of “a shocker” (GJ, 31). Illustrated by an appropriately “crude” nude executed by Nugent, the story commences with an invocation of the sexualized body that stands in profanatory relation to *The New Negro*’s disembodied messianism. “Physically, if not mentally,” the story begins—already a suggestive opener—“Cordelia was a potential prostitute” (F, 5). By the end of the story, that potential will

⁴⁶ These lines thus reflect the influence of certain uniquely African American Protestant traditions in which, as Joseph Murphy writes, “the Christian split between the body and the soul is overcome” (*Working the Spirit*, 174).

become fully realized. Thurman clearly desired this text to depict the seamy side of Harlem black life that *The New Negro* had papered over: at age sixteen, the title character is already “matronly mature,” a “fus’ class chippie” with no sense of her actions’ “moral import” (5). Her “wanton promiscuity,” like *Fire!!* itself, burns with “the rebellious flame” (5-6). She trolls Harlem’s theaters in search of nakedly “physical pleasure,” attained in the most animalistic terms: “if successful, the approached female will soon be chatting with her baiter”; “our lips met in an animal kiss” (5-6). In keeping with this bestial theme, Cordelia has left behind a pig-farming boyfriend in her South Carolina hometown; in a line dripping with innuendo, we are told that she has had to “leave her lover to his succulent porkers” (5). The salaciousness that attends those liquid *l*’s and “succulent porkers” characterizes the whole story. With passages of elliptical free indirect discourse (“one could always have the most delightful physical contacts . . . hmm . . .”), Thurman’s male narrator places us in the mind of a woman who desires, and who acts on those desires, with seemingly no discrimination (5).

Except that she does discriminate, a little: “In a short while she learned how to squelch the bloated, lewd faced Jews” (5). So much for “Exodus strategies.” Far from identifying with the Jew as a figure of mutual oppression, Cordelia, like the story that contains her, views the figure’s otherness as absolute and un-assimilable—a move perhaps calculated to align Thurman’s fiction less with anything in *The New Negro* than with high modernist antisemitism as it appears in the poetry of Eliot and Pound, and in the contemporaneous novels of Fitzgerald and Hemingway. In any case, while Thurman’s foreword to the magazine deploys the religious language of scripture, damnation, prophecy, and hellfire, neither that foreword nor “Cordelia the Crude” has any truck with *The New Negro*’s typological investments—either its invocations of Hebraic parallels or its more emphatic rewriting of those parallels to promote its Christ-like, messianic New Negro.

Resurrecting the Crucifixion

There is something else worth noting, though, about *The New Negro's* anticipated black Christ and about *Fire!!'s* revisions of that figure. For while the tragic but potentially redemptive figuration of the suffering black body as Christ has its own rich tradition in African American literature, both before and after *The New Negro*, Locke's anthology offers something very different: a bowdlerized Christological typology that manages quietly to ignore this tragic figuration. Without addressing Locke or *The New Negro* specifically, Henry Louis Gates, Jr., speaks to the motivations behind this strategy when he traces a coherent line of thought—from William Dean Howells to William Stanley Braithwaite, from Du Bois to Carl Van Vechten and many others—which held literature and the arts to be the foundations on which the “apocalyptic notion” of a New Negro would be sustained. “The Black Christ would be, in short, a poetaster”: a de-thorned and sanitized redeemer, assimilable to white and black tastes alike, minus the connotations of a lynched black body.⁴⁷ The Lockean trope of the “New Negro” is essentially the black-Christ figure shorn of its negative valance, a fact nowhere more evident than in Locke's systematic pruning of lynching references from the anthology. Neither the word *lynching* nor any of its cognates appears in its 450 pages: this at a time when lynching remained a persistent element of the United States' racial landscape, and when some of *The New Negro's* most celebrated contributors (Toomer, McKay, Cullen) had already searing literary documents of these atrocities.

Had Locke had only literary merit in mind when selecting the poetry for his anthology, after all, he would surely have included Toomer's “Portrait in Georgia” (1923). This most powerful and condensed poem from *Cane* depicts the attributes of a white woman in the terms of a white-on-black lynching: her hair “coiled like a lyncher's rope,” her eyes like “fagots,” her

⁴⁷ Gates, *Figures in Black*, 23.

lips like scars and blisters, her “slim body, white as the ash / of black flesh after flame.”⁴⁸

Toomer here takes a European lyric tradition of devising a lengthy conceit to portray the body-parts of a beloved – Robert Herrick, for instance, “Upon the Nipples of Julia’s Breast” – but uses these means to dramatize the horrors of mob violence. Even to look upon the “slim body” of a white woman could mean capital punishment for a black man in the South. Thus the poem projects the evil of lynching upon the putatively sacred body of the white woman, whose purity must be protected and revenged at all costs and by the most profane means. The poem’s connotations of sacrificial violence and more subtle suggestion of lynching as Crucifixion make it an impossible candidate for inclusion in *The New Negro*. It would sit uneasily, to say the least, next to the wholly positive, Christic New Negro trope that Toomer himself is said to herald as “a bright morning star of a new day of the race” (NN, 44).

Nor did *The New Negro* make room for one of Claude McKay’s best known poems, “The Lynching” (1922), with its more overt allusions to the Crucifixion: “His Spirit in smoke ascended to high heaven. / His father, by the cruelest way of pain, / Had bidden him to his bosom once again.”⁴⁹ Nor Countée Cullen’s “Christ Recrucified” (1922), which depicts a lynching victim as wearing a crown of thorns and “purple robe of ridicule,” then describes the victim directly as Christ: “Christ’s awful wrong is that he’s dark of hue, / The sin for which no blamelessness atones.”⁵⁰ Such invocations of the black Christ were not what Locke needed for *The New Negro*, which instead proffered the optimistic flipside to this tragic trope – a trope which the Niggeratti would resurrect with insistent force in the years immediately following *The New Negro*’s publication.

⁴⁸ Toomer, *Cane*, 29.

⁴⁹ McKay, *Harlem Shadows*, 51.

⁵⁰ Cullen, “Christ Recrucified,” 221.

Among *Fire!!*'s suite of ten poems, for example, Helene Johnson's "A Southern Road" violates Locke's twin refusals to brook any references to lynching or to the tragic or politically charged aspects of the black Christ figure. Johnson invokes both, depicting a lynched black body as the "sacrificial" offering at an altar ("predella") to the "raff" of white supremacy:

A blue-fruited black gum,
Like a tall predella,
Bears a dangling figure, –
Sacrificial dower to the raff,
Swinging alone,
A solemn, tortured shadow in the air. (*F*, 17)

Three of the other nine poems contain ambiguous but nonetheless suggestive allusions to trees and to their occasionally strange fruit; Cullen's reference, for instance, to the "bursting fruit" that white Americans "reap" inevitably calls forth the similar imagery he invokes in poems such as *The Black Christ* (1929) to connect Christ's sacrificial offering on the Cross to the utterly unredemptive suffering of lynching victims (*F*, 16). In works beyond *Fire!!* these same writers reclaim the tragic and political dimensions of the black Christ. Cullen's "The Litany of the Dark People" figures African Americans explicitly as crucified Christs, wreathed with thorns, spear-wounded, and crucified "on white wood from a scented bough" – a lynching image, of course, the "white wood" leaving little doubt about the racial identification of these modern crucifiers.⁵¹ Elsewhere in Cullen we find a "twisted tortured thing hung from a tree, / Swart victim of a newer Calvary."⁵² Calvary, for this Christian poet, "Was but the first leaf in a line / Of trees on which a Man should swing."⁵³

⁵¹ Cullen, *Copper Sun*, 13. Crucifixion reemerges as a theme in another poem in the same volume (36); African Americans, Cullen asserts, "own His cross" (67).

⁵² *Ibid.*, 11. This stanza is immediately followed by another that insists on recognizing a black contribution to the story of Christ: "Yea, he who helped Christ up Golgotha's track, / That Simon who did *not* deny, was black" (11). The juxtaposition of these two stanzas makes a double argument: The whites who crucify blacks deny Christ by doing so, and thus resemble Simon Peter, the biblical denier, while forgetting the darker – and, perhaps, more faithful – Simon of Cyrene.

⁵³ Cullen, *The Black Christ*, 69. Further examples from the period following *The New Negro* are not hard to come by. A poem by Melvin Tolson depicts daily life for blacks in America as playing out atop a "Golgotha" where they have

Each of these works reanimates the tragic Christ figure banished from Locke's anthology. But no one more eagerly and provocatively reclaimed the black Christ as an overtly politicized figure than *Fire!!* contributor and Niggeratti member Langston Hughes, whose searing "Christ in Alabama" (1931) states the point bluntly in its opening lines: "Christ is a Nigger, / Beaten and black." The poem proceeds to depict this Christ as the product, not of a Virgin Birth, but of a white man's rape of a black woman, equating God the Father with the white tyrant of a plantation:

Mary is His mother —
Mammy of the South,
Silence your mouth.

God's His Father —
White Master above,
Grant us your love.

Most holy bastard
Of the bleeding mouth:
Nigger Christ
*On the cross of the South.*⁵⁴

Unlike Cullen's more diffuse Crucifixion poetry, Hughes's poem aims for a blunt economy of diction and of the poetic line, driving its conceit home with alliterative associations (*Mary/Mammy/Master*) and using twice the controversial word "nigger." Here is no idealized black Christ but rather a "Nigger Christ / On the cross of the South," presented with the sort of shocking candor that characterizes *Fire!!*

When the poem was first published in *Contempo*, accompanied by a Zell Ingram silhouette of a black man bearing white stigmata, it instigated an immediate public "furor," making this his most controversial work behind the equally blasphemous and even more politically incendiary "Goodbye Christ." Politicians and newspaper editors denounced "the

had their "manhood crucified," while Frank Horne reminds "Two Brown Boys in a Catholic Church" that their future suffering is bound to "exceed" Christ's (Hughes and Bontemps, eds., *The Poetry of the Negro*, 137-38, 146-47).
⁵⁴ Hughes, "Christ in Alabama," 1.

insulting and blasphemous” Hughes in ways that prove the success of the poet’s calculation to provoke: “It’s bad enough to call Christ a bastard . . . but to call Him a nigger – that’s too much!”⁵⁵ Hughes’s poetry draws on Christ and the Crucifixion nearly as often as Cullen’s does, though always with a more militant emphasis. His poem “Scottsboro” invokes “Christ, / Who fought alone” as predecessor for the Scottsboro Boys’ suffering, while “Lynching Song” draws an unspoken comparison between the Resurrected Christ and a pseudo-resurrected lynching victim (CW, 207). For in a reversal of the life-taking dynamics of lynching, the victim in “Lynching Song” finds his voice as he comes to life – and to a truer “life,” evidently, then the spiritually “dead” whites who persecuted him: “the white folks die,” while “That black boy’s / Still body / Says: / NOT I” (CW, 149-50). Hughes’s 1927 poem “Song for a Dark Girl” likewise features a black body that has been “hung . . . to a cross roads tree” (CW, 106). That unlikely preposition, *to* rather than *from*, emphasizes the Crucifixion framing: one is generally hung *from* a tree, or nailed *to* a cross – or, as here, to “a cross roads tree,” an image that blends Calvary and rural crossroads in a striking conflation (106). The poem continues, “I asked the white Lord Jesus / What was the use of prayer” – for that same “white” Jesus, whose death this lynching duplicates, is as readily invoked by the perpetrators of these crimes as by the families of the victims (107).

While Hughes presses the lynching/Crucifixion analogy into the service of political propaganda, he reserves the more optimistic Redeemer trope for equally radical purposes, imagining its birth as a violent “kick” from within the belly of a fed-up mob: “Hail Mary, Mother of God! / the new Christ child of the Revolution’s about to be born / (Kick hard, red baby, in the bitter womb of the mob)” (CW, 211). Elsewhere Hughes extends the Crucifixion

⁵⁵ Quoted in Arnold Rampersad, *The Life of Langston Hughes, Vol. I*, 225. The word “furor” is Elmer Carter’s, who expressed in a letter to Hughes his fear that the poem’s publication “might cause some of the more hot-headed of the cracker type to attempt to do you bodily harm” (ibid.).

trope beyond the African American sphere: “Czechoslovakia *lynched* on a swastika *cross!* . . . Nails in her hands and nails in her feet” (CW, 261; emphasis added). Here the lynching-Crucifixion equation has become so reified, so automatic, that what might otherwise seem a mixing of metaphors—Czechoslovakia as lynched black person, Czechoslovakia as crucified Christ—instead serves as a complex metalepsis that shores up and hypostatizes the original analogy: an equation that ceases, in such a work, to be merely figurative.⁵⁶

Hughes thus makes for an especially apt figure to prepare *Fire!!*'s readers—via his prominently foregrounded poem “Fire”—for the varieties of New-Negro sacrilege to follow. Like Thurman's and Nugent's romans à clef, Hughes's poem echoes the biblical rhetoric and sacramental idioms of Locke's anthology. It sets a precedent, moreover, for the self-conscious emulation of those idioms that *Fire!!* itself employs—its concluding article being a striking case in point. Recalling with an eerie precision the rhetorical strategies of Du Bois's closing apocalyptic essay in *The New Negro*, Thurman's coda to the issue (“Fire Burns”) begins by invoking a “prophecy” he made “some time ago” and by offering that prediction's prophetic status as indeterminate—even as he forecloses such ambiguity by referring to it repeatedly by the word *prophecy*: “So far my prophecy has failed to pan out, and superficially it seems as if it never will. . . .” (F, 47). The prophecy in this case has less to do with the future of race relations broadly considered, as in Du Bois, than with a foreseen vindication of Carl Van Vechten's 1926 novel *Nigger Heaven*. Like Du Bois, however, Thurman returns to the questionable status of his earlier prophecy only to offer it again with even greater confidence in his prognosticating prowess: “Thus I defiantly reiterate that a few years hence Mr. Van Vechten will be spoken of as

⁵⁶ The Crucifixion topos thus becomes in this instance a form of Signifyin(g), the figure of figures; one reason Cullen's 1929 poem “The Black Christ” succeeds so little as poetry (a “flaccid” poem, Eric Sundquist has called it) is that its whole conceit has long since solidified into cliché, into a metaphor so often invoked that, by the end of the '20s, it is best used as a vehicle for other, fresher tropes (*To Wake the Nations*, 593). For a more positive reading of “The Black Christ,” see Qiana Whitted, “In My Flesh Shall I See God.”

a kindly gent rather than as a moral leper exploiting people who had believed him to be a sincere friend" (47). That *Fire!!* ends by rushing to the defense of a prominent renaissance patron newly vilified for his sensationalist depictions of black life in Harlem – as well as for manifesting that “decadent strain” that Locke worried had penetrated the Niggeratti’s own work (IS, 234) – testifies to the magazine’s efforts to upset the black intelligentsia. (Du Bois memorably dismissed *Nigger Heaven* as “a blow in the face” – nothing but “gin and sadism,” and “one damned orgy after another” – which rather echoes Locke’s characterization of *Infants of the Spring* as just another of Thurman’s “prolonged orgies of exhibitionism.”⁵⁷)

It is further significant that *Nigger Heaven*, this novel that Thurman has chosen to defend as the final word in *Fire!!*, climaxes – like Joyce’s *Ulysses* – with an explicitly sacrilegious rite. Toward the end of the novel, the black would-be writer Byron finds himself in a taxi – at six a.m., following a long night of drinking, carousing, and occasional powder-sniffing – and tells the cab driver his destination: “Drive to hell!” To which the driver responds, not illogically, “I guess you means duh Black Mass.”⁵⁸ Soon we find ourselves in a strange, dark interior of secret doors and passwords, of “uncanny, horrible laughter” and “wild music, music that moaned and lacerated one’s breast, . . . shrieking, tortured music from the depths of hell. . . . [Byron] joined this witch’s Sabbath. Demoniac saxophones wailed like souls burning in an endless torment. Triumphant trumpets called to a profane glory” (253-55). A naked girl appears, with “savage African features” and hair “like a lanate halo” – “she could have been no more than sixteen” – and commences “to perform her evil rites” (255-56). These rites, only elliptically evoked, involve a knife, a woman’s scream, and a body – the girl’s – turning purple. What exactly transpires is left tantalizingly mysterious, but one can perhaps fill in the gaps with reference to Huysmans

⁵⁷ Du Bois, “On Carl Van Vechten’s *Nigger Heaven*,” 516-17; Locke, unpublished review (Alain L. Locke Papers, box 164-134, folder 17).

⁵⁸ Van Vechten, *Nigger Heaven*, 252.

and de Sade. The novel ends with Byron's firing two bullets into the body – apparently already dead, or close to it – of his rival, Randolph Pettijohn. Van Vechten's choice of words is suggestive: "He drew his revolver and shot once, twice into the ugly black mass" (284). Thus does Van Vechten link a blasphemous ceremony – the Black Mass – to the corporeality of this African American corpse, as well as to that other black mass, the African American population at large. Blasphemy here emerges as nothing less than the discursive mode in which the novel articulates Harlem life and black identity – and blasphemy likewise serves the Niggeratti, led by one of Van Vechten's more vocal defenders, as the preferred mode in which to articulate *their* irreverent perspectives on that life and that identity.

On the Sanctity of Mergers

Fire!!'s most transgressive work is also its most well-known: Bruce Nugent's "Smoke, Lilies and Jade," a polymorphously avant-garde short story that queers race, gender, and sexuality while making a mockery of the Protestant work ethic. It also, in the words of Marlon Ross, "makes more explicit" *Nigger Heaven*'s "blasphemous gesture" by "intertwin[ing] the singing of a spiritual with homosexual imagery."⁵⁹ The passage Ross has in mind samples the very Hughes poem quoted in the magazine's foreword:

Beauty's lips had pressed hard . . . cool . . . cool . . . fy-ah Lawd . . . his breath had trembled . . . fy-ah's gonna burn ma soul [. . .] Beauty's body had pressed close . . . close . . . fy-ah's gonna burn my soul [. . .] Beauty's lips touched his . . . pressed hard . . . cool . . . opened slightly [. . .] Beauty's lips pressed hard against his teeth . . . Alex trembled . . . could feel Beauty's body . . . close against his . . . hot . . . tense . . . white . . . and soft . . . soft . . . soft (F, 38)

Nugent's elliptical effects here exceed Van Vechten's in *Nigger Heaven*'s Black Mass, and the interweaving of Hughes's sermon-cum-Spiritual "Fire" with a passage that is not only erotic but

⁵⁹ Ross, *Manning the Race*, 417.

utterly without precedent in its treatment of interracial same-sexuality makes this one of the most iconoclastic moments in African American modernism. Indeed, the transgressions of “Smoke, Lilies and Jade” inhere largely *in* its modernism – its experimentations with form, interiority, and subject matter – and in what it makes modernism *do*.⁶⁰

This penchant for mingling the sacred with the erotically transgressive emerges in much of Nugent’s visual art. It also drives his poem on Adam and Eve that appears in *Gentleman Jigger* (32-33), a heteroglossic affair that interweaves quotations from Genesis with ruminations on such matters as modernity, liquor, the Charleston, and sex:

Kisses-in-the-evening-hey-hey
 AND WHEN THE WOMAN SAW THE TREE WAS
 GOOD FOR FOOD
 [. . .]
Maybe . . . gimme another kiss, baby . . .
Wine . . . gin . . .
Wine-of-life noise
Light . . . half-pint-gin smoke?
 SHE TOOK OF THE FRUIT THEREOF
What was life?
Kisses . . . perfume . . . noise . . .
Light . . . pappa-love-mamma?

One would know life
 AND DID EAT

Nugent’s “Bible stories,” written in the late 1920s and early ’30s, effect similarly transgressive mergings of erotics and scripture, putting Nugent squarely in league with the idiosyncratic religious ethos expressed in the work of Mina Loy – such as her poetic depictions of sex (or “Xes”) as a sacred communion cast in the language and imagery of Christian ritual, or in her stated opinion that, at its root, “the divine mission of Jesus was to invite us to a party” (“HRE”).

⁶⁰ Noting the story’s resonance with important precedents in the works of Joyce, Proust, and Faulkner, David A. Gerstner locates the story “squarely within the so-called stream-of-consciousness style and Bergsonian inquiries about the relationship between space and time. But Nugent brings these modernist interests into queer interracial territory. . . . Nugent’s wisps of space and time are specifically put into service – in 1926 – to bring to life panracial and pansexual sensations” (*Queer Pollen*, 45).

For these Bible stories present markedly queer rewritings of scripture, making them, as Thomas Wirth asserts, “even now as unsettling to the conventionally minded reader as [they are] exhilarating to the iconoclast.”⁶¹

In one of Nugent’s stories, Carus – Herod’s fourteen-year-old, “fabulously white” catamite, “the most beautiful boy of his age” – holds an instructive conversation with Caspar, the black-skinned Magus for whom Carus nurses a forbidden desire.⁶² On their journey home from visiting the newborn Jesus, Caspar reminds his young charge that “God is love,” but Carus insists instead that “love is God” (127). Caspar explains that Carus’s notion of love is “an active thing, and that of which I teach thee is a name” (128). Their dialectic turns on the equation of desire with the divine: if God is love, then does not love equal God? And if so, how can desire – even between a black man and a white boy, regardless of its status as “active” or inert, profane or platonic – be anything but holy?⁶³ Nugent continues his erasure of distinctions between Eros and *agape* in another Bible story, “Tree with Kerioth-Fruit,” which tells of Jesus and the disciples. Here Nugent focuses again on God and on love – as well as jealousy, commitment, betrayal, and grief – between men. The story mingles scripture and Decadence, presenting a distinctly Wildean vision of the Apostles: they “caress” one another with their voices, finger each other’s necklaces, and take turns pouting over their jealousy of the beloved newcomer called Jesus.⁶⁴ The tale’s opening finds the Disciple Simon admiring John as he basks in the sun, “comparing with his artist’s eyes the gold of John’s hair with the brown of his own” (139). John is nude here, evidently, as only several lines later do we find him “putting on his

⁶¹ Wirth, Introduction to Nugent, *Gay Rebel of the Harlem Renaissance*, 45. That Nugent was familiar with and even influenced by Loy’s poetry is attested by a single line in an untitled holograph manuscript. Written in the elliptical manner of “Sahdji” and “Smoke, Lilies and Jade,” this brief short story by Nugent summons forth an unmistakably Loyan “saxophone . . . yielding inebriate hiccoughs” (Alain L. Locke Papers, box 164-188, folder 1).

⁶² Nugent, “Beyond Where the Star Stood Still,” *Gay Rebel of the Harlem Renaissance*, 119.

⁶³ This denial of separations and limits is characteristic of other Nugent texts as well. See Tyler Schmidt, “In the Glad Flesh of My Fear,” on Nugent’s “uncoded exploration of sex between father and son” and of “cross-dressing, public sex, and gay desire” in his still unpublished novel *Geisha Man* (162).

⁶⁴ Nugent, *Gay Rebel of the Harlem Renaissance*, 141.

robe." Yet John does not reciprocate Simon's desires; it will require the physical beauty of Jesus to awaken these feelings in John, who has "never indulged in the Greek refinement. 'Tis not according to the laws of Moses, nor truly to my desire. But the stranger [Jesus] does fascinate me . . ." (139).

John soon finds that "a pleasant tremor [is] vibrating his young knees and excitement painting his face with even greater beauty," a beauty to which Jesus reacts in like fashion: "It excited him strangely and left him embarrassed for words" (140). In Nugent's telling, Christ offers an end to the inhibiting "laws of Moses" that would still John's quaking knees, and soon John becomes one of the twelve men with whom Christ lives and, presumably, sleeps. John in fact becomes, not just one of the twelve, but a special favorite, "the beloved" (143). Yet Nugent presents the real love story as taking place between Jesus and Judas, "so alike in thought and desire were they" (143). Jesus gives John much of his "affection," true; "But Judas, Jesus knew" (143). Whether the word *knew* here is meant to operate in the biblical sense is not perfectly clear – but these are Bible stories, after all.⁶⁵

Nugent takes pains to emphasize Christ's erotic physicality: "He liveth completely in the physical beauty he hath inherited from his father's fathers – the sons of David" (141). Reminiscent of Mina Loy's Christic vision, this Jesus seduces with his voice; for Nugent, the poet in Christ subsumes and trumps His godhood: "it was *as a poet* that Jesus said, 'I am the Son of God'" (140, 144; emphasis added). Touched by "divine madness," he is "the poet of man," "through whom all things became living words" (142, 146, 140). But perhaps it is more accurate to say that Jesus' divinity becomes in Nugent's hands a datum to suggest and hint at, then teasingly retract. This epistemological flirtation occurs between Jesus and his apostles, but also

⁶⁵ The sexual implications of "knowing" operate subtly throughout "Tree with Kerieth-Fruit." After John and Andrew begin to share "the poet's home," John advises Simon, "Thou must come and know this man" (140). And perhaps Jesus has erotic knowledge in mind when he counsels Judas that "Knowledge is greater than belief" (145).

between Nugent and the reader; Nugent's vacillation on the decision whether to capitalize pronouns relating to Jesus—a sometime "he" who often becomes a "Him"—highlights the teasing back-and-forth of Jesus' godhood that we find in the narrative sequence. For instance, fast on the heels of Christ's seeming dethronement—in Nugent's assertion that it was merely "as a poet" that Jesus figured himself as the Son—comes the statement that "John, because he loved Jesus, knew that Jesus *was* God" (144). Yet this knowledge, seemingly sanctioned by the author, is again undercut by the following sentence: "Jesus spread his poetry; it became the word of God" (144). Rather than fulfilling and embodying God's Word, Nugent's Christ is a poet whose words retroactively inscribe God's lowercase "word."

The story's conclusion seems to reaffirm Jesus' status as mere man and symbol, rather than God's manifestation. Nugent imagines the Last Supper and its aftermath as follows:

While breaking bread Jesus stayed his hand and said, with that certainty and sadness of the poet's tongue, "One of you present will betray me." . . . And his hand, as always in trouble, rested on Judas's shoulder. And Judas shuddered, for he knew that Christ believed his own word. Knew that they all believed his word. . . . And Judas knew that none of them would betray their teacher, and that Jesus would have spoken false. Knew that after that one false word, there would be ever doubt in their eleven souls. . . . Then Judas knew the great thing that he would do. (145)

There is theological precedence for a sympathetic reading of Judas—his betrayal, after all, was necessary to Christ's mission of redemption—but Nugent's revision of that betrayal offers a more radical reading of Judas as in some sense a *redeemer* of Jesus himself. Were it not for Judas's decisive action, the story suggests, Jesus would have been exposed as a liar and his ministry would have failed, as Christ himself recognizes. Having been traded in for thirty pieces of silver, "Jesus saw that each coin was proof that the betrayal had been bought so that the poet's word would be true. And Jesus wept also that *he* had betrayed *Judas*" (145).

Nugent here lifts from the contexts of the Lazarus story the Bible's famous and shortest verse, "Jesus wept" (John 11:35) — or, here as in the Douay-Rheims Bible, "And Jesus wept" — in order to reimagine Christ's tears as an expression of regret tinged with homoerotic remorse. And so the story ends, it seems, by elevating Judas and stripping Jesus of divinity. Yet as both men are elevated onto their respective trees in the final paragraphs, we might consider these events from another angle: even if Judas thinks that he has played his own hand ("Thou knowest, Jesus, that had I saved thy life, thou wouldst be even more dead"), from a theological perspective one might readily say that he has merely played into the hands of "the poet" (146). Perhaps Jesus foreknew all. Hermeneutically, we are left in the queer morass of Nugent's teasing ambiguities — of profane and sacred love, poetry and prophecy, betrayal and redemption, mortal and divine humanity. Our last image of Judas, the would-be poet, informs us that he has inherited finally "the poet's tongue," and we are left to ponder whether this is mere serendipity or a gift from the god whose Crucifixion he has just enabled — though "love," as they say, seems finally to conquer all:

As Jesus on the Hill of the Skull murmured, "Forgive them, they know not what they do," Judas drew the cord from around his waist and hanged himself from the olive tree. And whispered with the poet's tongue he finally had been given:

"I did but love thee." (146)

In these texts as well as in his contribution to *Fire!!*, Nugent assaults taboos while breaking, in particular, many of the unspoken editorial rules of *The New Negro*: that one must elide those "decadent" displays of eroticism that characterized "the naughty nineties" — Locke's words — and that one must at least tacitly valorize the necessity for hard artistic work on behalf of "the

Negro.”⁶⁶ For one thing, dandyism requires a steadfast commitment to leisure, decadence, artifice, queerness – and Nugent played the role of the black dandy to the hilt.⁶⁷

Nugent’s friend Zora Neale Hurston, another *Fire!!* contributor and member of the Niggeratti, offers her own commentary on the figure of the black dandy in her one-act play, “The First One” (1927). Like her novels *Moses, Man of the Mountain* (1939) – which rewrites Moses as a figure of godlike power and Creativity – and the unfinished *Herod the Great*, this play radically revises Western interpretations of scripture while also transvaluing traditional Western conceptions of race, as well as of work and progress.⁶⁸ Here Hurston takes as her subject the supposed Curse of Ham, recasting Ham’s blackness as not a curse but rather a misunderstood gift. This Nugent-like Ham, youngest son of Noah, likes to “caper and prance”; wearing a goatskin and wreathed in flowers, he plays a “rude” instrument that evokes Pan’s.⁶⁹ “I am as a young ram in the Spring,” he sings, “Or a young male goat. / The hills are beneath my feet / And the young grass. / Love rises in me like the flood” (54). He is singer, artist, aesthete: a young Dionysus or Pan, here evoking nothing so much as Nugent “capering and prancing” tardily into a gathering of unamused Harlem elites – the sort of thing his fictional avatars do in *Gentleman Jigger* and *Infants of the Spring*. This Ham takes things in stride, including the inevitable darkening of his skin, telling Noah and his brothers: “Oh, remain with your flocks and fields and vineyards, to covet, to sweat, to die and know no peace. I go to the sun” (57). The echo here of Tennyson’s “Ulysses” (“To strive, to seek, to find, and not to yield”) suggests the centuries of restless imperial questing that lie ahead of the whites whom Ham

⁶⁶ Locke, “*Fire: A Negro Magazine*,” 563.

⁶⁷ On Nugent (and his avatar in *Infants of the Spring*) as a paradigmatic dandy figure, see Monica L. Miller, “The Black Dandy as Bad Modernist,” 199-200.

⁶⁸ *Moses, Man of the Mountain* takes the traditional Hebraic homology in a radically unconventional direction, with implications of black strength and empowerment that exceed the normal bounds of African American “Exodus Strategies.” In effect, its unorthodox fictionalization of Moses constitutes a proleptic vision of Black Power.

⁶⁹ Hurston, “The First One,” 53.

leaves behind. He and his black progeny, it seems, will not be tethered to avarice and ambition; they will “go to the sun” and live in peace. Such is the preferred attitude of the Niggeratti, privileging aestheticism and leisure over the more pragmatic ambitions of a Locke or a Du Bois.

Hurston’s rewriting of the Hebrew Bible finds a corollary in Thurman’s *Infants of the Spring*, as Bruce Nugent’s character regales an assembled crowd with his tale of a recent dream – which seems to have taken the form of a prelapsarian erotic fantasy (“I was in Eden . . .” [44-45]). Whereas in “Smoke, Lilies and Jade” Nugent’s narrator allegorizes an attractive lover as “Beauty,” in this dream the reverse occurs: Beauty itself is personified as an erotic partner of indeterminate sex.

I became aware of a presence. An ivory body exuding some exotic perfume. Beauty dimmed my eyes. The physical nearness of that invisible presence called to me, lured me closer. . . . My hand reached out and clutched a silken forelock. Involuntarily my eyes closed and I was conscious of being sucked into it until there was a complete merging. For one brief moment I experienced supreme ecstasy. (45)

The ecstatic experience of this “complete merging” signals a momentary suspension of all distinctions and boundaries, an encounter with the divine or sacred – with “an immanent immensity, where there are neither separations nor limits,” as Georges Bataille defines the sacred in his *Theory of Religion*. Bataille is worth mentioning here because of his insistence that only through concerted transgression – in the form perhaps of ambiguous erotic fantasy or, better, of an eroto-socio-racially transgressive orgy – can one breach the realm of divine continuity and immanence. If, as Bataille maintains, “the sacred and the forbidden are one,” then “the sacred can be reached through the violence of a broken taboo.”⁷⁰ It is thus appropriate that the phenomenon of merging should recur in Thurman’s *Infants* in the context of its

⁷⁰ Bataille, *Theory of Religion*, 42; *Eroticism*, 126.

climactic rent party, where “Shouts of joy *merged* into one persistent noisy blare” (184; emphasis added).

Compare Thurman’s story in *Fire!!*, where “at a Saturday night house-rent party in a well known whore house,” there arises “a chaotic riot of raucous noise and clashing color all rhythmically *merging*”; there, as is *Infants*, the colors merge, as all racial (and sexual) distinctions become “completely eradicated. Whites and blacks clung passionately together as if trying to effect a *permanent merger*. Liquor, jazz music, and close physical contact had achieved what decades of propaganda had advocated with little success” (*F*, 6; *IS*, 186). That this raucous party’s “merger” miraculously outpaces the efforts of mundane propaganda highlights Niggeratti Manor’s ritual and symbolic function as a space where boundaries and limits become porous, where sacred and profane, angelic and forbidden, are allowed to interpenetrate and meld. It is, in the contexts of Christian mores and New Negro orthodoxy, a profanatory space that nonetheless functions as an appropriate setting for what Bernard Bell has called the “Afro-American canonical story”: “the quest, frequently with apocalyptic undertones, for freedom, literacy, and wholeness.”⁷¹ The Niggeratti share, that is, the desire for the sacred that we see in *The New Negro*; their texts nonetheless betray far less reverent notions about how to get there.

⁷¹ Bell, *The Afro-American Novel and its Tradition*, 341-42.

Chapter Four

BLASPHEMY AS INVERSION: GO DOWN, DJUNA

Queerness . . . is both abject and exalted. —Heather Love, *Feeling Backward*

Ah, yes—I love my neighbour. Like a rotten apple to a rotten apple's breast
affixed we go down together, nor is there a hesitation in that decay. . . .
—Djuna Barnes, *Nightwood*

The competing aesthetic and political strategies of the New Negro Renaissance recall another cultural exchange from the period, one similarly characterized by biblical appropriation and the discourse of blasphemy. Like Harlem's heated debates over classicism versus decadence, discreet versus open sexuality, and so on—with Alain Locke urging a virile, Whitmanian expression of Eros while lamenting the "Niggeratti's" resuscitation of the "naughty nineties"—this other exchange likewise has to do with the problem of same-sexuality and of how best to treat the subject in literature and in life.¹ Playing *The New Negro's* part is Radclyffe Hall's classic lesbian novel *The Well of Loneliness* (1928), which, like Locke's anthology, exploits Christian typology in a bid for cultural recognition and acceptance. The "stigmata" of the homosexual, Hall writes, are "verily the wounds of One nailed to a cross."² Hall accordingly casts her protagonist, Stephen Gordon, as an elaborate Christ figure who begs the reader's mercy for those afflicted from birth with "sexual inversion," the period's dominant paradigm for same-sex desire.³

Echoing, meanwhile, the satiric or "signifying" role of such Niggeratti productions as *Fire!!* and *Infants of the Spring* is *The Sink of Solitude* (1928), a parodic pamphlet that writes back

¹ Locke, "Fire: A Negro Magazine," 563.

² Hall, *The Well of Loneliness*, 246.

³ Named after the first Christian martyr and born on the night of Christmas Eve, Stephen is "absurdly self-sacrificing," a fervently masochistic "martyr" who yearns to "give light to them that sit in darkness." As a child, she prays for her nanny, saying she "would like to wash [her] in my blood" (Hall, *The Well*, 433-34, 21, 437).

to Hall's novel while also engaging the public discourse that surrounded its suppression on charges of obscenity. Comprising a polemical preface by P. R. Stephensen, drawings by Beresford Egan, and an anonymous "verse lampoon" in heroic couplets, *The Sink of Solitude* directs its satire in two directions: on one hand it rails against the suppression of *The Well of Loneliness* "in the land of the *Areopagitica*," while on the other it pokes fun at the "silly novel" itself and at the pathologization of homosexuality by Hall as well as by the likes of Havelock Ellis and Sigmund Freud. Ellis, the period's most prominent sexologist and documenter of inversion, had helped to set the pleading tone of Hall's novel in his preface to that work; in *The Sink of Solitude*, P. R. Stephensen uses his own preface as an occasion to call "upon the Home Secretary as a christian to enforce the blasphemy laws" against the editor of the *Sunday Express*, James Douglas – who had written in that paper that he "would rather give a healthy boy or a healthy girl a phial of prussic acid than this novel." Hall's portrait of inversion, Douglas wrote, "cannot be reconciled with the Christian religion."⁴

These successive rhetorical posturings bear remarking. First, *The Well of Loneliness* makes "brazen, blasphemous" use of biblical typology in its moral defense of homosexuality – which some of its readers nonetheless decry as blasphemous for its perceived *immorality*.⁵ Then *The Sink of Solitude* calls for blasphemy charges to be brought against the novel's detractors for having profaned one of modernity's secular gods, Freedom of Speech. Finally, Hall herself was considerably upset by what she considered the "blasphemy" of *The Sink's* frontispiece, which depicts the author's body nailed to a crucifix; no doubt Hall's moralizing critics would have concurred in characterizing the image as blasphemous.⁶ The similarity of this dialectic – a blasphemous response to blasphemy, which itself elicits charges of blasphemy – to the *New*

⁴ *The Sink of Solitude*, unpaginated; Douglas, "A Book That Must Be Suppressed," 38.

⁵ Sally R. Munt, "The Well of Shame," 202.

⁶ Sally Cline, *Radclyffe Hall*, 280.

Negro/Niggeratti agon demonstrates that divergent minority constituencies in the modernist period experienced similar kinds of infighting over how best to deploy religious and blasphemous tropes.

In writing back to Hall's novel, moreover, *The Sink of Solitude* is joined by the works of Djuna Barnes, most especially *Ladies Almanack* (1928) and *Nightwood* (1936). The former, which appeared in the same year as both *The Well* and *The Sink*, casts Hall herself as "Tilly-Tweed-in-Blood," who "sported a Stetson, and believed in Marriage" (LA, 18). The book's heroine, "Saint Musset," the larger-than-life prophet of lesbianism, duly rebuts Tilly's moralizing advocacy of monogamy between women; like Christ, whose atonement for humankind's sins inaugurated a new dispensation, Musset preaches a new Law – in this case one that sanctions promiscuity and dismisses the righteousness of monogamy (36, 80). "'Girls, girls,' said she, 'pause now to listen, I bring no Trumpet but that of my Message. . . . I have come to deliver you from Love and Love's Folly'" (77). Such is the Good News she brings to those, like Hall, who have assumed that once two women unite as "Wife" and "Bride," to lie with another is a "Sin," "an Evil so exactly of a piece, that the Judgement Call must be answered in a Trembling Tandem!" (19).

At least superficially, Barnes's *Nightwood* more closely resembles *The Well of Loneliness* than does *Ladies Almanack*. Readers, after all, can hardly fail to detect "the melancholy hidden beneath every jest and malediction" in the novel, from Felix Volkbein's "laborious melancholy" to Matthew O'Connor's "melancholy that had no beginning or end" (N, 8, 39, 110). Yet *Nightwood's* brand of melancholia differs in important respects from that of Hall's novel, sharing neither its sexological essentialism nor its pious pleading. *Nightwood* resists our sympathy, is anything but sentimental. At the same time, it resists our reading its depictions of homosexuality as either tragic or liberative – even if critics have often attempted to claim them as one or the other. Take, for example, the angst-ridden confrontation inside a cathedral

between a weeping Matthew O'Connor – cross-dresser, tortured Catholic, homosexual – and Tiny O'Toole, his penis or “ruined bird” (132-33). In a particularly influential reading, Jane Marcus interprets this evocation of physical and spiritual impotence as “one of the novel’s most hilarious scenes,” then waves away Robin Vote’s religious inclinations in the same sentence: “Robin laughs in church and goes home to read de Sade. . . .”⁷ Such observations ignore the pathetic and decidedly un-humorous dimensions of the scenes under discussion, as well as the earnest desires that accompany them. In pursuit of “some inscrutable wish for salvation,” after all, Robin *seeks out* churches – Catholic ones initially and, in the end, an abandoned Protestant chapel – and even takes the Catholic vows (46). Her attraction to religion, in other words, is stronger, more complex, and more compelling than the scene of her laughter suggests when cited without context. Barnes does not make a joke of religion, or empty it of its sacred value, such that we should laugh at O'Connor’s private moment in the cathedral. On the contrary, her blasphemies resonate precisely because she refuses to do so.⁸

Barnes professed an interest in only three topics, “beauty, art and religion” – this last a telling disclosure of her veneration for religion itself, despite her irreligious upbringing and lack of any clear religious identification. “What do we know of [God’s] design,” Barnes wrote in a 1936 letter; “it is His, and for that we should be a little reverent” (*D*, 221, 305). This reverent side of Barnes, and of *Nightwood*, has not been heeded by critics eager to hear peals of liberating laughter throughout a darkly comic novel that nonetheless prohibits our laughter at every turn – unless perhaps we feel compelled, like O'Connor, “to scream with sobbing laughter,” or

⁷ Marcus, “Laughing at Leviticus,” 248.

⁸ Unlike, say, the novels of Ronald Firbank, *Nightwood* hardly represents what Ellis Hanson has called “ecclesiastical camp” – the sort of fiction in which “Eroticism collapses into aestheticism, and so for that matter does religion” (*Decadence and Catholicism*, 355, 359). Where *Nightwood* ends with a scene combining dog, chapel, and erotic communion, for example, Firbank’s *Eccentricities of Cardinal Pirelli* begins there, its first pages depicting a male puppy copulating with its father throughout its own baptism – a ceremony that takes place in a church, at the hands of a priest, though with white menthe in place of water (*Five Novels*, 290-91). (“Sticky stuff,” an onlooker reflects [311].) For Firbank, little is at stake in such a scene beyond its mischievous drollery; in *Nightwood*’s conclusion, as we will discover, *everything* is at stake.

like protagonist Nora Flood to “lean forward and laugh with terror” (141, 165).⁹ Yet I would also caution against the reading, common in an older generation of critics and more recently espoused by Barnes’s biographer Phillip Herring, that *Nightwood*’s “satirical thrust” serves merely as a distraction from what is “essentially a tragic novel” (D, 203). I would suggest rather that such a hierarchy of terms does not find sanction in *Nightwood*. Like the striking tableau with which it ends – and like Matthew O’Connor in the sanctuaries of the religion that he loves, fears, and profanes in equal measure – *Nightwood* “essentially” is both tragedy and satire, lamentation and affirmation, “obscene and touching” (N, 170).

The danger of both Marcus’s and Herring’s critical positions – what we might call the manic and the depressive – lies partly in the way they lend themselves to a reading of the novel that reifies the pseudoscientific concept of sexual inversion as much as Krafft-Ebing did, and Havelock Ellis, and Radclyffe Hall. Inversion, in such readings, becomes either a rallying cry or a source of the kinds of anguish familiar from *The Well of Loneliness*. The reality is that in *Nightwood*, inversion and related concepts become sites of contestation, resistance, and by-turns playful and sardonic *profanation*; Barnes recasts the sexological bywords for non-normative desire in blasphemously sacramental terms which transcend and critique the lexicon of inversion. Whereas *The Well of Loneliness* “mimetically scripts an easily identifiable – and all too easily policed – homosexual underworld,” as Scott Herring argues, “Barnes dares disown this progress.” She “battle[s] against – not over – homosexual legibility and recognition.”¹⁰ Blasphemy, I submit, is Barnes’s preferred weapon in this battle, the principal means – in accordance with its trademark inversions of the sacred – by which Barnes turns contemporary sexology on its head.

⁹ Or, for that matter, to share “the amused grim chuckle of a person who looks up to discover that they have coincided with the needs of nature in a bird” (N, 53).

¹⁰ Herring, *Queering the Underworld*, 174, 155. For a more sympathetic reading of Hall’s use of the “essentialist discourse” of inversion, see Heather Love, *Feeling Backward*, 100-28.

Likewise, it is blasphemy's ambivalent tendency to affirm, while desecrating, the sacred that produces the tonal ambivalences in much of Barnes's work. As Kenneth Burke recognized in his seminal reading of *Nightwood*, Barnes makes "lamentation a source of pleasure for the reader" – since, after all, "a literary jeremiad must somehow be fun."¹¹ In a related recognition, Emily Coleman observed that Barnes's "greatest gift" was to "make horror beautiful" – a less religious formulation than Burke's, ironically, given Coleman's insistence in an unpublished review that *Nightwood* be read as "the religious book of their generation," even "a Catholic sermon" (*D*, 254).¹² In any case, both observations get to the heart of the world as Barnes depicts it: "damned and undamned, blessed and cursed," "holy unholy," "clean and unclean" (*R*, 133-34). Barnes seeks, in the registers of profanation, to convey these eternal ambivalences, "blaspheming in fairness and foulness" (134). *Nightwood* especially is a work of "gross splendour," "cold yet hysterical abandon," and "awful happiness," a novel in which down means up, in which dirt cleanses and "obscurity . . . illuminates" (1, 2, 64). In this novel Barnes sounds tirelessly the motif of inversion, construed variously as anatomical, sexual, and theological – not to mention syntactical.¹³ Inversion is the form, finally, that *Nightwood's* biblical typologies take: the birth of Robin Vote's son, Guido, issues in an inverted travesty of the Nativity, while Robin's relationship with Nora Flood – and especially that relationship's shocking conclusion – inverts the typology of Resurrection such that "going down" equates to transcendence. These thematics of abjection, of going down, are moreover inextricably conjoined to a spiritual or religious narrative of *rising up*: of "a perverse 'ascent,'" in Burke's words, "whereby corruption and distinction become interchangeable terms." Both trajectories

¹¹ Burke, *Language as Symbolic Action*, 241; emphasis in original.

¹² Burke likewise seems to have shared Coleman's sense of *Nightwood's* essential religiosity, arguing that it "takes the step from book to Bible" (*Language as Symbolic Action*, 241) – though a Bible of a radically unorthodox kind, marked as it is by a "pervasive overtone of the profane and sacrilegious" (Deborah Parsons, "Djuna Barnes," 165).

¹³ For example: "The autumn, binding him about, as no other season, with racial memories, a season of longing and of horror, he had called his weather" (*N*, 2).

will conflate in *Nightwood*'s final scene, as Robin Vote's "position of human-to-animal collapse" coincides with her "spiritual ascension."¹⁴

These are the narrative and theological forms of inversion which finally overwhelm any of Barnes's provisional trafficking in the secular vocabularies of early twentieth-century sexology. We would nonetheless do well, before turning to *Nightwood*'s blasphemous apotheosis, to consider those vocabularies and the ways Barnes challenges them directly in *Ladies Almanack* and beyond. For if Western societies, as John Addington Symonds wrote in 1896, have traditionally classed "inverted sexuality . . . among crimes against God, nature, humanity, the state," it is likewise true that blasphemy—a crime ostensibly against the first article in that series—has often been perceived, and frequently intended, as a crime against the others.¹⁵ Thus it was that Joyce, in *Ulysses*, aligned queer genders and sexualities with blasphemous expression and sacrilegious ritual, posing them as allied discourses in critiquing repressive ideologies both sacred and secular; and thus it shall prove in the case of Djuna Barnes.

The Uses of Inversion

"Wried and Awander": Combating Essentialism

If for Krafft-Ebing, Ellis, and others, inversion was by and large a matter of innate disposition, an inexorable biological aberration, Barnes refused such essentialist constructions of sexual identity. "I might be anything," she wrote to Emily Coleman, reaching, characteristically, for a bestial example; "If a horse loved me, I might be that" (*D*, 59). We can imagine *Nightwood*'s Nora Flood saying much the same thing, and for that matter her lover, Robin Vote, who indeed

¹⁴ Burke, *Language as Symbolic Action*, 246; Dana Seidler, "Down on All Fours," 550.

¹⁵ Symonds, *A Problem in Modern Ethics*, 6.

seems finally attracted to a nonhuman animal. (A dog, let us note: *god's* inversion.) Insofar as Robin and Nora are “inverts,” in other words, it is a result of what they *do* – carrying on a sexual relationship with each other and, in Robin’s case, with other women – not of what they *are*. Nora, in part a portrait of the author herself, is like Barnes not strictly homosexual; in an early draft, she even has two sons (*D*, 209). For her part, Robin marries a man and bears a son – even if that child’s nativity seems a slyly blasphemous rewriting of the Virgin Birth, as we have seen.¹⁶ Moreover, when her most significant erotic encounter with another of God’s creatures takes place between herself and a male dog, Robin engages in a theologically inflected communion of a sort that secular sexology is not well equipped to explain.¹⁷

Where *Nightwood* does hint at congenital homosexuality, it does so in an exaggerated manner that burlesques the very notion of an inverted or “third” sex. The unsubtly named Frau Mann, for example, is a human doll; the impenetrable “bulge” in her “tightly stitched crotch” conveys the impression that the “needle that had made one the property of the child made the other the property of no man” (13). Here a matter of seemingly biological essentialism is overtaken by an emphasis on performance and outward display – Frau Mann is, after all, a circus performer – which problematizes her ontological status as invert. Of course, there is also Matthew O’Connor, who surrounds himself with feminine paraphernalia, occasionally dresses like a woman, and even imagines he is “the last woman left in this world, . . . the bearded lady” (*N*, 100). But Barnes makes O’Connor’s tragicomic flamboyance into a kind of sideshow, one that makes a sideshow also of inversion as queer sexuality’s governing trope. Consider the satiric literalism of O’Connor’s inversion in *Ryder*, where he professes to embody “a reversal of established order,” being “one of those creatures who have their bottom up instead of their

¹⁶ See Introduction.

¹⁷ It does however accord, ironically enough, with Krafft-Ebing’s commentary on women and bestiality in *Psychopathia Sexualis*: “The intercourse of females with beasts is limited to dogs” (375).

head" (235). As he says all this, a nearby chamber pot stands inverted, spilling its contents into the soil: an implicit commentary, perhaps, on the sexologists' reifications of sexual identification and desire.

Barnes additionally lampoons sexual inversion and its overdeterminations via the figure of Amelia Ryder's provincial, conservative sister, whose habits of mind are hopelessly ensnared by the vocabularies of inversion and perversion. In a letter that treats the subjects of anal and oral sex, for example ("The Royal Guards, 'tis said, can be got at a pound the hour at either end"; "Such-like it was, or I am much mistaken, which aroused the attention at Gomorrah"), she regrets that Amelia herself could "so inverse her mind" as to endure like treatment at her husband Wendell's hands—as though such sodomy, whether between man and man or man and woman, constitutes an inversion of nature that Amelia's sister quickly links to an inversion of the Last Things: "Those bent on heaven and those bent on hell have got fearfully confused as to direction, so they do stumble into each other on the way. . . . Therefore imagine, dear sister, where we will all land in the end,—somewhere in mid-air, no doubt" (71-74).

Consider also *Ladies Almanack's* Saint Evangeline Musset, born "an Inch or so less" than the boy her parents desired (7). As Susan Sniader Lanser observes, Barnes here "rewrites Stephen Gordon's birth in *The Well of Loneliness*: she too was 'meant' to be a son (and like Evangeline named with saintliness in mind), but Stephen's phallic lack becomes Evangeline's signifier of superiority."¹⁸ For Musset blithely declines to regret her lesbianism in any way, becoming instead a crusader and merry martyr for "the Single Beatitude" of Sapphic sexuality (11). As a young girl she consoles her father: "Am I not doing after your very Desire, and is it not the more commendable, seeing that I do it without the Tools for the Trade, and yet nothing complain?" (8). No mere Freudian substitution, Musset's trusty whip more than suffices for the

¹⁸ Lanser, Introduction to *LA*, xxxv.

lack of such tools; paying “no Heed to the Error” of her birth, “she took her Whip in hand, calling her Pups about her, and so set out upon the Road of Destiny” (7).

On the whole, *Ladies Almanack* — “which all Ladies should carry about with them,” Barnes writes, “as the Priest his Breviary” — seeks to recast Radclyffe Hall’s novelistic presentation of homosexuality, even as it echoes Hall’s interest in biblical typology (9). “Written,” Karla Jay observes, “at a time when *The Well of Loneliness* took an apologetic and modest tone toward the subject of lesbians, the *Almanack* tackles it with frank glee.”¹⁹ And tackles it, let us add, with a more gleeful adoption of Christian typology and theological tropes. Barnes offers a rigorous accounting of Dame Musset’s sainthood (14-17), and of the successes of her “Crusade” (34). Musset and her circle speak of themselves as “converts” and “martyrs,” “Sisters of Heaven” (35, 38). They even adopt the biblical “I AM” of Jehovah and Christ, while enhancing that statement’s inherent egocentrism with an additional affirmation of the first person; “I am I!” is their rallying cry (29). In their eyes, Musset — whose visage conveys alternately “the look of the Pope” and “the Cunning of a Monk in Holy Orders” — becomes “first God, then God Almighty, then God Dumbfounding, and still later God help us, and finally God Damn” — this last making her both deity and blasphemy at once (34, 66).

“I come,” Musset proclaims, “to give you Word”: a formulation that puts an erotic spin on the Word of Christian theology (78).²⁰ “What joy has the missionary,” she elaborates, “when all the Heathen greet her with Glory Hallelujah! before she opens her Mouth, and with an Amen! before she shuts it!” (34). The services her mouth performs are of course not limited to the rhetorical, and she extends them democratically to each of those rising “priestesses” who

¹⁹ Jay, Foreword to *LA*, xiii.

²⁰ Accordingly, Musset dispenses conspicuously Christlike parables: “Recall, and remember, my Love, that the Camel is forever facing a Needle, but cannot go through it, and a Woman is much nearer the needle’s proportion in her probabilities than a Man” (*LA*, 50). Musset is a more vengeful redeemer, though, than Christ was, having “hanged, cut down, and re-hung Judas a thousand times” (26).

worship at “the Temple of the Good Dame Musset” (3, 19). Apparently she gives very good Word indeed, and even from beyond the grave: this, at least, is the implication of *Ladies Almanack*’s climactic conclusion, an irreverent reiteration of the Holy Spirit’s descent upon the Apostles in “tongues like as of fire” (Acts 2:3). As Barnes explains in the paratactic rhythms of the King James Bible, Musset’s tongue- and lip-service continues even after her disciples have set her deceased body ablaze:

all had burned but the Tongue, and this flamed, and would not suffer Ash, and it played about upon the handful that had been she indeed. . . . Señorita Fly-About came down upon that Urn first, and beatitude played and flickered upon her Face, and from under her Skirts a slow smoke issued, though no thing burned, and the Mourners barked about her covetously. . . (84)

As though taking a cue from her friend Mina Loy (who appears in this text as one Patience Scalpel), Barnes stages the *Almanack*’s structural climax as coterminous with a climax of another sort.²¹ “Beatitude” here is a product of miraculous cunnilingus; “no thing” is a typically Elizabethan reference to Señorita Fly-About’s genitalia, which here burns in an ecstasy just this side of St. Theresa’s. Observe, too, Barnes’s play on the biblical Burning Bush, which likewise flamed without itself being corrupted.

If all of this constitutes blasphemy of a playful and highly inventive sort, it also stands as a rebuke to the apologetic, melancholic evocations of lesbianism that mark Hall’s appropriations of scripture and theology in *The Well of Loneliness*. For all the tonal ambiguity of *Ladies Almanack* – readers have long debated its status as fond parody or more devious satire of Natalie Barney and her circle – the Pentecost which brings this strange book to a close is unquestionably affirmative, a joyous communion whose theological dimension is indexed by the title of the facing illustration. “MASS,” the caption reads; the picture itself shows Musset’s

²¹ Patience Scalpel alone, Barnes writes, “could not understand Women and their Ways” – yet her fellow-less fellowship with the faithful earns her a qualified sainthood (*LA*, 11). As she speaks “in that divine and ethereal Voice,” her “Ankles are nibbled by the Cherubs” (30).

tomb, attended by two disciples-cum-mourners. Inscribed on the tomb is a promise of resurrection (“WHEN IVE RISEN / SAY THE PRAYER . . .”), and Musset’s flame burns on: “they took the Ashes and the Fire, and placed it on the Altar in the Temple of Love. There it is said, it flickers to this day, and one may still decipher the Line, beneath its Handles, ‘Oh ye of little Faith’” (84-85).

By the time she writes *Nightwood*, Barnes will no longer content herself with depicting inversion in such unabashedly affirmative lights, preferring to undermine, to deconstruct the dogma of inverted sexuality. But it is in the discourse of yet another *Almanack* character, Low-Heel (“bride” of a woman named High-Head), that Barnes most directly skewers the period’s conventional understandings of sexuality between women—especially the equation of transgender with same-sex desire that the rubric of inversion implies. Indicting the sexologies of Ellis and Krafft-Ebing along with their forebears (who treat of such matters “in Tomes with the Quill of the Goose that has, with her, been dead a million years, and is Dust with her doings”), she wonders, “what have These Scriveners said of her but that she must have had a Testes of sorts, however wried and awander; that indeed she was called forth a Man” (53).²² “Wried,” as in being wired awry: an essentialist position Barnes pointedly refuses to endorse.

“Unholy Covenant”: Inversion and the Law of the Father

According to *Ladies Almanack*, “The Fourth Great Moment of History” — successor, apparently, to the Three Moments Matthew O’Connor describes in *Ryder* — consists of a biblical conversion to lesbianism, as Jezebel seduces the Queen of Sheba and in turn is seduced away

²² Such assumptions are of a piece, High-Head responds, with overarching androcentric ideologies of gender, which at best can “admit [women] to sense through the masculine door” (*LA*, 53). To the faculty of “Good Woman’s reasoning,” as *Ryder*’s narrator laments, “no Credence has been given by Philosopher or Scribe down through the very ageless ages” (28). In Amelia Ryder’s curt formulation: “To man is the vision, to his wife the droppings!” — even if, in her opinion, “reason” is a thing “born from between two women” (114, 148).

from men forever (41).²³ This theme of converted royalty recurs in the *Almanack* in the form of a “Queen, who in the Night turned down / The spikës of her Husband’s Crown / Therein to sit her Wench of Bliss” (60). This monarch’s nocturnal turn to sexual inversion involves a metonymic, and at the same time literal, inversion: the upending of man’s crown, and with it of phallic authority and enforced heterosexuality. On the facing page, a woodcut depicts a literally inverted angel, a woman – unlike the male angels that predominate in Jewish and Christian scriptures – hanging upside down, one breast bared, her halo dangling below her at the bottom of the picture (61). The juxtaposition of image and text here bespeaks Barnes’s persistent use of theological inversion – of blasphemy – to frame her critiques, not just of modern sexology, but also of androcentrism, of heteronormativity, and of the religious structures that underlie and enforce them.

Hence the *Almanack*’s founding myth of Creation, “the part about Heaven that has never been told” (25). “After the Fall of Satan,” Barnes writes, all the heavenly Hosts

gathered together, so close that they were not recognizable, one from the other. And not nine Months later, there was heard under the Dome of Heaven a great Crowing, and from the Midst, an Egg, as incredible as a thing forgotten, fell to Earth, and striking, split and hatched, and from out of it stepped one saying “Pardon me, I must be going!” And this was the first Woman born with a Difference. (25-26)

“A thing forgotten,” a story “that has never been told”: here is a genesis narrative left out of Genesis along with the tail of Lilith, another woman born not, like Eve, “out of a man with his rib sticking in her side!” (R, 44). In this case we are given Woman with a Difference, a difference that indexes both her erotic inclinations and her difference from biblical idealizations of woman subordinated to man. This creature’s first utterance expresses agency, independence, *non*

²³ The first “Great Moment” occurs when Cleopatra, her “mother instinct” kicking in, lifts an asp to her nipple as though to breastfeed it. When it delivers its fatal bite, she emits a blasphemous moan both of surprise and of pleasure: “ooooooooOOOO *Jesus!*” (R, 229). That Cleopatra’s death preceded the birth of Jesus does not seem to bother O’Connor in the slightest.

serviam. Her Fall, unlike Lucifer's or Adam and Eve's, is originary; she is its product, in other words, not its agent or victim, and she is free to strike her own course – a bit like Saint Musset or, for that matter, like writers such as Barnes and Mina Loy.

Ryder features yet another rewriting of Creation, this one from the mouth of one Molly Dance, a happily promiscuous woman whose many sons are all given to “blaspheming,” and who herself specializes in drawing portraits of Christ “in a gunny sack” (192). Molly authors her own pseudo-Christian theology. It begins, like the Bible, “In the beginning,” but from that point diverges sharply (195). Jonah here is “the First Man, all decked out in olive branches and briars, and a crown of thorns”; Caesar, not Judas, is “the betrayer of Jesus” (194-95). Evolution becomes an easy component of this tale, as Jonah's original exterior of fish-scales turns to feathers, then fur, and finally “skin, which was as good as a hint at the human” (195). Most pertinently, Molly insists that Original Sin “was not a woman's”; the episode involved an apple, she affirms, “but man it was who snapped it up, scattering the seeds, and these he uses to this day to get his sons by” (197-98).

If, in Molly's cosmology, men's malignant urge to procreate supersedes any sinful desire for Knowledge on women's part, the same can be said for the private passion-plays Barnes constructs in her works around figures of the lustful and predacious father – especially Wendell Ryder and, in her 1958 drama *The Antiphon*, the dead patriarch Titus Hobbs. The latter work's title, ecclesiastical in origin, speaks rather directly to the play's objective: to articulate, in frequently theological and often blasphemous fashion, an irreverent counterdiscourse aimed at male-dominated institutions of oppression. Its setting conflates two such institutions, the Church and the family home; like *Nightwood's* finale, *The Antiphon* plays out in a decayed holy space, but in this case it is also the former home of the Hobbs family, Burley Hall, once “a college of chantry priests” (A, 80). It is stewarded by Miranda Hobbs's uncle, who “Studied for

the ministry . . . and didn't make it"; "The wall is chapped where once the altar stood, / The basin dry" (103, 82).

At the center of this pseudo-Jacobean drama is an "unholy covenant," one "Sealed by the jaw-bone of an ass" (97). The covenant in question is that of the Hobbs family, modeled quite clearly on Barnes's own; the ass in question is Titus, the deceased father on whose sinister memory the play frequently hinges. In notes she wrote for *The Antiphon's* first staging, Barnes explained that all the Hobbs children "had been brought up on the faith," by which she meant the doctrine of free love that Barnes's own father and grandmother, Wald and Zadel, had so zealously espoused (*D*, 271). Espoused, that is, even to the point of inducting a teenaged Djuna, against her will, into its ranks – and at the hands of a much older man, possibly Wald himself, though more likely a neighbor recruited to the task.²⁴ Calling himself "Titus Adam" and his home "Hobb's Ark," making each of his wives and lovers a "Carrion Eve," Titus is said to have cast himself as both Adam and Noah, seeking to populate the world with his progeny (193-94). In his own eyes, he was also crusader and martyr for this sacred undertaking, no less than was St. Stephen to his:

Titus, self-appointed bray of heaven;
Wived in righteous plenty; populated.
Thought himself as dedicate as Stephen
That crusading infant long before him. (208)

His son Dudley remembers him as a "Puritan too close to his apostasy, / A moralist!" – an ironically puritanical zealot for the polygamous doctrine whose sanction he found, conveniently enough, in such biblical passages as Gen. 30:26 – while another son, Elisha, wonders, "Is it possible we're father's blasphemy?" (160, 144, 100). Titus's wives, in any case, adhered readily enough to the family dogma, "Swallowing, at a gulp, the Trinity – / Father, son and most

²⁴ Although she always blamed the rape to some degree on her father, Barnes gave conflicting accounts of the actual perpetrator's identity (*D*, 268-71).

unholy cause" (161). Much of this chimes readily with *Ryder's* depiction of Wendell, "Prophet in the wilderness," who frames his reproductive compulsion as a divine mission: "I replenish the world. I have the spirit and the works" (18, 160). The result, purportedly, of an immaculate conception, the spirit of Ludwig van Beethoven having played the Holy Spirit's part ("it was no cohabitation," his mother says of the miracle, "it was an infusion"), Wendell bestrides the novel as a larger-than-life figure portrayed in eschatological terms (36). His "thundering male parts" resemble "a terrible anvil, whereon one beats out the resurrection and the death" (42) — *death* here pointedly replacing the *life* of John 11:25.

It is *The Antiphon*, though, that serves as Barnes's most damning response to Titus/Wald's warped liturgy of patriarchal violence, and to the self-righteous enforcement of "free" love. An early draft portrays a version of Barnes's own childhood rape with chilling effect, describing a young Miranda Hobbs — the play's protagonist — "crawling" away from the scene of her defilement, "Dragging small blood, and her fathers laughter. / Who, having failed to make her mutton to himself, / That impious, and unhallowed man, / Tossed her a Cockney, thrice her age" (*D*, 272). The play's final text works more explicitly to cast the rape as sacrilege, a profanation like that of the Black Mass, and like the Black Mass it turns "up-side-down" the object of its desecration — in this case Miranda's violated body:

As in a profaned monstrance, see conspire
 The fighting shadow of the Devil and the Daughter.

 Miranda damned, with instep up-side-down,
 Dragging rape-blood behind her, like the snail (185)

Miranda later echoes the imagery of a profaned monstrance, indicting her family for having "set the canine tooth / Into the Host; / I've heard them lapping at the wound" (216). "Canine" puns on the pack of dogs, her father and mother and brothers, that snap at her heels from beginning to end; given the hell into which Miranda was born, that very birth constituted her personal

Fall, as she explains to her mother: “A door slammed on Eden, and the Second Gate, / And I walked down your leg” (195). Now, as she walks onto the stage of *The Antiphon*, she returns as both “Inquisitor” and “scapegoat,” bringing with her a “Day of Wrath” (195-97). She returns, that is, in the form of a “damned dark Beatitude,” to indict her tormentors and also to fulfill her role as sacrificial victim (203). The play ends, as Louise DeSalvo rightly observes, with a substitution of “the murdered and molested body and rape-blood of Miranda for the body and blood of Christ.”²⁵ Yet Miranda’s sacrificial going-down at play’s end – as her mother brains her with the curfew-bell and both women fall to their deaths – provides not the slightest glimmer of hope or transcendence (223). Evidently the sins of the father cannot be redeemed, at least not when that father is Titus Hobbs.

Nightwood’s Paradox

The Antiphon is without question a very dark work, utterly devoid of redemption as well as of the comic spirit that animates *Ladies Almanack* and even much of *Ryder*. *Nightwood* is a different matter altogether. Tonally and generically, it conjoins the comedy of the *Almanack* and the tragedy of *The Antiphon*; thematically and stylistically, it fuses the latter work’s pervasive concern with degradation and profanation to the vision of transcendence that terminates the former. In keeping with blasphemy’s essential ambivalence, *Nightwood* both affirms and desecrates, culminating with a sacrilegious rite which, as in *The Antiphon*, comprises a profane act of “going down” – though this time with the paradoxical implication of coming *up* – or at least, in Kenneth Burke’s inspired phrase, of a “transcendence downward.”²⁶

²⁵ DeSalvo, ““To Make Her Mutton at Sixteen,”” 315. Miranda’s brother Dudley seems to register her role as sacrificial lamb when he tells her (“*Hypocritically*”), “Don’t misunderstand, we loved *the lamb* – / Till she turned mutton” (*A*, 147; emphasis added).

²⁶ Burke, *Language as Symbolic Action*, 244.

Paradox likewise attends *Nightwood's* Matthew O'Connor, as it does the novel his voice so often dominates. Here is a man, *Ryder* tells us, whose Catholic piety is so great he cannot help blaspheming a priest who asks him if he was brought up in the church: "No, and damn your eyes! says I, I've come to it with a free heart" (137). A "Sodomite," "abominable among the filthy people," a local convent's go-to abortionist, O'Connor is at the same time an abject Christ figure whom *Nightwood* last depicts in a crucifixion pose, "his arms spread, his head between them, his eyes wide open and crying" (N, 93, 114, 165). He longs, at least, to be Christ's favorite saint ("I have read that John was his favourite, and it should have been me, Prester Matthew!") or, failing that, his brother: "Mother of God! I wanted to be your son—the unknown beloved second would have done!" (96, 150). In an unforgettable image we are told that he bathes in a church's "holy water stoup as if he were its single and beholden bird" (29). And yet he stands in a decidedly vexed, even fatalistic relation to the religion he loves and fears, as to the God he both worships and resents. During the nights he can be found "staring up at the huge towers of the church . . . running a thick warm finger around his throat," as though the Church is his inevitable guillotine—a gesture echoing his traumatic experience with a literal executioner who made this same gesture to O'Connor's throat (29-30, 24). Similarly, he makes a kind of parable out of his recollection of an Irishman sending up pious avowals ("Glory be to Jesus!") while being defecated upon by a cow: for O'Connor, being a good Christian requires such personal degradation (22). Accordingly, in spite of his Catholicism, he living among "incredible . . . disorder" in an "appallingly degraded" room redolent of "venery"; a "swill-pail stood at the head of the bed, brimming with abominations" (78-79).

"None of the doctor's methods being orthodox," O'Connor's innumerable heresies emerge, often, as simple inversions of orthodoxy (33). His "great virtue," he explains, "is that I never use the derogatory in the usual sense"—for according to his largely inverted order of

values the derogatory assumes a positive and even redemptive valence (116-17). Such is the heterodoxy of his private “dogma,” which for example upends the Christian beliefs in both inborn sin and infinite grace, offering instead inborn innocence and no hope of salvation: “Man was born damned and innocent from the start” (31, 121). He similarly inverts the Christian cosmology of heaven and hell, telling Nora, “Let go Hell; and your fall will be broken by the roof of Heaven” (124). Holy and abominable, sacred and profane, O’Connor is *Nightwood’s* resident father-confessor as well as its prophet of inversion – an oracular role at which Barnes hints by having him keen to God by His several Hebrew names (with, naturally, a couple of blasphemous non-sequiturs thrown in): “Jehovah, Sabaoth, Elohim, Eloi, Helion, Jodhevah, Shaddai!” (91).

The quality that most clearly aligns O’Connor with the biblical prophetic tradition, though, is his own gift for prophecy, a prognostic prowess that he displays throughout *Nightwood*. Guido Volkbein, the novel’s travestied Christ-child, fulfills O’Connor’s prophetic warning to Felix that “the last child born to aristocracy is sometimes an idiot. . . . [W]e go up – but we come down” (40). In a related prophecy, O’Connor correctly foretells that Felix will take to drinking (19-20, 23, 120). But most of the doctor’s visions come to pass only in the final chapter, “The Possessed,” a fact that speaks to that chapter’s telic, indeed apocalyptic positioning within the narrative. For instance: speaking to Nora of Robin and of Robin’s new lover, Jenny Petherbridge, O’Connor predicts that “in the end,” the three women will “all be locked together, like the poor beasts that get their antlers mixed and are found dead that way, their heads fattened with a knowledge of each other they never wanted, having had to contemplate each other, head-on and eye to eye, until death” (100). “The Possessed” bears out this prediction with some variation: another sort of “poor beast” takes Jenny’s place in the triad, and it is with this animal that Robin meets “head-on and eye to eye,” while Nora alone is left to

contemplate their strange ritual, her head fattened with a knowledge she never wanted or imagined. This last scene also fulfills the prophecy with which O'Connor closed the "Watchman" chapter: "though those two [Nora and Robin] are buried at opposite ends of the earth, *one dog will find them both*" (106; emphasis added).

Likewise, "The Possessed" fulfills O'Connor's prescient association, early in the novel, of royalty, bestiality, church, and profanation. Kings command their subjects' submission, O'Connor explains, because they have been

set apart as the one dog who need not regard the rules of the house, they are so high that they can defame God and foul their rafters! . . . The people love their church and know it, as a dog knows where he was made to conform, and there he returns by his instinct. But to the graver permission, the king, the tsar, the emperor, who may relieve themselves on high heaven – to them they bow down – only. (39)

O'Connor here articulates many of the preoccupations of *Nightwood's* haunting final pages: the people "bow down" to their king because he is "the one dog" who can blaspheme ("defame God") and defile ("foul their rafters," "relieve themselves on high heaven") with impunity. As the doctor's monologues in "Watchman, What of the Night?" progress, the seemingly cosmic contours of "the night" – an elastic trope for irrationality, sin, sadness, liberation, and transgression – begin to telescope into this one specific night, "the night of nights": "It's all of a certain night that I'm coming to . . . the particular night you want to know about . . . the one particular night that makes all other nights seem like something quite decent enough" (89, 97, 99). His commentary here assumes an indeterminate temporality that further aligns him with the biblical tradition, prompting a paradox of meaning and time analogous to the Christian theological quandary over realized versus futuristic eschatology – over, that is, the question whether the events depicted in Revelation have already happened or are yet to come. Here in full prophetic mode, O'Connor seems on the cusp of describing a future occasion that awaits

Nora; as it happens, he instead begins to tell of the night when Robin met Jenny Petherbridge, and more particularly of their strange mutual going-down in the carriage—a rite that transparently prefigures the language and action of “The Possessed.”²⁷

That O’Connor’s monologues so often prophesy *Nightwood*’s enigmatic conclusion confirms the error of the novel’s promoter and editor, T. S. Eliot, whose enchantment with those monologues equaled his insistence that Barnes should excise “The Possessed” entirely.²⁸ It also clarifies the conviction behind Barnes’s refusal, despite her typical willingness to comply with Eliot’s and others’ suggested deletions, to end the novel in any other way. For one thing, without “The Possessed,” *Nightwood* would conclude with O’Connor’s dramatic lamentation at the close of “Go Down, Matthew” (“‘Now,’ he said, ‘the end—mark my words—now *nothing, but wrath and weeping!*’”)—which would destroy the tonal ambivalence which *Nightwood*’s blasphemies work sedulously to sustain throughout. For “The Possessed” does give us an end that transcends mere lamentation, that transcends a mode of degradation and profanation that would signify only “*nothing.*” At the same time, it also takes the novel’s core theme of inversion—with all its sexual, theological, and profanatory freight—to its logical conclusion. This final chapter stands as inversion’s, and *Nightwood*’s, Revelation; in her ritual going-down with a dog in a chapel, Robin Vote ensures that the erotic “inversion” of her affair with Nora finds its telos in an inversion of another, more universal and more eminently transgressive sort.

²⁷ “Robin began to go forward . . . as if she had no will, sinking down in the small carriage, her knees on the floor, her head forward. . . . and as she sank, Jenny also, as if compelled, . . . leaned forward and over, so that when the whole of the gesture was completed, Robin’s hands were covered by Jenny’s slight and bending breast, caught in between the bosom and the knees” (*N*, 76). As in “The Possessed,” Barnes here atomizes her characters, paying minute attention to body-parts—knees, heads, hands, and bosoms—rather than to the overall arrangement of the two bodies, making it difficult to decipher what exactly transpires in this erotically suggestive yet opaque scene of women coming bodily together. (*Nightwood* will end with the awkward arrangement of a dog’s head lying “flat along her knees” as Robin crouches on the floor [170].)

²⁸ To his credit, Eliot recants in his introduction to the published novel, saying that while he had once thought “it was the doctor alone who gave the book its vitality,” he is “now convinced that the final chapter is essential” (*N*, xii).

Going down – both the activity and the phrase, in its various conjugations – recurs with notable frequency in Barnes’s writing, often in overtly theological and sexual contexts. This is true of each of her major works, though truest of *Nightwood*, a novel dominated by the voice of O’Connor, “an angel on all fours . . . going down face foremost, drinking the waters of night at the water hole of the damned” (95). O’Connor so honors the Bible’s commandments, he explains, that he not only loves his neighbor but “go[es] down together” with him (153). And when he tells of the time he “went down” to a church where he could “be alone like an animal,” he again foreshadows Robin Vote’s eventual going-down like an animal in an old Protestant chapel – her version of the self-abjection with which both O’Connor and Felix Volkbein exit the novel (131).²⁹ *Going down*’s ubiquity is particularly noteworthy in the work of an author whose prose is otherwise so inventive and various. The standard sexual meaning was indeed operative during the period in which Barnes wrote,³⁰ but the phrase inevitably also recalls certain of its more conspicuous uses in the Bible: God’s commandment to Moses (Ex. 19:21), on which the title of *Nightwood*’s chapter “Go Down, Matthew” is predicated, and likewise His directive to Jacob/Israel that he “go down into Egypt; for I will there make of thee a great nation” (Gen. 46:3). In *Nightwood*, such sexual and theological contexts overtake and subsume inversion’s secular meanings. Hence the novel’s central figure of Robin Vote, up-ender of Creation, “always holding God’s bag of tricks upside down” (113). To invert, to *be* an “invert,” to go down or be gone down on, or with: these things never lose their erotic meanings in *Nightwood*, but they do shed their narrow sexual determinism as they acquire fully apocalyptic and eschatological dimensions.

²⁹ In Felix’s final appearance, “he turned and made a slight bow, his head in his confusion making a complete half-swing, as an animal will turn its head from a human, as if in mortal shame” (*N*, 123). The bow and the turning of the head presage “The Possessed,” with Robin’s self-abjection and “her head turned completely sideways” (169-70). O’Connor too exits by “going down” at the end of “Go Down, Matthew.”

³⁰ Henry N. Cary’s 1916 dictionary *The Slang of Venery* defines “Go down” in its current sexual sense (*O.E.D.*).

When God Meets Dog: Blasphemy, Inversion, and the Nonhuman

From her entrance in the novel onward, Robin's "Christian proclivities" seem doomed to converge with her inexorable attraction to and for the "debased" (44, 42). And indeed they do, quite dramatically, in *Nightwood's* "final pages of horror, sinister and incomprehensible in implication," as a contemporary reviewer described them.³¹ Robin prepares for this apocalyptic finale with the ambivalence of the blasphemer, "going into many out-of-the-way churches," where she adopts alternately the posture of the faithful – "her hands folded at their length, her head bent" – and the attitude of "one renouncing something" (167). Entering each place of worship "like a housewife come to set straight disorder in an unknown house," she offers her lighted tapers to the altars (167). Nonetheless, suspecting Robin of "wickedness" and of "sensuous communion with unclean spirits," Jenny Petherbridge takes it upon herself to set right Robin's intrusion into these Christian sanctuaries; following ever close behind, she sneaks Robin's tapers from their sconces, blows them out, and lights them anew (167-68).

Eventually Robin takes to roaming the forests, "frighten[ing] the woods into silence with her breathing" and "circl[ing] closer and closer" to Nora's house in rural New York (168). Occasionally she even sleeps in the "decaying chapel" nearby (168). Relic of the area's Puritan settlers, those men and women with "the calk of prayers thrust in the heart" (51), the church serves pointedly as the sanctuary in which Robin enacts *Nightwood's* weird conclusion:

On a contrived altar, before a Madonna, two candles were burning. . . . Robin began going down. Sliding down she went; down, her hair swinging, her arms held out, and the dog stood there, rearing back, his forelegs slanting; his paws trembling under the trembling of his rump, his hackle standing; his mouth open, his tongue slung sideways over his sharp bright teeth; whining and waiting. And down she went, until her head swung against his; on all fours now, dragging her knees. The veins stood out in her neck, under her ears, swelled in her arms, and wide and throbbing rose up on her fingers as she moved forward.

³¹ Rose C. Feld, qtd. in Jane Marcus, "Mousemeat," 197.

The dog, quivering in every muscle, sprang back, his tongue a stiff curving terror in his mouth . . . as she came on, whimpering too, coming forward, her head turned completely sideways, grinning and whimpering. . . . Then she began to bark also, crawling after him – barking in a fit of laughter, obscene and touching. (169-70)

Barnes's original typescript of this chapter, which describes either Robin or the dog – the wording is dubious – as the other's "mistress," impressed Emily Coleman as overtly sexual. It also rather forcefully struck Coleman, as well as fellow draft-readers Peggy Guggenheim and Edwin Muir, as implying masturbation on Nora's part ("With a quick involuntary gesture Nora put her hands on the fore parts of her legs, bending forward . . .").³² Even in the published version, of course, the ending is sexually suggestive enough, paying sensuous attention to open mouths and tongues, to the "quivering" and "trembling" of playful anticipation. Aside from the erotic connotations of Robin's "going down" and the provocative sight of a woman "grinning and whimpering" on all fours, Barnes also gives us a series of phallic images: an erect hackle, a "stiff curving terror" in a mouth, and Robin's "wide and throbbing" veins that swell and rise up. Taken together, these textual cues convey the potential for a hyper-literalized *coitus more ferarum*.³³

More important, for our purposes, is the staging. Barnes's decision to set *Nightwood's* climax of abjection inside a church, backlit by candles burning on an altar before an image of the Virgin, imbues the scene with the atmosphere of a Black Mass, featuring the crouching Robin as a kind of human altar that enlists Nora's dog as profane priest. Like Joyce in *Ulysses*, Barnes positions the Black Mass as a narrative climax, pressing this favorite modernist trope further

³² Cheryl J. Plumb, ed., *"Nightwood": The Original Version*, 185, 210

³³ The whiff of this particular transgression perhaps accounts for the common refrain among the novel's contemporary reviewers that the final chapter leaves the realm of all propriety and overreaches the bounds of acceptable aesthetics. Rose C. Feld wrote upon *Nightwood's* American publication that the novel's "final pages of horror" are its only flaw, while A. Desmond Hawkins similarly concluded that, despite the fact that *Nightwood* "undoubtedly dwarfs all recent fiction," "the brief last chapter . . . seems to me to fail" (Marcus, "Mousemeat" 197, 202). Hawkins's purportedly technical critique that "The Possessed" marks "the only major occasion when action outweighs analysis" betrays a visceral intolerance of the ending's profanatory content (202).

even than Mina Loy does in *Songs to Joannes*. What Joyce and Loy hold in common is an intrusion of the erotic body into sacred spaces, a transgression Barnes exacerbates by shattering the boundaries between human and beast and hinting at a rather extreme form of interspecies “Communion.” In *Nightwood*’s least forgettable image, Robin meets Nora’s dog in a headlock, the two of them on all fours, “moving head to head,” their craniums forming a fulcrum around which their bodies perform their strange dance (170). The dog keeps “his head toward her,” “running with her, head-on with her head” – until both animals give up, relenting into an iconic and monumental stasis, Robin “lying out, her hands beside her, her face turned and weeping; and the dog [lying] down, his eyes bloodshot, his head flat along her knees” (170). The aura of imminence so palpable here is made more explicit in Barnes’s original typescript, which baldly encourages a reading that the published *Nightwood* merely leaves open: the possibility that Robin’s blasphemous degradation has yet farther depths to plumb. Rather than leaving us with the indeterminate image of the dog’s “head flat along her knees,” Barnes’s original version concludes with an intimation of something more – something perhaps truly un-writable – to come: “the dog . . . lay down, his head flat along her knees, his eyes bloodshot, *and waiting*.”³⁴

These final words would certainly accord with the enigmatic temporality that clings to Robin’s character throughout. Despite her apparent embodiment of an atavistic past – an “infected carrier of the past,” she carries “the quality of the ‘way back’ as animals do,” “like a person who comes from some place that we have forgotten” – she nonetheless inhabits an impossible futurity (37, 40, 118). She moves in a continually deferred future tense, the always not-yet of apocalyptic time. “Apocalypse is never now,” in the words of J. Hillis Miller. “It is always to come, a thing of the future, both infinitely distant and immediately imminent.”³⁵

³⁴ Plumb, ed., “*Nightwood*,” 186; emphasis added.

³⁵ Miller, *Others*, 117.

Perpetually “waiting to begin,” Robin is likewise “a catastrophe that had yet no beginning” (*N*, 155, 48). Her voice intimates “postponed abandon” (38). She has “the face of an incurable yet to be stricken with its malady,” and she appropriately becomes—for Nora—like an amputated hand that “is experiencing a futurity” (41, 59). Robin functions in the continuous past and future of apocalyptic time, “anchored in anticipation and regret,” but apparently unmoored from the present (60). She is never now.

Accordingly, Barnes frames *Nightwood*'s central relationship, Robin's strained union with Nora Flood, in apocalyptic terms. Like O'Connor's prophecies and pronouncements, this relationship tends irrevocably toward its, and the novel's, culminating rite of sacrilegious revelation. Ever the “early Christian,” Nora awaits the imminent Day of Judgment, imagining the fate of their relationship in the Second Coming: “In the resurrection, when we come up looking backward at each other, I shall know you alone of all that company. My ear shall turn in the socket of my head; my eyeballs loosened where I am the whirlwind about that cashed expense, my foot stubborn on the cast of your grave” (51, 58-59). What Nora does not understand is that Robin's will be an *embodied* transcendence in fundamental conflict with the disembodied resurrection Nora imagines; Robin will not whirl free of “that cashed expense” but instead, like the speaker of Loy's *Songs to Joannes*, will transcend in and through her very embodiment. In any case, the apocalypse accompanies these two women: “Death went with them, together and alone,” we are told in the language of Revelation, “and with the torment and catastrophe, thoughts of resurrection, the second duel” (58). The scene in the decaying chapel either enacts or merely commences this second duel, bringing an uncertain “resurrection” of Robin and Nora's relationship and a more certain resurrection of the beast within Robin, which, now nakedly unleashed, unfolds before Nora's eyes as a horrible unveiling, a revelation that yet raises more questions than it answers—a ““second coming,”” as Judith Lee argues, “that denies

the possibility of ending.”³⁶ As ever in the case of apocalyptic time, “the coming is always to come”: a Derridean formulation that captures both the temporality and the erotics of revelation that Robin embodies.³⁷ Her suggestive yet impenetrable gesture of (be)coming leaves us, like Nora and her dog, “waiting” for this gesture’s meaning, for the revelation that will clarify yet will always be “to come.”

Yet for all this indeterminacy, “The Possessed” nonetheless marks the logical terminus of *Nightwood*’s converging thematics of inversion and “going down,” and of its overarching narrative investments in the sexual and the theological. In doing so, *Nightwood*’s final chapter takes inversion in directions unknown to conventional sexology, and even hints at taking it beyond the human; among other things, Robin’s blasphemous barking at novel’s end dramatizes what Georges Bataille called one of transgression’s “most obvious characteristics,” its “alliance with animal nature.”³⁸ Indeed, in preparation for her climactic sacrilege, Robin has taken to “speaking in a low voice to the animals,” and she confronts these unspecified beasts as though confronting the emerging beast within: “Those that came near, she grasped, straining their fur back until their eyes were narrowed and their teeth bare, her own teeth showing *as if her hand were upon her own neck*” (168; emphasis added).

Such bestial identification is not without precedent in Barnes’s fiction. In *Ryder*, for instance, Amelia Ryder dreams of “a great fair ox” entering her bedroom—a room bedecked, in the tradition of so many Barnes interiors, with an icon of Christ and with tapestries depicting

³⁶ Lee, “*Nightwood*,” 214.

³⁷ Jacques Derrida, “Of an Apocalyptic Tone,” 54. As Derrida notes, the Bible’s apocalyptic unveilings often take the form of literal denudings, from Ham’s accidental crime against his father Noah to the peculiar emphasis on visual discovery in the incest prohibitions of Leviticus. Sexual and apocalyptic revelation go hand in hand, it seems, right through the great whore of Revelation.

³⁸ Bataille, *Erotism*, 136.

scenes from Genesis (99).³⁹ The ox proceeds to lie beside Amelia in bed, demanding recognition for his bestial existence in echoes of the biblical “I AM”: “I am also,” he explains; “Give me a place in your God, or I go to acquaint him that I am” (99). The scene is readable as a plea against speciesism that resonates with Radclyffe Hall’s theologically couched plea for sexual recognition in *The Well of Loneliness*; as God IS, these texts both insist, so I AM.⁴⁰ *Ryder* also contains another embedded narrative of bestial communion, Wendell Ryder’s Chaucerian tale of Pennyfinder the Bull. According to Wendell, Pennyfinder was a gigantic, “besainted” beast who blessed the townsfolk with his urine and feces – “His leggës lifted, *benedicité!*” – and then gave himself eucharistically to their devouring: “And when his body was y-served for sup, / Why then, God wot, no soul but ate it up!” (63-64). Wendell closes this narrative, as Barnes closes *Robin Vote*’s, with the image of a wordless, eye-to-eye rite between human and beast; instead of the bull, however, it is Wendell’s horse that calmly rises up on two legs – a “miracle” – and rests his front hooves significantly on his master’s shoulders (68). Like the story of Amelia and the ox, Wendell’s encounter with his horse presages *Nightwood*’s conclusion, although there of course the miracle is inverted; instead of a beast rising up to commune with man, Robin goes down to commune with a beast, both parties perhaps seeking the recognition implicit in the ox’s “I am also.”

Robin’s sacrilegious rite seems to propel her, as it were, to the other side – to a pagan sense of beasts as sacred. “As soon as human beings give rein to animal nature,” writes Bataille, “we enter the world of transgression . . . a sacred world, a world of holy things.”⁴¹ If religion

³⁹ Barnes herself decorated in this fashion while living with Thelma Wood, the model for Robin Vote. Their rooms contained a portrait of St. Stephen, “church roses in tinsel, one church runner over the mantel, and one china Virgin. There were many books on Catholic philosophy” (*D*, 143-44).

⁴⁰ The ox’s “I am also,” writes Bonnie Kime Scott, “echoes the proclamation of the deity. . . . the ‘also,’ however, diverts the narcissistic human, undermines the word of God, and strikes a blow against speciesism as yet another form of hierarchical thinking” (“The Look in the Throat,” 165-66).

⁴¹ Bataille, *Erotism*, 84.

seeks to return us ultimately to this world, Robin manifests a similar goal of reincorporation. Surrounded by the lineaments of Christian ritual, she nonetheless enlists as un-Christian a partner as possible, a nonhuman agent, and duly commences to crawl and bark along with him, as though in fulfillment of Felix Volkbein's prediction that "she will make an innocence for herself; a fearful sort of primitive innocence. It may be considered 'depraved' by our generation, but our generation does not know everything" (117).⁴² It is consonant with *Nightwood's* governing paradox that the primitive is something to work *toward*, that innocence *succeeds* knowledge, and that these inverted trajectories are worked out in transgressive theological terms. "Bend down the tree of knowledge," O'Connor warns/counsels, "and you'll unroost a strange bird" (138). With her climactic rite, Robin Vote may indeed have unroosted a strange and transcendent bird, even if it does bark like a dog: the Phoenix that arises from the ashes of her sacrificed humanity. In those ashes, too, lies any semblance of sexuality or spirituality that a sexologist or a priest would be likely to understand. *Nightwood's* inversions – not, centrally, its depictions of inverted genders or desires, but its blasphemous inversions of theology and eschatology – subsume and transcend such narrowly secular definitions.

Postscript: Blasphemy and Melancholia

We should not lose sight, however, of the more conventionally blasphemous aspects of Robin's actions in "The Possessed." Her choice of communicant, after all, is linguistically on-the-nose, "god" inverted – and not just any god, but a Christian god in particular, as Robin makes clear in her very specific choices of housing (a chapel) and interior-decorating (candles, icons, a makeshift altar). Why does her communion with Nora's dog require such symbolic

⁴² As Carrie Rohman argues, Robin's rite in "The Possessed" constitutes a "posthumanist triumph" – although Rohman's universalizing conclusion that this triumph "ultimately revises the category *human*" seems to me to overreach ("Revising the Human," 81). The category *human*, I think, remains fairly stable in this final scene: it is the skin that Robin sheds.

staging? Why, unless Barnes's conception of blasphemous transgression, for all its looking beyond the Christian tradition, still clings to that tradition's sacraments and to its definitions of the sacrosanct? In order fully to transgress, Robin must defile something worthy of defilement; accordingly, Barnes graces her character with "Christian proclivities," has her take Catholic vows, sends her into the arms of various churches, and stages Robin's final renunciation as at the same time an affirmation (44). And if this affirmation accords with blasphemy's inherent ambivalence (its tendency both to profane the sacred and, in doing so, to affirm its targets *as* sacred), it also sets *Nightwood* apart from the unredemptive melancholia that characterizes Radclyffe Hall's *The Well of Loneliness* and Barnes's own late work *The Antiphon*. Melancholia, as it happens, bears certain structural affinities with blasphemy; both comprise ambivalent mechanisms of incorporation and abuse, identification and aggression. Indeed, to set these concepts side by side – the one a mode of expression, the other a mode of psychic coping – is to discern a homology that stands to illuminate *Nightwood's* particular brand of melancholy. It is also to glean certain final insights into modernism's broader investments in blasphemy as literary discourse.

I have argued that blasphemous modernism takes two predominant forms, the typological and the sacrilegious. The former appropriates; the latter profanes, desecrates. In our consideration of the *New Negro* anthology and the often hostile responses it provoked in the literature of writers such as Wallace Thurman, Bruce Nugent, and Langston Hughes, we witnessed a dialectical tension between these modes of blasphemous expression. In Joyce, Loy, and Barnes, however, we have seen the two modes coexist, informing and determining one another. To translate our standard critical terms into more psychoanalytic ones, we find in these authors' simultaneous appropriations and profanations of religion an analogue to the simultaneous incorporations and debasements that characterize melancholia. For Freud,

melancholia is essentially a “substitution of identification for object-love”: one’s cathexis for a lost or forsaken object, rather than being “displaced on to another object,” is instead “withdrawn into the ego,” where it “serve[s] to establish an *identification* of the ego with the abandoned object.”⁴³ Once this lost object has become fused with the melancholic subject, the subject directs his or her otherwise impermissible feelings of anger and resentment inward. This is a suggestive framework, especially if that lost yet incorporated object is God Himself; for although God lives on in the pages of many modernist writers, He does so in spite of – and inevitably in response to – His supposed death beyond those pages.

Charles Taylor, who puts little stock in oversimplified versions of the Victorian Doubt narrative, concedes that it contains “some truth,” principally in the “agonizing” and “poignant sense of loss” felt by those – Darwin included – who felt they had lost their God. More broadly, Taylor notes that God’s death is typically attended by “melancholy, ennui (the ‘spleen’ of Baudelaire).”⁴⁴ One can only imagine the kinds of spiritual melancholia suffered by those who truly experienced God’s death, in A. N. Wilson’s suggestive words, as “the withdrawal of a great Love-object.”⁴⁵ The modernists both registered this withdrawal and complicated it. With redoubled vigor, they continued to seek in scripture and theology the sources of affect, cultural prestige, and literary force that only religion was quite capable of providing. They wove the Christian mythos and its god into the fabrics of their poems and fictions, and at the same time put those materials, often, to transgressive and desecratory ends. Like the unmourned but nonetheless lost object of melancholia, God and the sacred were both incorporated and desecrated – though at the same time inevitably affirmed, since for these “first-rate

⁴³ Freud, “Mourning and Melancholia,” 249.

⁴⁴ Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 378, 6.

⁴⁵ Wilson, *God’s Funeral*, 13.

blasphemers" (to borrow the language of Eliot's *After Strange Gods*), to blaspheme in the utter absence of faith would constitute both a philosophical and a rhetorical self-betrayal.

Not all blasphemous modernism qualifies as first-rate according to this criterion. Consider Wallace Stevens's *The Man with the Blue Guitar*, a poem that relentlessly profanes the Christian deity ("him whom none believes, // Whom all believe that all believe, / A pagan in a varnished car"), even as it deploys that derided god as the model for a new poetic creator-messiah.⁴⁶ Equating himself with "Gesu" (180), the poem's speaker draws on Eucharist and Crucifixion imagery (173, 166) and channels the language and poetic power of Genesis to portray the glory of literary creation: "From this I shall evolve a man," "and call it good, / The immaculate, the merciful good" (181, 168). Stevens advises, here and elsewhere, that "Poetry // Exceeding music must take the place / Of empty heaven and its hymns" –but *The Man with the Blue Guitar* seeks to repopulate heaven less with secular poetry than with the supposedly absent but conspicuously present figures of Son and Father (167). Having so casually denied and negated Christianity's authority and relevance, Stevens nonetheless draws on Christian tradition and trope to give authority and relevance to his poem.

The Man with the Blue Guitar both disavows and incorporates the abandoned deity, performing the existence of a god it simultaneously denies. To adapt Judith Butler's theorizations of melancholia in another context, one might say that this performance "allegorizes a loss it cannot grieve, allegorizes the incorporative fantasy of melancholia whereby an object" – in this case, the Christian God – "is phantasmatically taken in or on as a way of refusing to let go." If *The Blue Guitar* seems to evince "both the refusal of grief and the incorporation of loss, a miming of the death it cannot mourn," that may be because Stevens

⁴⁶ Stevens, *The Collected Poems*, 170.

himself was unwilling to let go of faith altogether.⁴⁷ That poetry must enact the faith displaced from Christianity's recently emptied heavens is, after all, one of the predominant motifs of both his poetic and his critical output, from "Sunday Morning" (1923) to *The Necessary Angel* (1951). For all its swipes at established religion, *The Blue Guitar* finally has less to do with blasphemy than with secularization: "a form of repression," as Giorgio Agamben has written, that "leaves intact the forces it deals with simply by moving them from one place to another."⁴⁸

A work such as *Nightwood* is melancholic in a very different way, narrating the loss and rejection, not of God or the sacred – whose abiding presence, power, and significance Barnes underscores quite emphatically throughout – but of God's children. If there is an absence at the center of this text, a locus of lostness, it is not God but Robin Vote – a kind of vortex who draws into her orbit, and inevitably expels, a panoply of equally lost souls. Far from keening or trumpeting the deity's death and rejection yet again, *Nightwood's* troupe of "permanent mistake[s]" – the souls whom "God forgot" – inscribe their own forsakenness (132, 73, 143). Felix, Guido, Nora, Matthew: "all cry out in tiny voices to the great booming God," their muted prayers proving woefully insufficient cries for recognition from the figure whose booming voice resounds throughout this densely scriptural novel (136). In *Nightwood*, God lives, is in some ways realer – at any rate, louder – than the "God-forsaken" (144). They, not He, are lost. Thus it is a part of *Nightwood's* particular dogma that God is not accessible to melancholic incorporation or identification. This prohibition even demarcates one of the areas onto which Jenny Petherbridge, "the squatter," trespasses – prone as she is to such godlike ejaculations as "my love is sacred and my love is great!" (75). Robin, who hardly ever speaks, makes an exception in order to chastise Jenny her for this characteristically histrionic outburst: "It's such an awful

⁴⁷ Butler, *The Psychic Life of Power*, 145-46, 142.

⁴⁸ Agamben, "In Praise of Profanation," 77.

weakness with you. Identifying yourself with God!" (76). Not coincidentally, Jenny is the novel's least redeemable character; her blasphemies succumb to an embarrassingly self-aggrandizing melancholia of the sort that *Nightwood* cannot endorse. Exclaiming Christlike apothegms and lazily identifying herself with God will get Jenny nowhere in *Nightwood's* rigorous economy of transcendent degradation.

Jenny, in other words, belongs to a wholly different breed than that of Matthew O'Connor and Robin Vote, who respect God enough to mount their battles on His home turf, and with the appropriate sacramental staging. So it is that Robin's highly unorthodox means of transcendence nonetheless partakes of quite conventional notions of Christian blasphemy. Unlike the Pope "who forgoes his angels that he may recapture the beast," Robin communes with a beast while refusing to forego her angels – or her altars, or her icons and candles, or the very structures of Christian theology and ritual (2). *Nightwood* thus affirms a route to the sacred that passes inevitably through the church – or at least *a* church – even if that route is hardly a familiar one. It combines makeshift Catholic iconography with the decaying interior of a Protestant chapel, and it requires the forsaken to forsake her own humanity – to bare her teeth, to "go down," to whimper and bark in a fit of obscene and touching abjection, to taunt the abyss in a rite that leads, through profanation, to sacred regions below and beyond the human. When consigned to society's underworld, *Nightwood* finally suggests, one must keep digging, must transgress farther and deeper in pursuit of salvation. One must go down until it becomes possible to let oneself go, in accordance with O'Connor's prophetic advice: "Let go Hell; and your fall will be broken by the roof of Heaven" (124).

CONCLUSION

Modernism takes many shapes, assumes many temporalities. It did not disappear with the onset of World War II, any more than God died when Darwin published his *Origin of Species* – or any more, for that matter, than blasphemy died when T. S. Eliot wrote its epitaph in 1934. Blasphemy, too, assumes various forms, and although it holds a remarkably central place in Christian scripture and theology, it hardly belongs to Christianity alone. There are many directions, in other words, in which a critical study called *Blasphemous Modernism* might go. I have sought, here, to demonstrate blasphemy's importance to literature of the period in which Anglophone modernism flourished – a period still very much associated with the “men of 1914,” but also with the New Negro Renaissance, with “Sapphic modernism,” and with the often startlingly avant-garde efforts of writers and artists like Mina Loy and Richard Bruce Nugent. Despite their differences, these authors' blasphemies all depend primarily on the Christian contexts, Catholic and Protestant, which accounted so pervasively for religious experience and literary precedent in their time and place. Although many modernists expressed interest in other religions and spiritual systems, Christianity represents the living tradition that most pressingly demanded their artistic attentions and negotiations. Small point, as G. K. Chesterton observed, in blaspheming Thor, the god of a bygone culture.¹ Or as Salman Rushdie wrote, many years later, in the novel that earned him the blasphemer's highest sentence: “Where there is no belief, there is no blasphemy.”²

The reception of Rushdie's *Satanic Verses*, the most famous work of blasphemous postmodernism, provides a forceful example of literary profanation in a non-Christian context, while also illustrating blasphemy's abiding relevance to the world we inhabit – a world whose

¹ Chesterton, *Heretics*, 20.

² Rushdie, *The Satanic Verses*, 393.

geopolitics continue to pivot around deep-seated conflicts between divergent religious and secular cultures, and in which blasphemy continues to hold pride of place at the nexus of literature, politics, and theology. Surveying that novel's legacy, two decades after the *fatwā*, a journalist for *The Guardian* writes that "from the start, the *Satanic Verses* affair was less a theological dispute than an opportunity to exert political leverage."³ Such a statement raises obvious questions. When is a theological dispute *not* an opportunity to exert political leverage? Since when is there any coherent means of distinguishing theological polemics from their political implications and ramifications? Political contests are not always theological contests, that is, but theological disputes are invariably political. They could hardly be otherwise.

Rushdie's own critiques of Islam in *The Satanic Verses* are, of course, also political ones. The novel's theological satire encompasses the worldly and often terroristic enforcement of Islamist theocracy, including its silencing of counterhistories, its treatment of women, and, of course, its intolerance of heterodox belief and blasphemous expression: this last a critique more than ably borne out by the violent reactions the book inspired in many Muslim quarters. Like Mikhail Bulgakov's *The Master and Margarita* before it – Rushdie has cited that novel as one of the *Verses'* "greatest models" – *The Satanic Verses* frames its literally dangerous political critiques in theological terms, mingling its blasphemies and its treasons in ways that would not be unfamiliar to James Joyce or Langston Hughes.⁴

Rushdie's death sentence has not, thankfully, been carried out, but assassination attempts have been made on four of *The Satanic Verses'* translators (into Japanese, Italian, Norwegian, and Turkish). One of these proved successful; another resulted in serious injuries.

³ Andrew Anthony, "How One Book Ignited a Culture War."

⁴ Rushdie, "In Good Faith," 56. Bulgakov's novel was blasphemous in its fast-and-loose appropriations and rewritings of the Gospels, and at the same time "treasonous," unpublishably so, in its satire of the Soviet Union's suppressions of religious faith. Written between 1928 and 1940, it was not published until the late 1960s, long after Bulgakov's death – and even then in censored form.

Along with such highly publicized events as the 2004 killing of Dutch filmmaker Theo van Gogh and the uproar, the following year, over Danish cartoons depicting the prophet Muhammad, the shadow that continues to hang over Salman Rushdie suggests that the story of blasphemy in the twenty-first century will be a predominantly Islamic one. Problems arise, however, when observers too readily take blasphemy as a measure of temporal asymmetry between an enlightened multicultural West and its Muslim other. “The presumed archaism of blasphemy,” as Gauri Viswanathan observes, is often “invoked to separate cultures of modernity from those of premodernity, as if to suggest that blasphemy is operative today only in the Third World.”⁵ It is not, of course, and neither is its criminalization, as suggested – and, ironically, ensured – by its recent prohibition in the land that produced the eminently blasphemous James Joyce.

Effective January 1, 2010 – less than fifty years after Ireland belatedly allowed *Ulysses* to be sold inside its borders – the law activates a previously dormant provision of the Irish Constitution and holds liable, to the tune of up to €25,000, anyone who “utters matter that is grossly abusive or insulting in relation to matters held sacred by any religion, thereby causing outrage among a substantial number of the adherents of that religion,” or who even “intends . . . to cause such outrage.”⁶ Proposed as a measure to promote multiculturalism and prevent sectarian intolerance, Ireland’s new law has met with staunch opposition from advocacy groups who see it as a reactionary muzzling of free speech.⁷ Admittedly, this legislation – like the United Kingdom’s Racial and Religious Hatred Act of 2006 – has been enacted for very different

⁵ Viswanathan, *Outside the Fold*, 240.

⁶ “Defamation Act 2009.” This act is worth comparing to Britain’s Racial and Religious Hatred Act of 2006; for a thorough survey of blasphemy as a legal and cultural problem in European nations in the twenty-first century, see David Nash, *Blasphemy in the Christian World*, 14-41.

⁷ Loudest among these dissenting groups has been Atheist Ireland, which has mounted a campaign – thus far unsuccessful – to repeal the law. The group’s rationale can be found at the website atheism.ie. See Henry McDonald, “Irish Atheists,” for more on the controversy.

purposes than those served by older blasphemy laws in Europe and the United States. Today's variety aims less at protecting Christianity and Christendom from the profaning tongues of heretics, public drunks, and mischievous artists than at trying to patrol precisely the kinds of violent confrontations between Christian, secular, and Islamic demographics that works such as *The Satanic Verses* helped to foment.

It is not my aim here to survey blasphemy's fascinating legislative and judicial history – other scholars have covered that territory – but two instances bear noting, one in the United States and the other in England.⁸ The first occurred in 1971, when two Pennsylvania shopkeepers were formally charged with the crime of blasphemy for hanging in their store windows a “Wanted” poster depicting a hippie Christ alongside the following text: “Wanted for sedition, criminal anarchy, vagrancy and conspiracy to overthrow the established government. Dresses poorly; said to be a carpenter by trade; ill-nourished; associates with common working people, unemployed, and bums. Alien; said to be a Jew.”⁹ The charge was eventually dropped, under pressure from the ACLU, but the incident records the satisfying irony that whoever filed these charges manifested in doing so the very hypocrisy the poster quite reasonably lampoons. The incident also reminds us of the radical core that many theologians, biblical scholars, and leftist social critics alike find in the Christian scriptures; and it further underscores the neglect of that radicalism by many Christians – such as those who pressed these charges – as well as by the so-called New Atheists who can find nothing in Christianity worth preserving or resuscitating.

Jesus of Nazareth, after all, provides a remarkable example of blasphemy's equally theological and political import. Consider how politically revolutionary many of Christ's

⁸ For more on blasphemy's legal history, see Leonard W. Levy, *Blasphemy*; Nash, *Blasphemy in the Christian World*; and Joss Marsh, *Word Crimes*.

⁹ Quoted in Levy, *Blasphemy*, 530.

proposals, as recounted in the gospels, would sound today in the ears of countless secularists and believers alike, and reflect that the crime with which Jesus was charged – as each of the gospels insists – was blasphemy. As the biblical scholar John Dominic Crossan argues, the threat Jesus posed or seemed to pose to Roman and to Jewish authority was equal parts political and religious, which is to say equally treasonous and blasphemous. The New Testament’s essential conflict, Crossan writes, arises “between Pilate’s Kingdom of Rome as violent repression and Jesus’s Kingdom of God as nonviolent resistance.”¹⁰ For many biblical scholars, and for avowed radicals like Slavoj Žižek and Terry Eagleton, the essential lesson of the New Testament is, in Eagleton’s words, “that the ultimate signifier of the human condition is the tortured and murdered body of a political criminal.”¹¹ If the variously blasphemous modernists we have considered here pursued radical agendas of their own, they did so in part by drawing on the transformative and subversive resources of Christianity’s texts, traditions, rituals, and sacraments. This is not to say that these writers were all budding Eagletonians, but that their blasphemies may have been truer to the insurrectionary spirit of early Christianity and of Jesus himself – whose blasphemy killed him and founded a faith in his name – than were many of their contemporary Christian institutions.

This insurrectionary spirit is what those Pennsylvania shopkeepers so “blasphemously” attempted to publicize, and it likewise animates our second example: the infamous *Gay News* case of 1977, in which the English poet James Kirkup was convicted of blasphemy along with the newspaper that had published his poem “The Love That Dares to Speak Its Name.” Like the shopkeepers’ poster, this offense involved Jesus in image and text; illustrated by a large picture of the Nazarene “in full frontal nudity and, in the phrase of the poem, ‘well hung’” – a

¹⁰ Crossan, *God and Empire*, 5.

¹¹ Eagleton, *Reason, Faith, and Revolution*, 37. Even as conservative a Christian as G. K. Chesterton remarked with awe the subversive and “terribly revolutionary” political implications of Christianity; that its God is “a rebel as well as a king” constitutes, in his view, “a boast for all insurgents for ever” (*Orthodoxy*, 145).

supplanted by, I suppose, the *Erection*: “He crouched to her, and he felt the blaze of his manhood and his power rise up in his loins, magnificent. ‘I am risen!’”¹⁵ More to the point, Kirkup’s poem and its successful prosecution – along with the fact that this prosecution made England’s blasphemy law “even more reactionary” – underscore the abiding shock-value of bringing God and the erotic body too close for comfort.¹⁶ It also reminds us that with each ensuing generation, blasphemy finds not only new dangers but also new necessities and new efficacies in matters political, racial, gendered, and sexual. In the 1920s and ’30s, blasphemy served as a means for black, queer, and women writers to assert such essentially modernist subjectivities as those implied by the terms “new woman” and “new Negro.” By the 1970s, when many of these earlier blasphemies might have been more easily tolerated – if not, by any means, quite condoned – homoerotic blasphemy appears to have remained dangerously beyond the pale. As the presiding judge recalled in his memoirs, “One didn’t have to be a Christian to be revolted by it,” but Leonard Levy’s gloss is apt: “Presumably one had to be heterosexual.”¹⁷ Today, it seems highly doubtful that anyone in either Britain or the United States could successfully press charges for this particular crime.

Such is progress. And while more recent events such as the *Satanic Verses* affair and the killing of Theo van Gogh demonstrate the continued and even mortal danger of blasphemous expression in art and literature, they also – like the *Gay News* trial – underscore blasphemy’s historical and cultural specificity, the way such expression matters most when framed in terms most relevant to the blasphemer’s time and place. In another time or another place, that is, van Gogh’s film would not have cost him his life, and *The Satanic Verses* would have been best known for its considerable virtuosity as a work of fiction. Yet blasphemy’s relevance also

¹⁵ Lawrence, *The Escaped Cock*, 57.

¹⁶ Levy, *Blasphemy*, 543.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 540.

outlives its immediate temporal and cultural contexts. One will not rock many boats, today, by speaking impiously of the ancient Greek gods – but the shape of Western philosophy would look rather different if Socrates had not done so, and had not paid for that transgression with his life. Christianity, too, would be a very different thing without its founding narrative of a Christ who suffered the same punishment for his blasphemy. And modernism, minus blasphemy: what would that look like?

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