

Edge Effects: Poetry, Place, and Spiritual Practices

by

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B.A., Trinity Western University, 2004

M.A., Trinity Western University, 2009

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Abstract

"Edge Effects: Poetry, Place, and Spiritual Practices" focusses on the intersection of the environmental and religious imaginations in the work of five West Coast poets: Robinson Jeffers, Theodore Roethke, Robert Hass, Denise Levertov, and Jan Zwicky. My research examines the selected poems for their reimagination of the sacred perceived through attachments to particular places. For these writers, poetry is a constitutive practice, part of a way of life that includes desire for wise participation in the more-than-human community. Taking into account the poets' critical reflections and historical-cultural contexts, along with a range of critical and philosophical sources, the poetry is examined as a discursive spiritual exercise. It is seen as conjoined with other focal practices of place, notably meditative walking and attentive looking and listening under the influence of ecospiritual eros. My analysis attends to aesthetics of relinquishment, formal strategies employed to recognize and accept finitude and the non-anthropocentric nature of reality, along with the complementary aesthetics of affirmation, configuration of the goodness of the whole. I identify an orienting feature of West Coast place, particular to each poet, that recurs as a leitmotif for engagement of such aesthetics and related practices. In chapter one, I consider a group of Jeffers's final poems as part of a project he designated "our De Natura," attending especially to his affinity for stones and stars. In chapter two, I investigate both Roethke's and Hass's configurations of ecospiritual eros in accord with their fascination for flora, while in chapter three, I employ the concepts of "aura" and "resonance" to explicate Levertov's meditations on the "coming and going" Mount Rainier-Tacoma and Zwicky's reflective iterations of the sea.

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List of Abbreviations

- CL – Jeffers, Robinson. *The Collected Letters of Robinson Jeffers, with Selected Letters of Una Jeffers, Volume One: 1890-1930*. Ed. James Karman. 2 vols. Stanford: Stanford UP, 2009. Print.
- CP1 – *The Collected Poetry of Robinson Jeffers. Volume One: 1920-1928*. Ed. Tim Hunt. 5 vols. Stanford: Stanford UP, 1988. Print.
- CP2 – *The Collected Poetry of Robinson Jeffers. Volume Two: 1928-1938*. Ed. Tim Hunt. 5 vols. Stanford: Stanford UP, 1989. Print.
- CP3 – *The Collected Poetry of Robinson Jeffers. Volume Three: 1939-1962*. Ed. Tim Hunt. 5 vols. Stanford: Stanford UP, 1991. Print.
- CP4 – *The Collected Poetry of Robinson Jeffers. Volume Four: Poetry 1903-1920, Prose, and Unpublished Writings*. Ed. Tim Hunt. 5 vols. Stanford: Stanford UP, 2000. Print.
- CP5 – *The Collected Poetry of Robinson Jeffers. Volume Five: Textual Evidence and Commentary*. Ed. Tim Hunt. 5 vols. Stanford: Stanford UP, 2001. Print.
- SL – Jeffers, Robinson. *The Selected Letters 1897-1962*. Ed. Ann N. Ridgeway Baltimore: Johns Hopkins P, 1968. Print.
- SP – Jeffers, Robinson. *The Selected Poetry of Robinson Jeffers*. New York: Random, 1938. Print.
- LP – Zwicky, Jan. *Lyric Philosophy*. 2nd ed. Edmonton: Brush Education, 2014. Print.

Acknowledgments

“ . . . an awakened sense of physical location and of belonging to some sort of place-based community have a great deal to do with activating environmental concern.”

—Lawrence Buell (*Writing* 56)

This project has been sustained—admittedly, through a long gestation—by reverence, appreciation, and concern for the more-than-human community and for the creative *word*, first cultivated in me by my parents and two eldest sisters, whose memories I tend with gratitude.

My sense of inspiration, “the dearest freshness deep down things,” springs from two locales: the absent presence of my childhood place on the edge of an Ontario woods, field, and escarpment, and the present place of my dwelling on the edge of a bay and a mountain range in British Columbia. For the gift of being there and here, daily doxology.

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Dedication

To Roc, Aaron, and Dylan,
for making home a place of faith, hope, and love.

Introduction: Ecospirituality on “the Fringey Edge”

“Here is the fringey edge where elements meet and realms mingle,
where time and eternity spatter each other with foam.”

—Annie Dillard (*Holy the Firm* 21)

*We are at home only so long
as we are inhabited,
alive only so long as we are lived in
by the places where we are.*

—Robert Bringhurst, “Ursa Minor” (*Selected* 243)

Insofar as I am “at home” in Robert Bringhurst’s sense, this work, *Edge Effects: Poetry, Place, and Spiritual Practices*, partakes of the same “fringey edge” region of Annie Dillard’s eccentric memoir, *Holy the Firm*. Following Dillard, I use the word “edge” both geographically and spiritually, to signal my focus on the intersection of the environmental and religious imaginations in the work of five poets who have written from the perspective of places on the Pacific coast they have called home: Robinson Jeffers, Theodore Roethke, Robert Hass, Denise Levertov, and Jan Zwicky. Like all the poets except for Hass, I migrated here from elsewhere. But for over twenty-five years, I have lived minutes away from a dike trail built along the eastern shoreline of Tsawwassen in southwestern British Columbia. As this place has helped to ground and orient my research, I will begin by acknowledging it.

The name Tsawwassen is derived from the *hənq̓’əmin’əm*’ (or Downriver Halkomelem) word translated as “facing seaward” (Akrigg 273). The Salish Sea waters of Boundary Bay caress and, very occasionally, crash on this side of the peninsula, those of the Georgia Strait, on

the west and south side. Here the official boundary between Canada and the United States is naturally fluid. On a map, the forty-ninth parallel runs across the bay, making the southern tip of this peninsula a tiny land exclave of Whatcom County in the greater Puget Sound region of Washington State. The peculiarly isolated position of Point Roberts's American residents is a reminder of the essentially arbitrary, abstract measures in the construction of the nation-states' enclosing lines. But the waterfowl in the bay give a signal that grander patterns are at play. Boundary Bay lies on the Pacific Flyway migration corridor between South and Central America and the Arctic for a myriad of birds paying no heed to border patrols. For ages the shallow waters have gently receded and risen—in summer, almost as warm as a bath—leaving an accumulated ring of mud that nurtures a delicate coastal wetland. The fecund ecotone sustains birds and other life forms, and acts as a buffer from floods for the Fraser River delta region.

Over the years, I have made it a practice to walk regularly on the dike and face seaward. The sky is dynamic with clouds, fog, and mist, but often the sightline is clear to Mount Baker-Kulshan cresting on the eastern horizon and the San Juan Islands undulating on the southern one, contributing to the “fringey” character of this part of the Salish Sea bioregion. From this vantage point, to the left in Bellingham Bay is Lummi Island, where for a few years in the mid-1970s, Dillard came, as she puts it, “to study hard things—rock mountain and salt sea—and to temper my spirit on their edges” (19). In the course of *Holy the Firm*, she identifies her artistic vocation with that of fourteenth-century contemplative anchoress Julian of Norwich, who translated her visceral visions of the Passion into *Revelations of Divine Love*. For Dillard, “hard things” take the form of a question that, in analogous ways, the poets of this dissertation have also posed. How does one hold to the goodness of creation in the face of suffering and death; how to

reconcile the pain of loss with the “deepening of wonder” (26)? Her answer is akin to that of the poets: “the heart’s slow learning where to love and whom” (62).

Simone Weil, a modern mystic, affirms that the “love of the order and beauty of the world” is an implicit love of God; it has “the virtue of a sacrament” and requires relinquishment, “to give up being the center of the world in imagination” (*Waiting* 158, 138, 160). In like manner, Dillard enacts a process of meditating, questioning, doubting, and self-forgetting: letting go of her egocentric, and, even, anthropocentric perspective to embrace a wider one (62-64). As she participates in mundane preparation for the Eucharist, she receives an epiphany of the holiness shining in things. This leads her to conceive of the Christian Incarnation in terms of a Jewish esoteric notion: the substratum, “Holy the Firm,” in contact with “the Absolute” (62-64; 70-71). The realms of immanent and transcendent, beneath and beyond, interpenetrate: “[t]here is an anomalous specificity to all our experience in space, a scandal of particularity, by which God burgeons up or showers down in the shabbiest of occasions” (55). Thus *Holy the Firm* is an instance of what Richard Kearney calls an “anatheistic” text, a testament to “God after God,” of suffering disorientation and being reoriented to “the divine in the very *haeccitas* [thisness] of things,” to “[t]he sacramentality of the everyday” and *amor mundi* (*Reimagining* 163). Indeed, in the end, Dillard devotes herself to contemplate and witness the beauty of the earth, “for the joy of it” and “held fast by love” (75, 76).

Spiritual Practices of Place

Allowing for alterations in the theological frame, the poems selected here for study attest to the kind of spiritual practice that informs and is informed by ecospiritual eros in Dillard’s Puget Sound memoir. I will say more about “ecospiritual eros” shortly, but it is one of my presuppositions that human *poiesis*—in this case, lyric nature poetry—can be a form of attention,

a form of desire, or eros. I take poetry to be more than a means of living for these poets, though it is that; it is also constitutive of a way of life that intends the stance Henry Bugbee demonstrates as vital to “the wilderness theme” of his philosophy. He avers that “[t]o be aware of the other as a presence in its independence is an experience of participation in reality with the other” (164). The selected poems profess such a desire to cultivate a disposition of “true perception” that is both erotic and non-acquisitive, an “open reception of the limitless gift of things” (163). Thus they extend, in various ways, the Romantic concern to revivify affiliation between human and non-human nature, but with more acute “recognition and a valuing of the other’s wilderness,” that which exceeds rational order and domestication (McKay 28).

Poetry, particularly lyric, is taken in this dissertation to be a discursive, spiritual exercise accompanying other practices of place, notably meditative walking and attentive looking and listening, the traces of which are found in the language of the poems. To borrow from Levertov, poetry shares a family resemblance to prayer, in that it is a movement “of absolute abandon, absolute / release into clear or cloudy / inner flow” (“Contrasting Gestures,” *Evening* 100). Levertov marks a subtle distinction between what the artist and the mystic seek to have transformed in the act of contemplation—the former her art, the latter herself. I assume, however, that for these poets, these activities are on a continuum. For each, the composing of lyrical poetry serves to motivate, challenge, bring clarity, and in other ways orientate their being-in-the-world to an ultimate reality known in encounters with place. For the reader, engaging with this poetry offers a “proposed world” by which he or she may come to a new understanding of himself or herself in relation to the more-than-human community, and consider possible “*new modes of being*” or “*forms of life*” (Ricoeur, *Hermeneutics* 142-43; *Ricoeur* 314).

To clarify the perspective from which I read each poem as a spiritual practice of place, I look to Pierre Hadot's account of ancient philosophy and Christian spirituality (especially of the monastic and mendicant orders) as a way of life. Hadot shows that, for the ancient Greeks and Romans, to pursue philosophy was to be a practitioner of a particular school of "lived and experienced wisdom" (Leclercq qtd. in Hadot, *Philosophy* 130). To belong to such "a way" involved practicing "psychagogic" spiritual exercises and discourses that engaged not thought only, but the "entire psychism," aimed to "a transformation of [his or her] vision of the world, and to a metamorphosis of [his or her] personality" (82). Philosophy seen in this way is "essentially an effort to become aware of ourselves, our being-in-the-world, and our being-with-others. . . an effort to 'relearn how to see the world'" (*What* 276).

The Anglo-American meditative poetry tradition has its source in this tradition. As Louis L. Martz has shown, the Christian European "art of meditation" movement of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries was informed by the Spiritual Exercises of Ignatius Loyola (xvii-viii). The latter were "rooted in the spiritual exercises of ancient philosophy," and their literary expressions part of a process of transmission that had been occurring since first century Christian spirituality began to define itself as "*the philosophy*," a way of life "in conformity with the law of the divine *Logos*" (Hadot, *Philosophy* 126, 128). Like its philosophic counterpart, "Christian meditation flourished by using all available means of rhetoric and oratorical amplification, and by mobilizing all possible resources of the imagination" (133). In other words, *poiesis* of language, written and read, was part of a spiritual exercise that helped to stir and direct desire.

Deictic Discourse: "a finger pointing"

The poetry of place discussed in this dissertation can be situated within the cultural-literary history just briefly sketched, bearing family resemblance to the ancient philosophical

practices and discourses in at least one intention, “to *transform*—that is, to change people’s way of living and of seeing the world” (Hadot, *What* 274). The poets see the act of writing as a contemplative act and assume that reading can be, too. If the poem is composed with deliberate design and desire, however, its aim is neither possession nor coercion. A key comportment of the contemplative tradition, Tim Lilburn tells us, is courtesy, countering the impulse of conquest with “the poverty and inventiveness of contemplative appetite”; its texts feature language admittedly missing its mark but “somehow manag[ing] to achieve a greater interior proximity” to what is loved (*Going* 12, 3, 185).

For a delineation of the hermeneutical situation I assume for this project, I first posit Paul Ricoeur’s simple definition of discourse, as the labour by which “someone says something to someone about something” (*Hermeneutics* 138). Ricoeur stresses that in the act of being written, the text of the poem as the poet-practitioner’s “saying,” or expression of experience, is cut loose of his or her controlling intentions to be taken up in a variety of ways by its readers. More pointedly, drawing from Albert Borgmann, I designate the poetry as *deictic discourse*, that is, articulation “about something that addresses us in its own right and constitutes a center by which we can orient ourselves” (155). Differing from scientific discourse (*apodeictic*) in that it lacks the narrowness and cogency that come from precise conditions and appeal to empirical laws, deictic discourse “remains contestable because it cannot, nor does it want to, control its subject matter or the conditions of its reception” (181). Its force is testimonial, coming through its embodiment of an attitude of enthusiasm through which a matter of ultimate concern—what he names a “focal” thing or event—becomes eloquent for the listener or reader (176, 178).

Borgmann aligns deictic discourse with poetic inspiration when he notes that “[t]o be enthusiastic, according to the original sense of the word, is to be filled with the divine.

Something is of ultimate concern if it is divine in a catholic sense, if it is greater and more enduring than myself, a source of guidance and solace and of delight” (176-77). The appeal made by the poetry considered in this dissertation, at least in part, issues from an enthusiasm that prompts the poet to invite others to see the worth of the more-than-human community. The force of appeal is also in the aesthetic embodiment, the forms of the language that “gathers, guards, and presents” nature—or, to use Zwicky’s favored term, “what-is”—as “something of ultimate significance” indexed to personal experience and place (179). Each of the five poets has reflected on the writing of poetry along these lines, but Zwicky most explicitly articulates that it is “deictic”—the word comes from the Greek *deiknynai*, to show, to point out, to bring to light (Borgmann 178)—when she defines a nature poem as “never more than a finger pointing at the moon . . . a kind of ontological signpost,” anchored in bodily attention in place (“Lyric” 88).

Focal Things and Practices

In this study, I consider the writing of poetry under the rubric of spiritual practices, or what Borgmann calls focal practices. Borgmann argues that the possibility of critique and reform of the disembedded, narrowly instrumentalist and consumerist technological paradigm of contemporary life—the dominant way we are constrained to take up with the world—lies in the recovery of deictic discourse for the common life. Such discourse is about focal things, matters of ultimate concern (196); it is one of the practices that “guard focal things in their depth and integrity” and yield “profound and manifold engagement with the world,” being praxis outside of the technocratic paradigm (202; 77). To elucidate what he means by focal things and practices, Borgmann notes that the Latin word *focus* means hearth, the fireplace in the pretechnological house (*domus*) that “constituted a center of warmth, of light, and of daily practices. For the Romans the *focus* was holy, the place where the housegods resided. . . . [and so the] hearth

sustained, ordered, and centered house and family” (196). The modern technical sense of focus (geometry, optics) converges with the ancient one: “Figuratively they suggest that a focus gathers the relations of its context and radiates into its surroundings and informs them. To focus on something or to bring it into focus is to make it central, clear, and articulate” (197).

Acknowledging his debt to Heidegger’s discovery about the pre-technological orienting centre that the Greek temple, and later, art, once were in society, Borgmann cites “nature in its pristine state,” or wilderness, as “the focal power which is most clearly eloquent in its own right” in North America (182).

The notion of focal things and practices has informed my exegesis of the selected poetry. Nature, conceived in various ways through particular facets of place, is a matter of focal concern, orienting the spiritual vision of these texts. To borrow from Borgmann, it might be said of these poets that writing poetry is a focalizing practice that gathers the effects of the environmental imagination and religious imagination, radiating the relation between the two into the whole of the poem, thereby informing its ordering (197). My investigation entails identifying specific aspects of the West Coast’s geography and biology that are repeatedly given as salient. These aspects arose in the poets’ having “begun to apprentice themselves to their particular places” (Abram, *Spell* 271). For Jeffers, it is the stones he worked with by day, the starry sky he watched by night from his Carmel shore; for Roethke and Hass, it is flora; for Levertov, the rhythms of a mountain, and for Zwicky, iterations of the sea. These focalizing things clearly have “effects” on the writers and, thus, are represented with aesthetic-spiritual efficacy, not only as “icons of place,” but also icons of ultimate reality (Ricou 1).

I am interested in how the poems bring forth a sense of what Gary Snyder, in *The Practice of the Wild*, calls “very loosely the ‘spirit of the place,’” as well as of the sacred, “that

which helps take us . . . out of our little selves” (41, 101). They enact a resistance to the purely instrumentalist view of nature in the technological-consumerist order of modernity, and a desire to better orient the self in relation to the more-than-human community known in their place.

Borgmann’s assessment of “speakers of deictic discourse” may be applied to the poets: “they all have their mooring in the attention to tangible and bodily things and practices, and they speak with an enthusiasm that is nourished by these focal concerns” (201). Further, as the issue of a focal practice, the poems themselves are outside of the technological paradigm, “allow[ing] for forms of thinking not bound to an instrumentalist imperative” (Bradley 124).

Tracing the Edges: Environmental Imagination

The titular phrase “edge effects” was coined by ecologist Aldo Leopold to describe the interactions between various species in the transitional edge (or ecotone), in which two environmental zones overlap and blend. At these dynamic meeting places, better conceived as fields of interpenetrating forces and forms than as sharply defined borders, there is an abundance of biodiversity due to exchange and adaptation (Cronon). I use this trope to indicate the cultural-geographical place from which the five poets of my dissertation attend to and imagine relationships with “nature,” or the more-than-human community. Acknowledging that “place” is an ambiguous concept, Lawrence Buell’s definition helps clarify: “space that is bounded and marked as humanly meaningful through personal attachment [including memory and practices], social relations [including cultural symbols and narratives, socio-economic and political systems], and physiographic distinctiveness” (*Future* 145). Dillard’s modifier, “fringe,” underscores the continental marginality of the edge, the coast where the Pacific Ocean meets the western shores of North America. It also indicates a cultural locus. Just as Dillard momentarily moves the marginal place (Lummi Island, Puget Sound) in terms of the cultural centres, to be the

axis of her world, so also, these five poets—Jeffers, Hass, Roethke, Levertov and Zwicky—have sought to orient their perspectives—and those of their reading audiences, by the places where they live.

The metaphor “edge effects” also implicates the bioregional location of the poets on the Pacific coastland of the continent. Snyder points out that “[b]iota, watersheds, landforms, and elevations are just a few of the facets that define a region” of interdependence (41). He has suggested one way the bioregion that serves as my proximate literary region might delineated: floristically, by the distribution of the coastal Douglas-fir from central British Columbia to central California.¹ Alternately, Laurie Ricou proposes as a primary regional marker the arbutus (in Canada) or madrone tree (in the U.S.), the duality of nomenclature signalling to the international border and “the region’s doubleness and fluidity” in terms of national histories and cultures, as well as coastal geography of land and sea (1).

The trope of “the edge” applied to the West Coast helps me trace geographic relations between my poets, visualizing a literary bioregion in which each, in his or her particular context, has been “part of a part” of the greater whole (Snyder, *Practice* 41). To the right of Lummi, from my vantage point on the Tsawwassen dyke, lies Orcas Island, where Theodore Roethke spent a few leisurely summer days in the late 1950s before heading northward to the estuarine shore at Campbell River to fish for salmon. There, as he walked and pondered joyful embrace of life in the face of death, “[t]he edge of all the land, the final sea” (“The Abyss,” *Collected* 213), he must

¹ The Douglas-fir has been taken as the symbol for the bioregional movement of Cascadia, envisioned and given a map by David McCloskey. Since the southern boundary on McCloskey’s map is marked by Cape Mendocino, Ricou’s version of the Pacific Northwest (see map, Fig. 1 in *The Arbutus/Madrone Files*), which includes Jeffers’s Central Coast, is more apt for my purposes.

have gazed across the Inside Passage to Quadra Island, where Jan Zwicky now resides and often walks, “up to the ridge” (Heriot Ridge) to see “[t]he long and level shaft of light / at day’s end, reaching from the planet’s edge” (“Late Love,” *Long* 64).

Allowing my mind’s eye to rove down the strait to the southern region of the Salish Sea, I can imagine Roethke trundling across the campus of the University of Washington on Union Bay in Lake Washington, Seattle, where he launched the Creative Writing Department upon his arrival in 1947. Here, Denise Levertov delivered the Roethke Memorial Poetry Reading a few months after her move from Boston to a house near the lake in 1989. Like Roethke, Levertov found in the Pacific Ocean, to which all the region’s waters eventually flow, a symbol for the mystery of death she felt approaching. During her regular walks in the neighbouring Seward Park, a now-defunct fish hatchery made its way into her poetic myth of wandering “west and west” to “the edge of the mist where salmon wait the day / when something shall lift them and give them to deeper waters” (“Two Magnets,” *Evening* 17).

Further down the coast, in the San Francisco Bay Area, Robert Hass continues to craft perspicacious poetry and prose that imagines peace in the “broader dimensions,” as he and his friend Levertov had discussed together in the early 1980s (Levertov, *New* 154). The thought of Hass walking, thinking, and gazing in the Berkeley Hills prompts me to picture, as he did, a returning Robinson Jeffers, one hundred and fifty more miles south down “the mind’s coast” in Carmel Point. Jeffers himself imagined his future ghost mournfully inspecting the stone house and tower he built as an orienting *axis mundi*. His house, built of yearning to belong to his geological place, if not to his time, is dwarfed now by sprawling residences of modern and contemporary design. Still, Tor House and Hawk Tower stand to mark the spot where the poetic

“mapping of the Far West, or of the Pacific slope . . . pretty much begins” in American literature (Snyder qtd. in Murphy 93-94).

To reiterate, then, this study takes particular places on the Pacific coast as axes of attention, indexes to the worlds opened up by the texts. I am interested in the “edge effects” when culture, or second nature—constituted by collective “symbols, rituals, attitudes and perspectives about life” (Sheldrake 3)—is variously reappropriated and adapted to the first nature of the Pacific coast. In Hass’s vivid expression, I have been intent to discover how the poets’ “language came to the landscapes of the coast and took hold,” and also how the coast took hold of and shaped the language of the texts (*What* 154). By language, I take Hass to mean the cultural background of shared meanings, of “basic structures of thought, values, feeling, expression, and persuasion” (Buell, *Writing* 31). Recalling that discourse is always “about something,” the poems studied here refer to “actual environments” and are a matter of “‘mutual construction’ of discourse and material world” (31). I engage Buell’s concept of “environmental imagination” for the capacity to respond to and represent in a range of accurate description and inventiveness the natural and human-built world. Each text is read as a nature poem, which “provides a provisional account of an experience of place, one that enacts a set of relations among locale, individual, and cultural context” (Bradley 124). More pointedly, I investigate the interpenetration of the environmental with the religious imagination, that capacity to respond to and represent what is transcendent of the self and calls for “reverence, devotion or love” (Taylor, *Secular* 18).

Hasidic theologian Abraham Heschel asserts that “[t]he acceptance of the sacred is an existential paradox: it is saying ‘yes’ to a no; it is the antithesis of the will to power” (48). Heschel’s insight is apposite to my use of Buell’s term “aesthetics of relinquishment,” indicating

guiding artistic principles practiced in the “imaginative structures” of the texts. Aesthetics of relinquishment recognize and accept human finitude and the non-anthropocentric nature of reality, and model affectivity and appropriate stances to that reality (Buell, *Environmental* 143). I propose a complementary structuring principle at work in the texts: aesthetics of affirmation that praise the beauty or goodness of the whole. Each of the poets exhibits some variation of affirmation and relinquishment, saying yes to a no, portraying what Zwicky names “the gestures through which we bind, and let go of, our lives” (“Dream,” *Songs* 149).

Varieties of Religious Experience on the Epochal Edge

In Dillard’s *Holy the Firm*, the doubleness and fluidity of “the fringe edge” refers not only to the geographic region, but also to the nexus of the material and spiritual, where and when “time and eternity spatter each other with foam” (21). Likewise, the “edge effects” examined in this dissertation include the imagined interplay of transience and continuance, “thisness” and wholeness, lucidity and mystery, that imbues representations of the ordinary with otherness. Through linguistic configurations arising at the intersection of the environmental and religious imaginations, the poems acknowledge sacredness in the more-than-human community as an alterity—“Wildness,” in Thoreau’s sense (“Walking,” *Walden* 644)—“outside the bounds of human control and rationalization” (Gatta 10).

This intersection in the texts occurs as one of the “unquiet frontiers of modernity,” registering the gradual epochal changes to the cosmic imaginary in the contemporary world order (Taylor, *Secular* 711). In *A Secular Age*, Charles Taylor defines the cosmic imaginary as the shared background, the “way in which nature figures in [the collective] moral and aesthetic imagination,” “the way the universe is spontaneously imagined, and therefore experienced” (323, 325). The salient feature of the modern cosmic imaginary, Taylor argues, “is that it has opened a

space in which people can wander between and around” a whole range of options regarding belief (351). It is a heterogeneous “neutral zone,” we might say, a place of religious edge effects. As Kearney asserts in *Anatheism*, a re-orientation of the sacred arises in the “liminal spaces—what the French call *des zones frontalières*—where one tries to get one’s bearings as one transits between two (or more) worlds” (xvii).

The notion of transition is crucial to Bronislaw Szerszynski’s account of the historical orderings or epochs of the sacred in the West. Complicating the modern narrative of “the disenchantment of nature” posited in Max Weber’s secularization theory, Szerszynski argues that the “religious meanings that frame the understanding of nature do not disappear over time – they just alter” (xi). The sacred ordering of nature has never been fully dissolved by progressing instrumental rationality and technology; rather, there is ongoing transformation of the ideas and practices of nature, and “not the disappearance but a *reorganization* of the sacred” (26). The modern order is an immanentist reconception of the monotheistic transcendence that oriented the previous “Protestant sacred,” and calls forth a postmodern ordering in the collapse of its organizing dualism (22). In the postmodern sacred, “a variety of sacralizations of nature” coexist with a modern disenchanted “experience of empirical reality as without a transcendent source or ground of meaning” (9). Like Taylor, Szerszynski recognizes that a “plurality of subjective perspectives” is constitutive of the postmodern sacred, in which the authority of organized religion or scientific rationality is supplanted by “a growing imperative for each individual to work out their own religious and spiritual meanings” (23). Though I will not rehearse his argument further here, Szerszynski convincingly shows that within the postmodern sacred, technological mastery of nature, “promising an overcoming of contingency and finitude,” is one “sublime,” hegemonic form of contemporary enchantment (59, 172-73). However, other

biocentric forms of the sacred, as exemplified in the poetry examined here, relinquish the desire to overcome finitude and affirm the goodness and/or beauty of the more-than-human community.

Running parallel to Szerszynski's pluralistic postmodern sacred in contemporary creative writing is a multivalent "post-secular project of resacralization," as John A. McLure names it, which reactivates marginalized mystical and religious discourses in order to counter and potentially destabilize the modern hegemonic discourses authorized by ideological scientific "rationalism (and rationalized religion)" (144, 147). For example, as Dillard moves a marginal place to the centre of her textual-perceptual world in *Holy the Firm*, she also adapts marginal ways of knowing—mystical contemplation and esoteric concepts—for a fresh point of view onto the ultimate. The five poets of this dissertation make similar moves in what Ricoeur calls "creative reinterpretation of cultural heritage" (*Hermeneutics* 97).

One strand in that cultural heritage, the discourse of mystics throughout the centuries, has been a locus of innovation in Western culture, as Nathan A. Scott, Jr. observes. For those devotees whose conceptions of the divine fall outside the prevailing orthodox discourse concerning the relation of a transcendent God with the creation, "the frontier between the world and God is an 'open frontier'" (*Wild* 59). Such panentheistic contemplatives as St. John of the Cross and Julian of Norwich reached across this "open frontier" through the self-transcendent way of spiritual eros. My understanding of the selected poems involves inquiry into the mystical, along with theological and/or ancient philosophical, resources from which the poets draw to express their ecospiritual visions in non-dogmatic, "subtler languages" (Taylor 359).

Ecospiritual Eros

A key indication of the intersecting environmental and religious imaginations in the poems studied here is the enactment of what I will refer to as ecospiritual eros in the practice of

attention. Ecospiritual eros is analogous to Yi-Fu Tuan's "topophilia," i.e. the "affective bond between people and place or setting" (Tuan 4), or E. O. Wilson's "biophilia," "the innate tendency to focus on life and lifelike processes" (Wilson 1). However, what distinguishes it is indicated in the Greek word for love, *eros*, rather than *philia*. It connotes a deeply embodied, affective focusing of attention. Eros has been given particular spiritual significance in ancient philosophical and Christian mystical, monastic, and mendicant traditions in western culture. A basic definition of eros as "sexual desire" does not convey the spiritual significance with which it has been imbued at least since Plato, and that I intend here.

In Greek and Roman myth Eros is the god of Love: in Hesiod's *Theogony*, he is a primordial god of generation; in later myth, he is the son and/or attendant of Aphrodite-Venus. His identity is the subject of discussion in Plato's *Symposium* in which, among the varying views presented by the party guests, Phaedrus maintains the older Hesiodic view and Pausanias the more recent one. The final word on the matter goes to Socrates, who draws on the teachings of the sage-instructor Diotima to tell the "truth" about Eros. Not a god, Eros is a *daimon* spirit mediating between the realms of gods and men, the son of Poros (plenty; resource; expediency) and Penia (poverty) conceived at a feast on Aphrodite's (beauty) birthday (Plato 62).

In the course of Western culture, under the influence of Plato's philosophy, that of his third-century disciple Plotinus, and Neoplatonic Christian theology and mysticism, eros was elevated into "luminous Aspiration," a limitless longing for union with the beautiful beloved (at times, identified with the Absolute) that draws the lover ecstatically beyond him/herself (de Rougemont 61; also Lewis 85; Christie 16; Lilburn, *Going* 65). Eros came to be defined by "want,' 'lack,' 'desire for that which is missing'" (Carson 10). Some theorists, however, have

sought to emphasize the positive potential of erotic longing, such as resourcefulness, reciprocity, connectivity, and procreativity (Costa 41-43; Griffin 60; Scarry 3-8).

Following the lead of Denis de Rougemont in *Love in the Western World*—a book with which both Roethke and Hass were familiar²—Julia Kristeva in *Tales of Love* traces the various transformations of “Western Eros” (and related notions of *psyche*) from a psychoanalytic point of view. Freud denoted Eros as the creative life drive opposed to the destructive death drive (Thanatos), while Jung named it as the principle of relationship. Kristeva notes Eros’s entanglement with Thanatos: “far from amounting to an understanding, passionate love can be equated less with the calm slumber of reconciled civilizations than with their delirium, disengagement, and breach. A fragile crest where death and regeneration vie for dominance” (5). If eros is an agent of destabilization, however, she also names it “the supreme guarantee of renewal” (16). Likewise, in *The Double Flame*, a literary history of eros to which Hass alludes (Donnelly), Octavio Paz acknowledges the “terrifying aspects” of eroticism related to dissolution or death, but asserts these can be integrated with its “luminous” aspects of fertility and life through “the wisdom of the senses” (26-27). Referring to the ancient Stoic notion that the cosmos is “a ‘conspiracy of elements’ all moved by universal sympathy,” Paz expresses hope that a recovery in the modern world of erotic knowledge as sympathetic imagination might effect a reconciliation of humans with non-human nature (270).

It is philosopher-novelist Iris Murdoch’s Platonic definition of eros, however, that most informs and clearly articulates my sense of ecospiritual eros: “the continuous operation of

² Roethke “read and made copious notes on” de Rougemont’s *Love in the Western World* in the early 1940s (Bowers 122). Hass refers to the book in reference to the challenge of how “to write about sexuality as a part of life rather than as this either dark or numinous thing outside it altogether” (Donnelly).

spiritual *energy*, desire, intellect, love, as it moves among and responds to particular objects of attention, the force of magnetism and attraction which joins us to the world, making it a better or worse world” (*Metaphysics* 496). As it calls for “a shifting of the centre of the world from [self] to another place” (17), eros is an impetus for the aesthetics and practices of relinquishment and affirmation at the intersection of the poets’ environmental and religious imaginations.

Reimagining the Sacred

Writing about Jeffers, Hass makes the intriguing observation that it “seems to be the fate of American poets to reinvent the religions of their childhoods in their poetry” (*What* 132). He has a strong “notion that the language and many of the attitudes of American poets were formed by the sense of the sacred and the traditional forms of discourse . . . in the communities they grew up in, however tenuous those forms and practices were in their families and communities” (295). I have found that this holds true for the poets of this dissertation, although only one (Levertov) identifies as a religious believer, and a heterodox one at that. Each deals with the sacred in a non-dogmatic way, “religious” broadly implying “some dimension of divine [or ultimate] alterity or truth, some sense of a transcendent or sacred call” (Kearney, *Reimagining* 152-53). Perhaps these writers would more comfortably refer to themselves as “spiritual, not religious,” as a growing contemporary confession states (Todd 12). Hass, for instance, defines religion as “a community created by common symbols of the sacred,” and spirituality as having to do with “the mystery of one’s own existence and of the existence of others” (*What* 294-95).

Accepting the distinction, but seeing spirituality and religion as inextricably bound, I attend to the process of creative appropriation and reimagining of religious, theological and philosophical rhetorical-conceptual figures involved in the deictic discourse of the poetry, as it probes “the mystery,” particularly enacting and expressing ecospiritual eros. Like Kate Rigby in

her wonderful *Topographies of the Sacred*, my thinking is informed by M. H. Abrams's eminent analysis in *Natural Supernaturalism* of the relation between Romantic poetry and the broader eighteenth-century philosophical movement and its "secularization of inherited theological ideas and ways of thinking" (12). I agree, however, with Rigby's "ecocritical rejoinder" to Abrams's description of the Romantic poets' project as one of secularization. She argues that in light of its reaction to "the mechanistic and atomistic models of scientific rationalism," Romanticism could alternately be viewed as "rejuvenating religious traditions in such a way as to resacralize the earth" (12). While my interpretation of the selected poetry has been enlightened by Abrams's and Rigby's studies in Romanticism, I note that the epistemologies represented by my poets are not identical to, but rather are developed out of or in response to, the philosophies and poetics of the Romantic movement. They recognize the human creature's dependence upon and dialogue with that which exceeds it, and of the consequent demand for ways of knowing that displace the Cartesian subject at the centre of modern rationalism, the illusion of self-sufficient consciousness separated from an objectified world. They are as concerned with resisting the pretensions to God-like perspective, autonomy, and power of utopian-inflected humanism as they are in countering modern scientism and "the Promethean character" of technology that prevails, even in much of postmodern constructivism (Hadot, *Veil* 150; Rigby, "Prometheus" 251). The sacred, after all, is "something that surprises us, something that we haven't constructed or envisaged in advance, that blindsides us, as it were. . . .involv[ing] a deep sense that there is something 'more,' something radically Other . . . impossible for us to imagine until we imagine it anew" (Kearney, *Reimagining* 16).

The hermeneutical approach of this dissertation brings nuance to Greg Garrard's assertion in *Ecocriticism*, that the ancient Greco-Roman and Christian tropes "are problematic

for ecocritics” because they are associated with worldviews that have legitimized environmental ruination and carry “the liability of anachronism in the postmodern era” (176). In Garrard’s formulation, “only” metaphors arising from “novel constructions” of reality “profoundly shaped by scientific thought” are “adequate” for the task (176). Demonstrating that the poets have chosen to reconfigure rather than abandon certain traditional discourses, I assent to the necessity the poets have felt for innovation, but question Garrard’s attenuating assumptions about the source material for such work. Rather, I believe critical attention to the “preoccupations, investments, and discursive urgencies” signalled by the poets’ use of spiritually-charged discourses reappropriated from the past promises to enrich the reading of the texts and the “imaginative variations” of the worlds they project (McLure 160; Ricoeur, *Hermeneutics* 142).

A Survey

In what follows, I begin by taking up Snyder’s cue that Robinson Jeffers achieved a decisive inaugural moment in the Pacific Northwest literary bioregion. My beginning is in Jeffers’s end, in that I read a group of final poems reconstructively, as belonging to a project he named, after Lucretius’s, his “De Natura.” I have also been cued by Albert Gelpi’s claim regarding the literary historical location of Jeffers’s work as a “life-and-death response” to Modernism, a form of resistance accomplished “by reconstituting the Romantic sense of the divinity of nature for the twentieth century to redeem modernity from its own doomed proclivities” (Introduction 2-3). Prompted by Gelpi’s commentary on the religious dimensions of Jeffers’s poetry (8-10),³ I trace the development of the poet’s creative reappropriation of ancient philosophical-spiritual exercises, particularly of staying in place, contemplating divine beauty in

³ Other critics that assess the significance of the religious imagination in Jeffers’s poetry include William Everson, Robert Brophy, Frederic Carpenter, and Robert Zaller.

earth and cosmos (*theoria physike*), contemplating death as part of the natural course of things, and composing meditative poetry. I consider Jeffers's practices in a historical trajectory that includes Jonathan Edwards and Ralph Waldo Emerson in what Perry Miller calls "the Augustinian strain of piety" (*New* 9). I refer to the blend of theological aesthetics and spiritual eros directed toward God into which Jeffers was inculcated as a child in his parents' home. As these are given form in his philosophical, astronomically and geologically educated imagination and through his practices of star-gazing and stone masonry, the di-polar gestalt of "star-fire and rock-strength" represents the strain of eros in tension with the *ataraxia* of his peace-cultivating meditations.

In the next chapter, I observe Roethke and Hass developing in their own ways Emerson's assertion that "[t]he greatest delight which the fields and weeds minister, is the suggestion of an occult relation between men and the vegetable" (6). The focal aspect of their places is flora, the uncultivated native plants that offer images of ecospiritual eros in a Pacific *locus amoenus*. Drawing on Northrop Frye's archetypal theory, my exegesis also involves the myth plot of the spiritual quest. Taking Roethke's "North American Sequence" to be a contemporary spiritual autobiography, as others have before me, I pay close attention to the circularity of the form and imagery to trace its place more clearly. In my reading, Roethke's myth is oriented by its localization and his wilding of the literary rose. This leads me to explore the persistent form of ecospiritual eros in Hass's literary myth: wildflowers. I note his awareness that eros-infused perception simultaneously aids and abets clarity, particularly as it underwrites his appropriation of the Santa Lucia legend and Christian metaphysics of light. I take up the "Santa Lucia" series as a place-conscious innovation of the spiritual quest in the comic mode, as the female persona embraces "a different order of religious awe" invigorated by eros of the everyday (*Apple* 92).

Finally, under the rubric of “ambient holiness” I traverse the common ground between Denise Levertov and Jan Zwicky, and proceed to interpret their poetry of place according to the leitmotifs of mountain aura and sea resonance, respectively, drawing on Walter Benjamin’s concept of aura. In my reading of a series of poems that Levertov wrote *sur le motif* of Mount Rainier-Tacoma, evocations of the sacred are achieved through associations with her mystical, Muse-like wisdom figure, Sophia-Shekinah-Spirit, and her phenomenological practice of the presence of the appearing and withdrawing mountain. I attend to a similar wisdom figure in Zwicky’s personal myth, Plato’s instructor of spiritual eros, Diotima, whom Zwicky links with Aphrodite Ourania. Just as there is a connection between the tidal rhythm of Levertov’s mountain and her wisdom figure, so also I note associations between Zwicky’s mythic wisdom figure and the enactment of attention as participation in the tidal “emptiness and fullness of things” (*Wisdom* LH §118). Zwicky has long been associated with a coterie of Canadian writers (including Bringham, Lilburn, and Don McKay) given the rubric “the thinking and singing poets” for the way “[t]hey use [lyrical] poetry to think, along with the textures and rhythms, complicated histories, and subterranean energies of particular places” (Dickinson, “Canadian”). I show that the content and aesthetic form of *Forge* is grounded in the ancient notion of cosmic harmony, “the live, metaphorical relation between things and the resonant structure of the world” (*Wisdom* LH §117). Particularly, “Envoy: Seven Variations” instantiates this resonance in the rhythms of the sea. Zwicky’s psychagogic exercise of poetry, like Levertov’s, entails practices and aesthetics of affirmation and relinquishment, “all praise, all sorrow, / ripening” (*Forge* 37).

Contributions

The bioregional commonality of the poets has provided me with an angle for studying the reciprocal relation between environmentality and spirituality that places my research within the

broad fields of environmental criticism and western North American literary studies. My hope is that, with its specific focus on the ecospiritual imagination and related aesthetic and linguistic strategies, this project will bring a fresh perspective on those poets for whom book-length studies and numerous essays on the religious, theological and philosophical influences and spiritual valences of their work already exist (Jeffers, Roethke, Levertov), and a “thicker” reading of those for whom such research is minimal or nascent (Hass, Zwicky).

In relation to extant literary criticism of North American poetry, my project shares John Elder’s supposition in *Imagining the Earth: Poetry and the Vision of Nature* that contemporary poetic “attentiveness to nature” often involves a counter-discourse of “alienation” from, as well as “crucial re-alignment” with, the Western tradition (2-3). Two other critical projects that have helped to orient this project’s purview are John Gatta’s *Making Nature Sacred: Literature, Religion, and Environment in America from the Puritans to the Present* (2004) and Nicholas O’Connell’s *On Sacred Ground: The Spirit of Place in Pacific Northwest Literature* (2003). As Gatta’s title suggests, his project undertakes a diachronic literary investigation of U.S. nature writing viewed through a religiocentric ecocritical lens, differing in scope from my research in terms of temporal frame and generic focus. Insights gleaned from his history of ideas and discursive practices approach to the relations among the literary imagination, nature, and the sacred have been germane to my project, particularly the final chapter on contemporary ecopoetry. O’Connell’s literary regionalist survey emphasizes the recurring depictions of the human-environment relationship and its spiritual aspects in the literature of the Pacific Northwest. Although my project shares his regionalist sense, its historical and generic purview is obviously more narrow, while the region is expanded, as traced above.

My research aims to elucidate the revitalized language that spiritually-charged poetry offers environmental discourse. Interpretation of the selected poems discloses the possibilities that arise from the various figurations of the sacred and spiritual practices signified by the poets. In this way, my project meets the broader concern articulated in the environmental humanities, that science, theory, political advocacy, and policy are “necessary but not sufficient in helping to transform human consciousness and behavior” (Tucker 3). This project aims to contribute to understanding the poetic aspect of the undertaking, similar to Jonathan Bate’s *The Song of the Earth* and Rigby’s *Topographies of the Sacred*. Also noteworthy is Jane Bennett’s appeal to a variety of non-religious “onto-stories” for the way they might “enhance the aesthetic and rhetorical, hence persuasive” power of environmental theory” and “inflect affective energies in one way rather than another” (161). At the same time, I bear in mind the quality of ambiguity that defines the “subtler languages” used by contemporary artists to “articulate the new moral meanings in nature” (Taylor, *Secular* 357). Embedded in the modern cosmic imaginary, Taylor avers, poetry is a “middle space” of undefined “ontic commitments” regarding the locus of meaning, and the poets’ struggle is “to recover a kind of vision of something deeper, fuller,” even divine, that transcends human making, yet requires imagination for us to be open to it, since it no longer is just a given (359-60).

I take as my point of departure the nexus of a problematic and a hope Buell posits in “Religion and the Environmental Imagination in American Literature.” The problematic is the “in-principle devaluation of the earthly” by fundamentalist strains of the predominant North American religion, Christianity (236). The argument famously laid out by Lynn White, Jr. in “The Historical Roots of Our Ecologic Crisis,” and echoed in Garrard’s critique of the use of Christian tropes, implicates Western classical and Judeo-Christian sources of modern civilization

for other-worldliness. Buell sees hope in the possibility of a positive re-envisioning of the human relation to the nonhuman as it currently is configured in the modern world. Such hope is vested in the potentiality of “religio-environmentalism” in creative writing, that is, the pervasive practice of employing religious or spiritually charged discourse about nature as an animating “mode of appeal” (219). “Reimagining the sacred,” to use Kearney’s phrase, can help inspire changes in conceptions and attitudes needed to counter a mastering technologic considered to be without bounds in the “contemporary culture of ‘excarnation’” (Kearney, *Reimagining* 164).

While the reformulation of theological language does not lie in the domain of this study, I have borne in mind that poetry has always been a part of wisdom traditions and that eco-poetics plays a vital role in contemporary creation-oriented theology (for example, in the work of Sallie McFague, Catherine Keller, Mark I. Wallace, and Rigby). Reciprocally, religious discourse and practices—for the five poets of this study, particularly in the traditions of Judaism, Christianity, Buddhism, and Taoism—creatively appropriated and reinterpreted, remain a significant source in our time for personal identity-formation and expression, as well as for collective representations of care, meaning and purpose. The poets have found their places on the West Coast to be especially congenial to their ecospiritual explorations, and what Douglas Todd says about the binational “Cascadia” region might be extended from the Pacific Northwest down the coast: “the forces of informal spirituality and [more ecumenical, interfaith and experimental] religion, impacted by an overpowering landscape . . . create a spirituality of place” that includes “a kinship with nature and a yearning for a fresh future” (8-9, 13).

The interfusing of the spiritual and environmental imagination is nothing new; indeed, it is ancient, notable in an exemplary passage from Ecclesiastes:

One generation passeth away, and *another* generation cometh: but the earth abideth for ever. The sun also ariseth, and the sun goeth down, and hasteth to his place where he arose. The wind goeth toward the south, and turneth about unto the north; it whirleth about continually, and the wind returneth *again* according to his circuits. All the rivers run into the sea; yet the sea *is* not full; unto the place from whence the rivers come, thither they return again. (*King James Version*, Eccles. 1.4-7)

The sage's observation of nature's cyclical rhythms, deposited in western religious-literary memory, reminds the reader that humans and their cultural practices and discourses are rooted in the earth, however restless they are for the horizon of innovation and discovery. Auden puts it this way: "Man is both a historical creature creating novelty and a natural creature suffering cyclical recurrence" ("Religion" 175). His assertion, "no religion is viable which does not do justice to both aspects," echoes in Ricoeur's warning that for the Christian *kerygma*, "without the support and renewing power of the sacred cosmos and the sacredness of vital nature, the word itself becomes abstract and cerebral. Only the incarnation of the ancient symbolism ceaselessly reinterpreted gives this word something to say . . . to the whole human being" (*Figuring* 67). The same principle applies to the discourses by which the five poets of this dissertation point to the sacred. The dialectic between nature's *poiesis* and the language of the text opens the reader to "reality in the process of being created," even in the familiar round (Ricoeur, *Ricoeur* 462).

Returning to the trope of the edge, I will end with an image given by Michel de Certeau in his analysis of the development of mysticism within the context of sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Europe. Echoing Hadot's notion of philosophy as a way of life, de Certeau portrays mysticism as "a way of proceeding," one that transgresses boundaries, for those "disadvantaged

by change, marginalized by progress, or destroyed by war” (qtd. in Sheldrake 130). “Mysticism,” he avers, “seems to emerge on beaches uncovered by the receding tide” (130). Analogously, the practices of ecospiritual eros enacted in these texts are placed on coastlines where the tidal rhythms of earth and history are felt keenly. Created under the influence of those places, the poetry carries the potential of catalyzing “edge effects” in the reader’s imagination, as has been my experience of reading while dwelling near the ever rising and receding Boundary Bay.

Earth’s rhythms are registered in Ecclesiastes both to support the declaration that “all is vanity” and to emphasize the call to wisdom and a good life. Likewise, in this poetry attention to non-human things is enacted lyrically to show that, as Murdoch says is the case of all great art, “[t]he only thing which is of real importance is the ability to see it all clearly and respond to it justly” (*Sovereignty* 87). Murdoch adds, “Perhaps one of the greatest achievements of all is to join [the] sense of absolute mortality not to the tragic but to the comic.” Like the mystics, the poets studied here offer the comic hope of new configurations of “being in the world, of living there” (Ricoeur, *Interpretation* 60). A myriad of lives, human and nonhuman, are precariously marginalized, some to the point of eradication, by the deleterious effects—including rising seawaters—of the prevailing paradigm of civilization. The timely gift of these texts is to point attention to the beauty, and the demands, of the fragile, fringey edge we inhabit in the cosmos, that we might let it more fully inhabit us.

Chapter 1: The “Beautiful Secret in Places and Stars and Stones”: Jeffers’s “De Natura”

“He hath made everything beautiful in its time: also he hath set the world in their hearts, so that
no man can find out the work that God maketh from the beginning to end.”

— Ecclesiastes 3.11

“ . . . spread before your mind a bright light, whereby you may see to the heart of hidden things.”

— Lucretius, *On the Nature* (31; bk. 1, ll. 145-46)

Though baffled seers cannot impart
The secret of its laboring heart,
Throb thine with Nature’s throbbing breast,
And all is clear from east to west.

— Emerson, “Nature” (364)

Introduction: The Beginning and the End

In early 1941, while the Second World War was raging in Europe and the United States verged on entrance, Robinson Jeffers set out from Tor House and Hawk Tower. He was reluctant to leave his anchorage of peace in Carmel, California, on “a furlong of granite cliff, on which the Pacific / Leans his wild weight” (“Salvage,” *CP3* 421). Driving across the wintery continent with his wife Una, his destination was the region of his birth and childhood. He was to speak at the University of Pittsburgh, where he had spent a year as a self-described “somewhat precocious” fifteen-year old sophomore before his family moved to California in 1903 (*CP5* 972). Now he returned as one of the country’s preeminent poets to deliver the first lecture of a tour that would include the inaugural address of “The Poet in a Democracy” series at the Library of Congress in

Washington, D.C. (Hunt 953).⁴ Despite major blizzards in the east, the talks were well attended and the tour, in Una's words, was "a triumph" (*SL* 285; Carpenter, *Robinson* 45-46).

At the midpoint of Jeffers's literary career, launched nationally with the publication and critical acclaim of *Tamar and Other Poems* (1924), these public performances proved to be exceptional. Jeffers was reticent to travel, let alone to present and speak about his poetry. After this tour he never gave another public presentation (*CP5* 972-73). One of the defining characteristics of his approach to the poet's life was his choice to be "set . . . like a stone in cement" at the stone cottage on Carmel Point he helped to build in 1919 (*Selected Letters* 111). Robert Zaller asserts that "Tor House [. . .] became the most famous site of literary seclusion in America after Walden itself" (85). Jeffers's stance was a variation on the ancient "asceticism of staying where you are" (Lilburn, *Going* 184). He consciously sought to define such solitude as engagement from a distance. Alluding to both the Epicurean enclosed garden and monastic *fuga mundi* in "Meditation on Saviors," he recalls his earlier "pledges [made] against the refuge contempt, that easily locks the world out of doors" (*CP1* 396).

Still, he eschewed modern urban centres, along with the modernist movement and its social circles. To him, cities were mechanized "nets" of exclusively human "interdependence" that left "vast populations incapable of free survival, insulated / From the strong earth . . ." ("The Purse-Seine," *CP3* 517). Modernism was given over to "corruptions of instinct," antithetical to the "permanent things and the permanent aspects of life" that he deemed poetry's proper focus

⁴ The tour itinerary, arranged by Una and likely financed by patron-friend Noel Sullivan, who accompanied them, also included Princeton (cancelled due to a blizzard), Harvard, Columbia, the University of Buffalo, Butler University, the University of Kansas City, and the University of Utah (Hunt 964).

(CP4 391). Having found his most congenial society in Una and their twin boys,⁵ a coterie of friends, and the more-than-human community around Carmel, he did not assertively seek to advance his career through social connections (Gelpi, Introduction 1; Brophy, “Robinson” 6). Yet by the time of the lecture tour he had achieved international renown for his “rugged native poetry,” as the dust jacket of the 1938 *Selected Poetry* boasts, responsive to the Central Coast that many identified as “Jeffers country” and he took as both setting and “chief actor” of his verse (CP4 414).

One version of the lecture was given a second life in 1956 by its publication as *Themes in My Poems*.⁶ By then, Jeffers had lost Una to cancer (1950) and had been writing, off and on, through his own failing health, for a last collection to follow *Hungerfield and Other Poems* (1954). The lecture provides insight into key themes to which Jeffers returned with renewed focus and a wider scope in the later poems. I will focus particularly on a long poem project to which he referred in his notes as “the De Natura” (CP5 888). The epithet is a key allusion to one of the project’s chief poetic influences, Lucretius’s *De Rerum Natura*, or *On the Nature of Things*,⁷ for it enjoins Jeffers’s work to the tradition of philosophical, theological and aesthetic

⁵ In the late twenties, he wrote that he was “ridiculously contented” with his life’s “personal and natural environment” (CL 779-80). A decade later, this was decidedly not the case: he was experiencing a long dry spell in writing and he had an affair that severely disrupted his marriage (in her fierce distress, Una attempted suicide). Karman reports that Jeffers’s home life remained “unsteady” for a few years afterward, but eventually stabilized (74, 80).

⁶ *Themes in My Poems* is based on the script of the Harvard lecture (March 3, 1941). Manuscripts of both the Library of Congress lecture and the tour lecture, along with notes and commentary, appear in the *The Collected Poetry* as “The Poet in a Democracy” (CP4 399-406; CP5 953-61) and “Themes in My Poems” (CP4 407-16; CP5 961-80).

⁷ On drafts of “Passenger Pigeons,” intended to be part of the central long poem of the “De Natura,” along with “The unformed volcanic earth,” Jeffers uses the phrase “our Natura Rerum” (CP5 888). He indicates in a 1953 letter that

meditation on the nature (*natura*) of things (*rerum*) (Cornford 4; Hadot, *Veil* 7). In his “De Natura,” he sought to focus his narrative and lyric art more directly than before on a sustained treatment of cosmogony, the emergence of life on earth, and the evolution and future of the human, the planet, and the cosmos. Until recently, this final period of Jeffers’s career has received little critical attention, but along with Steven Chapman and Robert Zaller, I see it as an intriguing and culminating phase (Chapman 78, n. 1; Zaller 332, 393, n. 9). In addition to considering the influence of social-cultural aspects of his life-world, my approach to interpretation of Jeffers’s “De Natura” will focus on the way he purposely meditated upon these large matters through the features of his particular geographic place.

Arthur Coffin has observed that Jeffers, “like such modernists as T.S. Eliot, Wallace Stevens, Robert Lowell, and Theodore Roethke, was trying to create poetic structures that would bring order and integrity to his vision of the world (which was nature *and* God) and that would reestablish the reality he believed Mallarméan ‘moderns’ had forsaken” (“Something” 187). The “De Natura” project was Jeffers’s most ambitious attempt at such an endeavour, following an ancient tradition that sees poetry as representing, “insofar as is possible, the *poiesis* of the Universe” (Hadot, *Veil* 208). Indeed, Jeffers uses the metaphor of the universe as poem in a late lyric likely meant for the “De Natura” sequence, “There is no God but God,” in which God is “a great poet” continually creating the universe of his own identity (*CP3* 454). Pierre Hadot explains the ancient philosophical idea conveyed by the metaphor: “If the Universe is a poem,

the title of the related poem, “De Rerum Virtute,” is from Lucretius (*SL* 355). Allusions to Lucretius’s *De Rerum Natura* are scattered throughout his corpus, but particularly of note is an image from the first part of Lucretius’s *De Rerum Natura*: the early mention in “The Year of Mourning” (1915) of the “flaming walls of heaven, the heartless fires” to “[t]he flaming world-walls” in “The unformed volcanic earth” (*CP4* 201, *CP3* 430).

the poet can unveil its meaning and its secret by composing a poem in his turn. . . . For according to a concept that is archaic but has remained alive throughout the ages, the artist has the power of recreating that which he sings” (*Veil* 205). Plato’s *Timaeus* and “the pre-Socratic cosmogonic songs” assume the idea that “the literary work is meant to be a microcosm that somehow imitates the gigantic poem of the universe” (205). The metaphor is invoked in the longest portion of Jeffers’s “De Natura,” the now stand-alone poem “The unformed volcanic earth.” There “the exultations and agonies of beasts and men” are “sense-organs” of God, just as tragic heroes in poems act as sense organs for their audience, inferring that God is both author and audience, or reader, of his own universal poem (*CP3* 434).

Jeffers seeks to accomplish in his “De Natura,” then, what he says in the conclusion of his lecture “*great poetry*” can do: “contain a whole world at once, the physical and sensuous, the intellectual, the spiritual, the imaginative, all in one passionate solution. . . . Thus it becomes a means of discovery, as well as a means of expression” (*CP4* 416). A culmination of his spiritual-aesthetic practice of poetry, the ultimate concern of the project was to extol, and exemplify proper human response to, “Deus sive natura [God, or Nature],” a phrase borrowed from Spinoza (*SL* 184). The nascent “De Natura” is outlined at the bottom of the manuscript of the *Hungerfield* lyric “The Beauty of Things” (c. 1949): “In epical story—chapter about origins—the nebular disc from which swirled the sun and planets . . .” (*CP5* 818). A fragment in a later sketch begins on a Miltonic note: “No doubt I have undertaken a greater theme / Than any mind can accomplish / . . . the history of the earth and the glory of God” (906).

It was an unfulfilled ambition; Jeffers’s “De Natura” remained incomplete at the time of his death in 1962. Still, many of the related poems were edited, arranged, and titled by his friend and biographer Melba Bennett and published posthumously in *The Beginning and the End and*

Other Poems (1963). Bennett's title is apt, both signalling the leitmotif of the project, the natural cycles of cosmic, terrestrial, and human life, and paying tribute to the passing of the poet.

Bennett drew the title from an allusion to a well-known Heraclitean aphorism (Fragment 103), "[The] beginning and the end in a circle's circumference are common" (113), which appears in the poem she gave the same title (I will refer to it as "The unformed volcanic earth"). Here the earth's primordial atmosphere is associated with the gases to which "our remembering bodies" return when "the end of life / Meets its beginning" (CP3 430). However effective her title, I have opted not to use Bennett's collection as my source, but rather the more inclusive *The Collected Poetry of Robinson Jeffers*, in which last poems have been selected and arranged in chronological order by Tim Hunt, with manuscript notes and commentary.⁸

Three key themes distilled from the tour lecture, relating Jeffers's spiritual worldview and practices, will help frame my investigation of this final project: his pantheistic "religious feeling" and beliefs about the universe (CP4 412), contemplation of the "beauty of the universe" as perceived from his "rocky coast" (412, 414), and "contemplation of death" (407). These themes are enjoined, in a different order, to the three large "time-worn questions" asked by one of Jeffers's most controversial protagonists, Rev. Barclay, in "The Women at Point Sur" (1927), and the poet-speaker raises them again in "Theory of Truth (*Reference to Chapter II, The Women at Point Sur*)" a decade later (1937): "First, is there a God and of what nature? Second, whether there's anything after we die but worm's meat? / Third, how should men live?" (CP2 608). He engages these spiritual-moral themes again through the persona of the contemplative old caretaker in "The Inhumanist" (*The Double Axe*, 1948), and continues in the following decade, in

⁸ See Hunt's comments on his compilation process, including his reasons for not using Bennett's versions of poems as they appear in *The Beginning and the End* (852-58).

the poems of the unfolding “De Natura” project. I use these themes to investigate a selection of the final poems, considering the way Jeffers’s corresponding aesthetics affirms “the beauty of things” and relinquishes human-centred passions, including fear of death. He focalized his theological aesthetics through practices of attention in the place he inhabited on the California coast, especially watching the starry sky by night, writing poetry and working the granite stone by day. I take his “De Natura” as an extended contemplation on what he names, in the late elegy “Salvage,” “the beautiful secret in places and stars and stones” (*CP3* 421).

“New Birth” and Inhumanism

The themes I have outlined can be seen arising from within the naturalist mystical worldview and way of life that emerged for Jeffers between 1914, the year he and Una moved to Carmel, and 1919, when they settled at Carmel Point. Jeffers had gradually left behind the Christian faith in which he was raised, particularly rejecting the central tenet of the Judeo-Christian tradition, the supernatural revelation of a personal God whose qualities include “mercy and justice,” which he deemed an “anthropoid God” (“Birds and Fishes” *CP3* 426; “Explosion” 414). He embraced instead a naturalist concept of the divine, “Deus sive natura,” that was congruent with his intellectual synthesis of scientific knowledge and philosophical ideas, “running in harness with a mysticism that seems almost instinctive” (*CL* 777). His notions of what occurs after death and what is the best way of life stemmed from his ultimate concern, the God-reality.

In a letter to Una (1938) in which he recalls that time in which he underwent a profound change, Jeffers borrows a metaphor from Christianity to recall “the accidental new birth of my own mind” (*SL* 269). Fascinated by the mystical impulse, having written her MA in philosophy entitled “The Enduring Element of Mysticism in Man,” Una framed his change as “a kind of

awakening such as adolescents and religious converts are said to experience” (213). Both Jeffers and Una point to a *metanoia*, the early Christian designation for conversion. *Metanoia* literally means “change of mind” and entails “reorientation of one’s way of life” (“metanoia, n.”). Among the conditioning factors leading up to this change was “a whole series of accidents” (*SP* xvi), beginning with his publicized affair with and eventual marriage to Una in 1913. This was followed shortly by the deaths of their first child and his Presbyterian minister-theologian father in 1914,⁹ their move from Los Angeles to Carmel that same year, followed by the birth of their twin sons in 1916, and the mental and emotional tensions he experienced in 1917 over responsibilities of fatherhood and consideration of joining the United States troops entering into the Great War (*CL* 779; Karman, “Life” 23). Una further credited his “awakening” to his involvement in the building of their house in 1919 on newly purchased property at Carmel Point: “As he helped the masons shift and place the wind and wave-worn granite I think he realized some kinship with it, and became aware of strengths in himself unknown before” (*SL* 213). After completion of Tor House, so named because it was built on “a knoll where stones jutting out of the treeless moor reminded us of tors on Dartmoor” (Una qtd. in Bennett 87), Jeffers carried on with masonry over the years, building Hawk Tower and additions to the house.

In the fires of psychological strain, the complementary focal practices of poetry writing, stonemasonry, and contemplation of the world from his place on the western shore helped to meld together his particular temperament, environmental perception, and enculturation. Of the latter, Arthur Coffin has observed that, in Jeffers’s “quest for ways to structure the powerfully integrated vision of God, nature, and humanity that he eventually articulated, [he] had an

⁹ See “The Year of Mourning,” where Jeffers eulogizes and explores the loss: “What twofold suffering / One dark-starred year may bring!” (*CP4* 190).

uncommonly wide range of intellectual resources at his command” (“Something” 187).¹⁰ His worldview was derived in part from the “timely ideas about origin of species, descent of man, astronomy, geology, etc.” taught him by his father (*SL* 255).

Likely Jeffers’s father drew on the work of Joseph LeConte, the University of California professor of geology and natural history who promoted a synthesis of evolution with the Christian faith (Lawson 276). Besides authoring a widely-used geology textbook, *Elements of Geology* (1878), which Jeffers studied at Occidental when he took a geology class in 1905 (Williams 51), Le Conte wrote two books, *Religion and Science* (1874) and *Evolution: Its Nature, Its Evidences, and Its Relation to Religious Thought* (1888). In the latter, he claims that evolution calls for a reconstruction of Christian theology (295). In terms similar to those Jeffers uses in “De Rerum Virtute,” LeConte asserts that the morphological law that develops the egg “has presided over the creation of the world. . . . There is one law and one energy pervading all space and stretching through all time (282-83). He describes the mystery of existence as the “*one eternal* act of creation—a never-ceasing procession of the divine energy. Every object is still a creation, but not a separate creation—only a separate manifestation of the one continuous creative act” (348). Clearly, such ideas took hold early in Jeffers’s imagination and did not diminish with time.¹¹

¹⁰ For in-depth studies of Jeffers’s Continental philosophical resources see Coffin’s *Robinson Jeffers: Poet of Inhumanism* and Radcliffe Squires’s *The Loyalties of Robinson Jeffers*. Anthony Lioi situates Jeffers as a neo-Stoic in “Knocking Our Heads to Pieces Against the Night: Going Cosmic with Robinson Jeffers.” Zaller covers similar philosophical sources, while foregrounding the seminal influence of Puritan Calvinism and Emersonian Transcendentalism in *Robinson Jeffers and the American Sublime*.

¹¹ See Zaller’s discussion of 19th-century “immanentist” theology, especially that of LeConte (100-03).

He speaks of the tension between “reason and faith” in his 1941 lecture, and on the manuscript of “The Old Stone-Mason” (c. 1949) notes the “debate between religion and science” in Victorian times “seemed a vital and necessary choice” and critiques the responses of both “Tennyson and Fitzgerald-Omar” as “Escape-literature” (*CP5* 820). This implies that he was considering around the time of conception of his “De Natura” a poetic response that would synthesize the religious impulse and scientific discovery in terms of Inhumanism. He was drawn to literary works that sought to present the nature of the divine-cosmic reality, large “poems” that inspired his own eventual attempt at such art. Among the writers he mentions are Lucretius, Dante, Goethe, Nietzsche, Yeats, Wordsworth, Shelley, Hardy, Emerson, Poe, Frost, and, in a late unfinished poem, Darwin (“I hear that Darwin grown old,” *CP4* 536). In one letter responding to a query about philosophical influences, he admits “a gleam from Lucretius on one side and Wordsworth on the other” (*SL* 201). Romanticism was for him a pivot between the Christian worldview in which he had been raised and the philosophy that informed the spirituality of his mature years (Everson, “Introduction” ix-x; Gelpi, “What” 6, 10). In Emerson’s Transcendentalism Jeffers found room to assimilate modern scientific discoveries and theories, including evolution, through the religio-aesthetic valences and conceptual patterns of the American strain of Calvinist Christianity, devoid of the dogma, instilled in him by his Presbyterian professor of theology father and hymn-loving mother.

Divine Beauty: Traces of Edwards’s and Emerson’s Theological Aesthetics

On his lecture tour, Jeffers discovered that his maternal forebear was the famed preacher and earliest American philosopher, Jonathan Edwards. One of the defining characteristics of Edwards’s theology was his repudiation of human self-preoccupation and Enlightenment humanist views concerning “rational abilities and natural moral sense” (Marsden 26-27). These

are also characteristic of Jeffers's worldview, for he maintained Edwards's radically theocentric (rather than anthropocentric) orientation and acute awareness of human fallibility. Edwards wrote two final essays expounding on the beauty and virtue of the self-regarding God from which all things emanate, expressing an essentially panentheistic ontology in which all things are in God, who yet transcends the sum of his parts.¹² In his lecture, as elsewhere, Jeffers expresses a similar sensibility and ontological concept of God, although where Edwards theologically maintained the dualistic relation of Creator and creation of classic theism, Jeffers's conception is monistic. His God is described in both Edwardsian and Stoical terms: "one being, a single organism, one great life that includes all life and all things . . . so beautiful that it must be loved and revered; and in moments of mystical vision we identify ourselves with it" (CP4 412).

While Edwards praised divine beauty and goodness, he maintained that God's wrath and the destroying fire of hell—described identically to the "hellish principles reigning" within reprobate humanity—are also integral to his excellence ("Sinners" 407). Analogously, Jeffers

¹² In Edwards's final dissertations, "The End for Which God Created the World" and "The Nature of True Virtue," he counters the theological notion of human happiness as the purpose of creation. Perry Miller summarizes Edwards's argument: "He who is Himself the source of all being, the substance of all life, created the world out of Himself . . . by an extension of Himself, by taking upon Himself the forms of stones and trees and of man. He created . . . for the pure joy of self-expression"—in Edwards's terms, from "the disposition to communicate himself"—"as an artist creates beauty for the love of beauty. God does not need a world or the worship of man; He is perfect in Himself. If He bothers to create, it is out of the fullness of His own nature, the overflowing virtue that is in Him" (Miller 194). Edwards's panentheistic concept of creation (*creatio ex Deo*) is in line with the Christian theological tradition appropriating the Neoplatonic concept of emanation (Cooper 63; 74-77). There are strong echoes of this theological vision (perhaps even of Miller's presentation of it) in Jeffers's poetry and prose. Indeed, it is possible that he alludes to Edwards's "The Nature of True Virtue," as well as Lucretius's *De Rerum Natura*, in the title and intent of "De Rerum Virtute."

affirms the beauty and virtue of the God-reality, regardless of the “violent strains and conflicts,” suffering, and death essential to it (*CP4* 413). In a 1936 letter, Jeffers explained a conception “that runs through my verses,” the ‘Heautontimorumenos,’ a Greek term meaning self-tormentor. “All the prevalent religions think of God as blessed, or happy, or at least at peace,” he wrote. Pointing to his tragic narratives, he continues, “If God is all, he must be suffering, since an unreckoned part of the universe is always suffering. But his suffering must be self-inflicted, for he is all. . . . I suppose the idea carries psychological as well as cosmic or religious implications. Man as well as God must suffer in order to discover” (*SL* 240).¹³ To persuade his readers to recognize their absolute dependence upon and rightful worship of the sovereign God, regardless of their precarious estate, Edwards purposely cultivated the affective appeal of his sermons through what Perry Miller calls “sensational rhetoric” (*Errand* 179). Frederic I. Carpenter, with whom Jeffers carried on a long correspondence, observes similar rhetorical strategies for the same purpose in Jeffers’s poetry (“Radicalism” 638; “Values” 357).¹⁴ Apparently Jeffers recognized the affinity. When it was revealed to him during a tour of the

¹³ Jeffers follows the German *Naturphilosophie* of Schopenhauer and Schelling, patterned after the mysticism of Jacob Boehme, in which “being deploys itself only by a struggle against itself, and this is what explains the distressing and terrifying character of existence,” so that at the very “foundation of things . . . is ‘sadness,’ ‘suffering,’ ‘madness’” (Hadot, *Veil* 302).

¹⁴ Carpenter also places Jeffers in the line of radical American mystics who included “evil” (from a human perspective) within God’s nature, from Edwards through Whitman, in his 1931 essay “The Radicalism of Jonathan Edwards” (630, 636). He shared the essay with Jeffers in correspondence; Jeffers replied, “I read [your essay] with much interest, and some profit, learning things that were new to me, and feeling a new sympathy toward your subject” (*SL* 186).

exhibit complementing his Library of Congress address that he was a descendent of Edwards, Una reports, it was as if he had received a great gift (*SL* 285).

Still, converging from Edwards, Jeffers's worldview was a form of "Calvinism without Christ" (Gelpi, Introduction 9). He rejected most of the essential Christian beliefs and especially "the Word made Flesh," but not the sense of intuitive knowledge of God or the devotional meditation on divine beauty and the desire to reflect it (3-4, 9-10; Everson, "Introduction" xxiv; Zaller 18, 21). Among the "guides" that Jeffers chose to follow away from the Christian faith ("To His Father," *CP4* 288), Emerson was preeminent and lasting. Jeffers expressed his esteem for Emerson in a 1912 letter to Una where he describes him as "a great and good man," one of only two in American literature, the other being Poe" (*SL* 7). In a 1933 letter to Carpenter, Jeffers writes that Emerson was "a youthful enthusiasm . . . but not outgrown by any means, only read so thoroughly that I have not returned to him for a long time" (209). That he did return to him is apparent in his lecture manuscript notes, where he mentions Emerson, along with Wordsworth, as sources of his pantheism (*CP5* 965). Clearly, he disregarded Emerson's anthropocentric humanism, and generally saw through a darker lens with regard to the possibilities facing humanity.

The pathway from Edwardsian Calvinism through Emersonian Transcendentalism to his own philosophy of "Inhumanism," as he named it, was not circuitous. Perry Miller has traced the continuity between the two great American thinkers, particularly in terms of the mystical feeling that "God is present to their intuitions and in the beauty and terror of nature" (192). Like his German and British Romantic counterparts, Emerson undertook a reconstruction of Christian theology and especially of Calvinist piety to arrive at some of the principles of his American

Transcendentalism, and Jeffers continued the transvaluation.¹⁵ In his seminal essay “The Poet,” affinity can be detected between Emerson’s theological aesthetics and that of Edwards when he claims that the world “is from the beginning beautiful; and God has not made some beautiful things, but Beauty is the creator of the universe” (289). Further, as Edwards maintained his end was to give assent to and praise the excellence of God, so Emerson writes that nature “has insured the poet’s fidelity to his office of announcement and affirming, namely by the beauty of things, which becomes a new and higher beauty when expressed” (292).

Jeffers followed Edwards and Emerson in formulating his own version of theological aesthetics, a contemplative knowledge and discourse of God centred on beauty. He concludes in “Invasion (written May 8, 1944)” that only the “aesthetic emotion” can properly perceive reality. It is folly to expect moral qualities to prevail, as the world was not “constructed for happiness nor love nor wisdom.” But if “pain, hatred and folly” balance and “cancel out” these aspects, still “the beauty stands” as ineradicable (*CP3* 132). Beauty is, in his view expressed again in a late fragment, “the extra quality, / The excellence, the unbalanced virtue: all the rest comes even” (*CP5* 876). So in a 1951 statement of belief for The American Humanist Association, he recommends “the immense beauty of the earth and the outer universe, the divine ‘nature of things,’” as the proper focus for philosophy as “an endless research of truth,” and for contemplation as “a sort of worship,” concluding that such pursuit is “ennobling” and “a source of strength” (*SL* 42).

¹⁵ On the matter of continuity and change between Puritan Calvinism and American Transcendentalism, see Perry Miller’s essay “From Edwards to Emerson” (*Errand* 184-203). See also Robert Zaller’s illuminating discussion of the background influence on Jeffers of Puritanism and Transcendentalism, in chapters one and two of *Robinson Jeffers and the American Sublime*.

Jeffers's Ultimate Value: The Integrity of Beauty

Emerson mandated for the poet a role in creating “the new religion” of his time, to be “the reconciler” with life, despite what seems “evil” from a human perspective (304). His ideal poet is able to perform theodicy: “For as it is dislocation and detachment from the life of God that makes things ugly, the poet, who re-attaches things to nature and the Whole—re-attaching even artificial things and violation of nature, to nature, by deeper insight—disposes very easily of the most disagreeable fact,” presumably by rendering them meaningful in relation to the greater good or beauty (295). Emerson saw the root of contemporary humanity’s alienated consciousness as short-sightedness, seeing only the surface appearance of things. Noting Jeffers’s affinity for Emerson, Carpenter has suggested that “the key” to Jeffers’s poetry is his striving to articulate the essential, “transcendental value of ‘integrity,’ or the unity of man and nature” (“Values” 355). In addition to an Edwardsian sense of the beauty of God imbibed from his father’s theology and his mother’s hymns, Jeffers’s concept of the divine was informed by his studies in the classics, particularly the holism of Stoic cosmology. Such cosmology is expressed by Pliny the Elder in *Natural History*: “The world is sacred, eternal, immense, wholly present within all things, or rather it is the All, infinite while it seems finite, determinate in all things while appearing indeterminate, embracing all things within and without in itself, it is both the work of the nature of things, and the nature of things itself” (qtd. in Hadot, *Veil* 26).

To the implicit thematic question, “how should we then live?” in “The Answer” (*Such Counsels You Gave to Me*, 1937), the response is “keep one’s own integrity” (CP2 536). Jeffers echoes Emerson’s notions of self-reliance and the poet as integrator, counselling himself and his reader that “[i]ntegrity is wholeness, the greatest beauty is / Organic wholeness, the wholeness of life and things, the divine beauty of the universe. Love that, not man / Apart from that . . .” (536).

A few years later, in 1942, he summarized the subject matter of his poetry in three points that elaborate on integrity as an ultimate value. The first states that “man” is a part of nature, relatively insignificant and transient in the “big universe” that will go on after “he has totally ceased to exist” (*CL* 176). The second counsels against racial (human) introversion and promotes attention being turned outward to “non-human nature.” The third point regards holistic valuation, echoing Emerson: “It is easy to see that a tree, a rock, a star are beautiful; it is hard to see that people are beautiful unless you consider them as part of the universe—the divine whole. You cannot judge or value any part except in relationship to the whole that it is part of” (176). These points reflect the three themes distilled from his lecture: the nature of divine reality, contemplation of death (future racial extinction), and contemplation of the world’s beauty.

Concerning the perennial question of the good life, Jeffers cautiously avoided what he called the “savior” role; not looking to make disciples, he practiced the “reticence” of his old caretaker persona in “The Inhumanist” (*CP3* 304). In both his narratives and lyric meditations, he explored the transcendence of certain “traditional morals” qua “habits or conventions” as personal work in the vein of Emersonian self-reliance, distinguished from the denial altogether of values as mere “illusions” (*SL* 262; Carpenter, “Values” 361). Still, as Carpenter points out, his valorization of integrity promotes a shift in the Judeo-Christian and liberal humanist values of his society, “transcend[ing] the old values of good and evil (as Emerson knew)” (“Values” 355).¹⁶ Convinced of “[f]atalism (perhaps from Calvinist ancestry) reinforced by scientific determinism”

¹⁶ In “Experience,” Emerson is aware there are ethical implications in his philosophy of self-reliance, confessing, “I would gladly be moral and keep due metes and bounds, which I dearly love, and allow the most to the will of man; but I have set my heart on honesty” (318). In the conclusion, he stipulates that he is not interested in “compil[ing] a code” of conduct for all, but believes that “a private fruit” is sufficient evidence for his assertions (325).

(*CL* 777), Jeffers claimed that in the universal scheme of things, “our vices and blazing crimes are as insignificant as our happiness” (*CP*4 418). He was faced with the challenge of discerning the guiding principles that correspond with such reality.

At first he defined his new worldview as “getting beyond” or “break[ing] away from” humanity, before coming to call it “Inhumanism” (*SL* 35, 68; *CP*1 240; *CP*4 428). His morality was informed not only by his cosmic theology but also, like Lucretius, with his view of what occurs after death. So the old caretaker of “The Inhumanist,” a trans-valuing Moses figure (Zaller 41), counsels “future children” to not fear the end to which they are headed from birth, since it is a return to the elements, “your better nature,” and to embrace life experience as “worship” of “the beauty of things . . . the face of God” (*CP*3 304). Jeffers engages the same themes in “De Rerum Virtute,” modelling contemplation of death in the opening section’s meditation on a skull and enacting the contemplation of beauty in the final section. Integrity, the poem asserts, is the ultimate value discerned in “the beauty of things,” for “the world is sound, / Whatever the sick microbe does. But he too is part of it” (*CP*3 403). As Chapman and Zaller have found, “De Rerum Virtute” clearly signals Jeffers’s final phase of writing (Chapman 78, n. 1; Zaller 332), touching on the themes developed in the “De Natura” project, including the intent to properly situate the human race within “the immense beauty of the whole” (*CP*3 403).

The Beauty of Recurrence

In addition to integrity, or wholeness, Jeffers’s concept of “the immense beauty” entails recurrence, permanence, and intensity (*CP*4 375, 378). Further, beauty is characterized by polarity. I will consider each of these in due course, but begin with a consideration of recurrence. As can be seen in the preface to *Tamar* (1923), this aspect of his aesthetics was entwined with his environmental imagination early in his career, informed by his place on Carmel Point:

“Poetry does not live in [the human-built indoors] but in all the larger, and poetry cannot speak without remembering the turns of the sun and moon, and the rhythm of the ocean, and the recurrence of human generations, the returning waves of life and death” (*CP4* 381). Pertaining to human life, his notion of recurrence extends beyond the cycle of the individual: being born, maturing, dying and reentering the elements to be renewed in other forms, as he imagined Una at the end of “Hungerfield” (*CP3* 397). Recurrence applies also to human “cultural-cycles” in his organicist concept of civilizations coming to be, rising, declining, and arising in new form, as presented in the 1941 tour lecture (*CP4* 409-10).¹⁷ The “De Natura” goes further still, applying the pattern to the entire human race, with anticipation of something “greater” arising beyond it (“It flows out of mystery,” *CP3* 450).

Ultimately, according to his panentheistic worldview, this cyclical—or more accurately, spiral—pattern of recurrence is in the nature of things, humans among them, because it is the nature of the universal God. So, in “The Inhumanist” the caretaker meditates on the Milky Way with “the hub and heavy nucleus, the ringmaster” at the centre “Of all this million-shining whirlwind of dancers, the stars of this end of heaven” (*CP3* 269). He proceeds to connect the dots, from atoms to solar systems, galaxies and “the galactic universes” (perhaps alluding to the theory of the multiverse), seeing them all “organized on one pattern . . . [t]he eternal firewheel”

¹⁷ Jeffers attributed the idea of recurrence in his university lecture to Sulla, Vico, Petrie, and Spengler, with Nietzsche conspicuously absent (*CP4* 410). William Butler Yeats and his mythic theory of the gyres was another unnamed source. Jeffers named him one of his favorite writers in a 1929 questionnaire (*CL* 775) and mentions him again in his 1948 article for *The New York Times*, “Poetry, Gongorism, and a Thousand Years,” admiring him as one whose “fighting will . . . to push on with time and abide its turnings” made him “a great poet in our time” (*CP4* 426).

(CP3 269-70).¹⁸ The spiral image of “firewheel” and “whirlwind of stars” is repeated in the second section of “De Rerum Virtute,” but now the notion of a divine cosmic consciousness is introduced as the source of the pattern; it “[i]s not blind force, but fulfils its life and intends its courses” (402). Aphorisms from Thales and Heraclitus blend in the assertion that ““All things are full of God. / Winter and summer, day and night, war and peace are God”” (402).

The phrase “winter and summer” repeats the first strophe of “The Inhumanist,” where the caretaker reflects on the movements of all things as God “hunt[ing] in circles” (256). The circling way of God is also presented in the late lyric “There is this infinite energy,” apparently intended as part of the “De Natura” project. Here Jeffers reprises his earlier poem “An Artist,” to imagine God as “a great sculptor” who wills the recurrence of creation and destruction: “to make great things and destroy them, and make great things / And destroy them again” (CP3 455).

Though no purpose is evident besides self-expression, the beauty of this God calls forth affirmation: “look how beautiful-- / Look how beautiful are all the things that he does. His signature / Is the beauty of things” (455). The term “signature” connotes the divine artist’s identification printed on his work of art, but also, in the tradition of Paracelsus, Boehme, and Goethe, means “a sign or a figure” of correspondence to an ineffable or hidden reality (Hadot, *Veil* 202-03, 258). The use of the recurring phrases in his poetics conveys a key principle of his theological aesthetics. The poetic expression of dynamic reality mirrors the perceived recurrence in the procession of things and points the reader, in the intensifying repetition of “look,” to see it

¹⁸ F. M. Cornford, whom Jeffers read, describes Heraclitus’s concept of the nature of nature as “the divine soul-substance, *physis*. . . . It is God, who is ‘day and night, winter and summer, war and peace, surfeit and hunger; only, he takes various shapes’ (187).

for what it is. In Jeffers's aesthetics, beauty, of which recurrence is a primary quality, is a manifestation of the essential but secret nature of things: self-expression of a self-sustaining ("infinite energy") divine artist, worthy of reverence and adoration.

The Secret Nature of Things: Polarity and Process

Jeffers's "De Natura" thus joins a long western philosophical and literary discourse, much of it poetic, on the nature of things. In *The Veil of Isis: An Essay on the History of the Idea of Nature*, Pierre Hadot investigates some of this tradition through Heraclitus's aphorism, "*phusis kruptesthai philei*, usually translated, "nature loves to hide" (1). He presents various interpretations of the aphorism throughout history, including: "the mystery of metamorphosis and of the deep identity of life and death" (possibly Heraclitus's meaning); the secret of the divine All, "sacred, eternal, immense" (Stoics, Pliny the Elder); and "the original mystery of Being, its impenetrable and unexplorable character" (Goethe and Schelling [Hadot, *Veil* 11; 26, 34; 301]). Emerson offers his variation on the theme, asserting in his second series essay "Nature" that carefully studied phenomena point to a principle aspect of "the unfathomed secret" of nature: "from the beginning to the end of the universe she has but one stuff—but one stuff with its two ends, to serve up all her dream-like variety" (368, 370). Those two ends are "the first and second secrets of nature: Motion and Rest. The whole code of her laws may be written on the thumbnail, or the signet of a ring" (369).

Emerson denotes this universal code as the dipolar relation of *natura naturans*, active or efficient nature (in motion), and *natura naturata*, or passive nature (at rest), a "system in transition," forms transcending other forms in the process of metamorphosis, whose "direction is

forever onward” and unknowable (369-70, 372).¹⁹ Goethe, one of his “Representative Men,” held that through intuitive, “attentive perception” of the “concrete individual” signature, nature allows glimpses of “an inconceivable, unexplorable, unfathomable transcendence,” a *Geheimnis offenbares*, or “manifest secret” (Hadot, *Veil* 254, 258, 255). Through attentive perception of individual things, one might detect *Urphänomene*, the basic forms at the origin of “the movement of genesis and growth,” and these manifest the universal laws associated with them (254-55). Goethe perceived in the *Urphänomen* of the spiral, discovered in his study of the metamorphosis of the plant, that the “fundamental rhythm of nature” is the conjunction of the force of polarity (*Polarität*), or “division and the opposition of contraries,” with the force of intensification (*Steigerung*), or augmentation and ascent to a superior form (220-221; Rigby 26).

The ontological vision represented in Jeffers’s poetry, like Emerson’s, is of one divine, sentient reality bearing the Goethean duality of *Polarität* and *Steigerung*: “Spirit and body, energy and matter” (unpublished fragment, *CP4* 561). In the two-part “The Double Axe,” the concept of polarity is a leitmotif signalled by the title. In part two, “The Inhumanist,” the old caretaker of the Gore’s coastal ranch (also the setting of the first part) wields a double-headed axe, noted by critics to be a multivalent, ancient symbol (Karman, “Life” 97; Zaller 37). Seen from one angle, it represents sexual generation, with its “two lobes and the stiff helve” (*CP3* 258). From another, it signifies the dual movements of regeneration and destruction, or “existence and annihilation” in the infinite process of the universe (3.293).

¹⁹ The dual concept of *natura naturans* and *naturata* originates with the 16th c. Dominican friar philosopher Giordano Bruno, from whom “Spinoza inherited this tradition of viewing Nature as God’s self-generation and God as being caused in that he is self-causing. . . . *Natura naturans* is ‘God insofar as he is considered as a free cause.’ *Natura naturata* is ‘whatever follows from the necessity of God’s nature, or from any of God’s attributes’” (Cooper 69-70).

Notably, a double axe appears in the eponymous poem of Robert Frost's *New Hampshire*, a collection George Sterling gave to Jeffers in 1925 (*SL* 33). Frost's speaker is challenged to take a side regarding "the new school of the pseudo-phallic" in Modernist art that explored the implications of Darwinian evolution and Freudian psychoanalysis (*Poetry* 170). He answers that he'd neither be a "puke" nor "a prude afraid of nature," like a certain man he knew who "took a double ax / And went alone against a grove of trees" (170). The allusion is to the biblical story of King Hezekiah cutting down the groves that served as sites of pagan sexual-rites, after his predecessor, Ahaz (also mentioned in the poem), had revived nature religion in Judah (2 Kings 18.1-4). The man's prudery, euphemistically referenced as "dendrophobia" and preference for trees "mill[ed] / And educated into boards" (171), arises from his dread of nature's "flux" and fear of erasure of the "line where man leaves off and nature starts" (171). Jeffers's axe-wielder, in contrast, is calm—almost cavalier—in identifying himself with the God who is all things ("The Inhumanist," *CP3* 289). He joins Empedocles in seeing "[t]he reciprocal ebb and flow of opposing forces in the whole . . . mirrored in man" (Robinson 168). Indeed, the title of the first part of "The Double Axe," "The Love and the Hate," is an allusion to Empedocles's concept of the dipolar forces Love and Strife, unity and dispersion within the process of the world-order (Cornford 230-32; Robinson 153, 159).

Modern Science and "Heautontimoroumenos"

The wielding of the axe can be seen as the old caretaker's—like Jeffers's own—practice of contemplating beauty and death, and his dual stance of affirmation and relinquishment. But the double-axe also signifies meditative intuition of the nature of things, as "it knows" more than modern science (*CP3* 290). Jeffers's Inhumanism involved not only transcendence of humanist social values, but also eschewal of the anthropocentric ideal of modern science to fully know and

control nature. The topic of modern science as an insufficient epistemological approach to the nature of reality is broached in “Explosion,” the poem intended to open the “De Natura” sequence according to at least one of his sketches (*CP5* 879). There the poet-speaker ruminates on the Big Bang theory, at that time the latest model of the birth of “the whole stellar universe, the earth and the other planets, the sun and his galaxy, and the innumerable / Firefly millions of the other star-swirls” (*CP3* 413). He avers that “astronomers, mathematicians, men of science” employ their own form of “metaphor” (413-14), an assertion echoed later in “The mathematicians and physics men,” as “mythology” that works “alongside the truth, / Never touching it” (459). In “What’s the best life,” Jeffers presents in even stronger terms his claim that the nature of the universe is not fully fathomed by astronomer’s speculative models and mathematical theories employed in physics, for these are “the wrong tools” that “[r]un parallel to reality, they symbolize it, they squint at it, / They never touch it” (*CP3* 425). In this he follows the logic of the great mathematician Pascal in *Pensées*: “Reason’s last step is the recognition that there are an infinite number of things which are beyond it,” and, “The whole visible world is only an imperceptible dot in nature’s ample bosom. No idea comes near it; it is no good inflating our conceptions beyond imaginable space, we only bring forth atoms compared to the reality of things” (85, 89).²⁰

At the close of his 1941 lecture, Jeffers sees both science and poetry as worthy methods of knowledge, but he valorizes the integrating force of poetic knowledge and expression:

²⁰ Expanding on the conversation between the old caretaker and the German physicist in “The Inhumanist” (stanza 36), several other poems in the following decade feature the motif of the inadequacy of modern science to comprehend the whole of reality. In addition to those mentioned, see the unfinished poem “We see ourselves from within” (*CP4* 534-35) and “The Urchin,” which points to the eventual confounding of cosmological models (Ptolemy, Einstein) by the “tricky urchin in nature” (*CP3* 415-16).

“Science usually takes things to pieces in order to discover them; it dissects and analyzes; poetry puts things together, producing equally valid discovery, and actual creation. Something new is found out, something that the author himself did not know before he wrote it; and something new is made” (CP4 416). For Jeffers, poetry at its best is superior knowledge, encompassing what the analysis of science reveals about the nature of things, but it also incorporating sensory perception, affective responses, aesthetic apperceptions, and religious feelings.

As applied nuclear science takes into consideration analytic knowledge only, it advances in unacknowledged ignorance and will bear unintended consequences, including a holocaust of earthly life. In the observation that “[w]e are born of explosion and homesick for it; our little blasts / Echo that huge one” (CP3 413), “Explosion” reprises the insight into the cosmic *Urphänomen* and concern about human destructive tendencies conveyed in “The Inhumanist” (c.f. stanzas 36 and 51-52). The exiled German physicist wins the approval of the old caretaker when he voices the view that “[s]cience is not to serve but to know. . . . it is a noble thing, which to use / Is to degrade” (CP3 291). Jeffers later expresses distrust for utilitarian science in the unpublished “I hear that Darwin grown old” (c. 1951), decrying the “all-too-human mathematicians making poems (which work, you know) / Parallel to truth, and produce death” (536).

Similar foreboding about the application of nuclear research is conveyed in other poems of this decade, including “Fire,” “Monument,” “The Urchin,” “Explosion,” and “Passenger Pigeons.” In the latter, whose title points to the theme of extinction, a human spokesperson in dialogue with personified Death hubristically claims hold of “[t]he primal powers, creation and annihilation” through science (CP3 436). Death hides his grin behind his hand. The satirical poem critiques the anthropocentric, utilitarian view of nature that Jeffers counters with the

reverently courteous approach to knowing promoted in his meditative poems. In this he shows affinity for Emerson's principle that, as with humans, so with "Nature": "[a]ll good conversation, manners and action come from a spontaneity which forgets usages and makes the moment great" (318).

Emerson proceeds to insist that "Nature hates calculators; her methods are saltatory [leaping] and impulsive" and all levels of being, from chemical "undulatory and alternate" movements and organic "pulses" to the evolution of human life, all are "of God," so that the "results of life are uncalculated and uncalculable" (318-19). Jeffers likewise observes pulsation and alternate movements in all things, on a microcosmic and a macrocosmic level, as they cycle through the poles of intensity and relaxation, contraction and expansion, life and death. He employs the ancient philosophic-poetic metaphor in "Explosion" (and the later reworking of the theme, "The Great Explosion") that interprets the polarity of the universal energy as "systole and diastole: the whole universe beats like a heart" that is "pumping into our arteries his terrible life" (*CP3* 413).

This Neoplatonic image of the universal heart is common in Romantic and post-Romantic writers (including Goethe, Wordsworth, Whitman, and Poe). Noting the duality of pain and pleasure in experience, Emerson concludes the second-series essay "Nature" with the ancient trope:

The divine circulations never rest nor linger. . . That power which does not respect quantity, which makes the whole and the particle its equal channel, delegates its smile in the morning, and distils its essence into every drop of rain. . . . It has been poured into us as blood; it convulsed us as pain; it slid into us as pleasure . . . we did not guess its essence until after a long time. (377)

In another late lyric, Jeffers imagines the tension alternately as “the great music / [that] Blares on forever” (*CP3* 450). Whether beating or blaring, the energy radiates analogically in concentric circles inward, as he outlines in his lecture, from the “outer universe . . . not at peace with itself, but full of violent strains and conflicts,” to the “physical world [. . .] ruled by opposing tensions,” and the “world of living things . . . formed by perpetual struggle and irreconcilable desires” (*CP4* 413), to the “spiritual conflict that lies at the heart” of Western culture and in the individual human consciousness (410-11).

At the conclusion of his earlier epic poem “At the Birth of An Age” (*Solstice*, 1935), the heart of the universe is envisioned as the dynamic “self-hanged God” who chooses being over the absolute peace of non-being (*CP2* 482).²¹ He suffers “all forms / Of being, of life, of cold substance; / all motions and netted complications of event, / All poisons of desire, love, hatred, joy, partial peace, partial vision,” in order continually “to discover myself” (482). This view of “God, or Nature” is repeated in “Contemplation of the Sword (April, 1938)”: “. . . You are the one that tortures himself to discover himself: I am / One that watches you and discovers you, and praises you in little parables, idyl or tragedy, beautiful / Intolerable God” (545). In a draft of an incomplete poem—first given the title “The Beauty of Things” and then the Yeatsian “Anima Mundi”—that was precursor to a section of “The unformed volcanic earth,” Jeffers names his universal God, “Heautontimoroumenos, the self-tormentor” (*CP5* 874).²²

²¹ In addition to echoing Edwards’s notion of creation as God’s self-expression, this image of the self-hanged God at the heart of the cosmos is similar to a central concept in Gerard Manley Hopkins’s theological aesthetics, the “Great Sacrifice” of Christ’s incarnation and crucifixion as the inscape of creation.

²² The Greek epithet “Heautontimoroumenos,” the title of a Menander-based play by second century BCE Roman playwright Terence, is also the name of a poem by Charles Baudelaire (*Fleurs du Mal*), whose theme is sadistic self-torture.

In his “De Natura,” self-torment is the ultimate *Urphänomen* of the cosmic process, repeating in all things. The concept appears to have gripped Jeffers during the time of turbulence in his first years with Una in Carmel, when he felt “quite sure” that the experience of his mind “at conflict with itself” in fact “realized the external world,” and was not merely projection (*CL* 779). As Carpenter interprets this statement, Jeffers believed a “man may use his own suffering to unlock the secrets of the universe” (*Robinson* 137). Thus, it was a combination of self-knowledge and the study of physical science, including astronomy, geology, and Darwinian biology, along with history and psychoanalytic theory, that first brought Jeffers to his Inhumanist worldview, “a tortured pantheism” (*CP5* 965).

In the late lyric, “There is no God but God,” the universal God “is all that exists,”

And being alone does strangely. He is like an old Basque shepherd,

Who was brought to California fifty years ago,

He has always been alone, he talks to himself,

Solitude has got into his brain,

Beautiful and terrible things come from his mind.

. . . God is a great poet. . . . (*CP3* 454)

This depiction of the divine cosmic-poet is a place-informed version of Emerson’s “efficient nature,” or “*natura naturans*” (nature naturing), “the quick cause before which all forms flee as the driven snows; itself secret, its works driven before it in flocks and multitudes (as the ancients represented nature by Proteus, a shepherd) and in undescribable [sic] variety” (369). The Latin designation of dynamic nature appears again in a draft of “Animula” (1953): “But the beauty of God is actual and visible, / *Natura naturans*” (*CP5* 865).

Listening to “Nature and His Own Heart”

In Jeffers's "De Natura," all things share in the pulsations emanating from the dipolar tension within the self-tormenting God's process of discovery and becoming. In the face of the "beautiful and terrible" secret of nature, Jeffers takes up Emerson's call in "The Poet" to be the one who "shall draw us with love and terror, who sees through the flowing vest the firm nature, and can declare it" (304). Robert Brophy concludes, in his study of myth and ritual in Jeffers's narrative poems, that the function of the long poems is "educative, purgative, and ritual," intended to help the meditating poet participate vicariously "in the world's agony" and, at the same time, open for him "a godlike mode of cosmic-personal discovery, exultations, and peace—exempting him from the blind, disquieting immersion in the grinding, cyclic process which makes most men simply victims" (*Robinson* 4). For Jeffers, commitment to contemplate on the nature of things entails the social separation Emerson recommended for his ideal poet: "God wills also that thou abdicate a manifold and duplex life," so that "thou wilt lie close hid with nature" (306). Emerson's poet accepts the "renunciations and apprenticeships," attempting to withdraw from worldly affairs to "know the muse [Nature] only" (306). Likewise, the "manner of thought and feeling" Jeffers named Inhumanism involves both relinquishment, "a reasonable detachment as a rule of conduct," and affirmation, "recognition of the transhuman magnificence" (*CP4* 428).

In "Let Them Alone" (c. 1954-55), his speaker refuses the attention from friends and critics alike, asserting, "A poet is one who listens / To nature and his own heart" (*CP3* 427). Emerson asserted that in so listening, the poet learns the language of nature, identical with the voice of God, and enacts a new interpretation for his time, "[f]or the experience of each new age requires a new confession" (290). A Jeffersian "new confession" is conveyed by "The Inhumanist" caretaker, particularly when he names ideal science, like poetry, as an "adoration,"

“worship,” “a contemplation of God,” “a coming nearer . . . [t]o learn his ways / And love his beauty” (*CP3* 292). Elsewhere Jeffers conceives of beauty in Platonic terms as “effulgence—the shining forth—of truth” (*CP4* 413). So contemplation is a spiritually erotic epistemology combining scientific and aesthetic insight, a way to know by lovingly attending to things.

The phrase “listens to nature and his own heart” in “Let Them Alone” points, then, to the persistence of his belief in the primacy of intuitive, aesthetic knowledge of the nature of things.²³ Hadot’s study of ancient philosophy as a way of life is relevant here: “Since earliest antiquity, the poet has been thought to be the true interpreter of nature, who knew its secrets precisely insofar as it was imagined that nature acts like a poet, and that what nature produces is a poem” (*Veil* 201). Emerson assumes this mystical notion in his call for the poet to write in the dynamical flow of being:

It is a secret which every intellectual man quickly learns, that beyond the energy of his possessed and conscious intellect he is capable of a new energy . . . by abandonment to the nature of things; that beside his privacy of power as an individual man, there is a great public power on which he can draw, by unlocking, at all risks, his human doors, and suffering the ethereal tides to roll and circulate through him; then he is caught up into the life of the Universe. . . . For if in any manner we can stimulate this instinct, new passages are opened for us into nature; the mind flows into and through things hardest and highest, and the metamorphosis is possible. (298-99)

²³ In a letter to Benjamin Miller commenting on Miller’s thesis, “A Study in Aesthetic Naturalism,” Jeffers wrote, “I did not in my verses intend a distinction between aesthetic experience and what you call sensual mysticism. . . . It seems to me that the mystical experience grows out of the aesthetic experience, naturally, almost logically” (*SL* 262).

Jeffers sought such “abandonment to the nature of things,” but particularly grounded the practice in his West Coast place, where “the ethereal tides” were incarnated for him in the roll and circulation of the Pacific at his open door.

Central Coast Transcendentalism

As he was considering a narrative frame for his “De Natura,” he imagined an ideal centre of consciousness, an artist—or at one point, a professor of literature—who would “[l]et the world flow through his mind, // hoping to include the whole universe // In one picture, one imagination, one thought” (CP5 919). Taking a cue from the title of the poem from which this manuscript note is taken, “Goethe, they say, was a great poet,” this idea for his persona may have stemmed from his memory of meeting Una in a 1906 Advanced German course at the University of Southern California where they studied Goethe together (919). Jeffers’s belief in the possibility of intuiting the secret of nature through aesthetic contemplation undoubtedly carries the influence of Goethe and German Romanticism. But it was equally informed and strengthened early in his career by the Transcendentalism that pervaded the cultural imaginary of Central Coast artists in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century.

Fostered by the dramatic conditions of the physical environment, California Transcendentalism especially lingered in the bohemian Carmel artist community, alongside decadent aesthetics (Shields 153-55). For a time prior to Jeffers’s move to Carmel in 1914, the group centred on the poet George Sterling before he left for New York and then settled in San Francisco (Karman, *Robinson* 71-75). Jeffers formed his first and closest, albeit brief, poetic friendship with Sterling, who died by suicide in 1926. Sterling had initiated contact in 1924, just as Jeffers was developing his worldview and poetics. Sterling, along with James Rorty and Genevieve Taggard, was editor of *An Anthology of Contemporary California Poets* (1925) to

which Jeffers had submitted poems from *Tamar and Other Poems*. Sterling and Rorty became champions of the young poet on the east and west coasts, respectively (93). There is a note of the neophyte's deference—and pandering—in Jeffers's response to the first letter from Sterling, where he writes, “You have long been a fixed star in my sky. . . . and living about Carmel the past ten years I have felt myself again and again an intruder in your domain, but now the lord of the region has made me welcome” (*SL* 27). As can be discerned from the letters, at a crucial time in Jeffers's developing worldview and poetics, Sterling was a chief mentor not only in his career, but also in his perception of the exceptional places around Carmel and Big Sur through the lens of Sterling's fin-de-siecle Romantic-Transcendentalist philosophy (54, 56).

In addition to the zeitgeist of the Carmel artist community in which Sterling had once been the coalescing force, Kevin Starr points to the ground broken for Jeffers's contemplative engagement with his place in “the aesthetic geology of the 1860s and 1870s” in California, along with the “biology-oriented naturalism” of Jack London and Frank Norris, “the Darwinian philosophizing” of Joseph Le Conte, and the environmentality encouraged by the conservationist movement initiated by The Sierra Club, which Le Conte helped John Muir establish (321). Aesthetic astronomy also appealed to Jeffers, more than the predominantly mathematical variant of his younger brother, Hamilton, who was an astronomer at Lick Observatory located on Mount Hamilton, east of San Jose. In a letter to Sterling, he observed with a condescension apart from that of an elder sibling, “Astronomers are curious folk: my brother is a mathematical one, and I doubt whether he could point out Orion on a clear winter evening” (*SL* 28-29).

Jeffers's intuitive, aesthetic perception of local “nature and his own heart” was broadened from the time of his so-called “new birth” in 1919 by a cosmic consciousness of reality sustained

by his everyday spatial practices. In a questionnaire from 1928,²⁴ Una reports that his daily routine included writing in the morning, stonemasonry, rolling up rocks from the beach below the hill, and tending the property trees in the afternoon, reading to the family in the evening, and then, around midnight, “going outdoors . . . and walking around the place—watching the stars in their courses, marking the rising or setting of the constellations—feeling the direction of the wind and noticing the tides at ebb or flow” (*CL* 772), and counting himself “fortunate to look westward as to look upward” (“Margrave,” *CP2* 167). Una also notes their daily sunset walks on the beach and, every two weeks, hikes in the hills and canyons, when he would examine stones and “geological formations closely,” along with the biota. These focal practices, carried out on the Pacific shoreline, exposed him more intensely to the meeting of elemental forces on the central coast and pressed his imagination hard against the deep time of earth and universe known through modern science, immersing his aesthetic perception in what he named the “tidal environments” of his world (*CL* 776). The meaning of “tidal” is literal and specific, as well as figurative and universal, pointing to recurrence, “the inevitable quality of life, and of life’s environment” (*CP4* 380).

Polarities of Rock and Fire

The effect on his imagination of environmental recurrence is demonstrated in an unpublished idyll written in 1926, “A Partial Secret,” that in significant ways anticipates the emplaced cosmic consciousness of the “De Natura” a little over two decades later. The first three

²⁴ In *Collected Letters*, the questionnaire is labeled “RJ and UJ to Unknown” and the endnote dates it either 1928 or 1929. Although some assume it was for *The Carmelite*, Dec. 12, 1928 issue featuring Jeffers, edited by Ella Winter and Lincoln Steffens (*SL* 255), I propose the “Unknown” is Louis Adamic. The first thirteen answers supplied by Una correspond almost exactly with passages in his *Robinson Jeffers: A Portrait*, published May 1929.

stanzas present a view of an outsider on the “[p]leasant-poor” poet, “[t]rundling stones from beaches to build / A little house more like a fisherman’s hut” (CP4 507). In a Thoreauvian moment, Jeffers’s speaker answers an imagined interlocutor asking, “how can he bear to live?” with a rhetorical question that echoes God’s voice from the whirlwind in response to Job: “Have you ever seen the ribbed sides of a mountain / Glow, when its own light came through, and the secret / Exultance of stone?” (507). He proceeds to describe the way “broad bands of shining / Waver and gather and are drawn up the flanks” of the mountain at sunset, until “from the peak breaks a great fibrous light” that is met, “[f]ar over the ridge” by “high plumes of fire” on another peak (507). The diurnal recurrence intersects with the circulation of migrating birds. Enjoining with their view from above, the speaker discerns the “snaky filament of light,” the glowing surf forming a line of undulating beauty along the coast.

The latter image of “fibrous,” “snaky” light registers the influence of Goethe. Following Renaissance painters and the eighteenth-century art theorist William Hogarth, Goethe conceived the serpentine line in natural forms to be part of the *Urphänomen* of the spiral (222-23). As already discussed, for Goethe the spiral manifests the secret that the fundamental recurring rhythm of nature is caused by the conjunction between the force of polarity and the force of intensification (220-221; Rigby 26). With the possibility that this concept inflects Jeffers’s perception, the “filament of light” in the mountain and the “snaky” line of light at the tidal edge might be taken as a shining forth of the titular “partial secret” of nature. While the serpentine form points to the spiralling continuity of all things within the pulsing polarity of the dynamic earth and cosmos, light manifests the intensification or ascent to higher form in the process of metamorphosis.

In the final two stanzas the poet-speaker's perspective on the coast springs from a terrestrial one, rooted in the his domestic task, to an elevated, celestial one:

I shaping a coign-stone for a door-jamb have seen
 In my mind between the hammer lifted and falling
 The whole sea-range glow like a hot iron;
 But when the point of the hammer struck the stone edge

The chain of all the coasts, Point Barrow [Alaska] to the Horn [Chile]
 Rock, sand and mountain; a stream of sea-wings and the evening
 Star facing all that, above the red streak
 Of sundown over the enormous red mound of the ocean. (CP4 508)

The epiphany extends from the fragment to the whole, from the stone to all the coastal sea-ranges at the western edge of the continent. The “chain” of mountains is juxtaposed with the “stream of sea-wings” and the “red mound of the ocean,” conveying the continuous energy undulating through “all that.”

The combination of elements, stone and light, is a unity of opposites, or *coincidentia oppositorum*, in keeping with the dipolar nature of God and things. Zaller has observed “the polarities of rock and fire” in the description of the Central Coast landscape in Jeffers's later *ars poetica*, “Apology for Bad Dreams” (151). Environmental and spiritual imaginations intersect in Jeffers's “intense and disciplined perception” (152), as the poet-speaker apprehends the “natural energies” of the rock and fire (or light), “flow[ing] through both the greatest and smallest units of terrestrial matter, both imbued with and aspir[ing] toward divine presence” (151). The poem's “apology,” in the dual sense of expressing regret but also giving a reasoned argument, maintains the poet is compelled by the tortured landscape to write his tragic, ritualistic narratives as

therapeutic exercise, “to magic / Horror away from the house” lest he become as one of his human protagonists, caught in tragic, unintentionally destructive behavior fueled by “the insanities of desire” (*CP1* 208-09).

Revisiting “Apology for Bad Dreams” in the late poem “I have been warned” (1957), Jeffers claims that his narratives had once enacted “sacrifice / Of storied and imagined lives,” but he was now either disinclined or unable (or both) to write them in this latter period (*CP3* 447).²⁵ Clearly the narratives and dramas had functioned as a form of psychic purging for the poet, since they “always / Ended in blood and pain [. . .]—my pain, my blood” (447). They might also be taken as symbolical recognition and respect given to the tortured “spirit” of the place penetrating his consciousness. Una wrote of “the genius loci” of their Central Coast, saying that Jeffers “seems to have drawn it up from the very earth and hills of this region and exposed it to our sight” (*SL* 200). In both poems, Brophy observes “the interplay of place and psychology” and the particular extreme conditions of Carmel-Big Sur (“Jeffers’s ‘Apology’” 14). Jeffers claimed such geographical influence produced “a mood that both excites and perverts its people” (*SL* 68).

The polarity of his “genius loci” is deeply grounded conceptually, in both a theological-cosmic and a geological-planetary sense. The explanation of “Apology for Bad Dreams” is based on the former, and a ritualistic logic of sympathy in which “a man having bad dreams, who invents victims, is only the ape” of the God whose ways are “fire and change and torture and the old returnings” (*CP1* 210-11). The characters and plots in his narratives and dramatic poems, along with the imagery of the meditative and descriptive idylls scattered throughout the

²⁵ Hunt observes that in 1954-55, Jeffers “had become less interested in narrating stories and was instead looking to use narrative as a framework for a set of meditations” (126-27). One of Jeffers’s manuscripts for a sequence treatment of the *De Natura* indicates his intent to use “little or no narrative” (*CP5* 127).

narratives or standing alone as lyrics, reflect the rock-fire polarity that is the *Urphänomen* of the infinite cosmic process, the self-tormenting God. But also, in the lyrics especially, the rock-fire polarity is located in the Carmel landscape, where exposed granite and other topographical features are signatures of the cosmic *Urphänomen* manifest in earth's originating and ongoing geological processes.

An early analogue to the polarities of rock and fire is presented in "Rock and Hawk" (*Solstice*, 1935), where "bright power, dark peace; / Fierce consciousness joined with final / Disinterestedness" is symbolized by the falcon with its intensely focused, "Realist eyes and act" perched on a granite rock, "[m]arried to the massive // Mysticism of stone" (*CP2* 416). Gelpi sees the fusion of "fierce consciousness" and "final disinterestedness" as Jeffers's "imagined, perhaps, unrealizable ideal" for the human imagination (Introduction 17). "The Inhumanist" recalls this dipolar symbol in a phrase appearing in a list of the attributes of God: "star-fire and rock-strength" (*CP3* 257). The epithet names the essence of the divine *Urphänomen* in Jeffers's late poetry, corresponding to two other outstanding qualities of beauty (alongside integrity, recurrence, and polarity): permanence ("rock-strength") and intensity ("star-fire"). The symbolic phrase "star-fire and rock-strength" signals the nature of God manifest in things, but it also conveys the balance Jeffers was seeking in the "De Natura" project through contemplation of beauty and death and in aesthetics of affirmation and relinquishment.

The Beauty of Permanence: Rock-Strength

I will return to comment on the first part of the symbol, "star-fire" and intensity. But for the moment, I want to emphasize the aesthetic-spiritual significance that "rock-strength" came to hold in Jeffers's Inhumanist worldview. Like the qualities of "dark peace," and "final / Disinterestedness" attributed to the "gray rock, standing tall / On the headland" in "Rock and

Hawk” (CP2 416), “rock-strength” conveys the permanence he detects in the world, corresponding to his Inhumanist principle of detachment. In “Rock and Hawk” the Inhumanist personality is associated with the coldness of rocks lying in ocean or deep layers of earth (“dark”), and dispassion linked with death and the grave (“final”). The trope of stone is engaged once again in his 1931 collection *Descent to the Dead*, written in 1929 after the first of three visits he and Una made to the British Isles. These poems of the Old World focus on “prehistoric stones and burial mounds,” the locations of his *memento mori* meditations in which he imagines himself lying down with his forefathers, hearing the perspective of the dead (SL162). In other poems early and late, identity with stone signifies the strength and stability of personal disinterest opposing the inwardly turned energies of individuals and society, or “collective onanism,” that he observes at the root of war and other troubles in the humanist western civilization (original preface to *The Double Axe*, CP4 419).

In his early idylls, permanence, along with stability, is embodied in the granite stones from which he built the house and tower, and in the larger rock columns that stand on the hillside and off the shore, “earthquake-proved, and signatred / By ages of storms” (“Rock and Hawk,” CP2 416). Working and living with the granite, he feels a participatory connection with the deep time of the geological movements of earth: to extend Emerson’s observation, “Nature, who made the mason, made the house,” and the rocks from which it is made (371). “To the House” (c. 1920) describes granite as a part of the earth’s body, “the blood-heat of her youth / Held molten in hot darkness against the heart / Hardened” (CP1 5). In “To the Rock That Will Be a Cornerstone of the House” (c. 1921), the stone bears, “Wing-prints of ancient weathers long at peace, and the older / Scars of primal fire, and the stone / Endurance that is waiting millions of years” before the foundation of the house was built on it (11).

Correspondingly, in his dramas and narratives he likens to stone the male protagonists who go “beyond tragedy” (*SL* 35): from his first Inhumanist persona, Orestes, “like stone walking” (“The Tower Beyond Tragedy,” *CP1* 177) to his last, Hungerfield, “like a rock walking” (*CP3* 396). These protagonists convey the characteristics, coded masculine, of stilled passion, detachment, resoluteness and strength corresponding to the permanence of nature. During the early stages of the “De Natura” project, in “The Old Stone-Mason” (c. 1949), the poet recalls his “new birth” into Inhumanism, aligning himself with the stones of the house given tribute in his early idylls, as well as his “beyond trag[ic]” heroes:

I have much in common with these old rockheads.
 Old comrades, I too have escaped and stand.
 I have shared in my time the human illusions, the muddy foolishness
 And craving passions, but something thirty years ago pulled me
 Out of the tide-wash; I must not even pretend
 To be one of the people. I must stand here
 Alone with open eyes in the clear air growing old. . . . (*CP3* 372)

Resonating within this self-description is an earlier Inhumanist declaration of detachment and integrity that evinces the spiritual significance of rock-strength. “Sign-Post” (c. 1934), a contemporary of “Rock and Hawk,” answers the implied question “How should we live?” by counseling, “Turn outward, love things, not men, turn right away from humanity” (*CP2* 418). Alluding to Jesus’s Sermon on the Mount (Matt. 6.28), the poet says, “Consider if you like how the lilies grow,” but quickly turns to his preferred contemplation of stone: “Lean on the silent rock until you feel its divinity / Make your veins cold, look at the silent stars, let your eyes / Climb the great ladder out of the pit of yourself and man” (*CP2* 418). Once the loves are ordered

to the integral whole in a Dantean beatific vision of things, for “[t]hings are the God,” then “you are now free, even to become human, / But born of the rock and the air, not of a woman” (418).

The hyperbole of the closing line implies an impulse to conceptually decentre humanity in the great scheme by disengaging, not only from mass mentality, but also from human intersubjectivity, even the fleshly bonds of sex and birth. The impulse is obviously problematic from a feminist and environmental standpoint in its implicit misogyny, misanthropy, and desire for exclusion from interdependence, inconsistent with his wider worldview. As I will explore in the following chapter, Hass intentionally avoids the error of Jeffers’s extreme representation of detachment in his own aesthetics of affirmation and relinquishment as he engages with the more-than-human community, in his consideration of the lilies as well as the rock. In his poem “The Return of Robinson Jeffers,” Hass imagines within Jeffers’s temporarily resurrected body a more complete syzygy of the figurative stone and fire of flesh, coded masculine and feminine, respectively. He infuses strength with intensity of feeling “anguish,” “rage,” “desire,” “pain,” “tenderness,” to temper Jeffers’s masculinist Inhumanism (*Field* 43-44).

Still, while acknowledging the problematic implicit misogyny, it is possible to recognize the image of being born “of the rock and air” as symbolic conversion to a perspective “beyond tragedy,” a form of dying before death, so one can live wisely. “Sign Post” presents the spiritual practice of contemplative physics, the ancient technique to win peace of mind, *ataraxia*, by considering the grand scheme of things and thereby defusing the fear of death. Central to the Epicurean tradition of Lucretius, contemplation of death along with contemplative physics was also practiced by other ancient philosophical schools, including Stoicism (Hadot, *Philosophy* 95-96). The question “What comes after death?” is inextricably tied to “How shall we live?” For Jeffers, as for Epicureans, peace comes through eschewal of religious superstition (fear of the

gods) along with the notion of an after-life for the individual, with its attendant rewards or punishments. It entails embracing the cycles that bring change, which Jeffers equates with death, the essence of nature (*CP4* 520). Then one can vanquish the passions that entrap those who live in dread of death.

However, the danger Jeffers seems aware of courting is that he will so effectively overcome the fear of death that he comes to desire it too greatly as the ultimate prize, purity, and peace, as several other poems suggest.²⁶ Some of his critics, especially William Everson and Zaller, have identified this tendency in him, verging at times toward suicidal passivity, as Freud's notion of Thanatos, "the generalized impulse toward death and disintegration" (Zaller 10). At one point earlier in his life, Jeffers had made a conscious decision to resist suicide ("The Deer Lay Down Their Bones," *CP3* 407-08), which strangely lured many of Carmel's artist community, including Sterling (Karman, *Robinson* 73-74). Indeed, Amos N. Wilder observes a "preoccupation" with death after the war among modern poets "concerned with the nature of life—those aspects which the imagination can capture better than the understanding, be they beneficent or destructive, fair or ugly" (51). In his introduction to the collection that launched his career, *Tamar*, Jeffers declared that poetry is "to strengthen life by showing life her loveliness, to strengthen us death-condemned by indicating the dignity of death" (*CP4* 374).

The Beauty of Intensity: Star-fire

His intent to strengthen life by showing "her loveliness" through his poetry aligns with his practice of contemplating beauty. This turns us toward that opposite pole of his divine *Urphänomen* symbol, "star-fire," and the invigorating intensity it signifies. Returning to "Partial

²⁶ A partial list of such poems includes "Suicide's Stone," "The Treasure," "Original Sin," and the late poems "Patronymic," "The Deer Lay Down Their Bones," and "Vulture."

Secret,” I want to point to an image at the end of the poem that might easily be overlooked: the evening star “facing” the coastal mountains on the western edge of the continent. Una had reported in the earlier-mentioned questionnaire that Jeffers had “[o]ne invariable habit,” presumably carried on through his life: “watching the stars in their courses” (*CL* 772). After their move to Carmel, as Una’s diary from 1914-16 reports, during their walk “in the evening just after sunset” they habitually noted the appearance of the moon and stars, and particularly the evening star that accompanies the setting sun in the western sky (32, 34, 40, 42).

Of course, the evening (also, morning) star, to which both she and “Partial Secret” refer, is the bright planet whose namesake is the Latin goddess of beauty Venus, Aphrodite in the Greek.²⁷ Also designated as the mother of love (Cupid-Eros) in what Hadot calls the “theological physics” (*Veil* 39) of the Greeks and Romans, she personifies the generative force of attraction in the cosmos, and so also, the object of eros, beauty. In Hesiod’s *Theogony*, Venus rises from the sea-foam and from the castrated genitals of the sky god Uranus. Lucretius famously opens his *De Rerum Natura* with an invocation to his goddess-Muse, Venus Genetrix (“mother”) and Alma (“fostering” or “nurturing”). He praises Venus, “the life-giver, who beneath the gliding stars of heaven fillest with life the sea that carries the ships and the land that bears the crops,” who causes the earth to bring forth “sweet-scented flowers,” “the levels of ocean” to “smile,” and the

²⁷ His Nietzschean comment to Una in a letter just prior to their marriage, in 1912, points to his conception of Aphrodite as a force for affirmation of life, though he later shifts from the moon to Venus as her planetary figure: “Once, you remember, we said: ‘Christianity or suicide.—But now, in all seriousness, it’s ‘Paganism and life’—a fulfilled life—for both of us. Dionysus is the wild sun, and rules our happiness. Aphrodite is the shy moon, and commands our love. . . . Dionysus and Aphrodite are careless divinities [. . .] far-darting distributors of joy and love” (*CL* 323).

sky to gleam “with spreading light.” It is she who “strike[s] love into the hearts of all, and makest them in hot desire to renew the stock of their races, each after his own kind” (27; bk. 1).

In two early poems, “Invocation” (1915) and “Lamp of the West” (1917), Jeffers names the planet Venus the “Lamp of the west.”²⁸ Alluding to the force of attraction the goddess embodies, he attributes to the planet a migratory effect on his European forebears in their westward settlement (*CP4* 72-73; 227-33). The long poem “Ode on Human Destinies,” written in 1915-16, imagines this drive leading to colonization of that planet, too, before the race’s final end (212). The seventh stanza features a list of all things shining on the coast, both animate and what would normally be considered inanimate. Stars, sun, mountain, and stone are as animated as the biota by the “Mighty Spirit, from the stone / Flashing, from the sea exhaling” (214-15). Apparently he identifies the mythological-planetary Venus with this spirit, suggested in the lines, “As lately from thine ancient throne / Of orb on orb of starry flame / Ere the dawn thou lookedst down” (215).²⁹ This seems even more likely when he addresses her, “Holy Spirit, loveliest one?” and states, “Beauty is thy human name” (216). She is the enduring “flame” fueled by all things that begin and end, “[t]he rhythm of universal things,” the spirit, child, and mate of the sovereign Fate (216) that is earlier identified as God (213). For Jeffers, habituated to the westward view from his shore, the planet Venus is the brilliant light “facing all that” (“Partial Secret”) and the goddess his symbol of the intensity of the beauty of things.

²⁸ An entry in Una’s diary in November 1915 uses an identical simile for Venus: “after sunset she hung like a great golden lamp in the lovely rose hued western sky—before she too sank into the waves. Now for many months we can look for her in each morning” (40).

²⁹ Again, Una refers to Venus in similar terms in an October 1914 entry: “the most beautiful thing in the sky—so luminous, and mellow and queenly alone in the Western Sky. We sat on the dunes at the last and watched her drop, suddenly into the dark water, her flaming loveliness all quenched before we could draw breath” (34).

The sustained tension in his poetry between the desire of intense passion and the desire for the peace of detachment, between the affirmation and the relinquishment of life, reflects the polar nature of things, the Motion and Rest identified by Emerson as nature's secret. Jeffers recognized that nature is dynamic and the human cannot be otherwise, if living. In the early, unpublished "Placard" (1916), subtitled "For the Scarecrow in Epicurus' Garden," possibly with the Epicurean Lucretius and his *De Rerum Natura* in mind, he writes, "Water will stream or stink, the world would rot / Without its riot, the fire-heart stars would merge / In chaos if they forgot to whirl"; so "[t]he Mother has appointed passions," he concludes, "to urge life onward" (CP4 484). In his environmental imagination, conditioned by his place on the West Coast, the Venus-Aphrodite life-force became particularly associated with "star-fire" and sunlight, and in keeping with Hesiod's myth, the white sea foam whirling around the rocks.

These associations are reflected in the long poem he laboured over throughout the early and mid-1920s and gave the working title of *Point Alma Venus*, employing Lucretius's epithet for his goddess-Muse (Hunt 55-56, 64, 69, 70-74). Lucretius called Venus "pilot to the nature of things" (CP1 20, 27), a metaphor that connects directly with the main feature of Jeffers's setting, the Big Sur lighthouse. He describes the lighthouse in a letter to George Sterling, after visiting it in late 1925, as a "phantasmagoric situation" (SL 56).³⁰ To his editor Donald Friede in 1926, he wrote of the mood associated with topography that "excites" the local people (as discussed above), and explained, "The story grows rather intimately from the rock of this coast. . . . There's a headland with a lighthouse on it, of some importance in the story called Point Aumentos; and

³⁰ Before his death in 1926, Sterling had shown Jeffers a prosaic, "condensed" *De Rerum Natura*, which he destroyed (Squires 182). If Jeffers was drawn to Lucretius before their meeting, Sterling seems to have incited his keenness to make what Kevin Starr calls his "Lucretian connection to the universe" (319).

one of the people, (he reads Lucretius), dreams of it and thinks of it to himself as Point Alma Venus” (69). The Spanish word “aumentos” (“enlargement” or “intensification”) calls to mind the universal force Goethe perceived as complement to polarity in nature’s metamorphosis.

Jeffers never completed his *Point Alma Venus*, but the project gave rise to his second major collection, *The Women at Point Sur and Other Poems* (Hunt 55-56). The eponymous long poem centres on the transgressing preacher, Rev. Barclay, driven mad by his insight into the amoral nature of God with whom he identified himself. Jeffers intended “The Women at Point Sur” to be “the Faust of this generation,” depicting, among other things, the potential dangers involved in transcending liberal humanist values (*SL* 105, 115-117). Although it brought him sharp critique, he maintained the work depicts “an attempt to uncenter the human mind from itself” and integrate it with the beauty of God (*SL* 116).

Death and Rebirth of the Mind

In the mid-thirties to forties with the threat and outbreak of the Second World War, Jeffers grew increasingly “obsesse[d],” as he put it in the lecture, with the violence and strain of human nature enacted on a large scale (*CP4* 408). Both poetry and prose from that time reveal concern that he had lost his focus on his primary subject, the more-than-human reality.³¹ In his foreword to *The Double Axe*, he admits that within the long poem of the collection, the first part (“The Love and the Hate”) “bears the scars” of the war. Its Gothic plot and grotesque details, with a play on the family name “Gore” of the young soldier killed in the Pacific theatre who

³¹ From the late thirties until the completion of *The Double Axe*, as Jeffers confesses in the 1941 lecture and in the introduction to *Be Angry at the Sun* (published later that year), his mind was “obsessed” by the threat of American involvement in World War II. Poems like “Contemplation of the Sword,” “Night Without Sleep” (*Such Counsels You Gave to Me*, 1938) and “The Stars Go Over the Lonely Ocean” (*Be Angry at the Sun*, 1941) directly express his concern over the loss of perspective. See Hunt’s textual commentary on *The Double Axe* (692).

wills himself back to life to wreak vengeance on his family, are reminiscent of a zombie film. The poem is also comparable, in its descriptions of the rotting, animated corpse of the protagonist, to several of Lucretius's vivid depictions of the effects of "The Plague at Athens" at the end of *De Rerum Natura*, suggesting that the poem, like Lucretius's, had a philosophically therapeutic purpose, not merely a prophetic-rhetorical one.

Two notes on the manuscript of "The Double Axe" point to this therapeutic function: "Long poem also—forced on me—obsessive. A picture perhaps of the emotional state of the time"; and, "This poem has to be written. I can think nothing clean[?] until it is written. And the crime denounced" (CP5 760-61, Hunt's parentheses). After the psychic purgation of the first part of "The Double Axe," the prophetic-rhetorical intentions are renounced in the second part. About midway through "The Inhumanist," the old caretaker critiques both tragedy as a "cult of pain" and salvation as a cult "of happiness," the former, hopeless in its desire to find "a little nobility in man / To match the world's," and the latter, seeking too exclusively for peace for the people (CP3 283). This pictures Jeffers's own conscious relinquishment of priestly and prophetic responsibilities, wanting to end his writing of ritualistic narratives and his commentary on current affairs. Although *The Double Axe* was poorly received, it seemed to catalyze a new beginning for his writing in Jeffers's sixtieth year (1947). From this point on, his poetic attention was focused on the primary subject of "the enormous unhuman beauty of things" ("The Old Stone-Mason," CP3 372) from a later vantage point. In the words of the old caretaker, he determined in this final stage to be "turned again to the outer magnificence, the all but inhuman God" (283), and "to give free rein to the contemplative imagination" (Zaller 332).

Within the year, he was faced with personal events that deepened his practice of contemplation of death and presented the greatest challenge yet to his practice of contemplating

the beauty, and affirming the nature, of things. A cluster of endings, in addition to his completion and publication of *The Double Axe*, induced what might be considered a poetic rebirth. One “ending” was a brush with his own death: he was struck with both “[e]mpyema and embolism” while visiting Ireland with Una in 1948, and had to be resuscitated (CP4 533). To him, it was an experience of death and resurrection. Shortly afterward, he wrote the unpublished lyric “Descent to the Dead” (c. 1949), which recalls the trip to the British Isles in 1929 and alludes to the *Descent to the Dead* collection, particularly the poem “Antrim” (the place mentioned in the later “Fever and Vision,” also treating this theme). “Antrim” ends with the central consciousness among the dead in a tomb stating, “I lie here and / plot the agony of resurrection” (SP 473). In “Descent to the Dead,” he takes this earlier poem as prophetic of his illness and resuscitation nearly twenty years later, suggesting the mind knows what will come, both in one’s personal and “the world’s huge future,” even though “a heavy curtain covers it” (CP4 533).

He was in convalescence after they returned to Tor House from Ireland in 1948 when another, more agonizing ending had to be met. In January 1949, Una was hospitalized and eventually diagnosed with a recurrence of the cancer for which she had a mastectomy in 1941 (Karman, *Robinson* 133). She died September 1, 1950. Among the draft of possible frameworks for his “De Natura” in the form of a sequence, a 1957 fragment begins, “Dear God through ten years and a great sorrow / I have thought this poem” (CP5 906). This places the conceptual beginning of the “De Natura” in 1947, upon completion of “The Inhumanist” (Hunt 116), but the reference to “a great sorrow” indicates the project was induced by Una’s death.

Jeffers wrote one final narrative, “Hungerfield” (c. 1951), as a contemplation of death with an elegiac frame of tribute. The poem dramatizes a wrestle with death personified, and its therapeutic function is made clear in his “wish to make verses again, to drug memory, / To make

it sleep for a moment” (*CP3* 378). He concludes the poem with meditation on Una’s entry into the eternal round of elemental being:

. . . . But the ashes have fallen
 And the flame has gone up; nothing human remains. You are earth and air; you
 are in the beauty of the ocean
 And the great streaming triumphs of sundown; you are alive and well in the tender
 young grass rejoicing
 When soft rain falls all night, and little rosy-fleeced clouds float on the dawn.—I
 shall be with you presently. (397)

The thought of Una enjoined with the dynamic trans-human beauty is in keeping with the focus of Jeffers’s meditation in the accompanying *Hungerfield* lyrics, “Carmel Point” and “The Beauty of Things,” where he restates his Inhumanist manifesto. “Carmel Point” addresses an implied Una with observations of the metamorphosis of their place from “[u]nbroken field” and “clean cliffs” to “a crop of suburban houses” (369). The poet steadies himself with the thought that the cycle is not complete, “people are a tide / That swells and in time will ebb, and all / Their works dissolve,” and concludes with the counsel that in the midst of change, “We must uncenter our minds from ourselves; / We must unhumanize our views a little, and become confident / As the rock and ocean that we were made from” (399). The poem signals a kind of rebirth of his mind, while “The Beauty of Things” restates his original poetic purpose, directing his focus in the coming period of his career to rebalance contemplation of death, with which he had been over-occupied before and during the war, with contemplation of “the natural / Beauty,” its feeling, understanding, and expression “the sole business of poetry” (369).

As he confesses in the unfinished “Whom should I write for” (c. 1952, *CP4* 541), which could have served as an invocation for the “De Natura,” now that Una had “gone up with the flame to the high air” and her “bone-ash . . . lives in bright flowers” in her garden, he found it difficult to write. So he felt for her in the elemental world, imagining her consciousness being

. . . taken into the great dream of the earth; for this dark planet
 Has its own consciousness, from which yours came,
 And now returns: as the Earth’s consciousness,
 Half-separate for a time, will return at length
 To the whole galaxy; and when that perishes
 To the whole endless universe—that is, to God,
 Who will make all things new. (541)

The poem indicates the solace Jeffers finds in combining contemplation of death with contemplation of beauty in its recurrence. He spoke of this consolation in his 1941 lecture, when commenting on the last line of “Antrim”: “I think that when poetry dreams too much about death, there is usually a resurrection being plotted. It is not really death that we seek, but symbolically, through the gates of death, a new birth” (*CP4* 408). These lines from “Whom should I write for” express his longing for the renewal of “all things,” and his imagination of Una’s reintegration with the whole anticipates the narrative impulse of his “De Natura,” based on the unending cycles he detects in the nature of things.

Contemplation of “the beautiful secret in places . . .”

Jeffers’s efforts in his final years to discover and express the nature and beauty of reality in the “De Natura” project are informed by a dream of birth, death and plotting of rebirth, applied on a local, terrestrial, and cosmic level. This pattern informs the basic plot of the “De

Natura” which can be gathered from his various sketches (*CP5* 127, 130-31): the universe is birthed in cosmic explosion and our galaxy “flung from that fury” (“Explosion,” “The Great Explosion”); within that galaxy, earth “follow[s] with the other planets / Their lord the sun” (“The unformed volcanic earth”) and from the earth’s molten “flesh,” the moon is torn by the force of attraction to “an alien star” (“I walk on my cliff,” “At the near approach”); from the earth’s cooled rock and other elements, life emerges, including the human race (“The unformed volcanic earth”),³² however, the individual, the human race, earth, and galaxy all are headed to some eventual end (“Explosion,” “The Great Explosion,” “Monument,” “Passenger Pigeons,” “The Beautiful Captive,” “Birth and Death,” “The End of the World,” “The Epic Stars” and other related lyrics).

In his “De Natura,” Jeffers’s contemplation of the beauty of things—with its qualities of integrity, recurrence, polarity, permanence and intensity—manifests the secret of the self-discovering, self-tormenting God, and bears within it the consolation that a kind of salvation awaits his beloved central coast and the earth he reveres. Within the great cycles, all will be purged of the imbalanced and destructive ways of modern human nature. He maintained that the particular ugliness of contemporary humanity, distorted by “industrialized civilization” and the

³² Two passages from Emerson may have been early influences on the conception of Jeffers’s “De Natura.” First, in “Nature” from the *Essays Second Series* (1844), Emerson writes, “Geology has initiated us into the secularity of nature, and taught us to disuse our dame-school measures and exchange our Mosaic and Ptolemaic schemes for her large style. We know nothing rightly, for want of perspective. Now we learn what patient periods must round themselves before the rock is formed”; he proceeds to touch on the evolutionary “patient periods,” and ends, “Yet all must come, as surely as the first atom has two sides” (*Essential* 369). Secondly, the poem that introduces “Wealth” in *Conduct of Life* (1860) is a *De Natura Rerum* in brief, addressing the evolutionary emergence of human “mind” (621).

attendant “loss of contact with the earth,” will be rectified when the race enters back into the great life from which it came (*SL* 104, n. 65; see also “The Broken Balance” [*CP*1 372-76]). The late lyric, “Metamorphosis,” demonstrates the way in which this longing and pattern inform his meditations on coastal places. The poem opens on a hopeful note: “The beauty of the earth is a resilient wonderful thing, / It dies and lives, it is capable of many resurrections” (*CP*3 417). His thought moves from the confident declaration to an anti-idyllic description of the desolation of a “temple” of redwoods, once “a hushed and holy place,” now “profaned and atheist” (417). The thousand year-old “great rich trees” that once stood in “sacred twilight” are rendered into “little finicking redwood planks” by the industrial technologic of the “harlot Goddess of Reason-- / I mean desolation’s handmaid” presiding over modern human activity (417).

Yet, in the dialectic underwritten by recurrence, there is a *volta*: “Oh yes? In two or three years / Come back and see . . .” (417). Recalling Thomas Cole’s landscape of “Desolation,” last in the series *The Course of Empire* that depicts the rise and fall of a civilization, here vines, flowers, and “holy grass” cover over the signs of human sin (“stumps”), just as, at the “abandoned Mal Paso / coal-mine” where “[t]he sweat of men laboring has poisoned the earth,” acres of thistles now are “glowing” (417). The image recalls lines from Hopkins’s “God’s Grandeur,” “And all is seared with trade; bleared, smeared with toil; / And wears man’s smudge and shares man’s smell: the soil is bare now . . .” (128). The poem is also a metaphysical naturalist’s rendition of the theme of Hopkins’s “That Nature is a Heraclitean Fire and of the comfort of the Resurrection,” which both admires and laments the way “nature’s bonfire” continually clears “manmarks” and “manshape” from the face of the earth (181). There the *volta* is the consoling announcement of hope in “Resurrection,” since the human is immortalized by

the Incarnation (181). For Jeffers the Inhumanist, nature's metamorphic process is the sorrow but also the consolation. All things will be made new, even with no human form in view.

The latter preference may be one reason his habitual place to contemplate the beautiful secret, or nature of things, is from a high point on the coastline, as he wrote in "Continent's End" (1922), "gazing at the boundaries of granite and spray the established sea-marks, felt behind me / Mountain and plain, the immense breadth of the continent, before me the mass and doubled stretch of water" (*CP1* 16). Here he can sense most keenly, from a distance, the beauty of the permanently recurring cycles of civilization and elemental forces, the earth, and the cosmos; he can intuit the polarity of "the insolent quietness of stone" and the intensity of the primal "tides of fire" that are "in our veins, [as] we still mirror the stars" (16).

Thirty years after "Continent's End," in "De Rerum Virtute," the poet meditates as he "stand[s] on the cliff at Sovranes creek-mouth," south of Carmel in what is now Garrapata State Park (*CP3* 402). This is an intratextual allusion: in the earlier "Theory of Truth," the speaker had recalled that where "I stand near Soberanes Creek, on the knoll over the sea," Rev. Barclay, the "priest in revolt" in "The Women of Point Sur," also stood and asked three thematic questions regarding the nature of God, the nature of death, and how best to live (*CP2* 608). The speaker of "Theory of Truth" also considers the ways Confucius, Jesus and the Buddha came close to, but mistook, the truth about reality to which he considers himself more attuned. The locus of meditation is significant, for its vertiginous vista over wild waters swirling and crashing around the sea stacks connotes for Jeffers the danger and beauty of the Venus-personified force of attraction, and the equally dangerous Inhumanist insight into the nature of things. Both "Theory of Truth" and "De Rerum Virtute" end with similar counsel, to turn the mind's "love from itself

and man, from parts to the whole” (CP2 610), and to the “One light . . . left us: the beauty of things, not men; / The immense beauty of the world, not the human world” (CP3 403).

In the *Hungerfield* lyric “The Old Stone-Mason” (c. 1949), Jeffers positions himself standing, like one of the great boulders, on the cliff of Carmel Point: “Alone with open eyes in the clear air growing old, / Watching with interest and only a little nausea” the proceedings of leaders and “the docile people” in their sway, “the shifts of power, / And pitiless general wars that prepare the fall” of western civilization (CP3 372). But he sees “also the enormous unhuman beauty of things; rock, sea and stars, fool-proof and permanent, / The birds like yachts in the air, or beating like hearts / Along the water; the flares of sunset, the peaks of Point Lobos” (372). In an update of his autobiography for Random House in 1953, he wrote, “I live in the same place, and open my eyes every morning on the same rocks and ocean, ever new,” noting that he still did stonework (SL 353). By 1957, as a discarded fragment for “I walk on my cliff” tells it, “the trowel and hammer have dropped out of my hand” and “now I can hardly move / The stones that I used to lift” (CP5 906). The nearly-blind centre of consciousness of the “De Natura,” though not able to find his way to Soberanes Creek, Jeffers yet walks and stands “on the cliff above the Pacific Ocean and feel[s] the tides” (CP3 457). If the recurrence reminds him of change and death, with its attendant sorrow, it also brings him the consolation of beauty.

His aesthetic contemplation is expanded by knowledge of deep time and space, yet his vision remains grounded in Carmel Point. Revisiting the setting of “Partial Secret” and the early house idylls from his present perspective over three decades later, “The Last Conservative” and “Salvage” are similar treatments of a theme meant to be assimilated into the sequence of “[t]he

great poem” (*CP5* 908).³³ As in the *Hungerfield* lyrics “The Old Stone-Mason” and “Carmel Point,” both of these later poems are elegiac anti-idylls, for the virginal place he and the now-deceased Una had first known in 1914 is nearly ruined by “heavy change” (*CP3* 418). In “The Last Conservative” Jeffers recalls building the house “[a]gainst the outcrop boulders of a raised beach,” when “the place was maiden, no previous / Building, no neighbors, nothing but the elements, / Rock, wind and sea” (418). Now “[t]he world deteriorates like a rotting apple, worms and a skin. / They have built streets around us, new houses / Line them and cars obsess them . . .” (418).

In “Salvage,” he is convinced that being there is still “worth it,” as he had demonstrated in “Partial Secret” over three decades earlier. Yet “half the glory is gone” with the modern world creeping onto his “granite cliff.” He observes with scorn the suburban encroachment and escalation of taxes on his “three acres of shorelong woodland / And the little low house that my own hands made” (421). Beyond these detriments to his vision of the beauty of things, other, personal reasons are given for why “it’s darker now.” At the time of writing, Jeffers was losing his eyesight, but more significantly, he had lost Una, “Whose eyes made life.” This phrase recalls Una’s response to an inquiry about her contribution to Jeffers’s writing in the late 1920’s questionnaire. She reports that he compared her to Dorothy Wordsworth, for her “ardent *passion* for natural objects and scenery—I have influenced him toward their enjoyment” (*CL* 773). Ten years later, in the foreword to his *Selected Poetry* dedicated to Una, Jeffers wrote that “[m]y nature is cold and indiscriminating; she excited and focused it, gave it eyes and nerves and

³³ An unfinished revision of “Salvage” (*CP5* 866) and the contemporaneous “The Last Conservative” each have the image of birds on the roof like rain that is mentioned in sketches of the “De Natura,” linking them to that project (908; Hunt 131).

sympathies” (xv; *CP4* 392). Una’s intensity seems to have made her his personal avatar of Aphrodite-Venus, the cosmic and bodily force of affinity and attraction. In the elegiac lyrical frame of the narrative he wrote a year after Una’s death, “Hungerfield,” he recalls “her great blue eyes . . . brimmed / With the wild beauty” (375), and in “Salvage” he confesses that, “[while] I have to consider and take thought / Before I can feel the beautiful secret / In places and stars and stones, to her it came freely” (421).

Feeling the Secret in Stars

As noted earlier, in my reconstruction of Jeffers’s “De Natura,” the dipolar phrase “star-fire and rock-strength” is a cosmic variation on his earlier “Rock and Hawk,” where these two denizens of Carmel Point offer a local symbol of the *Urphänomen*, the divine self-tormenter. The phrase is concomitant with Jeffers’s way of knowing the nature of things: in contemplation of beauty and death. In the late project, contemplation of beauty turns to the “outer magnificence,” focusing on the stars (including the sun) and the birth of earth and her moon, the non-human “characters” of the “De Natura” acting under the force of attraction.

Since the beauty of things—the source of attraction to life—is personified in his poetic mythology as Aphrodite-Venus, a very brief consideration of his final verse drama, “The Cretan Woman” (c. 1948-49), will point to the motif of eros-charged consciousness in “De Natura,” particularly in its longest completed poem, “The unformed volcanic earth.” “The Cretan Woman” is a rendition of Euripides’s *Hippolytus* focused on Phaedra’s fatal attraction to her husband Theseus’s son. Jeffers already had written a narrative version of *Hippolytus* set in contemporary coastal California, “Cawdor” (1928), but undertook this dramatic form in his convalescence after Ireland and completed it as Una was in her demise (Hunt 118; Jeffers, *CP5* 803). Although “The Cretan Woman” is set in mythological Greece, it has deep ties to the project

that had captivated Jeffers at the beginning of his career, the regionalist *Point Alma Venus*. To him, Venus-Aphrodite is more than mere goddess; she is “a force of nature” (*SL* 356). This force was instantiated for him in a particular place and intensified through the eyes and consciousness of the particular person that had centred him there, Una, “whose very name suggested some single and all-embracing force” (Gelpi, Introduction 7).

The first scene of “The Cretan Woman” features a theophany of Aphrodite at her altar, come to stir Phaedra (meaning “bright one”), who has fallen in love with Hippolytus, into action. In lines reminiscent of Lucretius’s hymn to Venus in *De Rerum Natura*, Aphrodite declares that she is the deity

The Greeks call Aphrodite; and the Romans will call me Venus; the
 Goddess of Love. I make the orchard-trees
 Flower, and bear their sweet fruit. I make the joyful birds to mate in the
 branches. I make the man
 Lean to the woman. I make the huge blue tides of the ocean follow the
 moon; I make the multitude
 Of the stars in the sky to love each other, and love the earth. Without my
 saving power
 They would fly apart into the horror of night. And even the atoms of
 things, the hot whirling atoms,
 Would split apart: the whole world would burst apart into smoking dust,
 chaos and darkness; all life
 Would gasp and perish. But love support and preserves them: *my saving*
power. (*CP3* 323)

This drama, with its allusion to Lucretius's invocation of Venus, anticipates themes explored in the meditative lyric "De Rerum Virtute," especially the nature and the beauty of things. Working portions of "De Rerum Virtute" were titled in the manuscripts as "De Anima Rerum" and "The beauty of things." These, in turn, indicate development toward the main poem of his "De Natura" project, "The unformed volcanic earth," whose composition includes parts of an unfinished poem first titled "The Beauty of Things," and then "Anima Mundi" (Hunt 840-41, 874).

Recognizing the thread running from *Alma Venus* through "The Cretan Woman" and "De Rerum Virtute," the implied presence of Venus can be detected in "The unformed volcanic earth." There is this direct reference to Lucretius's *De Natura Rerum*:

Straining its limits, striving to understand itself and the universe to the last
galaxy —

Flammantia moenia mundi, Lucretius wrote,

Alliterating like a Saxon — all those Ms mean majesty —

The flaming world-walls, far-flung fortifications of being

Against not-being. (*CP3* 431)

But, further, the opening depiction of the earth as "a female thing / Furiously following" after the male sun, her "lord" (430) is reminiscent of Jeffers's last female human protagonist, Phaedra, under the influence of Aphrodite. I suggest, then, that the earth is the Inhumanist protagonist in Jeffers's "De Natura."³⁴

³⁴ That Jeffers wanted to transcend his all-too-human protagonists is apparent in his struggle with the narrative form in this decade (Hunt 126-28), but also in his voiced preference in the unpublished "Whom should I write for," for the subject of the landscape painter over that of the sculptor or tragic poet, both of whom are tied to the human subject (*CP4* 541-42). The theme is revisited in the later "The Silent Shepherds" (c. 1957), where the "painter has more

An early, unpublished poem, “The Stars” (1916), anticipates this depiction in “The unformed volcanic earth” of the earth’s erotic passion, expressed in the “heat” of her “molten” body and her hot pursuit of the sun. In the second movement of “The Stars,” the speaker sees the earth as a “passionate deep-eyed” Great Mother, baring “the sacred breast” before her lover-lord, the sun, while her “hot blood” is stirred at night by the “torch-carrying multitude” of fire-sandalled stars, “awfully beautiful ones” (CP4 459-60). In “The unformed volcanic earth,” it is the force of attraction—the unnamed Aphrodite-Venus—that stirs earth’s pursuit of the sun, “[s]creaming for life in the womb” (CP3 430). Earth’s “atmosphere / Was the breath of her passion” and the “womb,” stirred by the sun’s “germinal power,” birthed life that grew “[o]n the warm ocean” (430).

The presentation of earth’s “furious” eros for the sun in “The unformed volcanic earth” recalls the imagery and diction evoking consciousness in the *Hungerfield* lyric “Animals (c. 1949), where “a knot of sea-lions” viewed in the rising light of the dawn is compared to “the rapid and furious lives in the sun” (CP3 364). The solar flames are different, yet kin to the earthly lives that emerged from “oxygen and salted water” in “The unformed volcanic earth.” The “beautiful passionate bodies of living flame, batlike, flapping and screaming, / Tortured with burning lust and acute awareness” in “Animals” (364) anticipate the fiery character of the primordial “volcanic earth” and of the discrete animal consciousness to which she gives birth:

I think the rocks

And the earth and the other planets, and the stars and galaxies

Have their various consciousness, all things are conscious;

choice,” while the “sculptor has nothing to say but ‘Man, man, man,’ and “the time’s poets / Have so little to say” about the greater reality (CP3 472).

But the nerves of any animal, the nerves and brain

Bring it to focus. (432)

Playing with the identity of meaning via the etymological roots of the words “focus” and “hearth,” Jeffers imagines the intensity of human consciousness: “the nerves and brain are like a burning-glass / To concentrate the heat and make it catch fire: / It seems to us martyrs hotter than the blazing hearth from which it came” (432).

In the section of “The unformed volcanic earth” that begins, “But whence came the race of man?,” Jeffers narrates the coming to be and “fall” of the tortured human consciousness. There is an unhealed “wound . . . made in the brain,” “[b]y shock and agony” in the evolutionary descent of humans from “manlike apes” forced “down from their trees” into the dangerous forest (432-33). Essentially, Jeffers’s myth of human descent follows the Romantic notion that human self-consciousness is the “original sin” (Gelpi, Introduction 10-11). As Emerson puts it in the essay “Experience,” “the Fall of Man” is the “unhappy . . . discovery we have made that we exist, which causes us to see that all knowledge is subjective and mediate” (322).

In this vein, the unfinished poem “We see ourselves from within” (c. 1952) meditates on the limits and possibilities of human knowledge. Employing parallelism, Jeffers extrapolates from the self-conscious perspective—“We see ourselves from within”—that there is no perfectly objective view of reality—“We see the universe from within, we are little parts of it” (CP4 534). He goes on to assert that “all our knowledge is a dream / dreaming: — say rather a *dream* / Dreaming a dream”; yet he insists that the human mind can approach the divine “reality / Under the dream” through “experience,” a word repeated four more times, to echo Emerson (CP4 534-35). His manuscript workings of “The unformed volcanic earth” reveal that he figured the “ancient wound” of consciousness in the human mind as an open “window” on cosmic reality,

one that “lets in the stars” (*CP5* 878, 883). Through this window-wound, Jeffers posits in one of his alternate endings of “The unformed volcanic earth,” God “tortures himself / To discover himself” (883). God is the poet creating and observing humans in order to experience himself vicariously in our “[e]xtremes of pain and passion” (*CP3* 434). Our end, continuous with other “much greater nerve-endings,” is to “[e]nrich the consciousness of the one being / Who is all that exists. This is man’s mission: / To find and feel . . .” (434).

One of the ways to accomplish that mission, for one so inclined, is to exercise cosmic consciousness, reflecting on the vastness of the universe revealed in the night sky. In “What’s the best life” (c. 1954), an abbreviated attempt at Plato’s thought experiment in *The Republic*, Jeffers assents to the modern spirit’s push for “experiment and experience and discovery: to look truth in the eyes / To strip truth naked, let our dogs do our living for us” (*CP3* 425). The ideal philosophers of his republic would not be scientists or mathematicians, who use “the wrong tools” (425), but shepherds, “Tall dreary men lying on the hills all night, / Watching the stars, let their dogs watch the sheep” (424). The theme is revisited in “The Silent Shepherds” (c. 1957): “I will have shepherds for my philosophers, / Tall sullen men who lie on the hills all night / Watching the stars” (*CP* 3.472).³⁵ Jeffers’s preference for sage shepherds under the stars over “clergymen and mathematicians” (472) is reminiscent of Frost’s intrigue with “our place among the infinities” in “The Star Splitter” (*Poetry* 177). It also echoes the perspective conveyed in Frost’s “The Peaceful Shepherd.” Solitary and skeptical, the shepherd-speaker of this poem surveys “the figures in / Between the dotted stars,” and concludes that “[i]f heaven were to do

³⁵ “The Silent Shepherds” (c. 1956-57) is a reworking of a common theme, the inadequacy of mathematical knowledge, associated with religion in its anthropocentric utility (*CP3* 472). Possibly this poem was intended as a segue, to link various parts, including “The mathematicians and physics men,” into the whole of the “De Natura.”

again,” he would advise that the constellations “The Cross, the Crown, the Scales” (signifying religion, state, and commerce) are “hardly worth renewal,” for they have amounted to “the Sword” (252). Echoing the sentiment, in “What’s the best life” Jeffers rejects the presumed rational authorities for his ideal republic, for he would have “no more wars, no more massacre” (*CP* 3.424).

It appears that a sustained poetic dialogue was conducted between Jeffers and Frost across the continent over the years.³⁶ Carpenter reports that on the 1941 lecture tour, as he was driving Jeffers home from his visit to Concord and the poet absorbed the scenery, he declared, “This is Robert Frost country” (*Robinson* 46). In an interview with the *Los Angeles Times* in 1958, the former Californian Frost admitted, “I am an admirer of Robinson Jeffers. He has kept California as a base. He hasn’t run out to New York” (qtd. in *Norwood* 69). In a late poem, “Our Doom to Bloom” (1962), Frost’s takes his epigraph from Jeffers’s, “Shine, perishing republic,” and he follows his use of the “Cumaean Sibyl” to predict the republic’s rise and fall (449-50). Much earlier, in *West-Running Brook* (1928)—the collection that includes “The Star-Splitter” and “The Peaceful Shepherd”—the poem “Once by the Pacific” imagines a Jeffersian scenario. The speaker recalls a storm brewing over the ocean, “. . . and yet it looked as if / The shore was lucky in being backed by cliff, / The cliff in being backed by continent,” recalling the location of Jeffers’s “Continent’s End.” Doom appeared imminent:

It looked as if a night of dark intent
 Was coming, and not only a night, an age.
 Someone had better be prepared for rage
 There would be more than ocean-water broken

³⁶ See Kyle Norwood’s essay for comparison of Jeffers and Frost.

Before God's last *Put out the Light* was spoken. (250)

In a similar apocalyptic mood, Jeffers admires in "The Epic Stars" the heavenly bodies' "magnificent raid at the heart of darkness."³⁷ Like Frost, who advocates for cognitive humility by stressing that things "looked as if," but still, "[y]ou could not tell," Jeffers confesses the insufficiency of human comprehension: "We don't know enough, we'll never know" (CP3 466).

Feeling the Secret in Stones

It is clear that a central concern in Jeffers's "De Natura" is the wound of self-consciousness, but it serves a positive function as a window onto the sublime stars and, in turn, onto humanity's inconsequential place in the scheme of things. Following the train of thought in the notes and sketches of the "De Natura," the motif of the mind-wound was meant to connect with the unfolding narrative of the earth in "The unformed volcanic earth" by way of his "mythology" of the birth of the moon, based on a now defunct scientific theory ("The mathematicians and physics men," CP3 459). The lunar birth is the theme of a place-situated meditation given two different treatments in 1957, "I walk on my cliff" and "At the near approach of a star." These developed conceptually from his contemplations of death and beauty in the unpublished "Not Solid Earth" (1952), in which astronomical and geological knowledge is continuous with psychological insight.

To balance the passions aroused in "know[ing] the stars, hotter and more fatal than earth," the speaker in "Not Solid Earth" pursues peace by "remember[ing]" stone (CP4 538). As in the preceding "Descent to the Dead," Jeffers associates peace with death and links it with

³⁷ If this is an allusion to Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, so also may the image of earth in "The Beautiful Captive," except that where Conrad's narrator sees nature as "the shackled form of a conquered monster," momentarily freed (36), Jeffers sees an enslaved noblewoman, biding her time until emancipation (CP3 428).

stone in the “dim gray” atmosphere of Ireland, especially in Antrim (539). The speaker’s reflection on passion from the perspective of a cooled, detached mind is likened to Antrim’s “grim volcanic basalt remember[ing] / Its times of fire.” This geological thought then turns to Jeffers’s home place: “. . . And we remember the moon / At high tide when a star passed torn from the earth the huge trough of the Pacific / Her gain, our sea” (539).

In “I walk on my cliff,” Jeffers again draws on geology to complement astronomy in his therapeutic contemplation at Carmel Point. As he “feel[s] the tides,” he imagines “the flesh of the earth tearing apart” and the moon propelled by the force of attraction, like a “huge bird / Lofting up toward her star” (CP3 457). The hollow is filled with ocean waters that are “[m]oon-led” in their ebb and flow, and are continuous with the cosmic eros that moves “the sun and other stars,” to borrow from the grand finale to Dante’s *Divine Comedy*.³⁸ A line of connection can be drawn from “the fire-torn, moon-forsaken / Basin of the Pacific” in “I walk on my cliff,” (CP3 457) to the wound in the human mind near the end of “The unformed volcanic earth.” There the effort of the human is to “be balanced and neutral / As a rock on the shore, but the red sunset-waves / Of life’s passions fling over him” (CP3 434). This, in turn, connects with the image in “De Rerum Virtute,” where the poet-speaker meditates in the first section on a “bone vault” skull, comparing it to the vault of sky over the Pacific.³⁹

³⁸ That Jeffers had Dante in mind as he wrote his “De Natura” is apparent in the reference to him and his “anthropoid” “God of love” in “Explosion” (CP3 414). In “Fourth Act,” as he reflects on the nuclear threat, he quotes Dante’s “*a rivedere le stelle*” (CP3 113). The phrase is from the final line of *Inferno*, which translated means, “to see once more the stars.” As Allen Mendelbaum points out, each of the three books in *The Divine Comedy* ends with the word “stars,” since Homer’s time, a signifier of the sublime (*Inferno* 394, n. 139).

³⁹ The analogy appears earlier in “Credo” (c. 1926), where he asserts that “the ocean in the bone vault is only / The bone vault’s ocean: out there is the ocean’s” (CP1 239).

An early draft of this part of “De Rerum Virtute,” as Hunt reports, is derived “from a narrative sketch in which someone finds the skull of a person who has fallen or been pushed into a sinkhole and drowned” (840). A set of notes for “The Cretan Woman” shows that he considered setting the Phaedra drama in coastal California, including a scene in which a skull—apparently that of the Hippolytus-character—is found in a “crater” made by a collapsed sea-cave (CP5 804). The image made its way into “De Rerum Virtute,” where the passions passing through the “bone vault” are as flame-lit clouds moving over the face of the dynamic deep, evoking the tumult of unconscious forces. The effects upon the mind of “love and desire and pain” are like “[t]hunderclouds of wrath and white gales of fear” (CP3 401). Likewise, at the conclusion of “The unformed volcanic earth,” the wounded human mind is composed of “Huge pits of darkness, high points of light” (434).

In the manuscript notes for “The unformed volcanic earth,” Jeffers considers the possibility of the human creature ending “in honor” with an alternative final line: “We ought to practice dying: we shall need it” (CP 5.885). Contemplation of death is a remedy for the agony, and stone the image most associated with it. Several of the final poems, such as “Passenger Pigeons,” a *memento mori* for the human race, and “Birth and Death,” originally titled “Morituri” (CP5 891), register Jeffers’s concern about an impending Third World War that would involve nuclear weapons bearing the violence of star-fire (“Fire,” CP3 367). In “The Great Explosion,” he seeks ironic distance by connecting the beginning with the end: “No wonder we are fascinated with fire-works / And our huge bombs: it is a kind of homesickness perhaps for the howling fire-blast that we were born from” (471). But the distance does not always effectively balance the despair in his poetry.

A longing for death or the “peace of God,” the root meaning Jeffers discovers in his family name of Welsh-Scottish origin (Godfrey), is conveyed in “Patronymic” (*CP3* 422), a late poem that recalls his travels in “the islands of the dead,” the British Isles (*SL* 172). Thanatos also infuses the first part of “What’s the best life.” The immediate answer to the opening question “What’s the best life for a man?” is, “— Never to have been born [. . .] and the next best / Is to die young” (*CP3* 424). Jeffers alludes to the Cumaean Sybil from Petronius’s “Satyricon,” who chants, “I want to die. / Apothanein Thelo”; yet, in dialectical fashion, he calls himself back to the matter of “life, not death” (424). In “Pleasures,” he counters the longing for death by imagining himself: “under ocean-surf, like the cold stones” (*CP3* 473). Eschewing the pleasures of youth, he partakes in “a higher pleasure: / To lie among the cold stones my older brothers,” an aquatic version of his ideal philosopher-shepherds, “[u]nder the film of surf and look[ing] at the sky” (*CP3* 473). “[T]he incredible voids / And lofts of space” that “strain the mind” connect this poem to “The unformed volcanic earth.” The evolutionary wound that lets in the stars overwhelms self-concern: “our mother the ape never suckled us / For such a forest: The vastness here, the horror, the mathematical unreason, the cold awful glory, / The inhuman face of our God: It is pleasant and beautiful” (473).

One of the last poems Jeffers wrote, “The polar ice caps,” also enacts a calm consciousness from the imaginary perspective of a stone under the sea, star-gazing. The opening is prescient of our current concerns about global warming and the rise of sea levels from melting polar ice: “Tides ebb and flow, but every year a little bit higher. / They will drown New York, they will drown London. / And this place” (3.476). He consoles himself with the vision that the stone house and tower he built “will become / Geological, fossil and permanent” (3.476). Reprising the Epicurean theme of “Pleasures,” he concludes:

What a pleasure it is to mix one's mind with geological

Time, or with astronomical relax it.

There is nothing like astronomy to pull the stuff out of man,

His stupid dreams and red-rooster importance: let him count the star-swirls. (476)

On the one hand, the poem's decentering aesthetics of relinquishment enacts a kind of death. But on the other, "the star-swirls" are signatures of "the beauty of things," one of the most repeated of Jeffers's motifs. Beauty, the manifestation of the divine, is a powerful affective force that initiates and strengthens affirmation of life, while identifying with stone is a form of relinquishment. Practicing the polarity of "star-fire and rock-strength," he sought to master his longing for death, a form of self-concern, and give assent to the conditions of his life within the whole. Contemplation of both death and beauty help maintain an ideal tension between the extremes of the final peace and the chaos of inordinate passion (pain and pleasure). To align himself with the nature of things, he exercised in these last poems "a shifting of emphasis and significance from man to not-man; the rejection of human solipsism and recognition of the transhuman magnificence" (*CP4* 428).

Imagining A Serene End

In a fragment of a preface from 1920, Jeffers explains some of his early and, it turns out, enduring poetic principles. One of them is that, whether the work concludes in "marriage or escape or sudden death, a lysis," there is a "happy ending" in the sense that "something happens . . . a freeing of some sort; and a settlement, an adjusted balance" (*CP4* 372). From one perspective, the "De Natura" project follows his usual narrative pattern, pointing as it does to a tragic ending for the human race. Una once opined that Jeffers considered every personal story to

end in tragedy, but on the other hand, “comedy is an unfinished story. The impersonal and universal story never finishes at all and is neither merry nor sad” (*CL* 776).

In the expanded sympathies of his Inhumanism that inform the “De Natura,” the human race is portrayed as a tragic hero defying its limits, such as the confrontation with “Death” in “Passenger Pigeons” (*CP3* 436-37). But in “The Beautiful Captive,” humanity is also oppressor of the “De Natura’s” central protagonist, earth, the “beautiful planet” biding her time to shake it off (*CP3* 428-29). Jeffers comes close to Edwards in his theological imagination of the earth held captive by corrupt humanity. In “Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God,” Edwards interprets the eighth chapter of Romans for his audience:

God's creatures are good, and were made for men to serve God with, and don't willingly subserve to any other purpose, and groan when they are abused to purposes so directly contrary to their nature and end. And the world would spew you out, were it not for the sovereign hand of him who hath subjected it in hope. There are the black clouds of God's wrath now hanging directly over your heads, full of the dreadful storm, and big with thunder. . . .” (410)

So if, from the perspective of humanity, an end to the race, or at least the present form of it, is tragic, from the earth’s-eye view imagined in Jeffers’s “De Natura,” it is comic.

One lyric, written in his seventieth year (1957), situates the earth’s continuing story within the eternal process of the universe:

It flows out of mystery into mystery: there is no beginning —
How could there be? — and no end — how could there be?
The stars shine in the sky like the spray of a wave
Rushing to meet no shore, and the great music

Blares on forever. . . . (CP3 450)

The poet-speaker envisions the possibility of the extermination of the human race by “our own explosive bile,” but even then, “far greater witnesses / Will take our places. It is only a little planet / But how beautiful it is” (450). A fragment from 1951 offers an alternate possibility for humanity, in which “man” aims to transcend its current state of “living”:

. . . he has
 not reached it yet,
 But who knows? he might yet. He might see the ocean
 Pounding its rocks — see, I mean — he might see the stars dancing their
 courses. I should be
 His best admirer.

Man — taking his place

In the glory of nature — (CP4 537)

In this case, poetic contemplation of death is the hastening of new birth, or the plotting of resurrection, as he put it in his 1941 lecture (406, 408). Whatever humanity’s fate, for the protagonist earth of Jeffer’s “De Natura,” the future is promising. To borrow Emerson’s conclusion in “Nature,” “[t]he reality is more excellent than the report. Here is no ruin, no discontinuity, no spent ball” (377).

The “De Natura” project, incomplete though it remained, bears witness to the capacious vision and resolve in Jeffer’s final phase of writing. It is an attempt to participate in the *poiesis* of the universal God through contemplation of death and beauty and the secret nature of things known from his place on the edge of the Pacific. He seeks to “attain an elevated, even serene clarity of perception and articulation in the face of death,” in Gelpi’s assessment, “that balances

and rounds off the kinetic incandescence of his prodigious arrival forty years earlier and brings his life's work to a fitting culmination and resting point" ("Enskymment" 3). His beatific vision is informed by long meditative engagement with intellectual tradition and modern discovery, national and personal history, and focal practices of walking, looking and building on the Central Coast landscape. He longs to be part of "the star-fire and rock-strength" of God, that his own ending might be met with an adoring and calm mind. In "Not Solid Earth," he articulates the *summum bonum* of his Inhumanist theological aesthetics and spiritual practices:

. . . There is one way of peace: to know all
 That men know or discover, and make it vital in the mind, the enormous
 and terrible beauty of things.
 – Never fear that: it will be beautiful: whatever we know or discover
 Is as beautiful as fire. Reality, all considered is all one reality, it is all
 beautiful.
 It is God's joy; and cruelty and shame, the two worst horrors – we try to
 ignore them – melt in the mass. (CP4 539-40)

Chapter 2: “Flowers drinking in their light”: Shapes of Eros in Roethe and Hass

“Look at the flowers, so faithful to what is earthly.”

R. M. Rilke, *The Sonnets to Orpheus* (*Selected* 247)

The flora of our lives could guide occasions

Without confusion on their frisking way

Through all the silences and all the spaces.

— W. H. Auden, “Kairos and Logos” (*Collected* 310)

“I wish I could photosynthesize.”

— Theodore Roethke, “All My Lights Go Dark” (*Straw* 146)

“. . . whose flecked petals and womb- / Or mouthlike flowers are the shapes of desire. . . .”

-- Robert Hass, “State of the Planet” (*Apple* 314)

Introduction: Influence and Convergence

In early March 1941, as Robinson Jeffers was on his mid-career lecture tour enlightening eastern audiences about his sublime central California coast, Theodore Roethke, then a young instructor at Pennsylvania State College, anxiously awaited the publication of his first collection of poetry. In a letter to Katherine Anne Porter (March 7, 1941), Roethke mentioned the impending event and asked her to “[s]ay at little prayer, if that isn’t too blasphemous” (*Selected* 90). *Open House* offered an initial glimpse into the “leafy mind” of the German American horticulturalist’s son from Saginaw, Michigan (*Collected* 10). Many of the early poems reveal his unfurling poetic identity drawn from the conscious and unconscious provenance of his life,

his “Father-Stem and Mother-Root” (*Straw* 62).⁴⁰ The latter epithet indicates the psychosomatic-botanical correspondence he assumed in the first book and retained as his poetic signature to the end (Balakian 12-13; Parini, *Theodore* 55).

As Roethke jittered with anticipation in Pennsylvania and Jeffers steered through a first-of-March snowstorm between Washington, D.C. and Cambridge, Massachusetts, in the meantime, back on the central California coast, Robert Hass was born. As he reflects in the poem “Consciousness,” from infancy Hass’s senses were attuned to “blue sky,” “the moan of a foghorn,” “sunlight and the smell of sea air from the Golden Gate,” defining features of his Marin County home (*Apple* 344-45). Residing in the richly diverse cultural and natural milieu of the San Francisco Bay Area, the future two-term Poet Laureate of the United States (1995-1997) developed a decidedly cosmopolitan strain of bioregionalist poetics. Among his influences are Jeffers’s “feeling of the power and actuality of the physical world” (*What* 131) and Roethke’s “incantatory power” rooted in psychosomatic rhythms (*Twentieth* 3, 5, 58).

Imagining the temporal conjunction of significant occasions in the lives of these poets affords us the opportunity to reflect on a spatial one. For all three, certain places on the Pacific coast were integral to their poetic and spiritual development. In the last chapter, I explored the way Jeffers’s spiritual practices of star watching and stone masonry and the accompanying aesthetics of relinquishment and affirmation inform his personal archetype of the divine, “star-fire and rock-strength.” In this chapter, I will investigate Roethke and Hass’s poetic practice of

⁴⁰ Roethke takes his psychosomatic-botanical term “mother-root” from the second stanza of George Herbert’s “The Flower,” where it denotes the womb-tomb of earth: “Who would have thought my shrivel’d heart / Could have recover’d greenesse? It was gone / Quite under ground; as flowers depart / To see their mother-root, when they have blown” (154).

attending to and identifying with flora in the light of earth's "star-fire," the sun: the plant life of particular regions is important to their imaginative connection to the earth and configuration of spirituality. I will consider a selection of meditative-descriptive poems, but focus on "North American Sequence" from Roethke's final publication *The Far Field* (1966) and the two-poem "Santa Lucia" sequence in Hass's *The Apple Trees at Olema* (2010).

I am interested especially in the way the flora-in-light image embodies "desire flowering into contemplation," to use Lilburn's felicitous phrase (*Going* 3). What I call ecospiritual eros—the integrating force of attraction to the more-than-human community of earthly life—is given shape in Roethke's "wakening blossoms" ("The Shape of Fire," *Collected* 63) and Hass's "irresistible flowering" ("Santa Barbara Road," *Apple* 176). The poets engage a botanic-psychosomatic identification, what Robert Pogue Harrison has defined as "a state of mind . . . consubstantial with an external element or place, rather than merely correlated with it according to rules of analogy or representation" (*Gardens* 126). Such a stance, in the selected poetry, goes beyond Ruskin's "pathetic fallacy" of mere projection; it retains the "plain and leafy fact" of the plant, while clearly signaling "the associations and passions . . . that crowd around it" (qtd. in Langbaum 161). Photosynthesis merges with physiology and psychology in their imaginations of spiritual attention.

Roethke and Hass's evocative use of plants follows that of Romantic writers (Herder, Schelling, Coleridge) who associate the integrating power of imagination and the process of *poiesis* with the way the plant "unites different elements: light, water, minerals, and carbon dioxide" (Parini 54). Romantics on both sides of the Atlantic, including Wordsworth, Emerson, and Whitman, equated imagination's power with love, an idea traceable to the Neoplatonic concept of eros as the cohesive force in the universe (Abrams, *Natural* 294-95). Whitman's basic

article of faith, as Hass notes, is that the rhythmic “nature that courses through us” and “that larger rhythm” of the earth is guided by the “kelson of creation,” love (Introduction 6). Roethke learned from Whitman to practice and present meditation as an erotic action that leads one to “know the vital center of life’s energies” (La Belle 137), while Hass admires Whitman’s “celebration of the generative power of life itself” (*What* 236-37). Both poets are particularly Whitmanian in their concern to cultivate this ancient ground in the wilder milieu of a new world, which is to say, they sought to be responsive to their place and time, to the actual geographical and historical-cultural locus of their lives.

More than “art for art’s sake,” the flora-in-light image is a pattern of the poets’ responsiveness to place, a localized form of their aesthetics of affirmation and relinquishment. For them, as for Jeffers, poetry is an “act of attention” (Hass, *What* ix-xi). As a spiritual practice, it helps reorient the self to the more-than-human community and displace egocentric consciousness. Botanical imagery, in particular, contributes to the psychagogic effect, helping to cultivate a sense of the interconnectivity of life and the comings and goings of its “larger rhythm.” The poets’ significantly different dispositions, personal situations, and historical contexts register in their varying formal approaches to exploring and expressing phenomena and experiences. Yet, underlying their work is a common desire to elicit reverence and a praiseful “yes” to the “no” of the sacred whole, that is, affirmation of life in the face of human finitude.

Cultivating Poetics of “Wild Longings”

The sustained development of the theme of ecospiritual eros can be traced in a brief examination of each poet’s oeuvre. After his second and third collections, *The Lost Son and Other Poems* (1948) and *Praise to the End!* (1951), Roethke sought to expand the personal myth

he developed in “The Lost Son/Praise to the End” fourteen-poem sequence.⁴¹ This long poem was autobiographical—a *Künstlergedicht*, or poem about the growth of the poet’s mind—as indicated by the title of the eponymous poem in his third book. The titular phrase alludes to the first book of Wordsworth’s *The Prelude* where he reflects on the way even the “terrors, pains, and early miseries” of his childhood shaped him into his best present self: “. . . Praise to the end! / Thanks to the means which Nature deigned to employ!” (lines 350-51).

Roethke’s readings in mysticism in the 1930s were also a source for his personal myth. Using Evelyn Underhill’s pattern of the mystic’s way as an interpretative lens for his first manic-depressive episode in 1935 (Seager 90, 199), he viewed regression, a descent into the body and subliminal regions of the psyche, as an integral part of the process of illumination, followed by ascent and progression. In 1952 he was awarded a Ford Foundation grant, the application for which included a plan to conduct a more concentrated study of mysticism, along with Platonic philosophy and existentialist theology (Roethke, *Selected* 173; Balakian 96-98; Blessing 171; Bowers 5-6; Malkoff 124; Parini 134-37, 142). This interest coincided with his 1953 marriage to Beatrice O’Connell and honeymoon at his best man W. H. Auden’s villa in Ischia, Italy. In poems published in *The Waking* (1953) and *Words for the Wind* (1958), he increasingly explores love in terms of “epithalamic mysticism” (Bowers 4, 122), borrowing from Elizabethan and Metaphysical poets to imagine it as a sacramental unification of flesh and spirit and a salvific means of self-transcendence (Blessing 171; Bowers 122; Kalaidjian 12; Malkoff 125-26).

Roethke defined Eros as “embracer of life” (qtd. in Sullivan 70), and his early affirmative association of love with leaves and flowers unfolding in the light that “falls and fills” (“The

⁴¹ In *Praise to the End!* the previous four autobiographical long poems from *The Lost Son* are integrated with ten new ones.

Shape of the Fire,” *Collected* 64) continues in the later love lyrics and sequences. Repeatedly he employs rhythm, moving images (water, wind, flame) and words such as “love,” “desire,” and “longing” with “sway” and “motion” to convey erotic restiveness. The sensibility is intensified in *The Far Field* (1964) by phrases like “love-longing” (“The Tranced,” *Collected* 229), “[d]esire, desire, desire” (“The Marrow,” *Collected* 238), and “wild longings of the insatiate blood” (“The Sequel,” *Collected* 233).⁴² His poetry and notebooks demonstrate the spiritual stimulation he obtained from his wide reading in and engagement with the poetic tradition. His “real concern with his belief,” writes his biographer Allan Seager, “shows most clearly in his poetry where a profound desire for a personal wholeness grows clearer and clearer, a desire for harmony with all created beings, and an elevation of his father, the dead god, into an identity with God” (199). In a late notebook entry he expresses a quasi-religious view of poetry as an “act of faith” (*Straw* 177; *Wagoner* 7): “You must believe: a poem is a holy thing. . . . Remind yourself once more of the absolute holiness of your task” (*Straw* 256). The hyperbole amplifies an aspiration. His colleague and confidante Arnold Stein recalls that, “[h]e conceived of poetry as a form of contemplative being” (xviii), a way to “feel his way . . . through uncharted courses of thought” and experience (xiv). Like many of his contemporaries, T. S. Eliot importantly among them, Roethke was fascinated with the relation between poetry and mysticism. At the same time, his letters make abundantly clear that his writing was equally guided by a pragmatic strategy for survival and

⁴² This last phrase echoes a line in Auden’s *For the Time Being* uttered by Herod concerning the spiritual hunger of his subjects for which the “desperate longing” of the Virgin Mary—who is associated with the rose in the enclosed garden—is the prototype: “Legislation is helpless against the wild prayer of longing that rises, day in, day out, from all these households under my protection” (*Collected* 360, 392).

success, psychological, social and economic. If he was spiritually drawn more to the ecstatic than the ascetic aspects of the mystic's devotion, nonetheless, he worked doggedly at his poetic task.

For his part, Hass does not invoke the descriptor of holiness for poetry, being far more conscious than Roethke of the nature of human language as an ideological and desire-charged medium (*Twentieth* 156). He undertook his graduate studies at Stanford from the mid to late 1960s and began a poetic career in the 1970s, a time of poststructuralist theory's ascendancy in literary departments. References to such theory, with which he developed an ambivalent relation, appear in his early poetry and prose, including the disappearance of the self, the word as signifier of absence, Lacan and Derrida (*Apple* 65, 79, 103; "Creeley: His Metric," *Twentieth* 156). His work holds in tension, on the one hand, scrutiny of the desire for immediate concourse with the world through pure language and full consciousness, and, on the other, resistance to a too rigid application of poststructuralist theories that would deny any link of the word to the actual world and refuse agency to the subject.

Hass approves of Robert Duncan's definition of responsibility for the poet: "keeping the ability to respond" ("Consequences"). He has joined those seeking a recovery of "some fundamental ground of romantic poetry, having passed through the modernist crucible" that deconstructed the Romantic "I" (intrv. in Gardner 166). This involves rehabilitating personal perception of experience as "a form of knowledge, of knowing the world" (167). He presents perception from a multiplicity of viewpoints, both in a Whitmanian democratic spirit and in postmodern resistance to closure or rigidity. Modes and moods are collaged to undercut sustained elegy and balance sentiment with wry wit, dry statement, or clear image. For him, poetry is "an activity of the spirit," by which nothing is perceived as static or sealed off from change (*Twentieth* 60). It is a practice of attention that, if accompanied by certain negations and

relinquishments, or “saying and unsaying,” can help order desire and serve as a *techne* “on the side of life” (Gardner 16; Hass, *Twentieth* 133).

Hass shares with many of his Bay-Area predecessors an interest in exploring and expressing eros as attachment to life. His cognates for longing, such as “desire,” “wishing” and “yearning,” along with biotic images of hunger or thirst and “life want[ing] life,” designate eros as a major theme (“July Notebook: The Birds” *Apple* 3). William Lockwood, referring to Hass’s Bay Area poet-elders, Kenneth Rexroth, Lawrence Ferlinghetti, and William Everson, observes that “Eros, as Herbert Marcuse defined it—the integrative and healing tendency in human consciousness that opposes itself to Thanatos, the disintegrative and death-oriented tendency—appears central” to their imaginations (1209). Early on, Hass particularly admired Rexroth for his pioneering bioregionalist impulse that included translation of classical Chinese and Japanese poetry, which, in turn, productively increased the tension between his amatory intensity and imagistic, detached clarity when writing about California. In fact, Hass attributes the invention of “the culture of the West Coast” to Rexroth’s first collection of poems, *In What Hour*, published in 1940 (*Twentieth* 224). Rexroth’s poetry explores connections between sacramental love, the natural world, and socio-political relations. His “organic philosophy,” identified by Everson as “erotic mysticism” (“Eros” 112), posits eros as a stimulant and guide to human participation in the ongoing, dynamic processes of formation, dissolution and transformation in the cosmos. Hass similarly recognizes eros as a potent influence on the mediation of the formal imagination, through which is forged bonds with people and places, and is disclosed the mysterious aspect of the earth’s more-than-human community.

For this reason, he expresses appreciation for Roethke as a mentor in the overt bodily and “psychological basis” of form in poems of “disintegration and return” (*Twentieth* 57-58, 116).

But he has developed a self-awareness and ambivalence, not evident in Roethke's poetry, concerning the unconscious motivations beneath his poetic inclination to "*enumerate the vegetation*" (*Apple* 261). Exploring the way the "psychic energy" of eros intensifies perception and motivates imagination (*Twentieth* 304), in the poem "Natural Theology" he concludes with a line that summarizes a theme that runs throughout his work: "there is one desire / touching the many things, and it is continuous" (*Apple* 190). Both poets imbue eros with spiritual import, associating it with light and attentive vision, or in Roethke's wordplay, "long looking" (*Collected* 167, 252). Paradoxically, eros is also associated with blindness and with the dark knowing of the body in dream, art, and sexuality.

Frye's Influence: *Mythos, Dianoia, and the Locus Amoenus*

To situate the poets' use of the flora-in-light imagery in the context of their personal myths and within the classical-Judeo-Christian myth dominant in their literary background, Northrop Frye's theory proves crucial. Responding to the strategies of modernist writers who absorbed ideas from anthropology and psychoanalytic theory, Frye rose to prominence in the late 1940s. He was an authoritative figure in the post-war cultural milieu in which Roethke and Hass formed their poetics, and became "*the critic in the 1960s and 1970s,*" but fell out of vogue as structuralist theory was supplanted by poststructuralism in literary studies (Nicholson 2-3). Hass explicitly draws on Frye's myth theory (*What* 87), and though Roethke does not directly refer to him, his mature poetics evince avidity for archetypal literary theory that would have included Frye scholarship (La Belle 88; Sullivan 40).⁴³ Given Roethke's interest in William Blake, he was likely to have known Frye's first book, *Fearful Symmetry* (1947), and to have discussed his theory with their mutual friend A. J. M. Smith, the Canadian poet, critic, anthologist and

⁴³ See also Parini (7) for his use of Frye's theory to explicate Roethke's strategies.

professor at Michigan State University from 1936-72. Further, in 1951, the year that Frye's essay "Archetypes of Literature" was published in the *Kenyon Review*, he taught a summer course on the Romantics at the University of Washington and corresponded that fall with Roethke's chair, Robert Heilman, about the possibility of "a career move" to Seattle (Frye, *Selected* 41).

I will make a brief excursion here to outline aspects of Frye's theory, relevant for two reasons, besides influence on the poets. First of all, his model of literature accounts for the intertextuality of the poems I am considering. This is due, in part, to the fact that *Anatomy of Criticism* is itself a recovery of Aristotelian concepts that have shaped the Western literary tradition and beyond. These concepts, including *mythos* (narrative pattern of action) and *dianoia* (significance, esp. as pattern of imagery), continue to circulate in the North American cultural imaginary as writers craft their forms and figures in relation to the literary tradition, even if ironically or subversively. Secondly, relevant to my particular angle on the selected poems, Frye identified Eros as "the creator of all the arts," pointing out that "procreative power has been associated with [the god's] creative powers for centuries" (*Words* 226). He acknowledges the relation of the body and desire with imagination and culture making, and the mutually informing relation between the natural world and human culture. Poetry, broadly referring to literature, is an essential activity in the process of building civilization, the latter an imitation of nature "impelled by the force . . . called desire" to make it fit harmoniously with human life (*Anatomy* 105). As I am seeking to show, the reverse is also true for Roethke and Hass, who enact poetry under the force of ecospiritual eros as a practice to fit human life harmoniously within nature.

Frye asserts that private dream and public ritual, two modes of erotic expression, are united within the collective myth of a society and within analogous discrete works of *poiesis*. Dream is the archetypal aspect of the myth's meaning in the structure of imagery, or *dianoia*,

while ritual is the archetypal aspect of the generic narrative structures, or *mythoi* (*Anatomy* 107). Frye delineates four levels of *dianoia* relative to the vertical, dialectical movement of eros. There are two worlds of undisplaced myth, the apocalyptic or heavenly (the infinitely desirable) and the demonic (that which is repugnant or frustrating to fulfillment of desire). Two broad intermediate structures correspond to the mythic ones: the analogy of innocence under the “romantic” idealizing tendency (contiguous with the apocalyptic), and the analogy of experience influenced by the “realistic” tendency (contiguous with the demonic). Literary works are the production of this dialectic of desire, the imagination moving between the two undisplaced mythic worlds. Frye also identifies four *mythoi*: comedy, romance, tragedy and irony/satire, associated with the cycle of seasons, spring, summer, autumn and winter, respectively. Each of these *mythoi* is a portion of an overarching myth cycle in Western literature whose central theme is the fulfillment of the circuitous quest-journey of the exemplar hero or protagonist (106, 192).

Taking my cue from Frye, I see the image of flora-in-light in both Roethke and Hass’s poems as a form of ecospiritual eros (*dianoia*) situated within a narrative arc (*mythos*) of a metaphorical personal journey. In Roethke, the protagonist-speaker is typically identifiable as the poet; in Hass, at times the speaker can be identified with the poet, at other times he explores through other voices. In both, developing consciousness may be inflected through memories of literal movement within or through a place by foot or car. The poets have creatively reappropriated the quest plot from a long tradition in which it depicts eros, as affective, relational energy urging restless *ekstasis*—outstretching, unfolding, self-transcendence—toward what attracts it. The quest typically culminates in marriage or analogous union and restoration of the homeland (Frye, *Anatomy* 187, 192-93, 319-20; Abrams, *Natural* 152, 165, 255). The archetypal quest has parallels in dream and ritual: in dream, the *dianoia* or central idea is “the search of the

libido or desiring self for a fulfillment that will deliver it from the anxieties of reality but will still contain that reality”; in ritual, the intent “is the victory of fertility over the waste land”—a theme T. S. Eliot developed to great effect in the modernist landmark, *The Waste Land* (193).

This ancient narrative pattern can be traced in a variety of philosophical and sacred writings. Further, according to Evelyn Underhill, whose *Mysticism* was an essential source of spiritual ideas and imagery for Roethke,⁴⁴ Christian mystics generally patterned their quest as awakening, purgation, illumination (sometimes including the “dark night”), and union or sacred marriage (169-70). Such a theological pattern of the soul’s eros informs influential western spiritual classics, from Augustine’s *Confessions* to Dante’s *The Divine Comedy* (Frye, *Anatomy* 316, 319; Abrams, *Natural* 46-56, 146-53, 165; Underhill 46, 169). In the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century German and British Romantic philosophers and poets employed the myth in a non-dogmatic or secularized form to narrate the conversion and education or development of the mind (individual or generic human consciousness) through a continuous, yet episodic, process of self-formation (*Bildung*) in eventful time and epiphanic space (Abrams, *Natural* 74, 91, 255).

In my reading of Roethke and Hass’s poems, the narrative arc or myth is a contemporary, ecospiritual analogue to the mystic’s quest, “a progress [and] a growth, in love: a deliberate fostering of the inward tendency of the soul towards its source” (Underhill 428). For both poets, the “inward tendency” of the soul—Hass might prefer to say “consciousness” (*What* 460)—is a matter of body and spirit together, seeking to be in touch with and grounded in the source of life. The “source” in Roethke is the God present in all earthly things (*On Poetry* 42); in Hass, it is an

⁴⁴ Roethke read Underhill’s *Mysticism* more than once and outlined in his notebook her five-step pattern of the “mystic way” (Blessing 59-61; Kalaidjian 17-18).

unanswerable question: “From where?” (*Apple* 313). His Lucretius-inspired poem “State of the Planet” demonstrates wonder at life, “the amazement / Of its being there” (312).

In a further application of Frye’s theory, the flora-in-light image on which I focus corresponds with the *mythoi* of comedy (spring) and romance (summer), as part of the *dianoia* of the poets’ overarching myth. Beauty, and the longing for beauty, are often the impetus for the mythic quest, often given in the image of the rose or some other flower (e.g. German Romanticism’s blue flower). The literary flower is typically embedded within an earthly garden-like environment, the ideal “form imposed by human work and desire on the vegetable world” (Frye, *Anatomy* 141; 152-54; Seward 19). More specifically, the figure of the rose unfolding in light is associated with Venus-Aphrodite (and of Cupid-Eros) in classical myth and of the Virgin Mary (and of Christ) in Christian tradition (Haig 71, 79-81; Seward 11, 19). The rose is the paradigmatic erotic symbol in romance literature, signifying love and communion, both earthly and apocalyptic (Frye, *Anatomy* 144; Seward 3, 63).

The garden is the conventional instance of the archetypal *locus amoenus*, a *topos* of the pastoral genre signifying “felicitous space” (Bachelard xxxv) that may also be “amatory space” (Kristeva 293). The *locus amoenus* generally conveys an ethos of *otium*, “vacation, freedom, escape from pressing business, particularly a business with overtones of death,” not to retreat permanently from reality, but to restore *ataraxia*, the “tranquil joy” central to the Epicurean way of life (Rosenmeyer 67-68). As such, it is defined by utopian imagery depicting peaceful rural seclusion and fecundity that includes fresh-water streams and pools, trees, birds, and, of course, flowers and grasses (Frye, *Anatomy* 152).⁴⁵ The *locus amoenus* is associated, and sometimes equated, with the female body of the mother, beloved, or bride essential to the rebirth of society

⁴⁵ See Rosenmeyer 179-203; Samson 10.

in comedy and to the reintegration of the representative quest-hero with the land in romance (Frye, *Anatomy* 183, 193; Rosenmeyer 181). Notably for my reading of Roethke and Hass's poetry, as a vision of "innocence" and longing for personal well-being or social flourishing, this *topos* is conventionally informed by male experience of the world.

Relative to the life stages of the hero, the *locus amoenus* might be a setting of youthful dalliance or of mature contemplative retreat (Frye, *Anatomy* 185, 202). Regardless, it generally signifies restoration, integrative insight, and "nature in its numinous aspects," often serving as a "vessel for essentially religious feelings" (Evelt 506). Points of epiphany typically occur within a *locus amoenus*. These are moments when the terrestrial realm, with its natural cycles, intersects or corresponds with the eternal, "heavenly" one; in other words, the author's visions of experience and innocence are brought into alignment (Frye, *Anatomy* 203). Frye cites the conclusion of *Purgatorio* as a prime example: upon entering the Earthly Paradise at the peak of Mount Purgatory, Dante is reunited with Beatrice, purged of difficult memories in the river Lethe, strengthened in blessed memories by immersion in the river Eunoe, and given an apocalyptic vision before he begins his ascent through the heavenly spheres (Dante, *Purgatorio* Cantos 28-33). Such epiphanies mirror the culminating scene of recognition (*anagnorisis*) in comedy and romance, after which the hero is married to his beloved and society is renewed (Frye, *Anatomy* 163). So, for example, the central setting of Shakespearean romantic comedy is the paradigmatic "drama of the green world, its plot being assimilated to the ritual theme of the triumph of life and love over the waste land" (182). A place of peace and flourishing within the "landscape of [human] will and need," the *locus amoenus* is an ideal "*ordre du coeur*," to use Auden's phrase from "New Year Letter," whereby the poet seeks to "set in order sense / And feeling and intelligence" (*Collected* 226, 212, 200).

Historical Consciousness and "A Prior Order"

In the poetry I have selected for consideration here, especially Roethke's "North American Sequence" and Hass' "Santa Lucia" series, the floral image is situated within a *locus amoenus*. This is done with the poet's full awareness that the Old World pastoral vision has altered from the time explorers and colonists applied its imaginative frame to the New World. To borrow Leo Marx's observation, "The pastoral ideal has been used to define the meaning of America. . . . [as] the site of a new beginning" (3). As such, it was employed creatively by the settler in the *poiesis* of homemaking (for example, Anne Bradstreet in "Contemplations"), but also ideologically in the justification, both unconscious and conscious, of colonial appropriation of Indigenous people's land, the institution of slavery, patriarchal chauvinism, and reckless exploitation of natural systems. As Lawrence Buell argues, "The challenge this legacy poses . . . is to appreciate how compromised the pastoralizing vision thereby can become without losing sight of its constructive power" (*Environmental* 32).

Both Roethke and Hass demonstrate in their poetic practice awareness of historically effected consciousness, or reflection on the situation of the poet (and listener/reader) within a long tradition of cultural forms and effects (Gadamer 301, 306). Prompted by literary archetypal theory such as Frye's, and by Eliot's argument concerning "tradition and the individual talent," Roethke intentionally employs pastoral motifs to tap into the "unrecognized patterns of human psychology" deposited in the tradition (La Belle 85-86). But for the most part, he is unconcerned with ideology. More than Roethke, Hass is wary of "American naturism's ideological multivalence" (Buell, *Environmental* 36), so that, in Marx's terms, his is an "imaginative and complex pastoralism" as opposed to a sentimental one (Marx 5). He therefore engages the pastoral tradition more critically than Hass, employing the *locus amoenus* and the related *topoi* with ambivalence.

peace and prosperity. Hass's speaker similarly juxtaposes the two realms, their "love" and "weal," to reimagine eros and logos, love and governing or ordering reason, as integrated.

The opening line of "Monticello," "Snow is falling," sets an emotional temperature reflective of the Enlightenment ideal of detached rationality; but it also suggests suppression and cessation, even death. This sense is strengthened when "Monticello" is read alongside its companion "Winter Morning in Charlottesville," where "the sacrament of winter" in the birthplace of the Declaration of Independence is linked with Savonarola's over-zealous asceticism in trying to quell "the carnal word" and flowering of the blood in Botticelli's Florence (96). The speaker in "Monticello" seeks equanimity in the handling of desire, evoked in the closing image of the snow caught "star-shaped"—a vivid, erotic-botanic form—"in the vaginal leaves of old magnolias" (98). The poem's historical delving goes deep, to recall that all forms of life, even those proceeding from human consciousness, arise from the body and earth and their tidal renewals. Besides, divisions—even "the separation of powers"—are not "monument[al]" or marmoreal, for all is in flux.

Hass is also critically alert to the various ideologies that can colonize the desire expressed in the conventional *locus amoenus*, including the identification of the female body with nature, in opposition to civilization, coded as male. The theme is raised subtly in the first section of "My Mother's Nipples." "They're where all displacement begins," the poem opens, in reference to the literal subject of the title. A *locus amoenus* is immediately conjured ("meadow"), but it is in a state of disruption by modern housing development: "They bulldozed the upper meadow at Squaw Valley" (*Apple* 210). The latter name, literally referring to a Lake Tahoe place, is besmirched by centuries of derogatory use, and the image evokes the history of Native American displacement and exploitative colonization of the land. Along with the strain of elegy for what

has been lost, there is flat irony over commercial fetishism: “someone put up a green sign / with alpine daisies on it that said Squaw Valley Meadows” (*Apple* 210).

This opening scenario highlights the way humans driven by basic longings—in this case, for home—employ technology for rendering things as commodities in modern civilization. The technocratic approach to making home is signalled by the bulldozer, the framers, electricians and plumbers, the general contractor. In mechanically “goug[ing] up,” “push[ing] aside,” we are alienated from the ground of life. The poet-speaker proceeds through a variety of perspectives in which unfulfilled eros might be channelled instead into creative forms of “Mother-song” (214). Images of breasts, gardens, meadows of wildflowers and grass form a composite picture of “some place on earth” that is loved by the speaker, if not by his alcoholic mother (218). The poem enacts an achievement of balance between appreciation for the pleasures of being here and acceptance of the suffering that entails, between “all kinds of emptiness and fullness / that sing and do not sing” (217).

“My Mother’s Nipples” also probes the pastoral “land-as-woman” metaphor that runs through a spectrum of texts in American literary history, from colonial conquest onward (Kolodny 150). The poem presumes that biological and psychological dependency upon the mother’s body and earth—those primary ambiances of individual and collective life—schematize thought and imagination. This very dependency, feminist critics Annette Kolodny and Susan Griffin argue, is experienced as threat when met by the predominant Western habit of mind that valorizes unlimited autonomy and conceives of knowledge as power over the object rather than inter-relational dependency (Kolodny 151-56; Griffin 75, 90-91). Such a mindset infuses perception of the female other and of non-human nature (as figures of the subject’s dependency) with both “longing and fear.” When frustrated by the limits on fulfillment imposed by reality,

desire for gratification, which involves dependency, may deform under this habit of mind into a counter desire for absolute freedom. Frustration and conflict promote feelings of alienation and can result in efforts to reify, possess, and control women and the natural conditions upon which life depends (Griffin 88-90; Kolodny 137, 139).⁴⁶

Granting that that pastoral vision has played a role in the ideological marginalization of women and Native American, I am in agreement with Marx and Buell that it yet bears the “constructive potential” of animating the environmental imagination, energizing regard for the earth, and strengthening affection for particular places (Buell, *Environmental* 33). Marx insightfully observes that the pastoral impulse may be “the starting point for infantile wish-fulfillment dreams, a diffuse nostalgia, and a naïve, anarchic primitivism,” but it may also be “the source of writing that is invaluable for its power to enrich and clarify our experience” (11). As an archetype that idealizes place, for example, the *locus amoenus* is primarily an expression of desire for renewal and harmony. In so far as it fosters attachment and the imagination of hope, rather than being essentially escapist, the *locus amoenus* registers “protest against the ruins” or a repugnant socio-political order (Miłosz 349). When held in dialectical relation with a self-disinterested observation of the world, its imagery may even embody a stance of “acceptance and relinquishment” (Hass, *Twentieth* 305).

Hass considers these possibilities in the essay “Lowell’s Graveyard” (1984). In contrast to Robert Lowell’s pessimistic, hyper-Calvinistic determinism in “The Quaker Graveyard in Nantucket,” according to which a saner social order can neither be imagined, chosen, nor achieved (*Twentieth* 4-5), Hass observes latent political potential within Roethke’s use of the

⁴⁶ See also Carolyn Merchant’s *The Death of Nature: Women, Ecology and the Scientific Revolution* for a genealogy of “Nature as Female” (1-41).

comic *mythos* in “The Lost Son.” Enacting the pattern of disintegration and renewal, Roethke’s poem begins in a dark cemetery but ends in a “wide field” with light moving over it. This image signifies the promised return of “[a] lively understandable spirit” to a pleasant place and hope for change from an old, decaying social order or worldview to a revived one (Roethke, *Collected* 55). In response to Lowell’s tragic state of mind, Hass invokes the “small gods of hilarity and carnality,” comic “forms of imagination” that envision a more pleasant world “in which we could dwell and through which we could see” (*Twentieth* 7, 18). He recoils from the shape Lowell gives to the longing for escape to some purely ideal “not-world” from this actual one where life is, admittedly, mixed with “violence and cruelty” (20-21).

Elsewhere, Hass redefines the Freudian concept of Thanatos, Eros’s opposite, “not as an instinctual drive toward death in human beings,” but rather, “the imaginative conception of death as escape from nature, death as glorious transformation,” related to the *mythos* of tragedy (*What* 88). Invoking Frye, he reflects on the potential of the *mythos* of comedy, over which Eros presides, as one possible imaginative restraint upon the agonistic tendencies of the human spirit (*What* 87-88). Insofar as comedy acts both to subvert a decaying social order and imagine a peaceful new one, it is “on the side of Eros.” The flora-in-light image and *locus amoenus* can be forms of imagination on the side of life, as I find to be the case in Roethke and Hass’s work.

I am not suggesting, then, that the poets simply adopt the pastoral conventions unmodified. Each seeks to express his affirmation of life and “accept the limitations of joy” relative to some vision of a more desirable world that supports this acceptance (Frye, *Anatomy* 299, 301). Combining a hermeneutics of recovery that is both suspicious and sympathetic, I assume that pastoral topoi are “ideologically multivalent,” as Buell puts it, and interpret them as bearing “constructive potential” despite their varied literary history (*Environmental* 33, 35-36).

Focusing on this form of ecospirituality foregrounds the dialectic of desire in the poets' writing between visions of "innocence" and "experience" (from dailiness to disappointment), which Frye proposes is at work in all *poiesis* (*Anatomy* 301). It helps us see from one angle the tensional aesthetics in their poetry that affirms earthly, interconnected life and relinquishes the violence that may attend egoistic fear of death.

The practice of poetry for Roethke and Hass is part of an ongoing exercise to effect both attachment and what Jonathan Bate names (after Rilke) "a letting-go" and "acceptance of finitude and of mortality" (263). Indeed, Rilke's expression *dennoch preisen*, "praise nevertheless," in "The Sonnets to Orpheus" (*Selected* 248; 2.23)—conveying, at once, affirmation and relinquishment—appears to have made an impression upon both poets. The attitude is reflected in their earlier book titles, *Praise to the End!* (Roethke) and *Praise* (Hass).⁴⁷ Cultivating balance in the dialectic of desire, they work to moderate the escapist idealizing impulse infusing the pastoral and resist the extreme passion and annihilative drive marring the eros of the courtly love tradition. The pull of eros to naïve idealization and escapism need not lead to nihilistic tendencies; it can be checked.⁴⁸

So while the *mythos* of romance is "nearest of all literary forms to the wish-fulfillment dream," it also provides the archetypal pattern of the quest journey through which the poets

⁴⁷ Both poets read Rilke closely. Roethke claims Rilke taught him that "there are themes other than light" (qtd. in Seager 168; see also *Straw* 196; *On Poetry* 40). Hass wrote the illuminating introductory essay, "Looking for Rilke," for Stephen Mitchell's translation of Rilke's poetry, *The Selected Poetry of Rainer Maria Rilke* (reprinted in *Twentieth Century Pleasures*).

⁴⁸ Similar to Hass's view of Thanatos as a form of escapist nihilism, Roethke repudiates the onanism of his protagonist "lost son" as the "ecstasy death wish," and says his "will to live saves him from the *annihilation* of the ecstasy" (*Selected* 152; *On Poetry* 52).

imagine the reconciliation of the mind with its embodied, earthly existence (Frye, *Anatomy* 186-87; Abrams, *Natural* 83). As for the *mythos* of comedy, Frye asserts that it demonstrates “the archetypal function of [all] literature in visualizing the world of desire, not as an escape from ‘reality,’ but as the genuine form of the world that human life tries to imitate” (*Anatomy* 184). From this perspective, the flora-in-light and associated *topoi* on which I am focusing are forms of the creative work of the human imagination in the process of homemaking and cultivating attachment to place. In creatively reappropriating the pastoral topos of human identification with the vegetable world, both poets convey erotic attachment to and affirmation of life, and particularly, of ordinary life in the regions where they reside.

Praising Nevertheless: Roethke’s Weeds

Roethke echoes Frye in his expressed desire to write “a poetry of longing: not for escape, but for a greater reality” (*Straw* 193). For Roethke, the modifier “greater” indicates the possibility of transcending despair in present conditions, to come nearer to the source of fullness and joy. In his review of *Open House*, Auden advised Roethke that he had “read quite enough English poetry for a bit” and should reach beyond, to gain a variety of organizing thematic material (127). This counsel Roethke echoes in his application for the 1952-53 Ford grant, writing that he is thoroughly familiar with English poetry, “but there is much in philosophy and history and science” he wants to learn (*Selected* 173).

Auden’s influence is detectable in the readings in mysticism and existentialist philosophy and theology he undertook to better imagine and express “a greater reality,” particularly through readings in Underhill’s *Mysticism: A Study in the Nature and Development of Spiritual Consciousness* and Paul Tillich’s *The Courage to Be* (Malkoff 124; Sullivan 126-27). The latter especially fortified Roethke’s sense that his poetry, reflecting the development of identity or “a

self,” is neither an egocentric preoccupation nor withdrawal from the world, but the activity of an exemplar expanding consciousness (Roethke *On Poetry* 35).⁴⁹ For Roethke, self-discovery is a profoundly arduous and creative process, a “struggle,” a “drive toward God” (53). In Tillich’s terms (drawn from Nietzsche), it involves the courage to affirm life “in spite of” existential awareness that nonbeing, the abyss, is part of being (Tillich 30, 32, 66). Tillich’s designation of mysticism as “an element of every form” of spiritual relation to “the ground of being” (160), and Underhill’s presentation of the mystic’s journey to God, encouraged Roethke to conceive of poetry as a this-worldly mystical way of “[t]raining himself to love life” (*Straw* 147). His aesthetics of affirmation and relinquishment gave shape to the longing for “a greater reality.”

Just months before his death, Roethke explicitly articulated the main themes of his spirituality and poetry in a lecture presented at Northwestern University in April 1963. Later published as the essay “On ‘Identity,’” the lecture outlines four principal concerns he believes are common to his contemporaries: “(1) The multiplicity, the chaos of modern life; (2) The way, the means of establishing a personal identity, a self in the face of that chaos; (3) The nature of creation, that faculty for producing order out of disorder in the arts, particularly in poetry; and (4) The nature of God Himself” (*On Poetry* 35). Afterwards, he received a note from the students who had invited him, thanking him for inspiring in them a feeling of “spiritual unity with self and nature” (Seager 282). These themes of ecospiritual eros are central to his late presentation of the quest journey, “North American Sequence,” but they can be described in seminal form in the early poem “Long Live the Weeds” (*Open House*, 1941).

⁴⁹ Tillich immigrated to New York to teach at Union Theological Seminary on invitation by Reinhold Niebuhr after his 1933 dismissal from the University of Frankfurt for opposing the Nazi regime. He incorporated German Romantic philosophy, existentialism, hermeneutics, and depth psychology into his theology of culture.

From the opening Hopkinsian hurrah of this poem dedicated to the Victorian poet—“Long live the weeds that overwhelm / My narrow vegetable realm!”—Roethke reveals his developing romantic-comic tendency to use the flora figure and *locus amoenus* as affirmative symbols of the self and its place of unfolding (*Collected* 17). His “vegetable realm” is no prelapsarian garden, for the poem is a microcosm in which the difficulties of life—*ponos*, or labor and pain valorized in the Hesiodic tradition of didactic agrarian (or georgic) poetry (Rosenmeyer 22)—are a counterpoint that call upon the poet to “match,” with his ordering creativity, “the ugly of the universe.” Here he demonstrates the principal longing that Ralph J. Mills, Jr. describes in all his work: desire for “‘unity of being’ . . . that final condition of grace which is a harmony of the self with all things” (*Theodore* 17). The speaker is reminiscent of Roethke’s horticulturalist father, one among “austere German Americans [who] turned their love of order and their terrifying efficiency into something truly beautiful,” in his case, hothouses. These were, in Roethke’s memory, a Blakean state of contraries: “heaven and hell, a kind of tropics created in the savage climate of Michigan” (*On Poetry* 22). When the poet was fifteen (1923), following the sale of the greenhouses after a quarrel between his father and uncle, the latter committed suicide; a few months later his father died of cancer (Seager 42).

The central “father-stem” of his personal myth, in its early stages of development in “Long Live the Weeds,” is the blending of “the papa on earth and heaven” (*On Poetry* 51). The protagonist self is “the lost son,” and the hothouses and fields are paradise, “my father’s world.— / O world so far away! O my lost world!” elegized in one of his last poems, “Otto,” written in 1962 and published in *The Far Field* (*Collected* 217; *Selected* 254). “Long Live the Weeds” assumes the displaced biblical myth of Genesis, so that behind the persona of the gardener-poet is that first Father of humans and Son of God, Adam, a figure of “human nature

under sentence of death” (Frye, *Anatomy* 42). Though a Mother-Eve figure is not yet explicitly present, elsewhere Roethke states that the hothouse was a “womb” (51), so the garden-“vegetable realm” of the poem might be taken as a “primordial image of Woman,” anticipatory of the *genius loci*, *anima*-soul, or psyche Muse figure of later poems, including those of “North American Sequence,” where the archetype is presented in the figures of protecting Mother and ecstatic beloved (Malkoff 111-13, 126; Burke 71; Staples 202; Parini 137).

In Frye’s archetypal interpretation of the Genesis myth, Adam (representative of humanity) is exiled and must undertake a cyclical quest-journey away from and then return to the Divine Father and Paradise (Mother) in order to renew an estate that, in the poem’s phrase, is “marred by curse” (*Anatomy* 188, 319). Roethke’s poet-persona in “Long Live the Weeds,” following this pattern, must actively order through “toil” and “match” with “wit”—though not eradicate—the chaos of weeds, rocks, and soil, to “[h]ope, love, create, or [else] drink and die,” in order to “shape the creature that is I” (*Collected* 17).” Throughout his adult life Roethke was plagued with manic-depressive disorder complicated by heavy drinking. Periodic breakdowns required his institutionalization (Seager 101-109), but also presented him with insights from “that dark pond, the unconscious,” which he perceived as glimpses into the “hinterlands of memory” of both the individual and the race and even into the mystical Abyss (Roethke *On Poetry* 49, 70; Parini 60; Sullivan 12). “Long Live the Weeds” versifies the antagonistic forces as, “The rough, the wicked, and the wild / That keep the spirit undefiled.” They are aspects of the unconscious that must be tapped “for schooling the spirit,” precursors to “all the muck and welter, the dark, the *dreck*” of the more experimental long poems to come (*On Poetry* 52). Two late poems in “Sequence, Almost Metaphysical” (*The Far Field*) reflect his early identification of poetry as a vital psycho-spiritual practice in the face of these challenges. “The Marrow”

features the lines “From a burnt pine the sharp speech of a crow / Tells me my drinking breeds a will to die” (*Collected* 238) and “In Evening Air,” “Who would be half possessed / By his own nakedness? / Waking’s my care— / I’ll make a broken music, or I’ll die” (232). In Hass’s terms, this free-verse confession assumes “openness or chaos in which an order must be discovered,” and discovery is predicated both on “sensual attention, of possibility and emergence” and on inventive engagement with tradition (*Twentieth* 123).

“Long Live the Weeds” is an early formulation of the botanical setting and the allegorical journey emplotment Roethke will use in future long poems to convey his ongoing erotic “[r]eaching out more desperately for life” (*Straw* 147). In “The Lost Son” and “Praise to the End!” sequences (published together as one long sequence in *Praise to the End!*), the human striving to be more fully actualized—“the mind, under great stress” seeking to be reborn “in order to go forward” (*On Poetry* 25)—takes the pattern of regressive and progressive movements in the journey, or “disintegration and return,” as Hass names it (*Twentieth* 57). I will demonstrate shortly the way Roethke entwines this journey trope with the flora-in-light figure and anchors both in a particular Pacific *locus amoenus* in the “North American Sequence.” For now, I want to highlight that in “Long Live the Weeds,” love is the link between hope and creation in combat with despair and chaos.

Though only generally suggested in this early poem, eros—love of a non-human or human other, of creative work, and of God—is the energy of motion central to his creative representations of integration, peace of mind, and “illumination” (*On Poetry* 41, 51). He asserts, “I think of myself as a poet of love, a poet of praise” (33). His use of vegetal imagery to bring Psyche and Eros into unity, as Burke puts it (72), is key to my reading of “North American Sequence” and the related poem “The Abyss.” I focus on his relocation of the site of this union—

his *locus amoenus* and its central rose—from his father’s hothouse and fields to the wilder estuarine shorelines of the San Juan Islands and Vancouver Island in the Salish Sea.

Hass’s Praise: “Enumerate the Vegetation”

Hass’s poetry also shows an erotic impetus “to forge a connection to place, history, and community through loving attention to land, landscape, and the language” (intrv. in Gardner 164). This homing instinct is entwined with botanical images in his poetry, for instance in “Santa Barbara Road” (*Human Wishes*, 1989), where the speaker, identifiable with the poet, ruefully recalls a time when he “felt like a stranger to my life / and it scared me” so he “went into the garden and started / digging, trying to marry myself / and my hands to that place” (*Apple* 173). The domestic activity of gardening is connected to a wilder motif in his writing, the flora-in-light of a meadow located in a distinctly Coastal Californian *locus amoenus*, in “imagination of early childhood, dusty fig leaves and sun and fields of wild fennel” (*Twentieth* 4-5). The meadow is variously associated with desire for the displaced breast: that of the beloved in “Weed,” which alludes to William Carlos Williams’s “Queen-Anne’s Lace” ([*Praise* 1979] *Apple* 100);⁵⁰ that of the mother in “My Mother’s Nipples” ([*Sun Under Wood*, 1996] *Apple* 210); and that of the motherland in “Between the Wars” ([*Human Wishes*, 1989] *Apple* 196).

This latter poem particularly exemplifies the botanic-erotic conflation and the associations that constellate around the flora-in-light image, pertinent to my later discussion of the “Santa Lucia” series. For his speaker, Hass employs his characteristic “spiritual ventriloquism,” the ability “to project not merely voice but a whole sensibility” (Glück 68). Here

⁵⁰ Hass’s temporal reference in “Weed” to “meadows in New Jersey / in 1933” likely indicates his first reading of “Queen-Anne’s Lace” in Williams’s *Collected Poems 1921-31* (published in 1933), though the poem was first published in *Sour Grapes* (1921).

the speaker, whom I take to be a persona of the poet, channels the sensibility of an exile from Poland we can safely assume to be his friend Miłosz, “the hawk-like Lithuanian poet in the Berkeley hills” whose work Hass helped to translate from 1979 onward (*Twentieth* 179). Hass pays tribute to Miłosz in *The Apple Trees at Olema* by including a sample of poetry-in-translation (“Czesław Miłosz: In Memoriam”) and alluding to him in several poems (“July Notebook: The Birds,” “For Czesław Miłosz in Kraków,” “Interrupted Meditation,” “Consciousness”).

The setting of the speaker’s memory in “Between the Wars” is in “midsummer, upstate New York,” where he was writing and studying away from home. He recalls his practice of going for a run in late afternoon rain near a marshy meadow, possibly riverine, with reeds and redwing blackbirds (196). One particular instance, “toward sundown,” comes into focus. As his consciousness was filled with “Polish history,” the darkening sky and bird song conjured thoughts of death and a requiem eliciting from him a prayer to a Blessed Virgin-Venus Anodymene figure, “*Lady of eyelashes*” (196). She is a variation on what Hass calls Miłosz’s “pantheist Madonna” (*Twentieth* 180). Her “*Whiteness, otter’s body*” also mirrors an image from Hass’s earlier poem “Against Botticelli,” in which the Florentine artist’s *The Birth of Venus* is a universal figure of the beautiful and the enchantment of sensual pleasure that spurs generation of life. “Against Botticelli” gives Venus a Pacific coast—even Jeffersian—inflection: “spray of that sea, / irised: otters in the tide lash, in the kelp-drench, / mammal warmth and the inhuman element” (*Apple* 83). In “Between the Wars,” she is “coolness of the morning, rubbed amber / and the skin’s salt” (196). The eros to which she gives rise is associated with Poland’s new independence in the “*era of the dawn of freedom, ’nineteen twenty-two,*” year of that nation’s first presidential election after World War I (196). As such, she also recalls the Venus figure in

Hass's "The Origin of Cities," where she is social desire poised between change and cohesion, "what goes out, what returns" (95). She is central to "[t]he arcadian or cytherean myth"—Cytherea another name for Aphrodite-Venus—of which Miłosz has written, the longing for collective happiness that dreams "about a beautiful future" place and peace (347).

Accordingly, after the italicized apostrophe the speaker continues to conjure the remembered meadow, where up from "the soaked odor of the grass," an allusion to Whitman, there arises an earthly, "impure shining." This "levitating, Congregational, meadow-light-at-twilight," that "darkens the heavy-headed blossoms of wild carrot," the latter Williams's erotic and demotic "Queen-Anne's Lace," gestures to the religious history of the American locus and the collective longings from which unfolded the democratic experiment. Unexpectedly, there "boils," "pools" and "fissures" a "pure fire" that casts multi-hued "flame[s]" on the clouds (196). While the imagery of light and heat suggests erotic passion, the phrase "pure fire" invokes the Christian tradition of metaphysical light. The juxtaposition of "impure shining" and "pure fire" presents the tension between historical reality and religious and poetic imaginations of the ideal.

The phenomenon of "[f]irst darkening, then light," then on-coming night, move the speaker's thought back to the land of his childhood, after the First and prior to the Second World War.⁵¹ The conflation of Mary and Venus in the image of an American meadow at sunset indicate the speaker's deep cultural memories from that time, the folk legends that blend maternal paganism with the Christian story of "the Virgin and the Child" seeking shelter from "Herod's hunters" (196-97). The allusion associates the casualties of war to the massacre of the innocents under orders of the paranoid tyrant in Matthew's Gospel (2.16-18). So also the Christ

⁵¹ See Miłosz's "A Meadow" (*Facing the River*, 1995), which appears to be a response to Hass's "Between the Wars" (*New* 597).

of legend and icon and Cupid-Eros are merged in the description of night that comes as a “maimed figure of the god,” exiled, hungry and begging. Though the god of Love is usually depicted as the youthful son of the goddess Venus-Aphrodite implied in the poem, the poem calls to mind Socrates’s Eros in *Symposium*, the rough, shoeless vagrant son of Penia (Poverty) and Poros (Resource). More importantly, it evokes an aged, “wizened” mendicant-Christ-Everyman being soothed at the breast, a Madonna *lactans* icon (197). The image gives form to the spiritual and physical hunger of wartime Poland being met by the “sweet milk” of a dream of freedom and home restored. The speaker, filled with longing for his own home, says: “I’ll suckle at that breast, / the one in the song of the muttering illumination / of the fields before the sun goes down” (197).

The meadow image recurring throughout Hass’s corpus evokes ecospiritual eros, the affective-somatic attachment to earthly place mirroring the infant’s bond of hunger with the mother and the lover’s bond of desire with the beloved. The image has ancient religious, as well as biological, roots. In one of his 1998 entries for his syndicated *The Poet’s Choice* column, he highlights an ancient Sumerian hymn to the earth goddess, translated:

O Lady, your breast is your field.
 Inanna, your breast is your field.
 Your broad field pours out plants.
 Your broad field pours out grain.
 Water flows from on high for your servant.
 Bread flows from on high for your servant.
 Pour it out for me, Inanna.
 I will drink all you offer. (*Now* 62)

This bond to meadow-and-breast can be detected in Hass's prose poem "Calm" (*Human Wishes*, 1989). The speaker engages in a psychagogic inner dialogue in which he counsels himself to dissolve his anxiety, revealed in a nightmare—or *nicht*-mare, to note the mechanical repetition of "no" in the dream. In a move that recalls Duncan's "Often I Am Permitted to Return to A Meadow," "as if it were a given property of the mind / that certain bounds hold against chaos" (Duncan 54), the speaker conjures a *locus amoenus*: "The meadow, you remember the meadow?" (Hass, *Apple* 143). There the June air cradles a scent like the Virgin Mary "holds the broken son," evoking an empathic-erotic maternal presence: "You can go into that meadow, the light routed by a brilliant tenderness of green, a cool V carved by a muskrat in the blue-gray distance of the pond, black-eyed Susans everywhere. You can go there" (143).

The reference to the muskrat, a creature indigenous to North American wetlands, brings to mind the diving hero of Native American creation stories. The allusion may be to the "gliding *musquash*" in the "Pleasant Meadow" of Thoreau's *Walden* poet, or the "musquash look[ing] out from his cabin" in "air . . . so warm and serene that nothing was wanting to make a paradise of that meadow" in "Walking" (192, 663). Deepening the New World motif, the ubiquitous native wildflower black-eyed Susan (*Rudbeckia*) stands at the end of Williams' *Spring and All*, and brings to mind his nativist poetics. The flower's namesake is the faithful beloved in John Gay's "Sweet William's Farewell to Black-Ey'd Susan" (1719). Gay's ballad lyric was turned into a popular British nautical song that drifted across the Atlantic to take root as a "traditional" North American folk song (Gustar 442). In Hass's poem, then, the memory of a quintessential pastoral *locus amoenus* is an enduring placeholder that can be creatively recovered. It is a Frostian momentary stay against confusion that is not an escape from time and matter, but an improvisation within earthly conditions.

The theme is explored in a particularly Roethkean “lost son” poem of disintegration and return, “Child Naming Flowers,” from his second poetry collection, *Praise* (1979):

When old crones wandered in the woods,
 I was the hero on the hill
 in clear sunlight.
 Death’s hounds feared me.
 Smell of wild fennel,
 high loft of sweet fruit high in the branches
 of the flowering plum.
 Then I am cast down
 into the terror of childhood . . . (*Apple* 101).

Composing himself at the end of the poem, the speaker recovers from his psychic regression by taking in “all the fullness that there is / in light.” He does this through contemplative “looking / at one clear pure peach” in a Georgia O’Keeffe painting. In the ecology of the speaker’s thought, the soothing effect of the artifact’s mammary, botanic form intertwines with being able to name the familiar bird, a towhee, that “scratches in the leaves / outside my door” (101-2).

Art gives form to what Hass names elsewhere “the hope of a shapeliness in things” (*Twentieth* 56). In the long poem “How to Survive the Summer,” he acknowledges that traditional “stories, / songs” and the poetic shapes of desire, such as the *locus amoenus* flora and fauna within the poem, “are the frailest stay / against our fears” (126). The speaker, seeking how best to help his child adapt to her loss of innocence in the experience of death, thinks to teach her, through consoling rhythm, about the rhythms of life. If pain interrupts pleasure, still, pleasure can be creatively recovered. The theme is woven through sixteen sections consisting of

varying numbers of tercets, many of them haiku-like in still, compact images of summer present and past. The seventh section foregrounds the formal reference: “The haiku comes / in threes / with the virtues of brevity” (117). In the same section, Issa’s haiku—“*What a strange thing! / To be alive / beneath plum blossoms*”—obliquely echoes the sentiment of wonder at the pattern of pain followed by pleasure in the poem’s epigraph. It is drawn from the conclusion of Dostoyevsky’s *The Brothers Karamozov*, in which Kolya addresses Aloysha: “*It’s funny, isn’t it, Karamazov, / all this grief and pancakes afterwards . . .*” (Apple 112).

The digressiveness of “How to Survive the Summer,” a characteristic quality of Hass’s aesthetic, shows the “mind in the act of finding / What will suffice,” to borrow from Stevens (“Of Modern Poetry,” *Selected* 135). Indeed, Stevens surfaces in the speaker’s stream of consciousness in the third and fourth sections. We learn that the “gray-eyed child” who announces in the first section that her “mother’s dead” is the neighbour-friend of the speaker’s daughter, and that her thirty-one year old mother “died, at Sunday breakfast” (115). By way of this temporal reference, the tragedy is linked to Stevens’s “Sunday Morning,” in which he coins the memorable aphorism repeated here, “Death is the mother of beauty” (114, 115). Death can be endured through the domestic and cultural rituals—at one time, religious—that order ordinary life; it gives birth to form amidst “the war between desire / and dailiness,” in which desire won’t settle for the arrangement and seeks to transcend it (114). The passing of beloved people and things gives rise to profound longings for salvation—“save” is a repeated motif—and for an “other world” (118). Thus is generated *poiesis*, the making of forms of beauty, the art of books, farms, “old / country songs, herbal magic, / recipes for soup,” the ecstatic motions of sex and religion, and a polished wooden nickel from “grandpa,” ironically delivered with an adage against illusion, “Don’t take any wooden nickels, kid” (113, 115; see also *What* 286).

The poem links Stevens's languid wisdom with the time-"lustered" and "cosmic" wit of his grandfather's aphorism:

Should I whisper in her ear,
 death is the mother
 of beauty? Wooden

 nickels, kid? It's all in
 shapeliness, give your
 fears a shape? (*Apple* 115)

But the aesthetic lightness of Steven's aphorism is brought into uneasy juxtaposition with the weight of the speaker's own sense of finitude pressing upon him, triggered by the "misery" of the mother's premature death. Like Roethke's "ugly of the universe," the "formlessness, / *informis*" and "ugliness" in the poem are reminders that death is part of nature, while the cultural forms that arise, like the "sea birds . . . in early light," are indispensable in helping "to calm" the fears of facing it (113, 118, 126). Indeed, they are also part of nature. The poem holds the tensions in a self-reflexive form that both commemorates and interrogates the synthesizing powers of the formal imagination, calling the reader to be attentive again to "all things lustered / by the steady thoughtlessness / of human use" (127).

As can be seen in each of these poems, Hass follows Roethke who, among his early mentors, especially modelled the art of "poems of disintegration and return," poems that register childhood experiences of the tension between disturbance and pleasance (*Twentieth* 57).

Topographical, historical and autobiographical details of place are regularly engaged in Hass's art. Ambivalence about the traditional religious symbolism and sensibility absorbed through his Catholic upbringing are intertwined with traces of "what my parents in the innocence of their

malice / toward each other did to me” (“Thin Air,” *Apple* 193). For instance, the chaos of his family of origin—his mother’s alcoholism at the epicentre—is the theme of “The World as Will and Representation,” in which “a drug called antabuse” and gender roles of the 1950s are clearly failed forms of cultural “order” (*Apple* 282-83). This poem, in turn, casts light on “The Garden of Delight,” a reflection on what Miłosz puts succinctly as, “the discrepancy between reality and the desire of our hearts,” incarnated in art and its cultural frames (*Witness* 115).

“The Garden of Delight” opens with dolorous narration of a scene in an art museum whose “poor floor” “hurts” and “whines” under the feet of patrons, “whichever way they step” (90). The pathetic fallacy in the description of the floor, “as if it had learned the trick / of suffering,” cues the reader to the mood colouring the speaker’s perception of a painting. “This is the garden of delight,” he states with incredulity. We can surmise he is looking at Hieronymus Bosch’s *The Garden of Earthly Delights*, the likely referent of “the Bosch” in another *ekphrastic* poem, “Against Botticelli” (83). Published in *Praise* along with “Santa Lucia,” both “The Garden of Delight” and “Against Botticelli” feature parodic *locus amoenus* settings of less-than-idealized love in the modern world. As we will see, this ironic view is repeated in the “Santa Lucia” sequence, in which allusions to the Florentine Renaissance signify the female persona’s troubled relationship with the tradition of “Art & love.”

The description of the painted garden vignette—perhaps from the central panel, bottom right, of Bosch’s painting—is spare but poignant: “a man pointing at a woman / and a bird perched / on a cylinder of crystal” (90). In a highly compressed image, what appears to the speaker as “a stopper / in [the woman’s] mouth” and an expression of worry on the man’s face externalizes the relational agony caused by alcohol addiction and failed attempts to enforce control and the wider issue of “Gender and the order of things,” taken up in “The World as Will

and Representation” (*Apple* 283). The speaker in “That Garden of Delight” exhales relief over the “advantage of paintings,” synchronic and removed as they are from necessitated action. He notices the man “doesn’t move,” but response is not required: “You don’t have to.”

This statement seems to undercut the didactic intention of Renaissance and medieval allegory where the Earthly Paradise represents “the perfected *vita activa*” upon which the viewer was meant to meditate as a preparatory exercise for engagement in social life (Dee 4). Lost or without relevance to life in modern society are the old figures and codes of interpretation consistent with the “Christian orientation of love” idealized and expressed in Botticelli’s garden of Venus in *Primavera* (Deimling 46). The imaginative assumption of interconnected cosmic, earthly, and social order to which Botticelli and Bosch belong has long been fragmented.⁵² But the speaker of “The Garden of Delight” abruptly recalls a younger self, the one in the companion poem, “Child Naming Flowers,” concluding the poem with a nostalgic memory: “I used to name the flowers— / beard tongue, stonecrop, / pearly everlasting” (*Apple* 90). This suggests that, despite the loss of the cultural context and code, some of the meditative intent of the paintings has been met. For in both “The Garden of Delight” and “Child Naming Flowers,” naming the flowers is revealed as more than pleasure; it is a spiritual strategy against *informis*. “The very act of naming things,” writes, Miłosz, “presupposes a faith in their existence and thus in a true world” (*Witness* 57). Listing is akin to reciting a litany of praise; it is an innovative means to

⁵² In “Not Going to New York: A Letter,” the puzzle Hass’s children are bent over is “some allegory / of the quattrocento cut in a thousand small uneven pieces” (110). This suggests the modern fragmentation of what he calls “the old wisdoms,” the ceremony, ritual, and practices that, along with paradise, are lost to the viewer here and to the lovers in “Against Botticelli” (83).

draw beauty out of its mother, death. In both poems, death is the broken expectation of pleasure and peace, of order in things; but naming restores the possibility of affirmation.

In the essay, “One Body: Some Notes on Form” (1978), Hass writes, “It seems to me . . . that we make our forms because there is no absolute continuity” between the world and the infant’s “first nurturing,” where the imagination begins. Contrary to Wordsworth’s confident account of the coming to be of “the form-making activity of the mind” in harmony with the gestalt of the mother and, then, with the “sources of the order of nature,” Hass is ambivalent about what those sources are and doubtful of a direct link between them and imagination’s forms (*Twentieth* 63). He sees artistic form arising because “[t]he mind, in the act of recovery, creates” (63). Artistic form and patterns are multiple possibilities born of frustrated desires for fullness of presence, love, and life “everlasting” (*Apple* 90, 126).

The process of achieving momentary balance is enacted in the poem “Interrupted Meditation” (*Sun Under Wood*, 1996). It opens with the speaker, identifiable with the poet, in mid-reverie about a mountain meadow in springtime, “[l]ittle green involute fronds of fern at creekside. / And the sinewy clear water rushing over creekstone” (*Apple* 260). The *locus amoenus* is interrupted mid-stream, “thinnest lines of gold rivering through the amber / like—ah, now we come to it. *We were not put on earth,*” by a gruff “old man” interlocutor (260). The *iron*’s Eastern European harsh wartime recollections, his frank realism, and sharp criticism of poetic self-indulgence impede the poet-speaker’s dreamy composition of place.

Still, in the second section the speaker “comes back to me on the mountainside. Butterflies . . . hover[ing] lightly / over lupine blooms, whirr of insects in the three o’clock sun” (261). The remembered conversation interrupts, once more: “*What about being?* I had asked him,” the interlocutor now revealed as an academic colleague in San Francisco, “gesturing out

the window, pines, ragged green / of a winter lawn, the bay” (261). He is a dialogical foil to Miłosz concerning the potential of poetic language to be ontologically responsible and significant. “*Ah*, he said, *you’ve been talking to Miłosz*,” and slyly teases him about his propensity to employ imagery, to “*enumerate the vegetation*,” in place of metaphor (261).

The old man challenged him to imagine what a word, a “magic key,” could possibly open. This brings a jarring remembrance of *informis* of “the failure of my marriage,” unfolded in the final section (262). He notes ironically that this loss occurred in the springtime, the conventional season of love and comedy. With the admission, twice repeated, that “I don’t know,” and that “We live half our lives / in fantasy, and words,” he returns to his meditation: “A vault of blue sky, traildust, the sweet medicinal / scent of mountain grasses” (262). In closing, he confesses his impulse for comedic return, not tragic dissolution:

I’m a little ashamed that I want to end this poem
singing, but I want to end this poem singing—the wooly
closed-down buds of the sunflower to which, in English,
someone gave the name, sometime, of pearly everlasting. (262)

So the man enumerating the vegetation, echoing the child naming flowers in “The Garden of Delight,” is given the halting final words: “pearly everlasting.” Invoking the fulfillment of desire (“I want”) in its allusion to heaven, the folk-name points to the cultural history of desire infusing perception and practical identification of the actual, native plant (“in English, / someone gave the name, sometime”). Rather than foreclose on this impulse, the poem foregrounds the movement of “the soul in the bardo state . . . among the heavens and the hells,” between innocence and experience (*Twentieth* 117). While exploring the dialectic of desire that infuses language and mediates human perception of the world, the poem resists both “fantasy” and despair.

With this notion of the recuperative action of poetic process, we can get a greater purchase on what Hass—and by extension, Roethke—is doing with his floral imagery. Returning to Hass’s essay on Lowell’s “The Quaker Graveyard in Nantucket,” it is safe to assume that he was among the “younger writers” who learned from the “Our Lady of Walsingham” section of Lowell’s poem and its provision of a “little tranquil island in all the fury” of the rest of it. Hass recognizes that Lowell’s Lady (a version of the Virgin Mary) and her altar are at the centre of a *locus amoenus*: “And the small trees, a stream and hedgerows file / Slowly along the munching English lane” (Lowell 2487). Hass finds this centre “attractive as a possibility of imagination,” transforming and granting peace to “the painful seeing in the poem” (*Twentieth* 21-23).

The Lady represents a “contemplative peace beyond any manifestation in the flesh, beyond thought or understanding, and—most especially—beyond desire,” a figure not unlike the statue of the young Virgin Mary in Hass’s own “Our Lady of the Snows” or the Buddha in “Regalia for a Black Hat Dancer” (22; *Apple* 204, 243). In Lowell’s poem, the “penitents” pass through a pleasant place to arrive at the point of contradiction—a tensional balance—figured in the Lady’s expression of God in an “expressionless / Face” (2487). Hass describes this ideal still point as a centre of both ascetic “world-denial” and compassionate “alert[ness] to the world and the flesh,” and attributes the same to “the Buddhist Gary Snyder,” a quality that makes him “our best poet of nature” (*Twentieth* 22). For Hass, like Roethke, achieving this equipoise between relinquishment and affirmation involves noticing and naming the flora.

As demonstrated in the poems just discussed, Hass constructs a satirical (though not cynical) stance to the elegiac aspect of his recurring Coastal California *locus amoenus*. He is alert to the pull of nostalgia, which “locates desire in the past where it suffers no active conflict and can be yearned toward pleasantly” (*Twentieth* 4-5). Yet he does not eschew the pastoral

vision and its “vision of an alternative world”; instead, he strives to dwell in the contradiction between praising what is and imagining what could be, between acceptance and yearning. Thus, his green world “paradise” is varied and ambiguous as he works thoughtfully with the productions of desire. At times his vegetal *dianoia* is related to the *mythos* of comedy and a desire to reimagine peace in the more-than-human earthly community. At other times, the *mythos* of irony and satire, “the enemy of idealization,” is at work (*What* 87). Often, a cool balance is achieved in what Frye calls an “outscape,” a poetic form of ego-relinquishment carrying the sense of “pure projected detachment,” comparable to haiku (Frye, *Anatomy* 297). In such poems, Hass seeks to follow the path of the Japanese masters he has translated (Basho, Buson, Issa), along with the mature Rilke of *Sonnets to Orpheus*, to rinse from perception the wish for perfection that is so intense it “turns every experience into desolation” (Hass, *Twentieth* 257). This is the source of those clear descriptive images of flora in Hass’s oeuvre, compact forms of relinquishment and affirmation that glimpse into the rising and falling, the coming and going, “the fullness and emptiness of things” (308).

Whitmanian *Ekstasis* and Roots

In both Roethke’s and Hass’s poetry, varieties of imaginative floral forms present opportunities to practice imaginative modulations of desire, from its heightening to frustration, restraint, and re-formation. The dialectic of desire takes another form in their expressions of ecospiritual eros: light and dark imagery. This conveys the interplay between insight and mystery, freedom and participation, transcendence and rootedness. The flora-in-light images often signify affirmation of being rooted in the more-than-human community and relinquishment of egoism in *ekstasis*, or out-stretching. Self-transcendence in this form acknowledges interconnectivity without obliterating the sense of individuality. In the gestalt of the plant’s roots

and blossom and the alteration between dark and light, equipoise between a sense of affirmation and negation is sought and momentarily achieved.

A precursor to Roethke's and Hass's flora, Whitman's grass, the "flag of my disposition," is emblematic of such reconciliation with earthly life and individual finitude. It is grasped in the fist of the wondering child and spread over the graves of the departed in "Song of Myself" (*Song* 11-12). In the essay "Democratic Vistas," Whitman imagines future Lucretius-like poets who can "absorb whatever science indicates, with spiritualism" and compose "the great poem of death" that will help their readers "confront Nature, and confront time and space, both with science, and *con amore*," to take their "right place, prepared for life, master[s] of fortune and misfortune" (76-77). He desired to bring about this effect with his own poetry, to offer "a vision of sane and sacred death," as Paul Mariani names it (68), charged with an exuberant ecospiritual eros.

A "sane and sacred death" is, indeed, one of the predominant religious themes in American poetry, as Marilynne Robinson has observed, with Whitman and Dickinson the salient figures in this thematic field. While Milton followed Dante in the cosmological scheme of his poetic *mythos*,

there is strikingly little interest among American poets in mapping the terrain of heaven and hell. In place of mythopoesis, their attention is turned on the actual, the phenomenal. And it is turned on the universal, solitary, subjective experience of the transformation, or the end, of consciousness. If death is the mother of beauty, it is the mother also of the deepest self-awareness, the consciousness of the nerves and senses that translate experience as beauty, and as meaning." (138)

To qualify this slightly, if Roethke and Hass do not occupy themselves with building cosmological structures, they assume reconfigured "topocosms" in light of modern scientific

discoveries by which to order the *mythos*, or psychological drama, and *dianoia* of their poetry, including the imagery of the flora within a *locus amoenus*. They observe the epic drama of the human creature, the biological and psychological roots of individual and cultural achievements. To borrow from Robert Langbaum, they assume that “our thoughts like our bodies recapitulate the history of the species, and this imaginative appropriation of evolutionary biology awakens in [them] a sense of awe before the miracle of culture—as a flower growing out of the mud” (10). If the mythopoeic impulse is displaced, as Robinson points out, it remains an informing influence on their poetic analogies of the archetypal quest myth. These analogies centre, not on gods or god-like men at large in the cosmos, but on ordinary subjects in the earth, depicted, as Roethke says of his protagonist, “in the course of a conventional albeit sometimes disordered existence” (*On Poetry* 27).

Both poets identify with Whitman’s imaginative connaturality or “sympathy” with and among the interrelated things of the earth in their poetic explorations of “the claim of kinship” on the human, to use Lawrence Buell’s term (*Environmental* 180). In Hass’s introduction to the 2011 collection of Whitman’s poems that he selected and annotated, he admiringly observes,

[t]he argument that "Song of Myself" makes — that we have more in common than separates us, that that common thing is the nature that courses through us, that we and the nature of which we are a part are carried by a profoundly sexual rhythm . . . that the principle of nature is abundance and variety, that death is as much a part of its rhythm as birth and sexual desire are, that love — which he calls the "kelson of creation" — and sympathy . . . are among the deepest ways that the human imagination connects people to one another and to that larger rhythm, that the body is as important as the soul. . . . (Introduction 6)

I have quoted Hass at length here to highlight his admiration for Whitman's participatory worldview, shared with Roethke (*Selected* 230; LaBelle 127; Parini 163). The ecospiritual eros expressed here is related to the *biophilia* of E. O. Wilson, to whom Hass refers as “[t]his naturalist I admire” in the poem dedicated to him, “A Note on ‘Iowa City: Early April’” (*Apple* 229). In conversation with Wilson in *The Poetic Species* (2014), Hass speaks of the modern poets’ “sense of absolute mystery at the core of existence” that emerges in reconciliation with evolutionary science’s “kick[ing] us out of a comfortable anthropocentric community” (55-56). Hass comments on the normative aspect of Wilson’s *biophilia*, the “social imperative” that extends “to the rest of life” and calls for humans to find new ways of making our human world compatible with the flourishing of the other creatures’ life-worlds (60-61; 77). His bioregional sense of wonder at “the rich interactions among species in a given place” fits the category of *biophilia*, but the feeling that we are “moving among great powers and mysteries” on earth infuses his work with the deeper, Whitmanian “urge” of ecospiritual eros (46, 56).

Similarly, Roethke claims to have gained in his childhood a particular affective sense of kinship within “the whole scheme of life,” “some rhythm, old and of vast importance,” which was intensified as much from violation of this relation and from the attendant guilt as from enjoyment of it (“Moss-Gathering” 38).⁵³ This sense, influenced by Darwinist conceptions (perhaps as much from Erasmus as Charles), gave rise to the “organic aestheticism” and spirituality of his poetry (Balakian 12). He once defended his emphasis on nature symbols by

⁵³ For an in-depth exploration of Roethke as a poetic descendent of the Transcendentalists, including Whitman, see Jay Parini, *Theodore Roethke: An American Romantic*. Parini traces the influence of the “great Romantic model for the creative process . . . the botanical organism” (35), in Chapter Six, “The Lesson of the Plants” (54-68) and Chapter Seven, “The Greenhouse Poems” (69-81).

insisting, “there is a deep and abiding energy in all living things which can aid our human strength and contribute to our destiny. I don’t think this is just mystical bunk; even the anthropologists seems to believe this” (*Selected* 97). From his “greenhouse poems” at the opening of *The Lost Son* onward, one of his central assumptions, as Nathan A. Scott, Jr. observes, is “that this lust for life in dirt and roots and flowers is the same great lust by which the human reality itself is also moved” (*Visions* 96). Replacing Scott’s word “lust” with “eros” (the Greek for the Germanic) makes clear the traditional spiritual significance of the energy being described here. Both poets develop in their own way the Romantic-Transcendentalist sense that the biotic sympathy or synergy of life in “house”-hold earth is something to be affirmed and revered. This affirmation is echoed in the chiming titles of Roethke’s *Praise to the End* and *The Far Field* and Hass’s *Field Guide* and *Praise*.

So the flora-in-light image in Roethke and Hass’s poetry, as a form of ecospiritual eros, bears the dialectical polarity of self-transcendent *ekstasis* and rootedness in the depths of the body and the earth. Where these depths are evoked in references to the plant’s roots, transcendence is signaled in its reach toward the light. This botanic imagery of spiritual eros has a long history in the West, stemming from the concept of metaphysical light, as expressed in the patristic allegorical readings of *Song of Songs*, Bernard of Clairvaux’s epithalamic mysticism, Aquinas’s contemplation of God as “a movement of desire” that Dante took as his prime motif (de Rougemont 110-11, 153; Underhill 50, 137; Kristeva 151-52, 170-71; Mandelbaum xvi).⁵⁴ As Iris Murdoch explains, in the Christian Platonist image of the soul’s orientation, the Good (or God) is the Sun whose light exerts a “magnetic” pull, and “*looking* (concentration, attending,

⁵⁴ See also M. H. Abrams’s discussion of the “the Apocalyptic Marriage” trope in *Natural Supernaturalism* (37-46).

attentive discipline) is a source of divine (purified) energy” responding to that magnetism, while love is “an orientation, a direction of [that] energy” (*Metaphysics* 25, 503).

The corresponding *mythos* to the flower unfolding in light is of a journey of exile and return, culminating in an apocalyptic or mystical marriage with God, the source of life. Underhill explains the significance of this erotic imagery to mystics: “Attraction, desire, and union as the fulfillment of desire; this is the way Life works, in the highest as in the lowest things. The mystic’s outlook, indeed, is the lover’s outlook. It has the same element of wildness, the same quality of selfless and quixotic devotion, the same combination of rapture and humility” (89). She notes a blurring of the lines between certain poets and the mystic of the Illuminative Way (as opposed to the *via negativa*), naming Whitman as an exemplar of this type for whom the “Uncreated Light manifests Itself” frequently through “[p]lant life of all kinds. . . . The flowery garment of the world is for [them] a medium of ineffable perception, a source of exalted joy, the veritable clothing of God” (191-92).

It follows that a poet in the line of Whitman might very well find in the heliotropism of the plant under the external stimulus of sunlight a most apt metaphor for *ekstasis* or the expansion of consciousness. For both Roethke and Hass, light is a continuous, potent symbol of self-transcendence in which conscious spiritual yearning and growth is rooted in bodily memory and responses to the world. But for neither is the flora imagery merely heliocentric; it blends the tellurian, darker sensibilities of D. H. Lawrence and Jeffers, who might be considered outliers on the margins of Underhill’s category of mystic-poets of illumination.

Roethke’s *Dianoia*: Dark, then Light

Kenneth Burke once observed that Lawrence’s “flower poems could have served as models for Roethke,” as they “imagistically figure” carnal-mystical “yearning” for immediate,

intuitive communion (79, 81). Indeed, Roethke saw the relation, writing in his notebook sometime in the mid-forties, “For Lawrence and I are going the same way: down: / A loosening into the dark . . .” (*Straw* 150). “I seem to want to write of nothing but light,” he confessed in a 1946 notebook entry (qtd. in Bowers 117); but he came to recognize “the dark” as an essential complementary motif to that of light. The dark implies mysterious depths, in mystical terms, the “ground” of the soul, or in psychological terms, the unconscious; but it also indicates death. He once asserted that “[t]o write poetry: you have to be prepared to die,” to embrace “Death’s possibilities” (*Straw* 256; “His Words,” *Collected* 147). John Crowe Ransom traces the paradoxical intertwining of life-affirming love and negating death in Roethke’s “In A Dark Time,” an insight that can be applied more widely to his corpus. Ransom delineates three kinds of death, the “Little Death” (*la petite mort*) of the sex act, the “Big Death” that ends all mortal things, and “the Symbolic Death which the mind embraces by a religious conversion” (Ostroff 29). While the aesthetic “conversion” of the modern American poet is of a different character than that of saints or mystics, Ransom concedes, yet its effect can still cause the natural world to “wear a new look” of significance as the I-eye breaks “from self-involvement, from I to Otherwise,” to use Roethke’s phrase (*On Poetry* 40).

“The Lost Son/Praise to the End” sequence enacts a visionary conversion through multiple stages of symbolic death or descent to “the underworld” (*Selected* 128), as his “protagonist” recapitulates “those lost depths” of the mind—touching on generic evolutionary “pre-history”—beginning with infancy and rising through childhood and adolescence, to the “randy young man” (*Straw* 62; *On Poetry* 23, 25). Along with what he calls the “psychic shorthand” of the phrasing, the imagery used to convey regression is subterranean and subhuman, including roots, dirt, slime, stone, and water symbolic of memories or feelings that

are at times horrible and paralyzing, at others, oracular and inducing of movement. In one of his greenhouse lyrics, "Cuttings (*later*)," he imagines the struggle of spiritual growth as roots absorbing water: "I can hear, underground, that sucking and sobbing, / In my veins, in my bones I feel it,-- / The small waters seeping upward" (*Collected* 35). Episodes of regression are followed by "later emerging into the 'light' of more serene or euphoric passages at the end of each phase of experience" (*On Poetry* 25). "The Lost Son/Praise to the End" sequence reflects his generally positive attitude toward his experiences of psychological breakdown and recovery. He saw these as "sources of creative insight" and an expansion of consciousness that integrates sub- or unconscious memory not only of ontogenesis, but also of phylogenesis (Sullivan 10-11).

He once wrote, "The spiritual growth's an oscillatory thing: we move by shivers in the world's tumultuous spine" (*Straw* 209). His poetry thus reflects Underhill's psychological description of the purgative Dark Night of the Soul, the "exhaustion of an old state, and the growth towards a new state of consciousness" accomplished through "spiritual oscillations," in which the self seems to be tossed "back to an old and lower level" before it is once again unified and "the lower" is caught up in synthesis around a new, "higher" centre (386-87). A coincidence of opposites is conveyed in botanic images such as, "Deep in their roots, all flowers keep the light" (*Straw* 40) and, from the late poem "The Right Thing," "God bless the roots!—Body and soul are one!" (*Collected* 242). Both images, the flower in light, the root in the dark, by their reference to photosynthesis and osmosis suggest the ecstatic porosity of what phenomenologist Drew Leder calls the "aesthetic absorption" through which a person can "form one body with the world" (165). Roethke's familiarity since childhood with the organic interchanges across the permeable membranes of plants supplied him with an image of mystical and aesthetic attentiveness at an "open frontier" between world and God (Scott 59).

Roethke's notebook entries of the late 1950s and early 1960s, while he was composing "North American Sequence," also demonstrate oscillation between descent into "misery my mould," "the mire" and "primordial ooze" (*Straw* 110-11), and Dantesque ascent toward paradisaic light: "I'm set in one direction: toward the sun," "Recall this heaven's light, you speechless man," and "A pure light came; / And stole me away / From time" (*Straw* 86, 13). His preoccupation with the spiritual significance of light and erotic attention appeared early, in poems such as "This Various Light" (*Selected* 10), "The Light Comes Brighter" and "Genesis" (*Open House*). In a letter dated May 6, 1934, he explains the theme of "This Various Light": "What I'm trying to say is that light—so various and strange in its nature—is, after all, the supreme gift of God—(Imagine my being religious!) But I wrote it after reading [Henry] Vaughan one time" (*Selected* 11).⁵⁵ Elsewhere he claims that flowers became his "life-symbols" (*Selected* 162). In a tribute to his friend and one-time apprentice, Stanley Kunitz notes: "what absorbs [Roethke's] attention is not the intricate tracery of a leaf or the blazonry of the completed flower, but the stretching and reaching of a plant, its green force, its invincible Becoming."

"The Light Comes Brighter" offers an early example of the floral form of rooted *ekstasis* under the influence of light. It pictures spiritual development as the working of the imagination in vernal vegetal imagery, using the trope of photosynthesis in the final stanza:

And soon a branch, part of a hidden scene,

⁵⁵ "Unfold! Unfold!," the twelfth poem in the "The Lost Son" cycle, takes its title from a phrase in a poem by the seventeenth century light-intoxicated poet, Henry Vaughan (*Selected* 155). Vaughan's "The Revival" opens with a botanical analogy for the soul: "Unfold! unfold! take in His light, / Who makes thy cares more short than night. / The joyes which with his day-star rise."

The leafy mind, that long was tightly furled,
 Will turn its private substance into green,
 And young shoots spread upon our inner world. (*Collected* 10)

Here vegetal life is consubstantial with human life, as the erotic energy produced by things closely perceived in the spring light spurs “inner” growth and creativity. Likewise, in “Genesis” creativity and self-affirmation is imagined as an “elemental force . . . wrested from the sun” (*Collected* 17).

To the horticulturalist’s “lost son,” the symbolic appeal of this image is not for its conventional metaphysical and poetic significance alone. It came to him in the *habitus* of his childhood, the routines and rhythms associated with his family’s greenhouse ecology and economy. Apprehension of a plant’s biological dependency upon dirt, water, and sunlight merged with his understanding of the family’s dependency on the flourishing of the plants. This likely intensified his attunement to “the green” and growing things—housed and in the field—and informed his repeating, if varying, “shape” of attachment to the world. In the course of his life, the floral image was charged with intense emotional and spiritual associations, coming to signify matters of life and death in his meditative poetry. As will be seen in my reading of “North American Sequence,” the sustained fascination comes to bear on a particular Pacific Northwest flower-in-light that gives shape to the ideal of his ardent spiritual longing and roots his continuing poetic meditation on life-as-journey in his current place.

Hass’s Pattern: Coming and Going

Also keenly interested in botany, Hass has co-taught the undergraduate course “Introduction to Environmental Studies” (with Professor of Environmental Science Garrison Sposito) at Berkeley since 1998. He insists that his students become acquainted with and learn

the names of local plants (Hamilton 49), a practice he exemplifies in his poetry. He attends to and expresses wonder at the evolution of life on earth, including the emergence of human consciousness and culture. To refer again to his poem dedicated to Wilson, he imagines kinship with the raccoon in Freudian-botanical terms: the eros that gives birth to each creature's life-world (*Umwelt*) is a contiguous force, the "smell of sex" of the human "some distant / cousin to the smell that is pistil and stamen / from which flowers the raccoon-universe" (*Apple* 229).

The theme of "human blossoming" ("Faint Music," *Apple* 232)—of the coming to be of consciousness and culture—and its relation to other life forms is explored in many of his poems. Variations on the theme of "light . . . touching everything" recur throughout the more recent "July Notebook: The Birds" (2010), figuring that common eros for life shared among the technologically extended humans and the various flora and fauna he delights in observing. For this long collage poem, Hass improvises on the form of Miłosz's dream-journal poem. Each section of the opening poem, as well as subsequent poems in the "notebook," are linked by a single asterisk, evocative of the concentrated "point of glowing light" gleaming off the surfaces of things in the opening poem (5). If Miłosz is clearly a poetic partner here, so also is Jeffers. The poem begins at the beginning, the speaker descending in sleep to dream a phylogenetic "memory lapse" through deep time to pre-human genesis of earthly life. Reminiscent of Jeffers's vision of beginnings in "The unformed volcanic earth," he imagines his own birth synchronized with earthly life emerging in the ocean-womb, drawn "[o]ut of yellowish froth" to begin to "feed on sunlight" (*Apple* 3). The poem proceeds to enact the interconnectivity of "life want[ing] life," in all its varied forms, a theme explored in a darker mood by Jeffers in his "De Natura."

The vegetal image for the emergence of culture also occurs in "State of the Planet," where this evolutionary event is given in more detail and named "the essential miracle" (313). In

earlier sections of the poem, Hass follows Jeffers's cue, quoting Lucretius: "It's your doing that under the wheeling constellations / Of the sky [. . .] all nature teems with life" (*Apple* 311). Thus he evokes Lucretius's enduring description of the reproductive life force, "Spring-time and Venus come, and Venus' boy" in procession behind "Zephyr" and "Mother Flora / Sprinkling the ways before them" in *De Rerum Natura* (Book 5). This Venus, celebrated in Botticelli's *Primavera*, is a figure for what medieval philosophers (and Spinoza after them) named *natura naturans*, the "womb of all forms of life," including the poetry that Hass believes "should be able to comprehend the earth" (Frye, *Great* 68; Hass, *Apple* 311).

Dwelling where fog and sunlight perpetually alternate and alter the ambience, Hass developed a heightened sensitivity to the "human longing for light, the reach for transcendence," and the way this is "stylized" in European art as a "metaphor for the conversation between heaven and earth" (*What* 307-08). Carrying both a physical and symbolic sense, the phrase "what light can do" titles his 2012 collection of essays and conveys his painterly intrigue with the dynamics of light. Its compelling effects on bodies (human, plant, and otherwise), and particularly on vision, are vividly evoked throughout his poetry. Much of his poetic and prose reflection on visual art (photography and painting) centres on the sublimation of eros in representations of light; for example, his admiring meditation on Vermeer and "the luminosity / Of paint" that captures the play of presence and absence, what we "can have because we cannot have it," in the poem "Art and Life" (*Apple* 292-294).

The phrase "what light can do" also recalls the long Western metaphysical tradition of light, symbolic of the love of and for God, a matter on which Hass touches in the section "Two Essays on Literature and Religion" in *What Light Can Do* (*What* 275-302). In the opening note of that essay collection, he calls on Miłosz's intellectual guide Simone Weil to assert, "attention

is prayer” (ix). The reference is from *Waiting for God*, where Weil writes that prayerful attention is led by “desire directed toward God” as a living creature’s longing is for light (110-11).

Likewise, the photographer’s act of “trying to see what’s there, what light can do” is taken as a paradigm of attention compelled by, but also directing, desire (Hass, *What* xi). An aesthetic corollary follows: “form in art is the way attention comes to life” (ix).

For him, light bears intimations of—if not Wordsworth’s immortality—the sacredness of earthly life. In “Notes on Poetry and Spirituality,” he approvingly describes the Romantics’ development of a new form of spirituality in poetry, from a strictly religious expression of inwardness and “the habit of self-examination, of prayer” to “the direct experience of nature or . . . the pure experience of oneself as a conscious and perceiving being” (296). But turns to Emily Dickinson to flesh out what spirituality means to him. He focuses on her image of “a certain Slant of light” and the intertwining of its effects on the landscape with her mood’s effects on her seeing (297, 300). Alluding briefly to the biblical Johannine tradition of metaphysical light (explored in the previous essay in the collection), he admires the way Dickinson complicates the convention of divine presence symbolized as light. He surmises that for her, as for himself, spirituality involves relinquishment or “negation, some version of saying no to the plausibly constructed world,” or to certainties concerning the self, or divine providence, before it moves into something affirmative like “*mystery and wonder*” (294). The *via negativa* precedes a tentative *via positiva*; spirituality entails coming to terms with the “painful sense of absence, but a divine sense of it,” so that “numinous” longing, coupled with the sharp and “fresh” clarity that light gives, transmutes into a sense of presence, too (300-301). So Hass finds the language of Dickinson’s spirituality is enlivened by means of her self-permission “to dwell in possibility.”

This appears to be synonymous with allowing oneself “to dwell in contradiction,” which Miłosz learned from his light-observing mystic, Weil (*Twentieth* 202).

For Hass, the history of both art and religion is “a history of new visions,” arising from perceptions on the periphery that counter the accepted “relation to the sacred,” and then, often, come to revivify mainstream cultural practices (296, 279). As Bruce Bond notices, Hass is at ease with the fact that language fails “to tell the whole truth,” since, like the effect of religious dissatisfaction on the marginalized, that very failure “animates the imagination and inspires its continual revisions” (47). This is why the rhythm of eros—coming and going—is one of his central motifs, conveying what he describes in “After the Winds” as the “swift, opposing currents” of regret and joy and the tensional way of desire “that hollows us out and hollows us out, / That kills us and kills us and raises us up and / Raises us up” (*Apple* 284). Like Roethke’s pattern of regression and renewal, Hass’s rhythm reflects the principle that perception and language are inspirited by negation of static or decaying forms, followed by their resurrection in new embodiments.

“The experience of each new age requires a new confession,” Emerson once asserted (290). Both Roethke and Hass offer, in Robinson’s words, confessions of “universal, solitary, subjective experience” narrated as contemporary and ordinary life-quests. They are reminiscent, however distantly, of Augustine’s *Confessions*, Dante’s *Comedy*, and Whitman’s “Song of the Self.” Concomitant with their new confessions, Roethke and Hass’s attention is indeed “turned on the actual, the phenomenal” of their place as their poetry engages the environmental imagination as well as the mythopoeic-religious one. The literary DNA of Whitman’s grass mingles with that of Dante’s Empyrean rose—and other roses in the course of Western literature—in their flora-in-light images: Roethke’s wild rose in “North American Sequence” and

Hass's roadside and coastal meadow wildflowers in the "Santa Lucia" poems. These flowers are situated in a *locus amoenus* unique to each poet's Pacific ecoregion, Roethke in the Marine West Coast Forest and Hass in the Mediterranean California. The particularity of these images is a feature of erotic poetry, which according to Hass, "like erotic experience, is usually intense because it is narrow and specific, mute and focused" (*Twentieth* 210). Paradoxically, such intense particularity can widen the appeal of their private visions.

Roethke's Journey Westward

The challenge of typifying the unique particulars of his personal experience "in the new field" of his poetry was an ongoing concern for Roethke. It became more so from within the new "far field" of the Pacific Northwest, after his move to Seattle to teach in the English Department at the University of Washington in September 1947. He had expressed "misgivings about going even further into the provinces" before his move, presumably for fear of dislocation from a stimulating cultural network and appreciative audience (*Selected* 132). A feeling of western isolation may have partly informed his decision in September 1950 to spontaneously purchase a car, at the end of a usual summer sojourn at his family home in Saginaw (Seager 172). Whatever the case, the inaugural drive back to Seattle had far-reaching consequences. Shortly afterward, he wrote in an unsent letter to an unknown addressee (possibly Williams, with whom he had been corresponding):⁵⁶

⁵⁶ William Carlos Williams was a mentor "father-figure" to Roethke through the forties and fifties (*Selected* 221). In a letter to him dated February 1950, Roethke refers to *Paterson* III and his own "Praise to the End!" sequence, saying: "Old T. S. E. [Eliot] can fall dead after this: We're both writing rings around him now, I say with the usual modesty" (165). See Robert Kusch's "My Toughest Mentor": *Theodore Roethke and William Carlos Williams (1940-1948)*.

Here I don't know just how the material will be resolved but for next or possibly later book will be a happy journey westward—not along the Oregon Trail but on Route 2; in a word, a symbolical journey in my cheap Buick Special toward Alaska and, at least in a spiritual sense, toward the east of Russia and the Mongolian Plains whence came my own people, the Prussians” (qtd. in Seager 193-94).

His vivid encounter with the varied landscape while on the most northerly transcontinental highway in the United States—driving from Great Lakes and North Woods country, through the Great Plains and the Rocky Mountains, into the Pacific Northwest, and on to the coast—must have seemed both epiphanic and epical. Indeed, the implied analogy between the settlers heading west on the Oregon Trail and himself on Route 2 brings to mind Whitman's “Facing West From California's Shores,” “towards the house of maternity, the land / of migrations.” M. H. Abrams identifies the life journey (*peregrinatio vitae*) as the “enduring master trope by which the postclassical West has made sense of human existence by endowing it with purpose, structure, and values” (*Fourth* 195). Apart from the adjective “master,” I find the assertion useful to understand what Roethke is doing with his poetic myth. Similarly to Frye, Abrams observes that in the Judeo-Christian tradition, the parable of the prodigal son follows the story of Adam and Eve, “figur[ing] the spiritual history of humanity as, specifically, a circular journey that ends at the point of departure” (197). Roethke's road trip idea adapts Whitman's New World version of this quest, “the circle almost circled.”

Prior to the road trip, Roethke had told his mentor Kenneth Burke that he was in search of “a larger structure; something dramatic: an old story,—something” by which to transcend the current scope of his “personal myth” of the “lost son” set in his Saginaw Valley childhood home

(*Selected* 147). The idea of the real road trip grounding a figurative one might be one way to achieve this, linking up to a long western literary tradition by way of the quest archetype (La Belle 88). He was also intent to assimilate a wider historical past, as indicated two years later in his Ford Foundation Grant application (173). Where Whitman's speaker in "Facing West From California's Shores" remains innocent, if uncertain, about the aggressive drives behind the dream of westward progression, Roethke's completed project bears a trace of national "guilts" of injustice, as he put it in his application. Behind "North American Sequence" was intention to write an epic that would integrate historical accounts of the complex relations and conflicts between explorers, settlers, and Native Americans (Seager 279). "Grandiose?" he had wondered in the unsent letter. "Perhaps but it's already more than a plan and will, I believe, have a real imaginative order" (qtd. in Seager 194).

Already, in the earlier poem "Night Journey" (*Open House* 1941), he had depicted a westward trip by train, likely on the Great Northern's *New Empire Builder*—the name signaling the transmuted ideology of Manifest Destiny—whose route ran parallel to the western portion of Route 2 (*Collected* 32). With the dual significance characteristic of his imagery, the poem's title is a play on the Jungian term for the descent movement in the mythic quest, the classical term for which is *katabasis*. Taking note of this movement help to detect his use of the *mythos* in the later "North American Sequence." In both he shows a Whitmanian meditative-epical "sense of America as an unexplored territory" analogous to the inner terrain of the self, awaiting discovery through intensely somatic, visionary experience (Balakian 28-29).

"Night Journey" constructs a version of the questing self in intimate relation with the land that enlarges the narrative scope of "Long Live the Weeds," published alongside it. It also anticipates the "history of the psyche (or allegorical journey)" *mythos* of "The Lost Son" and

then in-process “Praise to the End!” poems, explicated in his 1950 introductory essay “Open Letter” (*On Poetry* 51). In a 1953 BBC broadcast and two other written introductions (1955, 1957), he refers to his long poems as “spiritual history” and “a kind of old spiritual autobiography” (23, 28, 32). He reinforces the epic intention of the poems by announcing that their setting in Michigan is representative of the American continent and “a splendid place for schooling the spirit” (21-22; 51-52).

The idea of the westward road trip as spiritual journey in 1950, beyond rendering the *mythos* in his poetic sequences more expansive, would eventually enable him to include his current life in his personal exemplary “extended narrative” (Seager 145). But it was a long time before he explicitly depicted his Pacific Northwest home as a new “splendid place” for his spiritual development. Shortly after his arrival in Seattle, Roethke wrote enthusiastically about the “riot of natural life” on the university campus, enumerating the flora that “grows green and strange” (qtd. in Seager 173). However, for various reasons—such as bouts of manic-depression, feelings of job insecurity, and physical ailment, including acute arthritis pain exacerbated by the wet climate—he “did not feel himself settled” in the Pacific Northwest in 1950 (Seager 194, 251). Seager provocatively suggests that the poet needed the catalyst of love before he could notice things around him, “visible only in its light” (237). He observes that after Roethke’s marriage to Beatrice in 1953, his growing “bond of love” for her became an affective stimulant for his perception of and attachment to the West Coast flora and fauna registered in the poems of *The Far Field* (218, 237-38). Assuming that love intensified Roethke’s perception, the drive from Saginaw to Seattle with Beatrice in late summer of 1953, following their European honeymoon (Seager 217), may well have refreshed his appreciation for the Northwest terrain and the idea of a symbolic road trip.

Epithalamic Mysticism and Dante's *Comedy*

From the mid-1950s onward Roethke “seems to have been trying to achieve [the] quiet balance that is so apparent in his last poems,” to discover “the nature of God, . . . his own relation to Him, and his relationship to what he believed to be God’s primary creation, nature” (Seager 224-25). He had once described the “erotic and even religious significance” of his father’s greenhouse, calling it “a kind of man-made Avalon, Eden, or paradise” (*Selected* 113). But in the love poems that he began to write prior to, and increasingly after, marriage, he locates this religious significance in non-specific natural landscapes “infused with a *numen or pneuma*,” as Kenneth Burke describes it in his discussion of “The Visitant,” “a concentration of spirit just on the verge of apparition” (71). Roethke’s “devotional attitude . . . makes of love an almost mystical presence” (71). The beloved “Other” in these poems is ambiguous: sometimes clearly a human woman, she may also be the poet’s anima or Psyche or a varying, temporary “shape” of *Natura naturans*, a *genius loci*, and “a green elemental creature” (Sullivan 99). Burke calls such appearances “a partly secular, yet gently pious, theophany,” or manifestation of the divine (71).

Drawing on the tradition of “epithalamic mysticism,” Roethke indicates a transcendence of rational apprehension in the love poems. He, like the mystics before him, articulates his spiritual experiences of communion with God in the figure of human love, the relation between the lover and a mysterious beloved (Underhill 425). Rosemary Sullivan suggests that what Roethke means by “God” is “an energetic principle of love directing all of life,” often presented as a feminine form of hierophany (138). In “The Other,” Roethke’s speaker claims, “I find her every place; / She happens, time on time— / . . . / Nature’s too much to know” (*Collected* 125). In “Words for the Wind,” “Passion’s enough to give / Shape to a random joy” embodied in a swaying, dancing form (118, 119). Likewise, in “The Sequel” from “Sequence, Sometimes

Metaphysical,” the lover-mystic sees “a body dancing in the wind, / A shape called up out of my natural mind” (233). Following Dante and the Metaphysical poets (especially Donne), Roethke interprets the ecstasy of human love as sacramental and the body as a threshold “into divine harmony” (Sullivan 101). While Psyche and Eros, spiritual and bodily urges, are integrated within, the mind is imagined marrying the world, without (Burke 73).

The influence of Dante’s epic journey out of the self, the education of a “hungering, longing, thirsting will” (Mandelbaum, Introduction, *Purgatorio* viii), was first apparent in Roethke’s “Four for Sir John Davies” sequence. In early 1953, he completed the sequence with post-marriage edits to the concluding poem “The Vigil.” The latter begins with the line “Dante attained the purgatorial hill,” followed by an allusion to Beatrice that is a play on the name of Dante’s Muse and that of his new spouse (103).⁵⁷ “All lovers live by longing, and endure: / Summon a vision and declare it pure,” the speaker incants, as he proceeds to recognize that material “things” can be means of sustaining that vision, can “have their thought” and give “form” to “shapeless night.” Erotic intimacy contains a mystical paradox; even as it is a kind of death and “fall”—a form of *katabasis*—it raises the lovers “from flesh to spirit”: “We dared the dark to reach the white and warm” (103).

His next sequence, “The Dying Man,” subtitled “In Memoriam: W. B. Yeats,” engages more directly with “[l]ove and death, the two themes I seem to be occupied with,” as he wrote to a friend while on a Fulbright teaching grant in Florence in 1956 (qtd. in Seager 230). Florence, of course, was Dante’s beloved home, and it is possible that Roethke had this in mind as he applied

⁵⁷ In a letter to Dylan Thomas in July 1953, Roethke mentions the name of his new wife, refers to “The Divine Comedy,” and points to alterations made to “The Vigil” that I surmise are concerned with allusions to “Beatrice,” since the pre-marriage version was sent to Thomas in a letter dated December 1952 (*Selected* 183, 192).

for the grant. Perhaps the experience of teaching American poetry in ambient communion with “the dead” master would be a “singing school,” to borrow from Yeats, where he might further develop his art and monumental themes of the tradition in his own vernacular. In “His Words,” the opening poem of this Yeatsian sequence, the dying man has a vision: “But a kiss widens the rose; / I know, as the dying know, / Eternity is Now” (*Collected* 147). The life-affirming act of the kiss while on the threshold of death, evoking *la petite mort*, expands the spirit’s consciousness, bringing into full bloom the eternal in the heart of being. The dying lover becomes “that final thing, / A man learning to sing” whose “heart sways with the world” (147).

This kiss of conversion anticipates the protagonist’s salvific proximity to the rose “rooted in stone” in “North American Sequence.” As in Yeats’s “To the Rose Upon the Rood of Time,” where the speaker hopes to find the rose of “Eternal beauty” even “[i]n all poor foolish things that live a day” and “common things that crave”—the “weak worm” and “field-mouse” included—Roethke’s rose unfolds as a sort of *axis mundi* connecting a multitude of “finite things” and “infinitude” (*Collected* 195). Under its influence, the protagonist “sways” and “changes,” “as if another,” a “final man” (196, 199, 195). Uncannily, the final poem of the sequence “The Rose” was published a month before Roethke’s sudden death in 1963.⁵⁸

The spiralling journey of *The Divine Comedy* informs the way he takes up the 1950 road trip idea to structure “North American Sequence.” Jay Parini names the entire final collection, *The Far Field*, Roethke’s *Paradiso*, noting the extension and apparent fulfillment of the “lost

⁵⁸ “The Rose” was written in 1962, after a late spring visit to San Juan Island. Roethke introduces it in a recording done in 1962 (“Remarkable”) and read it at his performance at the 1962 Seattle World’s Fair (“Reading”). It was published in *The New Yorker* on July 6, 1963 (Staples footnote 1, 189). Roethke died of a blood clot to the brain after diving into the pool at the Bainbridge Island home of his friends the Bloedels on August 1, 1963.

son” quest in the trajectory of its pages (161-62). The closing poem of “Sequence, Sometimes Metaphysical,” “Once More, the Round,” bring the collection to an end on a joyful note: “everything comes to One, / As we dance on, dance on, dance on” (*Collected* 243). Certainly, it parallels the moving conclusion of the *Comedy*, a vision of the great cosmic dance in the shape of the Empyrean Rose. Yet more than *Paradiso* is reflected in the *mythos* and *dianoia* of Roethke’s final collection. Indeed, “North American Sequence” generally follows both the falling (*Inferno*) and rising movement (*Purgatorio* and *Paradiso*) of the *Comedy*: *katabasis* and *anabasis* structure the fragmented circular journey sustained through the first half. The last three poems feature a Pacific Northwest landscape as a littoral *locus amoenus*, an Earthly Paradise, in which the speaker attains at sea-level, rather than in the supra-lunar heights of the *Comedy*, the mystical transcendence, joy, and—above all—peace for which “the longing” of the opening poem instigates the quest.

Recalling Frye’s theory at this point will help clarify the contemporary Dantesque intent in Roethke’s journey *mythos* and *dianoia* of the *locus amoenus* and rose in “North American Sequence.” Frye asserts that the source of the quest-myth is the human will to adapt to and synchronize with the recurrences of nature. Seeking to “recapture a lost rapport” with the energies of the cyclical natural cycles, humans once collectively mimicked them in ritual form (*Fables* 15). Myth is the poetry of ritual: “In the solar cycle of the day, the seasonal cycle of the year, and the organic cycle of human life, there is a single pattern of significance, out of which myth constructs a central narrative around a figure who is partly the sun, partly vegetative fertility and partly a god or archetypal human being” (15-16). Accordingly, throughout “North American Sequence” Roethke employs imagery of natural cycles, elemental, diurnal and

seasonal, to coincide with the “movement” of the inward journey of his quest-hero as he meditates from twilight to twilight in summertime.

Frye associates the season of summer with the *mythos* of romance and the triumphant resolution of the quest (*Anatomy* 163, 186). But summer is also a time of transition to fall, suggesting the mid-life of the protagonist. In “North American Sequence,” Roethke’s quest-hero is, like Dante, at the mid-point of “our life’s way,” meditating in the “face” of death (Parini 161; “Meditation at Oyster River” 184). The quest for identity of his earlier “Lost Son” sequence continues, but the conflict now centers on a desire to overcome anxiety so that he can affirm being, despite the contradiction of non-being within it, using the terms of Roethke’s favored existentialist thinker Paul Tillich (Tillich 34; Parini 143; Sullivan 126). The first poem of the sequence, “The Longing,” expresses this desire in terms evoking Eliot’s “still point in a turning world”: “I long for the imperishable quiet at the heart of form” (*Collected* 182). Roethke’s hero wants to be at home within “the redolent disorder of this mortal life” (182).

Here he demonstrates the logic of Frye’s assertion that the meaning of myth, and subsequently literature, arises from the dialectical tension between desire for an ideal world, on one hand, and, on the other, experience of real life, including its “repugnant” aspects, which frustrate the fulfillment of that ideal (*Anatomy* 106). Referring to Plato’s definition of art as waking dream, Frye suggests that art has “as its final cause the resolution of the antithesis” between the natural world and the idealized dream or mythic one, “the mingling of the sun and the hero, the realizing of a world in which the inner desire and the outward circumstance coincide” (18). In terms of dream and poetry, they present “the search of the libido or desiring self for a fulfillment that will deliver it from the anxieties of reality but will still contain that reality” (*Anatomy* 193). Sometime between 1949 and 1953, Roethke made the notebook entry

that chimes with the latter statement: “A poetry of longing: not for escape, but for a greater reality” (*Straw* 193). The title of the poem that opens “North American Sequence,” “The Longing,” indicates the general theme, while the sequence title points to the importance of place to its resolution. In the final poem, “The Rose,” the flower is a form of his aesthetics of relinquishment and affirmation, of finding “true ease” as his inner “desire” is trained to let go of the fear of death, and he is reconciled with his life (199).

Placing Desire, Desiring Place

Considering the six poems of “North American Sequence” in the light of biographical details helps to underscore the importance of place indicated by the title. In an interview conducted by novelist Zulfikar Ghose in late 1960, while the Roethkes were living in England, Roethke spoke of his latest poetry. He reported that his imagery was coming “out of the Northwest rather than the whole of America” within the context of an exploration by car (Seager 269). His friend David Wagoner recalls the focal practice of paying close attention that is connected with this imagery: “He absorbed an awful lot from the wildness” of the Seattle area and beyond, “simply by sitting in it, or walking a short way in it, and becoming a part of it” (“Remarkable”). His writing method involved keeping notebooks as stores of memory and observations, which he would regularly reread and from which he would select images and lines to create his mosaic-like poems (Seager 163-64; Wagoner 3-5). When he consulted his notebooks, he would recall “the period and the area that has been charged with his deepest emotions” (Seager 163). Locations in the Puget Sound region at this time were so charged, and the seeds were sown for the first half of “North American Sequence,” though they germinated and unfolded slowly.

The conditions under which Roethke wrote the sequence make the placing of his desire to affirm the conditions of his life all the more poignant. For years he had experienced stretches of unstable mental health and his “arthritis grew worse . . . in Seattle’s damp climate” (251). He indicates such malaise in the opening section of “The Longing,” where his persona describes a state of ennui, “[i]n a bleak time, when a week of rain is a year” (*Collected* 181). In 1957, his perception was likely heightened by concern over Beatrice’s ill health (mild tuberculosis), for which she was committed to care in a sanatorium from January through May (Seager 241). They had rented a few different places since their marriage (including Morris Graves’ house) and in the previous year had been house-hunting. Just before Beatrice’s release, they purchased their first home on Lake Washington, stirring mixed emotions in Roethke, including economic anxiety (*Selected* 214). That summer, as Beatrice continued her recovery and the house was being renovated, they traveled to the industrial south of Seattle, one likely source of the modern inferno-wasteland imagery in the opening section of “The Longing.” After that, they stayed at a resort on Orcas Island (in the San Juan Islands), then traveled north to a fishing lodge near Oyster River, Vancouver Island, the setting of the second poem (243-44).

Roethke first published “The Longing” in November 1959 after a year of undergoing psychiatric treatment, though also of teaching, readings, and “honors received” (Seager 260). In 1960-61, he was abroad in Europe on a second Ford Foundation grant, briefly sojourning in Ireland (where he was hospitalized with yet another manic episode) and England when he wrote and published the second and third poems, “Meditation at Oyster River” and “Journey to the Interior.” After their return to Seattle in 1961, he and Beatrice vacationed on San Juan Island at the summer cabin of friends—Beatrice’s former teaching colleague-turned-documentarian Jean (Maggie) Walkinshaw and her husband Walter (Seager 272; *Selected* 246). The remaining three

poems, “The Long Waters,” “The Far Field,” and “The Rose,” were composed over the year following this trip.⁵⁹

While in England, Roethke claimed that he was “trying to say something about America that I don’t believe has been put down yet” (qtd. in Seager 271). If Yeats and Florence in 1956 had brought him into proximity with Dante’s journey to the celestial Rose via the characters and features of his particular time and place, and this prompted Roethke to think more intensely about the place of his desire, so also did the irritant influence of Eliot.⁶⁰ Many of Roethke’s critics have observed traces of *Four Quartets* in his work from 1950 onward (Mills, *Theodore* 28; La Belle 86-87, 126, 154; Balakian 130; Sullivan 144-45, 150).⁶¹ Only grudgingly does he admit his preoccupation with *Four Quartets*, deflecting credit onto the ancestor Whitman, whom he insists was an unacknowledged influence on Eliot. He vows to take what Eliot had done with

⁵⁹ “The Longing” appeared in the *Times Literary Supplement* in November 1959; “Meditation at Oyster River,” “Journey to the Interior” and “The Long Waters” appeared in the *New Yorker* in November 1960, January 1961, and June 1962, respectively. “The Far Field” was printed in *Sewanee Review* Oct 1962 and “The Rose” in *New Yorker* July 1963 (Staples 189, note 1). Roethke completed “The Rose” in the summer of 1962 and read it during his performance as a Northwest luminary and “civic asset” at the Seattle World’s Fair in October (“Reading”; “Seager 279).

⁶⁰ Eliot’s *Four Quartets* was published serially between 1935 and 1943 (when they were combined), important years in Roethke’s poetic development. Roethke joined with William Carlos Williams in opposing Eliot as he pursued his own project of creating “indigenous” poetry of American rhythms, speech, and experience (*Selected* 101, 231; Kusch 28-39; Sullivan 141). In several letters over the years Roethke showed his antagonism, mentioning Eliot in terms of “cult”-fatigue or rivalry (*Selected* 13, 122, 142, 231, 251).

⁶¹ La Belle reports from evidence in the archive collection at University of Washington that Roethke copied out “Ash Wednesday” and *Four Quartets* “in longhand again and again” (155). See also Mahlon H. Coop, “The Eliot Influence: Theodore Roethke’s “North American Sequence” As Alternative to *Four Quartets*.”

“this Whitmanesque meditative thing [. . .] and use it for other ends, use it as well or better” (*Selected* 231). Although this comment pertains to “Meditations of an Old Woman” sequence (*Words for the Wind*, 1958), clearly he continues to pursue this challenge in “North American Sequence.”

Indeed, at the end of the opening poem, “The Longing,” Roethke explicitly alludes to Eliot and his version of the Dantesque spiritual journey in *Four Quartets*.⁶² To the assertion in “East Coker,” “Old men ought to be explorers” (*Complete* 182), Roethke’s protagonist asks and answers: “Old men should be explorers? / I’ll be an Indian” (*Collected* 183). Here he counters Eliot’s injunction not by disagreeing with it, but by making it “native” American: he wants to identify with Indigenous people and their close relation to the land. Although *Four Quartets* is also preoccupied with place, its “significant soil” is mainly in the Old World (“The Dry Salvages,” *Complete* 190). The lines framing Eliot’s explorer imperative read: “Love is most nearly itself / When here and now cease to matter” and “Here and there does not matter” (*Complete* 182-83). With these in mind, Roethke’s riposte to Eliot is made more overt in the opening lines of “The Rose”: “There are those to whom place is not important, / But this place, where sea and fresh water meet, / Is important—” (*Collected* 196). Here he aligns with Williams, who famously insists in “The American Background” that a culture “has to be where it arises, or everything related to the life there ceases. It isn’t a thing: it’s an act. . . . It is the realization of the qualities of a place in relation to the life which occupies it; embracing everything involved, climate, geographic position, relative size, history, other cultures” (*Selected* 157). To be in the stream of such chthonic poetics, Roethke strategically places his desire in a West Coast estuary.

⁶² See Abrams’s discussion of the journey theme in *Four Quartets* in which he observes *The Divine Comedy* as the model (*Fourth* 210-11).

An Estuarine Locus Amoenus

Recalling that he identified Eros as “embracer of life” (qtd. in Sullivan 70), “North American Sequence” can be understood, at least in part, as an expression of ecospiritual eros, the “bond of love” Seager describes, being extended to Pacific Northwest places. No doubt, practicing a localized poetry and paying close attention to things around him had the effect of increasing Roethke’s attachment to this place. Beatrice remembers that he particularly “loved” the watery areas in what is now called the Salish Sea, “respond[ing] to the beauty” of this liminal region of islands and straits between the continent and Pacific Ocean (“Remarkable”). Throughout the sequence, the meditating protagonist is located in the temporal present in a composite estuarine Pacific Northwest place.

This estuarine setting is first made explicit in “Meditation at Oyster River” by its title and reference to the “barnacled, elephant-colored rocks,” tide-ripples,” “salt-soaked wood,” “the bay,” and “the rivermouth” (*Collected* 184). The following poems feature related image clusters. Section three of “Journey To the Interior” situates the speaker bodily in the same location and activity as the final twilight section of the previous meditation. He feels his soul “[a]t ease after rocking the flesh to sleep”, and “[a]fter the midnight cries,” he sees “the glitter of light on waves” (188). In “The Long Waters,” the protagonist picks up at the wakening at the end of the previous poem: “I return . . . / Where the fresh and salt waters meet, / And the sea-winds move through the pine trees, / A country of bays and inlets, and small streams flowing seaward” (*Collected* 190) and “I have come . . . / To a rich desolation of wind and water, / To a landlocked bay, where the salt water is freshened / By small streams running down under fallen fir trees” (191). In “The Far Field,” a Saginaw boyhood memory of lying in “the silted shallows of a slow river” is mirrored in the “fine yellow silt” of a river emptying into the sea, “[i]n a

country half-land, half-water” (194-95). Finally, in “The Rose,” “sea and fresh water meet” and “the sea rearranges itself among the small islands” (199).

Perhaps the threshold realm of the Northwest Pacific Salish Sea estuary reminded Roethke of one of his favorite childhood places in the freshwater Great Lakes region of Lower Michigan, “a swampy corner” of his father’s acreage of second-growth forest in the Saginaw River water basin (*On Poetry* 21). The estuarine mingling of fresh and salt water in the sequence suggests, among other things, the “fluid interchange” and “interpenetration” that occur between place and perceiver (Kalaidjian 123; Balakian 137). Absorbed sensuously, Roethke’s persona notices, remembers and enumerates, Whitman-like, a variety of biota and human-made phenomena in his meditative compositions of American places. But the salmon, eagle, “drip of leaves,” and the “wind-tipped,” “wind-warped” madrona are particularly evocative of the West Coast. So also is his ultimate symbol for the fulfillment of the quest, “a single wild rose”—identified as the Nootka rose in poet Sam Hamill’s response poem “The Lover’s Quarrel” (dedicated “*after Roethke*”).⁶³ The Nootka rose (*Rosa nutkana*) can be found in abundance on San Juan Island, as elsewhere in the region. It flourishes in ecotones, border areas between forest and field and seashores, in a range roughly reflecting the historic “Oregon Country,” from coastal Alaska to northern California (Stuckey).⁶⁴

⁶³ His widow Beatrice points to San Juan Island as the placial source of “The Rose” in a documentary on Roethke by Jean Walkinshaw, her long-time friend and Seattle documentarian at whose island cottage the Roethkes stayed (“Remarkable”; Seager 272).

⁶⁴ This rose was named after the sound on the west coast of Vancouver Island called “Nootka.” Captain Cook in 1778 mistook the Nuu-chah-nulth word for “encircle” to be the name of the sound that separates the adjacent island (now also Nootka) from Vancouver Island (Nash).

While situated on this Pacific Northwestern estuarine shore, the poet-protagonist engages in a sort of allegorical dream quest, with nature emerging as his anima-guide, first as a mother and then beloved (obliquely identified in part two of “The Long Waters”). “The Longing” inaugurates this circuitous vision quest in three phases. The opening lines—“On things asleep, no balm: / A kingdom of stinks and sighs”—immediately signal the displaced Christian myth and its demonic archetype, the antipodes of the heavenly kingdom. The imagery of psychic, cultural, and environmental exhaustion viewed from “the edge of the raw cities” presents “one of the modern hells” of the poet’s experience (*On Poetry* 36), that state which “desire totally rejects” (Frye, *Anatomy* 147). In the second section, a momentary glimpse of “the rose [that] exceeds us all” offers a hint of the beatific vision to come (*Collected* 182). It briefly signals the myth-theme of “the victory of fertility over the waste land,” to recall Frye. Roethke seems to have in mind the epic simile at the beginning of Dante’s *Inferno*. After Dante’s poet-protagonist awakens in the dark wood, he meets and responds to Virgil’s persuasive speech on behalf of that trinity of women, the Virgin Mary, St. Lucia (Dante’s patron saint whose name means “light”) and Beatrice:

As little flowers, which the chill of night
has bent and huddled, when the white sun strikes,
grow straight and open fully on their stems,
so did I, too, with my exhausted force;
and such warm daring rushed into my heart
that I—as one who has been freed—began:

.....

You, with your words, have so disposed my heart

to longing for this journey . . . (*Inferno* 19; Canto 2.127-132)

As Dante's river of flame transforms into the Empyrean Rose in *Paradiso* (Canto 30) and Eliot's fire and rose "are one" in *Four Quartets* ("Little Gidding" *Collected* 209), so also Roethke entwines his rose with a "great flame" rising out of the depths—possibly the setting sun, on the literal level—that "cries out" and is received by him as a call to action: "I am there to hear." The vision immediately sets desire in motion, and in the play on "there" and "hear," that motion unfolds in the homonymic "here," even as the declaration of that follows, "I'd be beyond; I'd be beyond the moon," expresses his wish for a self-transcending beatific vision. The string of images that follows present his purged state of preparation, his "beginnings" from "nothings": "Bare as a bud, and naked as a worm," he is also "a stalk," "free" and "all alone" (182). The third section enacts the quest-hero's gestating will. He rocks in the Whitmanian motion of desire (Parini 163), intensified by the litany of quotidian things and actions in anaphoric lines beginning with "I would" (*Collected* 182). In order to transcend the ego consumed with self-concern, he must descend into his body and the flux of the natural world (Sullivan 148). So the quest-hero determines to "unlearn" the abstract "lingo of exasperation, all the distortions of malice and hatred," as he wills to "be with" the migrating creatures, the dancing children, the widening flowers, the winding stream, and unfolding leaves (*Collected* 182). He is reborn through the contractions and expansions of "pain" and "delight" in nature, "this mortal life." In this early moment of the poetic quest, he enacts a deep synthesis with his present place, in Frye's words, to realize "a world in which the inner desire and the outward circumstance coincide" (*Fables* 18). His longing is on the way to being transformed into belonging.

The following poem, "Meditation at Oyster River," links with the second and third sections of "The Longing" by way of a continuing catalogue of fauna and the thematic

declaration of desire, “With these I would be.” The catalogue contributes to a “composition of place,” as practiced in the tradition of English meditative poetry derived from Ignatian spiritual exercises (La Belle 155; Martz xviii). In a notebook entry contemporaneous with “North American Sequence,” Roethke stresses the interconnectivity involved in this act of composition, akin to Hopkins’s inscape: “Not only to perceive the single thing sharply: but to perceive the relationships between many things sharply perceived” (*Straw* 252). Such perception, and the joining of his voice with natural rhythms, unifies the meditating speaker with the object of his contemplation, the more-than-human community (Molesworth).

The speaker recalls the spring thaw in a Saginaw river and brook, identifying the movement with his ecospiritual eros: “Water’s my will, and my way” (*Collected* 186). “Meditation at Oyster River” presents the moment in the quest when there is a “turning of the cycle from the wintry water of death to the reviving waters of life” (*Anatomy* 199). The first two poems can thus be seen as intertwined variations on the twilight rebirth, followed by the hero’s archetypal night journey, which is signaled by the announcement in the third part of “The Longing”: “I have left the body of the whale, but the mouth of the night is still wide” (*Collected* 183). Expelled like Jonah onto dry land, the quest-hero heads by memory southeastward in the night, “On the Bullhead, in the Dakotas.” The “Bullhead” indicates a revision to the 1950 road trip idea, shifting to a more southern highway through the Great Plains instead of Route 2 (Dougherty 188).⁶⁵ In the sequence, the quest-hero must travel to his father-and-motherland to recover the lost treasure from childhood, symbolized in the rose, by which he will reconcile with his place. The way of this night journey lies through a parched interior. The sensory associations

⁶⁵ Dougherty suggests the speaker is “near” Route 12 (188). Possibly “the Bullhead” refers to a stretch of Route 12 that dips south and passes near Bullhead, South Dakota.

of the prairies and steppes contrast starkly with the fluvial bioregion in the Great Lakes watershed, mirror of the Pacific Northwest estuarine. “The Dakotas,” home of the Oglala Lakota, is “the country of few lakes,” “buffalo grass,” and “clay buttes” (*Collected* 183). Beyond alluding to the mythic antithesis of arid wasteland-fecund paradise that subtends the sequence, the hero’s choice to be an “Iroquois” over “Ogalala” (*sic*; 3.21-22) in the enigmatic four-line ending of the poem locates the coming *anagnorisis* in the Great Lakes region of the poet’s own origin.

The third poem, “Journey to the Interior,” enacts the return trip comprised of both *anabasis* and *katabasis*. The title reflects that, as in literary tradition, the *anabasis* here is an ascent from shoreline to the interior of the country. In the second section, the protagonist “remember[s]” ascending to the “North” on the “highway ribboning out in a straight thrust,” an image of the highway (I-75) from the lower peninsula of Michigan to the Mackinac Bridge and the Upper Peninsula junction with Route 2. The time shifts to present, as the speaker retraces the journey west to the interior of the continent, the turn indicated by “And all flows past—” and followed by a catalogue of western American creatures and things. The sense of the geographic memory as a meditative vision of the spirit is evoked by the insertions: “I am not moving but they are,” “I rise and fall in the slow sea of a grassy plain,” “I rise and fall, and time folds / Into a long moment,” followed by a brief epiphany (in section three) which centers his thought in stillness (188). He remembers that he has “known the heart of the sun,” and “in the face of death,” the journey ends with the mention of “morning” and the turning of “wrath” to “blessing,” indicating the quest-hero’s awakening as he rises out of the depths like the sun.

In the second half of the sequence, comprised of “The Long Waters,” “The Far Field,” and “The Rose,” the speaker’s consciousness is mainly situated in the central setting of the

sequence, a composite estuarine place in the present. Here his “intensity in the seeing” and participatory perception enacts a “break from self-involvement, from I to Otherwise,” as he describes the practice of participatory perception in the 1963 lecture “On ‘Identity’” (*On Poetry* 40). The “longing” that births and propels the quest-hero in the first half of the sequence is to attain “the imperishable quiet at the heart of form,” the rose that “exceeds us all” (*Collected* 182). This longing intensifies in the final three poems and transforms the Pacific estuarine place into a *locus amoenus*, an Earthly Paradise where reciprocity of perception compels conversionary relinquishment of egoistic fear and “Eros [calls forth] affirmation of being against non-being” (Parini 142).

The title of “The Long Waters” underscores the theme of longing to be at home, “delighting in the redolent disorder of this mortal life,” recalling his stated desire in the catalogue section of “The Longing” (*Collected* 182). The poem opens with a continuation of the impulse to identify with the small creatures of the field, which are valorized throughout Roethke’s corpus. Here it is bees, a wiggling worm, minnows and butterflies—all symbols of the embodied, sentient spirit. They are part of the composition of his place into an estuarine *locus amoenus* at the “edge of the sea,” in contrast not only to the inferno-like nature of the setting in the opening of the sequence, but also the bleakly abstract world he describes next, “the peaks, the black ravines, the rolling mists” and “unsinging fields where no lungs breathe, / Where light is stone” (*Collected* 190). Related lines in the opening of a contemporaneous poem, “The Abyss,” help interpret this latter imagery, for there, after climbing a vertiginous stair, the speaker confesses: “I have taken, too often, the dangerous path, / The vague, the arid, / Neither in nor out of this life” (212). This is one of the moments where, as Sullivan suggests, Eliot “becomes a kind of *doppelgänger*, haunting Roethke with the allurements of release from nature by positing a

separate and settled supernatural order beyond life” (150). To counter that pull, Roethke’s protagonist calls upon Whitman as if he were patron saint: “Be with me, Whitman, maker of catalogues” (*Collected* 212). Accordingly, in the first part of “The Long Waters,” the enumerated creatures compel him to “[r]ejoice in the language of smells and dancing” and to “reject the world of the dog / Though he hear a note higher than C / And the thrush stopped in the middle of his song,” oblique allusions to Eliot’s “The Waste Land” (190). The sublunary Earthly Paradise at the frontier between heaven and earth is brought low, among the small creatures dwelling at sea-and-tide level rather than on the peaks.

The second section of “The Long Waters” conjures the *anima-genius loci* that I noted earlier. At first, the speaker explicitly invokes Blake’s *Natura* guardian-nurse figure “Mother of Har” (Parini 164), suggestive of both Eliot’s prayer to the mediatrix Mother of God (“Ash Wednesday” and “The Dry Salvages”) and his own Old Woman’s cry to “Mother, mother of us all” in “What Can I Tell My Bones?” (*Collected* 166). As he addresses “her” mysterious presence, however, a more erotic possibility is given in the language reminiscent of Song of Songs: “Who magnifies the morning with her eyes, / That star winking beyond itself . . . ?” (190).⁶⁶ The speaker follows her sensuous way to transcend his fears.

The third section imagines a turn from the “pleasure” and “delight” of “my last fall”—likely a double entendre referring both to season and sex—to springtime in “the estuary,” as the reflections of “waves, in the sun, remind” the speaker of the flowers and weeds of his father’s paradisiacal hothouses and fields. The image conjures the eroticism of Williams’s “Asphodel, That Greeny Flower,” in which “sea / which no one tends” becomes a garden “when the sun

⁶⁶ Here Roethke echoes the reference in Song of Songs to the Shulamite: “Who is she that looketh forth as the morning, / Fair as the moon, clear as the sun . . . ?” (Song of Sg. 6.10).

strikes it / and the waves / are wakened” (*Collected* 313). But it also brings to mind the “sea-blooms” and “Pacific calm” of Wallace Stevens’s “Sea Surface Full of Clouds” (*Selected* 63). The allusions contribute to the “fresh transfiguring,” to borrow from Stevens, and relocation of the *locus amoenus* from his childhood to this Northwestern place where “the sea wind wakes desire” and the climactic epiphany transforms him: “I . . . / Become another thing; / My eyes extend beyond the farthest bloom of the waves” and “I embrace the world” (192).

The theme of life-affirmation continues in “The Far Field,” as the protagonist recovers innocence and overcomes the fear of death. He remembers the lessons of childhood, when absorption in the Thoreauvian wild of the “field’s end” acquainted him with transience and regeneration, and immersion in the shallow water “of a slow river” gave him an evolutionary anamnesis of “once” being something else and confidence he would “return again.” The Pacific Northwest river motif of “Meditation at Oyster River” is reprised; the spirit is in flux, “moving forward / As of water quickening before a narrowing channel” and “descending to the alluvial plain” to the “still, but not a deep center” where the protagonist is “renewed by death, thought of my death” (194-95). Having recovered “[t]he pure serene of memory” of his child-self, and with a sense of the presence of “[w]hat I love . . . near at hand, / Always, in earth and air”—an oblique hint of the *anima-genius loci*—he changes from the “lost self,” or son, persona of his personal myth to a kind of *penseroso* in the final phase of the romantic quest, “the final man,” “[i]n robes of green, in garments of adieu” (195).⁶⁷ Yet he has been renewed through suffering, like the god-

⁶⁷ Roethke’s final man is reminiscent of Whitman’s declaration in “Song of Myself”: “I am an acme of things accomplished, and I am encloser of things to be” (*Song* 123). The green-robed figure of “final man” as a culmination of evolutionary creation extends the imagination of the “Fourth Meditation” in the “Meditations of an Old Woman” sequence, where the blessing on future women who are, in turn, “descendants of the playful tree-shrew” states, “May they lean into light and live; / May they sleep in robes of green, among the ancient ferns” (163-64).

like “father shrinking in his skin” in “The Exulting,” finale of “The Dying Man” sequence: when “[he] turned his face: there was another man” (*Collected* 149).

Pacific Epithalamium

Giving shape to the spiritual eros that has fueled the quest, the final poem of the sequence, “The Rose,” is a sort of epithalamium celebrating his espousal to his life, to this place, and to the Nature, or God, manifested there. Several images and actions in the poem echo “Words for the Wind,” completed in 1953 while he was honeymooning in Dante’s land. In 1961, the year he had his epiphany of the Nootka Rose on San Juan Island, he chose “Words for the Wind” as his favorite poem, calling it “an epithalamion for a bride seventeen years younger.” Giving some background for his choice, he recounts the wedding-gift loan from Auden of his house in Forio, Ischia:

It was my first trip to Europe. A real provincial, I was frightened by Italy, but within a few days, the sun, the Mediterranean, the serenity of the house changed everything. I was able to move outside myself—for me sometimes a violent dislocation—and express a joy in another, in others: I mean Beatrice O’Connell, and the Italian people, their world, their Mediterranean. (qtd. in *Blessing* 171)

A similar ecstatic movement occurs throughout “North American Sequence,” only here he reaches outside of himself toward the more-than-human community in his Pacific place.

“The Rose” features another meditative composition of the Pacific Northwest estuarine place (in the first section and opening of the fourth) and a litany of “American sounds” of creatures and things recalled from the quest-journey (in the third section). The second and fourth sections are centred on “this rose, this rose in the sea-wind” that “stays in its true place”

(*Collected* 197). In “Words for the Wind,” Roethke uses the rose as the traditional symbol of love, but he also introduces an image particular to the Pacific Northwest: “arbutus-calm”:

She sways, half in the sun:

Rose, easy on a stem,

.....

Passion’s enough to give

Shape to a random joy:

I cry delight: I know

The root, the core of a cry.

Swan-heart, arbutus-calm,

She moves when time is shy:

Love has a thing to do. (119)

Likewise, in the final section of “The Rose,” the denouement of “North American Sequence,” the image of the rose reappears with the arbutus (this time, he employs the American name) to convey the sense of joy and repose: “Near this rose, in the grove of sun-parched, wind-warped madronas, / Among the half-dead trees, I came upon the true ease of myself” (199).

Combined with recollection of the sounds encountered on the circular quest and situated within specifically Pacific Northwest images, this rose links “past and present, Midwest and Northwest” (La Belle 158). It also bridges from Old World to New World. Recalling that, at the beginning of the night journey at the close of “The Longing,” the quest-hero chooses to identify with the Iroquois, it is possible to see him as a type of the ideal representative explorer in Williams’ *In the American Grain*. There Williams’s Daniel Boone seeks “with primal lust to grow close to [the land], to understand it and to be part of its mysterious movements—like an

Indian,” in order “to be *himself* in a new world” (136-37). When Roethke’s quest-hero declares, “I’ll be an Indian” (*Collected* 183), he makes clear that he does not seek “to find a ground to take the place of England” like the failed settlers depicted by Williams (136); nor, as in Eliot’s case in *Four Quartets*, will he seek to recover roots in the former home (La Belle 157). Rather, he longs westward, to find his home in the New World—despite loss, sorrow, and hardship—as “the land of heart’s desire” (Williams, *In the American* 139). Such a search entails an indigenous—broadly speaking—revision of spirituality, one that eschews colonial indifference to local conditions.

Although there is no overt mention of marriage in “The Rose,” the images and sense of “epithalamic mysticism” that infuses his earlier love poems is refracted throughout the sequence and concentrated in the final poem’s erotic images and motions. “Words for the Wind” features swaying and rejoicing in light, in waves, in the wind, in the “arbutus-calm” and “[t]he breath of a long root, / The shy perimeter / Of the unfolding rose” (119-20). These are in “The Rose,” too, as the protagonist “sway[s] outside [him]self,” recalling his former apotheosis, and comes to rest his eye on “this rose in the sea-wind,” with which he synchronizes his own dance of transcendence:

Flowering out of the dark,
 Widening at high noon, face upward,
 A single wild rose, struggling out of the white embrace of the morning-glory,
 Out of the briary hedge, the tangle of matted underbrush,
 Beyond the clover, the ragged hay,
 Beyond the sea pine, the oak, the wind-tipped madrona,
 Moving with the waves, the undulating driftwood,
 Where the slow creek winds down to the black sand of the shore . . . (197)

Sight of the “wild rose” reaching “beyond” brings to mind those “roses, roses, / White and red, in the wide six-hundred-foot greenhouses” and the earthly father “[l]ifting me high” to see the “flowerheads seem[ing] to flow toward me, to beckon me, only a child, out of myself” (197). The ecstatic flowers in light are mirrored in the child held high, ecstatic like the blossoms, “Out into the sweet air, / The whole flower extending outward / Stretching and reaching,” portrayed in the earlier greenhouse poem “Transplanting” (40).

As the quest-hero is transplanted on this western shore, “that man” and “those roses” (featured in the poem “Otto” in the same collection) are superseded by an implied God, manifest in “this rose, in this grove,” “[r]ooted in stone, keeping the whole of light, / Gathering to itself sound and silence” that are specifically North American (199). The meditating *penseroso* remembers and celebrates the moment when, near this rose, he was changed from a lost son, in an ecstatic moment: “As if another man appeared out of the depths of my being / And I stood outside myself, / Beyond becoming and perishing” (199). This moment is linked with the transformation depicted at the end of “The Long Waters” and “The Far Field,” each supplying a different angle on the one epiphany. The contemporaneous lyric “In Evening Air” recounts a moment of enlightenment with similar imagery: “Once I transcended time: / A bud broke to a rose, / And I rose from a last diminishing” (232). Similarly, here recollection and embrace of the more-than-human community lift the quester from the shadow of death and miasma of despair.

“The Abyss” serves as a transition between “North American Sequence” and “Sequence, Sometimes Metaphysical” in *The Far Field*. It offers a variation of the vision quest of “North American Sequence,” reprising the theme of epiphany in a *locus amoenus*. The speaker is located at “[t]he edge of all the land, the final sea” where “calm,” “quiet” and “luminous stillness” are found “under the small leaves!— / Near the stem, whiter at the root” (213). The final section

describes the estuarine setting in more detail and portrays the joyful and spellbound “I” in intercourse with the natural phenomena: “I hear the flowers drinking in their light, / I have taken counsel of the crab and the sea-urchin” (214). His own “thirst by day” and “watch by night” is continuous with that of the flora and fauna. The exclamation “I receive! I have been received!” emphasizes the reciprocity between percipient and perceived—and the divine within all things—in this moment of absorptive perception. To portray the spiritual effects of such union, Roethke imagines enlightenment and achievement of peace in an Eliotic synthesis of biblical and Buddhist allusion. The final Song of Songs-like union, “I am most immoderately married: / The Lord God has taken my heaviness away” is followed by, “I have merged, like the bird, with the bright air, / And my thought flies to the place by the bo-tree” (214).

“The Rose” enacts a similar integration and achievement of peace. The place of enlightenment is “[n]ear this rose,” underscoring the epithalamic mysticism shaping the form of ecospiritual eros (199). Undoubtedly, Roethke’s Presbyterian Sunday School training (Seager 17) had acquainted him with the prophet-poet Isaiah and visions of a post-exilic sacred marriage and healing of the land: “The wilderness and the solitary place shall be glad for them; and the desert shall rejoice, and blossom as the rose” (Isaiah 35.1); and, “Thou shalt no more be termed Forsaken; neither shall thy land any more be termed Desolate: but thou shalt be called Hephzibah, and thy land Beulah: for the LORD delighteth in thee, and thy land shall be married” (62.4). In the romantic-comedic resolution of the quest journey of the sequence, the speaker celebrates a fleeting moment of harmony between the human hunger for the eternal and the more-than-human community of natural life. As “[t]he sun a ball of fire com[es] down over the water,” the alienated westering hero experiences himself rooted like the wild Pacific rose, and can affirm the region as “beautiful”—“the place of my desire” (*Collected* 198).

Reimagining Eros, Reforming the Rose

It is fitting that the English “rose” is an anagram of *eros*. Recalling Hass’s words, “form in art is the way attention comes to life,” the rose is one conventional form (as both symbol and image) in which attention fueled by love or erotic *ecstasis* has been “figure[d] and share[d]” (*What* ix, xi). Roethke’s Nootka rose is a novel literary hybrid related to Dante’s Empyrean rose, Yeats’s Eternal Beauty “Rose on the Rood of Time,” and Eliot’s Marian Rose in “Ash Wednesday.” However, it is closer to the North American variants, H.D.’s “Sea Rose” (*Sea Garden*, 1916), Williams’s “obsolete” rose in *Spring and All* (1923), and Eliot’s “briar rose” in “The Dry Salvages” (1941).

H.D.’s Imagist rose is “harsh,” “caught in the drift” of Modernist sensibility as it transitions from “typical standards of beauty” and conventional notions of love and gender (Gregory 539). In its literal reference, a native flower of the littoral ecotone, it is predecessor to Eliot’s Massachusetts rose and Roethke’s Pacific one. The sun, wind and salty sea spray have so “marred” its growth that it is “with stint of petals, meagre flower, thin, sparse of leaf” (*Selected* 3). In its figurative aspect, it suggests the challenging conditions for a poet exploring love, identity, and spirituality on the frontier of a new cultural era. Williams’s ekphrastic poem, “The rose is obsolete,” brings attention to a similar “edge” where “love waits” to be “renew[ed].” A study of the Cubist Juan Gris’s *Flowers* (or *Roses*), Williams’s poem particularly focuses on the artifice of his rose (“figured in majolica—the broken plate / glazed with a rose”; “copper roses / steel roses”), enacting both an appropriation and negation of conventional symbolism. Despite the declaration that it is obsolete, the rose remains entangled with imagination of love, “[c]risp, worked to defeat / laboredness—fragile” (*Imaginations* 108). In the prose sections surrounding the poem, Williams considers the way in which new art forms can penetrate the “barrier” of

“crude symbolism,” a thick veil between the imagination and things. So his reinvented rose is sharp, cutting through the “layers of demoded words and shapes” (100), to bring the imagination into more immediate contact with the world. The poem pivots at its centre on the Heraclitean proposal, essential also to Eliot, that the end is the beginning: “[t]he rose carried weight of love / but love is at an end—of roses,” for at the “end” of the painted petal is that liminal “space” where “the start is begun” (107-08).

Hass follows his Modernist predecessors in using this thematic motif in several of his poems. In “Emblems of a Prior Order,” the title serves to underscore the expiration of the cultivar rose dropping its petals on the lawn in the vignette of the poem. His classification of the rose as “fin de siècle” suggests an end to a cycle in culture, too (99). The lines “gardens are a history / of art” combine with the symbolic association of the rose with “burning love” (“*brennende liebe*”), to evoke the eros of *fin’amors* or courtly love that is at an end (*fin*) in the current “order” of modern life. The opening phrase, “Patient cultivation,” points to the fact that the hybrid rose, along with the Dobermann’s pinscher, the lawn, and silver tray (depicting the British custom of morning tea), are the “careful work” of desire-fuelled, colonial imagination informed by aristocratic sensibilities. These things represent cultural systems vastly separated from the natural systems of the North American continent, and due for reformation.

Hass writes elsewhere about “the downward pull of the limbs of trees, heavy with leaves and fruit” in European art through the centuries, and his observation is apposite to the significance of the falling petals of this rose: they are “a metaphor for the way in which our vertical longings return to the earth again under the weight of their own ripeness” (*What* 508). One of his continuing interests is the way in which these longings for transcendence and associated works of imagination, by returning to the earth and to the local environment in which

they are situated, may be both relinquished and renewed by perception made more clear and true to present, corporeal life.

Conventional poetic forms, including the erotic image of the rose, and their relation to what he calls “the old riddle” concerning “whether one possesses being in desire or cessation of desire” (*Twentieth* 207), are addressed in both “Spring Drawing” collage poems in *Human Wishes*. In “Spring Drawing,” “A man” who is a poet seeks an apt “brushstroke,” a combining of words capable of “carrying the energy” and “force” to launch him beyond his self-absorbed “pathos” (*Apple* 131). He is “stranded” in the metonymic memory of “a woman’s breast,” nostalgia for the pleasure of intimacy shared with his beloved. The opening image “*lilacs against white houses*” invokes Whitman’s elegiac “When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom’d” and with it, his poetic “plainness” and commitment to develop poetry in an American idiom, rather than merely adopting traditional (British) poetic diction. Foregrounding language helps the man “transition” his libido from the ecstasy and intimacy of sexual passion to his creative work in the “habitable space” of the everyday, which the woman seems to do easily (*Apple* 131). The vernacular, featuring “common nouns of a plainer / intention,” moves him “away from” the classical imagination of “the garden roses” (among other figures), “as if” their form “were a little hobby of the dead,” and toward an eros of everyday life (Griffin). Hass thus depicts the search for a new “comedy” (131), emerging from the dialectic between the ideal and the real (*What* 87).

In a variation on the theme, the poet observes in “Spring Drawing 2” that, because it has been pruned badly, his pink garden rose sends out “a few wild white roses / from the rootstalk” (141). Juxtaposed with an epigram on the story of Sakyamuni (the Buddha) escaping the cycle of desire, these wild blooms suggest the erotic impulse of life breaking free from the stricture of idealization and stasis of form. The effect is analogous to the renewal of love at the end of the

petal of Williams's "obsolete" rose. Taking up Williams's evocation of the weight of history upon the rose, Hass sets up a New World/Old World contrast: "The wild rose looks weightless, the floribunda are / heavy with the richness and sadness of Europe // as they imitate the dying petal by petal, of the people who bred them" (142). The dropping petals are emblems of cultural decay, but also of possible renewal in being brought down into the humus. Hass considers the role of the poet in this work. "What if" forms of idealized desire are not left innocent, he wonders, but held "responsible" for "all the suffering" that accompanies pleasure, all that is "left over" after the abstractions? Asking the question is part of the undertaking to revivify imagination, allowing for the possibility of "a few wild white roses / from the rootstalk" of the erotic impulse, simpler forms that are more connected to earthly life (141).

For Hass, negating the accepted or outmoded forms of attention and making "fresh and resilient" ones is a spiritual activity (*Twentieth* 133-33; *What* 294). Spirituality involves recapturing the sense that culture making, language-informed consciousness, and desire—*poiesis*, *logos*, *eros*—are rooted within bodily life and natural processes. Poetry, Hass suggests in "State of the Planet," ought to "set aside from time to time its natural idioms / Of ardor and revulsion" in order to stay true to (betrotted), nourished by, and nourishing of the earth (*Apple* 311). As such, poetry can be a part of the renewal not only of culture, but also of the overridden natural systems of the earth, by presenting a "dream of restoration" (317). This is one way that he responds to the pressing environmental issues of our times. He calls for consideration of the unfolding, unintended consequences as desire and imagination pull away from "intelligent restraint" and awareness of the complexity of earthly life, when we, the technologically enhanced humans, proceed as if we are "alive somewhere, somehow outside it, / Watching" (*Apple* 316). In this he is in agreement with Susan Griffin, who implicates such a "prevailing

habit of mind” that European settlers “transplanted” in North America (29). She insists that, “if consciousness is to migrate further toward the eros embedded in daily and practical life, certain histories must be told and habits of mind revealed” (28).

Many of Hass’s poems enact this work of revelation. He has observed that “the language and many of the attitudes of American poets were formed by the sense of the sacred and the traditional forms of discourse . . . in the communities they grew up in, however tenuous those forms and practices were in their families and communities” (*What* 295). Applying this insight to his own poetry, one can trace in his evocation of the sacredness of nature the veneration of the Virgin Mary and the seasonal rituals and liturgy of Catholicism, both of which he says absorbed “large measures of Mediterranean earth religion” (289-90, 292). Ironically, to negate and then make something new of this religious symbolism, he draws on classical myth and European art to conflate the figure of Mary with a decidedly Earthly Venus. Out of this negation and affirmation emerges a figure for the rhythm of life and death, the larger matrix in which he situates the mystery of human eros and sexuality—or to use the more apt archaic word—venery.

His Venus figure, in her various incarnations, entwines a Whitmanian sense of the “procreant urge” with the foundational Buddhist principle that life is impermanence (*annica*). So the Lucretian Venus-*Natura* figure in his poem “State of the Planet” calls forth all the “multiple, complex” “shapes of the earth” that assemble and disperse (314-15); she is also the dancing figure in “The Origin of Cities” that presides over “what goes out, what returns” (*Apple* 95). It is “she” that turns toward the poet in “Thin Air,” her “blush” indicating the burning life in the mountain meadow in summertime, and sleeping under snow in winter (193). She is the source of the phenomenal “parade” (194), the endless tidal “rhythms of departure and arrival” in “July Notebook: The Birds” (10), “the composesures and the running down of things” in “Natural

Theology” (189), “the circular dance of being and suffering” in time and matter to which Hass says the erotic lyric poet gives “steady attention” (*Twentieth* 210). In “Santa Lucia,” “Santa Lucia II,” this Venus figure is evoked when the erotic urge building within and bewildering the speaker is mirrored in the water: “The sea foamed easily around the rocks / like the pathos of every summer” (166). With Venus and her son-emissary Eros in the background of the “Santa Lucia” poems, Hass reforms her rose by replacing it with “wildflowers” (*Apple* 93). For his persona, flora and the flora-like sea anemone are natural shapes of desire, and attending to them is an aid to reimagining Venus’s son as “the eros of everyday life.”

Santa Lucia: “Seeing and Being Seen”

The “Santa Lucia” series, composed of the four-part “Santa Lucia” (*Praise*, 1979) and five-part “Santa Lucia II” (*Human Wishes*, 1989), presents an artist engaged in “the war between desire / and dailiness,” to borrow the phrase from “Songs to Survive the Summer” (*Apple* 114). His female central consciousness seeks to turn that war into a dance. She is “a woman professionally involved with art,” going about her life in relation with her lover, her place (Hass’s central California coast), her domestic work, and, particularly, her writing (*Apple* 350). The series interrogates the history and habits of erotic idealization in Western culture that “make us strangers to the world” and the flesh (*Twentieth* 261).

The opening section of “Santa Lucia” announces the speaker’s dissenting perspective on the European tradition of “Art & love.” Immediately after the thematic phrase, the speaker describes her lover: “he camps outside my door / innocent, carnivorous. As if desire” (*Apple* 91). Along with the paradoxical description of his body several lines later, “wolfish, frail,” this phrasing identifies the lover with Socrates’s Eros described (via Diotima) in Plato’s *Symposium*: “always poor . . . tough and shriveled and shoeless and homeless, always lying on the dirt

without a bed, sleeping at people's doorsteps" (63-64). The enjambment to the next line alters the voice from comparative to credulous: "As if desire / were actually a flute, as if the little song / *transcend, transcend* could get you anywhere" (*Apple* 91). The speaker recognizes in her lover's intentions a Platonic eros she does not find convincing: "he believes in the arts / and uses them for beauty." She is skeptical of the gifts he brings her, for they highlight his hungry eye on her, though they include "postcards / of the hillsides by Cézanne desire has left / alone" (91).

In both poems, the woman protagonist is an alert, awakened Psyche vis-à-vis Eros in the western world. She carries within her a restless rebellion against the way she and her lovers have been culturally conditioned by traditional codes of love. In "Santa Lucia II," the speaker alludes to Aupelius's tale of Psyche and Eros: "It always circles back to being seen. / Psyche in the dark, Psyche in the daylight / counting seed" (165). The phrase "being seen" relates to Psyche's punishment for viewing Eros under the lamp, and suggests the difficulty of attending to desire. The phrase reflects back, also, to the description of shame in the first section, of the way momentary sexual "pleasure" is countered by the conspicuity of the body's involuntary responses. The speaker associates a childhood memory of humiliation in front of classmates with orgasmic loss of control: "when I call, vivid, / large and embarrassing like the helpless / doglike fidelity of my affections" (165). In "Santa Lucia," she readily admits to the pleasure: "I do cry out. / Like everyone else, I thrash, am splayed. / Oh, oh, oh, oh. Eyes full of wonder" (92). She recognizes, however, that her eyes, her way of seeing herself, are informed by his desire: "I see / my body is his prayer. I see my body" (92).

Writing elsewhere about the emergence of consciousness and the development of self-perception, Hass uses the (nearly) interchangeable terms "being and being seen" and "seeing and being seen" (*Twentieth* 56-57; *What* 294). This phenomenal structure is key to the way "the eyes

of a community [or a significant other], real and imagined” can influence how one sees the self (*What* 294). The phrase “seeing and being seen” accords with the chiasmic, reflexive structure of vision, the basic “open relationship of affection” of Merleau-Ponty’s “radically relational” phenomenology, “in which the internal relations between bodies are constitutive of a being’s identity” (Bannon 345). “Seeing and being seen” mirrors the larger context of “Flesh,” the “body as the medium through which life is lived and the structural relations that organize that life” (346). Bryan E. Bannon explains that, “in a body’s encounter with the place that environs it”—and I would add, the psyche’s situation within the culture—“there is a reciprocal action between bodies, each side of which is both passive and active” (345). This is the antonymic pair in Aristotle’s categories of being, *poiein* (from which “poetry” is derived), creating, acting, doing, on the one hand, and *paschein* (from which comes “pathos”), suffering action, undergoing, being affected, on the other. The affective, suffering side of this pair, as Hass observes, at times is difficult to accept as one of “the conditions of [human] consciousness,” and gives rise to a hunger for escape to some more ideal existence (*What* 286).

“Man is altogether desire,” Hass quotes from the Upanishads in the poem “Human Wishes,” proceeding to explore the way desire stimulates *poiesis* to fill the emptiness or lack of what is desired (*Apple* 149). Spinoza likewise denotes desire as the essence of human being, the basic *conatus* or striving for preservation in being (Cook 98-100). In several poems, including the “Santa Lucia” series, Hass uses related expressions such as hunger, longing, wanting, wishing, hollowing, blinding—even “goug[ing] out our eyes” (“Sunrise” *Apple* 80). These are synonyms for the affectivity of desire as an ambiguous, “irresistible force of life” (*What* 79). The phrase “one *desire* / touching many things,” from the poem “Natural Theology,” echoes in the recent poem “July Notebook: The Birds,” where “life want[ing] life” is drawn out and sustained

in “the *light* . . . touching everything” (*Apple* 190; 3-5, italics mine). Desire is entwined in Hass’s imagination with life, and desire for life with light and perception. “It always circles back,” the “Santa Lucia II” speaker states, “back to being seen” (165). The poem goes on to explore the contradiction that desire energizes and focuses attention, but can also distort perception, even blinding the perceiver to what is there (*What* 460).

The “Santa Lucia” persona discovers distortion in “[m]ale fear, male eyes and art. The art / of love” (*Apple* 92). In “Santa Lucia II,” she expresses exasperation at lovers’ narcissistic projections of longings upon the beloved, in order to see “[t]hemselves / transformed, adored” (165). She agrees with “the essay writer”—a “Persian cat” with apparent post-colonial critical awareness—in his assertion that, “Art since the Renaissance / is ownership” (167-68). For her, art is “a form of suffering,” the passive side of the “seeing and being seen,” as much as it is a form of desire (167). In “Santa Lucia,” Renaissance paintings display the female body, which she identifies as her own, “each moment, naked & possessed” and consumed by gorging tourists (92). For this reason, she prefers “walking the city in the rain” to “[w]alking in the galleries at the Louvre” (92). In “Santa Lucia II,” she goes away from the city to walk “[n]ear Point Sur Lighthouse” in Big Sur, that significant locus of unfettered desire in Jeffers’s poetic myth discussed in the last chapter. In both poems, she is finding her way to clarity, away from the habituated “eyes I use to see myself / in love” (92).

Indeed, “clarity” is implied in the very title and name “Santa Lucia.” “Lucia” is derived from the Latin word *lux*, for light. Earlier I touched on Hass’s intrigue with light and its philosophical, theological, and artistic significance in the Western tradition. That interest has made him alert to various ways of imagining light, including in the Eastern tradition. In the essay “Images,” he admiringly describes Buson’s poetry as featuring, “Light, light and color and a

painterly combination of intensity and detachment” (*Twentieth* 284). The latter is the tensional polarity of “pure seeing,” or clarity, a process involving attentive perception of nature and consciousness, accompanied by contemplation on the deliverances of perception. Such seeing amounts to a spiritual exercise of affirmation and negation.

In the second section of “Santa Lucia,” the speaker recalls a moment of pre-reflective, bodily perception as she walked “the Five Springs trail”: “the fog heaved in” and “sparrows made curves / like bodies in the ruined air” (91). Those aerial bodies rendered in *sfumato* are mirrored in the Renaissance paintings of women suspended on the walls of the art galleries in the following section. But the line jumps to the names of the common weeds she saw at the side of the trail: “Dead-nettle, thimbleberry.” These are enumerated without description, suggesting that they entered into her pre-reflective thought as she walked. The syllabic rhythm of their folkish names provides a sense of domestic knowledge steadying her, her thought process rooted in bodily contact with the earth.

The representation of meditative walking serves as a cue for the subtle underlying form of the “Santa Lucia” series: the quest. Movement through place, in the speaker’s walking and driving, evokes a search to break with habits of imagination that obscure her perception, just as the fog that “ruins” the air in this section, in the following, clears away so “the sky is empty, clean” (92). Negation and emptiness, for the sake of clear vision, is one signification the thimbleberry holds in the later “Regalia for a Black Hat Dancer,” which at one point refers to the martyr Santa Lucia (244). In this later long poem, its title alluding to the Tibetan Buddhist ritual of the Black Hat Dance, Hass presents a quest of “two emptinesses: one made of pain and desire / and one made of vacancy” (240). He travels from home to a foreign land (Korea), and journeys spiritually through the dialectic of sorrow and “hilarity,” of goings (a broken marriage) and of

unexpected comings (new love). There he finds a “wildflower” that is “something like a thimbleberry” at the trailside in South Korea, a “very plain ancestor of the garden rose— / another elaboration of desire” in the western tradition. He imagines relinquishing his “internal fury” by picking and placing this flower before the simple form of “the Buddha— / the carved, massive stone, the—” (*Apple* 243). The failure of language indicates the unnamable presence of the absence of desire. The peace in this moment of relinquishment and affirmation before the Buddha recalls Lowell’s “Lady of Walsingham” and Hass’s own Marian images of a calm centre. In the speaker’s inner landscape, “the stone at Sokkaram” and “the Buddha’s hands” replace the “sandstone and basalt / and carnelian marble” medieval “pietàs and martyrdoms of Santa Lucia” (245, 244). So, also, the wildflower that is not a rose represents negation of the old and openness to the possibility of the new. The artist-persona in the “Santa Lucia” series is on a similar spiritual journey that has “to do with negation, with some version of saying no to the plausibly constructed world, and of being drawn through that negation toward” something like “*mystery* . . . the inexplicable fact of being alive” (*What* 294). She reflects Hass’s interest in art that is more than indulgence of desire, but is a spiritual discipline of eros that refreshes “our sense of ordinary life” and clarifies perception, like “someone turning on the light” (92).

The Thickness of the Name

The titles of the “Santa Lucia” poems invite reflection on the “assumption[s]” of language. If “Santa Lucia” evokes light and the inner journey to clarity, it is also “thick with . . . an inherence of literary and historical associations” (*Twentieth* 155). Apart from the titles, there is only one mention of the name in both poems, and that is not until the opening line of the fourth and final section of “Santa Lucia”: “Santa Lucia: eyes jellied on a plate” (93). The name identifies the locus of the speaker’s remembered walk in the Big Sur region, where “[t]he thrust

of serpentine was almost green / all through the mountains where the rock cropped out” (93). But the colon indicates that what follows pertains to the name. The enigmatic image in the second half of the line is drawn from representations of the saint’s martyrdom in “old frescoes” in medieval and Renaissance churches mentioned in “Regalia for a Black Hat Dancer” (244). There allusion to the religious imagination of Old Europe, juxtaposed against evocation of the wildness of the far western place, functions as an implicit negation. In “Regalia for a Black Hat Dancer,” the allusion to Santa Lucia refers to the disintegration of Christendom; the emptiness the poet-speaker suffers upon the break-up of his marriage corresponds with the “vacancies, / sheer blanks where pietas and martyrdoms of Santa Lucia” and other religious subjects in art once had predominated throughout Europe (*Apple* 244). The jellied eyes in “Santa Lucia” likewise conjure decay while the mineral “serpentine” evokes life, and more specifically, botanical life in its colour and undulating form.

Santa Lucia of Syracuse is patron saint of both the blind and of sight. She is one of Dante’s three female mediators that send Virgil to help him find a way out of the *selva oscura* and up to the threshold of the Earthly Paradise in *The Comedy*. Her name was given to the mountain range of the Big Sur region early in the Spanish colonization of Alto California. Big Sur is the salient place in both poems of the “Santa Lucia” series, a *locus amoenus* in the speaker’s inner quest (*Apple* 91, 93; 166-67). In the first part of “Santa Lucia,” she recalls watching the pelicans “among white dunes / under Pico Blanco on the Big Sur coast” (91), while in the central section of “Santa Lucia II” she reflects on an erotic incident that occurred while she was beach-walking “Near Point Sur Lighthouse, morning, dunes / of white sand the eelgrass holds in place,” with “. . . Pico Blanco / in the distance and the summer heat steady / as a hand” (166). Pico Blanco is part of the mountain range that was named, claimed, and taken up into the

history of the West by the Spanish conquistador-cartographer Sebastián Vizcaíno, who sailed past in 1602 on the feast day of the Roman Christian martyr.

Known to English-speakers as St. Lucy, Lucia of Syracuse has been the repeated subject of legend, liturgy, iconography, poetry, and art, including Renaissance paintings by contemporaries of Vizcaíno that grotesquely depict her holding out a pair of eyes on a platter. The account of the eyes varies; in one version, her persecutors gouge them out, another pair miraculously growing either before or after she is killed by a knife-stab to the throat. In this case, the eyes are held out in offering to God, symbolic of the glory of her martyrdom. But in another interpretation, she is self-maimed and in the eternal moment of the painting, she holds out the eyes accusingly toward the pagan patrician suitor whose desiring gaze became murderous will to possess the body and dowry she had devoted to God.

Hass provides a paratextual reference that localizes the reference to the saint, tying it more closely to the possession of colonialism entangled with the tragic legacy of Spanish Franciscan missions. He mentions in an endnote that a rendition by a Native American painter of “a young Indian-looking St. Lucy offering her plucked-out eyes to the viewer” hangs in the Mission Santa Ynez near Santa Barbara (*Apple* 350). The note sheds light on the titular name, connecting the poem to the earlier “Palo Alto: The Marshes” (*Field Guide*, 1973), where the motif of sight and blindness links the speaker with Kit Carson’s brutality, on the one hand, and Mariana Richardson’s malice-filled “ancient eyes” (the poem is dedicated to her) that watched from the Mission San Rafael as Carson shot down her lover. Ironically, the mission is “named for the archangel (the terrible one) / who gently laid a fish across the eyes / of saintly, miserable Tobias,” in the legend, “that he might see” (55). Tobias and the Franciscan priests of St. Raphael parish are recalled in “Dragonflies Mating” (*Sun Under Wood*), where images hanging in the

mission museum commemorate the “terrible thing” that “came here with their love,” along with “the baroque statues and metalwork crosses / and elaborately embroidered cloaks”: the illness that decimated the Indigenous Californians (206).

The Native American painting of Santa Lucia, the note suggests, is a subversive cultural appropriation of the European Christian image by an artist whose experience of “seeing and being seen” under the influences of that culture have been grievously injurious. The name “Santa Lucia” signals an analogy, then, between the martyr’s suffering and the expropriation of identity and land, the “masculine conquest of a feminine earth” underwriting European expansionism and American manifest destiny (*What* 473). In turn, as the Californian artist’s portrayal of the martyr sheds a critical light on the cultural and identity-forming experience of colonial “seeing and being seen,” so the speaker in section three of “Santa Lucia” interrogates the Renaissance art of love that presents the woman’s body, “naked & possessed,” under the controlling male gaze.

A slow, steady reformation of the shape of eros propels the movement of meditation in the Santa Lucia poems. The image of the plucked-out and decaying eyes on the plate in “Santa Lucia” is foiled by the description immediately following of wildflowers in the mountain range that bears the name of the martyr; they “were not beautiful, / fierce little wills rooting in the yellow / grass year after year” (*Apple* 93). Even as her perception lets them be what they are, the image of uncultivated flowers offers a fresh form of ecospiritual eros, emerging from a reimagination of desire that valorizes ordinary life. For Hass, responsible poetry involves a refusal to unreflectively take up traditional forms to order perception and “name what we have seen” (*What* 474). In the “Santa Lucia” series, such forms include Renaissance paintings of women in the first poem (*Apple* 92; 167-68) and the ascetic “immaculate parable of a garden” kept by the neighbour with a Renaissance artist name, Mrs. Piombo, in the second (166-67). The

speaker rejects these idealizations of the female body and the earth, respectively, because they manifest for her the colonizing “ownership” from which she seeks to free her perception and art (*Apple* 92; 167-68).

So we come to better comprehend the poetic negation of Santa Lucia’s eyes: they are “jellied.” Hass has used the image of jellied eyes earlier, in “The Return of Robinson Jeffers” (*Field Guide*, 1973). There he imagines Jeffers’s resurrection on Point Sur, mimicking Jeffers’s own narrative of a lover resurrected by a woman’s desire for sublime sexual satisfaction as escape from the raging passions of her body. The woman is taken up as a figure in Hass’s poem for Jeffers’s psyche and her resurrected lover, a figure of Eros turned to Thanatos. After *la petite mort* of sex, the lover dies again: “Beside her was, again, just so much cheese-soft flesh / And jellied eye rotting in the pools of bone.” The phrase “jellied eye,” in turn, recalls Jeffers’s use of “jellies” in “Iona: The Graves of Kings.” There it refers to the eyes of once proud, now dead rulers of an ancient warrior culture being absorbed into the earth: “What delusions of grandeur / What suspicion-agonized eyes, / What jellies of arrogance and terror” (*CP* 2.121). Another connection: in the later “Shame: An Aria” (*Sun Under Wood*, 1996), Hass highlights the way “all the slimes and jellies of decay” are culturally repressed for their ugliness (*informalis*) and association with “the kingdom of the dead” (*Apple* 237). In each case, “jellied” conveys decomposition, and this links the “jellied” eyes of the martyr in “Santa Lucia” with death.

Further, the jellied eyes in “Santa Lucia” represent the imagination of “death as glorious transformation,” the hope of the martyr while suffering the undesirable advance of, and consequent punishment for repelling, her suitor’s desire (*What* 88). They point to the demise of a woman under the violent impulse of male desire and her counter-impulse of escape, which ruins her eyes and, in a spiritual sense, her vision of life. This effect is analogous to the effects of

“male fear” and idealist possession of the female body in the knotted “riddle / of desire,” which the speaker of the “Santa Lucia” series is in the process of repudiating (*Apples* 92). That riddle, I presume, is the old one Hass refers to elsewhere, about whether being is possessed by desiring or relinquishing desire (*Twentieth* 207). The “Santa Lucia” persona dismisses the riddle; she is not interested in possession of being. Further, she recognizes that to repress or malign eros because its pleasure is temporary and may be followed by shame or pain (“Santa Lucia II” 165), would be to fall back into the problematic relation to the body and the earth that mars the European tradition. So the “eyes jellied on a plate” are a thematic signal, a negation of a tragic form of eros, followed by an affirmation of the lusty urge of the wildflowers and the “thrust” of the “almost green” serpentine in the Santa Lucia mountains.

A Comedy of “Plainer Intention”

Hass once called upon “the small gods—hilarity and carnality” to deliver him from a tortured state of mind over the impasse of desire that he recognized in the poetry of Jeffers, who strategically seeks to meet the tragic view on the human condition with godlike detachment (*Twentieth* 5). Indeed, “The Return of Robinson Jeffers” was an early effort to re-imagine an erotic poetics of place that does not deal in the dark imaginations of furious hunger and disappointed desire and the accompanying “stone god” dispassion depicted by Jeffers. As indicated earlier, Hass theorizes that comedy is on the side of “the goodness of life,” of Eros, marriage, fertility, and renewal, opposed to tragedy and Thanatos, the tendency to imagine death as glorious or as an escape from natural processes and earthly violence (*What* 88; 286).⁶⁸ Through comedy, then, aesthetics of relinquishment meets up with aesthetics of affirmation.

⁶⁸ He is in agreement with Joseph W. Meeker, who claims the literary comedy “is a celebration, a ritual renewal of biological welfare,” its lesson “humility and endurance” (159, 168).

“Spring Drawing,” published alongside “Santa Lucia II,” can serve as a kind of gloss on the comedy of the “Santa Lucia” poems. “Spring Drawing” appropriates the tone and mood of “the comedy” to which it explicitly refers (*Apple* 131). This is also the case in the Santa Lucia poems, where it is apparent in their speaker’s satiric tone. In “Spring Drawing,” a comedic negation of tragedy is accomplished by an energetic “brushstroke” movement “away from, not toward” the “pathos” of elegy (*Apple* 131). The conventional “hes and shes” of comedy are represented by the nostalgic male contrasted with the active female transitioning into the tasks of ordinary life after their implied dalliance and separation. Likewise, the Santa Lucia poems feature the juxtaposition of male and female “wants” and perspectives. In the first section of “Santa Lucia,” the male lover “brings his body” and myriad gifts as offerings to her, representing an idealized object of his Platonic or courtly love (91). In the second section, she seeks to break free from a prevalent view articulated by Freud, that “*All women are masochists*,” taking pleasure in passivity and humiliation (91). She admires Dürer—rejecting what she has been told, that he is “*second-rate*”—because he depicts Eve as active and strong. Meanwhile, she sees her lover’s erotic desire as neediness, “all suction,” and wants love to need “less” (93). In the view of “Santa Lucia II,” the lover’s excessive profession that she is “all he wanted” is “sweet,” but born of narcissistic and unrealistic longings to be “transformed, adored” (165).

In “Spring Drawing,” as in the Santa Lucia poems, the juxtaposition of male and female desire sheds favorable light on “her” eros of ordinary life. A repeated “as if,” part skepticism, part possibility, creates an “interval” of “habitable space,” distanced from “the more complicated forms” of the court of “the dead,” those artistic forms of how “they used to say” love and life (*Apple* 131). A preference for “common nouns of a plainer intention, *moon, shit, sky*” over elaborate diction (131) is echoed in the central consciousness in “Santa Lucia.” She

likes to “walk the city in the rain,” free of her lover’s Renaissance-coloured rapture, where she can observe lucidly the “[d]og shit, traffic accidents,” all the undesirable aspects that are also part of the civilization wrought by human wishing (92). She is on the side of Yeats’ Crazy Jane who, as Hass observes, defies the Bishop’s high-minded spirituality with the assertion that the God of “Love has pitched his mansion in / The place of excrement” (*What* 287).

Exasperated with old forms of eros, the Santa Lucia speaker says, “It sickens me, this glut & desperation,” and in the second poem exclaims, “Oh, it makes me tired / and it doesn’t work” (“Santa Lucia,” *Apple* 91; “Santa Lucia II,” 165). Borrowing an image from Robert Duncan’s “Poem Beginning with a Line From Pindar” with its double allusion to the myth of Psyche and Eros as interpreted by Goya, she imagines the Platonic “god” of love “dismembered,” presumably in a make-out session in the back of “his Chevy” (92). Emerging from the ruin is “[a] different order of religious awe: / agony & meat, everything plain afterward” (92). To her, erotic ecstasy is linked with “religious awe,” but eros is more than sexual. It involves mutual kindness and domestic tasks of “good hands, chervil in a windowbox” (“Santa Lucia” 92); “You got me coffee, I’ll get you your book” (“Santa Lucia II” 167). Her spiritual quest involves reimagining a form of eros compatible with the procession of everyday life in the human, but also the more-than-human community.

In “Spring Drawing,” Hass considers the eschewal of conventional poetic form and diction in favor of homely plainness to be a matter of “justice.” Aligning with the ironic tone of the “Santa Lucia” speaker, the phrase “as if,” repeated four times, indicates that the poet-speaker here is also writing his way to a new incarnation of eros. Clarity of language, uncomplicated in expression, bears upon whether or not the “spirit attend[s]” to the work of the imagination (131). The poem assumes that such spiritual work is required to “reinvent the inner form of wishing” to

fit within the possibilities of “habitable space,” a livable world (131-2). As Hass avers in several essays in *What Light Can Do*, the negation of “complicated” old forms is necessary to move toward “the unheroic dailiness of life and its wisdom,” a particularly urgent matter in our time of escalating global violence and environmental crises (*What* 87).

The Dance of the Graces

“Natural Theology,” published along with “Santa Lucia II” in *Human Wishes*, explores the historicity of eros by depicting the evolutionary emergence of human consciousness and the various forms of the “imagination of need” in civilization (*Apple* 190). These include the city, “from which the sun keeps rising into morning light, / because desires do not split themselves up, there is one desire / touching the many things, and it is continuous” (190). Hass recognizes that this ubiquitous desire tends “to simplify what it sees” (*What* 473). Although he advocates for plainness of language over elaborate ornamentation in “Spring Drawing,” the point is clarity. Vision simplified by desire is another matter, as wanting to perceive something or someone effortlessly may entail erasure of particularity, a loss of clarity. So if the Eros of comedy is “a subverter” of Thanatos and the glorified death of tragedy, it is not an unproblematic one (*What* 88). Obscuring as well as intensifying in its effects, desire’s influence upon perception and the formal imagination may be paradoxically abstracting and can lead to idealization. Habitual, unreflective ways of seeing and “naming what we have seen” lack acuity, in part, because they are unconscious of the ever-present medium of desire (474). Appropriated without critical distancing, conventional imaginative forms affect perception, blinding the eye and deadening the hand of human making.

The “Santa Lucia” poems demonstrate a practice of “literature as resistance—not as a flowering, not as a pulse of the irresistible force of life, but as a [creative] restraint upon that

force” (*What* 79). They imagine relinquishment of egocentric and anthropocentric desire that demands reality fit within idealized forms that estrange from and give rise to violence against what is actually there (*Twentieth* 257, 261). Yet for Hass, the spiritual practice of his poetry is not all “the strict beauty of denial”; as he explores in “Spring Drawing,” it also involves an aesthetics of affirmation, “reinvent[ing] the inner form of wishing” to keep it connected to the goodness of earthly life (*Apple* 131). Negation is not enough; it must be wed to the affirmative force of ecospiritual eros.

Hass’s comic persona in the “Santa Lucia” sequence models the practice of “active and attentive capacity for creation that humans have” within the more-than-human community, recycling back into the culture “fresh and resilient forms extend[ing] the possibilities of being alive” (*Twentieth* 132-33). In the final section of “Santa Lucia,” the exhausted emblem of eros—the garden rose—is supplanted by the plain flora in the Big Sur *locus amoenus*. Immediately after the image of the martyr’s eyes, the speaker follows Williams’s impulse of favouring “the small / yellow cinquefoil in the / parched places” (*Imaginations* 117-18):

I liked sundowns, dusks smelling of madrone,
 the wildflowers, which were not beautiful,
 fierce little wills rooting in the yellow
 grass year after year, thirst in the roots,
 mineral. They have intelligence
 of hunger. Poppies lean to the morning sun,
 lupine grows thick in the rockface, self-heal
 at creekside.

The speaker's ecospiritual eros is akin to the thirst and reach of the native flowers.⁶⁹ Their uncomplicated "intelligence" fosters clarity of perception that, in a sense, heals the jellied eyes of the Old World saint. This clarity coincides with restraint, "want[ing] less," which allows lovers to live ordinary life, rather than remain absorbed in the erotic gaze, as conveyed in the closing image of the deer returning from startled alertness to calm grazing.

The erotic tradition of "Art & love" in the western world presented in "Santa Lucia" is supplanted in the later poem "Art and Life" by the portrayal of Vermeer's unpossessive attention to his subjects. Notably, the change of titular words suggests that, in the vision valorized by the poem, "love" is subsumed into "life." The artist known as the Master of Light sees "the soul [as] an animal going about its business" and "honor[s]" and "admire[s]" it for being "so alive" (291). In contrast with the erotic possession of the Renaissance portraits in "Santa Lucia," Vermeer's paintings of women are intimate, but invite "absolutely no claim of possession" (*Twentieth* 305). In the essay "Images," Hass compares Vermeer to Basho, whose famous haiku of the frog jumping in the pond "has become a figure for that clear, deep act of acceptance and relinquishment which human beings are capable of" when the suffering of "loss or peril" are not made more intense than they are, simply as "a condition for being alive" (305, 307). Desire is notably compatible with restraint in such exemplary works of poetic attention ("State of the Planet," *Apple* 315).

⁶⁹ The image of wildflower eros is repeated in "On Squaw Peak," a poem of loss, clarity, and affirmation (*Human Wishes*): ". . . that feeling, something like hilarity, of sudden / pleasure when you first come across some tough little plant you knew you'd see comes because it seems—I mean / by *it* the larkspur or penstemon curling / and arching the reach of its sexual being / up out of a little crack in granite—to say / that human hunger has a niche up here in the light-cathedral of the dazzled air. . . ." (*Apple* 198).

Like any good comedy, the Santa Lucia series resolves in a marriage between Psyche-at-work and Eros-of-the-everyday. In the pivotal middle section of “Santa Lucia II,” the speaker recalls the experience of unexpected arousal when walking “[n]ear Point Sur Lighthouse,” an allusion to Jeffers’s emplaced depictions of “the straining flesh, the aching desires” in “Prelude” (Jeffers, *SP* 152). The scene is a stark contrast to the containment of Mrs. Piombo’s garden, a *hortus conclusus* in which restraint without eros deadens perception: “She wears her black sweater under the cypress / in the sun. Life fits her like a glove, / She doesn’t seem to think it’s very much” (166). Compared to this life under wraps, the wild *locus amoenus* in Point Sur is charged with the energy infusing the continuous flesh of the world. The teeming life in tidal pools, shifting dunes and crashing waves, hungry sea birds, a pair of lovers spied in the sex act, all are entwined with the speaker’s own bodily response: “My crotch throbbed / and my throat went dry” (166). She recalls being troubled by the “absurd” response of her body and objectless desire, but rather than repudiating it, she identifies it with the anemones she had been “poking” as she walked the beach in solitude, peering into the tide pools. These creatures are “cream-colored, little womb-mouths, / oldest animal with its one job to do” (166).

The reference to “job,” echoed in the later “work,” places the Santa Lucia poems in the literary tradition that “deliberately mingl[es] the pastoral and the Hesiodic” or georgic (Rosenmeyer 25). The flower-like polyps, which share their name with the terrestrial windflower, are described as “womb-mouths” paralleling the “[b]romeliads and orchids whose flecked petals and womb- / Or mouthlike flowers are the shapes of desire / In human dreams” in “State of the Planet” (314). In a possible allusion to Levertov’s “The Pulse” (*The Sorrow Dance*, 1967), Hass’s speaker takes the sea anemone’s natural erotic shape and movement as an emblem for her *poiesis*. Levertov imagines her poet-self as an anemone, her perception depicted in

“seafern arms,” hands, fingers, swaying out into the world through “the air they call *water*” (227). Hass’s persona likewise identifies the “one job” of the anemone as her own that, “I carry as a mystery inside / or else it carries me around it, petals / to its stamen” (166).

The anemone’s form, a shape of desire in “Santa Lucia II,” is repeated in the “succulents ablaze on the embankments, / morning glory on the freeway roadcuts” that, in turn, mirror the wildflowers of “Santa Lucia.” At the end of the third section, the speaker remembers her Buddhist-inflected reflection on suffering and transitoriness as she was “[d]riving up the coast”:

I thought that life was hunger moving and
that hunger was a form of suffering.
The drive from the country to the city
was the distance from solitude to wanting,
or to union, or to something else—the city
with its hills and ill-lit streets, a vast
dull throb of light, dimming the night sky. (167)

Recollecting the “drive from the country to the city,” the speaker marks a transition in the cycle of her everyday life. She returns from contemplative solitude in the Big Sur *locus amoenus*, where her erotic attention was revived by contact with the natural rhythms of that place.

The double entendre “drive” connotes both literal transportation and redirected desire. The city is “a vast / dull throb of light,” echoing the earlier description of her body’s erotic affect. This image of the city as a social structure rooted in desire is echoed in “Natural Theology,” where it “throbs / in its accumulated glow which is also and more blindingly / the imagination of need” (190). The following section of “Santa Lucia II” elaborates on other erotic imaginations. The speaker juxtaposes the cathexis of sex that “center[s] longing” with the

condensation of dreams. A simile, “hilarity that comes and goes like rain,” brings her thought around to the same kind of reciprocal care the speaker admired in section two of “Santa Lucia”: “you got me coffee, I’ll get you your book, / something to sleep beside, with, against” (167). Thus she recognizes that coming and going, “opening and closing”—the motions of eros—bring not only suffering or ecstatic pleasure, but also communal peace.

In the final section of “Santa Lucia II,” the persona speaks for the first time in the present voice, indicating that the preceding is memory called up in a meditative stream-of-consciousness examination in the dawn. As the “morning light comes up” and ordinary life proceeds in “the matter-of-fact chatter / of the child dawdling at breakfast, a clink / of spoons,” she settles into the day (167). The self-consciousness described in the first section is recalled here in “the mirrors” that “disappear” as she undertakes “the small tasks” (167). Observing that Mrs. Piombo, “the old woman,” has “gone shopping”—another form of desire—the speaker associates her with the apricot tree in her garden, “pruned,” “bare,” “used up.” She is a figure of diminished creative energy, of eros channeled unfruitfully. In a leap of imagination, she links this state with Psyche “punished” for her desire to see Eros by the light of “her candle in the dark.” Immediately she counters the image of a disciplined and dejected Psyche by asserting that, “Oil painting is a form of ownership.” She repudiates the vision, recalling the critique uttered by a Persian “essay writer” at a party the previous year: “Art since the Renaissance / is ownership” (167). Recognizing the cultural construction of control clears her mind, and she turns to her writing.

Yet the tradition of love in the Western world is not abolished without something being creatively recovered from it. “Santa Lucia II” closes with a moving image of “get[ting] down to work” drawn from a Renaissance figure of desire, the dance of the graces. As “State of the Planet” reminds us, this figure consists of a balance between appetite for life, chaste restraint,

and beauty (*Apple* 316). The willful wildflowers and anemone with its “one job to do” combine with the image of the graceful dance in a revitalized form of poetic attention fuelled by ecospiritual eros:

You and the task—the third that makes a circle
is the imagined end. You notice rhythms
washing over you, opening and closing,
they are the world, inside you, and you work. (168)

Chapter 3: Ambient Holiness: Levertov's Mountain Aura and Zwicky's Sea Resonance

There is a glory, an aura, that lies about all beings, a spiritual setting of reality."

— Abraham Heschel (*Who Is Man?* 90)

"Feeling the polyrhythmic pulse of this place—this huge windswept body of water and stone."

— David Abram (*Becoming Animal* 3)

"This mountain's power / lies in the open secret of its remote / apparition."

— Denise Levertov ("Open Secret," *Evening Train* 14)

"O, but the sea wanders everywhere . . ."

— Jan Zwicky ("Envoy: Seven Variations," *Forge* 69)

Introduction: Coastal Relocations

In this chapter I investigate a common aspect of Denise Levertov's and Jan Zwicky's West Coast poetry: ambient holiness. The sacredness of nature is evoked in the leitmotif of aura in Levertov's Mount Rainier-Tacoma series, affiliated with the appearance and withdrawal of the mountain on Seattle's southeastern horizon. In Zwicky's *Forge*, the leitmotif of resonance registers the surging and ebbing of the Salish Sea around Quadra Island, but also, in a metaphorical sense, the encompassing fluency of being. I designate these two leitmotifs of aura and resonance as forms of aesthetics of relinquishment and affirmation expressive of the poets' ecospiritual stances. Playing a role in Levertov's and Zwicky's gradual attunement to the Pacific Northwest coast, the poems I consider are marked by "a sense of respect," as Levertov writes, demonstrating the speakers' "inten[tions] to fit themselves into the place they have come to, modestly, rather than planning to impose their wills upon it" (*New* 8). Their emplaced poetic

practice involves the poets in the spiritual exercise of contemplative attention to things, by which they are oriented to the world. My examination will include tracing the poets' recovery of ancient wisdom discourses and associated female figures representative of spiritual eros. I begin with an interpretive account of the poets' relocations to the west coast and of intersecting commitments that bring them into ideational proximity.

In the spring of 1997, eight years after Levertov moved to Seattle from Somerville, Massachusetts, and close to fifty years after she arrived in North America from England (via Europe), she received an unexpected phone call. Her friend Robert Hass had nominated her to succeed him as Poet Laureate Consultant in Poetry to the Library of Congress (Hollenberg 436). Under different circumstances, perhaps she would have accepted the challenge to "raise the national consciousness to a greater appreciation of the reading and writing of poetry" ("About"). In the span of her career as poet and teacher, she gave a considerable amount of thought and energy to this cause; however, unbeknownst to most of her circle of friends and acquaintances, her health was in steady decline. On the eve of winter solstice that same year, at the age of seventy-four, Levertov succumbed to lymphoma (Hollenberg 443). She was buried in the shadow of a stately sequoia on the hillcrest of Seattle's historic Lake View Cemetery.

Her ending, in my beginning of this chapter, calls to mind an image from one of her sources of inspiration, Rilke's *Book of Hours*. In Book One, the monk-speaker meditating on his past life is like a tree, "rustling over a gravesite / and making real the dream / of the one its living roots / embrace" (51). For Levertov, the tree is "a powerful archetype" of "that mysterious hope, *life at peace*," the dream she sought to make real as a possibility in the world (*New* 166). From the mid-1960s, her poetry collections registered her involvement with the peace movement, including anti-nuclear, social justice, and environmental concerns. Both her poetic practice and

political engagement were invigorated and sustained over six decades by a common source, “a passionate love of life” (*New* 144). In the year of her move, she delivered a lecture, “Poetry and Peace: Some Broader Dimensions,” in which she encouraged daily remembrance of the interconnectivity of earth: “we and all things are truly, physically, biologically, part of one living organism” (*New* 169, 171). Such environmental concern, inextricable from her religious imagination, infuses her Pacific Northwest collections, *Evening Train* (1992), *Sands of the Well* (1996), and *This Great Unknowing: Last Poems* (published posthumously, 1999).

If the sequoia over her grave symbolizes a dream of flourishing life, it also serves as a reminder that, like it, she was a non-indigenous transplant to the Pacific Northwest. The poem “Stepping Westward,” from the middle stage of her career marked by global, political, and personal upheaval, proved to be oracular of the final, more pacific season of her life in Seattle where her invigorated “sense of place” compelled her to express “awe of and gratitude for the mystery of creation” more than protest and lament (Zlotkowski, “Presence” 140). She speaks of being “drawn out / on a thread of wonder” by poetic destiny figured as a peregrination in the direction of the sun’s sky path (*Poems 1960* 166). Thoreau’s “Walking” is a likely influence; his sun is “the Great Western Pioneer whom the nations follow” in search of Atlantis or the Hesperides, “the Great West of the ancients, enveloped in mystery and poetry” (639).

The westering theme subtly underlies the imagery in two other poems written just prior to her move and published in *Evening Train*. “On the Eve” recalls her walking and talking with a friend about anticipated “change in our lives” while the “[d]aylight / changed without moving”: the sun set itself down in the west and the moon, “white in the stillness,” gained in influence as it “tuned its whiteness a tone higher” (43), while in “River,” her compulsion to “follow my task” is

a fluvial “dreaming towards / the calling sea” (44).⁷⁰ What Doug Thorpe observes of the poems in *Evening Train* can be said of all three of her post-move collections: they “belong to the watershed that flows west into the Pacific,” and if they speak of “endings: of dusk, autumn, an approaching sea-change,” over which the emblematic moon presides, they also express prospects of “new beginnings” (250).

In *A Door in the Hive* (1989), completed just prior to her move, Levertov anticipated such change with “Entering Another Chapter,” where she gives her new perspective on life through the Poundian figure of *periplum* (*New* 104). The land is seen through the eyes of a voyager coming to a place of different light, “[c]oastal villages, mountain contours,” but with “[n]o sense of arrival; / a sense of approach” (7). *Evening Train* opens with “Settling,” a memoir on the occasion of her coming to land in the Pacific Northwest drafted a month after her move in mid-August (Hollenberg 392). “Settling” finds her sanguinely balancing the current “grey” with the recalled “welcom[ing]” features of a quintessential American landscape likely seen through the window on a first morning: “clear gold / of late summer, of opening autumn,” the “dawn eagle sunning himself,” and a mountain

. . . revealing herself unclouded, her snow
tinted apricot as she looked west,
tolerant, in her steadfastness, of the restless sun
forever rising and setting. (3)

Facing the approaching Seattle winter “both heavy and chill,” she declares in the second half of the poem, “I am London-born,” able to acclimatize to such weather and “not care,” to

⁷⁰ The image of the sea as the poet’s destination is featured in her tribute to mentors in “September 1961” (*Poems 1960* 81-83), while the river is the central metaphor for poetic vocation in “A Blessing” (*Breathing the Water*, 1987).

“dig in, / into my days” (3). The declaration may have been, in part, a nod to her friend Sam Hamill, the Port Townsend poet-translator and publisher whose poetry she was reading at the time (*New* 6). His 1987 paean to the Pacific Northwest, “A Lover’s Quarrel” (dedicated “*after Roethke*”), celebrates “the three hundred kinds of rain” in response to Roethke’s complaint in the opening of “North American Sequence” about the seemingly interminable “bleak” weather (*Nootka* 13). Apparently chiding Roethke for his hankering after the “seasons in the East” and “eternal California summer,” Hamill advises, “It is enough, perhaps / to say, We live here. / And let it go at that” (12). In agreement with him, Levertov affirms she will settle in Seattle, “having come here to live, not to visit” (*Evening* 3).

Her house was located ideally, a block uphill from Seward Park and Lake Washington (Greene 181, 183; Hollenberg 388-89). The title to the first section of *Evening Train*, “Lake Mountain Moon,” is a metonymic image of the ever-shifting vista the east and south-facing windows afforded. From her kitchen and workroom she could catch weather-dependent glimpses of the highest of the Cascade Range, Mount Rainier, or to use the modified Salishan name, Tacoma (O’Connell, *At the Field’s* 341). As other mountains had done in her past,⁷¹ this one enchanted her, particularly by its wavering between commanding show and mysterious withdrawal on the southeastern horizon, with “a rhythm elusive as that of a sea-wave” (“Elusive,” *Evening* 4). Rising in the landscape a couple of hours away by car on a road not taken by her, Mount Rainier-Tacoma in its “measured self-disclosure” served as an *axis mundi* of

⁷¹ Mountains she had known in her life include: her mother’s Welsh Eryri/Mount Snowden (“The Instant,” *Collected* 65-66); Mont Sainte-Victoire, Cézanne’s mountain in Aix-en-Provence in 1951 (135); the mountains of Oaxaca, Mexico in 1957 (Brooker 79); Mount Blue in Temple, Maine where she spent summers through the 1960s (*Poet* 243); two unnamed mountains in Haderlehn, the Austrian Tyrol in 1988 (“Two Mountains,” *Door* 58; Hollenberg 380).

her sensuous and spiritual orientation, and its poetic configurations index the sacramental dimension of nature that subtends her late poetry (“Noblesse Oblige,” *This* 50).

Despite the determination to dwell expressed in “Settling,” Levertov remained “characteristically restless” to the end (Zlotkowski, “Presence” 150). Her final lecture given in the fall of 1997 at Goshen College was titled “The Migrant Muse: Roots and Airplants.” There she identifies herself and Rilke, her primary poet-mentor since young adulthood, as “airplants” (“Migrant” 487). By this she means her poetry is without one particular social or geographic “terrain,” save her “Jerusalem,” her mother tongue,⁷² acquired in the uniquely blended “household” of her father and mother, respectively a Russian Hasidic-Anglican clergyman and Welsh Celtic-Congregationalist teacher (483-84, 487; *New* 258; *Tesserae* 11; Brooker 103). Her enculturation became a more conscious component of her poetic identity after a 1960 exchange with her American mentor, William Carlos Williams. In correspondence regarding her pre-published poem, “The Jacob’s Ladder,” he chided his poetic daughter for what he took as a lapse in her hard-won facility with “the American idiom” (*Letters* 97-101). In September 21, 1960, Levertov wrote in a letter to Williams, “Certainly I am an American poet, if anything . . . nevertheless I feel the great European poets ‘belong to me’ as an inheritance too. It may perhaps not be a good thing to be without deep local roots, to be at home everywhere & nowhere, but . . . one surely must accept it” (Williams, *Letters* 100, original underscore). Decades later, in the final

⁷² Tropes in “A Map of the Western Part of the County of Essex in England” and the reference to “place of origin” in “The Well,” coincide with her fellow feeling with Paul Celan of language being home (Hollenberg 196). Celan reflects on the lost “place of my own origin” not locatable on a children’s map in his Holocaust-haunted acceptance speech for the 1960 Georg Büchner Prize, the circumstances of which are investigated by Levertov’s friend, John Felstiner, in his Celan biography (*Paul* 166). Levertov composed “Thinking About Paul Celan” around the same time she wrote this final essay (*This* 61).

lecture she reconfirmed that she was “at home nowhere and everywhere” (“Migrant” 487). Again, she echoes Thoreau’s “Walking,” where he plays with the moniker “Saunterer,” or “Holy-Lander,” noting it pertains to the one who claims to be on pilgrimage “*à la Sainte Terre*,” but also “*sans terre*, without land or home,” and she takes this latter, “in the good sense, [to] mean, having no particular home, but equally [being] at home everywhere” (627). Assuming the allusion is intentional, it may have been Levertov’s subtle rejoinder to Williams that Old World forms may not be obliterated from collective settler cultural memory, but they can be adapted to the New World in proliferating variety.

Levertov’s defining interchange with Williams, prompting her to more deeply explore her relation to place at this stage in her American career, underlies “A Map of the Western Part of the County of Essex in England” (*The Jacob’s Ladder*, 1961). It opens with “[s]omething forgotten for twenty years” and suddenly remembered: “I am Essex-born” (*Poems 1960 22*). After tracing her beloved childhood terrain, she proceeds to evince the presence of her migrant ancestors in her present. Like them, she is reorienting in a strange “new” ambience, “picking up fragments of New World slowly, / not knowing how to put them together nor how to join / image with image,” but recollecting her origins to help guide her as she learns by going where she has to go, to borrow from Roethke. The map is emblematic of the polar acts of settling and of sauntering, the tension felt, even in childhood, between attachment to locale and wanderlust spurred by the curiosity for “the world’s great splendors,” anticipating her peripatetic life to come (*Poems 1960 22*). After her move to Seattle, she continued to travel frequently within North America and abroad. Despite her affection for the place she now called “home,” she remained, “by nature, heritage, and as an artist, forever a stranger and a pilgrim” (*New 245*).

Nevertheless, one of the outgrowths of her childhood “cultural atmosphere” was her habituation to what Thoreau names “the art of Walking.” Absorptive practice of place was accompanied from childhood by “intense joy in the visual,” the spiritual and artistic “direction towards which my mother had faced my attention very early in my life” (*New* 258; 235). She developed an “abiding . . . love for the English countryside” under the equally abiding influences of her mother and the British Romantics (Brooker 184). These prepared her to welcome the “passion for inseeing” she found in Rilke, whom she began reading at nineteen (*New* 232; 235). To the end, she retained the value of being “very responsive to place” (O’Connell, *At* 337). In the Rilkean “For Instance,” written just prior to her move and published in *A Door in the Hive*, she observes that “[o]ften, it’s nowhere special” that “wrenches from me the old cry, / O Earth, beloved Earth” in response to a revelatory scene (*Door* 8). Notably, however, in her post-move poetry often it is somewhere particular in the Puget Sound landscape in which her “inseeing” attention is directed and “radiant epiphanies recur, recur” (“For Those Whom the Gods Love Less,” *Sands* 96).

Place-responsiveness, to come back to “Settling,” is part of the acclimatization implied in her assertion “I am London-born,” echoing the more specific “I am Essex-born” in the early poem. This epithet indicates her proclivity for the kind of place Seattle is. Considering the nature of self-identity in the eponymous poem of *Evening Train*, she observes that people seem to have “a core” age (surely she would allow for more than one), “around which the mind develops, reflections circle, / events accrue—a center” (63). Her childhood orientation included attunement to those personally sacred landscapes she called “place[s] of origin,” such as wooded Valentines Park in Essex where she imagined a first meeting with her poetic Muse (“The Well” and “The

Illustration,” *Poems 1960* 40-42).⁷³ This attunement inclined her to be near the “almost-island” of Seward Park, a glacial drumlin-cum-peninsula in Lake Washington covered in three hundred acres of old-growth forest (“The Almost-Island,” *Evening* 101; Tate). Established by the city as a park in 1911, nearly eight decades later it functioned as Levertov’s Puget Sound Grasmere or Walden (*Evening* 101). There “looking, walking, being” was her regular spiritual-poetic exercise (*Sands* 91). From the south beach, she could gaze across a stretch of lake at Mount Rainier-Tacoma if it happened to be “out” from its mist or cloud cover.

A long-standing admiration for Cézanne also informed her responsiveness to the enigmatic mountain. In “Evening Train” she reveals that, at the core “unchanging age” of fourteen, she would ride into London by train to visit the art museums (*Evening* 62; Greene 14; Hollenberg 45). Cézanne became her “model of the great artist” (qtd. in Archer 173; see also *Tesserae* 106; *New* 235). In her final lecture she names him first among her exemplars of the geographically rooted artist, noting his “relationship with the environs of Aix, and with Mont Ste. Victoire in particular” (“Migrant” 481). “For Those Whom the Gods Love Less” salutes the “great one” for the way he continued in his vocation, “doggedly *sur le motif*, his mountain / a tireless noonday angel he grappled like Jacob, / demanding reluctant blessing” (*Sands* 96). In effect connecting her mountain with Cézanne’s, she claims to have learned from him both “the passion for *getting it right*” and persistent patience to wait for “some inflection of light, some wing of shadow / [that] is other, unvoiced” (96). This passion for dialogic relation with the other-than-human presence resulted in more than twenty poems written “*sur le motif*” of the Pacific

⁷³ See Edward Zlotkowski’s “In the Garden: A Place of Creation” and Christopher MacGowan’s “Valentines Park: ‘a Place of Origin’” for an exploration of the significance of these childhood loci in Levertov’s personal myth.

Northwest mountain, which equally fits her description of Mont Ste. Victoire as an “ever-changing unchangeable beloved [stet], massive geometry of rock” (*Tesserae* 103).⁷⁴

Following her signal at the close of “Settling” and drawing on Walter Benjamin’s concept of aura invoked in one of her poem’s epigraphs, I will focus on Levertov’s persistent practice of attention to the “mountain’s vast presence, seen or unseen” as a way she settled in this place and the place settled her (*Evening* 3). With John Gatta, I assume the relationship between her and the mountain is “phenomenologically interactive” (242). To explore how this is so, I expand upon Emily Archer’s observation that Levertov’s alert perception of the changes in the mountain—how “clouds variously illumine [it], conceal it, transform it” and mists “rest, rise, veil, efface” it—was also a process of “shaping her faith” (171). Conversely, I consider the influence of memory and spiritual-intellectual commitments upon her apperception and articulation of the mountain’s aura as it signifies the ambient holiness of earth.

* * *

Shortly before Levertov’s death, Jan Zwicky also relocated from the east to the west coast, sixty-three nautical miles to the north of Seattle, to take up a professorship in the Philosophy Department at the University of Victoria in 1996. Since 2009, she has made her home at Heriot Ridge, Quadra Island with her partner, Robert Bringhurst. Her Ph.D. dissertation on Wittgenstein and ineffability (University of Toronto, 1981) inaugurated her public pursuit of a distinct form of philosophy as a way of life and not only of academic discourse.⁷⁵ Her work

⁷⁴ Of the twenty-one poems in this series, twelve (including “Mid-Winter” in “Dyptich [sic]) appear in *Evening Train*, four in *Sands of the Well*, five in *This Great Unknowing*. She arranged the first fifteen (excluding “Mid-Winter”) together in *The Life Around Us: Selected Poems on Nature* (1997).

⁷⁵ Zwicky’s approach to philosophy follows that of Pierre Hadot, who recovers the ancient notion that philosophical practice is prior to its discourse, the latter being only one of the spiritual exercises of the sage. The eponymous essay

promotes the value of non-systematic, non-analytic “lyric thought” and expression, along with “postures” such as openness and humility that strengthen the “capacity for ontological attention” (*Alkibiades*’ 283-84; “There Is” 120).

Zwicky is a trained violinist and her poetics are deeply informed by classical music, as many of her poetic titles and motifs reveal. She distinguishes her sense of “lyric” from the conventional association with Romanticism, objecting to what she sees as the latter’s sharp distinction between the subjectivity of “Art” and objectivity of “Science,” its “quasi-confessional” impulse valorizing the individual ego, and its insistence on the linguisticity of meaning (“Details” 92; *Alkibiades* 7). Observing that “lyric” signifies musicality, with its etymological roots in the Greek word “lyre,” she argues it is not exclusively a function of language, but of “resonance,” and that “resonance involves a kind of integrity” in which every detail counts (“Details” 92). She thus extends the rubric of lyric over the expressions of thinkers “in love with coherence” from varied traditions and vocations, any that “attribute meaning to the somatic and affective power of well-wrought” composition and, what is prior, to “the resonant structure of the universe” sounding through particular things, people, or events (*Alkibiades*’ 58; *LP LH* §70).

Lyric insight may be expressed in many mediums, including the discourses of ancient Greek philosophers from the Presocratics to Plato (*LP LH* §65, 68). As Pierre Hadot has shown, for these philosophers rhetorical methods serve to “associate our imagination and affectivity with the training of our thought” (*Philosophy* 85). Along with other spiritual exercises—including “physics,” or *theoria physike*, contemplation of the physical world—the aim for the ancient

“Alkibiades’ Love” of Zwicky’s philosophical essays collection (2015) first appeared in *Philosophy as A Way of Life: Ancient and Moderns: Essays in Honor of Pierre Hadot* (2013).

Greek philosophers of meditative writing and reading was to attain “a radical transformation of perspective,” “a new way of being-in-the-world, which consists in becoming aware of oneself as a part of nature” (211). Zwicky’s poetics entwines such contemplative, therapeutic concerns with the intense affectivity of the Greek erotic poets, most famously Sappho whom Socrates praised for her art in Plato’s *Phaedrus* (Plato 235c).

Like Levertov, Zwicky finds in Rilke a modern exemplar of the spiritual-moral weight of lyric experience, citing his expression of its command: “You must change your life” (*LP RH* §219-20; Levertov, *Poet* 100). Emerging from momentary experiences of being’s timeless coherence resonating in the particular, lyric insight can engender a way-of-life disposition Zwicky names the “domestic attitude” or “domesticity” (*LP LH* §133).⁷⁶ Similar to, though not identical with, Heidegger’s notion of dwelling, domesticity entails: ecological attunement or responsiveness to things and places; acknowledgement and acceptance of transience; the concomitant just management of *techne*, the “objectifying project of tool-use” (language included), by which we make home; and an ethics of care grounded in attentiveness and response (*LH* §52; 120). Such comportment is an alternative response to ontological alienation, differing from forms of life seeking mastery of or autonomy from the natural world (*Alkibiades*’ 16).

“The geologist’s daughter,” as Bringhurst names Zwicky in a tribute poem at the end of his *Selected Poems* (2009), was born and raised in the Rocky Mountain foothills city of Calgary, Alberta. She spent a great deal of formative time on the family farm on the north side of the

⁷⁶ As Zwicky points out, “domesticity” is from the Latin root *domos*, which in its Greek variant would be *oikos*, so the significance of her use of the term is spelled out in the conclusion of the essay “Bringhurst’s Presocratics”: “‘Eco’ from [*oikos*], *house*. Ecology as the [*logos*] of home” (*Alkibiades*’ 16, 58). Domesticity is the human art of inhabiting the world as home.

Paddle River in Mayerthorpe, located in the prairie heart of the province (Dickinson, “Back-Stretched” 106). In an interview with John Barton in the *Malahat Review*, she discusses her deep attachment to the land homesteaded by her great-grandparents at the turn of the century, considering it “one of my parents” (“Ongoing”). Her intimate knowledge of the place is reflected throughout her poetry, especially in the eponymous long poem of *Robinson’s Crossing* (2004) and in the recent poems “Depth” and “Into the Gap” in her latest collection, *The Long Walk* (2016). She entwines tender familiarity with humble recognition of the farm’s location in a national history that includes colonial settlement and possession of the land (Dickinson, “Back-Stretched” 106). Countering the deep-seated “technocratic world view” running through western culture, she espouses the practice of relinquishment of control in the face of loss and the unfamiliar (*Alkibiades*’ 8).

Relinquishment has long been a central gesture, alongside that of affirmation, or “awe and praise” (*Auden* 38), in her poetry and philosophy, and clearly it has helped give shape to her disorientation upon the farm’s sale. As she says in the interview, “Letting it go, when my mother had to move, was so huge I couldn’t imagine it, I could only stumble through, numb” (“Ongoing”). She proceeds, however, to express appreciation for her present home in the north end of the Salish Sea: “What helped me most was the way the place I live now kept walking towards me, an extraordinary generosity. Eventually I got my feet back on the ground.” In her most recent collection, she embraces it as home: “I’m from Quadra” (“In Winter,” *Long* 69).

A trace of her real-life practice, walking is a recurring figure in her work, often presenting the continual passage through psychic disorientation to reorientation. In this sense, it implies the earth science of ground truthing that yields embodied knowledge of a location, rather than data from a distance. An intimate practice of ground truthing is advocated in an excerpt

If the phrase “the walk that keeps on walking,” conveys the personal practice of walking meditation, it also speaks of humans collectively being “essentially nomads” in a psychosomatic sense (“Contemplation” 150). Zwicky defines lyric thought as “the desire to recapture the intuited wholeness of a world that is pre-linguistic” in order to “heal” what she calls “that gap” or “slash in the mind that is the capacity for language” and other objectifying technologies, even if it “cannot be permanently healed” (*LP LH* §124). Hence the poem’s title: to walk “into the gap” is both to be moved by eros for coherence and to accept “that incoherence is a fundamental aspect of human reality . . . that one’s way of being in the world can never come to rest in the world” (*LH* §297). Yet, if it is human nature to be nomadic in this sense, she argues, then we are actually always at home and the task is to become what we are (“Contemplation” 150). In this light, the phrase “[c]oming home / without a roof” articulates the tensional stances of domesticity and lyric. “Coming home” signals domesticity, the serene but active acceptance of human consciousness; “without a roof” pictures the openness that characterizes self-forgetful lyric experience, the absorptive participation in what-is.

Zwicky’s metaphor of the “walk that keeps on walking” thus parallels Levertov’s figure of spiritual longing as pilgrimage, expressed in “Variation and Reflection on a Theme by Rilke (*The Book of Hours, Book I, Poem 7*)”:

There will never be that stillness.
 Within the pulse of flesh,
 in the dust of being, where we trudge,
 turning our hungry gaze this way and that,
 the wings of the morning
 brush through our blood

.....
 What we desire travels with us. (*Breathing* 83)

Both poets in their restless search for wholeness were drawn geographically westward to the coast. There, meditative desire found new places in which to walk and be informed by things.

Zwicky's 2011 poetry collection, *Forge*, on which I will be focusing, is a carefully integrated composition of lyric attention and domestic reflection on life-passages of love, loss and relocation. Erotic effects often are conveyed specifically in terms of resonance with the sea that "wanders everywhere" in her current coastal region ("Envoy" *Forge* 69). Spinning off Roethke's claim of affinity between free verse and the sea, D. M. R. Bentley once observed that "all Canada's hinterlandscapes, *ad mare usque ad mare*, via that 'ocean . . . of grass,' the Prairie, and 'that sea of mountains,' the Rockies, have been seen [by Canadian poets] to exhibit similar affinities with the sea." Zwicky's *Forge* demonstrates the case, as coastal marine images are entangled with memories of her former beloved prairie place. "Late Schubert" is exemplary. The poet-speaker meditates in a near-dream state on what is past: a childhood, a "long-dead" father. Nostalgia, that Odyssean form of erotic longing, is a "wavelet" gently lifting the boats of specific memories, moored by bonds of affection that are figured in the alliterative and consonantal weavings of words and lines: "spider's thread, spindrift / with the tensile strength of steel" (14). Such affective stirrings may turn turbulent with "the fever / the restlessness," and, in further sea imagery, "the way the heart surges / against the breakwater, plunges, / and surges again . . ." (14). Gentle or stormy, the waves of yearning come from "the same thing": "Love afraid it won't get home, afraid / it will forget" (14). The poem enacts the possibility that one need not be governed by such fear, even if loss will always attend love. As the poet-speaker asks herself, "Is dying that hard?", perception of place helps to point her toward a "horizon" of egoless openness

to the whole. The views from both prairie and coastline bring home to her that, if one truly accepts and affirms the nature of things, the “possibility of absence” is not melodramatically tragic or strange (*LP LH* §70): “it is the same shape as your life — wild hillsides / pointing to the wind, the sea / heaving under the sky’s emptiness” (15).

I will attend to other such moments of sea resonance, particularly in “Envoy: Seven Variations,” alongside the “aura” of the mountain in Levertov’s series of Mount Rainier-Tacoma poems, seeing both as indexical of the ambient holiness of earthly life. “Resonance” is a key term in Zwicky’s philosophical prose, while Levertov indicates interest in Benjamin’s concept of “aura”—although she does not use the word explicitly in her mountain series—in the epigraph of “Two Mountains,” written in the year previous to her move (*Door* 58). More comprehensive engagement with these terms will be given in due course, but for now, I delineate “mountain aura” and “sea resonance” as place-responsive leitmotifs. Within the selected poems, to borrow from Zwicky, they are “lyric gestures about which the [other gestures] turn” (*LP LH* §211). As forms of aesthetics of affirmation and relinquishment, they express loving and “let[ting] go without leaving” the earth (Zwicky, “Transparence,” *Songs* 37).

Meeting Place: Ambient Holiness as Wholeness

In Levertov’s essay, “Some Affinities of Content” (1991), she reveals two kinds of contemporary poetry she was drawn to read around the time of her move to Seattle: nature poems “written predominantly by poets of the Pacific Northwest,” and religious poems “of various provenance” (*New* 1). Indeed, in her final year she compiled two anthologies of her poems according to these two groupings of affinity: *The Life Around Us: Selected Poems on Nature* and *The Stream and the Sapphire: Selected Poems on Religious Themes* (1997). The quality that drew her to both kinds of poetry, as “a reading writer,” is an expressed longing for “significance

underneath and beyond the succession of temporal events” (*New* 4). At this time, she was seeking to renew and deepen her engagement with the theme of “spiritual quest” for wholeness (Hollenberg 388), which, she points out, has been the primary “underlying interest” of her poetry all along.

She discovers a parallel between her poetic myth, “life as a pilgrimage,” and contemporary poetry that “is itself ‘on pilgrimage’” (*New* 4, 6). While the religious poetry selected shares her own “Christian or Jewish context,” she is clearly drawn to the “universal dimension that speaks to the inner life,” an aspect of the Pacific Northwest nature poetry infused with Asian-Buddhist and Indigenous North American spiritual affiliations (6). The essay testifies to her negotiating a confluence within her own poetry between “spiritual longing and . . . experience” in the “frame of reference of faith” and a broader, “conscious attentiveness to the non-human and to a more or less conscious desire to immerse the self in that larger whole” (6).

In light of this description, it is not difficult to imagine Zwicky in the company of Levertov’s group of West Coast nature poets, and it is here, in what I am calling ambient holiness, that I discover their spiritual-intellectual meeting. Zwicky calls herself a “contemporary nature poet” committed to “the practice, the discipline, of wholeness, a coming-home to the unselfed world” through “ontological attention” (“Lyric Realism” 88). As Levertov notes that in the Pacific Northwest nature poetry she reviews, “we are given more of *what is seen* (or otherwise apprehended) and less emphasis on the poet’s reaction to it” (*New* 5-6), Zwicky classifies nature poets similarly as a species within the genus “lyric thinker,” whose main focus is on “*what-is*” rather than self-expression. For Zwicky, this genus includes the “old ontologists of the European Presocratic tradition” (Demokritos, Empedokles, Herakleitos, Parmenides) and their “near contemporary of the Zhou Dynasty, the author of the *Tao Te Ching*” (Lao Tzu), as

well as “the non-writing thinkers of many indigenous traditions” (“Lyric Realism” 86, 88).

Among her affiliates are fellow Canadian poets with whom Zwicky has long shared ongoing conversations on philosophy and poetics: Bringhurst, Lilburn, McKay, and Dennis Lee.⁷⁷

If Zwicky fits with the West Coast poets Levertov admires, Levertov also belongs within Zwicky’s category of contemporary nature poet. Zwicky calls Levertov’s essay on poetics, “Some Notes On Organic Form” (1965), “a superb piece” for its description of the lyric process of placing the body and language “in the service of the music of being” (*Chamber* 74). Excerpts from Levertov’s prose and poetry also appear in Zwicky’s philosophical publications, *Lyric Philosophy* (1992, 2011, 2014) and *Wisdom & Metaphor* (2003, 2008). Arranged as intertextual “scrapbooks,” these works feature Zwicky’s part aphoristic, part dialogic entries as one continuous text on the left hand pages while a second, multivocal text runs on the right hand. The latter is comprised of “illustrative” and “challenging” excerpts from various sources, including music scores, dictionaries and encyclopedias, and the writings of philosophers, scientists, poets, and others (*LP* 18). Levertov appears among the “illustrative,” along with Hass, the “thinking and singing” poets, and others whose writings exemplify commitment “to acknowledging, mourning, and celebrating *what-is*—its non-, its extra-, and its fully human dimensions” (“Lyric” 86).

Both Levertov and Zwicky consider their coming to dwell on the margins of the Salish Sea as a meeting with place, and treat place as a particular instantiation of the more-than-human community. In “Settling,” Levertov attests to the way the assembly of eagle, tree, mountain, sun,

⁷⁷ Lee also corresponded with Levertov after their meeting at a Banff poetry conference in 1972. Levertov highly praised Lee’s *Civil Elegies* (1972) and *The Gods* (1978) for his “epiphanies” and presentation of poetry as “a score” (Hollenberg 319). Her poem “Continent” (*Candles in Babylon*, 1982) is dedicated to him.

and “opening autumn” gave her a sense of being actively “welcomed here.” Similarly, in the interview mentioned above, Zwicky describes her home environs as receiving her with “extraordinary generosity” and “walking towards me.” The latter echoes one of her aphorisms from Wittgenstein: to “mean something [is] like going up to someone. . . . We go up to the thing we mean” (*Alkibiades*’ 273; *Wisdom* RH§51). She adds the corollary, “Or: what-is-meant, meaning, comes up to us” (*Alkibiades*’ 273). As her Quadra island place is “walking towards” her, meaning comes with it, in the form of “connectedness” (266). So both poets engage with what Levertov describes as “the interplay of the personal rhythm and the rhythm of the place and the time” (Brooker 8).

Levertov’s “affinities” and Zwicky’s “connectedness” are gestures to a meaning-giving wholeness, or as I name it, ambient holiness. Both words in the titular phrase of this study have rich etymological and connotative significance. In Zwicky’s *LP*, the entry from *Klein’s Comprehensive Etymological Dictionary* gives the Middle English form of whole as *hale* (Old English *hal*) and lists root meanings of both “healthy” and “holy” (LH §76-7). The *Oxford English Dictionary* entry on “holy” shows one of the root forms to be the Old English *hálig*, from *hál*, “free from injury, whole, hale” and traces its sense-development to either *hailo*, “inviolable” and sacred, associated with the gods, or to *hail*, “health, well-being,” associated with “auspice, augury.”

Wholeness is cognate with holiness, then, and holiness implies that the human (individual and collective) and all earthly things, participate in a deeper reality than the everyday world of human purpose, making, and manipulation. This ultimate reality is apprehended existentially as a sense of “fullness,” as Charles Taylor puts it: “in that place (activity or condition), life is fuller, richer, deeper, more worthwhile, more admirable, more what it should be” (*Secular* 5). The sense

is experienced momentarily, in a variety of moods such as joy, wonder, awe, peace, fright, or exile from it; such experiences, in turn, “help us to situate a place of fullness, to which we orient ourselves morally or spiritually” (6). Taylor credits Iris Murdoch for recovering for modern philosophy the Platonic conception of morality as orientation to the Good, that which is “the object of our love or allegiance . . . the privileged focus of attention or will,” and the source of the sense of fullness (*Sources* 3, 4). For both Levertov and Zwicky, such orientation to wholeness-holiness involves relinquishment of the egocentric/anthropocentric stance toward “what-is” and affirmation as praise and gratitude. Orientation to this wholeness is an ongoing process figured by Levertov as pilgrimage and by Zwicky as a long walk.

The poets write in a historical moment of theoretical suspicion, when criticism is generally post-structuralist, skeptical of extra-linguistic referentiality, and lacking in sympathy for poetic evocations of “presence” and meaningful wholeness manifest in encounters with non-human nature.⁷⁸ Yet their commitment to what I have named ambient holiness is concomitant with concern over the fragmenting and obscuring effects of modern disengaged reason and technology upon perception, thought and language, and so on human interaction with the more-

⁷⁸ See Charles Altieri’s chapter “Denise Levertov and the Limits of the Aesthetics of Presence” in *Enlarging the Temple*, in which he observes the critical pressure placed on lyric poetry that is committed to expressing what he calls an “immanentist vision” of presence and to engaging political concerns, as well (225-44). See also James Dougherty’s “Presence, Silence, and the Holy in Denise Levertov’s Poems,” which summarizes the challenges to Levertov’s “metaphysics of presence” posed variously by Altieri, Marjorie Perloff, Cary Nelson and Victoria Frenkel Harris, including “issues of implied innocence and transparency of language” and the notion of “access to an unmediated referent” (309). Dougherty counters that Levertov’s metaphysics are essentially dialectical, engaging both presence and absence. For her part, Zwicky anticipates and engages with post-structuralism in her comments on language, presence, and referentiality in “Lyric Realism” (85-86) and *Lyric Philosophy* (§217-32; 262-64).

than-human community. Both seek to counter such effects in their spiritual practices, including poetry. Levertov writes, “Amid the savagery, stupidity, and corruption we of the late 20th century see around us, confronted with an over-expanded technology and an atrophied sense of moral responsibility, the poetic vision of God [or holiness] is almost always a somber, shadowed one” (*New* 17). Many of her post-move poems, including the meditative and/or “religious” ones, are lamenting, at times didactic, expressions of concern over the disincarnating, fragmenting effects of technology on the capacity of imagination and language for wonder, revelation, and integrative understanding (Hollenberg 439).⁷⁹ She connects these effects with the “evil of globalization,” the “conscienceless domination of multinational corporations,” and the seduction insidiously carried in “new technologies” to conform to the system, all of which she saw threatening not only aspects of western culture, but other cultures and creatures, as well (439).

Zwicky also expresses resistance to modern technological domination and exploitation of the non-human other, a stance subtended by reverence for what-is (“Details” 94-95). She holds that the neurobiological capacity for language is a necessary condition for (though not necessarily given to) the exploitative stance, since it is the capacity “to see a thing in a way that obscures presence,” and to see both perceived and percipient as discrete from the whole (*LP LH* §119-29; “Lyric” 89). Agreeing with Wittgenstein’s “intuition that deep matters of value in some way fall outside the scope of language,” she insists lyric experience is extra-linguistic (ineffable), “unselfed,” born of eros for wholeness (*LP LH* §118; “Lyric” 88-89). “The world, even under

⁷⁹ See “Contraband,” “On a Theme by Thomas Merton,” and the section “Witnessing from Afar” in *Evening Train*; the section “It Should Be Visible” in *Sands of the Well*; and “A Hundred a Day” and “Alienation in Silicon Valley” in *This Great Unknowing*.

threat,” she maintains, “is a lyric whole; and opening ourselves to perception of this can heal our culturally fractured psyches” (“Details” 95).

Likewise, Levertov describes the holistic presupposition that undergirds her organic poetics as “an intuition of an order, a form beyond forms, in which [individual] forms partake, and of which man’s creative works are analogies” (*New* 68). She writes elsewhere of “that sense of discovering, in a vivid part, the adumbration of an unnamed but intensely intuited whole” (*Poet* 45; *New* 46). Her holistic aesthetic is grounded in the familial spiritual-wisdom tradition from which she had departed as a young adult but, after her father’s death in the mid-1950s, began to gradually recover, in part, through the writings of Martin Buber (Greene 43; Hollenberg 149, 384). Buber helped disclose a pathway to reconcile “the ethical and emotional influence of [her] Jewish-Christian roots and early education” with her neo-Romantic and Objectivist-influenced, organic aesthetics (*New* 241; Hallisey “Denise” 262).⁸⁰ She was particularly drawn to the Hasidic notion that “a divine spark lives in every thing and being” (Buber, *Way* 5). She invokes the concept to denote the quiddity that may be disclosed to poetic attention: “The strawness of straw, the humanness of the human, is their divinity; in that intensity [of their particular being] is the ‘divine spark’ Hasidic lore tells us dwells in all created things” (*Poet* 51). Her friendship and correspondence with Robert Duncan from the early 1950s to the mid 1970s was a primary stimulus for her creative reappropriation of such ideas. In a tribute essay to Duncan, she specifically mentions their shared esoteric knowledge from a “common [back-]

⁸⁰ In turning to Buber, Levertov, like Roethke (who read *I and Thou* in 1952) was on the leading edge of a trend of interest in America following Buber’s visit in 1951 and subsequent publication of his American lectures, *Eclipse of God* (1952). For Levertov, there was strong personal connection in this interest: Joan Hallisey reports that Levertov’s father informed her Buber had read his 1918 study of Hasidism prior to writing *Tales of the Hasidim* (“Denise . . . Revisited” 166).

ground,” including the fairytales of George MacDonald and two names that I will address later, associated with her poetic vision: “the Shekinah [and] Vladimir Solovyóv” (*New* 205).

Parallel to her notion of divine sparks, Levertov also speaks of “*inherent* music, the music of correspondences, the music of inscape” (*Poet* 54, original italics). The latter term comes from Gerard Manley Hopkins, whom she called in her final interview in 1998, “one of my absolutely top favorites among poets” (O’Connell 344). She defines inscape as “intrinsic form, the pattern of essential characteristics both in single objects and (what is more interesting) in objects in a state of relation to each other” (*Poet* 7; *New* 67).

These various spiritual concepts derived from Hasidism and Christian sacramentality are entwined in a pivotal poem in her corpus, “Mass for the Day of St. Thomas Didymus” (*Candles in Babylon*, 1982), the writing of which constituted “a conversion process” from agnosticism to hopeful openness to the incarnate God of Christianity (*New* 250). The reconceived liturgy of this sequence poem assumes interconnection of people and things with the “spirit . . . written / in woodgrain, windripple, crystal,” the transcendent-immanent divine both “encompassing all things” and calling for human cooperation that it might be “utter[ed]” and “protect[ed]” as incarnate Word (*Poems* 1972 269, 271-72). At this time, Levertov associated her belief and poetics with the environmental philosophy “of the interdependence of all things, a sense of belonging to, rather than dominating, an ecosystem; and of the osmosis, the reciprocal nature, of the sustaining relationship between the parts of an ecosystem” and the whole, “that trembling web of being” (“Poetry, Prophecy, Survival,” *New* 152-53).

Zwicky’s lyric poetics also presumes the possibility of encounter with ineffable “being,” her philosophical analogue of “sacredness,” manifest in particular things and events (*Auden* 21). The poet responds in awe and praise, “astonishment before what-is . . . its overwhelming

meaning” (21). For her, “being” or “nature” is “the tendency in things to be what they are, and in that tendency to present themselves as both distinct and connected” (“Lyric Realism” 90). She refers to Hopkins’s term “inscape,” among analogues from Herakleitos, Taoism, and North American Indigenous culture, to indicate the “*thisness*” that appears and appeals to “ontological attention” (*Alkibiades*’ 278). In a metaphor that echoes Levertov’s association of inscape with the “divine spark,” she asserts, “When we see into something, we say we see its soul—the glint or gleam of the divine in individual things” (278). Every “*this*,” she asserts, “focuses the world’s resonant structure in a different way” (273). Each particular is part of the meaningful whole.

With visual and aural images that echo Levertov’s “trembling web of being” and “music of correspondences,” Zwicky portrays the “spiritual,” ecological concept of “[u]nity-in-multiplicity, multiplicity-in-unity” (*LP LH* §67) as a “radiant net of relations” and, more characteristically, as a “resonant structure,” “better comprehended as a piece of polyphonic music” (*Alkibiades* 260-61). The Presocratics and Plato, for whom music figured in their cosmology, are among various philosophers from the Western tradition explicitly influential on her spiritual vision and practices. Characterizing herself as “a person of no orthodox religious affiliation, raised by atheists in a secular culture” (*Auden* 21), her poetics of what I am calling ambient holiness are based in phenomenological and ecological “faith in the physical world” known as “an organic whole,” in which “reciprocal interdependence characterizes the relations of all beings, animate and inanimate” (*Alkibiades*’ 56, 58).

Ambience and Participation: “not one, not two”

As leitmotifs, Levertov’s mountain aura and Zwicky’s sea resonance express encounters with particular geographical features that are indexical to the wholeness-holiness of the earth. These poetic forms coincide with a stance that “is not objectifying but participatory,” to borrow

from Rigby,” responsive to the ambience of a place, “to the way it gives itself by showing itself in its effect” (*Topographies* 83). To frame the modifier “ambient” (from my titular rubric “ambient holiness”) within the lines of such dialogical participation, I turn to Leo Spitzer’s rich phenomenological investigation, “Milieu and Ambiance: An Essay in Historical Semantics” (1942). Spitzer traces the trajectory of the holistic (i.e. inclusive of spiritual as well as material significance) Greek term *to periechon*, “that which surrounds, encompasses” (2). He takes into consideration the analogous term, *milieu* (and its translations, German *Umwelt*; Spanish *medio*; Italian *ambiente*; English *environment*), which signifies “the concept of an ‘aggregate of influences or conditions which shape or determine the being, development, life, or behavior of a person or thing’” (2). In ancient Greek physics and in its translations through the Middle Ages and Renaissance, the concept *to periechon* presupposes the active influence of a god- or spirit-infused atmosphere upon the human and, further, a “fundamental kinship” and psychic “sympathy and harmony between universe and man” (2, 198). Spitzer contrasts *to periechon*, as a “warm” abstraction “which is visualized and which has not severed its ties with life, but remains organic and close to the bodily,” with the modern fatalistic spin on the state of being conditioned (10-11). For the pre-moderns, it applies to climate, air, environment, “the ocean embracing the earth,” and generally, any particular encounter in the more-than-human community that evokes feelings of being surrounded and sustained (11).

Evocations of ambience or its cognates in environmental writing have not been without criticism. In *Ecology Without Nature: Rethinking Environmental Aesthetics*, Timothy Morton refers to Spitzer’s essay in support of his theoretical (Marxist, deconstructivist) critique of “ambient poetics.” Morton asserts—sweepingly, in my view—that such poetics reify “Nature” (33). He describes Spitzer’s work as “chart[ing] a long reduction of ‘ambience’ from a spiritual

term to a scientific and sociological notion . . . and finally, one that suggests the form of the commodity” (80). This demise, along with that of its cognate, “milieu,” coincides with natural philosophy having “clearly discovered,” as Morton puts it, that the universe is “vast empty space.” Here he reports Spitzer’s findings of the impact of Newtonian physics on the concept of ambience, but strangely overlooks Spitzer’s later reference to the reconfiguration of the concept of space by new physics as a “field,” “filled with contiguous particles” (Spitzer 196-97). Morton appears resigned that a Newtonian worldview just is the “general background” of contemporary ecopoetics, “the vastness” of “abstract space” subverting the significance of particular place (80). In effect, he reads Spitzer’s essay as a narrative of disenchantment, concluding that “the gradual divestment of the aura of ambience” is a *fait accompli* (80-81).

There is a rather significant swerve, however, in the trajectory of ambience laid out by Spitzer that Morton has left out of his interpretive summary. First by “the Romanticists, who delighted in seeing the eternal even in the passing” and then by the Symbolists and Impressionists, “the richness and fullness of the Greek” term *periechon* was recovered in subsequent positive poetic use of “*ambiens*: that which embraces, envelops, enfolds” (198). In the course of time, Spitzer concludes, “[i]nfused with vitality” by biology, as well as the poets, “*to periechon* has finally come into its old inheritance of warmth and sympathy” (199; 190). It was this sense that “made Goethe once defy the cosmology of Newton” (199). Goethe’s cultivation of an alternate mode of perception of nature integrating the aesthetic and scientific (Hadot *Veil* 149) is paradigmatic of a continuing phenomenological engagement of ambience from which Levertov and Zwicky have drawn.

In *Topographies of the Sacred*, for instance, Rigby discusses the related German Romantic concepts of “acclimatization, attunement, and reinhabitation,” noting the assumed

reciprocity between culture and nature. In particular, she describes Alexander von Humboldt's biogeographical recovery of the concept of *genius loci* as essentially "the local and particular manifestation" of "the dynamically self-organizing, eternally self-transforming unity-in-diversity . . . 'nature'" that is "the locus of the holy" (77-78, 45). Downstream from German *Naturphilosophie*, Thomas Rickert develops Heidegger's philosophy of being and dwelling, especially the concept of *Stimmung* (mood), to propose three interconnected aspects of ambience: the "material, spatial, and environmental" surroundings; "affective investment and emplacement within an environs"; and dispersed agency, as opposed to the human *cogito* as sole actant (*Ambient* 16). Similarly, David Abram in *The Spell of the Sensuous* (1996) draws chiefly on Merleau-Ponty's concept of intercorporeal *chair* ("Flesh"), "the mysterious tissue or matrix that underlies and gives rise to both the perceiver and the perceived as interdependent aspects of its own spontaneous activity," to posit ambience as "the biosphere—the matrix of earthly life in which we ourselves are embedded," rather than standing over against it (65-66).

This brief review of Spitzer's findings and of recent theories of ambience only points to the more complex discursive context in which Morton issues his critical call to "dissolve the aura" of ambience under the presumed auspices of Walter Benjamin. Without dismissing Morton's concerns completely, I would argue that there are varieties of ambient poetics and individual texts deserve more nuanced ecocritical treatment. Morton sees an always problematic aesthetic distance implicit in notions of ambience or nature, one he claims depends on the very dualism that contributes to "the domination of nature"—though, ironically, here, as elsewhere, the term "nature" is unavoidable (162, 168). To correct the "aesthetic [and] metaphysical . . . discriminations between inside and outside," or "here" and "there," in environmental writing, he cites the Buddhist koan "not one, not two" (48). It is notable, then, that Zwicky explicitly

endorses this koan of nonduality, even though she is presumably one of those Morton categorizes as “fantasizing,” her ambient poetics informed by phenomenology and the deep ecology he especially targets (*Wisdom* LH §16, §34). Levertov, whom he cites as an exemplar of ambient poetics, demonstrates a similar interplay between whole and part. Her work “imagines a communal notion of self, empowered and continually altered through connection with others” (Kinnahan 182).

Interdependent Lyric “I”

Both Levertov and Zwicky are invested in disclosing a broader notion of lyric than is given in the terms by which the genre is usually defined. More than an expression of subjective emotion as opposed to objective description, the poets view lyric poetry as a spiritual exercise, the extension of attention. It is the translation (Levertov) or enactment (Zwicky) of a vivid, ego-transcending “experience of nonduality, of the thorough interpenetration of self and Other,” as Jane Hirshfield succinctly puts it (qtd. in Zwicky *Wisdom* RH §16). The lyric “I” is constructed as a perspective of interdependence. Lyric can include discursive meditation upon such experience and, in the metapoetic mode, upon the poetic process itself (Zwicky, *LP* LH §69; Levertov, *Poet* 95). As can be seen in the following discussion of two exemplary poems of ambient holiness, both Zwicky and Levertov convey the intersubjectivity of ambient holiness by assuming the imagery of flesh and breath.

The title of Zwicky’s “The Art of Fugue” alludes to Bach’s final masterpiece, *Die Kunst der Fuge*. The fugue is a polyphonic, contrapuntal form featuring interwoven variations on a leitmotif, and, quite likely, it once had a pedagogical purpose of providing an immersive, constitutive experience that attuned players and listeners into a way of being (Stone). “Many ancient and Baroque theorists,” John Stone reports, “contended that fugue was an adequate

human representation of the *harmonia mundi* (the ancient notion of musical spheres, or a divine music created by the revolutions of the heavenly bodies).” Zwicky’s creative reappropriation of Bach’s work, “The Art of Fugue,” comprises ten variations on the theme of lyric subjectivity. She associates the musical meaning of fugue with a psychological one. In psychology, “fugue” is a disassociating flight from one’s current identity to “some unconsciously desired locality” (“fugue, n.”). The poem’s form thus enacts the inter-relationality and continuity-in-change (or time) structures of the self feeling displaced by “wanting and regret” and relocated by subsequent “letting go” and forgiveness (57, 49-50).

The poem explores the tension between desire for self-integrity and the decentering desire for participation in the whole. This tension reflects a key part of her philosophy, alternation between the *via positiva* of “domestic awareness” that employs the coherent logic of narrative, and the *via negativa* of “lyric consciousness” that overwhelms linear order: “To try to make sense of one’s life is to gather one’s own and the community’s memories in an attempt to produce some kind of fit, some kind of mutual accommodation. But this project is continually undone by the world, by deep, open attention to the world” (“Lyric, Narrative” 94). In her own poetic consideration of how to navigate this process of undoing and reconfiguring subjectivity, Zwicky imagines (temporary) “accommodation”—or, to use her musical term, “innovation”—achieved through the clarifying phenomenological, psychogogic “art of fugue.” The poem presents the fugue as a contrapuntal *elenkhos* or cross-questioning (*Alkibiades*’ 291) between the inquiring “self” and “the self” of “splintered being” (*Forge* 48-49, 53).

Elsewhere, Zwicky cites Weil’s observation that “[a] Bach fugue is a model” of how to feel the qualitative difference between things (*LP RH* §40), so the poem might be read as a model of how to think about the self differently, not as autonomous and discrete, but in

relationship with the human community and, beyond, the resonant more-than-human community in which it lives and moves and has its being (“Lyric, Narrative” 95). Through varied arrangements of motifs, spare mnemonic-sensory images of a life-world, including a windowed, cedar-scented room with simple furnishings of table and chairs—the latter an evocative homonym of Merleau-Ponty’s *chair* (Flesh)—the poem enacts being “cleaned out, unclogged, turned into the emptiness that is *eros* for the world” (*Alkibiades*’ 293). The concourse of “[t]he river of your / listening, and the river of your voice,” emphasizes the fluidity of identity as opposed to the rigid egoism of a Cartesian *cogito* (50). The poem also recognizes the “multiple, multiple, multiple . . . voices of the inmost heart,” a polyphony of family members and influential others—human, animal and elemental (51, 56). The interdependent self has been called forth by “the four-eyed love / that makes a child,” set to the “compass points” of East and West, the given prepersonal horizons of birth and death shared by “human being / and the being of red alder and / the black-tailed deer,” those latter two, denizens of Zwicky’s childhood in her northern prairie place of dwelling (51, 52).

Subjectivity in chiasmic participation with the world is animated by the common ambient energy, the “soul” conceived as “the breath / that moves in you,” that is one with the “wind / that cherishes the trees and cools / the stars” (54-55). The image echoes Abram’s explication of soul, or *psyche*, as “mind,” “breath,” “gust of wind” (*Spell* 237), and his appeal to the Greek and Hebrew sense of language as participation in the element of air (240). In agreement with the paradox and cadence of the koan “not one, not two” (*Wisdom* LH§34), Zwicky’s speaking self guides her listening self to the “light” or clarity of understanding, to recognize identity in the dialectic of interdependence:

You are,

you are not,
 nothing, shaped
 by what you love. . . (55)

Beyond this inner dialogue, the address reaches out to “us,” and “we” are invited as readers to join in what Ricoeur denotes as “the apprehension of a common nature, woven . . . out of the network of intersubjectivity,” “being-enjoined” in the shared household of earth (*Oneself* 326).

Deeply informed by Buber’s *I and Thou*, Levertov similarly presumes an interdependent “I” in the web of the more-than-human community, which overtly includes God in her later poetry (Mills, *Essays* 208; Nielsen 697-98). In Buber’s dialogical philosophy, each particular relation ultimately participates in the “absolute” relation with the Divine. He posits two modes of existence that are in constant interplay for healthy human being: the I-You and the antipodean attitude of I-It. The former is a stance taken in the present moment of encounter, participating in the You-world of relation, giving and receiving; the latter is situated in an objectifying, space-time of experience, which brings forth the It-world of conceptual knowledge and use (82-85, 88). Every I-You encounter is ultimately grounded in the “absolute” or “pure relationship” with the “eternal You,” “the being of all beings” that never can be reduced to It (127, 147-49, 157, 160). Buber portrays this eternal You as the center of all I-You relations, recognized or not, and by virtue of this association, the You-world can “permeate the It-world and change it” in an ongoing dialogical process (149).

Buber’s dialogical philosophy, with its opposed attitudes and worlds, is implicit in Levertov’s poetic expression in “Two Threnodies and a Psalm” (*A Door in the Hive*, 1989). Notably, the poem appearing previous to it in the collection, “Those Who Want Out,” observes high-tech researchers in their hermetic lives, dreaming of a paradoxically Manichean-materialist

heaven, the future “city in space,” a “supreme / triumph of reason” because “*They do not love the earth*” (*Door* 44).⁸¹ So the first of the two threnodies can be heard as a wake-up call, a prophetic utterance of apocalyptic doom declaring that “it”—the impersonal pronoun appearing in each of the first stanza’s seven lines, and repeated several more in the remaining two six-line stanzas—is “happening now” and “[w]e are within it,” whether or not the privileged, set apart “we” will recognize it (45). The parallelism of its second stanza enacts lack of relation, alternating between declarations of disaster “happening,” and description of “its” effects upon the distanced “other,” with no “we” in sight. The third stanza pictures in the arrangement of line lengths a whirlpool abyss of doom into which, in time, even “we” that “circle its edge” like “a leaf or crumb” will be tugged down.

In the repetition of “it” and the strong sense of alienation, this portion of the poem presents the “It-world” of objectification. Buber warns that a world overly-informed by the (everyday) mode of “I-It” entails the decreasing ability of humans to relate with others or the world in the I-You attitude (89). He describes “sick ages” that may come to a culture, when “the living currents of the You-world” no longer vitalize the “It-world” with relation and fate is severed from meaning to become “demonic absurdity,” leading to something like Levertov’s whirlpool, “a descent through the spirals of the spiritual underworld” (102-04). An “It-world” devoid of relation is presented in Levertov’s second threnody, which employs the image of the vulture-tormented Prometheus to figure the whole earth community in distress (*Door* 45-46). “The body being savaged / is alive. / It is our own,” the threnody announces, but this goes

⁸¹ See “Alienation in Silicon Valley” where Levertov applies de Tocqueville’s view on the rootless restlessness of nineteenth century American frontier life “(not this far west, but at what was then the edge),” to the modern culture “severed from history” (*This* 58).

unrealized by the privileged “we” and “I,” who “are in / unacknowledged *extremis*,” whose unconcern assumes distance from the suffering, objectified other (45-46).⁸²

The closing Psalm enacts what Buber calls “returning,” an act of “freedom” in shaking off the dogmatic shell of deterministic doom, “with the power to relate resurrected” from the descent and active in the life of the person (thus informing community, culture) who stands in the I-You relation (*I and Thou* 107). In the poem, renewal of the “it” world by “the power to relate” is incanted in those words of paradoxical opening and encircling “o” that alone can reconnect the “I/”we” with the “other”: “our” and “one.” These are repeated in the confession of violations to the earth-community by pollution, consumptive greed, and war. The collective praying voice invokes “Spirit” to “waken our undertanding” (*Door* 47). Notably, like Zwicky’s soul-wind, Levertov’s Spirit is “rushing wind,” drawing on the biblical root metaphor of Spirit as “wind” and “breath” (*ruach*), described by Buber as that which arises “between I and You . . . like the air in which you breathe” (*I* 89). Following the invoking of the Spirit-wind, the poem enacts the ecstatic practice of what Leder calls “forming one body with the world,” a realization of the chiasmic ontological relation between all particular things and the world (157):

Our flesh and theirs
one with the flesh of fruit and tree.

Our blood
one with the blood of whale and sparrow.

⁸² She appears to draw the image from correspondence with Duncan in 1959, where he observes the contrast between Greek morality, instructed about *hubris* by the spectacle of “Prometheus . . . morbidly devoured by the vultures,” and the Judaic sense of “duty or command,” which sees “that we are all involved” (*Letters* 210). Apparently, he is positing a dichotomy between contemplative *theoria* and active *praxis*, whereas Levertov sought to integrate the two in her poetry.

Our bones
 ash and cinder of star-fire
 Our being
 tinder for primal light. (47)

She concludes with a petition to the Spirit to “impel / our rising / into that knowledge” of interrelationality, so the “present” can be saved from “its downspin” (47).

Her lyric persona “is very much a poet in the world, a situated subject enmeshed in material and historical contingency” (Harris 32). Elsewhere she writes that humans are given the unique role of being “the consciousness and self-awareness” of the earth, “the one living organism” that we tend to forget we are “part of” (*New* 169). In this respect, her perspective of human exceptionalism is similar to Jeffers’s less optimistic view in his “De Natura.” Both see an accompanying responsibility or culpability, acknowledging that human creature’s capacities for language and technology, thus far in history, have granted it unequalled power to create or destroy, to cooperate with or violate the natural systems and fellow creatures of earth. “Kin and Kin” acknowledges, in apparent sympathy with Jeffers, the violent “criminal kind” of primitive ancestors present in the psyches and behaviour of their modern progeny (*Door* 49). But in this lyric dedicated to her friend William Everson—Jeffers’s unacknowledged poetic disciple—Levertov balances the dire picture with speculative memory of other predecessors: “the wise, the earthen elders / humble before the grass” (49). She expresses Christian hope in Lucretian terms that “there might be open to us, even now, / a chance to evolve, a swerve we could take / a destiny still held out (if we would look) / in the Spirit’s palm” (49). Like Zwicky, her strong spiritual-ecological “sense of the interdependence of all things” gives rise to an incarnational ethic of care and call to attention (*New* 152).

The Exercise of Attention

At this point, I want to more closely consider the exercise of attention central to Levertov's and Zwicky's poetic practices. From the Latin *attendere*, meaning to stretch toward, attention denotes the ecstatic, "earnest direction of the mind, consideration, or regard" ("attention"), involving psychical energy, "heightened perception," and receptivity to the address of a thing or event (Levertov, "Genesis" 491). For these two poets, attention to the particular paradoxically grants a sense of the greater, interdependent reality in which the particular is embedded. Such insight is given in the aura or resonance of a thing.

Late in life, Levertov describes the stance of attention she developed in childhood, and retained, as "a disposition, an openness to acknowledge that there may be more than meets the eye" ("Genesis" 487). "Primary wonder" at the "mystery / that there is anything, anything at all" ("Primary Wonder," *Sands* 129) undergirds the assumption that "the sacred [may be] glimpsed in and through the particular instance of the momentary, the secular, and the worldly" (Hallisey, "Denise" 262). A Judeo-Christian familial tradition, even when she was distanced from its beliefs and practices, forms the background of the "sacramental realism" of her organic poetics (Schloesser 17). However, she explicitly invokes Schweitzer's non-sectarian moral "doctrine of Reverence for Life" as "the ground for poetic activity," because "the recognition of oneself as *life that wants to live* among other *forms of life that want to live*" is "the ground for Attention" (*Poet* 53-54). Attention is the instressing or interiorizing encounter with an absorbing presence (thing, person, place, event, etc.) by "highly developed seeing and hearing" which becomes a "revelation" of "deepest reality" (*Poet* 55, 94).

The line from reverence to attention was strengthened by her long apprenticeship to Rilke's way of "living one's life with attention" and the practice of "inseeing," which he

described as a kind of “divine” vision, “*really looking*” into the centre of a being and regarding it as good (*New* 235; 237-38). “Practicing attention” is for her a common element between poetry and prayer, though their intentions differ (Greene 187). So in “Contrasting Gestures,” apparently engaging Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi’s psychological concept of “flow,” she fashions an extended metaphor for the immersive contemplation of “artists and mystics” in the dive of coots seen from the shore of Lake Washington in an act “of absolute abandon, absolute / release into clear or cloudy / inner flow of the lake” (*Evening* 100).⁸³

Similarly, Zwicky echoes Weil’s assertion that “concentrated attention is prayer,” qualifying, “the core of prayer is a wide receptivity, not the projection of personal need” (“Ongoing”). This aligns with Weil’s assertion that attention “consists of suspending our thought, leaving it detached, empty. . . . waiting, not seeking anything, but ready to receive in its naked truth the object that is to penetrate it” (111-12). Zwicky links the word “reverence” with attention, insisting that it “is inextricably bound up with looking and listening. Really looking. Really listening” (“Lyric” 86). Like Levertov, Zwicky sees Rilke’s poetic “insight” or “seeing-into” a person or thing as exemplary of attending to resonance between things, including perceiver and perceived (*Alkibiades*’ 275-76).

In Zwicky’s poetics, the world is “*Partita, partie* -- a whole of many parts,” and the interconnection of the parts resonates with the “charge of meaning” (“Practising Bach: Bourée,” *Forge* 29). To borrow from Murdoch’s explication of Plato’s Forms, Zwicky’s earthly whole is “magnetic and illuminating” and charged with erotic energy, though not for the personal divine “You” assumed in Levertov’s Buber-influenced poetic mythology, for its manifestations are “not

⁸³ An interview conducted with Levertov in 1995 formed a part of the research for Csikszentmihalyi’s *Creativity: The Psychology of Discovery and Invention* (1996).

the sort of thing with which one holds a dialogue” (*Metaphysics* 478). Still, “what is” gives a call and the lyric thinker responds (Zwicky, *Alkibiades*’ 272). Zwicky sometimes evokes that address in the metaphor of vision and clarity—“The *this* strikes into us like a shaft of light” (273)—but she is more inclined, through a long practice of music, to use the metaphor of listening and resonance. One attends to a “sound” that “opens in the centre of a thing” (“Practising Bach: Gigue,” *Forge* 30), and attunes to resonance, the “sympathetic awakening” of vibrations or patterns of connectedness within and between things by which they cohere (*LP RH* §5).

Notably, both poets call attention “a form of love” (Levertov, *Light* 97; Zwicky, *Wisdom* LH §57). Murdoch’s moral reappropriation of Plato, to which Zwicky’s lyric philosophy on this point bears family resemblance, elucidates the claim. Murdoch writes that attention is the “activity of Eros,” the “orientation of desire” or “force of attraction” toward the envisioned, magnetic Good, “as connected with, or incarnate in, all sorts of particulars” (*Metaphysics* 496-97). In *The Sovereignty of Good*, Murdoch explains, “I have used the word ‘attention,’ which I borrow from Simone Weil, to express the idea of a just and loving gaze directed upon an individual reality. I believe this to be the characteristic and proper mark of the active moral agent” (34). Further, aesthetics and ethics meet in this active receptivity: “Virtue is *au fond* the same in the artist as in the good man in that it is a selfless attention to nature” (41).

Chiming with this latter statement, Levertov’s description of the west coast nature poet’s “spiritual longing” in her essay “Some Affinities of Content” delineates an ecological mode of spiritual erotics. It is desire for participation in the earthly whole that makes the poet and her reader more attentive to “*what is seen* (or otherwise apprehended) and less [. . . to] the poet’s reaction to it” (*New* 6). Similarly, for Zwicky’s nature poet, the self is “not the focus. It’s there often as a gesture of humility, an acknowledgement of a perspective on the whole” given in the

address of the particular: “*this* kingfisher, *this* lagoon, *this* slant-wise smoky West Coast rain” (“Details” 93; *Alkibiades*’ 272). She lists “recognition, greeting, acknowledgment” as synonyms of the “knowing” that occurs in ontological attention (*LP* LH §90). Since “knowing” at its roots carries “connotations of erotically intense involvement,” attention and its expression implies “*responsivity*,” her neologism highlighting the etymological link of responsibility with “spouse” via the Latin root *spondere*, to promise or pledge one’s troth (*Alkibiades*’ 266, 278).

Each poet also holds that the exercise of attention relies upon the engagement of the imagination. Levertov calls the imagination “the perceptive organ,” noting that it “synergizes” the various ways of knowing, “intellect, emotion and instinct” (*New* 246). She insists that “Only connect,” her oft-cited aphorism for the imaginal imperative (from E. M. Forster), is “not only an aesthetic statement,” but also “a moral statement” (137-38). So in her later poem, “A South Wind,” attention is directed to “what seem” at first to be disconnected “ephemera”: “Nothing much, or everything; all depends / on how you regard it. / On *if* you regard it” (*Sands* 92). She sees poetic imagination as both an actively receptive state and a creative act of integration. Imaginative perception is a state of “unified sensibility,” “love,” “sympathy,” and “in-seeing,” as well as “the power of perceiving analogies and of extending this power from the observed to the surmised” in the “esemplastic” act of synthesis, which takes as its materials the percepts (observed and surmised) and “the medium [of language] itself—in the poet’s case, words, syntax, sounds, rhythms,” “fashioning from [the material] new works” (184-85).

Concomitant with the imagination’s role in attention, Levertov advocates for poetic language befitting of the wholeness/holiness of earthly life, which she calls “that miracle of being” (*Poet* 99; *New* 136). A key point in her essay “Great Possessions” (1970), which Zwicky includes in *Lyric Philosophy*, is her call for “an ecstasy of attention, a passion for the thing

known, that shall be more, not less, sensuous, and which by its intensity shall lead the writer into a deeper, more vibrant language . . .” (*Poet* 97-98). Language of this kind, a medium of “*translation*” of experience that is capable of “giving ‘the shock of recognition’ and naming and praising *what is*” (100, original italics), “does not necessarily make use of the syntax of intellectually logical speech. It makes all kinds of leaps and bounds because many things are understood” (Brooker 20). Levertov cites Wallace Stevens to claim that poetic language, imbued with a force she describes as both revolutionary and “conservative in a real sense”—of guarding from destruction or death— “stimulates the sense of living and of being alive” (*Poet* 100-101).

To access such language, the poet must be capable of responding in answering wholeness, “liv[ing] in the body as actively as he lives in the head” (106). She describes the experience that demands poetic expression as embodied, “the instress of nonverbal sensuous and psychic events” (*New* 73). But language is easily abstracted, co-opted, and eroded in its daily, political and professional use, made “lifeless” by dissociation (*Light* 93-95). In an Emersonian vein, she contends that “intellect forgets or denies” the living root images of words, “whenever it is too exclusively cultivated, to the neglect of the sensuous, esthetic, emotional, or instinctive elements,” or severed from these wild “underlying dynamics of language” (*Light* 93, 95).⁸⁴ Considering language as part of human ecology, “a common resource to be cherished and served as we should serve and cherish earth and its waters, animal and vegetable life, and each other,” she posits a link between its “erosion” and that of the land or the pollution of rivers (*Poet* 53).

⁸⁴ Levertov was opposed to language poetry and the appointment of a critic appreciative of this movement, Marjorie Perloff, to the English department at Stanford in 1984. She objected to what she saw as Perloff’s cerebral relationship to poetry, which was not “holistic enough [and] didn’t acknowledge the relationship poetry has to one’s whole life” (Hollenberg 355).

Zwicky joins Levertov in seeing the imagination's role in the act of attention as that "organ of ontological insight" that both perceives "the resonance among individual things [and] the resonance that is the presence of being *in* those individual things . . . the resonance that is being" (*Alkibiades*' 282, 272, 274). For her, the deepest fruit of the imagination is pre-linguistic (or wordless) and unconscious "primary process" thought she considers synonymous with the deliverances of what Auden named (after Coleridge) the Primary Imagination (*Auden* 13, 15-16). Its insight is of "sacred beings and sacred events"—she substitutes "ontological" for Auden's "sacred"—that call forth "the passion of awe" (14, 21). She locates the primary process of imagination where "the mind emerges from the body" on the "frontier" of "somatic sources of psychic energy" responding to what-is (*Alkibiades*' 101). It is passive, unselfconscious, "imagistic and freely associative," non-linear, non-linguified, timeless, tolerant of paradox and contradiction, and patterned according to psychosomatic rhythms and connections (*Alkibiades*' 98, 101, 245-46; *Auden* 15). She sees it as the condition for moral life, for it is "sensitivity to resonance" between the perceiving mind-body and the perceived (*Wisdom* §60), or alternately, in a Wittgenstein-derived definition, "the capacity to see as and into" so that "the meaning of each situation comes up to us, and we cannot turn away"; its atrophy is "the root of injustice" (*Alkibiades*' 279, 280). Receptivity to the inter-connection or "patterned resonance of the world" is the ground of appreciation, compassion, and, potentially, the active reorganization of the different spheres of human thought and action.⁸⁵

⁸⁵ In "Alkibiades' Love," Zwicky names compassion ("imaginative identification") as the "overriding virtue," but recognizes it is necessary to cultivate "*discrimination*" to accompany it; therefore, "late in the day," she comes to include "analytic" expertise in her articulation of a way of life that leads to moral beauty, for the capacity to "think clear of our faults and so become free" is part of the process (288, 297).

Like Levertov, Zwicky firmly connects lyric poetic expression to “the speech of the body,” the corporeal *logos*-pattern of primary process or Primary Imagination (*LP LH* §79). Because the lyric thinker desires to address the whole human, lyric expression is fraught with difficulty as language itself must “be made whole,” recalling that the etymological connotations of “whole” include both “hale,” healthy, and “hail,” a call or shout to greet or get someone’s attention (*RH* §76). The poet seeks language that “enacts and acknowledges a web of emotional, perceptual, and intellectual comprehension” (*LH* §65); however, the neurophysical conditions for language “give rise to a phenomenological sense” of being distinct from the immediate environment (by the boundary of the ego). This makes it possible to take up a variety of stances toward the world, including the modern proclivity of “viewing things as mere objects” to be mastered (*Alkibiades*’ 256; “Lyric” 89). The linear, sequential logic of the grammatical system, Zwicky asserts, “obscures the world” (*LP LH* §221). Further, under the ordering of “a cultural alliance between capitalism and technology, part of the West’s inheritance from the Enlightenment,” modern culture increasingly develops in the patterns of pervasive *techne-logos*, and language is oriented by such “ontological alienation,” rather than by attunement to “the nonhuman world” (“Details” 94, 97). Thus one lives “divided off . . . from the inarticulate well-springs of meaning,” that is, the *logos* of primary process and connection with the more-than-human community (*LP LH* §107; *Alkibiades*’ 95).

Benjamin’s Aura

To bring into relief the socio-cultural conditions in which both poets consciously have developed and practiced their strategic lyric poetics of ambient holiness, I will make a brief excursus of Walter Benjamin’s ambiguous concept of “aura.” To do so, I refer mainly to his essay “On Some Motifs in Baudelaire” (1939), from which Levertov took the epigraph of “Two

Mountains,” precursor to the Pacific Northwest mountain series. Perhaps it was reading Hannah Arendt’s *Men in Dark Times* with its chapter on Benjamin that piqued Levertov’s interest in him at that time (Hollenberg 380). In the Baudelaire essay and elsewhere, he observes “the decline of the aura” within modernity and the related assertion that “the climate for lyric poetry has become increasingly inhospitable,” as a challenge to be met (Benjamin 187, 155). I take his assessment as relevant to Levertov’s leitmotif of mountain aura, but also, by extension, to the leitmotif of “sea resonance” in Zwicky’s *Forge*.

Complicating Morton’s reference to Benjamin’s aura in his critique of ambient poetics, I want to underscore Benjamin’s assertion that “genuine aura appears in all things, not just in certain kinds of things” (qtd. in Hansen, “Benjamin’s” 358).⁸⁶ With Miriam Bratu Hansen I grant that Benjamin’s relation to aura is ambivalent, but his intent is to produce “redemptive criticism” (“Benjamin, Cinema” 182), tracking “at once the decline and the transformative possibilities of experience in modernity” (“Benjamin’s” 350). Indeed, the point of his reference to aura in “On Some Motifs in Baudelaire” is to observe its link with deep cultural memory and the mode of genuine experience, *Erfahrung*, conditioned by ritual and “active reinterpretation of tradition” (Loveluck 181). He contrasts *Erfahrung* with *Erlebnis*, the rootless, sensational and momentary “shock experience” predominant in modern culture (Benjamin 176).

⁸⁶ Morton’s use of Benjamin’s concept of aura apparently rests on the latter’s reflections on the status of art in the modern world, rather than on his more complex engagement in other writings. Benjamin’s critique of aura was aimed polemically both against “the conventional and banal ideas of the theosophists” (qtd. in Hansen, “Benjamin’s” 358) and, as Hansen explains, “at technologically enhanced fabrication, from the mid-nineteenth century on, of auratic effects on a mass scale” (355-56). The historical and ideological pressures under which he theorized are noteworthy, not the least of which was “the bungled (capitalist-imperialist) adaptation of technology that first exploded in World War One and was leading to the fascist conquest of Europe” (338, 357).

A definition of aura hewing close to its etymological meaning (“breath, breeze”) is, “an elusive phenomenal substance, ether, or halo that surrounds a person or object of perception, encapsulating their individuality and authenticity” (Hansen, “Benjamin’s” 340). As such, it aligns with the Greek *to periechon* or ambience in Spitzer’s study, and the Renaissance use of “air” to refer to spiritual atmosphere as both essence and physical “manner, appearance” of a person or place (21-23 n. 18). In this field of significance, Zwicky’s resonance aligns with aura, especially when a related definition from the *Oxford English Dictionary* is considered: “a distinctive impression of a character or aspect” (“aura”). Zwicky uses similar language to describe the experience of lyric as “the dawning of an aspect that is simultaneously a perception or re-perception of a whole” (*Wisdom* LH §2). Her parallel aphorism links “the dawning of an aspect” with perception of resonance: “*This*ness is the experience of a distinct thing in such a way that the resonant structure of the world sounds through it” (LH §55). “Thisness,” resonance, and aura appear to be analogous experiences of the particular expressing the whole.

In the essay “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction,” Benjamin gives an illustration: “If, while resting on a summer afternoon, you follow with your eyes a mountain range on the horizon or a branch which casts its shadow over you, you experience the aura of those mountains, of that branch” (222-23). In a slightly different translation, “experience” is rendered “breathe” (Hansen, “Benjamin’s” 351). Aura is depicted as “a medium that envelops and physically connects—and thus blurs the boundaries between—subject and object, suggesting a sensory, embodied mode of perception” (351). Further, as Hansen points out, “the biblical and mystical connotations of *breath* and *breathing*” (again, spirit or breath, *ruach*) imply that aura “involves surrender to the object as other,” as opposed to willful control over or possessive grasp of it (351).

Elsewhere Benjamin offers a related image of aura: “a strange weave of space and time: the unique appearance [apparition, semblance] of a distance, however near it may be” (Hansen, “Benjamin’s” 339).⁸⁷ The word “weave,” along with the sensation of distance, conjures a veil of mystery connected with the ancient Greek concept of beauty, where the veil is a condition of appearance (“semblance”), inextricable from the perceived. Benjamin refers to this concept in an earlier essay on Goethe’s *Elective Affinities* (353), and again in a footnote in “On Some Motifs in Baudelaire” (*Illuminations* 198-99). His theory of aura thus approximates Goethe’s notion of “open secret,” to which Levertov also referred throughout her career and engaged as the title and metaphor of one of her Pacific Northwest mountain poems (Brooker 185). Goethe’s “open secret” reinterprets the Heraclitean aphorism translated “Nature loves to hide,” to mean that Nature “is inseparable from her veils and her forms” (Hadot, *Veil* 259). “The sacred mystery in broad daylight,” as Goethe puts it in one poem (qtd. in Hadot, *Veil* 256), is to be met, not with “the desire to know, or to solve a problem,” explains Hadot, “but admiration, veneration, and perhaps anguish as well, in the face of the unfathomable mystery of existence” (261). Benjamin’s concept of “aura” likewise means manifestation of the sacred, of “something set apart, something strange and ineffable” encountered in the everyday that disrupts and decentres the self, like Levinas’s “epiphany of the face,” or an experience of time and place that suddenly stands out in the quotidian (Kearney, *Reimagining* 16).

Aura’s Demise, Aura’s Demand

Examples of auratic experience in “On Some Motifs in Baudelaire” are marked by attentiveness across a distance charged with wishing, nostalgia, and eros or unfulfilled longing

⁸⁷ This definition appears first in “Little History of Photography” (1931) and is slightly altered in “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction” (1936).

for “the inapproachable” (187-88). Drawing on various sources, including Proust, Freud, Poe, in addition to Baudelaire, Benjamin presents in montage both the demand and the demise of aura directly related to changes in the perceptual structure that occur within the modern culture. In the past, religious ritual and myth amalgamated individual dream and memory with collective vision and memory, holiday festivals varied the quality of time in the calendar year, and shared needs and practices fostered feelings of dependence in a common life (159; 183-84; 174). But modernity is depleted of the kind of experience informed by living “tradition” (157). Society is reordered to the logic of post-Enlightenment rational formalism and industrial-capitalism with its technologies (Loveluck 168). Time is thus experienced as homogeneous and empty.

Other conditions affecting the modern structure of perception are made salient in this essay. Where art at one time evoked the inexhaustibly beautiful, “conjur[ing] it up . . . out of the womb of time,” now its aura is deadened by the ubiquity and accessibility of its technical reproduction (Benjamin 187). This is a particular case of a phenomenon spread across a wide spectrum of experience uninformed by tradition. But the erosion of aura is also related to the body sensorium being “overburdened with protective functions” to parry various “shocks and collisions” (crowds, traffic, factory assembly lines, etc.) associated with modern technology (175). In such conditions, there is “no daydreaming surrender to faraway things in the protective eye” (191), no contemplative absorption as one gazes across distances, spatial or temporal.

As a result of this numbing effect, when the capacity for contemplation is diminished in the “protective eye,” the “genuine” aura fades, not from art alone, but from perception in general. Benjamin’s critical project was concerned, as well, with simulated forms of aura employed in the aestheticization of politics and exploitation of “the masses” (by Fascism, but also liberal-capitalism and Stalinism). So the problem is dual: “overstimulation and numbness” (Buck-Morss

18). Still, Benjamin's critique includes a utopian dimension: he seeks to articulate opportunities and strategies "to redeem an auratic mode of experience" of the everyday in the midst of what he described as "the standardized, denatured life of the civilized masses" (Hansen, "Benjamin, Cinema" 186; Benjamin 156).

In this light, Benjamin considers Proust's *mémoire involontaire* to be the difficult strategy of a modern isolated individual severed from tradition and thus relying on "chance" for latent, deeply embodied memory to surge up suddenly as "associations" that "cluster around" things, like the *madeleine* that triggers sensorial memory in *Time Retrieved* (Benjamin 158; 186). Proust asserted that such experience imbues otherwise empty life events with the "energizing spark," a sense of "meaning" and "reality" (qtd. in Levertov, *Poet* 89-90). To Benjamin, such private involuntary memory is insufficient to revitalize collective experience in the modern everyday, the focus of his theoretical project. Yet, he was sympathetic with the Proustian "aura of the habitual" that takes shape in "memory, childhood, and dream," that is, of "experience that inscribes itself as long [repetitive] practice," (qtd. in Hansen, "Benjamin's" 341, 359).

Levertov similarly draws on Proust's *Time Retrieved*, in the essay "Great Possessions" (1970), to critique contemporary "prevalent" poetry in the Objectivist vein that she finds "inadequate" to speak to people facing contemporary crises in "dread and awe"—including the Vietnam War, racial tensions, social injustices, and growing nuclear and environmental threats (*Poet* 89, 90; 122). She highlights Proust's complaint that art based solely on "formal knowledge" (e.g. documentary realism) is vacuous (90). Implying connection between Proust and William Carlos Williams, she recalls the latter's revolutionary impulse to impart the "specifics" of daily experience with "*value*" by the "power of the imagination," drawing upon "origins, springs of vitality" (90-91, 96), the latter phrase, incidentally, cognate with Zwicky's

“inarticulate well-springs of meaning” in primary process. Levertov calls artists to engage intellect in tandem with “the unconscious and intuitive,” exerting “the daily effort” to give “attention to things and people, to the passing moments filled to the brim with past, present, and future” in order to make art that “can move us” (89-90, 98, 99). Her concern is not art for art’s sake, but for aesthetic engagement with the cause of “continued life on earth” imperilled by war, “The World Federation of Death, Inc.” (99, 106). A decade later she voices similar convictions, with the added environmental dimension of concern for “the fate of the Earth” (*New* 149).

In the Baudelaire essay, Benjamin adds a further delineation of aura that is pertinent to the moral force of attention for both Levertov and Zwicky. He considers this aspect “a wellspring of poetry” (200 n. 17): “To perceive the aura of an object, we look at means to invest it with the ability to look at us in return” (188). This line serves as Levertov’s epigraph in “Two Mountains,” and for her, it signifies an ethical dimension of aesthetics that informs the leitmotif of mountain aura. Benjamin drew this definition of aura from the topos of “the seer seen” in Romantic poetry, also deployed in psychoanalytic, metapsychological, and phenomenological discourses (Hansen, “Benjamin’s” 345). Rilke famously features the auratic return of the gaze in “Archaic Torso of Apollo,” where “this stone” (statue), though headless, is not “defaced” in the encounter with an attentive percipient, but has the capacity to “see you” with the force of a moral command: “You must change your life” (Rilke, *Selected* 61). Zwicky glosses the poem as “a description of seeing-into,” of ontological attention that perceives “a *this*” (*Alkibiades*’ 276). She understands “the radiance of the god’s gaze” to metaphorically convey “the resonance of light,” and the meaning of the encounter that “moves, and moves us” to respond (276). Zwicky aligns here with Levertov’s call for art that “moves us” to self-transcendent care for the non-human

other. The aesthetic-moral potential of aura, as of attention, hinges upon ecstatic *kenosis* or self-relinquishment, as well as affirmation.

“The Long Stem of Connection”

The unsettling force of the auratic gaze, Benjamin recognized, involved some investment of the human perceiver. In much the same way, Merleau-Ponty asserts that, “if the qualities [of things] radiate around them a certain mode of existence, if they have the power to cast a spell and what we call . . . a sacramental value, this is because the sentient subject does not posit them as objects, but enters into a sympathetic relation with them” (248). Benjamin resisted the urging of his friend Adorno to designate the aura entirely in Marxist terms as “reified human labor” (Hansen, “Benjamin’s” 346). Rather, his theory involves broader engagement of the body, eroticism, and dream. In the auratic gaze, he theorized, a profound interpellation of the viewer takes place by way of an image memory, resulting in “genuine historical experience.” But as modern conditions are corrosive of the deep image memory, the modern “melancholy man sees the earth revert to a mere state of nature. No breath of prehistory surrounds it: there is no aura” (Benjamin 185). In that phrase “breath of prehistory,” aura “seems to both hinge upon and bring to fleeting consciousness an archaic element in our present selves, a forgotten trace of our material bond with nonhuman nature” (Hansen, “Benjamin’s” 345-46). He turned to anthropology and mythopoesis to formulate this notion, following precedents set in Goethe’s *Faust* (“the Mothers”) and Bachofen’s *Das Mutterrecht*, or *Mother Right* (Hansen 366; Benjamin 182). More specifically, he borrowed the concept of transgenerational “image memory” from Ludwig Klages, also influential on Rilke,⁸⁸ and the Jewish mystical concept of *tselem* (“image”)

⁸⁸ Hans Urs von Balthasar found Rilke’s eighth *Duino Elegy* to be “one long variation” on Klages’ vitalist philosophy (Bishop 164).

from his friend Gershom Scholem (Hansen “Benjamin’s Aura” 339; 365-66). In Kaballah, *tselem* refers to a personal daemon or double, an ideal or antithetical self that confronts one unexpectedly.

Although Benjamin insists that the “breath of prehistory” has largely been dispelled in the modern world, he holds as an open possibility the creative “resurrection” or interpretative recovery of the auratic experience after its demise. This recovery is part of his larger proposal that the pre-understandings of the past (individual and collective) may be dialectically integrated within the waking present, the *Jetztzeit* or here-and-now moment (Loveluck 177). He offered an analogy for this dialectical approach: “The wisest thing—so the fairy tale taught mankind in olden times, and teaches children to this day—is to meet the forces of the mythical world with cunning and with high spirits” (qtd. in Loveluck 184). Levertov and Zwicky would resonate with the analogy, though likely by coupling “cunning” with “wisdom” in recognition of the need for both critical and creative reappropriation of tradition.

Levertov’s tribute poem for her first American mentor, “Williams: An Essay,” closes with an image evocative of Benjamin’s concept of image memory: “the lotus cup” on “swaying waters,” atop “the long stem of connection” anchored in “the wily mud / pressing swart riches into its roots” (*Poems 1972* 230). The image conveys that quality in Williams’s vision she identifies with F. G. Lorca’s “famous” concept in her 1972 prose essay, “Williams and the Duende” (*Poet* 264). She names it the “darkness, wildness, fierceness of life” (262). Her image in the poetic tribute is apparently drawn from Lorca’s essay “Play and Theory of the Duende,” where he describes the aching quality of Andalusian music: “These ‘black sounds’ are the mystery, the roots fastened in the mire that we all know and all ignore, the fertile silt that gives us the very substance of art,” the “mysterious power” that is, “in sum, the spirit of the earth (49).

As I have discussed, for both Levertov and Zwicky authentic poetic expression is rooted in the emotional-affective and somatic ground of imagination, dream, and deep memory (personal and cultural). The “stem of connection” in Levertov’s image, then, might be taken as a figure for the various practices that bring sensuous contact with the earth from the realm of the unconscious to flower in art and, working the other way, that enrich “the wily mud” with deep experiential memory. This includes absorbing activities of which both Levertov and Zwicky have written, from walking to lovemaking, but also such aesthetic practices of attention as writing and meditative reading, viewing, and listening to the work of other artists and contemplative writers across time and space, in what Levertov calls the relational “living tradition” and “the Fellowship of the Mystery” (*New* 202).

When Levertov wrote “Two Mountains” with its Benjaminian epigraph in the summer of 1988, she was sojourning with a friend in the Austrian Tyrol. She had been attending art-enriched liturgical church services for nearly a decade in Boston, and her appreciation of classical music and long-time fascination with visual art were being woven together with religious contemplation in her poetry (Hollenberg 320). While in Europe, her transgenerational memory was stimulated and enriched as she visited local art museums, regarded shrines on her walks in the countryside, read a variety of books, and enjoyed the company of her friend who engaged her in conversation about her childhood (Hollenberg 380-82). These experiences influenced her next poetry collection in which “Two Mountains” appears, published immediately after her move to Seattle. *A Door in the Hive* is subtended by “remembrance offer[ing] recognition . . . in the face of loss,” as Hollenberg observes, and Levertov placed at its “heart . . . poems that revive her youth or a link with her parents” and her mentor Rilke (369).

Continuing acts of memory and “re-cognition” were central to her poetic engagement with her new place. After her move she made it a practice to regularly walk in her locality with a notebook at hand. In the poem “Looking, Walking, Being,” deep memory permeates perception, bringing forth the sense of a mystical here-and-now (Benjamin’s *Jetztzeit*), and redemption of the time through genuine experience occurs:

World and the past of it,
not only
visible present, solid and shadow
that looks at one looking. (91)

The trope of the auratic gaze is explicitly invoked in that final line, just as it is, implicitly, in many of her Seward Park poems of encounter with what is near. Her Pacific Northwest mountain series, on the other hand, achieve the auratic effect in the way of “Two Mountains”—that is, through poetic attention practiced over a reverent distance.

The Benjamin epigraph of “Two Mountains” reads, “To perceive the aura of an object, we look at means to invest it with the ability to look at us in return.” It is juxtaposed ironically with meditation on her failure to solicit a returned gaze from the non-human other. Although she sees in each Austrian mountain its own particular visage-like features, both remain unresponsive, one “ceding nothing,” the other forcing her “to accept its complete indifference, / my own complete insignificance” (*Door* 58; Hollenberg 381). “Two Mountains” draws upon other aspects of aura, however: attentive longing across a distance and the impermeability of the perceived to the will of the perceiver. To borrow from Rigby, the poem engages both affirmative “poetics of aesthetic *re-ligio*,” or reattachment to earthly place, and a complementary “negative

ecopoetics” that relinquishes the notion of full apprehension and translatability of otherness in representation (*Topographies* 114, 119, 122).

Recovering the Rilkean and Hasidic stance of her earlier poem “Come Into Animal Presence” (*The Jacob’s Ladder*), Levertov does not assume that perception of aura relies upon a fulfilling, or even an indifferently reciprocated, gaze, for like the non-human creatures that are “disregard[ing]” and “insouciant” of the perceiver in “Come Into Animal Presence,” the mountains are portrayed with “the aura of . . . the incomprehensible” and “undisclosed: something that gives itself to experience as exceeding our powers of comprehension and control” (Rigby, *Topographies* 119, 90). In “Two Mountains” she retains the view of that earlier poem: “[t]hose who were sacred have remained so, / holiness does not dissolve, it is a presence,” and if it is not detected, it is “only the sight that saw it / faltered and turned from it” (“Come Into Animal Presence,” *Poems 1960* 23). As we will see, this perspective is essential to her mountain poem series.

Zwicky also engages cultural practices that contribute to strengthening the “stem of connection” between primary process and her lyric art, including appreciation of classical music as listener and musician, an Epicurean-like tending of her garden, and enjoying “physical exercise, fresh air, and good food” (“Ongoing”; “Brief”). She identifies with “an abstract ahistorical intellectual culture” whose members across space and time include philosophers, poets, artists in other mediums, mathematicians and scientists, holding in common what she defines as “a lyric thought-style” and practice of “attentive immersion in the unselfed, non-human world” (*Alkibiades’* 28; “Lyric” 88). Her prose collection *Alkibiades’ Love: Essays in Philosophy* indicates that, in addition to Wittgenstein, she has deep appreciation for the

Presocratics and Plato, with “his insistence on the centrality of *eros*, and his focus on the robustly physical and emotional character of Sokrates” (*Alkibiades*’ 27).

I venture to place Zwicky within a poetic tradition that fosters erotic-auratic perception: the lyricism of the Poetess that Plato praises in *Phaedrus* (235c).⁸⁹ Admittedly, Sapphic poetry is typically understood as the origin of a perspective Zwicky disavows, “lyric in a sense that emphasizes the role of the individual ego: the ‘outpouring of subjective emotion’ connected with the rise of Romantic poetry” (*LP LH* §69). However, observing Sappho’s devotion to the cult of Aphrodite, some have read her intensely personal expression in the same light as her more overtly ritualistic “affirmations of Eros,” that is, rather than of self-interest, a conveyance of piety and the “theology of love” (“Sappho”; Carson, “Decreation” 190). If this is the case, her lyric poetry is of the kind Zwicky has espoused, where “the desire that fundamentally underlies [its] expression [is] relinquishment of the individual ego rather than celebration of it” (*LP LH* §69). Sapphic piety involved voicing desire in “sensuous, incantatory” poetry within the “state of *aphrodite*, an interiorized quality of feeling indistinguishable from the numinous presence of the goddess,” so that “boundaries between inner and outer, between self and other,” personal creativity and impersonal god-givenness, are momentarily dissolved (Gregory 530-31). Indeed, Anne Carson juxtaposes Sappho with Weil and French mystic Marguerite Porete to observe their analogous expressions of consent to eros’ self-emptying ecstasy: “*Love dares the self to leave itself behind, to enter into poverty*” (“Decreation” 191, original italics).

⁸⁹ Peter Sanger refers to Sappho in his brief summary of the literary history of lyric and its relevance to Zwicky’s idea of lyric thought (244), while David Seymour begins his essay with an epigraph from Sappho, “but to go there / the mind / is endlessly singing” (254).

The provocation to self-transcendence by a divine presence echoes in Zwicky's description of the lyric disposition as "egoless availability, the capacity to touch and be touched by what-is" (*Alkibiades*' 292). In an interview, Zwicky gives a personal account of the erotic call and response that brings forth a poem:

For me, some being, some action, some scrap of memory, some musical phrase—
an emotional/visual /aural/ kinaesthetic/intellectual/*perceptual* complex "in an
instant of time"—will stand a little forward in the world, will be haloed with
visual or aural light, and suddenly I will have a feeling of terrible responsibility
toward it, as though I need to *do* something—to honour it, to pray in gratitude, to
offer due acknowledgement. (*Chamber* 72)

"Aural" here refers to ear (*auris*), but the phrase "haloed with visual or aural light" points also to the aura of ambience, and the underlying sensibility fits with the stance of the auratic gaze. The sacred presence described here also occasionally steps forward to disclose itself in *Forge* ("Transit" 38; "Schumann: Fantasie, Op. 17" 65). Eros is the likely referent of "the god," a recurring figure of the concentrated energy, the "asked or unasked" for Platonic attraction to the beauty of being that shines from the centre of the particular (*Forge* 45). As both a sustaining energy and a "discipline," eros is hallowing and hollowing solicitation, whereby one may be brought to a deepened stance of ego-emptied openness to ultimate reality ("Contemplation" 143).

Levertov's Muse: Aspects On the Way to Mountain Aura

Levertov may also be located in the Sapphic tradition for the eros-charged attention of her lyrics, as her mentor Williams observed (*Letters* 10-11, 36).⁹⁰ Her 1965 essay "Some Notes

⁹⁰ See also Sandra M. Gilbert's essay "Revolutionary Love: Denise Levertov and the Poetics of Politics," where she explores Levertov's expression of female desire and the "theology of Eros" in several 1960s poems. Eros is

on Organic Form” evinces the Sapphic influence of H.D. and Duncan on her thinking at that time. In terms similar to Zwicky’s, she describes the poet’s response to an intensely felt experience, or a “constellation” of experiences:

The beginning of the fulfillment of this demand is to contemplate, to meditate; words which connote a state in which the heat of feeling warms the intellect. To contemplate comes from “*templum*, temple, a place, a space for observation marked out by the augur.” It means, not simply to observe, to regard, but to do these things in the presence of a god. (*New* 68)

She proceeds to identify the term “to muse” with “to meditate,” or “to keep the mind in a state of contemplation,” pointing out that etymologically, muse signifies “to stand with open mouth,” an image of inspiration, which is literally “to breathe in” (*New* 68). The stance of musing is one of openness to the influence of the “divine . . . something beyond both the making and the needing elements, vast, irreducible” to egoistic volition (47).

Although this parallels the state of *aphrodite* in the presence of the goddess in Sapphic piety/poetry, there is more than Greek influence in her personal mythology. Levertov’s favoured expression for artistic dedication, borrowed from David Jones, is “the gratuitous setting up of sacred objects to the unknown god” (*Poet* 95; *Light* 89; *New* 124, 241).⁹¹ Years later, this “unknown god,” as she confesses in the essay “A Poet’s View” (1984), “began to be defined for

explicitly evoked in the sequence “Holiday” (*Poems* 1972 231-34), dedicated “for K.,” in tribute to Kenneth Rexroth’s sacramental eros (Lerner para 5).

⁹¹ Jones alludes to St. Paul’s first century address to the Epicureans and Stoics in Athens, where he asserts that the “unknown god” worshipped at an altar in the city is the God he came to profess, asserting in words borrowed from philosophical hymns, “in him we live, and move, and have our being” (Acts 17.28).

me as God, and further, as God revealed in the Incarnation” and in the sacramental liturgy and social justice movement of the Catholic church to which she was drawn (*New* 241). She identified God’s nature as “Love” that “demands a freely given requital” from the human creature, the power “to utter yes or no” to the call within “time and matter” (251). This demand and response is exemplified by the speaker’s *fiat*, “So be it,” in the “agnostic” liturgy, “Mass for the Day of St. Thomas Didymus,” and later, by the Virgin Mary’s “consent” in “Annunciation” (*Poems* 1972 272; *Door* 86).

The Muse of her personal mythology modulated along the lines of the “unknown god,” as her embrace of Christianity “usher[ed] in a new vocabulary and a new iconography” (Zlotkowski “In the Garden” 319, f.n. 15). She had long associated the Muse archetype with the experience of wholeness-holiness (Beck 271, 280-81); however, when asked about the evolution of her Muse in a 1995 interview, Levertov is evasive. She claims that she has used the figure “more or less playfully,” and, what is more, that she does not “really subscribe to the ‘muse’ idea,” at least not as “an embodied figure dictating to me” (Brooker 183-84). It is possible, of course, to imagine the Muse differently than a dictator; indeed, she has. I see the figure, in a displaced metonymic form, to be a key component of the auratic effect in her Pacific Northwest mountain poem series. My focus will be on two key aspects introduced in poems of the early 1960s, and manifest in her Pacific Northwest mountain poems. In “The Well” (1961), her first Muse poem, the feminine Muse presides over poetic attention, inspired imagination, and creative language, while in “To the Muse” (1964) she is a figure of divine presence.

Sancta Sofia-Shekinah-Spirit

As Levertov was composing “The Well” in 1961 and regularly seeing a Jungian therapist, in her journal she asked, “How is it that . . . I see the muse or anima as a female goddess, if the

unconscious of a woman is masculine? . . . isn't the Muse the Goddess, the Sancta Sofia, Ishtar, Isis, who was attended by priestesses? (And seen by H.D. too)" (qtd. in Hollenberg 187). The question reveals a prior feminine version of her figure for poetic process in "Some Notes on Organic Form," the priest contemplating "in the presence of a god." This gender-neutrality is in keeping with her view of the divine "Creative Source" as a "dialectical correspondence" between masculine and feminine," not exclusively one or the other (Hollenberg 320). Indeed, Beck observes Levertov's desire to present and foster a Jungian wholeness of psyche, "that transcendence of gender which is characteristic of the creative mind," in the hopes that it might assist in the healing of the body politic (281).

Levertov identifies her Muse at this time with the chthonic Great Mother Goddess under the names of three ancient Near East feminine divine figures, following Jane Ellen Harrison's *Prolegomena to the Study of Greek Religion*, in turn influenced by J. J. Bachofen's *Mother Right* (Gilbert 210).⁹² The name of most significance, Sancta Sofia, is a Latinate variant of the Hebrew *Hokhmah*, Hagia Sophia (Holy Wisdom), in the book of Proverbs. Within the biblical wisdom and rabbinic tradition, *Hokhmah* and *Shekinah* "are always presented as feminine both grammatically and rhetorically" (Schneiders 22-23), figuring the divine glory and/or "the world order [that] turns, as a person, towards men, wooing them and encouraging them in direct address" (Von Rad 156).

In her 1975 tribute to Duncan, Levertov alludes to this divine figure in the names "*Shekinah* and Vladimir Solovyóv" (*New* 205). The two poets exchanged letters in 1959 that

⁹² Around this same time, Levertov wrote the poem "Girlhood of Jane Harrison," published in *With Eyes at the Back of Our Heads* (1960), and she mentions Harrison in the essays "The Sense of Pilgrimage" and "Great Possessions" (*Poet* 79, 100).

discuss Hasidism, the *Zohar*,⁹³ and Solovyóv, the late nineteenth century Russian philosopher-theologian who founded the controversial movement of sophiology (*Letters* 208-10).⁹⁴ Solovyóv felt a strong affinity for Kabbalah, the Jewish mystical tradition recorded in the *Zohar*, and especially *Shekinah* (Kornblatt 67-71; Aizelwood 344). Levertov observes in “The Sense of Pilgrimage” (1967) that her mythology features a “mixture of Christian and Jewish references” that are especially strong because “one parent was both learned Jew and fervent Christian” (*Poet* 77). It was from her Russian Hasidic father she learned of Solovyóv and his central figure of “Sophia,” drawn from various sources beyond biblical wisdom literature and Kabbalah, including Russian Orthodox iconography and personal visions (Kornblatt 34-39; 40-48).⁹⁵

When Levertov was feeling a psychological need in the mid-1960s to “shake off the influence of her father in her work in order to achieve something truly original” (Hollenberg

⁹³ The *Zohar* is a thirteenth century Kabbalistic text written by Moses b. Shem Tov de Leon of Spain and ascribed to second century Rav Simeon bar Yohai, recording exegesis of the Torah and oral tradition. Denise’s father, Paul Levertoff, helped to translate several of the multiple-volume Soncino Press’s English edition (Kornblatt 68; Levertov “Genesis” 488).

⁹⁴ Among those thinkers influenced by Solovyóv and sophiology, including Fyodor Dostoyevsky, Thomas Merton was influential in Levertov’s conversion to Christianity (*New* 244, 250; see also “On A Theme by Thomas Merton,” *Evening* 113). His prose poem on the divine feminine figure, “Hagia Sophia” (1962), was written around the time of a letter to Pasternak mentioning his Sophia-dream, the source of Levertov’s spin-off poem, “I learned that her name was Proverb” (*Breathing* 51, note 43 p. 85).

⁹⁵ Levertov recalled a visit to the family home of two leading figures in sophiology, G. P. Fedotov and Sergei Bulgakov (Greene 10). Denise told Duncan her father spent “many hours of his life” studying the Kabbalistic texts in the same British Museum Reading Room in which Solovyóv was studying in 1875 when he had one of his Sophia visions (*Letters* 208-09; Kornblatt 15, 67).

201), she found at least one idea she could not discard: “His idea of the Shekinah is what I believe I really connect with in much of my work—the indwelling of the Divine in the temporal” (Levertov qtd. in Hollenberg 201). *Shekinah* is part of the Kabbalistic *sefirah*, a cosmic glyph in the form of an axial tree of life or Jacob’s ladder, conveying the way in which the infinite transcendent God (*Ein-Sof*) interacts with ongoing creation. The *sefirah* consists of emanative divine aspects depicted as branches or spheres (*sefirot*), of which *Shekinah* is closest to material reality. According to theosophical drama of Kabbalah, in the event of the creation there is instability or disharmony within the eternal One by which the *Shekinah* is exiled to become Divine Presence in the world (Buber, *Tales* 3; Friedman). The sixteenth-century Lurian Kabbalah holds that the voluntary self-contraction (*tsimtsum*) of God to make room for creation causes “the breaking of the vessels which contain divine grace,” and the *Shekinah* and “sparks of divinity” fall downward into the physical realm of creation (Friedman). The sparks yet “glimmer in all beings and all things” and humans can participate in “lift[ing] and redeem[ing] them, and re-connect[ing] them with their original root” (Buber, *Tales* 3).

At one point in their correspondence, Levertov “rejoice[d]” in Solovyóv’s Sophia visions, while Duncan admired the “woman-blue-everywhere-wisdom,” an intense “image of the indwelling of all parts of the created world, [or] the world being created, in all others,” and “the wholeness of experience” (*Letters* 209-10). Levertov employs this blue Sophia motif in “The Message,” a poem published with “To the Muse.” There Duncan is the likely model of the “Bard,” sending her a letter “[c]ross-country, out of sea fog” in San Francisco, who tells her to “gather” seeds from forget-me-nots, emblems of embodied memory, “varied blue / in a small

compass. In multitude / a cloud of blue, a river” (79).⁹⁶ So, in the later *Evening Train* poem “Flowers of Sophia,” the various plain “flowers with ugly names, / [that] grow in waste ground,” all “a dreamy blue, / a gentle mysterious blue, / wise beyond comprehension,” are a subtle allusion to sophiology and creation spirituality (48). Both early and late poems follow the cue of Hopkins (“The Blessed Virgin Compared to the Air we Breathe”) and Eliot (“Ash Wednesday”) in engaging the art tradition’s designation of blue for the Virgin Mary, associated in the Catholic and Orthodox liturgical tradition with Holy Wisdom.

The colour blue is part of the aura leitmotif in the Mount Rainier-Tacoma poem “Looking Through” in *Evening Train*, where “the mountain / stands clear on a sky of / palest blue” like a Russian Sancta Sofia icon, the poet’s painterly eye describing the features of its white face and shading them “that same / palest blue” (95). Even as the mountain’s materiality is emphasized in the diction of “the whole great mass,” the opening “o’s” in this line and in “one could look / through” emphasizes the mysterious transparency of the “[l]uminous mountain,” through which, it is suggested, the worshipful poet sees *lux aeterna* streaming (95). The Sophianic-Marian blue of aura is deployed in other poems in the mountain series. In “The mountain’s daily speech is silence,” the mountain’s variations include “its whiteness, its blueness” (*This* 42), while in “Masquerade,” the speaker addresses the mountain, saying the clouds’ “white and blue / are a perfect match for yours” (51).

Taking up the Sancta Sofia-*Shekinah* into her Muse, Levertov imaginatively engaged the religious materialism she absorbed from her father by which the spiritual is seen to embrace and

⁹⁶ In her tribute essay for Duncan, she recalls reading *Heavenly City, Earthly City* in Florence, finding it drew her to him and “brought me, too, a further dim sense of the California of fog, ocean, seals, and cliffs I was by then reading about in Robinson Jeffers” (*New* 198).

permeate the material and cannot be known apart from it (Felstiner, “The Hasid” 87). Rather than denigrating this-world sensuality, her conversion “resulted in an even greater hallowing of the ‘earthly paradise’ as a reflection of God’s goodness” (Zlotkowski, “In the Garden” 316). She was particularly drawn to “the feminine in theology” as she was studying Julian of Norwich for two poems in the mid-1980s, discovering connections between Julian’s image of God and the *Shekinah* (Hollenberg 365). Ecofeminist theological conceptualize “the Matrix of the living God in an encircling that generates freedom, self-transcendence, and the future, all in the context of the interconnected whole” (Johnson 43), while Holy Wisdom creates “the cosmos by existing within it, her ubiquity expressed through the image of ceaseless or circular motion. . . . an ambience enfolding it and quickening it from within” (Newman, *Sister* 64-65).

Similar images of aura as ambience appear in several of Levertov’s poems, including “The Beginning of Wisdom,” with the epigraph “*Proverbs 9-10*” indicating its address to Sancta Sofia and its reiteration of Julian’s famous image of divine lovingkindness, the world as a small hazelnut in God’s palm: “Are you holding / the universe? You hold / onto my smallness” (*Sands* 109). ““In Whom We Live and Move and Have Our Being”” imagines God as “the air enveloping the whole / globe of being” which “we inhale, exhale, inhale, / encompassed, encompassed” (107), again, echoing Hopkins’s incarnational imagery in “The Blessed Virgin Compared to the Air we Breathe.”⁹⁷

⁹⁷ The title ““In Whom We Live and Move and Have Our Being”” is drawn from the same biblical passage to which David Jones alludes, referencing “the unknown god” (Acts 17.28). Buber’s *I and Thou* includes a similar expression of the divine: “That before which we live, that in which we live, that out of which and into which we live, the mystery—has remained what it was. It has become present for us . . .” (159-60).

Along with the evocation of ambient holiness in the colour blue and element of air, light is a significant aspect of Levertov's aura leitmotif. In his essay on Levertov and Duncan's mutual mystical religious interests, John Felstiner detects the influence of Hasidism in her poems "especially in moments when light, that Kabbalist emanation of divine presence, touches the ordinary world around us" (87). Associated with the prophet Isaiah's declaration that "the whole earth is full of [the LORD's] glory" (6.3), *Shekinah* connotes "glory," "holiness," and "light" (Buber *The Way* 40; Heschel 89; "Shekinah"). Felstiner recounts Levertov's enthusiasm for his essay on Paul Celan, in which he reveals sources for unfamiliar allusions in Celan's poem "Near, in the Aorta's Arch," including the concluding line "Ziv, that light." Felstiner traces the source of this "*Hellwort*, a Hebraic 'brightword'" (Celan's phrase) to Scholem, "the great twentieth-century recoverer of Kabbalah," and identifies *Ziv* as "The light of the Shekinah" (82).

The central figure in "To the Muse" can be identified as *Shekinah* through the epithet "Light of the house" and by her location at the "hearth," similar to Celan's *Ziv* in its association with the heart (99). The image of the *Shekinah* at the "hearth" alludes to another of Buber's works read by Levertov after her father's death and revisited in 1989: *The Way of Man According to the Teaching of the Hasidism* (Hollenberg 384). There he tells the parabolic tale of a man who travels afar in search of treasure, only to find it is buried in the hearth of his home (38).⁹⁸ Buber explicates the story according to his philosophical interpretation of Hasidism: the treasure is "fulfillment of existence" and "[t]he place where this . . . can be found is the place on which one stands" (37). The *Shekinah* or "hidden divine life" can be made to "shine" in mundane words and deeds and "no encounter with a being or a thing in the course of our life lacks a

⁹⁸ Levertov uses the same story as an epigraph in the later "Relearning the Alphabet"; there her source is Heinrich Zimmer (*Poems* 1968 90).

hidden significance” (38). Likewise, in “To the Muse” Levertov’s wise man envisions domestic life and, on a metaphorical level, the practice of poetry, as the locus of the holy “hearth,” where the Muse is present “with shining eyes and a ready tongue” (*Poems 1960* 97).

The wise man’s teaching, recounted by the speaker to her Muse, evokes the biblical wisdom tradition: “you remain in your human house, and walk // in its garden for air and the delights / of weather and seasons” (97). This recalls from the Genesis creation myth the presence of God in Eden, walking with Adam and Eve. It also alludes to the prolegomenon of Proverbs, in which Wisdom claims, “I was daily [God’s] delight, rejoicing always before him; Rejoicing in the habitable part of his earth; and my delights were with the sons of men. . . . For whoso findeth me findeth life, and shall obtain favour of the LORD” (Prov. 8.30-35). The Muse enjoying the company of humans in their household and garden signifies Wisdom’s immanence as divine agency in the creation of the world.

Years later, in “Mass for the Day of Saint Didymus,” divine Spirit likewise infuses the “Dust of the earth” and turns it “gold, in the beam of / vision” (*Poems 1972* 268). “Passage” (1984) also engages her new iconography, as she imagines the “spirit that walked upon the face of the waters” in the Genesis story as a creating presence that does not just encircle, but circulates within earthly things, as “breath, *ruach*, light / that is witness and by which we witness” (*Oblique* 87). In her Pacific Northwest poems, to borrow from her essay “Some Affinities of Content,” composition of place “communicate[s] not just the appearance of phenomena but the presence of spirit *within* those phenomena” (*New* 6). Clearly, then, the development of her Muse also follows her father’s identification of “the Holy Spirit as Shekinah,” and “Creator Spirit” (*Oblique* 35; 76). This, despite the fact that, when asked in the 1995 interview if she might “recognize in poetic inspiration a place for the Holy Spirit,”

Levertov responded, “I would consider it impertinent, if not blasphemous, to claim the Holy Spirit as a muse!” (Brooker 183-84). The question was surely provoked by her own writings; for example, in Muse-related “The Message,” she uses the epithet “Spirit of Poetry” and addresses the “great Spirit” (*Poems* 1960 79). After conversion, she continued to hold that “*inspiration* or *the intuitive* . . . is to live with a door of one’s life open to the transcendent, the numinous,” and that the “concept of ‘inspiration’ presupposes a power which enters the individual and is not a personal attribute” (*New* 241).

Further, in the essay “Work that Enfaiths” (1990) she names the experience of writing “Mass for the Day of St. Thomas Didymus” as an “instance of the interaction of artistic labor and incipient faith—shall I say, of the workings of the Holy Spirit, or is that too presumptuous?” (*New* 250). Her “I” addresses the “Thou unknown I know, / thou spirit,” who is “giver, / lover of making” in the “Credo” section (*Poems* 1972 268). In the “Benedictus,” “[t]he name of the spirit is written” in all things, and as each “utters / its being”—repeating her earlier “Origins of a Poem” sense of the Hasidic divine spark—“the stone of stone, / the straw of straw” is blessed, “for there / spirit is,” also (270). In another religious poem, “Annunciation,” she depicts the moment of Mary’s response to the call “to a destiny” in similar terms of inspiration, as “a breath unbreathed, / Spirit, / suspended,” then inhaled as “consent illumined her” (*Door* 87-88). Although not identical, artistic inspiration is conceived as being analogous to Mary’s conception of the Divine Word by the Spirit.

Levertov’s Muse is a figure of the imagination’s capacity to mirror divine presence, the Sancta Sofia, *Shekinah* or Holy Spirit, indwelling the perceiver; but it also figures that presence in the world. In *Who Is Man?* Abraham Heschel uses the word “aura” to describe the experience of immanent holiness: “Standing face to face with the world, we often sense a presence which

surpasses our ability to comprehend. The world is too much for us. It is crammed with marvel. There is a glory, an aura, that lies about all beings” (90). For the one who views the world not as “a thing I own, [but] as a mystery I face,” Heschel declares, there is “a spiritual setting of reality” (88, 90). This accords with what Buber, in his introduction to *Tales of the Hasidim*, identifies as the human task: “endow[ing] daily life with the constant, undaunted and exalted joy in the Now and Here,” by making “manifest the reflection of the divine, the sparks of God that glimmer in all beings and all things” and working to bring about “God’s world-destiny,” “the union between God and Shekinah, eternity and time” (2-3, 4). Levertov’s ecospiritual poetics are deeply informed by this Jewish mystical vision of the healing of the creation.

For this reason, I propose that her translated Muse can be seen refracted in the setting of the first half of the first Pacific Northwest mountain poem, “Settling.” The title echoes the literal meaning of *Shekinah* (dwelling, settling) and its connotation of glory, which is depicted in the lines “clear gold / of late summer, of opening autumn,” “the dawn eagle sunning himself,” the west-facing mountain’s “snow / tinted apricot” (*Evening* 3). But the second half of the poem, in its “taste of the grey foretold” concealing the mountain (3), reflects the fact that the Hebrew *Shekinah* is not defined by light or manifestation alone; it is used also to speak of God’s “remoteness or to the hiding of His face” in withdrawn presence (“Shekinah”).

In this duality of manifestation and hiddenness, “Settling” engages another source of Levertov’s Muse named in “The Sense of Pilgrimage”: the archetypal “young/old grandmother” in the “beloved” fairy tales of George MacDonald (*Poet* 74). MacDonald’s great-grandmother is an imaginative Victorian instantiation of the Proverbs wisdom figure, like the changeful and change inducing mysterious person met along the way in Kingsley’s *The Water Babies* that Levertov identified as “Lady Wisdom” (“Genesis” 489). Regardless of her many “[d]isguises

and revelations, maskings and unmaskings,” she commands trust in her accompanying presence (489). The first three lines of “To the Muse” indicate this motif: “I have heard it said / and by a wise man, / that you are not one who comes and goes” (*Poems 1960 97*).⁹⁹ By this council the speaker is reassured in the face of the Muse’s felt absence. The theme is developed by several allusions to MacDonald’s fairy great-grandmother, including the enigmatic house with “stairways, corridors, cellars, / a tower perhaps, / unknown to the host,” the “[d]eep cave,” the “high room in the lost tower where you sit spinning,” and a lost-and-found gold ring (*Poems 1960 98, 99*).¹⁰⁰ The Muse of this poem also shares the moon emblem of MacDonald’s great-grandmother figure and the archetypal Great Mother goddess, “symbolic of change, transformation, regeneration” (*Poet 78*). While mention of “the light of the moon” shining on the couple in bed evokes the spiritual eros of marriage (97),¹⁰¹ it also recalls MacDonald’s fairy grandmother’s guiding moon-lamp in the house tower, symbolic of ancient wisdom followed in the commitment of faith. Later, in “Relearning the Alphabet,” the moon signifies wisdom in the dialectic of imagination’s insight:

Wisdom’s a stone
dwells in forgotten pockets—

⁹⁹ The “wise man” instructor in “To the Muse” is a composite figure, implying the teachings of the biblical Hebrew sages and Hasidim she learned from her father and Buber. It might also allude to MacDonald and Duncan as embodiments of the archetypal figure of the wise old man in fairytales and Jungian theory.

¹⁰⁰ For a characterization of MacDonald’s fairy grandmother that recognizes both Judeo-Christian and Greek mythological sources, see Bubel.

¹⁰¹ In Kabbalah, one of the ways the Shekinah is invited into the world is through marital relations, including sexual intercourse (Kornblatt 68-69).

lost refound, exiled—
 revealed again
 in the palm of
 mind's hand, moonstone
 of wax and wane, stone pulse. (*Poems 1968* 100)

Several of the Pacific Northwest mountain poems either feature the moon or feature a pattern similar to lunar wax and wane, though irregular and unpredictable, to evoke the manifestation and hiddenness of the Muse. Levertov's description of the mountain's presence in "Settling" inaugurates this defining dialectic of her mountain aura leitmotif. There she discovers the mountain "revealing herself," in "her steadfastness," as a "vast presence, seen or unseen" (*Evening* 3). The theme is sustained in following poems: in "Elusive," "[t]he mountain comes and goes / on the horizon" (4); in "Open Secret," it is seen "coming and going moonlike at the horizon" (14); in "The 6:30 Bus, Late Mate" it is "a moonflower in late / blue afternoon" (*Sands* 27); and in the late poem "Noblesse Oblige" the mountain "graciously continues / its measured self-disclosure" (*This* 50).

Poetic Process and Pilgrimage

The dialectic of manifestation and withdrawal also defines the trajectory of the Muse as a key figure in Levertov's corpus. At one point, Sandra M. Gilbert called the Muse "patroness of her poetry" (210), and this would seem a safe assertion when considering the collections of the 1960s. "The Well" and "The Illustration" in *The Jacob's Ladder* (1961), followed by "To the Muse" and "Song for Ishtar" in *O Taste and See* (1964), overtly refer to the Muse in varying aspects. But the figure disappears from plain sight after *Relearning the Alphabet* (1970), in which the eponymous poem carries a few related images and "The Cold Spring," an antithetical

revisitation of “The Well” as a song of experience, infers the Muse by the palpable absence of mystery and inspiration. For a decade, until *Candles in Babylon* (1982), only metonymic signs of the Muse are scattered here and there, in moments of what she calls “cross references” in the poet’s process of “weaving a fabric, building a whole in which each discrete work is a part that functions in some way in relation to all the others” (*Poems 1968* 105). Sometimes it is years before the poet picks up “that thread, [to] bring the cross reference into its rightful place in the inscape, the Gestalt of his life (his work) / his work (his life)” (105). I suggest that the Muse was one such thread dropped and picked up later in the “Gestalt” of her work and life.

Viewed from a wider perspective, though, her work features the Muse as an anchor for the main “journey-thread” of her work, located at the edge of transformation (*Poet* 65). In “The Sense of Pilgrimage,” Levertov observes that poetry gains dramatic force particularly through the *mythos* or plot pattern and the related metaphorical images (discrete “instants”) that participate in the myth’s “deeper than merely descriptive meaning” (*Poet* 68). She identifies pilgrimage as her dominant myth, signifying a “passage from one spiritual state into another” towards a destiny (*Poet* 66, 71). This is the significance of the gold ring in “To the Muse,” an allusion to the one the great-grandmother gives the heroine of *The Princess and the Goblin* that spools a magical thread to guide the heroine back to the grandmother’s “spinning room in a tower that is hard to find at will” (*Poet* 75). In this device, Levertov follows MacDonald in engaging the conventional trope of “the golden thread” for wisdom, in this case, carried in stories; it also symbolizes the unfolding of a life (as in the *Bildungsroman*), related to the mythic notion of destiny woven, measured, and cut by the Fates or Norns (Bubel, “Knowing” 13).

The thread image appearing in Levertov’s poems of vocational destiny, such as “The Thread” and “Stepping Westward” (*Poems 1960* 50, 166), reflects her conviction that writing

“parallels what, in a person’s life, is called individuation: the evolution of consciousness toward wholeness” (*Poet* 54). Her poetry often “revolves at some level around questions of borderlands, thresholds, transpositions, between states of being” (Giles 36). Presiding over the poetic process and transformations during the poet’s pilgrimage, the Muse is the mythic figure at the epiphanic “edge” (Nelson 96, 98). James Breslin finds that in Levertov’s creative appropriation of the journey archetype—a basic myth pattern she shares with Roethke, for all their stylistic differences—there is often a “return to origins” after momentary disorientation, followed by “an advance” (75-76). “Again and again,” Breslin finds in *O Taste and See*, “the poems refer to origins, beginnings, sources that are not lost, distant, inaccessible . . . but are present, immanent, within” (76).

Recalling her mention of H.D. in her journal entry on the Muse, a line can be drawn through the elder poet to connect the evocation of origins and epiphanic edges with the Muse of “The Well.” In her tribute essay “H.D.: An Appreciation” (1962), Levertov recounts the effect upon her of meditating on the poem “Sagesse” (in English: “Wisdom”) and the accompanying photograph of the symbolic owl: it “start[ed] a train of thought and feeling” that induced travel, “far back into childhood, by way of word origins and word-sound associations, and back again to a present more resonant, more full of possibilities and subtle awareness, because of that journey” (*Poet* 245). H.D.’s poetry catalyzed Levertov’s exploration of a childhood threshold in her writing of “The Well,” discovering “the interpenetration of past and present, of mundane reality and intangible reality” (245). Temporal interpenetration is key to her auratic experience.

In “The Well,” an imagined spring moves to the surface of the lake “[i]n the baroque park, / transformed as I neared the water / to Valentines, a place of origin” (*Poems 1960* 40).¹⁰² Indicating the starting place of the poet’s journey, this childhood park as “place of origin” is linked to the poetic process, having to do with immersive attention, engaged imagination, and language rooted in the sensuous. The poet-speaker reenacts her child-self attending to a majestic figure, the undine Muse, wading into the lake and filling her pitcher with its water. Suddenly, the lake, along with “the humble” stream flowing from it and the surrounding environs, becomes a locus of hidden and revealed reality. The “acknowledgment and celebration” of such mystery in the ordinary “constitutes the most consistent theme, of my poetry from its very beginnings,” Levertov confessed in 1984, over twenty years after writing “The Well” (*New* 246).

One of the sources of the Well-Muse figure revealed in “The Sense of Pilgrimage” and overtly named in this poem is “the young actress who played” “Miss Annie Sullivan,” presumably in *The Miracle Worker*, a 1957 *Playhouse 90* teleplay based on Helen Keller’s life story (*Poet* 74; *Poems 1960* 40).¹⁰³ Associated with this Keller allusion, the upwelling spring depicts the pre-linguistic drives for relation at the nexus between mind-body and the perceived other, the threshold of primary imagination. Levertov parallels her early experience of inspiration

¹⁰² In the 1967 essay “The Sense of Pilgrimage,” when speaking of “The Well” and its dream vision of the Muse, she says it was seventeen years since she had been there, placing the date of her last visit at 1950. In 1970 she made a return visit, the event registered in “The Cold Spring” (*Relearning the Alphabet*). Likely “forty years” in the latter poem refers to the temporal setting of “The Well,” so the visionary persona of the latter would be seven years old (i.e. 1930).

¹⁰³ Christopher MacGowan identifies Levertov’s “young actress” as Anne Bancroft, who starred in the 1959 Broadway production and the 1962 movie (8). However, Teresa Wright, who starred in the earlier teleplay, bears more resemblance to the illustration of the archetypal lady in MacDonald’s books.

with that of the blind, deaf, and mute young girl whose palm Sullivan impressed with the “living word” water and, with it, “the mystery of language,” in Keller’s words, “awaken[ing] my soul” from “misty consciousness,” to “light, hope, joy, set it free!” (Keller, ch. 4).¹⁰⁴ The Muse of Valentines thus “open[s] / the doors of the world” from which the neophyte poet will begin her life-pilgrimage (*Poems 1960* 40-41). In “The Sense of Pilgrimage,” Levertov states that the actress reminded her of illustrations of MacDonald’s fairy grandmother, and though not named in “The Well,” she belongs in constellation with H.D. and Annie Sullivan. If the latter is associated with embodied learning of the mother tongue and consequent emergence of consciousness, identity, and relationality, the MacDonald figure signifies secondary imagination and language informed by childhood fairy tales and songs, such as the hymn of joyful journeying Levertov would sing with her sister as they “tramped along Essex lanes at nightfall after a day’s rambling from village to village”: “Jerusalem the Golden” (*Poet* 65).

“Jerusalem,” in turn, signifies homeland or “place of origin” in the Jewish and Christian sources of her poetic mythology, and in her personal mythology, an earthly peacable community that the poet-pilgrim protagonist longs to realize as a revolutionary destiny (*New* 136).

¹⁰⁴ Mirroring the phenomenology of Keller’s autobiographical account of learning the word “water,” over thirty years later “Witness: Incommunicado” and “Primal Speech” appear together in *Sands of the Well*, where the title poem also alludes to the “origin” of poetry. In the diptych, the emergence of consciousness from the undifferentiated, on the ontogenic and phylogenic levels of “the infant” and “the primitive,” is imagined as “[a] kind of darkness / stirring the mind, blurring,” then the sudden clarity of Gestalt focus, expressed in the “Ur-language” of wonder: “‘This! ‘This!’ / showing and proffering the thing, anything, / the affirmation even before the naming” (94, 95).

Throughout her oeuvre, as contact with “origins” is lost by her persona, pilgrimage turns to exile or wandering in the wilderness, as in biblical history and the Hasidic creation mythology that gives the primal human condition as alienated or in exile (*Galut*) from communion with God. In the decade following the vision of the Muse at the “place of origin” imagined in “The Well,” Levertov’s poetic practice was situated in a reality pervaded by public and personal anguish: the Vietnam War and race-tensions in America, a broken marriage, unfulfilled erotic longing and loneliness, strained relations with her son, and the passing of her mother. Political engagement put pressure on her lyrical art, causing her (and her critics) to question the adequacy of her “poetics of presence,” as Altieri names it, to “propound values at once more explicitly ethical than those of immanence and more general than those bound to the now muddied objective contexts of specific moments of perception” (231). All of this may account for the disappearance of the Muse, particularly noted in “The Cold Spring,” and in the attenuation of “wonder” and “joy, my Jerusalem,” in the poetry of this period (“Joy,” *Poems 1960* 185; “Relearning the Alphabet,” *Poems 1968* 90, 92).

Not until a much later poem, “The Stricken Children” in *Breathing the Water* (1987), is the Well-Muse explicitly evoked once again. The collection’s title, drawn from the concluding poem, acknowledges the historical condition of being: “We must breathe time as fishes breathe water” (83). The theme of temporality and change is implicit in “The Stricken Children” as she compares the symbolic status in her childhood of “The Wishing Well” by the lake in Valentines Park to its state in contemporary late-capitalist England (MacGowan 10).¹⁰⁵ Now “the grandmother wellspring” is “choked” with “debris of a culture’s sickness . . . its aching unconsciousness,” in a society that suppresses dreams and discards desires. For her it had been

¹⁰⁵ An endnote gives the original title as “In Thatcher’s England, 1985” (*Breathing* 85).

“the place from which / year after year . . . I demanded my departure, / my journeying forth into the world of magical” realms, and to which “still wandering, I returned this year, as if / to gaze once more at the face / of an ancient grandmother” (*Breathing* 33). The poem’s elegiac assumptions and imagery recall Benjamin’s epithet for aura, “the wellspring of poetry,” and his observations of its decline with the reduced “scope for the play of the imagination” in the modern milieu (Benjamin 186-87).

In the same collection, “The Spirits Appeased” offers a happier turn. Here Levertov picks up the pilgrimage thread, as the “wanderer comes at last / to the forest hut” (*Breathing* 8) missed along the way in the eponymous poem of *Relearning the Alphabet* and featured in the “pendant” poem, “Hut” (*Footprints*, 1972). In “Relearning the Alphabet,” the poet-quester searches for but misses the Muse’s hut where “dwells / a secret” for the exiled one that longs to “head” “back to my origins: / (if that’s where I’m going) / to joy, my Jerusalem,” the place where “Heart’s river, / living water, / poetry” springs (*Poems* 1968 92, 97-98; “Let Us Sing Unto the Lord a New Song” 180). “The Spirits Appeased” imagines the weary quester reaching the hut, at last, “draw[ing] up water from the well” and finding “the absent sage is speaking to him, / is present” through spirit-attendants (*Breathing* 8). Then, turning from the extended Romance-fairytale metaphor, the poet-speaker addresses her Muse directly: “This is the way / you have spoken to me, the way—startled— / I find I have heard you” (8).

The Well-Muse makes a post-move reappearance in *Evening Train* as “the Old Mother” of “Dream Instruction” who dwells in the homely “language-root place” (60). In smiling “wisdom” she counsels her poet-daughter to let the life-water—now experienced as “rush[ing],” “oncoming,” “mighty falls bearing down”—to flow through her to “gradual stillness / blessing” (60-61). The Muse’s hut, a candle-lit inner realm, is described as “warm, Homeric, Beowulfian,”

but evocative more of fairy or folktale than epic, a “hewn / wooden cave, home / of shadow and flame” in which the wise old woman, “cheerful, spritely,” sits in bed “sipping her fragrant tea” (61). The secret she reveals is a new task for the poet that blends Christian mysticism with Buddhist insight: a call “to *be*, / to arrive at being” and not presume that so much depends on poetic capability “to write it / to write it down” (*Evening* 60-61). Zlotkowski discerns that this call to recognize the primary purpose of her poetry as being, not doing, becomes the “defining spiritual perspective” in *Sands of the Well*, registering what proved to be a final turn in Levertov’s poetic career, as “change in locale seems to have begun to generate a new sensibility” in her poetry, particularly evinced in her mountain poems (“Presence” 135). This “new sensibility” was not sudden, but gradually developed in the process of her poetic pilgrimage and literal move westward.

In her final lecture-essay, “The Migrant Muse: Roots and Airplants,” Levertov claims by allusion to her earlier poem “Staying Alive” that “[w]ithout a terrain” of belonging, “language is itself my home, my Jerusalem” (“Migrant” 487; *Poems 1968* 142). Nevertheless, her invocation of the ancient name, Jerusalem, signifies hope that pilgrimage leads to peace and wholeness, the security of home both literal and figurative. Her move to Seattle was intentionally part of her search for increased serenity from which to engage the world with compassion (Hollenberg 388). This serenity is imagined in the diptych “Heron I” and “Heron II” at the centre of the opening section of *Evening Train*, “Lake Mountain Moon.” “St. Simon Heron” stands on her new lake of vision, Lake Washington, a model in “patience” that “absorbs” hunger and thirst: “Time does not pass, for him; / it is the lake, and full, and still” (8). Across the lake, in this mode of contemplative watchfulness, Levertov would regularly direct her gaze to the distant mountain.

Place is clearly a crucial part of Levertov's poetic mythology, then, regardless of the "migrant" status of her Muse, due largely to the mentorship of her mother.

Maternal Mentor and the Mountain

In *Sands of the Well*, "now, leaving [her] sixth decade" and having lived in Seattle for several years, Levertov reflects on one of her aesthetic practices of perceiving place in "Something More" (*Sands* 63). The poem addresses her "custom" since childhood of seeing with "double vision" that entails "almost-trance," immersive reverie by which the immediate commingles with the imaginative in perception. Recalling the visionary locus of "The Well," she describes the way she used to conflate the "sluice where [the] man-made lake spilled into Cranbrook" river in "Valentines" Park, "with "a cascade huge in mesmeric power," likely from her mother's place of origin, mountainous Wales (63). Thus an estate park on the border of rural and urban England was rendered "a wilder place than it was" (63). She discloses that now she will sometimes draw into her present location a memory of "the freedom and shy charm of mountain rills" in Wales to enhance the qualities of "the tiny stream" flowing at that time past Seward Park's now-closed hatchery ponds into the lake, thereby "vesting the commonplace in robes of glory" (*Sands* 63).

Her practice of double vision is essential to her auratic vision of the Pacific Northwest mountain. It might be argued that this kind of seeing is illusionary, even disregarding of places and things as they are. Levertov anticipates the critique in her final lecture and last interview, where she contrasts place-responsive poetry to the detested "tourist poem" that imposes a premeditated "agenda" upon apperception. Missing from such a poem, she contends, is the crucial element of "surprise," by which "authentic revelation takes place" within perception and in the process of poetic composition (O'Connell 337; "Migrant" 487). She notes in the essay

“Williams and Eliot” (1989) that her American mentor Williams emphasized the practice of “intense attention” to place in his figurative wrestle with “how to grasp (and the tragedy of not grasping) the newness of the New World—how to make of it a sovereign ground and not a cultural colony” (*New* 62). The “essential quality” of “attention, fearless and objective,” is accompanied by “respect for otherness” that will not impose inflexible presuppositions on what is perceived and how it is brought forth in art (62).

Although her practice of double vision might seem at odds with her Williamsian commitments, she argues in the essay “The Ideas in the Things” that revelation or “the sense of discovering, in a vivid part, the adumbration of an unnamed but intensely intuited whole,” entails “becom[ing] aware, precisely through the physical *presentness* of what is *denoted*, of the other presentness—invisible but palpable—of what is *connoted*” (*New* 46, original italics). The phenomenological return to the “things” of Williams’s Objective poetics indicate fidelity to what is there in the work of imagination; but *poiesis* also involves artifice. Levertov interprets Williams to say that the poem is an effort to achieve “equipoise of thing and idea,” for it “does not reject its own sensory origins but illuminates them, and connects them with intellectual and intuitive experience” (*New* 44-45). Likewise, in her tribute to H.D., she praises the elder poet’s engagement “with matters of the greatest importance to everyone: the life of the soul, the interplay of psychic and material life” (*Poet* 248).

As if in dialogue with Williams on these matters, in “Something More” she allows that the “habit” of double vision risks being “[v]iciously sentimental,” a special case of the obscuring, agenda-casting stance she wants to avoid (*Sands* 63). But she goes on to assert that in her practice, the imagination does not obscure; rather, it defamiliarizes, and “gives, in time, / new spirit to fact—or restores it. Places / reveal, as it were, their longings. Inherent dreams” (63). The

phrase “as it were” qualifies her attribution of “longings” to places, indicating awareness of the anthropomorphizing investment in this kind of apperception and expression. Her “double vision” might be understood, then, along the same lines as Jane Bennett’s interpretation of anthropomorphism: as recognition that “a chord is struck between person and thing” or environment, pointing to “a more refined sensitivity to the outside-that-is-inside-too,” a phenomenological chiasm between the remembering and imagining sentient self and the world (*Vibrant* 120). Levertov realizes the dispersal of agency and the affective input involved in the experience of aura, for as she puts it in “Something More,” double vision “gives,” as places “reveal,” implying mutual activeness and receptivity in seeing and being seen (*Sands* 63).

Clearly, then, if she agreed with Benjamin’s descriptive diagnosis of the decline of the aura in modernity, she did not take it as prescriptive. “Something More” appears in a section titled “Anamnesis” (Greek: “remembrance”), structured around the Proustian theme of time retrieved,¹⁰⁶ of vivid impressions called up from individual and collective memory that, as Benjamin noted, contribute to auratic effects in perception. In this regard, two other poems in this section, “The Sea Inland” and “The Change,” particularly note her mother’s profound influence on her perception. This further suggests that her mother was another source of her Muse figure. Indeed, in her “Autobiographical Sketch” (1984), Levertov employs inspiration-related terms to acknowledge her mother’s Celtic-Welsh spiritual “intensity and lyric feeling for Nature” as a primal influence, “not just the air I breathed but, surely, . . . in the body I breathed

¹⁰⁶ “Time Retrieved” is the title of a poem in the related “Representations” section of *Sands of the Well*, where she identifies with a young girl walking through an autumnal English countryside in “the eighteen eighties, / eternal” (*Sands* 80). This image and date mark the poem as a spin-off of Hopkins’s 1880 elegy, “Spring and Fall: To a Young Child,” alluded to in Levertov’s earlier “Staying Alive” through a repeated phrase, “goldengrove” (*Poems 1968* 141, 143; 253 n. 4).

with” (*New* 258). In a tribute essay “Beatrice Levertov,” Levertov cites the poem “The 90th Year” (*Life in the Forest*, 1978) to acclaim her mother for having “taught me to look, / to name the flowers when I was still close to the ground” (*Light* 243).

This angle on her maternal mentorship is taken up again a few months before her own death, in the mother-daughter poem, “First Love,” where she recounts a face-to-face encounter with a “solitary” flower that “sprang” out of “poor soil” in Valentines Park, that place of origin identifiable by “the Roman Road” ruin that runs through it (*Poet* 75). Likely she drew the memory from an entry in “The Boffin Book,” her mother’s diary from this period (Hollenberg 27). She imagines the meeting as a post-infancy first communion with nature, over which her mother presides. The poetic flower evokes both the magic of faerie and the mystery of Christian sacrament: “Pale shell-pink, a chalice / no wider across than a silver sixpence” (8, 9). Time meets eternity in the epiphanic moment, as “suddenly / there was *Before I saw it*, the vague / past, and *Now*. Forever” (8; Hollenberg 440). Just as the Muse had done in “The Well” with the elemental water, her mother impresses upon her the significance of the flower’s name, having her repeat it after her: “Convolvulus” (9). “Convolv” means “entwine,” and the context brings to mind Wordsworth’s address in “The Prelude” to the “Wisdom and Spirit of the Universe” that “from my first dawn / Of childhood didst . . . intertwine for me / The passions that build up our human Soul” with “enduring things, / With life and nature . . .” (1.401-40). In a similar vein, Levertov confesses:

Perhaps through a lifetime what I’ve desired
 has always been to return
 to that endless giving and receiving, the wholeness
 of that attention,

that once-in-a-lifetime
secret communion. (*This* 9)

In this poem of *anamnesis*, Levertov renews contact with that originary “center out of which Attention reaches. . . . [in] the exercise of Reverence for ‘another form of life that wants to live’” (*Poet* 54-55). Buber writes of the primary longing of the “child’s soul” as a pan-relational drive that “aims at reciprocity, at ‘tenderness’” with all things (*I and Thou* 79). The auratic gaze of “First Love” manifests a longing imbued with the intimacy that bears traces of the mother’s face: “It looked at me, I looked / back, delight / filled me” (9).

“The Instant” (*Overland to the Islands*, 1958) presents another moment of maternal mentorship in attention, but differs from “First Love” in terms of distance. It evokes epiphany marked not by intimacy, but by the unattainable remoteness of the non-human other, calling for the quality of “disinterested intensity” in the perceiver that Levertov admired in Keats and Rilke (*Poet* 51). As such, “The Instant” anticipates the stance she engages decades later in “Two Mountains” and the following Mount Rainier-Tacoma mountain poems. The poem recalls from later childhood an early morning mushroom-picking excursion with her mother in Wales. Their meandering notice of common things near and haptic is interrupted, a turn of surprise figured in the deeply indented exclamation, “Then ah! suddenly,” as the “lifting” mist “rolls / quickly away, and far, far—” (*Collected* 66). The mother “grips” her daughter’s arm and tells her to “Look!” (66). On the horizon “fifty miles away” stands forth the highest mountain in Wales. Once again a word is “deeply impressed” upon her imagination; she recalls that “it was the charged, legendary name Eryri” that first “spring[s] atavistically to her [mother’s] lips,” evoking

with its associations of “eagles,” “Merlin” and roots in “the world of Welsh legend” drawn across centuries of colonial severance (*Poet* 69-70).¹⁰⁷

“Snowdon,” as the English call it, is the peak on which Wordsworth situates the culminating moonlit scene in the conclusion of *The Prelude*, and no doubt she means to give a nod to this poetic mentor, as she does decades later in her Seward Park poem, “The Almost Island.” In contrast to Wordsworth’s survey of sublunary reality from the transcendent mountaintop, however, Levertov’s vision is a “moment’s glimpse” of the mountain from below (*Poet* 69). While her response conveys the sense of awe characteristic of the aesthetic of the sublime, Linda A. Kinnahan notices the way “the Romantic [and Kantian] sublime’s essential concern with mastery within the creative act (what Keats called the Egotistical Sublime) . . . transforms into the open and attentive immanence that [her] poetry strives to reenact” (143).

The lines following her exclamation of awe demonstrate, in their indentation and enjambment, both the “roll” of the mists and the “wave” of her mother’s ecstatic voice (*Collected* 66). This illustrates the musing imagination grasped by sudden revelation, while the closing image marks the moment as a contingent bestowal of an unexpected gift (“graces”) to the wanderer “on the pilgrim way,” revealing the ambient holiness in the “Here and Now” (*Poet* 69):

Light

graces the mountainhead

for a lifetime’s look, before the mist

draws in again. (*Collected* 66)

¹⁰⁷ The Welsh name is thought by the locals to pertain to the eagles (“eryr”) that “do yet haunt these rocks” (“Eryri”).

Geoffrey of Monmouth drew on Welsh saga to construct his mage character of Merlin or *Myrddin* (Goodrich 4).

The phrase “lifetime’s look” is prescient. The stance of reverent attention toward the mythic mountain, the brief inseeing to the essential “core of Wales,” the interplay of light and mist, and above all, the enduring presence, yet “inapproachability,” which Benjamin names a defining characteristic of aura (188), conveyed in the mountain’s numinous appearance and withdrawal—all of this would define the leitmotif of aura in her mountain poem series over thirty years later.

Rainier-Tacoma’s Aura: From “Octopus” to “Open Secret”

The most glaciated peak in the contiguous United States and rising fourteen thousand four hundred and eleven feet above sea level, Mount Rainier-Tacoma would tower over Snowdon as it does its neighbours in the Cascade Range. Like its High Cascade siblings along the cordillera, it is an active stratovolcano composed of layer upon layer of lava and debris built up and breaking down over the last 500,000 years (Kirk, *Exploring* 6-7; Barcott 73-74). The geological fact is ready material for a metaphor: stratovolcano as stratified history. Storied human experience has been gathered on this mountain over thousands of years.

Given her regard for Native American culture (*New* 63), perhaps Levertov’s choice to leave the mountain unnamed in her poems is a form of subtle solidarity with local resistance to the colonial narrative mapped onto the Salishan landscape by British explorer Captain George Vancouver. In his published journal entry of May 8, 1792, Vancouver reports that he “distinguished” the “round, snowy mountain” that came into view by naming it after one of his friends, as was his wont; this time, the honour went to the rather rotund (by the looks of the official portrait) friend, Rear Admiral Peter Rainier (Vancouver 99). The name fell into hot dispute in the late nineteenth century when the coming of railroads and potential tourism raised the economic rivalry between Tacoma and Seattle. A meeting in 1893 of the Tacoma Academy of Science posed a rhetorical question: “Is it ‘Mt. Tacoma’ or ‘Rainier’?—what do History and

Tradition say?" (Wickersham 5). Participants, including members of settler families and leaders from the Puyallup, Nesqually and Klickitat tribes, rejected the name "so recklessly flung" by the British explorer (7). "Tacoma" was (unsurprisingly) deemed by the organizers to be most common among the Indigenous nations consulted. The meaning of Tacoma is ambiguous, but a few commentators suggested it signifies "mother," or the nourishing breast from which the milky waters flow, its glaciers feeding six major river systems in the bioregion (7, 9). The Board on Geographic Names was unmoved by the proceedings and any further renaming efforts (Barcott 46). Mount Rainier National Park was established in 1899.

A few years later, in the 1921 National Parks Services Portfolio, the glaciated peak was called "The Frozen Octopus" for its aerial-and-map-view shape, described as "stretching icy tentacles down upon every side among the rich gardens of wild flowers and splendid forests of firs and cedars below" (Yard 85). The phrasing caught the imagination of a visiting Marianne Moore, after a second journey with her mother to the Pacific Northwest in July 1922 to stay with her brother, who was stationed as Navy chaplain in Bremerton. They ventured for a couple of days to Paradise, the alpine meadow where the park visitor centre and inn are located. Moore adapted the portfolio's phrase for the titular first line of what she characterized as a "descriptive" poem about the mountain: "An Octopus / of ice . . ." (*Selected* 208; *Complete* 71). Throughout the poem she avoids the colonial name, using "Tacoma" and "Big Snow Mountain," while subversively interrogating the carefully constructed and "rule-bound" nature of the tourist documents by extractive use of their discourse (Ladino 306). Juxtaposed with her personal observations from the trip are excerpts from a variety of other unlikely sources, from classical myth to theological texts and newspaper articles. The result is a collage poem "that defies

categorization” for its “persistent contradictions, variable perspectives, patchwork of texts, and refusal to resolve into a single meaning” (286).

In turn, Levertov’s “The Art of the Octopus: Variations on a Found Theme,” published in *Candles in Babylon* (1982), pays allusive homage to Moore and her analogical art. It appears in the opening section of the collection, a cycle of poems titled “Wanderer’s Daysong.” “The Art of the Octopus” may have been inspired by views of Mount Rainier-Tacoma enjoyed by Levertov during a visit to the Pacific Northwest in 1979 as part of the Centrum Poetry Symposium at Port Townsend (Hollenberg 318). Levertov follows Moore’s associational strategy by featuring two italicized scientific descriptions of the octopus, vehicle for an extended metaphor of imagination as agile cephalopod with a capacious embrace:

Transparently
it ingests contrast, regarding it humbly
as joy. Nourished,
it gives forth peculiar light, a smoky radiance.
Some see this aura. Some think it poisonous,
others desire it (*Poems* 1972 197-98).

She counts herself among the latter, as evidenced in her later Mount Rainier-Tacoma poetry.

Her practice of double vision is one way that she “see[s] this aura.” In this practice, she follows Wordsworth and Coleridge for whom poetry is “an unveiling, which, in restoring to things the radiance of their enduring strangeness, restores us . . . to a ‘child’s sense of wonder’” (Rigby, *Topographies* 117). “Something More” concludes with the claim that “from behind gray curtains of low expectation / [the more that there is] is drawn forth, resplendent” (*Sands* 63). As the oxymoronic phrases “bright cloud” and “smoky radiance” in the earlier “The Art of the

But it was especially Moore's "An Octopus" that set a precedent for Levertov's mountain poems in depicting the mountain's recession from full knowledge. Moore regarded with a mix of admiration and irony the drive to "conquer the main peak of Mount Tacoma," the most extreme of the various attempts to be familiar with this dangerous, "[d]eceptively reserved" volcano (*Complete* 75, 71). Rather than join in damning it "for its sacrosanct remoteness," Moore admires the mountain's "Henry James"-like "restraint" (*Complete* 75-76). Her exploratory poem ends with the "glassy octopus" withdrawing into its sublime aura like a cloud of ink, by way of an avalanche, "a curtain of powdered snow launched like a waterfall" (76). Levertov's respect for the mountain's remoteness goes even further, eschewing proximity of any kind. The first part of "Open Secret," an open form variant of the sonnet that explicitly invokes Goethe's concept in the title, presents an abbreviated description of Moore's alpine Paradise:

Perhaps one day I shall let myself
 approach the mountain—
 hear the streams which must flow down it,
 lie in a flowering meadow, even
 touch my hand to the snow. (*Evening* 14)

Then, a turn: "Perhaps not. I have no longing to do so."

Like Moore, she undercuts the touristic notion that the mountain can really "be known / by close scrutiny, by touch of foot or hand," or "by any / familiarity of behavior" (14). But she evokes the mountain's auratic effects by paying her respects from afar, at sea level, rather than on the mountain's flank. Incorporating the shifting meteorological conditions of the Pacific Northwest in the rendering of perception, she creates "the sense of indirection, ambiguity, or distance" through which to elicit spiritual associations (Hart 167-68). The mountain is perceived

in all of its “moods, / frank or evasive” (“The mountain’s daily speech is silence,” *This Unknown* 42). It is construed variously as: “a sea-wave” (“Elusive”), “one cloud among other” (“Effacement”), “snowwhite foam” (“Mirage”), “a moonflower” (“The 6:30 Bus, Late May”), “a frail white moth” (“Midsummer Eve”), and an animal (“The Mountain Assailed”). The late poems “Masquerade” and “Noblesse Oblige” play variations on the notion of the mountain as an “open secret,” the former poem portrays it as Venus-like, trying to hide “her goddess-flesh” behind “a mask” (51), while the latter sees the mountain as a noblewoman, reminiscent of Dante’s Beatrice, whose “open approach” on a clear day “is not / an attempt at intimacy,” but rather, as the title tells, graciously restrained courtesy (50). On other occasions, the mountain is one of the biblical or Zoharic “Hidden Ones,” an “angelic guardian” over the city (“Against Intrusion,” *Evening* 94), its “majestic presence” often “barely discernible // like the archangel walking / with Tobias on dusty roads” (“Effacement” 7).¹⁰⁸ Zlotkowski finds that it “assumed the status of a presiding deity or *genius loci*” (“Presence” 141). As such, it might be seen as “the local manifestation” of “the ‘soul of the world’” or *natura naturans* (Rigby, *Topographies* 78).

These various depictions of the mountain’s variableness and “measured self-disclosure” (50) also reflect Levertov’s Thoreauvian admiration for “wilderness,” an aspect of “Nature” that exceeds human grasp (“The Almost Island,” *Evening* 101). The mountain elicits from her a courteous “vow not to desecrate it by going up there” (O’Connell 341). In her final interview, she expresses concern about the environmental effects of tourism and, more broadly, of

¹⁰⁸ The apocryphal story of Tobias, whose vision is restored by the archangel, is also alluded to in Rilke’s second Duino Elegy and in two of Robert Hass’s poems. It belongs in the tradition of “entertaining angels unawares,” to which Levertov gives “wider application,” explaining that for her, “it has to do with finding the more in the (seeming) less . . . the revelation of the wonderful in the apparently ordinary” (491)

ubiquitous pollution and the erasure of wilderness by human encroachment.¹⁰⁹ In the thematically related “Against Intrusion,” she finds meaning in the way the mountain eludes capture by photography:

How clearly it speaks! *Respect, perspective,*
privacy, it teaches. Indulgence
of curiosity increases
ignorance of the essential. (Evening 94)

Such a view of the mountain accords with Heschel’s pronouncement, “To accept the sacred is an acknowledgment that certain things are not available to us, are not at our disposal” (48).

Testifying to Levertov’s relinquishment of invasive curiosity and affirmation of the mountain’s sacredness, “Open Secret” concludes its sonnet-like dialectic with the resolution that

This mountain’s power
 lies in the open secret of its remote
 apparition, silvery low-relief
 coming and going moonlike at the horizon,
 always loftier, lonelier, than I ever remember. (*Evening 14*).

Along with evocation of Goethe’s “open secret” and Benjamin’s auratic distance, sacrality is suggested by the word “apparition,” with its religious overtones of epiphany. Modified by “silvery low-relief,” the word “apparition” also evokes the mountain as an icon through which

¹⁰⁹ Before her move to Seattle, Levertov was troubled by Bill McKibben’s apocalyptic trumpet regarding anthropogenic climate change, “The End of Nature,” run in the *The New Yorker* (Hollenberg 391). His reference to pollution mingling with clouds in the atmosphere is repeated in the imagery of “Whisper” and “The Almost-Island,” the latter including reference to the Thoreauvian trope of wildness (*Evening 96, 101*).

the divine is manifest. Further, the imagery of “coming and going moonlike” recalls the Muse as feminine divine aspect, underscoring the unpredictability of the mountain’s manifestations and “its vanishings.” The latter point to the wildness that is “needful” to the mountain’s being, as she writes in “Against Intrusion,” just “as silence is to music” (94). The poet’s perspective serves to remind readers that the mountain’s essence exceeds tourist viewing, geographical mapping, and even geological probing of its simmering “volcanic rage.”

“Morning Mist” carries a related meditation on the duality of manifestation and concealment. While allowing that the vanished mountain might be taken as an image of the “Deus absconditus,” the hidden God, she suggests that a “better” metaphor for the divine is the auratic mist that allows the mountain and the various features of the landscape to vanish from view (5). The poem’s white space, floating between line units, highlights the muting of sight and sound in the phrase “white stillness.” “[R]esting everywhere” speaks of the divine milieu that she calls, in the earlier poem “Flickering Mind,” “the unchanging presence in whom all / moves and changes” (*Door* 64). “Resting” is the root meaning of “Sabbath,” of which the atmospheric opacity gives “all things / an hour . . .” (*Evening* 5). The poem’s ecospiritual significance aligns with Scott Russell Sanders’s assertion that “wilderness represents in space what the sabbath represents in time—a limit to [human] dominion, a refuge from the quest for power and wealth, an acknowledgment that the Earth does not belong to us,” but is “a reality deeper and older and more sacred than our own will” (210, 216). The clouds and mist that are an essential part of the mountain and its region bear witness to the ultimately incalculable rhythm of creation wisdom, the immanent Sancta Sofia manifesting and hiding the being of things (*Evening* 5).

Perception of the mountain’s aura, in “a rhythm elusive as that of a sea-wave” (*Evening* 4), also parallels the experience of faith that informs Levertov’s confessional “Tide,” at the close

of *Evening Train*. The line “[i]n this emptiness / there seems no Presence” (117) underscores the uncertainty in the phenomenology of faith, when felt absence is met with a stance of doubtful desire that will settle for neither detachment nor false consolation. The poem enacts through sea imagery the spirit seeking what will suffice, both by its visual rhythm of alternating margin alignment for each stanza and in its concluding metaphor: “[f]aith’s a tide, it seems, ebbs and flows responsive / to action and inaction” (118). As in the mountain poem “Witness,” where she confesses that at times it is veils of inattention that obscure the mountain and she must take literal steps outside to “reconfirm / that witnessing presence” (97), so in “Tide” she recognizes there are ways to be active in the waiting: “[c]lean the littered beach, clear / the lines of a forming poem” (118). Imagination’s eros is unexpectedly met by a “flood inward,” so that “emptiness is a cup, and holds / the ocean” of divine Presence (118).

Levertov’s attention to the mountain was both an aesthetic practice, *sur le motif* after her painterly mentor Cézanne (*Sands* 74, 96), and a spiritual exercise patterned after one of her tutelary mystic figures, Brother Lawrence. She admires the humble Carmelite cook for the capacity to be “[j]oyful, absorbed” in domestic contemplation, ““practic[ing] the presence of God’ as a musician / practices hour after hour his art” (*Sands* 113). Her own aesthetic practice of the mountain’s presence appears to have strengthened her spiritual imagination, “the perceptive organ through which it is possible, though not inevitable, to experience God” (*New* 246). It was one way she cultivated affirmation of the deep pattern of coming and going in time as part of the creation-wisdom of an “unchanging” divine presence (*Door* 64). In this light, writing the mountain series was a sustained exercise in what Murdoch names the “orientation of desire,” a poetic psychagogy by which Levertov knew both “Nature” and God as “connected with, or incarnate in, all sorts of particulars, and not just as ‘an abstract idea’” (Murdoch, *Metaphysics*

497). In such orientation to the whole, Murdoch asserts, “[w]e do not lose the particular, it teaches us love, we understand it, we *see* it, as Plato’s carpenter sees the table, or Cézanne sees Mont Ste Victoire” (497)—or as Levertov sees Mount Rainier-Tacoma.

Zwicky’s Wisdom: Coming Home to Fluent Reality

Analogous to Levertov’s acceptance of the flux of faith in “Tide,” Zwicky’s definition of the love of wisdom in *Wisdom and Metaphor* evokes the tide: it is “to find your way home in the protean *phusis* of what-is. It is to embrace . . . the emptiness and fullness of things” (*Wisdom* LH §118). One of the essential premises of her lyric philosophy and poetics is that “the shape of metaphorical thought is also the shape of wisdom,” and in this way, the shape of wisdom “echoes the shape of the world.” Accordingly, in the leitmotif of sea resonance throughout *Forge*—particularly in “Envoy: Seven Variations”—she enacts wisdom’s acceptance of the emptiness and fullness of things in metaphorical sympathy with the movement of the world’s great waters.

In that concluding reflection of *Wisdom and Metaphor*, “protean” modifies the “*phusis*” or movement of formation and growth of “what-is.” It is derived from the Greek god Proteus, Homer’s shape-shifting “Old Man of the Sea” who evades mastering grasp. So “to find your way home in the protean *phusis*” makes of lyric wisdom a kind of odyssey or voyage of return for human consciousness.¹¹⁰ The action of returning home in the first half of the aphorism is paralleled in the second by embracing “the *duende* of language, the emptiness and fullness of things.” The *duende* appears in an earlier aphorism in *Wisdom and Metaphor*: “the mortality of things is the *duende* of wholeness. — The undoing, without which wholeness could not be, nor be seen to be, what it is” (LH §32). This means that acceptance of the ephemerality of particular

¹¹⁰ Zwicky may have in mind the influence of the *Odyssey* on Plato’s imagination of philosophical eros, remarked upon by Lilburn in *Going Home* (15, 173-74).

things is the sorrow or pain that accompanies recognition of their participation in the whole.

Across the page from this entry is an excerpt from Lorca's lecture-essay "Theory and Play of the Duende" that refers to the "black sounds" infusing the voice of one visited by the *duende* (RH §32). In another excerpt a few pages later, Lorca sees visitation of the *duende* as a catalyst for the "radical change in forms" realized in music, dance, and spoken poetry that "require a living body to interpret them, being forms that are born, die, and open their contours against an exact present" (RH §35). Living forms are fluent in the language of *duende*.

There are "[a]t least four elements" to *duende*, according to Lorca's translator Christopher Maurer: "irrationality, earthiness, a heightened awareness of death, and a dash of the diabolical" (ix). The latter highlights the changeable, unpredictable nature of *duende*, referring to the trickster-like "demonic earth spirit" of Spanish folklore. Likewise underscoring that *duende* is not susceptible to willful control, Don McKay describes it as "a violent upsurge of the other inside language and art—the arrival of chthonic force with its . . . message that death is just *there*, at your elbow; the dread connection to wilderness along the dark artery of our common mortality" (*Vis* 93). To love wisdom, Zwicky's aphorism tells us, is to relinquish hopes of possession and permanence of the particular, while affirming the tidal way of all things. It is to recognize that reality is fluent. "The substance of the world is light, / is water," she writes in "Practising Bach: Prelude"; death is not "unbearable" and the cosmos is not "laughing at us" but saying, "improvise" (*Forge* 24-25).

This sense of *duende* is linked with the sea in *Wisdom and Metaphor* by the proximity of the Lorca excerpts with a poem by Pär Lagerkvist:

O Man who stands beside my shore,
listen to my song.

.....
 Why do I make you sad?

Why does your face look so melancholy as I sing,
 the song of the eternal,
 the song of the waves
 against the shore?

Why do I distress you? (LH §30)

The speaker hears the sea's eternal song in an elegiac mood, "sad," "melancholy" and in "distress" over inevitable loss and death, concomitant with *duende* and with the Heraclitean principle of flux embodied in the waves: change is the only constant. In a chain of literary associations, Lagerkvist's poem echoes Whitman's "Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking," where the sea's rhythm telling of love and death draws forth "the thousand responsive songs" exhaled from mortal things. It alters, as well, the centre of agency in Stevens's "The Idea of Order at Key West," where a woman, not the sea, is the source of the song heard by the speaker on the shore. Stevens follows Whitman in underscoring the human imagination's capacity to translate the apparently meaningless sound, while Lagerkvist proposes mutual action and "amuse"-ment, the "accidental" beauty of the human as intriguing to the sea as its "eternal song" is to the human. Zwicky follows all three poets in recognizing the affective potency of the sea and its ancient metaphorical gesture to the plenum of being, associated with "birth, death, and infinitude" (Northrup 248).

The paradoxical phrase "the emptiness and fullness of things," appositional to "the *duende* of language" in the concluding aphorism of *Wisdom and Metaphor*, recognizes that the wholeness resonating in the particular thing to which one carefully attends is simultaneously the

thing's emptiness, its finitude and contingency. The application of the concept of *duende* as a limit to language's referential power coincides with her admiration of Virginia Woolf's *The Waves* for its enactment of the tension between narrative's making of linear order and its "undoing" by lyric's "deep, open attention to the world," trained on the seascape in the opening, intercalary, and closing sections ("Lyric, Narrative, Memory" 94). Zwicky is particularly impressed with Bernard's soliloquy closing the "prose meditation" of *The Waves*: "'Yes, this is the eternal renewal, the incessant rise and fall and fall and rise again. // And in me too the wave rises. It swells; it arches its back. I am aware once more of a new desire, something rising beneath me like the proud horse whose rider first spurs and then pulls him back'" (Woolf 167). After Bernard's valiant apostrophe to the enemy, "O Death!" echoing St. Paul's "Where, O death, is your victory?" (Romans 15.55), Woolf contradicts his hope of immortality. She gives neither story nor faith, but the sea the final, lyrical word: "*The waves broke on the shore*" (167).

Zwicky's own concluding salute to "the emptiness and fullness of things" in *Wisdom and Metaphor* also echoes a sea-related excerpt from Hass's essay "Images" that appears earlier in the book, in which he admires the "steady, non-reactive stance of Buson to the way of things: "he acted as if he believed that any part of the world, completely seen, was the world. . . . [He] is not surprised by the fullness and the emptiness of things" (RH§100). Hass elaborates that "there is something about the presence of water" in Buson's late spring/early summer poems "that heightens the sexual connotation" and "erotic implications" of the images (*Twentieth* 299). Read in succession, they speak to Hass of Buson's "ability to live in the grain, the way he seems to give himself to the world's tides" without regret (300). Hass's phrasing, in turn, chimes with

Bringhurst's lyrical meditation on Heraclitus's Fragment 118,¹¹¹ admired and explicated by Zwicky in the essay "Bringhurst's Presocratics: Lyric and Ecology": "bright tatters of wisdom, cast / over grey welter and spume" give "a little light / . . . / splayed against the sea's grain" so that the soul is cured like "sunlight / and sea-salt arrayed in the grain" (qtd. in Zwicky, *Alkibiades* ' 20-21).

Zwicky's "Meditation Looking West From The Berkeley Hills" possibly pays tribute to Hass.¹¹² Set in his home place on the Pacific coast, the poem alludes to the recurring erotic imagery and theme of longing and "want[ing] to let go" in Hass's poetry, resonant with her own poetic cultivation of a Pacific mind:

It's love, in the end, that we learn, learning also
 it isn't ours. Inexplicably, unsummoned,
 the world rises to fill its own emptiness. We feel it
 reaching through us — a voice, a hand,

 a greenness not our own —
 and are buoyed up momentarily, amazed. . . . (*Long* 51)

¹¹¹ Heraclitus's Fragment 118 is translated in Zwicky's essay as "A brilliant ray of light, dry soul: wisest and best" (*Alkibiades* ' 29).

¹¹² It is also possible she has in mind Henry Bugbee, who writes in the acknowledgments to his *The Inward Morning* of his orientation to "the wilderness theme and its human significance" arising in the late 1930s as he and a friend "began to walk and talk it out together in the Berkeley Hills" (13-14). Like Zwicky here, Bugbee finds that "the very perishing of what we love might be an essential moment in the clarification of the worthiness of love of that which perishes" (137). Edward F. Mooney, writer of the introduction to *The Inward Morning*, elsewhere cites Zwicky as a fellow practitioner, with Bugbee, of lyric philosophy (222, f.n. 4).

Her lyric attending to the song of the sea, one of the great voices of the earth, here and in *Forge*—especially “Envoy: Seven Variations”—is an aesthetic form of practiced affirmation and relinquishment responsive to the pattern Hass calls the “tidal rhythms” of life.

As Zwicky recognizes affinity between nature poets like Bringhurst and Hass, she also links them with an affinity she posits between the Presocratics and the author of the *Tao Te Ching*, viewing the “essence” of all such writers as a “commitment to acknowledging, mourning, and celebrating *what-is*” (“Lyric Realism” 86, 88). The implication is the Heraclitean concept of *logos* is analogous with the Tao. The *logos* is “a pattern of sorts—what the living, coherent universe hums to itself” (*Alkibiades*’ 49). Likewise the *Tao*, with its energy *ch’i* (or *qi*) and “organic pattern” *li*, has been described by Alan Watts as “the flowing course of nature and the universe” and named “the Watercourse Way because both Lao-tzu and Chuang-tzu use the flow of water as its principal metaphor” (49; 41). The metaphors differ but the ideas converge: ultimate reality takes the shape of fluent meaning. And the way to know ultimate reality is “[a]ttentiveness as a way of life, then — a way of *living*,” with the latter participle pointing to the fact that “continuance, ongoingness, practice — *phusis*? — is fundamentally constitutive of the whole” (*Alkibiades*’ 284). The “ongoing” way of an individual life may be attuned to the “ongoing” pattern of what-is.

Diotima’s Way: Cosmic Attunement, Domestic Desire

In regard to this pattern, Zwicky creatively appropriates for her lyric philosophy and poetry that figure from ancient Greek mythology and erotic poetry most closely associated with the sea: Aphrodite, whose son and/or envoy is Eros. In the essay, “Why is Diotima a Woman?” (2015), Zwicky’s interpretation of Plato’s *Symposium* brings Socrates’s instructor of spiritual erotics, Diotima, in alignment with the Cyprian goddess of Beauty, Love, and terrestrial

re/generation. Spiritual erotics are the “ongoing, long-term ravishment by beauty,” Aphrodite’s primary aspect; but such erotics are a discipline, a way of bringing forth wisdom not only by attending to resonating forms in the world, but also by being “conditioned by an awareness of *limits* to the systematically provable, articulable, or demonstrable” (*Alkibiades*’ 102). Zwicky regards various thinkers for their “sensitive attempts to be responsible to [their] actual experience of the world” and “looking informed by love” (*Wisdom* LH §102). Her primary exemplar in such ecospiritual attentiveness is Diotima.

Juxtaposing Plato’s *Symposium* with Parmenides’s cosmological poem fragments, sometimes named “On Nature,” in keeping with her method of “lyric argument,” Zwicky draws attention to the resonance between the two philosophical “forms of life” presented in the texts (*Alkibiades*’ 11, 103). *Symposium* culminates in Socrates’s account of Diotima instructing him in how to draw near to Beauty, while Parmenides’s poem dramatizes being led by a female *daimon* into a vision of the nature of Being. Zwicky summarizes the common goal of the initiation in each text: “a vision of the nature of the real” as “deathless, birthless, unchanging, indivisible,” in its reception will beget in the beholder, “truth, the wellspring of human excellence,” or moral beauty (221, 224). Such a vision is procreative.

Moving from this point of resonance between the texts, Zwicky asserts with some evidence that Diotima is a woman because Plato is a Parmenidean and fashions his “professor” of spiritual erotics after the female instructor-*daimon* in the first part of Parmenides’s poem (223). She proposes that this first *daimon* is an “ambassador” or vocal aspect of the nameless cosmic *daimon* at the centre of all things, “connected with the natural order” in the second part of the poem (228). Probing into the identity of the latter, she concludes that it is Aphrodite Ourania (229). In mythic tradition Aphrodite arose out of the sea. Echoing Lucretius’s paean for her Latin

counterpart, Alma Venus, Zwicky notes that Parmenides's cosmic *daimon* "steers or pilots all things; and she is origin, *arkhé*—that from which, through the agency of Eros, sexual union and birth arise" (228). Zwicky observes Aphrodite's roots in a pre-Olympian deity, possibly even from an "archaic pre-Hellenic fertility cult," a Great Mother presiding over birth and death (228, 235).¹¹³ Other associations with Aphrodite that she highlights include: Moira or Fate (who presides over childbirth); the Nymphs ("spirits of wild places"); and astronomy (in relation to the planet Venus or "Aphrodite of the Heavens"), indicative of "a principle of regulation, order, and absolute reliability" (230).

Granting that W. K. C. Guthrie convincingly identifies the cosmic *daimon* as Hestia, "keeper of the hearth, the fire within the earth," and noting that he connects Parmenides's cosmological vision with the Er myth at the end of Plato's *Republic*, Zwicky also notes that Albert Rivaud sees Hestia as "one of the faces" of Aphrodite (228, 229). This means that Parmenides's cosmic *daimon* situated at the centre of things (whether called Aphrodite or Hestia) aligns with Necessity (*Ananke*) in Er's after-death vision. In the latter, Necessity holds a spindle on her knees through which a shaft of light extends as an axis mundi through the "cosmic whorl," a donut-shaped weight at its end (James 53). This whorl is a composite of eight nested discs spaced in proportion from outermost to innermost, each orbiting at its own pace with a presiding siren singing a harmonious note. A model of the classical geocentric planetary system, Necessity's spindle and whorl accords with the Pythagorean concept of the music of the spheres. This latter conceit has deeply informed Zwicky's philosophy, poetry, and poetics, particularly her key concept of resonance (Northrup 4; 244). Perhaps this is why she finds Guthrie's

¹¹³ Erich Neumann's study *The Great Mother: An Analysis of the Archetype* traces the various associations mentioned here (229-31; 274-75).

identification of Parmenides's cosmic *daimon* as Hestia (and Necessity), so “illuminating” (*Alkibiades*’ 229).

Hestia, in addition to presiding over the central fire in the ancient cosmic model, oversees the public *prytaneum* and the private household (*oikos* or *domos*) hearth in ancient Greece. She brings the earthly microcosmic centres of community and house into alignment with the macrocosmic “natural order of things,” rightly ordering domesticity. In light of the fact that “domesticity” is a key concept in her philosophy, Zwicky can be seen reimagining Parmenides's cosmic *daimon* as an ecological figure. After all, in “Bringhurst's Presocratics: Lyric and Ecology,” briefly mentioned in the Diotima essay (223), she concludes with the etymological observation that “eco” is from the Greek *oikos*, for household, and “ecology” is the [*logos*] of the home (*Alkibiades*’ 58).

In “Why is Diotima a Woman?” she describes both the cosmic *daimon*'s activity in Parmenides's poem and Diotima's discourse in Plato's *Symposium* in terms of order and limits: the former “steers or pilots all things,” “constraining,” “control[ling],” “regulati[ng]” (228, 230-31, 232), and the latter is marked by “requirement and constraint” (234). Attending to the resonance of diction, as Zwicky advocates, the reader may realize correspondence between Parmenides's vision of Being's order and Plato's Diotimic discipline of spiritual erotics.¹¹⁴ “Bringhurst's Presocratics” sheds exegetical light on the ecological insight drawn from the ancient philosophers's mythic explorations: “Lyric longing is born of a failure of immersion in the living rhythms of the planet. The price of the capacity to manipulate those rhythms to the extent that technocratic culture manipulates them . . . is separation from those rhythms” (54-55).

¹¹⁴ See the discussion of eros as a “discipline” in the epistolary “Contemplation and Resistance: A Conversation” (with Lilburn) in *Lyric Ecology* (142-50).

Unrestrained by the insight of erotic attention—in other words, unheedful of Aphrodite’s ordering—“system and power,” which she names the Siamese twins joined at the heart of technocracy,” alienate us further from the earth (“Contemplation” 149). The original alienation of language, *techne* and self-consciousness is at the root of nostalgia, which may productively call us to realignment, but mastering technology is a source of deepening moral-ecological “oblivion,” a destructive void in human knowledge. Lyric thought and expression, the practice of contemplative ecospiritual erotics, can help to mend or, at least, mind the gap.

Zwicky steers the reader of “Why Is Diotima a Woman?” to a conclusion by posing two more questions, “What is it about knowledge of the natural order of love that belongs to women?” for Parmenides and Plato, and why do they both “associate” that knowledge with the vision of unvarying, atemporal being (*Alkibiades*’ 235)? Her gloss on Bringham’s “Parmenides” helps clarify the rhetorical intent of the second question by posing it as statement: “What is permanent cannot exist apart from what perishes, what is spiritual is inextricably bound up with what is physical” (47).¹¹⁵ The “natural order of love” in the rhythm of time’s ebb and flow is inextricably linked with the unvarying *physis* of “atemporal” order.

As for the first question, her closing remarks rephrase it, observing that in both texts, “culminating visions spring from a fundamentally feminine province of [the] mythworld” (236). The two questions are linked together, then, by the fact that the “physical” province of “women” in classical Greek culture, the *domos* or *oikos*, is analogical with the “spiritual” province of the

¹¹⁵ Zwicky’s interpretation radically differs from Cornford’s on this point. He says that Parmenides as “the father of Logic” posits that “Necessity . . . deprives [the One] of the creative force of life,” rendering it as mathe-mechanical (216). “Thus all the original life of the ultimate *physis* [from earlier religio-philosophy] is frozen out of it” by Parmenides, continues Cornford, so that “Nature, deserted by God, is to aspire towards that perfection which lies above and beyond her reach, and in that aspiration she regains the life which God has lost” (223).

female deities in Plato and Parmenides's visions of atemporal being. Especially if we grant that Hestia is an aspect of Aphrodite Ourania, then sexual union, pregnancy and birth, attending to the dead, along with keeping the hearth in reverent attentiveness, and ordering the *domos* are activities analogically resonant with the "natural order[ing] of love" at the heart of what-is. Particular "physical" forms of love disclose the "spiritual" order of eternal Being within them. This is love of wisdom as domestic desire or ecospiritual eros: Diotima's way.

Philosophy as practiced by the ancients, Zwicky asserts in closing, had "deep, live roots in the mythworld," and particularly, the feminine realms of that world. The pursuit of wisdom once assumed a place for what I will call "myth logic," akin to "dream logic"; it held that *mythos* and *logos* are entwined in the process of knowing.¹¹⁶ Thus Zwicky's discovery of Diotima's resonance with Aphrodite proves continuous with her advocacy for recognition and cultivation in philosophic practice of "primary process thought," the *logos* or insight that arises from the somatic-affective centre in human being, from which come both dream and myth. This nexus of body and world is analogically "resonant" with Hestia's region of the hearth in the household, polis, earth, and cosmos, and isomorphic with Aphrodite Ourania/Love's natural ordering of resonant reality. Seen this way, Zwicky's Aphrodite is a symbol of ambient holiness analogous to Levertov's Shekinah-Sophia-Spirit, both figures bearing ecological significance.

For Zwicky, it is "technocracy's world view" and consequent lack of regulation by the earth's systems that "has led us over the brink of planetary disaster" (*Alkibiades*' 26; 52). Such a view is uninformed by Diotimic eros and restraint, whereas the Presocratics' "lyric thought-style," as she understands it, intentionally participates in "the lyric order of the world," a stance "both moral and ecological" (28, 49). She advocates recovering ancient philosophical thought

¹¹⁶ See *Alkibiades*' 85-106; 237-61.

with its “roots in the mythworld” and attendant spiritual practices as an alternative to the logic of “dominant social, political, and economic institutions” that serve “aspirations to immortality” (39). The latter is an ancient and enduring psycho-spiritual impulse, but in the modern world it is redirected from former theological or ritualized channels to well-funded emerging technologies fuelled by transhumanist and transplanetary dreams, as Levertov also observes in her late poems “For Those Who Want Out” and “Alienation in Silicon Valley.” In contrast, Zwicky’s company of lyric thinkers assumes that “the cosmos [is] an organic whole [and] reciprocal interdependence characterizes the relation of all beings, animate and inanimate” (51, 56). This involves accepting that “human fate is [not] ontologically distinct from (because superior to) the lot of the rest of the world” (39).

To willingly accept human participation in the living rhythms of the earth, Zwicky cultivates in her poetic meditations both lyric eros and the domesticity that “is *at home* with its limitations *vis-à-vis* ‘the natural’” (*LP* LH §131). While the latter refers to “the image of re-connection with a resonant order untouched by human system” that is “idolized” by lyric thought (LH §131), domesticity “embodies relief from the tension of lyric desire” and compassionate acceptance that to be human is to experience self-concern, separation, and “inadequacy” to express in language “the music of being” (*Chamber* 73, 76). The dynamics of her poetics is “acknowledgment that eros demands ‘a labour of participation’ . . . always balanced against a letting-go, or ‘labour of extrication’” (MacDonald 214).

Such balance is advised by the speaker in the *Forge* poem “Diotima to Hölderlin: A Remonstrance,” who is a combination of Plato’s Diotima, as signalled by the epigraph drawn from *Symposium*, and of the beloved bearing the same name in Hölderlin’s *Hyperion*. The latter is described by M. H. Abrams as “‘beauty’ itself, [whose] role is equivalent to that of Beatrice in

Dante's pilgrimage" (*Natural* 239). Indeed, Zwicky's Diotima instructs Heidegger's chief thinker-poet in the natural order of the love that moves all bodies, gently reproaching him for his imperception. She counsels that if he wishes to really "see" being, he must be willing to shake loose from what Keats named the egotistical sublime, and become "the thing / you do not want: / invisible to history, invisible / to other men. . . ." (*Forge* 45). Love's knowledge comes not to those wielding socio-economic power, but to the humble exemplified by "Epiktetos," the Stoic philosopher "who'd been a slave," or by "some women" her auditor has known (46).

Zwicky's Diotima also recalls Hass's female artist-speaker in "Santa Lucia," who eschews not desire, but the "riddle of desire," preferring the everyday, small and domestic kindnesses of an eros that infuses a wide spectrum of gestures and is "not sexual, only when you're lucky." Standing at the threshold of *Lyric Philosophy* as one of its epigraphs, the seven-line excerpt from "Santa Lucia" containing this statement illustrates what Zwicky describes as "the tempering of lyric passion / by domesticity, its grounding of the flash of lyric insight in domestic earth, the turf of dailiness" ("Practising Bach: Loure," *Forge* 26). Accordingly, Zwicky's Diotima advises Hölderlin that, when the god's visitation "clouds [his] vision," he ought to "look into the cloud" and attend, rather than attempt to clear or control it. Further, she directs him to stop projecting onto the world his personal pain, making life into a tragedy of unrequited longing and death-wishing alienation: "dump / the hemlock." Otherwise, he will lose intimate knowledge of the way things are, and "die" in vain, or more to the point, in vanity.

On the other hand, she warns, "if you crucify desire, / you build inside yourself the wall / from which you'll hang the body of the world" (*Forge* 45). This extends Levertov's observation in "A Lamentation": ". . . Grief dismissed / and Eros along with grief" (*Poems 1960* 202). To be open to eros and what it teaches about the world, one must consent to suffer, or be affected by,

the particularity and inherent loss of the beloved other. “Maturity is achieved,” Zwicky writes elsewhere, “when things are let go, left to be on their own, allowed their specificity” and their consequent absence from the securing grasp (*LP LH* §89, 92). Hers is a counsel of reverence: “[t]ake your shoes off” while on the holy ground of the god. In a Heraclitean image, she twice calls her apprentice to lightly “step here” into “the brook” of eros and be absorbed in attentiveness: “Dissolve the nothingness you are / by walking into it” (*Forge* 45, 46).

The Way of Water, The Movement of *Forge*

The tidal tension of loving and letting go defines the place-responsive leitmotif of sea resonance. It is a defining aesthetic form of erotic affirmation and relinquishment in *Forge*. Related water imagery recurs throughout the collection with cumulative force and release of energy, in the manner of the dynamic water cycle evoked in “Sarabande” by the “dance of the earth / that drinks rain through us, of the sky that drinks / the earth through rain . . .” (*Forge* 35). In the epigraphic poem, an Eros figure speaks as a lover abandoned “barefoot in the snow” at peak elevation, while the water of Diotima’s “brook” appears, variously, as a glacial dream “pool” high on a hill, “[c]rystal: blue: lit somewhere / from inside its depths” (“Music and Silence: Seven Variations” 10); then, as “meltwater” (“Music and Silence: Seven Variations” 8, “When You Look Up” 44, “Autobiography” 58); “the floodwaters of the heart” (“Practising Bach: Loure” 26); and running rivers (“If There Were Two Rivers” 39, “The Art of Fugue” 8). The sea is the momentary destination of erotic flow, its restless circulation depicted in several poems throughout the collection, but fittingly featured in the final poem, “Envoy: Seven Variations.”

Forge is itself a mensural, “resonant structure” whose “components are attuned” (*LP LH* §234). Its formal order is based on the trope of cyclic form in classical music, of which she states

that, “[a] composition of any length usually consists of a number of lyric ‘motifs,’ each with its gestural integrity” (LH §211). The leitmotif of sea resonance circulates in ambient relation to a pivotal image-gesture that can be identified by consulting the medial poem, “If There Were Two Rivers.” The typographic arrangement in the index at the back of the book calls visual attention to this centring poem and to the correspondences occurring amongst it, the opening sequence “Music and Silence: Seven Variations,” and the closing sequence “Envoy: Seven Variations.” These three titles are aligned farthest to the left in the numbered list, and “If There Were Two Rivers” acts as a horizontal hinge by which all the other titles fall into mirror alignment in relation to the left margin. In addition to the typographic placement that connects the opening, middle and closing poems, the first and final sequences parallel each other in a shared “seven variations” form, which also serves to highlight the central position of “If There Were Two Rivers.”

The first lines of this pivotal poem posit two metaphorical rivers of “clear gold,” evocative of the molten, smelted precious metal. Thus begins the poem’s paratactic metamorphism. The mysterious subject of the poem is nominated obscurely as “it,” and by inference of shared imagery, can be identified as the “what-is” or “substance of the world [that] is light, / is water” upon which she meditates in the earlier “Practising Bach” (*Forge* 25). The anaphoric conditional “if” sustained throughout the poem underscores that the experience of “it” is ineffable and, as she puts it elsewhere, “there’s an enormous range in the ways the unsayable manifests itself” (“There” 118). The two rivers might suggest the diastole and systole of blood, or the influx and outflow from a body of water, except that they converge in “a standing wave, its crest of white” (*Forge* 39). Assuming the trope of time as a river is in play, the standing wave is the locus Thoreau describes in *Walden* as “the meeting of two eternities, the past and the

future, which is precisely the present moment” (16). It is what Zwicky calls elsewhere “the dimensionless present” of lyric’s erotic-ontological attention to *thisness* (“There” 118).

A more carnal association with the rivers’ confluence is that of two lovers meeting and mingling their bodies and destinies, as implied in “Gemini” (*Forge* 32), to face together “the death that’s yet to come” (“Vespers” 34), or “that leaving from which / there is no return . . .” (“Sarabande” 35). Throughout *Forge*, the ultimate relinquishment of egoic self-consciousness in death (“Song of Farewell”) is anticipated in *la petite mort* of the ecstatic love poems (e.g. “Vespers” and “Love Song”). Both sex and death are located within the larger context of a circulating energy, the eros that brings all things into sympathetic connection. The culminating image in “If There Were Two Rivers” is an altar-like forge named “love,” signifying the self-relinquishment to which the lover is brought by spiritual eros, a letting-go that is, at the same moment, a “forging” of relation. The forge of love, distantly reminiscent of Sappho’s temple of Aphrodite, serves as the titular and pivotal heart of the collection. Around it circulates the oceanic resonance of eros that evokes ambient holiness, recalling that ambient means “turning round, revolving,” “encircling, encompassing, environing,” but also, “surrounding as a fluid; circumfused” (“ambient”). The resonance of this collection surrounds the forge of love.

As a verb, “forge” means to fashion, make, or, especially, shape by heating and hammering; as noun, it refers to a smithy, an open fireplace or hearth (“forge”). When Anne Carson in *Eros the Bittersweet* reaches for an illustration of the way “[b]oundaries of body, categories of thought, are confounded by the god,” she cites one of Sappho’s contemporaries, the Greek lyric poet Anacreon: “With his huge hammer again Eros knocked me like a blacksmith / and doused me in a wintry ditch” (7). Zwicky’s “If There Were Two Rivers” portrays the erotic experience in similar terms: “If the hammer of it brought you to your knees. / If the hammer of it

clove your heart” (40). But it gives less the sense of the miserable Anakreon, and more the spellbound Pythagoras from Boethius’s famous account of his discovery of musical proportions. As described in Daniel Heller-Roazen’s essay “Into the Forge,” Pythagoras was “impelled” and “enchanted” by the ringing of blacksmiths’ hammers one day as he was passing by a smithy. Heller-Roazen focuses on the oft-overlooked fifth hammer, discordant yet in consonance with the other four upon which Pythagoras, according to the legend, based his discovery of “acoustical intervals . . . now expressible as arithmetical relations” (4). The fifth hammer is a manifestation of what exceeds and cannot be assimilated into the system of measure (7), that to which Zwicky refers in her philosophy and gestures in her poetry as “the ineffable.”

Confirming the connections in Zwicky’s mythopoetic imagination between erotic attention, resonance, and the Pythagorean forge, the sequence poem “Practising Bach,” located in the first half of *Forge*, begins with a presupposition in the opening “Prelude”:

There is, said Pythagoras, a sound
 the planet makes: a kind of music
 just outside our hearing, the proportion
 and the resonance of things — not
 the clang of theory or the wuthering
 of human speech, not even
 the bright song of sex or hunger, but
 the unringed ringing that
 supports them all. (24)

Likewise, the final variation in *Forge*’s opening poem, “Music and Silence: Seven Variations,” brings a dreamlike quest to a momentary pause by noting, “That sound: something in you has

been ringing” (13). The process of erotic encounter is narrated throughout this opening sequence in the second person point of view and a variety of tenses that confound linear time. Here the ringing is traced to its source in a past event. It was when the lyric “you” was utterly “defenceless,” in an emptied, receptive state, that

the flame inside you stood straight up,
tall, gold-coloured; and your heart walked forward
easily, as though something had called it, laid itself
on the anvil of that silence. (*Forge* 13)

The anvil image in this enactment of erotic attention and consensual sacrifice of the ego reflects the forge of love at the close of the medial poem “If There Were Two Rivers.” And in keeping with the resonant structure of the entire collection, as cued in the index, the flame is mirrored in the final poem, “Envoy: Seven Variations,” which begins with the conjunctive line, “And so I lay, waiting: a single flame felting the darkness” (68).

The anvil-forge-flame image running as an axis through the first, middle and final poems recalls the homology of the feminine deities Zwicky acknowledges in her Diotima essay. The “natural order of love,” like Whitman’s “kelson of creation,” is the meaning she hears resonating among Parmenides’s cosmic Aphrodite Ourania, Plato’s Diotima, Er’s Necessity (with her harmonious cosmic spindle and whorl), and Hestia, whose province and name translated is “hearth.” This word is used in “If There Were Two Rivers” to identify the shape of the ineffable “it” that emerges as a “radiant,” “massive,” altar-like rock of fire (39). The poem imagines how “you” would respond if “the necessity” of love was a “hammer” that “brought you to your knees,” “clove your heart,” and “broke you open. / If your blood shone on the hearth” (40). The semantic field around “hearth” includes “home,” “dwelling,” “earth,” and “hot, fervent”

(“hearth”). The associations recall Jeffers’s depiction of intense human consciousness in “The unformed volcanic earth,” playing on the synonymic relation of “focus” with hearth (*CP* 3.432). While literally referring to “the fireplace of a smith’s forge” (“hearth”), “hearth” chimes with “heart,” the pulsing chambered organ of life and symbolic centre of love. All of these meanings pertain to the discipline of spiritual erotics Zwicky enacts in *Forge*, with the vision quest of “If There Were Two Rivers” at its heart.

Taking the wider view of Zwicky’s corpus, a link may be discovered between the anvil-forge-flame axis and the image of the sea in an earlier poem, “Mourning Song,” published in *The New Room* (1989). One of the “Seven Elegies” that Zwicky composed to commemorate her father’s death, this poem demonstrates that the necessity of love, the blow that falls as a hammer, is the source of the sharp sorrow wrung from the heart in the loss of a beloved. “Mourning Song” enacts a plunge into

Great water, still
of the heart, heart’s anvil,
tangent to gull flight, the air-taut
arc, shaper. . . . (*New* 72)

Zwicky’s speaker proceeds to observe the way oceanic water—and on another level, the protean *phusis* of “what-is”—forges the forms of various animate and inanimate things in the earth. The sea is especially connected with “the human body’s saline currents,” both blood and tears bearing chemical similarities with ocean water (Northrup 248). “Mourning Song” thus recalls H.D.’s poetic alchemy in *Trilogy*, where the continuum between *marah* (Hebrew for “bitter”) “mer, mere, mère, mater, Maia, Mary // Star of the Sea, / Mother” forges a conjunction between death and natality, for the ocean is the primeval womb of life on the blue planet (Fredman 198).

“Envoy”: On the Way

The words “tangent” and “arc” in “Mourning Song” point to the geometry of the circle and a circulating energy not only in the gull’s flight but also in the implicit waves of the “Great water.” It is the poetic vehicle for what she calls the “geometry of the emotions,” as well (*Forge* 26). This metaphorical shape can be traced throughout “Envoy: Seven Variations.” Temporally, it is registered in the cycle of seasons, with references to the spring and spiraling shoots in the soil (2.1; 4.2, 4.12) and to autumn with its “[l]eaves turning” (7.5). The spinning of the earth on its axis (3.2) is signaled in the changing light of opening dawn (1.2), the air “shimmering” at dusk (2.2), the dark of night and “Languor. 2 a.m.” (6.1), and coming full circle, the “low light” (perhaps) before the dawn, in the final variation (7.11). Even the numeracy of the poem’s form, seven variations, each with twelve lines, suggests the human measure of time in the days of the week and hours of the diurnal-nocturnal cycle.

Both topographical and typographic imagery throughout “Envoy: Seven Variations” display what Stephen L. Talbott names the “circuitous tendencies of water.” Talbott describes water’s “expressive gestures, its ‘archetypal forms of movement,’ expressed even in bones and organs. In similar fashion, Zwicky’s “Great water”-shaped forms move around the axial pattern or *logos* of being in circular flux, analogical to the way the ocean currents and shorelines are shaped by the earth’s rotation on the planetary axis and, mythically speaking, by the magnetic-erotic attraction imagined in the dance of the moon, earth and sun in the cosmic whorl of Necessity’s spindle.

Recalling the lesson of “The Art of Fugue” that the soul is “shaped / by what you love” (*Forge* 55), the ecstatic opening to reality is performed in the circular exclamation of the second variation of “Envoy”: “O, but the sea wanders everywhere: the cool drift of it” (69). This repeats

earlier vocative “O’s” in the collection: “Purcell: Fantasia for Five Viols, ‘Upon One Note’ cries, “O, let there be” (*Forge* 37); “Love Song” delights, “O, // this unfolding into birdsong, / into leaves! O” (59). These exclamations return attention to the letter “o” in the poetic title “Envoy” and, further, in the collection’s title, “Forge.” Indeed, “O’ is the central feature of the book’s cover, typography being one of the lyric details to which Zwicky attends. The angular layout of “forge,” all upper case and large type, places the “o” front and (slightly off) centre, circling around the titular word repeated in smaller font.

“Envoy: Seven Variations” links with the earlier poem “Transit” by way of the titles. As both noun and verb, “transit” is synonymous with “voyage,” a word that shares the Latin root *via* (way) with “envoy.” Appearing directly before the medial poem “If There Were Two Rivers,” “Transit” marks a passage, like the threshold of the door in the dream of the poem, picking up the longing self where it was left standing in the opening sequence “Music and Silence” and bearing it across to the central poem. The “latch” appearing in the sixth variation of “Music and Silence” is lifted in “Transit,” and the “you” steps “into twilight, splay of cloud against the west’s / last light, that shadowland” (38). A nameless, numinous “it,” the apparent subject of the following “If There Were Two Rivers,” takes the form of a lover, “those lips against your cheek, that breath / dissolving in your hair” (38). The ineffable places “its palm above your heart” and the self is “caught, split” and then “flung open” to “the god, slick, dripping, / [that] stepped out from the darkness. Entered you” (38).

The clearly erotic image and sensory diction echoes Annie Dillard’s opening lines in *Holy the Firm*: “Every day is a god, each day is a god, and holiness holds forth in time. I worship each god, I praise each day splintered down, splintered down and wrapped in time like a husk, a

husk of many colors spreading, at dawn fast over the mountains split” (11).¹¹⁷ Dillard’s persona awakens in the god’s arms, feeling his kiss as she opens her eyes: “The god lifts from the water. His head fills the bay. He is Puget Sound, the Pacific; his breast rises from pastures; his fingers are firs; islands slide wet down his shoulders” (12). Zwicky’s “slick, dripping” god is Eros taking the form of a *genius loci*, too, a Pacific presence whose “light comes striding / down the strait and through the window” (“Music and Silence,” *Forge* 11). In Dillard’s account, she meditates in the mode of the mystic, repeatedly evoking Julian of Norwich consumed in the flame of desire for the divine, as well as the parallel image of moth-as-candlewick. As she opens “Envoy” *in medias res*, Zwicky’s speaker is similarly effulgent with eros: “And so I lay, waiting: a single flame felting the darkness. / Dawn, they tell us, breaks. It breaks” (68).

The word “breaks” in this line, as in the kenning “daybreak,” conveys the sudden coming of light rays on the horizon at dawn, picturing awakening both somatic and spiritual. But “breaks,” especially in its repetition, also calls to mind the cresting and crashing of a wave. In the earlier “Schumann: Fantasie, Op. 17,” “ecstasy” is “the wave rising through you / in the dark” (65). “And This” expresses “the headlong rush of new grass / under wind, dark waves / rising on the hillside in the naked light” as energy continuous with eros for the beloved: “And this, that breaks inside me: you” (64). In “Your Eyes,” the intense looking of the lover is experienced as light or a sky, “sea-grey and cloudy,”

Or like the wave tip,
sharpening in thought, dissolving
in the instant of its grasp

¹¹⁷ Dillard’s pronouncement alludes to the gnomic statement from Emerson, “No one suspects the days to be gods,” which serves as epigraph to her *The Writing Life* (1989).

to spume:
 the soul made visible
 as the body breaks. (42)

Just as the lines in this poem enact the shape of waves by way of length and typographic arrangement, so also in the first variation of “Envoy,” Zwicky plays with line length to create an undulating right margin that corresponds with the diction and cadence of waves throughout the section. The second line—“Dawn, they tell us, breaks. It breaks”—anticipates the diffusion of energy in the erotic storm of the following lines, in which wave motion is suggested in the procession of the lead words of the eighth, ninth and eleventh lines: “lifting . . . breaking . . . falling” (68). The poet-speaker recalls the way a voice “called me // to the edge of myself. / Did I choose? I chose,” and this ecstatic consent to the god and/or lover is an enactment of liminal opening to “what-is,” reminiscent of Sappho’s invocation and reception of Aphrodite (fragment 2) and the Virgin Mary’s consenting *fiat* in Levertov’s “Annunciation.” The spiritual infuses the somatic-affective experience. Reading this poem with a view to the wider context of the collection and of Zwicky’s oeuvre, as a whole, the sequence is recognizably in conversation with the writings of ancient philosophers, mystics, and erotic poets, those “repositories of the West’s deep, old stories [of desire on the move],” as Lilburn writes, “where an invaluable physics of the heart is stored” (*Going* 2-3). Zwicky’s demonstration of this stance in this first variation of “Envoy” establishes the poem’s underlying theme of cultivating availability to the ambient holiness of the cosmos through the practice of erotic attention to the particular.

The second variation (like the fourth and sixth) conveys the aftermath of lovemaking, the calm ebb after “[t]he storms we have ridden, have been ridden by” and the lovers lie peacefully “in the planet’s palm” (69). Out on the porch, “the rose nods, / drowsy with its own scent,

dreaming and dreaming // of the sea,” in the genus of Aphrodite-Venus’s flower, but also H.D.’s sea rose, Eliot’s salted briar rose, and Roethke’s rose in the sea wind. If the “storm” of eros has passed by, the resonance of love remains: “O, but the sea wanders everywhere: the cool drift of it” (69). The implication of the ubiquitous, ambient ocean of life agrees with Eliot’s observation in “The Dry Salvages”: “The river is within us, the sea is all about us” (*Complete* 184). When kissing the beloved’s mouth, the speaker tastes “my own salt taste,” an intimate sympathy between the lovers, and each with the sea, is affirmed.

Throughout the sequence, we are given a sense that the act of lovemaking enacts a Merleau-Pontean chiasm of “Flesh,” lovers entering and being entered by the ambient wholeness-holiness of life on earth. This is particularly registered in the third variation as a kind of enchantment:

The earth’s great arm
turns as it reaches into us. We are

the swirl of wing and fluke, the single thought
that moves like wind under the sea. (*Forge* 70)

The *axis mundi* in this image of a planetary “great arm” turning in all things recalls Necessity’s cosmic spindle-whorl and the dance of the planets, a motion made concrete in the vertical spiral form evoked in the right margin of the poem by the sequences of graduated lengthening and shortening lines. For all the cosmic implication, however, the image is an intimate gesture: the arm “reaches into us,” just as, in the more recent “Meditation Looking West From The Berkeley Hills,” the world is imagined “reaching through us — a voice, a hand” (*Long* 51). Hass puts it this way in “Images”: “The earth turns, and we live in the grain of nature, turning with it” (*Twentieth* 297). Zwicky’s enjambed line ending, “We are,” invites a reflexive reading before

proceeding; it calls for acknowledgement that the lovers' existence is conditioned by the "great arm" of the planet, torquing through" entangled bodies: "Your hands around me," "your hair," "my chin," "your lips" (*Forge* 70). The synecdochic identification of the lovers' amatory motions with "the swirl of wing and fluke," the "silver twist of fishes, the cloud-mind / of birds," recalls the "ambiguous undulations" of Stevens's "casual flocks of pigeons" in that post-Christendom religious poem, "Sunday Morning" (*Selected* 45). So also, this third variation of "Envoy" proposes that the lovers' in lovemaking, like the birds in their murmuration, the fish or marine mammal in their schooling, are particular embodiments of the "single thought" of earth's spinning on an axial *logos*.

The fourth variation repeats the erotic consent of the first in the line "Let springtime come," uttered near the beginning and at the end. The speaker dismisses the dread of her Roethkean winter death dreams with a rhetorical "Does it matter?" Welcoming the passage of the world into her "body, silent, by the empty door," she beckons: "[b]e within me creature. Be without a voice" (71). As she lies with her cheek to the earth, "[w]hat is furled, and furled, within"—the fecund stirrings elicited by light in the spring—furls also in her. The vernal setting, the prone and fully open posture, and those scattered poppyseeds are allusive to the ancient fertility rites associated with Demeter and Persephone in the Eleusian Mysteries, "centred on death and rebirth" (*Alkibiades*' 210). These faintly echo in the expressive gestures of ecospiritual humility, reverence, and receptivity to the gift of life. "[T]he shoots that break like wavecrests in the dark" reiterate the cyclic action of energy in the wave as wind moves across the face of the deep (71). The tight vortices of the short-lined variations on either side of this medial one reflect the principle that the higher the intensity of energy, the shorter the wavelength. Here, the longer, languid lines embody the expansive opening of a wave and evoke the emptiness of attunement.

The following, fifth variation is taut and spare, a mystical, *via negativa* un-saying of love's knowledge. Twice inviting eros to "enter me," then "[o]pen me," the speaker enacts an ecstatic *kenosis*, or humble self-emptying, through identification with "nothingness" and "the nothing," thus locating the wholeness of being in "the singing / of our emptiness" (72). "[T]he meaning of / what is" revealed "inside that music" resonates through the lovers' bodies, as they become one with "earth's measure of us, true geometry, the pattern / spilling from the centre of the rose" in the sixth variation. The spiral pattern of the rose, recalling "the golden ratio in the whelk shell lying on the beach, the leaf whorl opening to the sun" in the earlier "Practising Bach" (26), is repeated in the aureole of "the nipple" and "the dark whorl in the centre" of the lover's chest (73). Again, that opening "o," a cipher of emptiness that is fullness, is repeated in each image.

"Envoy's" seventh variation brings the sequence, and the collection, to leave-taking in a saturated autumn landscape: "Rain: the creeks in flood, lakes in the fields" (74). The assonance in "rain" and "lakes," "creeks" and "fields," emphasize the central position of "flood" in this line. Flood, in turn, gestures back to the erotic outpouring, the ecstasy that is both an emptying of ego and a filling up with the wholeness of being. To complete the water cycle that began in the snow at the opening of the collection, the sea is evoked by the second last couplet as "the final compass point, / the body dissolving in the soul" (74). This final moment of the collection may even imagine a deeper, species-wide relinquishment, enacted in a spiritual exercise of death.

Indeed, its watery world mirrors Jeffers's late poem, an early warning of global warming: "The polar ice-caps are melting, the mountain glaciers / Drip into rivers; all feed the ocean; / Tides ebb and flow, but every year a little higher" (*CP* 3.476). Jeffers predicts that his beloved Carmel Point, along with New York and London, will "drown." His advice is to

condition the mind according to geological and astronomical time, to stay calm like rocks under the tide at flow and contemplate: “count the star-swirls.” Zwicky also has noted from the precarious perspective of her coastal island home that “[t]he sea level is going to rise. . . . [and] marine ecologies are unraveling at a staggering rate” (“Details” 95). Hers is a counsel of neither despair nor inert passivity, and if she joins Jeffers in advocating for a reconditioning of the mind, she does not carry his bitterness toward humanity, a residue of what Louise Glück diagnoses as “enraged, disappointed romanticism” (66). Rather, she alludes to the Chinese poets and intellectuals who withdrew during the Warring States period in China’s history, and to Thomas Merton’s characterization of monks in cloister praying for the world, those who embraced a way of life that included voluntary poverty and contemplation on the nature of things. These exemplify the sanity of “deep, reflective, meditative immersion in and compassion for what is happening” (“Details” 96). In kind, lyric thought and poetry can help effect “a widening” of consciousness, “really experiencing what is,” so that from that position, we might “begin the reconstructive work of changing the culture” (96).

In the final variation of “Envoy,” the lovers’ “learning to drown. Be breath. Be nothing” (74), is a form of ecospiritual eros. Recall Diotima’s counsel to Hölderlin: “dissolve the nothingness you are. . . . Love” (46). “The watercourse way,” Watts’s title for the Tao, is an apt phrase for such immersion and emptying of narcissism and collective anthropocentrism. The dissolution Zwicky imagines is not permanent, for her lyric impulse is absent the self-annihilative tragic dimension of Sappho’s fabled “Leucadian leap.” Instead, it engages the measured wisdom she admires in “Practising Bach,” eschewing the death-and-sex obsession at the root of Romantic despondency and operatic pathos, and espousing instead “the resonant ground of sex and death”—the “domestic earth” (26). Like Bach’s music, her expression of

Diotimic desire in *Forge*, and particularly in “Envoy: Seven Variations,” “speaks directly to, and of, life / itself” unfolding on “the turf of dailiness” and the surf of life’s comings and goings (26). So her send-off poem, whose title comes from *en voie* ‘*on the way*’ (“envoy”), points to calm dispossession of the earth: “[a] way of letting go / without regrets” and affirming the ambient holiness with joy, as “the world steps on its way” (*Forge* 22, 37).

Conclusion: Renewal at the Edge

“How does memory / serve, serve the earth?” The question arises in the first section of Levertov’s three-part poem, “Anamnesis at the Faultline,” placed precisely at the centre of *Sands of the Well* (67). Voiced in either stutter or song, the repeated “serve” emphasizes action. The question seems obviously to share the environmental concern of John Felstiner’s *Can Poetry Save the Earth?* and Jonathan Bate’s repetition of Heidegger’s “What Are Poets For?” in *The Song of the Earth*. Indeed, the poem’s title redounds on the question, giving the impression that the planet is in a perilous state, calling for response. Further, it assumes that the human capacity to recollect (Gr. “anamnesis”) is appropriate, though in what manner it is not yet clear. The wording of the question is not “Does,” but “*How* does poetry serve, serve the earth?”

Regarding the titular “Faultline,” anyone living in the Pacific Northwest, and many beyond, will be aware of the dire warnings about “The Really Big One,” to borrow the title of Kathryn Schulz’s really scary 2016 Pulitzer Prize-winning article. Were the title “Anamnesis of the Faultline,” the poem might well be taken as a reminder to those living and continuing to develop housing and industry here that a different sort of building up is happening at the continent’s edge, the Cascadia subduction zone. The poem’s opening appears to engage this concern. There is the stark imagery of houses and “broken stones,” and the diction of these lines, which might insinuate that “the time” is up, and the fault “[l]ong-hidden” in the “foundation” is activated as earthquake and tsunami:

Partings, tearings

apart: storm, loss, hands

upraised for rescue,

onrush of wave,

exile.

Long-hidden, the time

Of arrival, plumb-line

First foundation.

The poetic form continues in this pattern, the uneven units alternating from the left to the right of a central edge, giving the effect of a fractured, or wavering, fault line around which the poem builds. All the lines are enjambed, but the first three units are heavily punctuated and variations between monosyllabic and compound or hyphenated words render a broken and agitated speech.

Following a breath-space, the question's smooth cadence is stilling: "How does memory serve, serve the earth?" According to Schulz, scientists studying the Cascadia subduction zone only recently determined it worthwhile to consult Pacific Northwest coastal tribes. They discovered that local oral traditions, conveying as they do hundreds of years of place-based memories, include many stories of the last "Big One" (now determined to have been in 1700). Which leads me to consider the poem's dedication: "*For Barbara Thomas after experiencing her installation, "What is Found, What is Lost, What Is Remembered," 1992*" (67). This reveals that the title's reference is more than geological, and that this is an ekphrastic poem. The date signals the occasion of an art show by Seattle artists, Hollenberg reports, which provocatively commemorated the quincentennial of Columbus's arrival in America (413). Now we can catch the punning gesture to the Spanish explorer in the final unit of the poem's first section:

Columns

of turned wood placed

among broken stones,

perches for companion

ravens. A way
of witness.

The “companion ravens” perched on the wooden posts are evocative of totem poles, so that the whole of the first section now takes on a different significance: First Contact, the rough start of European settlement, the conquest of the continent and of those who were here, before.

The poem opens with a simple two-line interpretive observation, “In each house, imprinted, / a journey,” followed by a gap to the centre of the page, where the second line continues, “Partings, tearings” (*Sands* 67). “Each house” can refer, on the one hand, to those in the line of colonists from various nations, marked by the hazardous voyage from Old World to New, leaving behind the familiar; on the other, it can refer to those in the line of Indigenous nations who suffered involuntary “Partings, tearings / apart” from their ancestral lands and life-ways, and from tribes and families, under cruel systems of reservations and residential schools. It is not a matter of either/or, but both/and. We are all “imprinted” by that “journey.”

At this juncture, at the end of the first section, a phrase stands out from the lines: “A way of witness.” It answers the question of how memory, embodied in visual and poetic art, may serve the earth. There is an echo of Levertov’s friend, Snyder, in both question and answer. As Nicholas Bradley points out, Snyder maintains, “the primary function of ‘artists and writers’ is to ‘bear witness’” (124). Their creative vocation is both “retrospective and idiosyncratic,” to shape material drawn from the collective “archive of ideas” and enliven them with the perspective of individual experience (124). In light of the historical allusions and context of Levertov’s poem, “the earth” that is served by memory may be taken as the more-than-human community, on which the impact of colonial expansionism has been profound. Memory crafted as poetic witness might serve to awaken desire for “imaginative re-occupation” of place (*Lilburn, Larger* xiv).

All five of the poets I have studied in this dissertation acknowledge they are from a Euro-settler heritage, their own particular places on land appropriated from Aboriginal people. Zwicky and Hass do so most overtly. Zwicky's speaker in "Depth" admits that "You come from the same direction that / they did: the misinformed, / the would-be heroes, unfirst" European settlers, bringing with them tools and abstracted economics, and "[t]he shock wave of that dream of ownership, that failure / of connection" to the land (*Long* 25). Hass's "Dragonflies Mating," begins with recognition that his *locus amoenus* once was the harvest and camping ground for "The people who lived here before us / [who] also loved these high mountain meadows on summer mornings" (*Apple* 205). His speaker's childhood memories are mixed with bitter "stories about sick Indians," infected by European diseases "brought with the baroque statues and metalwork crosses [of Jesuit missionaries]. . . . Which is why we settled an almost empty California" (206). Both poems convey remorse in the memory of what has been lost.

In Platonic philosophy, "anamnesis" is a hearkening to a previous existence. Though there is no easy way to recover from what has been done to the land and Indigenous people, Snyder prompts us to "rethink what sacred land might be. For a people of an old culture, *all* their mutually owned territory holds numinous life and spirit," and certain places "are gates through which one can—it would be said—more easily be touched by a larger-than-human, larger-than-personal, view" (*Practice* 100). As both Rigby and Lilburn argue, there is old wisdom, lost and waiting to be remembered anew by the inheritors of European cultures, too. Rigby is convinced that we must "develop more complex narratives about [the] past, avoiding the linear logic embedded in both the pro-modernist and antimodernist versions of the recovery plot, which assumes that paradise either stood to be regained or was lost with the onset of Western modernity" (*Topographies* 258-59). Lilburn has long testified to what may be creatively

recovered from the Western mystical and contemplative tradition. He exemplifies engaging in a “larger conversation” that includes experience of both place and the “Face,” a concept from Emmanuel Levinas that means arrestingly “deep recognition of the indissoluble individuality of another [that compels] a subsequent decorum and attentiveness toward the other” (*Larger* 11).

This brings me back to Levertov’s word, “serve,” less presumptuous than “save” (Felstiner) or “speak for” (Bate 262). Indeed, it does not necessarily imply a need on the earth’s part, but rather, might be the issue of humility and solicitude, a desire that the human capacity for memory and witness might offer something to honour, might attend upon, or to, the earth. The second part of “Anamnesis at the Faultline begins: “House, hill-field, open / shell of stillness,” connoting contemplative space, the calm attentiveness that makes possible

passage

through

from doorless

doorway

to doorway

to sky.

The wind

where it listeth.

The poem hearkens to the earth and to the sense of immanent Divine Spirit Levertov recovered from her Jewish-Christian tradition. “The wind / where it listeth” is an allusion to John 3.8 (Levertov wrote a commentary on John): “The wind bloweth where it listeth, and thou hearest the sound thereof, but canst not tell whence it cometh, and whither it goeth: so is every one that is born of the Spirit.” The speaker, Jesus, in turn alludes to the wisdom taught him in his Jewish

household and synagogue: “As thou knowest not what *is* the way of the spirit [also rendered “wind”], *nor* how the bones *do grow* in the womb of her that is with child: even so thou knowest not the works of God who maketh all” (Eccles. 11.5). No doubt, his passage, in turn, alludes to some other, more ancient and, likely, oral tradition of *ruach*, spirit-wind (Abram, *Spell* 239-41).

In the final section of “Anamnesis at the Faultline,” “each tilted / cross” perhaps signifies the way Christianity, and by extension, European settler culture, has been “tilted” as a sword. But there is that which exceeds human expectation or control, moving in the interstices of the cultured and the wild. “In each bird” there is “storm-voyage,” in each cross, “human / dreams,”

clouds

the shifting

seasons.

And in each grave.

“In each stasis, / impetus,” the poem asserts. An erotic energy circulates at the edge, and will bring we know not what. The encompassing *oikos*, “Dark / edifice, backlit, bigger / than house or grave,” remains the locus of the sacred, “White / gold of its aura.” Nature, for Levertov (as for me), is perceived and practiced under the symbol of “creation,” which acknowledges “radical dependence on a power that precedes us, envelops us, and supports us,” and gives a sense of “both a meaning and a direction,” so that it is “not just a something to exploit but . . . an object of solicitude, respect, and admiration” (Ricoeur, *Figuring* 297-98). Levertov, along with Jeffers, Roethke, Hass, and Zwicky, have each served the earth and their readers, too, by practicing their poetry, renewing language’s memory, and witnessing imaginatively in the worlds unfolded by their texts. If “grave” and growing environmental concerns have called for aesthetics of relinquishment, they have practiced affirmation, too, always attesting to the goodness of place.

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