Questions of the Infinite: Faith and Limitation in Contemporary Poetry

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Abstract

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This essay explores how contemporary poets make meaningful the human encounter with the divine. It weaves close readings of poems by Jorie Graham, Carl Phillips, and Kaveh Akbar with the author's personal experience to convey how prayer can still be a viable poetic tool despite our age of scientific skepticism. The essay argues that poets create a space in which we can imagine transcendence as a possibility, where grace may someday come.

Czeslaw Miłosz's essay on the fate of the religious imagination in the 21st century ends with a summons:

> Much depends on the number of serious religious thinkers in every country—and not religiously minded social reformers who everywhere abound but those who would try to deal with the basic enigmas of Being in the present conditions when all the premises have to be restated anew.

George Steiner's *Real Presences* contains a similar directive, but he specifies that art, particularly poetry, is the realm in which we must rethink the mysteries of creation: "we must…learn anew what is comprised within a full experience of created sense, of the enigma of creation as it is made sensible in the poem" (4). Much of the impulse to write this essay comes from my own experience with faith. Having been raised in a Protestant church and enrolled in a rural school in which all role models were stout believers, my intellectual curiosities were rooted, from the beginning, in a religion. As I grew up, I found myself abandoning the specific and troubling details of Christianity. However, I couldn't, and still can't, help but be most excited by questions that deal with God, ontology, and the ultimate reality of the unseen. And yet, when I read a quote like Milosz's, I'm unsure, still, how exactly to describe what a "religious thinker" thinks about. When I was young and firm in my beliefs, holiness was available in the orange light that stretched across Texas plains, the way my body swayed with wind on long bike rides, and in the Bible. I think what attracted me to poetry initially was how it echoed with the prayers I offered, confidently when I was young, less so as I grew older. Still, I was and am most moved by poems which reach towards and draw their power from a distant source, a source which seems to come simultaneously from "out there," an unimaginable distance, and from the deepest aspects of the self. But the problem of prayer, its function, became more complicated as my

belief waned. The question of religious thinking, especially as it is expressed in poetry, is impossible, for me, to disentangle from language. How can the kind of holiness I experienced while I was young be contained and communicated in language? How can one still be a serious religious thinker in this age of scientific reasoning? Jorie Graham and Carl Phillips are poets who, though not explicitly religious, offer poems which rely on religious thinking. Specifically, their poems engage in prayers. Their prayers are simultaneously despairing and hopeful, vulnerable and powerful. Consequently, their poems testify to the efficacy of language and reassert the poet's job in making language meaningful, especially in those instances when we expect words to fail, when individual experience is least translatable into language: namely, the human encounter with the divine.

Miłosz rightly contends that the religious imagination cannot be the same in every age. Religious thought had to change after the acceptance of, for example, Copernican or Darwinian theories. There is a tension inherent in describing religious experience during our age of scientific skepticism, in which "all logic militates against its existence" (Hudgins 159). Indeed, it was jarring to transition from the kind of religious education I received in my hometown to the culture of academia in college. It was a culture not merely skeptical of religious thinking, but one skeptical of language itself, of its ability to mean. Luckily, for my own sanity at least, I found in poetry a world in which those two opposing skepticisms were productively assuaged. The pressure placed on language in poetry produces genuine thought, thought that is logically and often scientifically accurate. But poetry, in a kind of magic, also moves me from language into belief, into what Stevens calls a "supreme fiction."

The skepticism toward religious belief in academia and increasingly in the zeitgeist is warranted. In America, religion is often associated with political groups on the right who use

Christianity to justify homophobia or the denial of climate change. Miłosz, incidentally, predicted this development, contending that in a society that relies exclusively on scientific truth, religious groups become more "horizontal, captive…of social surroundings…and allied with political forces." Nonetheless, it is crucial to understand what is meant by "religious thinking" and particularly the adjective "holy" before it can be applied usefully to poetry.

In his address to the Oxford University Poetry Society, Robert Graves gives his concept of holiness, relying on the Arabic term "baraka," which literally means lightning, and gets extended to mean "the sudden divine rapture which overcomes either a prophet or group of religious devotees" (110). In literature, Graves contends baraka inheres in works which eschew market forces or purely scientific or intellectual ends. However, "the quality of life in poems" evaporates when the poet is "more concerned with selling than with making," a problem Graves regards as on the rise (113). The OED's definition of "holy" also points to what is "set apart." Similarly, in her introduction to *The Best American Poetry 1990*, Graham conceives of the poet as an "outsider of the marketplace." Crucially, it is this aspect of the poet which allows "the act of the poem" to be "identical with a spiritual questing" (xxvii).

An insistence on a poetry which is apart from the "influences of its own time," as this quote by Eliot suggests, is not a new demand (Religion and Literature, 104). In his *Preface*, Wordsworth finds that "great national events" and the "enreasing [sic] accumulation of men in cities" produces a "craving for extraordinary incident, which the rapid communication of intelligence hourly gratifies" (108). These events only increase the importance of the poet's work. Wordsworth hopes poets will further our perception of "beauty and dignity" by returning to "the invaluable works of elder writers" rather than what he saw being produced: "frantic novels and sickly stupid German Tragedies, and deluges of idle and extravagant stories in verse"

(108). This complaint is echoed by Eliot more than a hundred years later. “There was never a time,” Eliot contends, “when the reading public was so large, or so helplessly exposed to the influences of its own time…shut off from the past” (104). Stevens, too, in his “The Noble Rider and the Sound of Words,” finds “for more than ten years now, there has been an extraordinary pressure of news” which is “beyond our power to tranquilize” or “metaphorize” because such events are both distant from us and yet strangely in our “presence” (322-323). All these warnings point to what Steiner calls an age of journalism: “journalism throngs every rift and cranny of our consciousness…it articulates an epistemology and ethics of spurious temporality” (26). Like Eliot, Steiner decries the deluge of writing, particularly secondary scholarship, which accumulates in American literature. He blames partially the American university system, which places precedence on secondary sources at the expense of primary argument. Such an avalanche of writers and writing cuts us off from the past, elevating whatever is new at the expense of what is original. Here is Steiner again:

> Above all, meaningful art, music, literature are not new, as is, as must strive to be, the news brought by journalism. Originality is antithetical to novelty. The etymology of the word alerts us. It tells of ‘inception’ and of ‘instauration,’ of a return, in substance and in form, to beginnings. In exact relation to their originality, to their spiritual formal force of innovation, aesthetic inventions are ‘archaic’. They carry in them the pulse of the distant source. (27-28)

Steiner’s conception of originality reads similarly to Graves’ rendering of baraka. Both desire literature which connects us to the past, the “spiritual formal force” of creation, and both regard this force as necessarily separate from the kinds of thinking inherent in journalism. Art must

stand apart from the draw of journalism, the allure of novelty, if it is to be connected to the "enigma of creation"—that is, if it is to be holy.

Jorie Graham clarifies and extends the argument to the realm of language. For Graham, literary culture is in trouble because our allegiance to language is decaying: "we have been witnessing the erosion of language in our culture for some time now—language having become primarily a means for sales—of desires, emotions, ideas, identities" (A Poetry Reading 2). Graham again calls for a language which is set apart from market concerns. More crucially, Graham's speech advocates a faith, despite our culture's ready-made skepticism, in the ability of language to signify meaningfully. We must, in the end, put some faith in language to mean, as it's our "chief instrument for belief, for self-creation" (4). Graham, like Steiner, places much of the blame on academic thinking:

> The ultimate reality is a fiction…But I ask you…how do we create, or envision, that fiction—what language will hold still for us—when we have, through intricately and beautifully evolved theoretical techniques (what most of us in the academy call *thinking* now) obliterated any possible sense of a bedrock—fact, event, place, perception, matter itself vanishing under our increasingly relativistic gaze? (5)

The need for a "bedrock" of meaning is also how Miłosz begins his essay on religious imagination. This stable, communicable meaning in language is necessary, to Steiner and Graham, for responsibility. The hubris which allows a culture to shirk its responsibilities of "belief" in and "stewardship" of language encourages the "freedom" to ignore our responsibilities to each other, to ourselves, and to the planet (7). Poetry provides the alternative. Poets, for Graham, "constantly restore words to their meanings, to keep the living tissue of

responsibility alive" (10). Her vision of the poet echoes Emerson's conception of language as fossilized poetry, the poet being the original maker and maintainer of language. Poets do so not only by assuming an endurable relation "between word and world," but in taking responsibility for upholding, making meaningful, that relation (Steiner 87). A real presence must inhere in the poem. Heidegger intuits this too when describing the origin of art: "the work makes public something other than itself; it manifests something other" (19). A poem with religious ambitions succeeds not when it is merely a monument to the divine; it must carry with it, must by its very essence be, something divine.

Similarly, while the conception of holiness as something "set apart," distinct and immune from the market and other cultural forces, is valid, holiness also requires human participation. Baraka, Graves contends, must be sustained by "the touch of human fingers" (113). Here, Graves is inferring the secularization of the term baraka. The holy presence that emanates from, say, the ground around lightning strike becomes felt in a well-crafted ceramic bowl or the family dining table. Through a magical transference, made things take on a presence. In this way, holy things also require our participation. They require ritual. Prayers are rituals of devotion. They express faith or at least a desire for it. I wonder though, is religion important for the act of devotion or the God to whom that devotion is directed? I think both. The former being a testament of our abilities: to serve, to have faith, to let that faith orient our bodies and minds, to pray; while the latter testifies to our limitations, as we are subject to, in service to, something which is beyond us. Poetry has the fascinating ability to convey both language's profound abilities—to move us, to change our perception of the world and our place in it—and its limitations, its ruses, its shortcomings. Prayer and poetry then are linked as language acts that expose both our greatest strengths and deepest vulnerabilities. Unlike television or journalistic reporting, holy things must

be participated with rather than merely looked at; they must be "ingested" as Steiner puts it, rather than merely "digested" (24). Prayer poems, then, must move past mere reporting. Graham makes a similar argument for participation in poetry:

> In those poems that change me the speaker is most often the protagonist, not the narrator. The narrator knows he will survive the poem. The protagonist never knows if he will even make it to the end; the poem itself becomes the act of survival, the act of flailing and probing, an open desire for grace or change. ("Pleasure" 93)

Her reasoning is that a protagonist is susceptible to getting into "danger legitimately" (she is quoting Frost) which foregoes artificial expressions of emotion. Poems, for Graham, require vulnerability. It is this vulnerability which prompts prayer and gives prayer its power. Language becomes most meaningful, requires most our participation and revitalization, at the thicket of things we don't yet know. Here is "At the Cabaret *Now*" from *Region of Unlikeness*:

> The Americans are lonely. They don't know what happened.
> They're still up and there's all this time yet to kill.
> The musicians are still being paid so they keep on.
> The sax pants up the ladder, up.
> They want to be happy. They want to just let the notes
> come on, the mortal wounds, it's all been
> paid for so what the hell, each breath going up, up,
> them thinking of course Will he make it How far can he
> go? Skill, the prince of the kingdom, there at *his* table
> now.
> Is there some other master, also there, at a
> back table, a regular, one we can't make out
> but whom the headwaiter knows, the one who never
> applauds?
> So that it's not about the ending, you see, or where to go
> from here.
> It's about the breath and how it reaches the trumpeter's hands,
> how the hands come so close to touching the breath,
> and how the gold thing, gleaming, is there in between,
> the only avenue —the long way—captivity.

Like this thing now, slow, extending the metaphor to make a
place. Pledge allegiance. By which is meant
see, here, what a variety tonight, what a good crowd,
some of them saying yes, yes, some others no,
don't they sound good together?
And all around this, space, and seedspores,
and the green continuance.
And all along the musicians still getting paid so let them.
And all around that the motionlessness—
don't think about it though, because you can't.
And then the mother who stayed at home of course because her
body . . .
Farewell.
Farewell.
This is the story of a small strict obedience.
Human blood.
And how it rivered into all its bloods.
Small stream, really, in the midst of the other ones.
In it children laughing and laughing which is the sound of
ripening.
Which the musicians can't play—but that is another
tale.
Someone invited them in, humanity, and they came in.
They said they knew and then they knew.
They made this bank called justice and then this other one
called not.
They swam in the river although sometimes it was notes.
And some notes are true, even now, yes.
They knew each other, then winter came
which was a curtain, and then spring which was when they realized
it was a curtain.
Which leads us to this, the showstopper: summer, the Americans.
I wish I could tell you the story—so and so holding his glass up,
the table around him jittery,
and how then *she* came along gliding between the tables
whispering *it* exists—enough to drive them all mad of course —
whispering *sharp as salt,* whispering *straw on fire looking at you*—
The Americans whispering it cannot be, stay where you are.
And the one in the back no one knows starting up the applause,
alone,
a flat sound like flesh beating flesh but only *like* it.
Tell me,
why did we live, lord?
Blood in a wind,
why were we meant to live?

Surprisingly, given the previous quote by Graham, the speaker of this poem is at first a narrator. Graham's paratactic syntax conveys certainty so that the poem reads like prophecy. Like Stevens' "Auroras of Autumn," on which Graham relies, her poem is a kind of extended mythology. While Stevens' poem, like many of his weather poems, uses nature to consider the effects of the environment on human thinking, the setting of Graham's poem is indoors, a jazz club. The title suggests some of the criticism I've been pointing to: the Americans are concerned with the "*Now*." "They want to be happy," Graham contends, resonating with Stevens' supposition of "an unhappy people in a happy world." For Stevens, that predicament persists due to people's inability to tap into the imagination, to see the world as it could be through the imagination. As he argues in "The Noble Rider," only the imagination, particularly poetic imagination, can give life "whatever savor it possesses" (328). Without that imaginative flare, the "world is ugly and the people are sad," as he concludes in "Gubbinal." For Graham, the unhappiness stems from the desire to be happy, to remain in the immediacy of opulence. Even art in this world becomes mere entertainment, a game of skill, a "captivity."

Graham's poem begins like the party in the fifth section of "Auroras," only here instead of the Chatillon we are given an American scene, a cabaret. And, like the sixth section of "Auroras," Graham moves into a fabulous telescoping of time, in this case human history: the "story of a small strict obedience./ Human blood," the invention of language and our tropes for understanding our place in the world. All this leads up to "the showstopper: summer, the Americans." Summer, in Stevens' and Graham's poem, represents ease and warmth, the comfortable life. A life, according to Graham, which Americans desire most. But as with "Auroras," summer is always interrupted by its opposite: winter. Here Graham personifies it, a woman enters quoting Stevens' poem as she whispers "sharp as salt," which represents death.

Death, of course, is the one thing the Americans cannot accept. It is antithetical to the lifestyle they have chosen, the culture of the "now." And here, having allowed the enigma of death to enter the poem, the narrator must turn to prayer.

That "prayer poems" talk about a subject which is beyond logic, beyond human perception, creates a paradox. This paradox is succinctly expressed by Andrew Hudgins when he argues, "the ineffable exists only in our inability to express it" (159). That paradox contains the essence of the religious imagination's power in poetry. As Steiner argues, "religious thought and practice metaphorize, make narrative images of, the rendezvous of the human psyche with absolute otherness, with the strangeness of evil or the deeper strangeness of grace" (147). It is precisely the moment that the poet addresses the divine that the poet is at her most vulnerable. Indeed, one way of reading Graham's concluding prayer is despair. The speaker is throwing up her arms, done with the violence and loss of being human. But another way of reading Graham's poem, what makes its ambitions particularly religious, is its willingness to abandon itself to the possibility of rapture, salvation, meaning. As Carl Phillips reasons,

> our wanting to believe becomes a form of belief, is a form of faith, even as the interrogative mood is a form of faith: to ask a question, however irresolvable, implies somewhere an answer, the desire for an answer, and to desire a thing means the thing must exist—even if only in imagination—for us to desire. (141)

By addressing the divine, Graham opens the possibility of an answer, and the possibility of a world in which the answer exists. It opens the possibility for a more supreme fiction. The crucial moment at the end, the prayer, is also the exact moment the speaker goes from narrator to protagonist. Suddenly, to reiterate Graham, "the poem itself becomes the act of survival, the act

of flailing and probing, an open desire for grace or change." Such an act is necessarily contained in an encounter with absolute otherness, in this case with God.

Mary Ruefle gives two contrasting visions of prayer. There is the prayer given by "those who must raise their voice in order to be heard in their emergency and desperation," which is for Ruefle the kind of prayer "directed toward the gods, in the plural sense…caretakers of all the multiple things that can happen to us" (256-257). Graham's poem, certainly, would be a prayer in this category. Graham's is a voice in the social realm. It is spoken, until the end, and even then in a different way, on behalf of us. But there is also the prayer "of the lower register," when one lowers their voice, "as when in the middle of a concert we lean to the person next to us and cup our hand around our mouth." This kind of prayer is offered "to god, who has become a singular absence" (267). Ruefle details how a prayer can be both to the God conceived as "out there" and to the otherness of creation most intimate and internal to us. A prayer of this later kind takes on the deeply personal concerns of the poet, which can only be spoken to another through a whispered conversation.

Carl Phillips' poetry often resorts to the latter kind of prayer. The speaker wrestles with himself in an internal dialogue, as in "Surrounded as We Are, Unlit, Unshadowed" from *Silverchest*:

> Squalor of leaves. November. A lone
> hornets' nest. Paper wasps. Place where
> everything that happens is as who says it will,
> because. As in Why shouldn't we have
> come to this, why not, this far, this
> close to
> that below-zero where we almost
> forget ourselves, rise at last unastonished
> at the wreckery of it, what the wreckage
> somedays can seem all along to have
> been mostly, making you wonder what fear
> is for, what prayer is, if not the first word

> and not the last one either, if it changes
> nothing of what you are still, black stars,
> black
>   scars, crossing a field that you've
> crossed before, holding on, tight, though
> careful, for you must be careful, so easily
> torn is the veil diminishment comes
> down to as it lifts and falls, see it falling,
> now it lifts again, why do we love, at all?

I remember first encountering this poem when I was nineteen, as a college freshman. I was mesmerized by it, and promptly memorized it, even though I had no clue what the poem was trying to say. Looking back, I am not surprised why this particular Phillips poem captured my attention. It was a moment in my life when my religious imagination and my secular, academic thinking were raging against one another. In many ways, this poem is similar to Graham's, though more personally focused in scope. The setting is nonetheless mythical. It begins with visceral detail: "leaves," the cold of November, "a lone/ hornets' nest, paper wasps." But we are soon transported from the concrete detail into an abstraction, a "place where/ everything that happens is as who says it will." The transition from visceral images into abstract language mirrors the speaker's decent into a state of mind where nothing seems to have meaning. Some disaster: a death, a break-up, the chill barren November, has caused the speaker to "almost forget" himself. Just as Phillips helps explain Graham's poem, Graham elucidates Phillip's use of abstract language:

> Abstract diction, for instance, feels especially powerful to me because of its poignancy, the sense of desperation that informs it, the sense of a last avenue being resorted to, a last, bluntest tool. One feels that imagery has been relinquished, that naming—the world as amulet—is all we have left … It's the urgency (not what teachers often tell us is the laziness) of abstraction that moves

> me. The sense that it is very late, and we must think fast and hard. Of course the language of image can do this, but it still believes in the physical world, in time enough, in the storyline and its properties, beauties, while the motion of resorting to the colder stuff, the drier quicker tools, moves me often precisely because of its implied failures. (Some Notes On Silence 409)

By resorting to abstract language, Phillips constructs the world of a speaker on the brink of losing imaginative connection to the world and to himself. While the speaker is in some ways numb to and "unastonished" at the "wreckage" which he seems to have inevitably come to, the syntax enacts an ironic holding off of this conclusion. The third sentence of the poem begins with that realization yet sets off a kind of clockwork of clauses that lasts till the end of the poem. The effect of this teetering, hypotactic syntax is uncertainty and hesitation. The speaker is tentative to put his foot down firmly on a conclusion. This sense is compounded by the line breaks which occur in the middle of clauses with the second line often revising the meaning of the previous as in, "changes/ nothing." The speaker's hesitation is also evident in the repetition of qualifying words such as "almost" and "mostly." The moment of disaster forces the speaker into a spiral of questions: What is fear? What is prayer? Who am I? Do these words mean anything, anymore? Despite the cascading, uncertain syntax, the questions resolve into instruction, a kind of internal dialogue in which the speaker speaks both to himself and to us as readers. The speaker urges "you must be careful, so easily/ torn is the veil diminishment comes/ down to." The word "careful" clues us in to the irony of the speaker's instruction. Why wouldn't we want to tear the "veil" of "diminishment" if we could? No, there must be something else going on with the final stanza.

Indeed, like Graham's poem, Phillips' work is also illuminated by Stevens. Here is Stevens' "Gubbinal":

> That strange flower, the sun,
> Is just what you say.
> Have it your way.
>
> The world is ugly,
> And the people are sad.
>
> That tuft of jungle feathers,
> That animal eye,
> Is just what you say.
>
> That savage of fire,
> That seed,
> Have it your way.
>
> The world is ugly,
> And the people are sad.

Again, Stevens warns against the danger of neglecting the power of the imagination. If we see the sun as merely the sun, not imbued with holy qualities, the world becomes ugly and sad. By lamenting the current state of affairs as "just what you say" or "everything that happens is as who says it will," Phillips and Stevens place the onus for reconceiving the world on our ability to construct it in language. We must dare to imagine the world past the limitation of our current fictions. As Stevens argues in "The Blue Guitar," "poetry…must take the place/ Of empty heaven and its hymns." Our poetry must contend with the enigmas of being, must create new "supreme fictions."

Phillips' poem, arguably, isn't itself a supreme fiction, but a warning against losing faith in supreme fictions. We are constantly having our fictions challenged, arriving hopefully at a better way of conjuring the world. When our fictions are challenged most acutely, for example by encountering theologies radically different than

our own or by the death of one we in some way built our world around, then not only do we question our specific "supreme fiction," but our ability to create meaningful fictions at all. That is, the ability for our language to mean anything, ultimately. Phillips' final question, what I would call a prayer, is a defiance to that threat against our capacity for fiction. We do love. And that love persists even in those moments we almost forget ourselves.

Though I've tried to avoid discussing it, the other impetus for writing this essay is my mother's illness and approaching death. The death of a parent is, for anyone, a moment in which one rethinks their place in the world. But for me such an abstract generalization does nothing to contextualize or rationalize what it is like for me to lose *my* mother. I want to pray. Instead, I grieve. And I write. And at times in my writing I allow prayer. I must allow prayer. And I think sometimes that the prayers in my poems are just expressing that I love or desire to love, that somehow there must be the possibility to love, beyond the reach of death.

Yet it is the impossibility of such communication that gives the prayer its force. Are we not in some way always speaking to absences in poems—people, places, selves, gods? Beings that aren't there, that can't, finally, hear us? What remains is the vulnerability of facing such powers beyond our individual reach. The hope is that we can in some way entreat these powers. The conviction is: if not, we must try anyway. Indeed, one thing I find compelling about prayers is that they are often admissions of failure. As Graham argued, the move to abstraction is a recognition of failure: the failure of language to adequately describe something. However, we proceed anyway. We proceed to prayer like it is still a choice that we can make. In this way, I don't think of prayers the same way I was taught to think of them, as testaments of our faith.

Rather, they are expressions of our desire for faith. At our most vulnerable, when there is nothing left for us to do, we pray.

In his essay “Nature and Panic,” C.K. Williams suggests that art and the concept of God were invented simultaneously:

> I’ve wondered sometimes if humans invented gods not to tend to our moral or immoral selves but to have something appropriately sensitive and grand and wise enough to appreciate these miraculous modes of beauty that are so different in material and quality from anything else in the world. Might gods have first been devised not to assuage our fears and hear our complaints and entreaties but for there to be identities sufficiently sublime to understand what those first painters and sculptors, and surely, though the words and tunes have been lost, those poets and singers had wrought?

The question of whether or not our gods are real is irrelevant. Rather, Williams conveys how our art intuits God’s audience. It reaches beyond us. Indeed, I feel Graham’s and Phillips’ poems rely on an audience which is beyond human conception, whether to talk about human history and suffering or our ability to love and search for meaning in the face of death.

Now I have, perhaps, stretched my argument too far. To include Phillips’ poem in my list of contemporary prayer poems is to potentially make the case that all poems are prayers. “Poetry as Faith” is the notion which stubbornly concludes Christian Wiman’s recent memoir/essay on the topic, *He Held Radical Light*. But I don’t contend that all poems need include or share qualities with prayers to be successful. I can’t think of any poem by Ashbery, for example, whom I love, that relies on what I’ve espoused during these pages. However, I do think that the religious imagination is a powerful tool that is perhaps underutilized by our generation of poets.

Too often prayer is an empty rhetorical move in contemporary poetry, one which seeks to insert religious heft into a poem which doesn't need it or doesn't earn it. Here is the poem "Despite My Efforts Even My Prayers Have Turned Into Threats" by Kavah Akbar:

> Holy father I can't pretend
> I'm not afraid to see you again
> but I'll say that when the time
> comes I believe my courage
> will expand like a sponge
> cowboy in water. My earth-
> father was far braver than me —
> coming to America he knew
> no English save Rolling Stones
> lyrics and how to say thanks
> God. Will his goodness roll
> over to my tab and if yes, how
> soon? I'm sorry for neglecting
> your myriad signs, which seem
> obvious now as a hawk's head
> on an empty plate. I keep waking
> up at the bottom of swimming
> pools, the water reflecting
> whatever I miss most: whiskey-
> glass, pill bottles, my mother's
> oleander, which was sweet
> and evergreen but toxic in all
> its parts. I know it was silly
> to keep what I kept from you;
> you've always been so charmed
> by my weaknesses. I just figured
> you were becoming fed up with
> all your making, like a virtuoso
> trying not to smash apart her
> flute onstage. Plus, my sins
> were practically devotional:
> two peaches stolen from
> a bodega, which were so sweet
> I savored even the bits I flossed
> out my teeth. I know it's
> no excuse, but even thinking
> about them now I'm drooling.
> Consider the night I spent reading
> another man's lover the Dream
> Songs in bed — we made it to

> "a green living / drops
> limply" before we were
> tangled into each other, cat
> still sleeping at our feet. Allow
> me these treasures, Lord.
> Time will break what doesn't
> bend — even time. Even you.

What's missing is the vulnerability of true devotion. The address to the "Holy father" at the beginning becomes only a gimmick, something which is returned to in a clever aphorism at the end, but in a way that lacks the earnestness of conviction and thus vulnerability. The final sentence sounds like the speaker is talking to another person over whom he has gained the upper-hand rather than any kind of God. It closes off the poem from the possibility of ultimate meaning. That is the literal argument as well: time changes everything, even God. We are left with a tone of certainty for a sentence which simultaneously argues that all things are ultimately tenuous. The prayer conceit reads like an empty gesture. I don't sense the poem's reliance and potential vulnerability to a supernatural audience as I do in Graham's and Phillips' poem.

The end of William James' stirring speech "The Will to Believe," a quote from Fitz James Stephens, is also a useful endnote for my own thoughts:

> What do you think of yourself? What do you think of the world?. . . If we decide to leave the riddles unanswered, that is a choice; if we waver in our answer, that, too, is a choice: but whatever choice we make, we make it at our peril. If a man chooses to turn his back altogether on God and the future, no one can prevent him; no one can show beyond reasonable doubt that he is mistaken. If a man thinks otherwise and acts as he thinks, I do not see that any one can prove that *he* is mistaken. Each must act as he thinks best; and if he is wrong, so much the worse for him. We stand on a mountain pass in the midst of whirling snow and

> blinding mist, through which we get glimpses now and then of paths which may be deceptive. If we stand still we shall be frozen to death. If we take the wrong road we shall be dashed to pieces. We do not certainly know whether there is any right one. What must we do? 'Be strong and of a good courage.' Act for the best, hope for the best, and take what comes. . . . If death ends all, we cannot meet death better.

What poets of the religious imagination represent for me, ultimately, is courage. The kind of courage required to take the path of the unknown even if it is unknowable. Poets need not flinch from the role of Jacob wrestling the angel, nor shy away from attempts at laying the "bedrock" of meaning. The questions "what do you think of yourself? What do you think of the world?" may be questions every poet must in some way address. But for the poet of religious imagination, it is the unanswerability of these questions that catalyzes prayer. Theirs is the poetry of patience. And it is patience which this age of journalism constantly degrades. Through the religious imagination, these poets, while perhaps not explicitly entering transcendent experience, create a space in which we can imagine transcendence as a possibility, where grace may someday come.

As Akbar's poem suggests, the crucial element isn't the act of prayer itself but in how well it is performed. The efficacy of prayer, the attainment of baraka in a poem, inheres in how artfully it is considered. It is a rendering of our devotion. In this way, art and prayer are similar. The intricate formal ambition of Herbert's poems is one example. As Longfellow claims in "The Builders,"

> In the elder days of art,
> Builder's wrought with greater care
> Each minute and unseen part,
> For the Gods are everywhere.

Poets of religious imagination, unlike social or scientific thinkers, give “endurable form” to the “encounter with otherness where such otherness is . . . most inhuman” (Steiner 141). How else can a thing be holy?

Such encounters counteract the ready-made reality of our journalistic thinking. Ironically, the need for novelty which permeates the culture of the secondary circumvents encounters with otherness, diminishing genuine surprise. Poetry opens the possibility for surprise as it creates new combinations. For true surprise—the enigma of creation—comes not from baffling newness but from recognition, a “re-cognition” of the world. Suddenly, a horse’s ear becomes the skin of a girl’s wrist, becomes loneliness, desire, what breaks us open. The journey is difficult. “A spiritual questing,” as Graham writes. It is possible we will even have to “almost/ forget ourselves.” But we may find in our willingness to pray in our poems a religious imagination capable of countering the constantly ready-made experience inundating our current culture. We may discover in our poems a “spiritual height and depth” that “helps us to live our lives” (The Noble Rider 330-331).

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