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Jonathan Fedors

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Modern American Poetry and the Protestant Establishment

Abstract

Modern American Poetry and the Protestant Establishment argues that secularization in modern American poetry must be understood with reference to the Protestant establishment. Drawing on interdisciplinary work revising the secularization thesis, and addressed to modern poetry and poetics, Americanist, and modernist scholars, the dissertation demonstrates that the tipping point of secularization in modern American poetry was not reached at the dawn of modernism, as most critics have assumed, but rather in the decades following World War II. From the 1890s to the early 1960s, poets such as Robert Frost, Marianne Moore, James Weldon Johnson, and Harriet Monroe - founding editor of the important little magazine *Poetry: A Magazine of Verse* - identified the establishment with the national interest, while fashioning gestures of openness toward its traditional targets of discrimination, particularly Roman Catholics, African Americans, and Jews. These gestures acknowledged the establishment's weakened position in the face of internal division, war, racial strife, economic inequality, and mounting calls for cultural pluralism. The poetry extending these gestures drew equally on the authority of religious and political literary genres - such as the ode, sermon, psalm, and masque - and establishment institutions - such as the church, state, school, and press. Beginning with Monroe's imperialist Protestant American poem of ceremonies for the Chicago's World Fair in 1893, the dissertation concludes with Robert Frost's reading at the Inauguration of John F. Kennedy in 1961, a watershed moment in which the literary scion of the Puritan-Yankee line blessed the election of the country's first Roman Catholic President on the establishment's behalf.

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Jonathan Fedors

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English

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Supervisor of Dissertation

Bob Perelman, Professor of English

Graduate Group Chairperson

Melissa Sanchez, Associate Professor of English

Dissertation Committee

Charles Bernstein, Donald T. Regan Professor of English and Comparative Literature
Max Cavitch, Associate Professor of English

MODERN AMERICAN POETRY AND THE PROTESTANT ESTABLISHMENT

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ABSTRACT

MODERN AMERICAN POETRY AND THE PROTESTANT ESTABLISHMENT

Jonathan Fedors

Bob Perelman

Modern American Poetry and the Protestant Establishment argues that secularization in modern American poetry must be understood with reference to the Protestant establishment. Drawing on interdisciplinary work revising the secularization thesis, and addressed to modern poetry and poetics, Americanist, and modernist scholars, the dissertation demonstrates that the tipping point of secularization in modern American poetry was not reached at the dawn of modernism, as most critics have assumed, but rather in the decades following World War II. From the 1890s to the early 1960s, poets such as Robert Frost, Marianne Moore, James Weldon Johnson, and Harriet Monroe – founding editor of the important little magazine *Poetry: A Magazine of Verse* – identified the establishment with the national interest, while fashioning gestures of openness toward its traditional targets of discrimination, particularly Roman Catholics, African Americans, and Jews. These gestures acknowledged the establishment's weakened position in the face of internal division, war, racial strife, economic inequality, and mounting calls for cultural pluralism. The poetry extending these gestures drew equally on the authority of religious and political literary genres – such as the ode, sermon, psalm, and masque – and establishment institutions – such as the church, state, school, and press. Beginning with Monroe's imperialist Protestant American poem of ceremonies for the Chicago's World

Fair in 1893, the dissertation concludes with Robert Frost's reading at the Inauguration of ^v John F. Kennedy in 1961, a watershed moment in which the literary scion of the Puritan-Yankee line blessed the election of the country's first Roman Catholic President on the establishment's behalf.

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Introduction: Rethinking Secularization in American Poetry

I. Introduction

On October 21, 1892, what was held to be the four hundredth anniversary of Columbus's arrival in the Americas, the dedication ceremony of the Columbian Exposition, also known as the 1893 World's Fair, unfolded against the backdrop of the White City, Chicago's lavish new fairground, with an attendance of over one hundred thousand. The program included a performance of selected lines from *The Columbian Ode*, a dedicatory poem by Harriet Monroe, some recited by a "statuesque" actress playing Columbia, and the rest sung by a chorus of five thousand.¹ Although Monroe would go on to found *Poetry: A Magazine of Verse*, a pivotal American little magazine, two decades later, her stature at the time was negligible, making her involvement in the World's Fair all the more surprising. She had had one book of poems privately printed the year before, and her primary occupation was working as an arts journalist. Professional and familial connections enabled her to secure what, in a country that would have no national poet of any kind until 1937, was undoubtedly one of the highest profile poetry commissions ever. Her poem echoed the themes of a major public poem from several decades earlier, James Russell Lowell's *Commemoration Ode*, which solemnly declared that the recent victory of the Union forces in the Civil War would "certify to earth a new imperial race."² *The Columbian Ode* picked up where Lowell left off,

¹ Harriet Monroe, *A Poet's Life: Seventy Years in a Changing World* (New York: AMS Press, 1938), 129.

² James Russell Lowell, "Ode Recited at the Harvard Commemoration," *Poems of James Russell Lowell* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1917), 482-91.

rehearsing the prehistory of America's imperial project and proclaiming the imminent endpoint of its progress. Where Lowell interpreted the war as God's test of America's strength, Monroe interpreted the coming peace as the completion of divine revelation: "Love shall make the world a holy place / Where Knowledge dares unveil God's very face."³ Love, for Monroe, meant the shared fruits of trade and technological innovation, but also the spread of democracy. She inherited this religious understanding of America's role in the world from a prominent late nineteenth-century variant of Protestant millenarianism, which gathered evidence from the events of secular history to bolster the eschatological belief that a millennium of unprecedented peace would precede the Second Coming.⁴ According to this understanding, the startling growth in American economic, political, and military strength after the Civil War purportedly demonstrated not just national maturation and God's favor, but also the beginning of the end times, when social ills such as poverty, disease, war, and tyranny would be vanquished forever. In keeping with this sense of momentousness, Monroe remembered much later one of the dedication ceremony's speakers speaking of "the millennial era then on the way."⁵ She also qualified the *Ode* as a product of its moment, writing reminiscently that "the skeptic need only look through the files of contemporary newspapers to be convinced that most

³ Harriet Monroe, *The Columbian Ode* (Chicago: W. Irving Way & Company, 1893), 22.

⁴ Richard Hughes Seager, *The World's Parliament of Religions: The East/West Encounter, Chicago, 1893* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1995).

⁵ Monroe, *Poet's Life*, 130.

of his countrymen were then afire with hope for a millennium of grand achievement and brotherly love among the nations.”⁶

As was clear to many international delegates at the Exposition, the chauvinism underwriting this American hope was reinforced, according to William Hutchison, by “constant reminders that the West, and the host nation in particular, represented the evolutionary endpoint toward which all human societies were moving,”⁷ particularly “the eventual triumph...of Christianity and the Christian West.”⁸ Monroe’s *Ode* massages this paradox by allegorizing force as consent, as in her description of Democracy, Columbia’s mobile counterpart, distributing his bounty: “Through the armed nations lies his path of peace, / The open book of knowledge in his hand. / Food to the starving, to the oppressed release, / And love to all he bears from land to land.”⁹ Far from envisioning a secular utopia, the woman who would become modern American poetry’s most consequential editor embraced the idea that the fruits of Protestant America were God’s gift to the world.

This idea reflected a consensus within the broader power structure in America that historians of the last half-century have referred to as “the Protestant establishment.”¹⁰ The establishment is a heuristic construct rather than the name of any entity clearly delineated

⁶ Monroe, *Chosen Poems: A Selection from My Books of Verse* (New York: Macmillan, 1935), vii.

⁷ William R. Hutchison, *Religious Pluralism in America: The Contentious History of a Founding Ideal* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2003), 172.

⁸ Hutchison, *Religious Pluralism in America*, 180.

⁹ Monroe, *The Columbian Ode*, 16.

¹⁰ Grant Wacker, in “A Plural World: The Protestant Awakening to World Religions,” *Between the Times: The Travail of the Protestant Establishment in America, 1900-1960*, Ed. William R. Hutchison (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 253-77.

in the historical record. This construct has proved useful for explaining the effects of Protestant domination on American culture and society throughout its history, particularly the exertion of Protestant influence through ostensibly secular institutions. The establishment consisted of “congeries of institutions” – the mainline churches, the offices of government, law, education, and business interests – and of a “personal network” that facilitated coordination between the leading figures of these institutions.¹¹

Monroe’s attainment of the *Ode* commission reflects this dual structure. First, her connections gave her privileged access to the Ceremonies Committee. Once before the Committee, her argument that the art of poetry needed the Exposition’s institutional backing won her the commission.¹² The lines of the poem performed at the dedication ceremony were those “emphasizing the role of America as the custodian of ‘the Spirit of Freedom’ and ‘the purpose of God.’”¹³ Monroe also plied the logic of institutional promotion when she courted guarantors for *Poetry*, but at that point, in 1911 and 1912,

¹¹ William R. Hutchison, Introduction, *Between the Times*, 6. For an influential early attempt to define the term, see Sydney Ahlstrom, *A Religious History of the American People* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1972), Chapter 50. On the legal dimensions of the establishment, see David Sehat, *The Myth of American Religious Freedom* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012). On its political dimensions, see Kevin D. Schultz, *Tri-Faith America: How Catholics and Jews Held Postwar America to its Protestant Promise* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), and Jonathan P. Herzog, *The Spiritual-Industrial Complex: America’s Religious Battle with Communism in the Early Cold War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011). On education, see Sehat, George M. Marsden, *The Soul of the American University: From Protestant Establishment to Established Nonbelief* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), and Tracy Fessenden, *Culture and Redemption: Religion, the Secular, and American Literature* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2007), Chapters 1 and 3. On business, see T.J. Jackson Lears, *No Place of Grace: Antimodernism and the Transformation of American Culture, 1880-1920* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1981), Chapter 1, and R. Laurence Moore, *Selling God: American Religion in the Marketplace of Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994); on the publishing industry in particular, see Matthew Hedstrom, *The Rise of Liberal Religion: Book Culture and American Spirituality* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013). These works vary in their use of the phrase “Protestant establishment,” but all provide evidence for its existence and impact.

¹² Monroe, *Poet’s Life*, 116-7.

¹³ Ann Massa, “‘The Columbian Ode’ and ‘Poetry, A Magazine of Verse’: Harriet Monroe’s Entrepreneurial Triumphs,” *Journal of American Studies* 20:1 (Apr 1986): 58.

she pleaded that American poetry could only enter modernity in good stead with an institution of its own, and that her magazine would be it.¹⁴ Its weakened position, she argued, belied its potential to tell the tale of the tribe, and her first *Poetry* editorial went so far as to insist that poetry and power were mutually dependent: “Poetry alone, of all the fine arts, has been left to shift for herself in a world unaware of its immediate and desperate need of her, a world whose great deeds, whose triumphs over matter, over the wilderness, over racial enmities and distances, require her ever-living voice to give it glory and glamour.”¹⁵

Whether or not the Protestant establishment required it, the institution Monroe created for modern American poetry acted as one of its organs. *Poetry* purported to identify poet-prophets of West and East in the mold of Walt Whitman as the most consequential exponents of the Exposition’s millennial optimism, in a form relatively unchanged two decades on. It also maintained standards of taste and decorum that, while more liberal than those applied under the Comstock Laws banning obscenity in the mail, were nevertheless far from being benignly tolerant. For instance, in a list of dead gods in a Richard Aldington poem, Monroe substituted out “Christ.”¹⁶ World War I brought the magazine’s brief period of intense optimism to a close, the internal division of the West throwing the American Orientalist dream of the brotherhood of nations into question.¹⁷

¹⁴ Monroe, *Poet’s Life*, 240-8.

¹⁵ Monroe, “The Motive of the Magazine,” *Poetry: A Magazine of Verse* 1:1 (October 1912): 26.

¹⁶ Ellen Williams, *Harriet Monroe and the Poetry Renaissance: The First Ten Years of Poetry, 1912-22* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1977), 94.

The discord and disillusionment the war engendered were two challenges among many to the authority of the Protestant establishment in the early twentieth century. These challenges did not, however, amount to the deathblow routinely invoked in literary histories of modern literature under the heading of secularization. Institutions allied with the establishment adapted to meet these challenges in ways that allowed it to persist into the late twentieth century, when its decline brought into relief the increasing power of the shadow establishment created by the evangelical and fundamentalist Protestant right, which built up its own political, educational, and media networks patterned after its predecessor's example. By the 1970s, poets' alliance with the establishment had all but ended, because their identification with any of the powers that be as Monroe imagined it had become unthinkable, and the power once vested in the establishment had shifted elsewhere.¹⁸

I argue in this dissertation that the tipping point of secularization in modern American poetry was not reached at the dawn of modernism, around the time Monroe founded *Poetry*, but after World War II, and that the process of secularization must be understood with reference to the decline of the Protestant establishment. Scholars have routinely assumed that modern American poetry reflects the accelerating progress of secularization in North America and Europe at the beginning of the twentieth century. The theories that collectively comprise the secularization thesis which they assume focus

¹⁷ For an account of American Orientalism in modern American Poetry, see Josephine Nock-Hee Park, *Apparitions of Asia: Modernist Form and Asian American Poetics*, New York: Oxford University Press, 2008.

¹⁸ This is not to say that the institutions of American poetry did not project a center of authority and value, but that this center did not involve connections to any religious establishment.

on such historical developments as the popularization of post-religious worldviews, the weakening of religious authority in the public sphere, and the transference of religious energies to non-religious entities and actors. However, over the last two decades, scholarship in religious studies, history, anthropology, and philosophy arguing for the limitations and historical misjudgments of these theories has prompted the reassessment of assumptions about secularization in multiple fields of literary study. The weakening of the Protestant establishment evident in the poetry I read confirms several phenomena associated with the secularization thesis, while contesting their scope, timeframe, and teleology. Instead of depicting secularization as religion's disappearance, whether from the world or from a meaningful role in the public sphere, my reading of this poetry complements the new scholarship in depicting it as a set of contingent historical developments by which the shifting power relations among religious and secular actors in American society resulted in institutional sanction for religious pluralism by the 1960s. Subsequently, my dissertation examines secularization in modern American poetry in terms of two phenomena that were essential to the weakening of religious authority in the American public sphere – the weakening of *de facto* state Protestantism and a decline in public religious expression – while serving as a corrective to the way these phenomena have been approached by other scholars of American poetry. This project is also consequential for scholars of modern American poetry generally, because, in illuminating the impact of the Protestant establishment, it corrects distorted impressions about the representative quality of that poetry's radically secular voices, distinguishing them from those more closely engaged artistically with the continued unfolding of America's

historical domination by Protestant Christianity. Only seeing the religious culture that poetry of the past confronted in the proper light can helpfully illuminate the secular culture confronted by poetry of the present.

II. Interventions

The dissertation traces the evolution of modern American poetry's alliance with the establishment across the careers of four modern American poets – Monroe, James Weldon Johnson, Marianne Moore, and Robert Frost.¹⁹ I argue that these poets identified the establishment with the national interest while fashioning gestures of openness toward its others – particularly Roman Catholics, African Americans, and Jews. They extended these gestures through the pluralistic use of religious forms, including the ode, sermon, psalm, and masque, respectively. They were themselves inside outsiders – that is, they were members of groups that were part of the establishment in theory, but which, in actuality, were outsiders to varying degrees – women, African Americans, and non-practicing, cultural Protestants.²⁰ These groups had more tenuous access to the networks of advancement controlled by the establishment. As such, they had motive and opportunity to expand access; they would be more likely to receive the benefits of this

¹⁹ I do not rule out the possibility that other poets had important alliances with the establishment, only that these poets, each of established critical interest, engaged with the establishment on prominent grounds of its decline.

²⁰ On women, see Virginia Lieson Brereton, “United and Slighted: Women as Subordinated Insiders,” in *Between the Times*, 143-67; on African Americans, see David W. Wills, “An Enduring Distance: Black Americans and the Establishment,” in *Between the Times*, 168-92. By cultural Protestants I mean, in the case of Monroe and Frost, those were considered themselves Protestant by dint of birth and environment but who had no formal or substantive affiliation with Protestant churches.

expansion; and they could be trusted as ambassadors for those fully outside the establishment's auspices. However, this status did not necessarily render them keenly sensitive to the politics of the establishment. The air of respectability and constructive involvement in civic affairs that each cultivated also required them to become sensitive to the unspoken norms of public discourse. The implicitly Protestant resonance of the millennial discourse in Monroe's recollection of the Exposition era is one such example of an unspoken norm. Moreover, beyond these poets' relations to the establishment and desire for civic engagement, each claimed for poetry special powers to affect the national and even global religious landscape. By poetry, each meant something like creative literature in general, which included, as most non-fundamentalist Protestants believed, scripture itself. Monroe awaited the poet-prophet of "the new democracy" who would "sing the old era away and usher in the new" and "speak for a world more vast than man has ever known."²¹ Johnson opined that "the production of poets by a race...is vital not only as an indication of the development of the race but...as to the place and recognition which that race is given by the world at large," and named Buddha, Confucius, Christ, and Mohammed among the greatest world poets.²² Moore, the lone churchgoer of the four, offered a strikingly Manichean observation: "One could almost say that each striking literary work is some phase of the desire to accept or reject religion."²³ And Frost boasted, "The person who gets close enough to poetry, he is going to know more about

²¹ Monroe, "The Audience – II," *Poetry: A Magazine of Verse* 5:1 (October 1914): 31-2.

²² James Weldon Johnson, "A Real Poet," *The Writings of James Weldon Johnson* (New York: Library of America, 2004), 646.

²³ Marianne Moore, "Religion and the Intellectuals," *The Complete Prose of Marianne Moore*, Ed. Patricia C. Willis (New York: Viking 1987), 677-8.

the word *belief* than anyone else knows, even in religion nowadays.”²⁴ Between Monroe’s appearance at the Columbian Exposition and Frost’s appearance at the Inauguration of John F. Kennedy in 1961, the writing of these four poets clearly registered the establishment’s survival as well as the changing concessions of its leading agents and institutions. Frost, the living poet then most identified with America’s Protestant heritage, blessed the election of the first Roman Catholic president, calling it, in the text of the Inaugural program, “a turning point in the history of our country, even perhaps in the history of Christendom.”²⁵

This dissertation’s intervention extends beyond the field of modern poetry and poetics into Americanist and modernist studies, furthering the insights of recent work on religion, secularization, and the sociology of literature. Each of these fields is in the midst of a significant transition involving reconsideration of the secularization thesis. None of this work is religiously committed, whether in the dogmatic or correlative mode, mine included.²⁶ In modern poetry and poetics scholarship, the transition has taken the form of a renewed reconsideration of religion, in which I see a divide between identitarian and theological approaches. The challenge posed by this divide has played out most consequentially in the reception of T.S. Eliot, whose example has cast a pall over the

²⁴ Robert Frost, “Education By Poetry,” *The Collected Prose of Robert Frost*, Ed. Mark Richardson (Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 2007), 109.

²⁵ Frost, “A New England Tribute,” *Collected Prose*, 222.

²⁶ Giles Gunn distinguishes types of Christian responses to modern literature in the first three quarters of the twentieth century. Dogmatic criticism, as of the kind prescribed in Eliot’s “Religion and Literature” (1935), measures literature against orthodox religious standards; correlative criticism draws Christian meanings out of texts that could just as well lack all Christian reference. See Giles Gunn, *The Interpretation of Otherness: Literature, Religion, and the American Imagination* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1979), Chapter 1, and T.S. Eliot, “Religion and Literature,” in *Selected Prose of T.S. Eliot*, Ed. Frank Kermode (New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 1975), 97-106.

study of modern poets with connections to institutional Christianity. Eliot's racism, and his joy in baiting antagonists on the left, has made it all too easy for critics to conflate his posture and prejudices with the place of Christianity in the Anglo-American landscape *per se*. For instance, Norman Finkelstein's recent work, which challenges the applicability of the secularization thesis to contemporary American poetry, creates a genealogy that opposes an Emersonian tradition to an Eliotic one, and "the sacred" to "religion."²⁷ While the Emersonian tradition as Finkelstein describes it conceives of poetry as the wellspring of religion, the Eliotic tradition puts poetry in the service of preserving religious orthodoxy. Poets in the Emersonian tradition, Finkelstein argues, are drawn to the sacred, an object not merely distinct from religion but also closely allied to poetic discourse. Through poetry, Emersonian poets seek a common point beyond religious difference that nevertheless assumes religiously plural society as a default condition. All the poets Finkelstein writes about – Duncan, Spicer, Howe, and others – come out of Emerson. Thus, even as he shows the poverty of secularization as a master narrative, Finkelstein, by taking Eliot as a metonym for institutional Christianity in modern American poetry, conflates religion and orthodoxy. This eschews the historicist analysis necessary to replace the standard narrative of secularization with one that makes the positioning of the poetry he writes about fully intelligible.²⁸ In exchanging religion for the sacred, he forecloses the range of religious positions available to poets apart from orthodoxy – the types of positions relative to the establishment that I explore – and

²⁷ Norman Finkelstein, *On Mount Vision: Forms of the Sacred in Contemporary American Poetry* (Iowa City, IA: University of Iowa Press, 2010).

²⁸ I gesture toward this point at the end of my review of *On Mount Vision*. See Jonathan Fedors, "Exiting the Sacred Wood," Rev. of Finkelstein, *On Mount Vision, Jacket2* (April 2011).

hedges about orthodoxy's different meanings. The difference between the connotations orthodoxy carries and its relevance to religious identity can be indicated succinctly by pointing out that, for all his talk of orthodoxy, Eliot's Anglicanism was highly unorthodox and idiosyncratic.²⁹

Eliot's adverse effect on the prospects for non-identitarian scholarship about Christianity in modern American poetry cannot be met merely by insisting on greater sensitivity to the nuances of religious identity. No amount of religious nuance could explain away Eliot's anti-Semitism, which was as racial as it was theological. He came to encourage dialogue between devout Christians and Jews; in fact, the infamous passage in his suppressed lectures often quoted to indicate his anti-Semitism, *After Strange Gods*, implies admiration for practicing Jews in stating that "free-thinking Jews" were "undesirable" "for reasons of race and religion."³⁰ According to Eliot, then, Jews, in rejecting religious observance, supposedly advanced the general cause of secularism, and in intermingling and -marrying, threatened to dilute and destabilize the cultures with which they came into contact. This was not a novel prejudice, and Eliot did not have to elaborate on the phrase to mark where he stood. Rachel Blau DuPlessis juxtaposes the lectures, as representative of the mature, "Christianized" Eliot's programmatic social criticism, with the more ambivalent fascination with "mongrelization" evident in his

²⁹ Barry Spurr has shown that Eliot's Anglicanism could hardly be described as orthodox, once the place of Anglo-Catholicism within the Church of England, and Eliot's relation to the majority of Anglo-Catholics, are taken into account. See Spurr, *'Anglo-Catholic in Religion': T.S. Eliot and Christianity* (Cambridge, UK: Lutterworth Press, 2010). This does not address the impact of Eliot's perceived orthodoxy, which functioned as a galvanizing force, authorizing the agenda of figures in the American poetry establishment, most notably, among Eliot's supporters, the American new critics.

³⁰ T.S. Eliot, *After Strange Gods: A Primer of Modern Heresy* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1933), 20.

earlier poetry, particularly “Burbank with a Baedeker; Bleistein with a Cigar” and *Sweeney Agonistes*.³¹ Placing such fascination in the context of the emergent American subjectivity of the New Jew, she argues that Eliot envied the “entitlement” claimed by this figure and its fellows – the New Woman, the New Negro – as well as “the passions and energies of their presence.”³² This passion and energy contrasted with the enervation of European Christian culture depicted throughout his early poetry, from the shallow, feminized cultural appreciation of Michelangelo that provides “The Love Song of Alfred J. Prufrock” with its pathetic near-refrain to the death-in-life of the declining industrial metropolis in *The Waste Land*.

However, as DuPlessis observes, “ideas about ‘race’ and national character” frequently impinge on “debates...specific to religious culture,” or, in theoretical terms, religious identity is intersectional but also distinctive.³³ Accordingly, the figure of the Christian requires the same historical contextualization and internal differentiation as the figure of the New Jew, and it could be said that my project concerns the formation of the New Protestant in modern American poetry, though the oppressive authority of the Protestant establishment militates against placing these groups on such equal footing. While using Eliot to frame the charged transformation of the interaction between Jews and entrenched Christian interests in America valuably recasts poets like Mina Loy and

³¹ Rachel Blau DuPlessis, *Genders, Races and Religious Cultures in Modern American Poetry, 1908-34* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2001), Chapter 6. See also Stephen Fredman, *A Menorah For Athena: Charles Reznikoff and the Jewish Dilemmas of Objectivist Poetry* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001), which discusses Jewish American modernist poetry more along the lines that I would like to follow with respect to modern Protestant American poetry, as a formation that contributed to development of national cultural pluralism according to its distinct opportunities and logic.

³² DuPlessis, *Genders, Races and Religious Cultures*, 154.

³³ *Ibid.*, 157.

Louis Zukofsky as effective foils, it also mischaracterizes Eliot as a representative Christian, whether English or American, and minimizes the importance of specifically Protestant debates to these questions. As in the case of Finkelstein's Eliotic tradition, Eliot becomes a straw – or hollow – man. Much more representative is the tendency DuPlessis identifies in Marianne Moore, one of whose poems combating anti-Semitism “half-participates in the prejudice it also deplors.”³⁴ Moore's patronizing sympathy reflects the way in which the Protestant establishment acknowledged the need for the extension of rights and recognitions to Jews in modern America but, trying to maintain its hold on power, took a minimalist approach – by creating university quotas, for example. DuPlessis clearly wants to depict the emergence of the New Jew as the claiming of an entitlement rather than as the passive reception of Christian beneficence. However, the establishment supported interreligious organizations that fought the nativism DuPlessis places at the center of anxieties about Jewish assimilation.³⁵ Moreover, relations with Roman Catholics and African Americans, whose precincts of American Christian culture are beyond the scope of DuPlessis's study, demanded comparable attention from the establishment. Lastly, the religious and racial ideal that DuPlessis finds of value in Loy, the utopian hybridity of mongrelization, did not supplant Christian dominance as the new norm in the twentieth century. What did supplant it was a particular brand of Judeo-Christian pluralism, shaped by agents and institutions of the establishment through efforts to which the poetry I read in this dissertation contributed. The purpose of examining the creation of this pluralistic norm from the perspective of establishmentarian poetry is not

³⁴ DuPlessis, *Genders, Races, and Religious Cultures*, 158.

³⁵ Schultz, *Tri-Faith America*, Chapter 1.

to affirm this perspective's priority after the fact, but to establish that it had its own pattern of development and internal dynamics, which modern poetry and poetics scholarship has largely overlooked, and which are crucial to understanding the social landscape of modern American poetry. If the history of American religion is one of "dominance and diversity,"³⁶ in the subtitle of one recent collection of scholarly essays on American Christianity, and the iterations of the Protestant establishment were the dominant force for much of that history, then the history of modern American poetry should reflect the co-evolution of both halves of this description.

Without downplaying the importance of Eliot as an enabling and constraining influence on twentieth-century poetry, then, the de-centering of Eliot from discussions of poetry and Christianity will have a beneficial effect. As for theological approaches to modern American poetry, the chief alternative to identitarian ones, the post-Christian shadow of Emersonian thought looms large, though scholarship from this perspective remains scant.³⁷ The principal contribution to this literature in the last two decades has

³⁶ Catherine A. Brekus and W. Clark Gilpin, *American Christianities: A History of Dominance and Diversity* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2011).

³⁷ The critical literature around certain individual poets is the exception: on Eliot, see Spurr, 'Anglo-Catholic in Religion.' On Marianne Moore, see Andrew J. Kappel, "Notes on the Presbyterian Poetry of Marianne Moore," *Marianne Moore: Woman and Poet*, Ed. Patricia C. Willis (Orono, ME: National Poetry Foundation, 1990), 37-51; Luke Carson, "Republicanism and Leisure in Marianne Moore's Depression," *MLQ: Modern Language Quarterly* 63 (Nov 2002): 315-42; Cristanne Miller, "Marianne Moore and a Poetry of Hebrew (Protestant) Prophecy," *Sources: Revue d'Études Anglophones* 12 (2002): 29-47; Jennifer Leader, "'Certain Axioms Rivaling Scriptures': Marianne Moore, Reinhold Niebuhr, and the Ethics of Engagement," *Twentieth Century Literature* 51 (2005): 316-40; and Benjamin Johnson, "The Poetics of the Fall in Marianne Moore's 'The Jerboa,'" *Arizona Quarterly* 63 (Autumn 2007): 61-89. On Robert Frost, see Robert Faggen, *Robert Frost and the Challenge of Darwin* (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 2001); Robert Pack, *Belief and Uncertainty in the Poetry of Robert Frost* (Lebanon, NH: University Press of New England, 2003); and Peter Stanlis, *Robert Frost: The Poet as Philosopher* (Wilmington, DE: ISI Books, 2007). On Mina Loy, see Keith Tuma, "Mina Loy's 'Anglo-Mongrels and the Rose,'" *Fishing By Obstinate Isles: Modern and Postmodern British Poetry and American Readers* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1998), 143-64; and Lara Vetter, *Modernist Writings and*

been Elisa New's construction of an expansive lineage counter to the traditional Emersonian one reconceived by Finkelstein, exclusive of Eliot, in which she places Whitman, Dickinson, Frost, Crane, and Lowell. New identifies Calvinist topoi such as orthodoxy and regeneration in these poets, while neglecting their different religious options or outright lack of religious affiliation. She avails herself of neo-orthodoxy and other modernizing currents in Protestant theology that positioned themselves against the post-Calvinist Romantic-Unitarian-Transcendentalist matrix represented by Emerson. However, she does this in a way that moves freely across historical contexts, without the sense of the immediate causes for these currents, in favor of an essential national Augustinianism previously observed by Albert Gelpi and Andrew Delbanco.³⁸ That is, by New's lights, the study of theology in American poetry becomes the study of Christian theology's poetic imitations and transformations, because any study of it that takes her list of poets into account will observe significant Protestant commonalities. The limits of her work reconfirm the need for an identitarian approach that critiques dominant traditions in the name of exposing suppressed diversity. The conflicts of religious identity politics shift with sequential stages of theological and institutional history and the

Religio-Scientific Discourse: H.D., Loy, and Toomer (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010). On W.H. Auden, see Arthur Kirsch, *W.H. Auden and Christianity* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2005). On Frank O'Hara, see Paul Giles, *American Catholic Arts and Fictions: Culture, Ideology, Aesthetics* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1992). One exception to this pronounced tendency is Gail McDonald's suggestive article reading poets as diverse in their commitments as Pound, Eliot, and H.D. as indirect bearers of the Social Gospel; see McDonald, "A Homemade Heaven: Modernist Poetry and the Social Gospel," *There Before Us: Religion, Culture, and Literature from Emerson to Wendell Berry* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2007), 194-215. McDonald's characterization of these poets' cultural Protestantism is persuasive, but her treatment of the Social Gospel in relation to their poetry and its historical moment is insufficiently textured.

³⁸ Elisa New, *The Regenerate Lyric: Theology and Innovation in American Poetry* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1993). New gives Roy Harvey Pearce and Hyatt Waggoner as the most influential expositors of the specifically religious interpretation of Emerson's influence on modern American poetry in the preceding generation.

relations of those shifts and stages to changing cultural and social conditions. For this reason, my take on a period that covers much of the same historical terrain as New's takes on a substantially different shape. Poets might have imbibed theology from their reading and familiarity with contemporary Christian groups, but they were equally if not more likely touched by the Protestant establishment in their capacities as students, voters, consumers, and so on. The long timeline of New's project justifies my mention of work in Victorian Studies contesting the application of the secularization thesis to that period. Charles LaPorte and Kirstie Blair lift the veil on the Victorian Crisis of Faith, painting a much more complex picture of several phenomena: the persistence of popular religious belief; the fervent belief in the religiosity of poetry; and the relation of poetic to traditional religious belief and ritual.³⁹

While I take the revised model of secularization from work in other disciplines, the methods that allow me to discern that model in modern American poetry come from recent work in Americanist and modernist studies. Americanist scholarship, particularly early American studies, has seen a renaissance of interest in religion, especially of the kind whose subject is, in the words of Tracy Fessenden, "the exacting religious, national, racial, and other specifications that have passed themselves off as a blandly accommodating Christianity."⁴⁰ Fessenden more than any other critic has explored the consequences of reading the Protestant establishment behind the exclusionary construction and deployment involved in depictions of "Christianity," "religion," and

³⁹ Charles LaPorte, *Victorian Poets and the Changing Bible* (Charlottesville, VA: University of Virginia Press, 2011); Kirstie Blair, *Form and Faith in Victorian Poetry and Religion* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012).

⁴⁰ Fessenden, *Culture and Redemption*, 12.

“secularism” in American literature. As her work on the early twentieth century focuses on fiction, and the “Catholic secularism” of F. Scott Fitzgerald – what she sees as the struggle in his fiction to represent Catholic characters who are not first and foremost legible as Catholics – my project represents one of the “differently descended, differently constituted secularisms” she identifies as alternatives to this bland accommodation.⁴¹

This secularism provides a bridge between the turn of the twentieth century and the Protestant secularism she has descried in the orientation of the Bush Administration toward the Islamic world after 9/11.⁴² Other new Americanist work on religion has focused on the relation between religion and secularism in antebellum, early Cold War, and post-1960 America across boundaries of religious affiliation and forms of cultural production, leaving the pivotal period demarcated by my dissertation unexamined.⁴³ Following Fessenden, and behind her the work of theorists of comparative religion like Talal Asad and Jonathan Z. Smith, who diagnose the persistence of Protestant biases about religion in academic scholarship, I prefer a narrower scope of religious identity.⁴⁴ I

⁴¹ The terminological distinction between “secularism” and “secularization” is under dispute; see Vincent Pecora, “Rethinking secularism: Secularism, secularization, and why the difference matters,” *The Immanent Frame* (18 Jun 2010), <<http://blogs.ssrc.org/tif/2010/06/18/why-the-difference-matters/>>. For my purposes, I use “secularism” to refer to the idea or actuality of a stable norm or condition, and “secularization” to refer to the means of progressing toward such a norm or condition.

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ See, respectively, John Lardas Modern, *Secularism in Antebellum America* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2011), Jason W. Stevens, *God-Fearing and Free: A Spiritual History of America's Cold War* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2011), and Amy Hungerford, *Postmodern Belief: American Literature and Religion Since 1960* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2010). For work focusing on Protestant imperialism and anti-Catholicism in nineteenth century American literature along the lines of Fessenden's work, see Albert H. Tricomi, *Missionary Positions: Evangelicalism and Empire in American Fiction* (Gainesville, FL: University of Florida Press, 2011), and Elizabeth Fenton, *Religious Liberties: Anti-Catholicism and Liberal Democracy in Nineteenth-Century U.S. Fiction and Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011).

focus on poetry because it was capable of gestures relating to the establishment that other forms of literary and cultural production were not, in the lingering tradition of its generic prestige and ceremonial function and the overlap between that ceremoniousness with the forms and functions of religious ritual. This sense of poetry's prestige and association with religion diffusely reflected the influence of the Victorian poet-critic Matthew Arnold, who famously claimed that "most of what now passes with us for religion and philosophy will be replaced by poetry."⁴⁵

In modernist studies, the tremendously fertile work in the sociology of literature over the last two decades – on literary institutions, print and periodical culture, and publicity and marketing – offers valuable tracks along which to trace the operations of establishment influence.⁴⁶ Such scholars shrink the Great Divide that modernists constructed to separate themselves from mass culture. This manifests in my project as

⁴⁴ For a critical genealogy of the biases in academic conceptions of religion, see Talal Asad, *Genealogies of Religion: Discipline and Reasons of Power in Christianity and Islam* (Baltimore, MD: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993), Chapter 1, and Jonathan Z. Smith, "Religion Religions Religious," *Relating Religion: Essays in the Study of Religion* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2004), 179-196. For a stinging critique of one recent work in modernist studies exhibiting this bias, Pericles Lewis's *Religious Experience in the Modernist Novel* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010), see Vincent P. Pecora, "How to Talk About Religion," *Modern Intellectual History* 9:3 (Nov 2012): 713-20.

⁴⁵ Matthew Arnold, "The Study of Poetry," *Essays in Criticism: Second Series* (London: Macmillan, 1888), 3.

⁴⁶ See Andreas Huyssen, *After the Great Divide: Modernism, Mass Culture, Postmodernism* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1986); *Marketing Modernisms: Self-Promotion, Canonization, Rereading*, Ed. Kevin J.H. Dettmar and Stephen Watt (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 1997); Lawrence Rainey, *Institutions of Modernism: Literary Elites and Public Culture* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1997); George Bornstein, *Material Modernism: The Politics of the Page* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2001); David Chinitz, *T.S. Eliot and the Cultural Divide* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2001); Mark S. Morrisson, *The Public Face of Modernism: Little Magazines, Audiences, and Reception, 1905-1920* (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 2001); *Little Magazines & Modernism: New Approaches*, Ed. Suzanne W. Churchill and Adam McKible (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2007); and John Timberman Newcomb, *Would Poetry Disappear? American Verse and the Crisis of Modernity* (Columbus, OH: The Ohio State University Press, 2004), and *How Did Poetry Survive? The Making of Modern American Verse* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2012).

attention to periodicals, from Monroe's agenda for *Poetry*, to Moore's tailoring of poems to *The Nation* versus *Ladies' Home Journal*, to newspaper accounts of Frost at Kennedy's Inaugural; as attention to promotion and marketing, of Frost as a latter-day Puritan or Moore in her tricorne hat as a Daughter of the American Revolution; and as attention to institutions of social reproduction like the school, as with Johnson's authorship of the hymn "Lift Every Voice and Sing," the so-called Negro National Anthem, as a schoolchildren's exercise for performance on Lincoln's birthday, Frost's university lecture tours, and Moore's endorsement of "*lux et veritas, Christo et ecclesiae, sapient / felici*"⁴⁷ – truth and light are pleasing to Christ and the church – as the motto of American higher education. The institutional sites and material contexts of these poems often reveal the unmarked assumptions of the venues in which they appeared, such as that they addressed themselves to a national Protestant public. As a result, my project sutures the gap between the impressions of secularization we get from reading a restricted canon of modernist poetry and the ones we get from reading a selection organized along religious axes and alongside the history of the Protestant establishment.

Although this dissertation is about a rear-guard action in American poetry, the impulses behind its poets' activities were progressive. It is easy to resist this paradox on the grounds that any action which relied on the hegemony of the establishment rather than contesting it outright could only have been part of the problem. Such resistance would only be strengthened by an attachment to ideas of modernist aesthetics like Adorno's that truthful art is the negation of existing society. What considerations could

⁴⁷ Marianne Moore, "The Student," *Poetry: A Magazine of Verse* 40:3 (Jun 1932), 123.

buttress the argument that these poets' pragmatic engagement with the establishment bore fruit? First, the year 2013 gives the secularist little hope, with the ranks of global Christianity and Islam growing quickly and substantially. This alone makes it worth spotlighting non-devotional, socially engaged poetry of the recent past that does not throw the baby out with the bathwater when it comes to religion. That is, the social landscape implicit in such poetry is more akin to today's than the one implicit in poetries of secularizing enlightenment, whether the variety that stresses institutional critique and personal liberation from moralism and dogma or the one that stresses the mystical, multicultural potential of religious hybridity and syncretism. Both of these impulses have been around in poetry and poetics since the Romantic period. Both treat religion as a malleable imposition rather than as a fact of social life. Yet nothing in the freedom poets have gained since Oxford expelled Shelley for *The Necessity of Atheism* has enabled them to challenge the persistence of religion as a social fact. This is partly what Hulme and Eliot meant by calling the exalted claims of Romantic poetry "spilt religion," that the type of religious power they invoked curdled once freed from social and institutional containers.

The poets in my dissertation, at least two of whom were agnostic, can thus be seen as ambassadors from the past, speaking to the need for rapprochement between secularists and conservative religionists that theorists of secularization and politics have increasingly recognized as a necessity in democratic states. Jürgen Habermas has argued that secularism must undergo a complementary process of modernization to that undergone by religion, whereby reason "becomes self-critically aware of its boundaries,"

including by redressing “the exclusion of religious doctrines from the genealogy of reason.”⁴⁸ And, as Vincent Pecora has observed, the emergence of forces competing with, curtailing, and substituting religious authority may not even have brought about an overall reduction in the crimes of corruption, oppression, and mystification secularists identify with religion:

Secularization can be considered simultaneously curative and distorting in the sense that its consequences can be understood to include both an enlightened liberation from dogma and an opening up of certain collective possibilities – redemptive revolution, nationalism, imperialism, racism – that could not have attained their full and often destructive potential otherwise.⁴⁹

Pecora’s reading of secularization, in taking the form of a narrative of unintended consequences, complements other recent theoretical writing on the long-term consequences of the Reformation and the short-term decline of mainline Protestant churches in late twentieth-century America.⁵⁰ In seeking to purify and reunify the Church, the forces of the Reformation ended up increasing religious schism and the strength of secular forces as never before. In prioritizing social justice over evangelization, the establishment helped secular causes at the expense of church membership, alienating the more conservative in their ranks and growing superfluous to their liberal young. This same narrative applies to the gestures of the poets in my

⁴⁸ Jürgen Habermas, “Religion in the Public Sphere,” *European Journal of Philosophy* 14:1 (Apr 2006): 16.

⁴⁹ Vincent P. Pecora, *Secularization and Cultural Criticism: Religion, Nation, and Modernity* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2006).

⁵⁰ In the case of the Reformation, see Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 2007), and Brad S. Gregory, *The Unintended Reformation: How a Religious Revolution Secularized Society* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2012). In the case of the modern history of American Protestantism, see David Hollinger, *After Cloven Tongues of Fire: Protestant Liberalism in Modern American History* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2013), and Hedstrom, *The Rise of Liberal Religion*.

dissertation; the internal logic of their poetry utterly relies on the establishment, but its occasion also indicates the insufficiency of that logic. It is not unlike the canary in the coal mine.

III. Organization

My dissertation is organized along three axes: historically, according to sequential stages of the Protestant establishment's weakening; sociologically, according to the types of relation poets had to the establishment and their perceived interests in its continuation, as manifest in their engagement with the beliefs and actions of its agents and institutions; and aesthetically, according to the religious genres and poetic forms through which such poets projected a vision of its future. The change in the establishment's fortunes between the 1890s and 1960s is stunning. In the 1890s, its leading voices expressed eagerness to Christianize the world and confidence in the march of historical progress. By the 1960s, its very theologians, those most removed from the exercise of secular power, were beginning to question the proprietary attitude of Protestants toward American society, never mind the world. Chapter 1 covers the height and sudden fall, during World War I, of establishment optimism; Chapter 2 focuses on the turmoil around race and nativism in the early interwar period; Chapter 3 tracks the establishment's shift from 1930s isolationism to coalition-building internationalism in the 1940s; and Chapter 4 deals with the positive redefinition of American religiosity in Judeo-Christian terms prompted by postwar triumphalism.

Chapter 1, “Harriet Monroe’s Poetic Spirituality and the Establishment Line of *Poetry: A Magazine of Verse*,” recovers the religious agenda of the magazine that introduced modernist poetry to American readers, arguing that, at least from 1912-14, *Poetry* acted as an organ of the Protestant establishment by design. Monroe’s stated program for the magazine was to foment the recognition of a religious movement of poetic spirituality. Poetic spirituality fused the nationalist millenarian optimism that she expressed as laureate of the Columbian Exposition with a model of the poet-prophet furnished by Walt Whitman that she and her co-editors used to classify and promote favored poets. Prose in the early issues predicted that the future of poetry lay in the hands of such poet-prophets as Vachel Lindsay, a pseudo-evangelical who styled himself a Protestant nationalist, and Rabindranath Tagore, a Bengali mystic whom Monroe both celebrated and distanced as a representative of the East. This ambivalence belied Monroe’s chauvinistic embrace of imperial aggression, which manifested in her poem “Our Canal” (February 1914), an ode envisioning the Panama Canal as a channel through which America would evangelize the East. Even though the outbreak of World War I derailed *Poetry*’s Protestant agenda, it demonstrates the extent to which the establishment’s strength could be perceived to be a prohibitive influence in the development of American poetry, and of American culture and society generally, a perception that Pound emphasized in his critique of Monroe’s editorial decisions. Befitting the scale of the establishment’s disillusionment, the poets in my later chapters traded in utopian visions of world fellowship for the strategic partnerships of pluralisms defined in national terms.

Chapter 2, “James Weldon Johnson’s Poetry and the Social Gospel in the Harlem Renaissance,” identifies a new common thread in Johnson’s poetry, the integration of African American Protestants into the Protestant establishment, and argues that Johnson, out of all his endeavors – serving as principal of an African American primary school, editorializing for the African American newspaper *The New York Age*, and organizing for the NAACP – tasked poetry with achieving the crucial aspects of this integration. He concluded this on the basis of four beliefs: that poetry represented a race’s greatest cultural contribution to the world; that the Harlem Renaissance could develop African American poetry to the point where it could make this contribution; that the single greatest force of social organization and uplift for most African Americans was the black church; and that only greater religious integration could create traction for African American civil rights. The idea that the black church should be an instrument of social justice aligned Johnson with the Social Gospel movement in Protestant theology, which manifested across the racial divide in Protestant churches. After looking at his Negro National Hymn, “Lift Every Voice and Sing” (1899), and his poem on the fiftieth anniversary of the Emancipation Proclamation, “Fifty Years” (1913), both of which fuse Protestant faith with American patriotism, I focus on how Johnson’s experiences as a field organizer and an editor of anthologies of African American poetry and spirituals led him to write the poetic sermons that would become *God’s Trombones* (1927). *God’s Trombones* followed the Social Gospel in condensing the Bible into parables of political prophecy, especially in its depiction of African Americans as Hebrews in captivity. The sermons staked out Johnson’s pragmatically conservative position in the Harlem

Renaissance. They distanced themselves from spirituals, which looked for justice in the afterlife and had become thoroughly commodified, on one hand, and from the vehemently post-Christian New Negro voice developed by the other major poets of the Harlem Renaissance on the other.

Chapter 3, “Liberal in Theology, Conservative in Politics: Marianne Moore’s Culture War,” addresses the bifurcation that characterizes scholarship on Moore’s churchgoing Protestantism, which has depicted her either as a repressed Puritan or a progressive liberal. I argue that she conceived of her poetry as participating in a single conservative culture war on the establishment’s behalf starting in the 1930s. It identified the New Deal welfare state and overseas totalitarianism as two sides of a single threat to the national morality and religious freedom supposedly guaranteed by the Protestant establishment. However, the fight against totalitarianism required the creation of a broader ideological coalition inclusive of Catholics, Jews, and secularists. Leading voices of the establishment, newly proclaiming the chastened realism of Protestant neo-orthodox theology, were engaged in similar coalition-building. I read these pivotal phases of Moore’s support for the establishment into such canonical poems as “The Steeple-Jack” (1932) and “In Distrust of Merits” (1943), which I read as a hymn and sermon, respectively, and which I place alongside the little-read, more explicitly partisan “Blessed is the Man” (1956), a campaign poem for President Eisenhower modeled on the First Psalm. None of Moore’s political maneuvering over the long, eventful period covered in the chapter takes away from the theological modernism of her Protestantism, but it

reveals that this politicking should be seen as an expression of her faith in the establishment.

Where the evasive difficulty of Moore's poetry and her reticent humility, which might have been conditioned by her gender, kept her intensely reasoned support for the establishment comparatively out of the spotlight, Frost would become spokesperson for the establishment by playing up his personality and simplifying his poetry. Chapter 4, "Robert Frost's Postwar Designs and Tri-Faith America," reconciles the outspoken political liberalism of Frost's late poetry, which veers toward the eccentric and even the frankly awful, with its religious turn. I note a development in the meaning of design for Frost, arguing that it shifts from signaling scientific anxiety, in the eponymous sonnet, to being an article of civic and political faith about the providential history of American democracy and its relation to the religious cohesion of the American people. This, along with his Puritan-Yankee persona, poised Frost to become the perfect spokesperson for the establishment. I read the companion pieces *A Masque of Reason* (1945) and *A Masque of Mercy* (1947), which graft Milton's technical theological discourse, Blake's iconoclasm, and Frost's own demotic humor onto a high form responsible for enhancing national religious mythology, as attempts to lay the groundwork for a postwar tri-faith consensus joining Protestants, Roman Catholics, and Jews that was gaining increasing institutional momentum. Unlike Moore's coalition, this consensus was based on a political liberalism that validated the New Deal welfare state as a composite reflection of Judeo-Christian beliefs. I follow by reading the occasional poems "Kitty Hawk" (1956) and "For John F. Kennedy His Inauguration" (1961), mawkishly written in rhyming couplets, both of

which apply the theological conclusions of the masques to Cold War questions of primarily civic patriotism and civil religion. The poem Frost ended up reciting at the Inauguration, thanks to the glare on the podium, “The Gift Outright,” perfectly suited the occasion by praising, in the poem’s representation of “salvation in surrender,” both American empire and religious diversity as elements of providential design. As with Monroe, however, the future Frost optimistically envisioned, both for the national unity that the establishment was authorized to approve and poetry’s involvement in affairs of state, would be shattered by the tumult of the 60s, which induced the surrender of the establishment, albeit in favor of many of the causes, including African American civil rights and genuine religious pluralism, toward which these four poets allied with the establishment had been looking for decades. The difference between the optimism of Frost’s prospect in 1961 and that of Monroe’s prospect in 1912 marked, more accurately than other gauges, the progress of secularization in modern American poetry.

Harriet Monroe's Poetic Spirituality

and the Establishment Line of *Poetry: A Magazine of Verse*

How otherwise shall democracy rise to spiritual consciousness except through the conquest of soul-destroying hunger and ignorance and pain? How otherwise shall the nations be brought together, and the brotherhood of man be revealed, except through loco-motives and reapers and flying-machines,- perhaps even battle-ships and repeating rifles,- all the miraculous modern bound-obliterating machinery of peace and war?⁵¹

I. Poetic Spirituality and the Protestant Establishment

In this chapter, I argue that *Poetry: A Magazine of Verse*, which Harriet Monroe edited from 1912 until her death in 1936, acted during its first several years of publication as an organ of the Protestant establishment. That is, it flattered and buttressed the imperial optimism that leading establishment figures expressed at the end of the nineteenth and beginning of the twentieth century. Focusing on the period between the founding of the magazine in late 1912 and its response to the outbreak of World War I in 1914, I show that the primary vehicle of this support was a movement that Monroe described as poetic and religious – what I call, in a phrase derived from her prose and that of associate editors, “poetic spirituality.” Monroe imagined poetic spirituality to be an emergent religion that traveled across borders of culture and nation, sanctified the authority and nobility of the individual, asserted the primacy of the ideal over the material, transcended religious difference, and most importantly, came into being through poetry. Monroe derived poetic spirituality from Walt Whitman and the recent history of liberal Protestantism in America. As early as 1911, she reported “an awakening of

⁵¹ Monroe, “The Bigness of the World,” *The Atlantic Monthly* 108 (Sep 1911): 374.

spiritual consciousness in the crowd – confused and scattered signs of far-blown sympathies, exaltations, ideals,”⁵² an awakening that called out for a “poet-prophet...of spiritual stature great enough...to speak for a world more vast than man has ever known.”⁵³ Much prose in the early issues of the magazine predicted that the future of poetry was in the hands of such poet-prophets, and *Poetry*’s famous Open Door policy was designed to discover them. The poet-prophet did not belong to any one class or school but to the modern “crowd.” This crowd wavered between a spontaneously growing global spiritual populace and a Christian West newly consolidated by Protestant America and eager to engage the East. This instability was registered in poetry and prose that exhibited competing impulses toward sympathy and distance, love and imperialism. These tensions reflected the limits of poetic spirituality’s liberal origins and its ultimate containment within the logic and agenda of the establishment. I trace the career of poetic spirituality from the magazine’s embrace of a religiously defined Whitman as an authorizing figure, to its promotion of Vachel Lindsay and Rabindranath Tagore as the two most important modern poets, to Monroe’s own attempt to become the spokesperson of poetic spirituality. Other evidence from the beginning of Monroe’s tenure, of censorship and religious commercialism, confirms the magazine’s establishment orientation.

Over the last two decades, critics have substantially reevaluated Monroe’s reputation, so that she has come to be seen as less of a footnote to literary history and

⁵² Monroe, “The Audience – II.” *Poetry* 5.1 (Oct 1914): 31.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 32. This and the preceding quotation first appeared in “The Bigness of the World,” which predated the founding of *Poetry* by just over a year. Excerpts then appeared in a *Poetry* editorial in October 1914, demonstrating the continuity of Monroe’s agenda throughout this period.

more as a tremendously consequential female editor, and even, to some, a notable poet in her own right. Her editorial achievements were initially judged through the lens of the modernist poetry canon, in terms of the poets the magazine introduced to American readers. In *Poetry*'s first three years, between 1912 and 1915, these poets included Ezra Pound, H.D., Robert Frost, Wallace Stevens, Marianne Moore, and T.S. Eliot, an impressive and aesthetically diverse record for a single magazine. However, the importance of Pound, Foreign Correspondent throughout the 1910s, in securing several of these poets, and the lack of comparable discoveries after his departure, easily gave the impression that Monroe had merely been "in the right place at the right time."⁵⁴ And while *Poetry* has survived into the twenty-first century, it has consistently refused to become the voice of emerging schools or movements. This policy dates back to Monroe's editorial in the second issue: "The Open Door will be the policy of this magazine....To this end the editors hope to keep free of entangling alliances with any single class or school."⁵⁵ For example, the magazine did not choose, as most literary histories have, between Imagism and the Midwestern School of Masters, Sandburg, and Lindsay. The reevaluation of Monroe has reappraised this aesthetic pluralism and other values that the magazine ostensibly brought to the American and modernist cultural landscapes – entrepreneurial acumen, female editorial collaboration between Monroe and Alice Corbin

⁵⁴ Newcomb, *How Did Poetry Survive?*, 28.

⁵⁵ Monroe, "The Open Door," *Poetry: A Magazine of Verse* 1.2 (Nov 1912): 64.

Henderson, the association of poetic beauty with Progressive values, a desire for popularity, and a dynamic model of poetic canonicity.⁵⁶

But these critics have overlooked religious components of Monroe's editorship, put off, perhaps, by the vagueness of the term "spirit." Attending to these components and reconstructing poetic spirituality brings to a head unresolved issues about the magazine's history and legacy. *Poetry's* hundredth anniversary in 2012 called for reassessments of its position in the history of twentieth-century American poetry. These reassessments appealed to aspects of Monroe's poetic spirituality to make their case. Recent *Poetry* editor Christian Wiman's introduction to the anthology *The Open Door: One Hundred Poems, One Hundred Years of "Poetry"* claims that the magazine kept its finger on the pulse of important developments in the art, and that one aspect of this currency was printing spiritual rather than religious poetry.⁵⁷ Likewise, John Timberman Newcomb has argued that the Open Door policy revolutionized American poetry, not just by tackling popular subject matter and opening up the canon but also in its embrace of "an emerging intercultural modernity" that mitigated the magazine's "Americentrism" with "humility and a commitment to cultural reciprocity."⁵⁸ The nature of poetic

⁵⁶ See Ann Massa, "'The Columbian Ode' and 'Poetry, A Magazine of Verse': Harriet Monroe's Entrepreneurial Triumphs," *Journal of American Studies* 20:1 (Apr 1986): 51-69; Jayne Marek, *Women Editing Modernism: 'Little' Magazines and Literary History* (Lexington: KY: University Press of Kentucky, 1995); Lisa Szeffel, *The Gospel of Beauty in the Progressive Era: Reforming American Verse and Values* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011); and, in reference to popularity and canonicity, Newcomb, *How Did Poetry Survive?* The primary work on Monroe's editorship before this line of scholarship, Ellen Williams's *Harriet Monroe and the Poetry Renaissance: The First Ten Years of Poetry, 1912-22* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1977), argued that Monroe benefited greatly from the help of Alice Corbin Henderson, Ezra Pound, and, initially, the lack of competing American magazines of innovative poetry.

⁵⁷ Share, Don, and Christian Wiman, Ed., *The Open Door: One Hundred Poems, One Hundred Years of "Poetry Magazine"* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2012), 11-12.

spirituality, however, was more contradictory than these vindications suggest. The magazine's rejection of dogmatism and promotion of aesthetic, religious, and cultural diversity was limited by the prejudice of Monroe's American Protestant background. This prejudice subjected difference to the lure of unity, both at the national level, in that Americans were invited to affirm their nation's rise on the world stage as evidence of divine favor in a way that affirmed its dominance by the Protestant establishment, and at the global level, where this rise was imagined to involve contact with other nations and their crowds via poetic spirituality's progressive synthesis of poetry and spirituality.

Poetic spirituality not only provides a new lens through which to read the most consequential years of the magazine's history, but also Monroe's poetry, which to date has received little attention. Monroe came of age as a poet at the turn of the century, when the imperial ambitions of the United States government began to extend beyond contiguous territory across the Pacific and into Central and South America. Against this backdrop, she bragged in *Poetry* in 1913 that Panama was "a ridiculous little republic, which, by the twist of Roosevelt's wrist, rose to the honor of providing a background for our epic,"⁵⁹ where "our epic" was the Panama Canal. "Our Canal," Monroe's subsequent poem in the magazine, gave this national assertion a distinctly Protestant cast, predicting that the canal would allow "East and West" to "keep their ancient tryst" by creating "a

⁵⁸ Newcomb, *How Did Poetry Survive?*, 51-2. The critique of static canons is not unrelated to poetic spirituality. According to Monroe, the spirituality of the poet was one criterion by which to judge a poet's departure from aesthetic tradition. In an editorial on tradition, she wrote, "The freedom of the human spirit is more important to the future of the race than the Greek temples and Gothic cathedrals of the past;" Monroe, "Tradition," *Poetry* 2.2 (May 1913): 67. In the case of poetry, the key departure at issue in the early years of *Poetry* was free verse.

⁵⁹ Monroe, "Our Modern Epic," *Poetry* 3.1 (Oct 1913): 24.

path for the Holy Ghost,”⁶⁰ defining the union that spirituality made possible as related not just to the fires of divine enthusiasm but also to missionary work or even conquest.

In what follows, I read texts from the early years of *Poetry* – editorial essays and notes, reviews, poems, and the motto – that articulated poetic spirituality to *Poetry*’s readers. I focus on the relationship between poet-prophet and spiritually conscious crowd, which is the heretofore unacknowledged religious dimension of the agenda that critics have always accepted as central to the magazine – the civic agenda of improving the relationship between poet and public. Monroe described it using terms inherited from the reception of British Romantic poetics. The public was not to consider poetry “a miracle of direct creation” but the product of “a reciprocal relation between the artist and his public,”⁶¹ in contrast to the alienation engendered by poetry when included in mass-produced magazines as an afterthought. In relation to British and American modernist little magazines, Mark Morrisson has called this problem the crisis of publicity.⁶² The role of religion in creating new mass publics is an underlying concern of poetic spirituality, essential to bringing the hoary figure of the poet-prophet into modernity. To specify the terms of this modernization, I first look at the magazine’s construction of Walt Whitman as a forefather of poetic spirituality, which gives a religious cast to the reciprocal relation between poet and crowd and reveals the roots of poetic spirituality in nineteenth-century American liberal religion. Then I compare Monroe’s reception of

⁶⁰ Monroe, “Our Canal,” *Poetry* 3.5 (Feb 1914): 158, 157.

⁶¹ Monroe, “The Motive for the Magazine,” *Poetry* 1.1 (Oct 1912): 26.

⁶² Mark S. Morrisson, *The Public Face of Modernism: Little Magazines, Audiences, Reception, 1905-20* (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 2001).

Rabindranath Tagore and Vachel Lindsay as twentieth-century poet-prophets in the mold of Whitman. Lastly I read Monroe's poem "Our Canal," her bellicose revision of the spiritual union of East and West that Whitman envisioned in "Passage to India."

At least one prominent reader of *Poetry* picked up on Monroe's program of poetic spirituality, even as he misread it according to his tendency. Ezra Pound complained in a letter to Margaret Anderson, editor of *The Little Review*, one of *Poetry*'s competitors founded in 1914, that *Poetry*'s chief deficiency was their "idiotic fuss over christianizing all poems they print."⁶³ Almost a decade later, in 1923, around the publication of a new and enlarged edition of Harriet Monroe's canon-making anthology *The New Poetry*, the centerpieces of which were successful poems that first appeared in *Poetry*, Pound accused Monroe of misrepresenting his beliefs through her selection of his poetry, letting loose several bottled-up minority reports years after the professional relationship between them had ended. He jokingly offers as a footnote to the anthology selection a vituperative credo:

Damn remnants ^{in you} of Jew
religion, that bitch moses and the rest of the tribal barbarians.

Even you do still try at least to leave the reader in ignorance of the fact that I do NOT accept the current dung, and official opinions about the dregs of of [sic] the Xtn superstition, the infamy of American laws. etc....

You might at least print a footnote saying that I consider many american laws infamous, and that I do not accept many beliefs which it is not at present permitted people to contradict in print or in school text books in the U.S.

That would ^{give better equilibrium to} your ladylike selection of my verse.

Say that I consider the Writings of Confucious [sic], and Ovid's Metamor-

⁶³ Ezra Pound, *Selected Letters 1907-1941*, Ed. D.D. Paige (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1950), 107.

phoses the only safe guides in religion. This doesn't repudicate [sic] the G.F. [Goodly Fere], Christ can very well stand a an [sic] heroic figure. The hero need not be of wisdom all compounded. Also he is not ^{wholly} to blame for the religion that's been foisted onto him. As well blame me for... for all the bunk in vers libre.

Christianity as practiced resumes itself into one commandment dear to all officials, American Y.M.C., bureaucrats [sic], etc. 'Thou shalt attend to thy neighbors business before attending to thine own.'

In your footnote you ought to point out that I refuse to accept ANY monotheistic taboos whatsoever. That I consider the *Metamorphoses* a sacred book, and the hebrew scriptures the record of a barbarian tribe, full of evil.

You have no decent right to palm me off for what I am not even if it does happen to suit your convenience.

This note wd. be an [sic] alternative for a selection of my work
Indicating my real position.⁶⁴

Pound's persecution complex and the interesting passivity that he expresses here with respect to his reputation aside, his sketch of the United States – where public irreligion is of questionable legality, books are routinely censored, Christianity is bred into bureaucracy, and respectable Christian belief is a salable commodity – is a serviceable account of the Protestant establishment in its diverse guises. Pound had a slightly more sanguine view of the British print marketplace.⁶⁵ He was correct that Monroe gave Christianity special consideration, and likely right to assume that her inclusion of "Ballad of the Goodly Fere," a poem of his that predated 1910, in the anthology selection, as a reflection of it. However, this special consideration was not the result of cautious

⁶⁴ Pound, Letter to Harriet Monroe, 16 Jul 1922, Series I, Subseries II, Box 39, Folder 19, *Poetry: A Magazine of Verse* Papers, Special Collections Research Center, Regenstein Library, University of Chicago.

⁶⁵ See his series "Studies in Contemporary Mentality," a survey of British periodical culture that appeared in *The New Age* in late 1917, recently reprinted in Robert Scholes and Clifford Wulfman, in *Modernism in the Magazines: An Introduction* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2010), Appendix.

deference but part of the program of poetic spirituality, which involved promoting Christianity alongside other religious traditions through emerging poet-prophets who could speak across traditional boundaries. Reconstructing Monroe's poetic spirituality thus accounts for the blind spots in critical and popular readings of *Poetry's* aesthetic and cultural agendas, allowing us a clearer view of the role that religion played in one of the key institutions that made modern American poetry new.

II. *Poetry's* Whitmanian Spirit

Monroe selected Walt Whitman as the magazine's guiding spirit because he supposedly set poetic spirituality on its true course for American readers. The motto she gleaned from him and placed on the back cover of *Poetry* – "To have great poets there must be great audiences too" – highlighted this connection while declaring that one of the magazine's primary goals was to create a similar relationship with its readers. Behind the poet/audience relationship was the one between prophet and crowd. This relationship placed Whitman within a distinctively American history of spirituality. As Leigh Eric Schmidt has shown, the invention of spirituality as a religious identity outside the boundaries of a particular religious tradition did not arise in America with the post-World War II counterculture but dates back to the early nineteenth century.⁶⁶ It emerged among American Protestants as part of a "search for a religious world larger than the British Protestant inheritance."⁶⁷ This new spirituality combined the search for solitary mystical

⁶⁶ Leigh Eric Schmidt, *Restless Souls: The Making of American Spirituality* (New York: HarperCollins, 2005).

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 5.

experience with beliefs in social justice and cosmopolitanism.⁶⁸ It supplemented earlier Christian understandings of spirituality as the opposite of materiality and individual devotional practice.⁶⁹ It was articulated by distinct but overlapping movements throughout the century like Transcendentalism and New Thought and through the public appeals of eloquent individuals. One such individual, Thomas Wentworth Higginson, delivered what would become an influential lecture called “The Sympathy of Religions” in 1870 that argued for the approaching inevitability of “a universal religion of shared spiritual aspirations.”⁷⁰ While the wisdom held up as the boon of this spirituality was said to be timeless, its surface comfort with the ideas that all religious traditions had value and that the distinctions between them would progressively break down was the recent result of “the global reach of the market, the heyday of Christian missions, and the achievements of Western philology.”⁷¹ American believers in spirituality such as Higginson denied that the commercial, religious, and intellectual powers enabling their beliefs made those beliefs any less universal.

Whitman belonged to this history through the value his poetry placed on spirituality and the devotion it inspired.⁷² The early years of *Poetry* updated this history

⁶⁸ Schmidt isolates six distinct characteristics of spirituality: “individual aspiration after mystical experience or religious feeling;” “the valuing of silence, solitude, and serene meditation;” “the immanence of the transcendent;” “the cosmopolitan appreciation of religious variety as well as unity in diversity;” “ethical earnestness in pursuit of justice-producing reforms;” and “creative self-expression and adventuresome seeking” (12).

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 4-5.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 115.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 105.

⁷² For a taxonomy of Whitman’s devotees, see Michael Robertson, *Worshipping Walt: The Whitman Disciples* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2010).

by presenting Whitman as a poet-prophet of spirituality whose influence had yet to truly flower. A 1913 editorial by Alice Corbin Henderson, Monroe's closest associate editor, praised Whitman's "curious mingling of the concrete and the spiritual" as one aspect of his writing that was only beginning to garner appreciation.⁷³ In an editorial the following year, she wrote, "It may be that the spirit of Whitman is still, in any large sense, to capture. It will be captured and transmuted into expressions varying widely in outward form if the American poets realize their birthright and heritage of individual genius."⁷⁴ Henderson recounted Vachel Lindsay's famous performance of "General William Booth Enters Into Heaven" and "The Congo" at a 1914 banquet for *Poetry* as evidence that he had realized this birthright. Lindsay's "working out his salvation in his own way" set him on Whitman's path from "self-realization" to "self-expression" to "expression of the race or nation."⁷⁵ Likewise, Monroe defined Whitman's representativeness in terms of the "magic" of "perfect love" between him and his public, "a magic which Whitman felt when he wrote the sentence posted on our cover."⁷⁶ The motto that Monroe adopted therefore identified the conditions for the enlargement of the poet-prophet's audience, but did not specify how to foster them except other than to cultivate mutual love. In her autobiography, Monroe openly admitted that her prescriptive intent with the motto was

⁷³ Alice Corbin Henderson, "A Perfect Return," *Poetry* 1.3 (Dec 1912): 90. For an account of Monroe's collaborative relationship with Henderson through the early 1920s, see Marek, *Women Editing Modernism*, Chapter 2.

⁷⁴ Henderson, "'Too Far From Paris,'" *Poetry* 4.3 (June 1914): 109.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 111, 108.

⁷⁶ Monroe, "The Audience-II," 32.

“to arouse a sense of responsibility in the public.”⁷⁷ Although she hit the more plangent note of the public debt to poetry on occasion in the early years of the magazine, she withheld it from scenes of the idealized relationship between poet-prophet and spiritually conscious crowd.

This prescriptive intent becomes clearer when Monroe’s use of Whitman’s statement is compared to the text in which it originates, “Ventures on an Old Theme.” “Ventures” concerns the struggle of the Good Gray Poet to find reciprocity with his readers despite offending their religious sensibilities. First published as part of a Christmas sequence in *The New York Daily Graphic* in 1875, the piece was reprinted in a supplement to *Specimen Days*, Whitman’s post-bellum writings.⁷⁸ Where the Preface to the 1855 *Leaves of Grass* had declared as a present fact that “the United States themselves are essentially the greatest poem,”⁷⁹ by the time of *Specimen Days and Collect* (1882), Whitman was focused on the carnage of the recent past and the subsequent hope of a better future for poetry and the Union. The obstacle to progress considered in “Ventures on an Old Theme” is the tyranny of social convention generally, including religious propriety. Asked why the behavior depicted in his poems flouts propriety, the poet replies that

the conventional laws and standards proper enough for ordinary society apply neither to the action of the soul, nor its poets. In fact the latter know no laws but the laws of themselves, planted in them by God, and are themselves the last

⁷⁷ Monroe, *A Poet’s Life: Seventy Years in a Changing World* (New York: AMS Press, 1938), 365.

⁷⁸ Walt Whitman, “Ventures on an Old Theme,” in *Specimen Days & Collect* (Philadelphia, PA: David McKay, 1883), 322-4.

⁷⁹ Whitman, *Leaves of Grass and Other Writings*, Ed. Michael Moon (New York: Norton, 2002), 616.

standards of the law, and its final exponents – responsible to Him directly, and not at all to mere etiquette.⁸⁰

Whitman's "song of myself" becomes the impersonal "laws of themselves," anchored in an appeal to the authority of God's design and man's creation in God's image. Although the sexuality of Whitman's poetry seems most clearly at issue here, the underlying framework of debate is religious, which for Whitman would have meant Protestantism.⁸¹ His defense, in which the exceptional religious figure exposes the inessential character of prevailing conventions, appears throughout *Poetry's* writing about spirituality and poet-prophets.⁸² "Ventures" ends with a lament for the lack of great American poets, which is explained as the result of insufficiently "cohering" "Nationality and patriotism" across consecutive generations.⁸³ The final line restates this lament as one of audience: "To have great poets, there must be great audiences, too."⁸⁴ What Monroe described as Whitman's statement of reciprocity approaching "perfect love" had originally referred to powerful experiences of rejection and isolation.

⁸⁰ Whitman, "Ventures on an Old Theme," 322.

⁸¹ David Kuebrich, considering Whitman's relation to the Protestant establishment, argues that his failure to appreciate the nature of his opposition is a negative judgment on his work: "Protestantism was supported by the churches, schools, and colleges, and it developed other effective organizations and strategies for outreach such as revivals, tract societies, and home missions. In wanting to start an institutionless religion, Whitman naively assumed that a new faith could, merely through the power of the printed word and the individual's response to it, quickly conquer an established and well-institutionalized competing belief system and become disseminated among tens of millions of citizens..." (178). This puts the problem of poetic spirituality clearly, even as it underestimates the extent to which this religion was perceived to be furthered by poetry but also the product of unstoppable forces independent of poetry.

⁸² This extends to Monroe's autobiography, especially in anti-Catholic passages describing her experience at a Catholic boarding school in Georgetown, where she singles out for favor one nun who validates her "liberalizing contact" with Roman Catholic's "mental tyranny and slavery" by introducing her to the "high spirituality" of its mystics; see *Poet's Life*, 50.

⁸³ Whitman, "Ventures on an Old Theme," 324.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*

The original context for the motto explains *Poetry*'s treatment of Whitman's ambition as finally ready to be fulfilled by the poet-prophets of the present. The irony that the statement concerns the limits that popular religion imposes on great poets, rather than the unlimited greatness that is possible given a relationship of mutual identification, only would have reinforced this construal of Whitman's career. But that negativity would have had no place in *Poetry*, and so in appropriation the feeling of Whitman's statement was reversed. The removal of the commas after "poets" and "audiences" transformed a resigned admission into an assertion of optimism appropriate to the founding American poet-prophet.⁸⁵ The versification of Whitman's prose broke the motto into two lines to emphasize the statement's formal enactment of the parallel greatness of poet and audience. In effect, the appropriation, by subordinating Whitman's words to the image of poet-prophet, succumbed to the social convention that he refused, in order that the magazine could court the large public that did not respect poets' laws of themselves. This approach balanced out the fact that Whitman was increasingly being recognized as the major American poet of the second half of the nineteenth century with the magazine's suggestion that Whitman was before his time.⁸⁶

When Pound debated Monroe in the October 1914 issue over the type of public the magazine required, he astutely commented on the tone of Whitman's statement,

⁸⁵ The practice of printing the motto in this way on the back page began in 2.3 (June 1913) and continued into the 1920s.

⁸⁶ In the Whitman centenary issue in May 1919, Monroe still held out this hope: "[W]hether we like it or not, his spirit may have the power of the *vates* to bring These States to his feet, and mold ideals for the democratisation of the world;" "Walt Whitman," *Poetry* 14.2 (May 1919), 90. The biggest service of his art was not loosening up formal and linguistic decorum but "his reassertion of the ancient conception of the poet as prophet, and of poetry as religion, as an ecstatic expression of faith," *ibid.*, 91.

dismissing it as an example of “Whitman tired.”⁸⁷ His “truce” with Whitman in the poem “A Pact,”⁸⁸ published in *Poetry* the preceding April, and usually taken to be Pound’s grudging show of respect for the precedent for formal innovation that Whitman established, did not extend to the motto. Pound instead proposed an alternative motto correlating the greatness of the poet to the people’s discomfort, Dante’s “Quem stulti magis odissent,” which Pound translates as “He whom the fools hate worst.”⁸⁹ To be provocative, he pressed the point beyond poetry to religion, citing Christ as a example of the greats’ labor against popular sentiment: “Had the savior of the world a great audience? Did he work on the magazine public?”⁹⁰ Pound argued the line that “the magazine public” was intractable, which the Whitman of “Ventures on an Old Theme” might have understood. Monroe cast the vigor of the debate as evidence of the magazine’s healthy pluralism: “Controversy is good for the soul, and the magazine which expresses but one opinion is doomed.”⁹¹ The exchange inoculated Monroe against charges of radicalism, airing Pound’s claim that radical cultural agendas were necessarily and valuably antithetical to popularity, and his deliberately provocative rhetoric, to showcase the moderate line of the magazine’s editor. Monroe, in defending the motto, both clung to the poet gradually receiving his due as the national great of the preceding

⁸⁷ Pound, “The Audience–I,” *Poetry* 5.1 (Oct 1914): 29.

⁸⁸ Pound, “Contemporania: A Pact,” *Poetry* 2.1 (Apr 1913): 11-12.

⁸⁹ Pound, “The Audience–I,” 29.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, 30.

⁹¹ Monroe, “The Audience–II,” 31.

century and fostered the impression that she would only push aesthetic and cultural boundaries so far as would allow *Poetry* to maintain a large, sympathetic audience.

Yet Pound's elitist conviction that "the Lord of the universe sends...in each generation a few intelligent spirits, and these ultimately manage the rest," who are themselves "aimless and drifting" without "the great artist,"⁹² was more compatible with Monroe's prescriptive appropriation of Whitman than his debate with Monroe suggested. In her April 1913 editorial, "The New Beauty," from which the anthology would take its name, Monroe described the modern poet-prophet as "a giant in strength and apostle in faith, whose vision of the new beauty would lead him through fire and sword,"⁹³ who had to "spend a heavy toll of his precious power in fighting the lords of things as they are, in destroying barriers and winning through to freedom."⁹⁴ This account of the battle involved in realizing the poet-prophet's vision sounds more like the poet's adherence to laws of themselves invoked by Whitman and the great man beset by fools invoked by Pound than Monroe's contribution to the debate. While she argued against Pound in the October 1914 debate, her belief in the heroic spirituality of the poet-prophet, not just as a populist figure but as one who upset the status quo, underwrote her original conception of the magazine. Rabindranath Tagore and Vachel Lindsay, the first poets Monroe identified with this heroism, complicated this template.

⁹² Pound, "The Audience-I," 30.

⁹³ Monroe, "The New Beauty," *Poetry* 2.1 (Apr 1913): 23.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*

III. *Poetry's* Establishment Portfolio

The criteria by which Monroe determined who should fill the role of poet-prophet were not solely religious. She sought poets who united the new spirituality with popularity and artistic excellence. She acknowledged that this presented difficulties: “How can a man be a popular poet and yet save his soul and his art?”⁹⁵ she asked. According to Monroe, the two poets who clearly met all three qualifications as of 1913 were Tagore and Lindsay. Their roots in, respectively, Bengali Hinduism and American evangelical Protestantism represented the types of relationship between poet and crowd that began at home but through skill and stature could open out onto the world, thus creating the possibility of uniting East and West, in the monolithic way that Monroe conceived of them, in a common spirituality. In her editorial comment in the June 1913 issue, she described how the “cold enterprise” of editing was transformed upon contact with the work of the right poet: “...one’s finger-tips tingle with spirit touches, psychic manifestations of life from afar.”⁹⁶ Monroe gave as examples Tagore, Arthur Davison Ficke, Witter Bynner, Alfred Noyes, and Lindsay, but spent by far the most time on the first and last. What brought these two portraits together was the “perfect love” between these poets and their eager audiences. Her description of Tagore rehearsed all of the terms surrounding the spirituality of the poet-prophet, as well as drawing on the populist images of labor and travel that would recur in her poem about the Panama Canal:

Here, manifestly, was the ideal poet, the prophet aware of his world and now great-heartedly adopting ours; the Ambassador Extraordinary from East to West, bearing no passports from king to president, but speaking with supreme authority

⁹⁵ Monroe, “Danger” *Poetry* 2.2 (May 1913): 68.

⁹⁶ Monroe, “Incarnations,” *Poetry* 2.3 (June 1913): 102.

from race to race, writing a brave chapter in that epic of human brotherhood which must be sung around the world when locomotives and swift steamers, when traders, travelers, teachers, warriors, shall have opened wide the gates.

Not the antagonism but the sympathy between the two vast branches of the Aryan stock was the important revelation in the great Hindoo's visit. He had lived essentially our life, and won from it spiritual exaltation which each of us, in however slight degree, must aspire to now and then. His sense of humor was as quick as ours, his judgment as shrewd; he understood us better than we, being prejudiced, could understand ourselves, and so his journey around the world must avail for more intimate knowledge. As he has brought something of India to us, he will carry something of ours back to his people.⁹⁷

This passage defines Tagore through the reach of his sympathy and his spirituality's defiance of existing boundaries. His temperament is democratic ("bearing no passports from king to president"), cosmopolitan ("speaking with supreme authority from race to race"), and spiritual ("spiritual exaltation which each of us...must aspire to"). Monroe attested that he understood *Poetry's* readership, and would extend their sympathy to the people of Bengal. His option to "adopt" the West even seems to give him significant agency and privilege. Monroe modeled a similar leap of sympathy in her courteously humble admission that prejudice prevented her from understanding Tagore as well as he understood her.

Monroe also packaged Tagore's poetry as an active facet of Bengali popular religion. She claimed that his poems were "sung throughout Bengal by the people, and many of them form part of the simple ritual of the Brahma Somaj church, of which Maharishi (Saint) Devendra Nath Tagore, father of the poet, was a founder."⁹⁸ The poems of Tagore's that appeared in the magazine adopt a contemplative but intimate voice for

⁹⁷ Monroe, "Incarnations," 103.

⁹⁸ Monroe, "Notes," *Poetry* 2.3 (Jun 1913): 115.

scenes and parables of solitary mystical experience. The speaker periodically addresses a beloved and a cosmic power defined in the December 1912 suite as “the bliss of the touch of the One in the play of the many.”⁹⁹ Although this voice lacked the slangy, erotic energy of Whitman, the priority placed on spiritual experience and use of poetic prose served the function of presenting a comparable poet-prophet. Tagore’s sequence “Narratives” in the December 1913 issue consisted of parables about the folly of materialism, idolatry, and vanity. Pound, initially an enthusiastic supporter of Tagore, strongly criticized this tendency in his mid-1913 letters to Monroe, which addressed the issue in terms that she would have understood, and perhaps even agreed with: “Tagore IS in some poems not only an artist but an Imagiste, in a lot of the stuff he is, exactly as [Floyd] Dell says, only a mystic.”¹⁰⁰ Pound placed the poet above the mystic and contended that Tagore’s poetry stopped answering to both identities, which Monroe also held to be a requirement. At the same time, Pound claimed the best of Tagore for Imagism, displaying how at this point both Tagore and Imagism were both treated as valuable literary properties that Ezra Pound and Harriet Monroe were struggling to manage and edit in line with their priorities. Monroe’s autobiography confirmed that the poems’ translation as prose was the link between their contemporaneity for the people of Bengal and their modernity in English, the metrically “intricate” Bengali originals converted into “beautifully cadenced poetic prose” in English.¹⁰¹ As with Pound, others

⁹⁹ Rabindranath Tagore, “Poems,” *Poetry* 1.3 (Dec 1912): 84.

¹⁰⁰ Ezra Pound, Letter to Harriet Monroe. 7 Jun 1913. Series I, Subseries II, Box 38, Folder 31, *Poetry: A Magazine of Verse Papers*, Special Collections Research Center, Regenstein Library, University of Chicago.

became critical of the accolades being heaped upon Tagore. Associate editor Alice Corbin Henderson echoed Monroe's appraisal of his spirituality in responding to a critical review of his poetry by Joyce Kilmer, a convert to Roman Catholicism:

Mr. Tagore is a Hindu, and not a Catholic – I should hesitate to call him less a Christian than many that I know; but if Mr. Tagore had been born a Catholic (whether in Brooklyn or Calcutta) would Mr. Kilmer have felt that it was unfitting to link his name with that of St. Francis or Thomas a Kempis....I doubt very much if the mind of the mystic recognizes any distinction between Krishna and Jesus Christ – except as these distinctions exist in the dogma of racial or religious sectarians.¹⁰²

The “sectarian” individual is at the opposite end of the religious spectrum from the “spiritual” one, who here takes on the exemplary individualism celebrated by Whitman in “Ventures on an Old Theme.” Tagore might have found curious the claim that his mysticism perforce made him an exemplary Christian.

Monroe and Henderson gave Tagore vast powers of sympathy but Monroe also kept them at a distance. The lack of writing by Tagore in the magazine after December 1913 – he was mentioned and advertised but did not appear again until late 1916 – suggests that either Monroe came to agree with Pound or that Tagore became more useful to Monroe as a type than as a poet. Even as Monroe strained to give Tagore's spirituality genuine religious and historical significance, it was still a “cultural commodity” that “curried enthusiasm amongst the community of modernist scholars and writers in which [Tagore] found himself” (Saha 8). Tagore's receipt of the Nobel Prize for Literature had enabled Monroe to boast, “The great Oriental poet who has just received the Nobel prize

¹⁰¹ Monroe, *Poet's Life*, 294.

¹⁰² Henderson, “A Partisan Verdict,” *Poetry* 7.1 (Oct 1915): 51-2.

for literature, may fitly open our Christmas number.”¹⁰³ (3.3.113). Even as this verdict relished the new combinations that poetic spirituality made possible, it reinforced the primacy of the Christian calendar, insisted that Tagore did not threaten it, and fended off questions or objections by appealing to the authority of an international cultural body and to a commercial rather than religious framework of production and reception.

In contrast with Tagore, Lindsay appeared regularly in *Poetry* through 1915, and Monroe’s editorial singled Lindsay out for the readership’s solicitude. In addition to touting his roots among the crowd, Monroe addressed him to the guarantors funding *Poetry*’s first five years with annual contributions, predicting the collectible value of his early self-printed creations:

Wholly sturdy and high-hearted is his faith in himself and his town, his brave resolve to leaven our whole lump with a bit of yeast in Springfield. Some day the rich collectors will bid high for those enlivening ‘war bulletins’ of his, and for that free magazine whose ‘first and last number,’ with its stirring prophecies and symbolic decorations, preaches the gospel of beauty to the new age....Mr. Lindsay is the real thing.¹⁰⁴

Lindsay’s gratis early publications placed him on the side of the crowd, not the collector, even as they were presented here to stoke the collector’s anticipation. Spurring Lindsay to continue playing the poet-prophet as itinerant evangelist, Monroe urged him to take this gospel on the road and spread it across the country: “Mr. Lindsay is a poet with a message, a message which his fellow countrymen would seem to be in need of. May all

¹⁰³ Monroe, “Notes,” *Poetry* 3.3. (Dec 1913): 113.

¹⁰⁴ Monroe, “Incarnations,” 103-4. This view of Lindsay’s publications as a good investment reinforces Lawrence Rainey’s identification of the figures of the patron-investor and patron-collector as crucial for modernists; see Rainey, *Institutions of Modernism: Literary Elites and Public Culture* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1997). In providing a degree of insulation from the open literary marketplace, these figures represented the modernization of patronage, and a valuable mediating force between the poet and the people.

the prairie muses help him to utter it!”¹⁰⁵ This imagining of the poet-prophet drew on Lindsay’s first poem in *Poetry*, “General William Booth Enters Into Heaven.” Booth, evangelical Protestant and founder of the Salvation Army, had argued in *In Darkest England and the Way Out* (1890) that the poor in the industrialized world were just as poorly off as those in “Darkest Africa.”¹⁰⁶ The Army sought to win the souls of all the disadvantaged and marginalized for Christ by improving their conditions. Lindsay’s poem is flanked by marginal notations that mimic the vocal and instrumental cues of a musical setting and cast the poem as a performance text. This evocation of performance located the dynamic between poet-prophet and spiritual crowd through the collective energy of the revivalist meeting. Monroe’s description of Tagore’s poetry as “part of the simple ritual of the Brahma Somaj church”¹⁰⁷ in her featured portraits of the two invited *Poetry*’s readers to draw the parallel.

“General William Booth” borrows its score from that of the hymn “Are You Washed in the Blood of the Lamb?”, the lyrics and music for which were composed by the American Presbyterian minister Elisha Hoffman in the late nineteenth century.¹⁰⁸ The choice of this hymn was significant for several reasons. First, reflecting the collective experience of spiritual leader and crowd, it was not written for private reading but corporate song, which in the terms of Lindsay’s poem correlates to an aspiration of co-

¹⁰⁵ Monroe, “Lindsay’s Poems,” *Poetry* 3.5 (Feb 1914): 133.

¹⁰⁶ William Booth, *In Darkest England and the Way Out* (New York: Funk and Wagnalls, 1890), 14.

¹⁰⁷ Monroe, “Notes,” *Poetry* 2.3 (Jun 1913), 115.

¹⁰⁸ Elisha Albright Hoffman, *Best Hymns: From All the Books and New Ones to be Made the Best* (Chicago, IL: Evangelical Publishing Company, 1894), 52.

devotion with his readership. Second, it relies on the imagery of the new raiment worn by the saved in the Book of Revelation, which provided American Protestants with resources for describing the Kingdom of God that was the object of millennial fervor. In aligning this hymn and its imagery with the goals of the Salvation Army, Lindsay was blurring the line between personal and social salvation, the competing emphases of what Martin Marty has called the “two-party system” of American Protestantism that developed after the Civil War.¹⁰⁹ The anaphora of “Are you...” that structures the hymn reflects the personal urgency of the question of salvation, while the subject of the poem is Booth’s proud parade of “lepers,” “drug-fiends,” “convicts,” and “loons,” those whom society has failed, marching to a heavenly court of justice presided over by Jesus.¹¹⁰ Lastly, the choice of the hymn related to the Army’s motto, “Blood and Fire,” the saving blood of Christ juxtaposed with the righteous tongues of fire inflamed by the Holy Spirit. The poem effectively provided the magazine with a pseudo-interactive expression of interdenominational American Protestantism that assumed its audiences’ familiarity and willingness to participate, with Lindsay as revival leader. It consolidated the American crowd in a way that the magazine’s history with Tagore suggested was not yet possible on a global scale.

“Booth” imagines the titular character’s ascent to Heaven as a scene of apocalyptic fulfillment, his crusade celebrated by Jesus. The emergence of Jesus from the courthouse confirms his identification with institutions of secular authority, while the

¹⁰⁹ Martin E. Marty, *Righteous Empire: The Protestant Experience in America* (New York: Dial Press, 1970), 177-87.

¹¹⁰ Vachel Lindsay, “General William Booth Enters Into Heaven,” *Poetry* 1.4 (Jan 1913): 101-3.

setting of the scene after death anticipates the Second Coming and witnesses him act through the transformative powers of his divinity rather than the legal system:

Flutes	<p>Jesus came from out the Court-House door, Stretched his hands above the passing door, Booth saw not, but led his queer ones there Round and round the mighty Court-House square. Yet in an instant all that blear review Marched on spotless, clad in raiment new. The lame were straightened, withered limbs uncurled And blind eyes opened on a sweet new world.</p>
Bass drums louder and louder	<p>Drabs and vixens in a flash made whole! Gone was the weasel-head, the flash, the jowl; Sages and sibyls now, and athletes clean, Rulers of empires, and of forests green!</p>

The hosts were sandalled and their wings were fire –

Are you washed in the blood of the Lamb?

But their noise played havoc with the angel-choir.

Are you washed the blood of the Lamb?

Oh, shout salvation! it was good to see

Kings and princes by the Lamb set free.

The banjos rattled and the tambourines

Jing-jing-jingled in the hands of queens!¹¹¹

Grand chorus –
 tambourines
 all
 instruments
 in full blast

Booth lost his sight in advanced age, lending him the prophetic power of the poet, whose vision enabled the rest of the group to reach a “sweet new world” of justice and peace. The sad comedy of this group’s juxtaposition – “athletes clean” alongside “Sages and sibyls,” “King and princes,” and all the pariahs – borders on an unintentional parody of Whitmanian vulgarity, the democratic leveling of *Song of Myself* reduced to a contrast between chaotic squalor and spotless order that Jesus creates “in an instant.” “Blear review” militarizes the group, in keeping with the structure of the Army, while “raiment

¹¹¹ Lindsay, “General William Booth Enters Into Heaven,” 102-3.

new” attests the renewed purity of this company before Jesus. The poem beatifies Booth by way of previewing the Army’s triumphal success on Earth.

Like Tagore’s poetry, Lindsay’s divided Monroe and Pound. This was evident in their struggle over the recipient of the first annual *Poetry* prize for best poem. Pound encouraged Monroe to split the prize money between Yeats and Tagore.¹¹² Monroe ended up selecting Yeats and procuring money for another prize to award to Lindsay.¹¹³ The following spring, Monroe implied that Yeats had christened Lindsay America’s leading future poet at a banquet held in his honor by the magazine’s guarantors in Chicago.¹¹⁴ That August, Pound responded with a sequence appearing in *Poetry* slotting a poem of friendship addressed to Yeats, “Amitiés,” alongside an envoi poem, “Salvationists,”¹¹⁵ expressing antipathy toward Lindsay’s Christianity and Monroe’s favoritism. Members of the Salvation Army were officially known as salvationists, and in hijacking the term to describe his own poems, Pound was not only expressing his frustration with the dominance of the Protestant establishment but also with Monroe’s editorial agenda. However, Monroe granted that Lindsay’s poetry did not consistently live up to his exalted claims for it: “His sincerity in this use of his art hardly admits of question; the point for us is, how far does he, in this first book of poems, get his message into poetry?”¹¹⁶ This

¹¹² Pound, Letter to Harriet Monroe, 9 Nov 1913, Series I, Subseries II, Box 38, Folder 26, *Poetry: A Magazine of Verse* Papers, Special Collections Research Center, Regenstein Library, University of Chicago.

¹¹³ Monroe, “Announcement of Prizes,” *Poetry* 3.2 (Nov 1913): 72-4.

¹¹⁴ Monroe, “Poetry’s Banquet,” *Poetry* 4.1 (Apr 1914): 25-9.

¹¹⁵ Pound, “Salvationists,” *Poetry* 4.5 (Aug 1914): 172-3.

¹¹⁶ Monroe, “Lindsay’s Poems,” 183.

review appeared in the same issue as Monroe's "Our Canal," leaving us to ask whether competitiveness affected her critical stance. In any event, the judgment of Lindsay's inconsistency, which has contributed to his absence from most literary histories of the period, threatened one of the three supports of beauty, spirituality, and popularity on which the poet-prophet stood or fell.

IV. Poetic Spirituality in Monroe's Poetry

Monroe also believed that she met all of her criteria for becoming the poet-prophet of the West. But "Our Canal," the poem in which she puts on this mantle in the pages of *Poetry*, must be read in light of an earlier formative moment for her conception of poetic spirituality – the 1893 Columbian Exposition or World's Fair, held in her hometown of Chicago. It was there that the tension between Protestant chauvinism and world religious fellowship crystallized and the force of the Protestant establishment was brought to bear on her career. The Exposition's Parliament of Religions was an unprecedented experiment in interreligious contact. Representatives from what were considered the ten world religions were invited to share the same stage and inform spectators about their history and traditions.¹¹⁷ Monroe recalled the Parliament as the "most important and spectacular of all" the Exposition's international congresses.¹¹⁸ The banging of the gavel to begin the first session "seemed a great moment in human history,

¹¹⁷ In addition to Protestantism, Roman Catholicism, and Judaism, these religions were Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism, Zoroastrianism, Taoism, Confucianism, and Shintoism. On their status as "world" religions, see Tomoko Masuzawa, *The Invention of World Religions: Or, How European Universalism Was Preserved in the Language of Pluralism* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2006).

¹¹⁸ Monroe, *Poet's Life*, 136.

prophetic of the promised new era of tolerance and peace.”¹¹⁹ This optimism brought together Monroe’s appreciation for spirituality with the more widespread belief in post-millennial strains of American Protestant theology.¹²⁰ Looking back in the introduction to her 1935 *Chosen Poems*, Monroe wrote, “If this seems incredible, the skeptic need only look through the files of contemporary newspapers to be convinced that most of his countrymen were then afire with hope for a millennium of grand achievement and brotherly love among the nations.”¹²¹ She gave the dialogue among religions initiated at the Parliament pride of place among claims for human progress on display at the Exposition, validating this Pentecostal premonition of achievement and love.

Monroe’s account of the Parliament in her autobiography centered on Swami Vivekananda, a Vedanta monk who attended as part of the Hindu delegation, and who, according to Monroe, “stole the whole show and captured the town” due to his “perfect English.”¹²² The Parliament created widespread interest in Vivekananda, who went on lecture tours around the country afterward, “making,” Monroe claimed, “converts by the score to his hope of uniting East and West in a world religion above the tumult of

¹¹⁹ Monroe, *Poet’s Life*, 136.

¹²⁰ This optimism about the opening of a new chapter in world history resonated with the widespread belief in post-millennial strains of American Protestant theology, as Monroe’s use of the temporal marker “millennium” in the following quotation suggests. Christian millennial thought interprets Chapter 20 of the Book of Revelation, which prophesies a thousand-year reign of peace under Christ before the end of the world. In the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, pre-millennialists believed that the world would descend into chaos before Christ’s return; post-millennialists believed that the reign of peace had begun or was imminent; for a definition and context, see Randall Balmer and Lauren F. Winner, *Protestantism in America* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002), 253-4. For a reading of the Exposition as a whole as an expression of millennial optimism, see Richard Hughes Seager, *The World’s Parliament of Religions: The East/West Encounter, Chicago, 1893* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1995), Part I.

¹²¹ Monroe, *Chosen Poems: A Selection from My Book of Verse* (New York: Macmillan, 1935), vii.

¹²² Monroe, *Poet’s Life*, 137.

controversy.” Monroe capped off this report with her recollection of running into Vivekananda years later in downtown Chicago and watching him ponder the glory of a skyscraper, as though his vision represented the perfect intersection of modern progress and timeless spiritual wisdom. William R. Hutchison, complicating this triumphal image, notes that Vivekananda’s address upset many delegates by openly criticizing the proselytizing intent behind their calls to unity.¹²³ Hutchison connects this reaction to the ethos of the Exposition as a whole, arguing that it “qualified its welcome to the world’s diverse peoples with constant reminders that the West, and the host nation in particular, represented the evolutionary endpoint toward which all human societies were moving,”¹²⁴ particularly “the eventual triumph...of Christianity and the Christian West.”¹²⁵ Although Vivekananda was “an ally of liberal universalists,” he retained his ethno-religious particularism at the Fair and in lecture tours promoting his Vedanta Society.¹²⁶ Just as Monroe flattened out the complex circumstances of Vivekananda’s address, she would flatten out the South Asian religious and political landscape to maintain her image of a distinct East and West poised to unite, finding an analogy to Vivekananda’s Bengali Hindu heritage, perfect English, and modernity in Tagore.

Monroe had a more prominent role at the Exposition than that of witness, one in which the full weight of the establishment was brought to bear on her participation; she composed *The Columbian Ode*, a poem commemorating the Fair performed in part at the

¹²³ Hutchison, *Religious Pluralism in America*, 181-2.

¹²⁴ *Ibid.*, 172.

¹²⁵ *Ibid.*, 180.

¹²⁶ Schmidt, *Restless Souls*, 162-4.

opening ceremony. The poem seconded the triumphalism of many of the Parliament's Protestant delegates, conflating love and imperial aggression. After depicting Spain and England ceding imperial prerogative to the United States, it narrates the country's providential development from discovery by Columbus to a coming democratic utopia. This development is embodied by Columbia, the female personification of the nation who dated back the late eighteenth century and gave the Exposition its name. The Ode envisions "the Columbia of the future – her search into nature's secrets; the march of science; and finally, her leadership of nations to a warless world of liberty and love."¹²⁷ The process of Columbia's modernization remakes the entire world in God's image: "Love shall make the world a holy place / Where Knowledge dares unveil God's very face."¹²⁸ The rise of American power is figured as the improvement of man's relationship with this immanent God, which involves Democracy freeing the world from poverty, oppression, and war. Monroe did not trade on the poem, publishing three collections of poetry, including two in the 1910s, without the *Ode*, before finally reprinting it in a 1924 collection, the introduction to which called it a product of its moment.¹²⁹ It nevertheless provides a window onto the tension between the promise of post-Protestant world religion Monroe glimpsed in Vivekananda and the establishment perspective of her official contribution to the Exposition.

¹²⁷ Monroe, *Poet's Life*, 120.

¹²⁸ Monroe, *The Columbian Ode* (Chicago, IL: W. Irving Way, 1893), 22.

¹²⁹ Monroe, *The Difference and other poems, including the Columbian Ode* (New York: Macmillan, 1924), 1-2.

One year into *Poetry's* run, Monroe sensed a new opportunity for poets to celebrate American power and progress. The Panama Canal, which had been under construction by the United States since 1904, was nearing completion. Monroe wrote an editorial reviving the purpose of the *Ode*. This time, the Canal itself, not the manifold displays of the Exposition or the utopia of the future brought together in the figures of Columbia and Democracy, would be the great deed worthy of a great nation. The act of joining Atlantic to Pacific, Monroe rhapsodized, carried “a certain poetic glamor,”¹³⁰ the Canal could be considered “the work itself,”¹³¹ and the builders poets, “in imagination and idealistic motive if not in words.”¹³² This expansion of American influence represented the opening of a new frontier, “destiny stretching her long arm southward from the chosen seat of our security.”¹³³ As Robin Schulze has observed, Monroe “participated in the imperialist and eugenicist discourses of natural conquest,”¹³⁴ responding especially to the historian Frederick Jackson Turner’s idea that frontier expansion had been the decisive factor in determining American character. Thus, while Monroe granted that “Our Canal becomes the focal point in the politics of our age,”¹³⁵ “politics” resembled conquest, Panama being “a ridiculous little republic, which, by the

¹³⁰ Monroe, “Our Modern Epic,” 23.

¹³¹ *Ibid.*

¹³² *Ibid.*, 26.

¹³³ *Ibid.*, 24.

¹³⁴ Robin Schulze, “Harriet Monroe’s Pioneer Modernism” *Legacy* 21.4 (2004): 59.

¹³⁵ Monroe, “Our Modern Epic,” 24.

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twist of Roosevelt's wrist, rose to the honor of providing a background for our epic."¹³⁶ If the Canal represented America bending nature its will, then Panama could hardly be an obstacle. Monroe ended her inflated representation of the cosmopolitan labor and management force occupying the country with a call for a poet to give it a voice: "Will the articulate poets prove worthy of them?"¹³⁷ Answering her own call, Monroe's poem appeared several months later at the head of the February 1914 issue.

"Our Canal" reprised several formal characteristics of the *Columbian Ode* while modifying others, indicative of Monroe's freer hand. Instead of the *Ode*'s Pindaric strophe-antistrophe-epode structure with elaborately heterometric lyric stanzas,¹³⁸ "Canal" consists of long irregular stanzas of stacked tetrameter quatrains, like lyrical ballads, a form more suited to the crowd. These stanzas are bookended by two italicized sections, akin to the sung sections of the *Ode*. But these sections did not define America in relation to European powers. Rather, they defined America as the leader of the West in uniting with the East and hence, in the logic of the poem, uniting the world. The neoclassicism of the *Ode* also fell away in favor of language appropriated from the New Testament stressing the Christian identity of America and the West. But the poem retained the narrative of the gradual revelation of an immanent God through American development and expansion, and Monroe connected the two poems in the Apologia that opened her *Chosen Poems* of 1935, closing the nineteen-year gap that separated their

¹³⁶ Monroe, "Our Modern Epic," 24.

¹³⁷ *Ibid.*, 26.

¹³⁸ Stephen F. Fogle and Paul H. Fry, "Ode," in *The New Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1993).

publications: “That its optimism was sincere and capable of persistence is proved by other poems of the nineties, and especially by the triumphant tone of *Our Canal*, which was written twenty years later.”¹³⁹

The poem’s central conceit is of the low brought high. Panama starts as a trifling land of primitives that through America’s creation of the Canal is transformed into “a girdle of love divine” that supports and reshapes the whole world.¹⁴⁰ The inhabitants of “*lazy laughing Panama*” occupy the same role of savage as the Native Americans briefly mentioned in the *Ode*,¹⁴¹ except that the land’s value is not what it produces but its strategic position, the country a “*ribbon-twist / That ties the continents together*,”¹⁴² echoing Monroe’s description of Roosevelt’s strength as “the twist of [his] wrist” that undoes the ribbon. The six middle stanzas consist of three call-and-response exchanges, the poet asking symbolic populations at the Canal site – “Sons of the pioneer,”¹⁴³ “Sons of the men who founded / New states in the wilds,”¹⁴⁴ and “Sons of the dreamers brave / Who followed the Truth austere”¹⁴⁵ – to explain their deed in light of their American heritage. These groups are the poem’s dedicatees, “*COLONEL GOETHALS / and other laborers / in the Canal Zone*.”¹⁴⁶ These exchanges layer scientific-industrial, political,

¹³⁹ Monroe, *Chosen Poems*, viii.

¹⁴⁰ Monroe, “Our Canal,” *Poetry* 3.5 (Feb 1914): 157.

¹⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 153.

¹⁴² *Ibid.*

¹⁴³ *Ibid.*, 154.

¹⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 155.

¹⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 157.

and religious progress as great deeds that poetic spirituality publicizes and glorifies. The technological adeptness involved in building the Canal “would make the old gods laugh / For the bitter games they played / With the secrets they kept in vain,”¹⁴⁷ lines that denigrate polytheism while grafting the Prometheus myth onto the modern pace of technological innovation. The advent of industrial construction machinery allowed for the description of the Canal as “the thing not made with hands,”¹⁴⁸ an allusion to “the temple not made with hands,”¹⁴⁹ which Jesus contrasts with the money changers in the Temple, a scene of prophetic critique of the corruption of institutional religion. Lastly, the pioneer claims that the Canal is the “last gift of the grand old workman, Time,”¹⁵⁰ suggesting that it represented the summit of technological achievement and should be interpreted within a post-millennial framework that keeps the end of history in view. Having established the wonder and significance of the Canal itself, the poem moves on to depict the modern state that it makes possible in the eyes of the founders. This state wrests freedom from necessity and expresses its collective well-being in corporate song, collapsing the distinction between art, life, and worship: “a perfect state... / Where each one has his place / And a measure more than his mead... / Where wan Disease, the slayer, / Is trapped in his poison lair / With squalor and Want and Care; / Where the Work is a marching song / Sung by us all together, / Bearing the race along / Through good and evil

¹⁴⁶ Monroe, “Our Canal,” 158.

¹⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 154.

¹⁴⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁴⁹ Bible, King James Version, Mark 14:58.

¹⁵⁰ Monroe, “Our Canal,” 155.

weather.”¹⁵¹ This takes the corporate song of the revival evoked by Lindsay and integrates it into the rhythm of daily life.

But these two groups of builders are insufficient as agents of spirituality; they are ultimately exemplars of the material accomplishments of technological ingenuity and social justice. The dreamers, by contrast, look beyond the deed itself and the authoring state to the Canal’s spiritual significance. They “wait at the gate / Till the dream shall be the law,”¹⁵² their accomplishment in the future, inside the gates of the Kingdom of Heaven. This union of law and dream requires a spiritual quest, which the poem represents as a national crusade:

Ghost-led, our ships shall sail
West to the ancient East.
Once more the quest of the Grail,
And the greatest shall be the least.
We shall circle the earth around
With peace like a garland fine;
The warring world shall be bound
With a girdle of love divine.
What build we from coast to coast?
‘Tis a path for the Holy Ghost.
Oh Tomorrow and Yesterday
At its gate clasp hands, touch lips;
They shall send me forth in ships
To find the perfect way.¹⁵³

The tension between Protestant empire and global spirituality manifests in the dreamers’ long list of paradoxes and oppositions. America takes the westward course of empire to

¹⁵¹ Monroe, “Our Canal,” 156.

¹⁵² *Ibid.*, 157.

¹⁵³ *Ibid.*, 157-8.

make contact with the East; modern America visits antiquated East, also figured, respectively, as Tomorrow and Yesterday; the East is the Christian “Grail;” the inversion of hierarchy from the Sermon on the Mount indicates the posture of humility with which this mission is conducted; the center of ribbon-twist turned girdle as contact point is juxtaposed with the circumference of the peace “garland” to “circle the world around” as domination; “the perfect way” for both is “a path for the Holy Ghost,” the source of evangelical zeal. This spiritual quest is glossed with a loose quotation of the Gospel of Luke: “All that was writ shall be fulfilled at last.”¹⁵⁴ The words are spoken by Jesus in the context of warnings about the mass destruction preceding his return, which suggests that the spiritual quest in “Our Canal” could involve military conflict. This possibility is reinforced in the contrast between the two types of ships given – “caravels,” early modern sailing ships used by Columbus, as though America were in turn embarking on a voyage of discovery, and “cruisers,” or warships.¹⁵⁵ Monroe’s dream of East and West “keep[ing] their ancient tryst” holds out the hope of global spirituality, but the cruisers must be present. The conclusive image of “our song of glory / Rung in the chime of India’s temple bells” accommodates both of these possibilities.¹⁵⁶ The frontier opened up is therefore spiritual but also territorial. Reviewing *You and I*, the 1914 volume of Monroe’s poems in which the poem was reprinted, in the pages of *Poetry*, Edgar Lee Masters noticed continuities with the *Columbian Ode*. He questioned her stylistic

¹⁵⁴ Monroe, “Our Canal,” 158. The King James Version of Luke 21:22 reads: “For these are the days of vengeance, that all things which are written may be fulfilled.”

¹⁵⁵ Ibid.

¹⁵⁶ Ibid.

approach, asking, rhetorically, “how nearly a Greek saw an Olympian game through an ode of Pindar, and whether he got an idealization or an ennobled image through the excitation of the imagination, or whether he saw it clearly and abstracted a vital significance from it.”¹⁵⁷ Masters classed “Our Canal” among Monroe’s poems of modernity “that do not seem to measure up to her sense of realism.”¹⁵⁸

If the poem did not measure up to Monroe’s sense of realism, it might have measured up to her sense of Whitman. As Josephine Nock-Hee Park has demonstrated, Whitman engaged in the same variety of American Orientalism that identified the East as an ally of the expanding West. Whitman’s “Passage to India” celebrated the Suez Canal, among other technological and industrial developments, in much the same way as Monroe celebrated the opening of the Panama Canal, as a resumption of American discovery that would double as a primitivist return home.¹⁵⁹ But rather than Monroe’s classes of American “Sons,” the one “Son” in “Passage to India” is “the true Son of God” who will one day unite the world and is identified with the figure of the poet,¹⁶⁰ in contradistinction to the present-day poet Whitman and his soul “Chanting our chant of pleasant exploration.”¹⁶¹ Monroe not only utilized a more thoroughly American and scripturally allusive language, but combined it with a barely veiled bellicosity, addressing readers of *Poetry*, in tandem with her editorial from the previous October, as jingoistic

¹⁵⁷ Edgar Lee Masters, “Review of *You and I*, by Harriet Monroe,” *Poetry* 5.4 (Jan 1915): 190.

¹⁵⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁵⁹ Josephine Nock-Hee Park, *Apparitions of Asia: Modernist Form and Asian American Poetics* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 4-6.

¹⁶⁰ Whitman, *Leaves of Grass*, 349.

¹⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 351.

American Protestants. The collectivity of the title is not the world but America, and the dreamers do not imagine the political symbolism of raising the American flag over India but the religious one of temple bells.

Although “Our Canal” appeared in *You and I*, Monroe did not include it in the first edition of *The New Poetry* in 1917. The First World War had made optimism about global unity difficult, and Monroe later grouped the *Columbian Ode* and “Our Canal” as the bookends of a distinct era: “These two poems may be said to mark the beginning and end of the final period of an epoch, a period full of illusions and uncomfortable orthodoxies, resting on an apparent stability which was soon to be rudely shaken.”¹⁶² It rounded out the period “in which any poet could have chanted his faith in an imminent brotherhood of nations.”¹⁶³ In retrospect, “Our Canal” became the final cry of a period in which Monroe’s hopes of combining poetic, national, and religious progress ran roughly parallel to the “orthodoxy” of the Protestant establishment.

V. Toeing the Establishment Line

Other evidence from the magazine in its early years unconnected to poetic spirituality demonstrates support for the Protestant establishment. For one, *Poetry* incited Christians to subscribe, adopting a tactic of mass-market commerce indicative of its ambitions for growth. A Christmas subscription form appeared intermittently in *Poetry* in January and December of the years 1913 through 1919 featuring the following slogans

¹⁶² Monroe, *Chosen Poems*, viii.

¹⁶³ *Ibid.*

and copy: “A GOOD CHRISTMAS PRESENT: POETRY FOR TWELVE MONTHS;” “A CHRISTMAS PRESENT FOR THE WHOLE YEAR;” “Your Xmas Shopping via POETRY;” “Give POETRY to your friends. All lovers of the art should endeavor to increase its publicity. One year’s subscription as a Christmas present will be a constant reminder of your goodwill;” “Such a gift would especially be appreciated by men in the service, who love to keep poems in their pockets and learn them by heart.”¹⁶⁴ The treatment of Christmas in this way was not new. The significance of the occasion underwent a substantial shift in nineteenth-century America, from dividing Protestant denominations to uniting Protestants and Catholics alike in the celebration of a holiday with pronounced secular, commercial aspects.¹⁶⁵ The version of the form that lays bare the essential logic of marketing subscriptions as Christmas gifts conflates the duty of widening *Poetry*’s subscriber base with the duty of Christmas goodwill. These new readers could become effective means of spreading the word about *Poetry* and the spiritual poet-prophets stoking the “far-blown sympathies, exaltations, ideals” of the crowd. *The Crisis*, the official journal of the NAACP, followed suit, in addition to running Christian stories, poems, and essays for a readership assumed or directed to have a strong investment in the black church. Even *The Little Review*, founded in Chicago as a multi-generic, more aesthetically adventurous rival to *Poetry*, was not above selling subscriptions as Christmas gifts in December.¹⁶⁶ Like these other magazines, *Poetry*, in

¹⁶⁴ See Illustrations 1-5.

¹⁶⁵ R. Laurence Moore, *Selling God: American Religion in the Marketplace of Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), 205-6.

¹⁶⁶ Subscription Form, *The Little Review* 2.9 (Dec 1915): 43.

appealing to Christians as consumers, assumed their majority in numbers and purchasing power. This marked such an appeal as an affirmation of the Protestant establishment. Beyond the subscription forms, the advertising function of which were overt, Monroe referred to December issues as the “Christmas number” in the “Notes and Announcements” of the third issue, in December 1912,¹⁶⁷ and intermittently for several years thereafter, including in the Note where she proclaimed Tagore’s fitness for the Christmas issue. This reflected the importance to her of *Poetry*’s readers embracing this sentiment without experiencing feelings of hostility or cognitive dissonance.

The other feature of the magazine congenial to the establishment, Monroe’s use of her editorial prerogative and blue pencil, was the other side of actively guarding against giving Christian readers offense. After the Parliament of Religions, she would have construed this enforcement of a boundary beyond which religious criticism was not permitted as the logical consequence of embracing the best in world religions, including one’s own. The cuts that Monroe suggested to one of the most canonical poems in American modernist poetry, Wallace Stevens’s “Sunday Morning,” demonstrate concern over the poem’s provocative post-Christian aspects. In the last stanza of the *Harmonium* and standard anthology version, the poem reaches a stark theological conclusion. A voice cries out to the female protagonist, denying the divinity of Jesus: “The tomb in Palestine / Is not the porch of spirits lingering, / But the grave of Jesus where he lay.”¹⁶⁸ The poem figures this voice off the water as the interior tributary by which the woman’s soul will reach the freedom of the open sea. Monroe softened the force of this voice by cutting

¹⁶⁷ Monroe, “Notes and Announcements,” *Poetry: A Magazine of Verse* 1.3 (December 1912): 99.

¹⁶⁸ Wallace Stevens, *The Collected Poems of Wallace Stevens* (New York: Vintage, 1954), 70.

three stanzas and suggesting a new order for the rest. She requested that Stevens place the final stanza in second position, which is how the poem appears in the November 1915 issue. Stevens consented to the order, but reverted to the text's original form for *Harmonium* (1923).

The *Poetry* version, instead of ending with the mortal Jesus and the profane pigeons (as opposed to the doves of the Holy Spirit) making “Ambiguous undulations as they sink, / Downward to darkness,” the poem ends with a ring of men chanting “their boisterous devotion to the sun – / Not as a god, but as a god might be.”¹⁶⁹ This confuses the sequencing of the poem. In the standard version, four of the eight stanzas begin with a line mentioning “she,” sustaining the thread of the opening vignette, in which the bourgeois woman luxuriates in her nightgown and delinquency from church. In Monroe's version, the first four stanzas represent the woman, and the fifth abruptly switches to the men. Although their relation to the woman is unstated, the juxtaposition of her plush yet tortured meditations and the vigor of their primitive communal worship reflects the themes of the standard version well enough for readers who know both, even as it hints obliquely that her imagining of the men is a form of sexual reverie. More importantly, Monroe removed Stanzas II, III, and VI.¹⁷⁰ Stanza II contains the line “Divinity must live within herself,” stanza III wonders “shall the earth / seem all of paradise that we shall know” and bemoans the sky's “dividing and indifferent blue,” and stanza VI asks, “Is

¹⁶⁹ Stevens, “Sunday Morning I-V,” *Poetry: A Magazine of Verse* 7.2 (November 1915): 83.

¹⁷⁰ The stanzas were not merely removed or rearranged as wholes. Other lines, such as “Death is the mother of beauty,” migrated from one stanza.

there no change of death in paradise?”¹⁷¹ These lines are more aggressively skeptical from a metaphysical standpoint, and incompatible with the program of poetic spirituality. In separating the revelation of the humanity of Jesus from these plangent expressions of theological questioning and doubt, Monroe’s version forecloses the possibility of their concatenation. Those who have read and praised the poem over the years could hardly imagine it without these moments, but they were absent for the first readers of the poem, at Monroe’s request. She also glossed over the religious content of the poem in a form letter of a type she often sent out to literary organizations that touched potential subscribers. Describing the November 1915 issue, she highlighted the searching conversation with God in the two leadoff poems by Masters, while writing of “Sunday Morning” only that “Stevens, in five long stanzas...proves himself a virtuoso of rhythmic skill.”¹⁷² Critics of the poem admire its blank verse, but to overlook the religious subject-matter whitewashes the achievement of the poem entirely.

VI. The Open Door After Poetic Spirituality

Although the entry of America into World War I did not close *Poetry*’s Open Door, it was dispiriting for poetic spirituality. Monroe recalled that the war was “a destructive shock to my optimistic hope for the brotherhood of man.”¹⁷³ She also claimed, in a more deliberate expiatory gesture, to have “never joined forces with the

¹⁷¹ Stevens, *Collected Poems*, 67-69.

¹⁷² Monroe, Form Letter to the Literary Editor, November 1915, Series I, Subseries II, Box 46, Folder 8, *Poetry: A Magazine of Verse Papers*, Special Collections Research Center, Regenstein Library, University of Chicago.

¹⁷³ Monroe, *Chosen Poems*, ix.

many who believed in the spiritualizing influence of war,” which was absurd so long as she continued to republish “Our Canal.”¹⁷⁴ In any event, the magazine’s shift from optimism to chastened realism beginning in 1914 included the solicitation of poems about “the present European situation” that *Poetry* published in the September issue: “While all poems national and patriotic will be considered, the editors of POETRY believe that a poem in the interest of peace will express the aim of the highest civilization.”¹⁷⁵ Contrary to the literary-historical commonplace that the war was a moment of secular rupture that made religious belief untenable, a number of the poems that resulted grappled with the religious causes of war. Karle Wilson Baker’s “Unser Gott” classified the religious corollaries of competing European nationalisms and enjoined, “[S]ince we must make our God, / Oh, let us make Him large enough for all, / Or cease to prate of Him!”¹⁷⁶ The poem’s title, taken from Martin Luther’s hymn “Ein Feste Berg is Unser Gott” (A Mighty Fortress is Our God), indicted German aggression as an outgrowth of religious belief. It not only investigated relations between Christianity and nationalism, but also between Christianity and racism, as they complicated the ideal of overcoming difference at the heart of poetic spirituality. Monroe would denounce this hypocrisy on the part of the West in the 1916 Christmas Number, quoting images of peace from Milton’s Nativity Ode: “What can be said for a world whose nineteen-hundred-and-sixteenth Christmas dawns to the roar of guns, a world which in nearly two thousand years of vaunted loyalty to the Prince of Peace has not yet molded its age of gold out of the refractory ore of races

¹⁷⁴ Monroe, *Chosen Poems*, ix.

¹⁷⁵ Monroe, War Poems Advertisement, *Poetry* 4.6 (Sep 1914): n.p..

¹⁷⁶ Karle Wilson Baker, “Unser Gott,” *Poetry* 5.2 (Nov 1914): 76.

and nations?”¹⁷⁷ The great era that *Poetry* had come into being to celebrate had been decisively postponed by an inconsistent historical development – the Christian West at war with itself.

Monroe died before finishing her autobiography but made a point to compose a concluding chapter gathering her last thoughts on religion. The chapter presented a picture of humble but vigorous agnosticism unconcerned with the elevation of particular poets, places, or religious traditions and hardened by time. She confessed that she was a “heathen,” which she defined as opposition to exclusive religious affiliation, leaving the world religions model behind: “If religion means allegiance to any sect or church, or any grand division of the great historic faiths – then I am completely irreligious.”¹⁷⁸ She had concluded that none of these religions provided an adequate account of “the creative force which whirls the atoms and the stars,” reflecting, perhaps, a sense of the increasing strength of secular scientific worldviews. Engaging in speculative cosmology rather than prophecy, she offered an account of human life consistent with such worldviews, that it, like all life, “struggle[s]...to assert its dominance over destructive forces, the momentary conquest and the final defeat – this is the universal story of which all lesser tales are mere chapters and paragraphs.”¹⁷⁹ But she also granted religion’s persistence, in a tone at odds with the respect for world religions in poetic spirituality, and in keeping with the shift of the wartime period, writing that “there are times when religion seems to me the greatest curse in human history, the first cause of wars, of persecutions, tortures, of ethical

¹⁷⁷ Monroe, “Christmas and the Poets,” *Poetry* 7.3 (Dec 1915): 141.

¹⁷⁸ Monroe, *Poet’s Life*, 449.

¹⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 449-50.

confusions and errors, the enemy of reason, of tolerance, of courtesy.”¹⁸⁰ The wearisome predictability of this blight on humanity was due to “the distance between the teaching of idealistic founders and the practice of narrow-minded followers,” which seemed “a chasm too wide and deep to bridge – I gaze into it with a feeling of futility and despair.”¹⁸¹ While Monroe kept her wonder at the non-deistic, creative force of the universe and its enactment on a grand scale of the pattern of “momentary conquest” and “final defeat” that structured worthwhile human lives, she developed new contempt for the social ills of religion. This contempt recognized the ultimate defeat, at the hands of sectarian followers, of the spiritual exemplars that religion inspired. In other words, Monroe came around, as editor and seeker, to the position of Whitman’s that she had unceremoniously reversed. To have great poet-prophets, there must be great audiences, too.

Although poetic spirituality sputtered, the confusion of poetic success and imperial conquest persisted. Monroe’s 1917 introduction to *The New Poetry* correlated the two with the pioneer language of manifest destiny, mentioning, instead of spirituality, the “spirit of beauty,” transposing conquest from the geographical to the aesthetic realm: “[W]e have tried to be hospitable to the adventurous, the experimental, because these are the qualities of pioneers, who look forward, not backward, and who may lead on, further than we can see as yet, to new domains of the ever-conquering spirit of beauty.”¹⁸² This

¹⁸⁰ Monroe, *Poet’s Life*, 451.

¹⁸¹ *Ibid.*

¹⁸² Alice Corbin Henderson and Harriet Monroe, Ed., *The New Beauty – An Anthology* (New York: Macmillan, 1917), v iii.

focus on aesthetics looked forward to the future of the magazine, and to a secular future for American poetry. While the abandonment of poetic spirituality did not necessarily mean the abandonment of the magazine's concessions to Protestantism, considered as part of the mainstream of American culture, both developments paved the way for *Poetry's* conception of itself as constructing the mainstream of American poetry. As mentioned earlier, recent *Poetry* editor Christian Wiman named spirituality one feature of this mainstream, though not one essential to the general development of poetry, like Monroe had with poetic spirituality. But the dynamic of growing the mainstream by assimilating the other, which Monroe had conceived religiously more than poetically, has now come to be primarily poetic. Most notably, in recent years, the feature on Flarf and Conceptual Writing in the July/August 2009 issue of *Poetry* was an act of editorial tokenism similar to Monroe's publication of Tagore. K. Silem Mohammad, founding member of the Flarf listserv, treated the appearance as such, crudely reducing the magazine to a venue where hucksters peddle "crappy"¹⁸³ nature poetry – "if you like poems about trees you're in for a treat"¹⁸⁴ – and ending his poem with the flat "\$10,"¹⁸⁵ the rate paid by *Poetry* per line. The secularism of contemporary American poetry can thus be measured by the changing scope of the magazine's liberal inclusiveness, the modes of pluralism it has found crucial to negotiate.

¹⁸³ K. Silem Mohammad, "Poems About Trees," *Poetry* 194.94 (Jul/Aug 2009): 322.

¹⁸⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 323.

1.

*To have great poets there must be great
audiences, too.—Whitman.*

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James Weldon Johnson's Poetry and the Social Gospel
in the Harlem Renaissance

...if God is anywhere, he is in the flag.¹⁸⁶

I. Johnson and the Politics of the Black Church

In this chapter, I investigate the representation of African American Protestantism in the poetry of James Weldon Johnson, particularly in his major yet underappreciated book of poetic sermons, *God's Trombones*. I attribute the nature of Johnson's representations to what he calls, after the concept of double consciousness formulated by W.E.B. Du Bois, "double audience,"¹⁸⁷ which, according to him, characterized the inevitable pitfalls of the black writer's irreconcilable choice to write for an exclusively white or black audience. I argue that Johnson's poetry set itself the ambitious goal of uniting these audiences under the auspices of the Protestant establishment by appealing to shared values, particularly the prophetic moralism of the Exodus and Judgment Day narratives, the national belief in equality as God-given, especially as focused through the lens of the Christology of martial sacrifice, and the covenantal understanding of American exceptionalism as a guarantee of progress and God's favor. As Johnson wrote in 1914, segregation ran "contrary to the spirit of democracy and Christianity."¹⁸⁸

¹⁸⁶ Johnson, "Saluting the Flag," in *Writings*, Ed. William L. Andrews (New York: Library of America, 2004), 624.

¹⁸⁷ Johnson, "The Dilemma of the Negro Author," in *Writings*, 745.

¹⁸⁸ Johnson, "President Wilson's 'New Freedom' and the Negro," in *Writings*, 609.

Johnson hoped that religious integration would bring about the forceful establishment of civil rights for African Americans and newfound harmony with America's white Protestant majority.

God's Trombones condenses the Bible and loosely reconstructs the conventional folk sermon of a fading figure in the black church Johnson calls the "old-time Negro preacher," whom he claims first fostered black political consciousness in America.¹⁸⁹ The book met Johnson's own call, broadcast over the previous decade, for a vernacular alternative to dialect in African American poetry. He thought that Claude McKay and Langston Hughes had answered the call in their own ways, but that neither poet showed necessary appreciation for the role that the black church could play in the formation of the New Negro. This appreciation relied on the Social Gospel movement in American Protestantism, which confronted modernity by diagnosing social structures like institutional racism and economic inequality just as sinful as individuals. Translating the Social Gospel and his integrationist mindset into the terms of a poetic persona, Johnson characterized the vernacular of his old-time Negro preacher not just as an alternative to dialect, but as a historically suggestive example of the "enlargement" of dialect enabled by the appropriation of King James English.¹⁹⁰ This enlarged English became a medium through which to imagine integration without assimilation, one that retained "racial flavor" within a unified national and religious framework.¹⁹¹ In effect, Johnson

¹⁸⁹ Johnson, *God's Trombones: Seven Negro Sermons in Verse* (New York: Viking, 1927), Sixth Printing, 2.

¹⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, 9.

¹⁹¹ Johnson, "Preface to *The Book of American Negro Poetry*," in *Writings*, 713.

thoroughly manipulated language that he introduced as memorial artifact in order to advance this project at the height of the Harlem Renaissance. Johnson's agnosticism partly determined his choice of poetry as a privileged genre for advancing this integration. Poetry allowed him to detach himself from the black church as a sociological observer and artistic aspirant while endorsing it politically. The pragmatism of the book's decision to work within the establishment parallel the politics of Johnson's NAACP work, even as his conflation of the old-time preacher with the poet, prophet of social justice, and source of uplift represented the imaginative transcendence of these constraints through poetry, that is, an artistic impetus for the establishment to evolve its position on race. The goal of *God's Trombones* was evident in the book's lengthy Preface, its descriptions of the persuasive power possessed by the old-time Negro preacher, its typological reading of African Americans as Israelites, and the poems' patriarchal representations of middle-class respectability. These values had been evident in Johnson's descriptions of African American Protestantism in his anthologies, editorials, and fiction, but came to fruition in the poetic sermons.

Prior to the ferment of the Harlem Renaissance, Johnson's image of the black church developed in the context of his experiences of the color line in the Reconstruction South. He came of age in the 1880s, just as the first wave of Jim Crow laws was being enacted. These laws compromised the tenuous political and economic gains blacks had made in the aftermath of the Civil War and laid the legal framework for segregation that reshaped American society. The rise of Jim Crow eventually prompted Johnson to move north to New York City where social and economic mobility were still possible. Over the

course of his life as a principal, newspaper editor, lawyer, composer, diplomat, poet, editorial columnist, NAACP leader, anthologist, and professor, he remained convinced that Protestant Christianity was historically beneficial for African Americans and offered a path to equality. He held this view despite coming to agnosticism in college, under the influence of the most famous spokesperson for agnosticism of the time, Robert Ingersoll, and against Atlanta University rules mandating chapel and prayer meeting attendance and forbidding travel on the Sabbath.¹⁹² He also held this view despite his disdain for the otherworldliness of many aspects of African American worship, which he believed traded worldly justice for posthumous rewards. This was why he modeled his major poetic work supporting the church on the sermon rather than the spiritual. Hughes criticized this devaluation of the spiritual, driving a class wedge between black Protestants and accusing those like Johnson of imitating white Protestants out of envy.¹⁹³

Johnson's belief in the political potential of African American Protestantism was partly derived from his sense of history and partly a concession to perceived necessity. Nathan O. Hatch has argued that evangelical Protestantism and democratization were in many respects complementary forces in nineteenth-century America.¹⁹⁴ In particular, the evangelical leveling of social and clerical hierarchies and reliance on large, public, exhortatory revivals encouraged populist democratic politics. The rejection of Calvinist

¹⁹² Eugene Levy, *James Weldon Johnson: Black Leader, Black Voice* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1976), 31.

¹⁹³ "...many an upper-class Negro church, even now, would not dream of employing a spiritual in its services;" Langston Hughes, "The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain," in *The Portable Harlem Renaissance Reader*, Ed. David Levering Lewis (New York: Penguin, 1994), 93.

¹⁹⁴ Nathan O. Hatch, *The Democratization of American Christianity* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1989), Introduction.

theology among evangelicals also nurtured the belief that the masses were not predestined for damnation. Although whites were the greatest political beneficiaries of this democratization, black churches, especially in the North, were established in significant numbers as independent forces of social and political organization. The fast-growing upstart denominations most identified with this democratization, the Methodists and Baptists, attracted the most African Americans.¹⁹⁵ The congregation Johnson belonged to as a child in Jacksonville, Ebenezer Methodist Episcopal, was part of a church that had been founded by a freed slave in Philadelphia in the late eighteenth century. Thus, by and large, African American Christianity meant African American Protestantism. Johnson could not have failed to view this historical context for twentieth-century African American political struggle as a practical constraint.

To judge from his biography, there is no good reason to think that Johnson actually believed that most white American Protestants were open to religious integration, and there are many reasons to doubt whether Johnson's conception of religious boundary crossing was a legitimate solution to racial injustice. The civil rights movement of the 1960s drew heavily on Christianity for sanction, mobilization, and rhetoric, but white Protestants at the time were at best divided on integration and equal rights. As Martin Luther King, Jr. observed in 1963, "We must face the fact that...the church is still the most segregated major institution in America,"¹⁹⁶ speaking, as the

¹⁹⁵ To put the numbers in perspective, R. Laurence Moore estimates that, after beginning to accelerate in 1800, the rate of slaves that had become church members by 1860 was 12-15%, similar to the rates among white Protestants, and that many more slaves were nominally Protestant; Moore, *Religious Outsiders and the Making of Americans* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), 176.

context makes clear, about black and white Protestants. He went on to narrate the historical context for this judgment: “I think it [desegregation] should have started in the church, but since it didn’t start in the church, our society needed to move on.” Johnson, in 1917, offered the same prescription to the audience of the African American newspaper *The New York Age*: “The writer has said several times in this column that if the white churches of this country should unite in taking a real Christian stand on the race question, a miraculous change would be brought about.”¹⁹⁷ This ambivalence about the historical role of the black church extends into the present day. As Curtis J. Evans observes, “Scholars have posed the question of whether the black church has been an instrument of freedom that promotes civil rights and social justice for blacks and other Americans or a mode of accommodation advocating an otherworldly ideology that counseled blacks to accept their lot meekly and gather whatever crumbs their white oppressors threw their way.”¹⁹⁸ Evans goes on to question the historical unity of the black church, perhaps highlighting the willfulness of functional imaginings like Johnson’s. E. Franklin Frazier claimed in his 1963 study, *The Negro Church in America*, that, while African Americans were joining “the mainstream of American life” in some respects, the black church was

¹⁹⁶ Martin Luther King, Jr., “Questions and Answers,” *Archives and Regional History Collections*, Western Michigan University Libraries, 16 Oct 2012 <<http://www.wmich.edu/library/archives/mlk/q-a.html>>, 2005.

¹⁹⁷ Johnson, “Responsibilities and Opportunities of the Colored Ministry,” in *Writings*, 625.

¹⁹⁸ Curtis J. Evans, “African American Christianity and the Burden of Race,” in *American Christianities: A History of Dominance and Diversity*, Ed. Catherine A. Brekus and W. Clark Gilpin (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2011), 102.

both “the most important cultural institution created by Negroes” and “the most important barrier to integration and the assimilation of Negroes.”¹⁹⁹

Johnson’s strategy for integration became evident in the 1910s. During this decade, he began writing political editorials, working with the NAACP, and publishing poetry. He had been writing poems since the 1890s, alternating between the generic lyrics on love and mortality – some of which *Ladies’ Home Journal* rejected for being too conventional²⁰⁰ – and dialect poems that took after Paul Laurence Dunbar. This alternation reflected his wavering between two different models of what poetry was, one universal, and one raced. He eventually reconciled these two models, by claiming that poetry became universal when it was the truest expression of a particular race. This reconciliation resulted from Johnson’s other literary activities, namely, his editorship of anthologies of African American poetry and spirituals. In prefaces to these works, Johnson judged the African American experience of Christianity to have produced the highest achievement of African American culture to date, spirituals. However, he also stated that the essence of the spirituals was still ripe for refinement into what he called the universality of high art, which reflected his awareness of their commodification as much as frustration with one enabling condition of that commodification – their apparent detachment from worldly politics. As NAACP leader, Johnson supported Social Gospel Protestantism that fought for justice for the oppressed, building up the organization through speaking tours of congregations all across the country. Johnson’s conception of high art led to poems that try to unite these two roles. This development can be traced

¹⁹⁹ E. Franklin Frazier, *The Negro Church in America* (New York: Schocken Books, 1963), 70-1.

²⁰⁰ Levy, *James Weldon Johnson*, Ch. 5.

throughout Johnson's poetry, from "Lift Every Voice and Sing" (1898) to "Fifty Years" (1913) to *God's Trombones* (1927), which charts a complex, pragmatic attitude toward African American Protestantism. The Protestant establishment had ample room for agnosticism when that agnosticism reinforced its authority, allowing for the subordination of religious conviction to racial and national politics. Johnson's poetry, especially *God's Trombones*, enacted this subordination at several different levels, reinforcing the Protestant establishment as the vehicle through which African Americans could claim the rights and recognition they deserved, with poetry as its most irresistible standard bearer.

Little work has been done relating Johnson to African American Protestantism. Jon Michael Spencer touches on the subject when establishing the role of the black church in the Harlem Renaissance. Spencer argues that the Renaissance was institutionalized in the black church in the form of the Social Gospel movement.²⁰¹ As an example, Spencer cites Johnson's receipt of a Harmon Award. The awards were distributed by the Harmon Foundation, an important philanthropic organization supporting individual black achievement, and administered by the Commission on Race Relations of the Federal Council of Churches of Christ in America, an interracial ecumenical Protestant group.²⁰² Johnson received the literature award in 1928 for *God's Trombones*, suggesting that the collection heeded the call of the Social Gospel, obliging Christians to engage in activism in pursuit of social justice, including racial justice.

²⁰¹ Jon Michael Spencer, "The Black Church and the Harlem Renaissance," *African American Review* 30 (Autumn 1996): 453-60.

²⁰² *Encyclopedia of the Harlem Renaissance, Vol. 1: A-J*, Ed. Finkelman, Paul and Cary D. Wintz (New York: Routledge, 2004), 275.

Another example is that, in 1936, Johnson served on the interracial American Advisory Committee of the Universal Christian Council, a subsidiary group of the Federal Council, which was organized to explore the relations between religion and American government and society.²⁰³ Spencer concludes that Johnson felt “the black church could be the most effective medium for the pursuit of equal rights for blacks,” but neglects Johnson’s conception of the black church’s relation to the Protestant establishment, and the special burden Johnson placed on poetry in this context. Spencer sketches Johnson’s relation to the black church and Social Gospel in the Harlem Renaissance well, but does not identify it as a consistent theme of his poetry. More recently, Josef Sorrett has identified the resonance between racial ecumenism and the rhetoric of religious liberalism among black artists of the Harlem Renaissance, arguing that a range of responses akin to Johnson’s were brought to bear on the contested question of the black church’s significance to the promotion of the New Negro.²⁰⁴

Johnson distinguished the social utility of religion from the emotional force of literature, and both from the intellectual commitment of religious belief. His activist writing, however, effaces these distinctions at every turn. Johnson was an agnostic but thought that Protestant Christianity had a special hold over African Americans that could precipitate black uplift and empowerment if its focus were properly trained. He recognized that most African Americans lacked the education and advantages he had, but felt personally uncomfortable with many aspects of Christian theology and belief. He

²⁰³ Spencer, “The Black Church and the Harlem Renaissance,” 456.

²⁰⁴ Josef Sorrett, “‘We Build Our Temples for Tomorrow’: Racial Ecumenism and Religious Liberalism in the Harlem Renaissance,” *American Religious Liberalism*, Ed. Promey, Sally M. and Leigh Eric Schmidt (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2012), 190-206.

considered his literary career only one aspect of the legacy he wanted to leave, and accordingly suspended that career when the chance to excel in more respectable occupations came calling. He only devoted himself to literature once the Harlem Renaissance reached critical mass and he had grown increasingly exhausted by his work as secretary of the NAACP, around 1926-7. It is at this time that he finished and published *God's Trombones*. Johnson's biographer astutely characterizes the tack of Johnson's literary endeavors in the 1920s as a "soft-sell tactic" "to impress both the black and the white middle-class with the overall contributions of black Americans to American culture," and that he considered art the most effective vehicle for this.²⁰⁵ However, this way of putting it shortchanges the degree to which Johnson depicts African Americans as contributing to something that they and mainstream white Americans have in common - the national religious culture sustained by the Protestant establishment.

For instance, on April 4, 1916, writing on the editorial page of *The New York Age*, Johnson responded to a letter inquiring about the case of Hubert Eaves. Eaves, a young black boy in Iowa, was ordered by a Juvenile Court judge to salute the American flag in school after refusing on religious grounds. The letter, "written in a boyish hand,"²⁰⁶ Johnson noted, intimating the pedagogical tone adopted in what followed, wondered whether this ruling was just. Johnson recounted the facts of the case and analyzed the statement the boy gave to the court, which rejected the flag for being devoid of God and America for being under the control of whites who, unlike God, rejected blacks. Johnson dismantled the boy's arguments. First, he judged them inconsistent, on the basis that the

²⁰⁵ Levy, *James Weldon Johnson*, 301.

²⁰⁶ Johnson, "Saluting the Flag," in *Writings*, 622.

boy should have issues with God “for placing him in a country against which he...has such bitter feelings.”²⁰⁷ Then he disputed the arguments one by one. He argued that the act of saluting the flag was neutral, neither good nor bad in itself, and thus not worthy of religious scrutiny. Next Johnson argued that “Three hundred years of labor and loyalty makes this country belong to the Negroes as much as it belongs to anybody else.”²⁰⁸ This was not to deny the existence of staunch discrimination, but that “Although many, sometimes a majority, of the people in this country are wrong, yet that abstract thing we call the Country is right, and is always making for the right.” To the “boyish” letter writer, and against the religious beliefs of an eleven year-old boy, Johnson offered a robust defense of America, and of the integral place of African Americans in it.

Ultimately, the most salient factor in determining the boy’s error was the character of his family’s religion, which Johnson demeaned at several points. They belonged to a “‘sanctified’ sect” called the Sanctified Holy Church.²⁰⁹ The boy’s mother reportedly claimed that “the Holy Ghost told Hubert not to salute the flag,” suggesting that the church was likely Pentecostal, basing worship on personal experience of the Holy Spirit, which often took the form of speaking in tongues. The identification of the church as a sect was a tactic of marginalization that severed it from the mainstream forms of Protestantism, which, as Hughes pointed out, had more sedate practices of worship. This marginalization also manifested in Johnson’s conspicuous declaration that he charitably attributed the boy’s statement to “conscientious scruples” rather than to “religious

²⁰⁷ Johnson, “Saluting the Flag,” 623.

²⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, 624.

²⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, 623.

vagaries.” The appeal to conscience distinguished the more respectable forms of Protestantism from the extremes of evangelical enthusiasm from which genteel whites and upwardly mobile blacks alike distanced themselves. It also suggests that Johnson was addressing the child’s reason, while his parents have brainwashed him: “It is hardly to be doubted that the attitude which [the boy] has assumed is due more to the teachings of the ‘Sanctified Holy Church’ than to anything else.”²¹⁰ In sum, their religion was not ultimately respectable or upright Protestantism, but small, divisive, and foolish. “We say to Hubert that if God is anywhere, he is in the flag,”²¹¹ Johnson concluded decisively.

The racial, religious, national, and class dimensions of this news item presented Johnson with an opportunity to lean in the opposite direction from most of his editorials, affirming a court ruling against an African American as patriotic. Rejecting not just the child’s arguments but the his religious experience entirely, Johnson promoted, without introducing it as such, because purportedly shared and obvious, his own. This experience involved proclaiming that God supported America and that both deserved conjoined allegiance from American blacks, affirmed daily in the public school classroom. Moreover, he led his inquirer to this proclamation in a way not just meant to speak to the boy, but to the generation of which the boy was a representative. Johnson was playing the role of principal every bit as much as when he held that occupation in Jacksonville two decades earlier. His critique of African American Protestant worship that he judged to deviate from social respectability and thus prove counterproductive in the cause of racial integration ran throughout his writing. Often times, these respectable and deviant aspects

²¹⁰ Johnson, “Saluting the Flag,” 625.

²¹¹ *Ibid.*, 624.

coexisted in the same worship contexts, which is why the pedagogical task seemed so difficult. The conditional in Johnson's conclusion – if God is anywhere – did not signal skepticism, but only made his response to Hubert more strident. He was fairly open about his agnosticism with friends, yet at this moment the cause of racial equality could only be hurt by denying the unity of God and country. The terms in which this unity was articulated in Johnson's writing are those of the Protestant establishment.

II. Johnson's Negro National Hymn

Poetry held unique importance for this unity, because, in Johnson's idealistic assessment of the art form, it supposedly defused or at least held in abeyance the existing racial tensions within American Protestantism and American society more broadly. Writing in the 1910s and 20s, Johnson claimed that art had become the most likely means by which African Americans could attain the recognition they deserved for their contributions to America. According to Johnson, this art would facilitate the redress of broken promises of equality by disproving racist prejudices about the nature of African American talent and intellect and by inspiring whites to see black culture afresh. He wavered between singling out the arts of poetry and music as suitable media for this task, claiming for both a special connection to religion. Poetry, he argued, represented the highest spiritual ideals of a people. Buddha, Confucius, Christ, and Mohammed were not just "four great religious teachers" but "great ethical poets."²¹² While Johnson traced the

²¹² Johnson, "A Real Poet," in *Writings*, 645.

tradition of African American poetry back to Phillis Wheatley, he considered his near contemporary Paul Laurence Dunbar, the first undisputedly great African American poet, one hampered as much as helped by his use of dialect. Johnson looked forward to African American poets who would “take hold of the imaginations of men and stir their souls” in the way of great religious teachers and to the gradual entrenchment of the view that “the production of poets by a race” is “a vital thing.”²¹³ Johnson realized that his view that the development of African American poetry would allow it to be held to a global standard ran aground on the popular perception that music already constituted the primary legacy of African Americans to American culture. This music had secular and sacred strains. Ragtime took “sex and work” as subjects, while spirituals, in keeping with the importance he attributed to the black church, touched eternity but also “passed over the strict limits of religion and covered nearly the whole range of group experiences.”²¹⁴ Johnson lavishly praised both ragtime and spirituals but lamented that, while the former had become “national and international,” the “nobler music” of the latter has not yet been “wrought into the greater American music that has so long been looked for.”²¹⁵ The promises of African American achievement in poetry and music had not been fulfilled because African Americans had yet to fully tap their spiritual and religious resources.

On first blush, this diagnosis intersected awkwardly the one that made the black church central to achieving the political goals of African Americans. The latter was based on an understanding of the church’s formative role in the organization of African

²¹³ Johnson, “A Real Poet,” 646.

²¹⁴ Johnson, “Preface to *The Second Book of Negro Spirituals*, in *Writings*,” 730.

²¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 742.

American communities and the regulation of their social life to reflect a common set of beliefs, values, and practices that could be formulated, justified, and debated independently of whites. In prescribing a course of action for “the Colored Ministry,” Johnson contrasted the states of worship in black and white churches: “A miraculous change would be brought about” in either of two cases – “if the white churches of this country should unite in taking a real Christian stand on the race question,” and “[i]f the colored churches of this country would unite in taking an intelligent and unselfish stand on all questions of vital interest to the race.”²¹⁶ While the problem in white churches was patent hypocrisy, the failure to see that racism and racial oppression and violence are contrary to Christian teaching, the problem in black churches was more ambiguously defined as the failure of ministers to unite blacks by effectively appealing to their senses of selflessness and solidarity – beyond perhaps even whether they accepted Christ as Lord and savior. The goal of this unity was political mobilization, but the precise relation of Christianity to “the vital interest” of the race was left to the ministry to provide. The minister, in any case, rather than the artist, seemed to be the key intermediary between African Americans and whites at this stage.

The broader assumptions of this prescription are worth spelling out. The first is that “black churches” and “white churches” picked out definite, coherent social groups. The second is that the social groups the churches encompassed all those touched by the race question in America, and by extension that the churches had the power to resolve this question decisively. The third is that the black churches possessed a correct

²¹⁶ Johnson, “Responsibilities and Opportunities of the Colored Ministry,” *Writings*, 625.

interpretation of Christianity, which the white churches were aware of but rejected. The only historically sensitive way to explain these assumptions is to identify two that are more fundamental – that America is a Protestant country, and that its politics had to conform to the values of Protestant Christianity. These were not Johnson’s deliberate, practical simplifications, but he indirectly confirmed them on numerous occasions, and especially, I will argue, in his poetry. Poetry relying on these assumptions, however, posed the conundrum that I identified earlier, whether to place the well-being of African Americans in the hands of the artist or the minister. I argue that Johnson did not decide, but that his poetry approximated the effects of both.

Nowhere was this more evident than in *God’s Trombones*, which, explaining the preacher’s effectiveness in the scientific, musicological terms of the trombone, also brought in Johnson’s emphasis as music as a medium of African American artistic achievement. Applying the logic of Du Bois’s concept of “double consciousness” to writing, Johnson wrote that “the moment a Negro writer takes up his pen or sits down to his typewriter he is immediately called upon to solve, consciously or unconsciously, the problem of the double audience. To whom shall he address himself, to his own black group or to white America?”²¹⁷ Johnson ultimately believed that the “fusion” of the two audiences “is the only way out.”²¹⁸ This required the African American author “standing on his racial foundation” but writing “something that rises above race, and reaches out

²¹⁷ Johnson, “The Dilemma of the Negro Author,” in *Writings*, 745.

²¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 751.

the universal in truth and beauty.”²¹⁹ As I will show, poetry supporting the Protestant establishment ultimately came to occupy this synthetic role for Johnson.

The precedent for poetry playing this role dated back to the very beginning of Johnson’s career as a poet, which, perhaps unsurprisingly given his preferences for both poetry and music, began with the composition of the music and words for a song titled “Lift Every Voice and Sing” that celebrated President Lincoln’s birthday. Such celebrations had their root in African American “freedom celebrations,” which in the early nineteenth century had centered on the prohibition of the foreign slave trade (January 1, 1808), the abolition of slavery in New York state (July 4, 1827), and the emancipation of slaves in the British West Indies (August 1, 1834).²²⁰ The celebrations “were hope-laden gatherings, festive commemorations of freedom expected but not fully realized.”²²¹ The featured singers on the occasion of the celebration of Lincoln’s birthday in were to be young schoolchildren, casting Johnson’s song as a generational statement about the future, linking the song to Johnson’s later rebuke of Hubert Eaves. The lyrics contained no reference to Lincoln, as though too difficult a subject to approach directly. “Fifty Years,” which Johnson wrote fourteen years later to celebrate the 50th anniversary of Lincoln’s Emancipation Proclamation, would incorporate Lincoln, but Johnson’s late autobiography indicated that he considered his Lincoln poem still unwritten. “Lift Every Voice and Sing,” in any case, became Johnson’s most durable poem. In the introduction

²¹⁹ Johnson, “The Dilemma of the Negro Author,” 752.

²²⁰ Eddie S. Glaude, Jr., *Exodus! Religion, Race, and Nation in Early Nineteenth-Century America* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 85-6.

²²¹ *Ibid.*, 85.

to the poem as it appeared in *Saint Peter Relates an Incident and Other Poems* (1935), Johnson wrote that “within twenty years it was being sung over the South and in some other parts of the country,” and that by 1935 it was “popularly known as the Negro National Hymn.”²²²

The lyrics visualize the progress from slavery to freedom as a religious journey, one in which African Americans must “forever stand,” in the sense of allegiance, “True to our God, / True to our native land,”²²³ as the poem concludes. As would be the case in “Fifty Years,” this marked devotion and patriotism as consistent with one another and as necessary for the creation of a world in which “earth and heaven ring, / Ring with the harmonies of Liberty.”²²⁴ The plural “harmonies” suggests that, while liberty in this world would be equal for blacks and whites, these communities would live out that liberty on its own terms.²²⁵ In any case, musical harmony figures this eventual resolution, as in the vaunted range of the trombone/preacher. The song counsels the classical Christian virtues of joy, faith, and hope, bidding all African Americans to publicize their belief and example: “Let our rejoicing rise / High as the listening skies, / Let it resound loud as the rolling sea. / Sing a song full of the faith that the dark past has taught us, / Sing a song full of the hope that the present has brought us.”²²⁶ The supplication to “the listening skies” prompts the renewal of the call to sing in a spirit of joy that honors God.

²²² Johnson, *Writings*, 874.

²²³ Johnson, “Lift Every Voice and Sing,” in *Writings*, 875.

²²⁴ *Ibid.*, 874.

²²⁵ The plural might be an oblique allusion to *e pluribus unum*, the unofficial national motto.

²²⁶ *Ibid.*, 875.

Faith is the product of surviving “the dark past,”²²⁷ in contrast with “the rising sun of our new day,”²²⁸ embracing the biblical connotations of the binary of light and dark, despite their implication in racial discourses. Hope is the product of present opportunity for racial progress, signified by the concept of the Church Militant: “Let us march on till victory is won.”²²⁹

A rhetorical question in this vein figures the song and its rhythms as a procession: “Stony the road we trod, / Bitter the chastening rod, / Felt in the days when hope unborn had died; / Yet with a steady beat, / Have not our weary feet / Come to the place for which our fathers sighed?”²³⁰ Apart from the opening promise of liberty and other figures of light, this place is not described; the context in which the song is sung becomes the adaptable present from which this future is projected. The open-ended promise of the future contrasts with the absolute break from the “gloomy past,”²³¹ with its “path through the blood of the slaughtered.”²³² The possibility of regression is denied. The third and final stanza directly addresses God, the guiding force behind this history, from the “stony road” to the “place for which our fathers sighed” to “the path through the blood of the slaughtered” to another path, demanding but congenial:

God of our weary years,

²²⁷ Johnson, “Lift Every Voice and Sing,” 875.

²²⁸ Ibid.

²²⁹ Ibid.

²³⁰ Ibid.

²³¹ Ibid.

²³² Ibid.

God of our silent tears,
 Thou who hast brought us thus far on the way;
 Thou who hast by Thy might
 Led us into the light,
 Keep us forever in the path, we pray.
 Lest our feet stray from the places, our God, where we met Thee,
 Lest, our hearts drunk with the wine of the world, we forget Thee,
 Shadowed beneath Thy hand,
 May we forever stand.
 True to our God,
 Truth to our native land.²³³

This bright path challenges the singers of the song to care for themselves, maintaining the relationship they have established with God and moderating earthly pleasures. Despite progressing, they live in the shadow beneath God's hand, both reduced before His majestic glory and benefiting from his protection. The title of Johnson's autobiography, *Along This Way*, likely referred to this path and its sense of gradual progress. The elemental rhymes are part and parcel of the hymn form, and, as lineated, the intricacy of the two adjacent long lines in each stanza – the “Lest” lines here – introduce a flourish of rhythmic variation and elaborated exposition.

Editors and popular commentators have emended Johnson, preferring the subtitle “Negro National Anthem.” Johnson's biographer claims that this alternate subtitle

²³³ Johnson, “Lift Every Voice and Sing,” 875.

became standard after Johnson's death, and a collection of essays, *Lift Every and Sing: A Celebration of the Negro National Anthem* (2000), featuring contributions from Amiri Baraka, Maya Angelou and other renowned African Americans, seems to confirm this.²³⁴ At the Inauguration of Barack Obama in 2009, Rev. Joseph E. Lowery, a major figure in the Civil Rights Movement, read the text of the song as part of his benediction. The original subtitle represented Johnson's project more accurately, joining "national" to "hymn." The revised one chooses civic over congregational space, instead of merging them or projecting their codependence. It reflects the personal distance of those embracing the song from Christianity, even though that Christian element is essential to the poem, no more so than when it calls forth "the faith that the dark past has taught us," a providential reading of the destruction of African religious traditions wrought by slavery, which Jon Butler has described as "the African spiritual holocaust."²³⁵

Of course, these later readers of the poem were not endorsing this sentiment, just as Winston Churchill was not endorsing racial violence by reading Claude McKay's "If We Must Die" to the British Parliament. They were celebrating the collectivity that the poem brought into being, and the accompanying feeling of empowerment and direction. But they were also fixing a different role for the poem than Johnson intended. According to the *OED*, "anthem" refers to a prose or verse composition set to music, usually sacral – or, in the loosest sense, to a song of praise, i.e. hymn. The hymn can thus be considered a

²³⁴ *Lift Every Voice and Sing: A Celebration of the Negro National Anthem* (New York: Random House, 2000).

²³⁵ Jon Butler, *Awash in a Sea of Faith: Christianizing the American People* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1992), Ch. 5.

type of anthem. Johnson used “anthem” in his autobiography to refer to church music.²³⁶ Another context for this shift in usage was the legal adoption of “The Star-Spangled Banner” as the American national anthem, which occurred in 1931. The anthem referred to God in articulating what, in 1956, would become the national motto: “And this is our motto: ‘In God is our trust.’” The gradual switch to “Negro National Anthem” might have had to do with the emerging perception of its relation to the official National Anthem, as a parallel text of protest. Just as if not more likely was the preference for the apparently secular over the overtly Christian term, which Johnson, and a strict reading of the poem, would not encourage.

Johnson’s decision to include a poem written in 1899 and already popular within a couple of years (apparently without his efforts) in a collection published in 1935, with three intervening collections, was peculiar. One reason might have been that he was reclaiming “Lift Every Voice and Sing” as his poem. Johnson’s autobiography, from the same period, recounted his original intention to write a poem about Lincoln. The scene is a Romantic account of rapturous inspiration: “I paced back and forth on the front porch, repeating the lines over and over to myself, going through all of the agony and ecstasy of creating....I could not keep back the tears, and made no effort to do so. I was experiencing the transports of the poet’s ecstasy.”²³⁷ What this recreation manifested, even though the scene includes Johnson’s brother Rosamond composing the music, was the implicitly divine inspiration that marks Johnson as a true poet of the race, but lift his poetry into the realm of universality. Reclaiming “Lift Every Voice and Sing” meant

²³⁶ Johnson, *Along This Way*, 276, 294.

²³⁷ Johnson, *Writings*, 302.

reestablishing it as Johnson's creative production, not that of his brother or of the African American communities for which it had become a mainstay of commemorative public ritual, whether in or out of church. Johnson privileged the singular voice, as in his review of the great ethical/religious poets of world history. It was for this reason – the power of the individual voice – that he viewed *God's Trombones* as his greatest accomplishment. Many figures were wrapped up in this voice – the rhetorical power of the old-time Negro preacher, the Romantic poet, the ethical teacher, and the bourgeois striver – and *God's Trombones* conveyed all of them to a degree that the voices of Johnson's other poems did not.

III. Double Address in *Fifty Years and Other Poems*

“Fifty Years” placed the narrative of “Lift Every Voice and Sing” in a more concrete historical context for a unraced, and thus, by Johnson's lights, white readership. He composed the poem while stationed at the American consulate in Nicaragua. It commemorated the fiftieth anniversary of the Emancipation Proclamation, another African American freedom celebration. Johnson, hoping for the largest readership possible, sent the poem to Brander Matthews, Professor of Comparative Literature at Columbia, with whom he had studied modern drama several years earlier, and whose influence he hoped could secure the poem a prominent venue. Although Johnson had established a reputation in musical theater circles with the Cole and Johnson Brothers during the previous decade, this reputation did not entitle him to publish a didactic poem on the state of race relations in America. Matthews approached *The New York Times* and

the poem appeared on the editorial page on January 1, 1913, the occasion of the fiftieth anniversary. An introduction listed the poet's respectable qualifications – college graduate, admitted lawyer, American consul to Nicaragua – but not his popular songwriting or stewardship of the black Stanton School in Jacksonville. It described Johnson as spokesperson for “the sentiments and aspirations of his own race.”²³⁸ The poem's initial phrase – “O brothers mine” – signaled this representative voice, and that the poem was directed to African Americans by one of their own.

“Fifty Years” merits comparison to Frederick Douglass's 1852 Fourth of July oration, “The Meaning of July Fourth for the Negro.” Both used a national day of celebration as an occasion to cast triumphal narratives of American history in a new light by diagnosing the present condition of African Americans. Douglass argued that the legality and popular defense of slavery contradicted American ideals of liberty. His oration consistently links Protestant and civil liberty, enumerating the ways in which slavery “disregarded and trampled upon” “the Constitution and the Bible.”²³⁹ Despite attacking the “popular church” for its opposition to his message, Douglass expressed hope for the abolitionist cause, straddling the line between predicting and demanding imminent change. He concluded in an elevated mode, voicing a poem by leading white abolitionist William Lloyd Garrison. The first three stanzas began with the injunction “God speed,”²⁴⁰ supplicating God to hasten the end of slavery, war, and tyranny, while

²³⁸ Johnson, “Fifty Years,” *The New York Times* (1 Jan 1913): 16.

²³⁹ Frederick Douglass, “The Meaning of July Fourth for the Negro,” in *Frederick Douglass: Selected Speeches and Writings*, Ed. Philip S. Foner (Chicago, IL: Chicago Review Press, 2000), 195.

²⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 205-6.

the last began “Until that year, day, hour, arrive,” a pained admission of deferral, suggesting, in contrast with the supposedly completed and renewable Declaration, the exacting precision of an hour when the tasks of the poem, and the oration, would finally be achieved.

If Douglass depicted the Fourth of July as an imperfect beginning for America, and its tolerance of slavery as abetted by the Protestant establishment, then Johnson’s poem depicted the Emancipation Proclamation as the beginning of real equality for African Americans, and a nation truly unified by Protestant culture as the basis of this equality. Johnson, while on summer break from Atlanta University, heard the elderly Douglass speak at the 1893 World’s Columbian Exposition in Chicago. Douglass addressed the crowd at the hastily organized Colored Peoples’ Day, which he and others had called for to counter the exoticism of the Exposition’s African exhibits, and, in lieu of an official exhibit, to highlight African American contributions to America. Harriet Monroe had composed the poem for the official opening ceremony of the World’s Fair, though it is not clear that Johnson was present. He and friends from Atlanta University paid their way in Chicago by working as hand-drawn carriage drivers, which came to be known, ironically, as “gospel charioteers,” because many were local divinity students.²⁴¹ Both unknown figures at the time, Monroe and Johnson participated in the World’s Fair in drastically different roles, but each within the range of cultural movement prescribed by the Protestant establishment. Monroe gave *God’s Trombones* a mediocre review in

²⁴¹ Levy, *James Weldon Johnson*, Ch.2.

1927, preferring, where it was not her place to judge, Johnson's anthologies for their superior "authenticity."²⁴²

Johnson had written the lyrics for "Lift Every Voice and Sing" – and, with his brother Rosamond, the music – for Emancipation Proclamation celebratory exercises within the black community in Jacksonville in 1898. This means that "Fifty Years" was the second work that Johnson had written to commemorate the occasion, but the first with an interracial audience in mind. The difference between the two audiences was reflected in the subheading below the poem's title in the *Times*, which stated, "To-day is the Fiftieth Anniversary of Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation,"²⁴³ suggesting that readers needed to be reminded, and that Johnson also had to elaborate a case for the day's national importance, such as was unnecessary for the Fourth of July. The poem is Johnson's fullest poetic statement of adherence to the Protestant establishment, integrating African Americans into the body politic by integrating them into Protestant ways of thinking about the role of God in guiding American history and sanctifying the rights of citizenship. Johnson apposes Africans Americans in 1913 as "freedmen, freemen, sons of God, / Americans and Citizens,"²⁴⁴ suggesting an intimate link between these identities. The passage from "freed" to "free" men jumps from the perfect to present suffix, affirming the passage from Reconstruction freedom to legitimate equality. The poem delivered the message that racial progress in America had been gradual but

²⁴² Harriet Monroe, Review of *God's Trombones*, *Poetry* 30.5 (August 1927): 292.

²⁴³ Johnson, "Fifty Years," *The New York Times* (1 Jan 1913): 16.

²⁴⁴ *Ibid.*

that God assured its consummation, the full integration of African Americans into American society.

As would be the case with Johnson's activism more broadly, the politics of the poem are resolutely gradualist. Its chief function was to quiet the charge that this progress has not come quickly enough:

O brothers mine, to-day we stand
 Where half a century sweeps our ken,
 Since God, through Lincoln's ready hand,
 Struck off our bonds and made us men.

Just fifty years – a Winter's day –
 As runs the history of a race;
 Yet, as we now look o'er the way,
 How distant seems our starting-place!²⁴⁵

The comparison of fifty years to a winter's day, seasonally the shortest of the year, gives the arc of progress plenty of time to reach its zenith. One of the concluding stanzas enjoins, not God's haste, but faith in his plan: "Look out, beyond, and see / The far horizon's beckoning span! / Faith in your God-known destiny! / We are a part of some great plan."²⁴⁶ This differed from the "narcotic doctrine" that Johnson criticized in spirituals and the black church,²⁴⁷ which stipulated that God's role in human destiny as far as the afterlife is concerned was unimportant, while the right understanding of his role in human destiny in history was a decisive guide to action.

"Fifty Years" must be judged according to the history of its composition. This history reveals that the proximity of hope to dismay on which Douglass and earlier

²⁴⁵ Johnson, "Fifty Years."

²⁴⁶ Ibid.

²⁴⁷ Johnson, *God's Trombones*, 3.

freedom celebrations insisted also existed in an earlier version of Johnson's poem. However, the negative parts of the poem were excised when Johnson passed it on to Matthews. When "Fifty Years" was reprinted in Johnson's *Fifty Years and Other Poems* in 1917, Johnson included a headnote describing the circumstances under which the poem was written and came to be published. He recounted composing and then deciding to remove sixteen stanzas emphasizing both the violence and oppression to which African Americans were still, if not with renewed intensity, subject – in his words, "ending on a note of utter despair."²⁴⁸ He attributed this decision to a combination of "artistic taste and best judgment."²⁴⁹ It is clear from Johnson's life that the poem's suggestion of steady progress actively belied the deterioration in race relations that Johnson experienced as he grew up in Florida and Georgia in the 1890s, a period characterized by an upsurge in violence and the passage of Jim Crow laws that curtailed black mobility, opportunity, and representation. This would continue after World War I, in the race riots of 1919 and the growth of the nativist Ku Klux Klan. Johnson would address all of these concerns during his time with the NAACP, yet he kept this evidence of regression out of the poem, ultimately wanting to affirm the integrity of the celebration on which he commented, and to offer it as a national holiday, rather just than as an African American one. As Matthews wrote, in his Introduction to the 1917 volume, "Fifty Years" is "one of the noblest commemorative poems yet written by any American."²⁵⁰ By eschewing despair, Johnson folded the present into the triumphal history marked by the celebration.

²⁴⁸ Johnson, *Along This Way*, 456.

²⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 455.

This history incorporated slavery, shifting the scale on which progress should be judged geographically and temporally. Looking “o’er the way” – reiterating the idea of a steady forward course that the title of Johnson’s autobiography, *Along This Way*, would also evoke – incorporated the distance traveled in the Middle Passage in this history. God directed this path, setting the enslaved ancestors of African Americans on a path to saving faith and political freedom:

Far, far the way that we have trod,
From heathen kraals and jungle dens,²⁵¹
To freedmen, freemen, sons of God,
Americans and Citizens.

A part of His unknown design,
We’ve lived within a mighty age;
And we have helped to write a line
On history’s most wondrous page.²⁵²

Lest this seem to justify the atrocities of slavery as necessary stages in the black experience in America, the poem created a false distinction, pivoting from the difficult history of African Americans to the exceptional American history of which they are a part, which was “a mighty age” and “history’s most wondrous page,” and which the poem presented as beyond the need for justification. Phillis Wheatley’s “On Being Brought from Africa to America,” which Johnson had certainly read by 1922, when he discussed it in his introduction to the *Book of American Negro Poetry*, also gives thanks for Christianization in this vein, connecting “Fifty Years” to the long tradition of African

²⁵⁰ Johnson, *Fifty Years and Other Poems* (Cornhill Company: Boston, 1917), xiv.

²⁵¹ The version of the poem in *Fifty Years and Other Poems* (1917) alters this line to read “From slave and pagan denizens,” removing the Germanic Afrikaans word after the onset of World War I.

²⁵² Johnson, “Fifty Years.”

American poetry. As a result, slavery in the poem becomes refigured as part of the larger history of African American labor, joining the cultivation of the land by slaves and later by tenant farmers: “This land is ours by right of toil, / We helped to turn its virgin earth, / Our sweat is in its fruitful soil.”²⁵³ African Americans had always been integral to the economic growth of the colonies and the early republic, but Johnson pleads recognition for this fact. His headnote described this process as “faith in the realization of well-earned rights.” Drawing rhetorically on the feeling of security contained in this faith, the poem takes a soft version of the nativist line by depicting the waves of immigrants from Eastern and Southern Europe over the preceding decades as illegitimate contenders for American identity: “Then should we... / Stand back of new-come foreign hordes, / And fear our heritage to claim?” “Hordes” is the most charged word, but the driving stress that includes the initial syllables of “new-come” and “foreign” also contribute to the tone of haughty disdain. Commenting on this strain in Johnson’s writing, Levy observes that Johnson “thought of nativism as at least a useful tool to gain his ends.”²⁵⁴ The poem specifically appealed to this nativism in the language of Protestant nationhood, and softened its progressive stance toward African Americans by staking out reactionary common ground with whites – more fundamentally than in the hostility to new immigrants, the ideas that the basic rights of citizenship had to be earned rather than being simply owed.

This pragmatic positioning comes across most clearly in the focus of the second half of the poem on the Christology of martial sacrifice. It completes the poem’s history

²⁵³ Johnson, “Fifty Years.”

²⁵⁴ Levy, *James Weldon Johnson*, 157.

of African American labor by privileging the battlefield over the sites of slavery as most constitutive of the earning of African American rights, as though fighting for a country that sanctioned one's enslavement was the ultimate test of loyalty: "And never yet has come the cry - / When that fair flag has been assailed - / For men to die, for men to die, / That we have faltered or have failed."²⁵⁵ From the Revolutionary War onwards, the poem claims, African Americans have rallied to defend their adopted land. The first red stripe on the flag is figured as "dyed by Attucks' willing blood," Crispus Attucks a symbolic martyr of the Boston Massacre. The logic is that martial sacrifice bound black citizens, soldiers, white abolitionists, and President Lincoln alike, and that the claiming of rights bore no connection whatsoever to undermining the republic: "And, never yet, O haughty Land - / Let us, at least, for this be praised - / Has one black, treason-guided hand / Ever against that flag been raised." A parade of figures, the success of whose causes both pre- and post-date the Proclamation, keeping the timescale larger than fifty years, closes the poem – the abolitionists William Lloyd Garrison and Wendell Phillips, the abolitionist-martyrs John Brown and Elijah Parish Lovejoy, and the martyr-president, Abraham Lincoln. The poem ends on a note of promise, comforting African American readers and supplicating God with the language of covenantal favor: "That for which millions prayed and sighed, / That for which tens of thousands fought, / For which so many freely died, / God cannot let it come to naught." The "free death," like that of the aforementioned martyrs, was modeled on the willing self-sacrifice of Christ, and conflated with that of activists for racial justice.

²⁵⁵ Johnson, "Fifty Years."

The poem's mode of address – directed by an African American spokesman to the rest of the race, with white *Times* readers listening in – created the impression of an elite African American perspective bringing the masses in line, as Johnson argued it was the responsibility of African American ministers to do, so that they continued to pray and sigh, and fight only if called. He let the readership of *The New York Times* in on the editorial line of *The New York Age*. The message Johnson delivered with “Fifty Years” compares closely to poems of his in *The Crisis* from the three years following, providing a frame of reference for the way he took audience into account. “The White Witch” opens with the same phrase as “Fifty Years,” “O brothers mine,”²⁵⁶ but instead of rousing and rallying on the premise of shared history, the poem evokes white temptresses and steers African American men away for their own safety. Five stanzas are devoted to the witch's allure, the speaker's acquaintance with her type, and the vulnerability she engenders. With “the shadow of the panther” and “the spirit of the vampire,”²⁵⁷ she seeks the primitive intensity and sexual voracity of racist stereotype, “the great dynamic beat / Of primal passions” and “the last besieged retreat / Of love relentless, lusty, fierce, / Love pain-ecstatic, cruel-sweet.”²⁵⁸ The poem concludes, “O, brothers mine, take care! Take care! / The great white witch rides out tonight. / O, younger brothers mine, beware! / Look not upon her beauty bright; / For in her glance there is a snare, / And in her smile there is a blight.”²⁵⁹ The erotic thralldom of love lyric merges with the danger of

²⁵⁶ Johnson, “The White Witch,” *The Crisis* 9.5 (March 1915): 239.

²⁵⁷ Ibid.

²⁵⁸ Ibid.

interracial sexual relationship, connecting the snare of the white witch's gaze to that of the lynching noose, and evoking the witch's punishment by burning, but visited upon her victim. The red lips "burn and sear / my body."²⁶⁰ This warning against profligacy would recur in Johnson's retelling of the parable of the prodigal son *God's Trombones*, but what stands out here is the palpable sense of predation endangering African American men, and its distance from the steadiness counseled by "Fifty Years."

In "Brothers – American Drama," by contrast, published in the February 1916 issue, the setting of a lynching in the American South put forth a frankly dystopian view of interracial brotherhood. The poem is structured by a grim dialogue between lynch mob and lynching victim, in which the aftermath of slavery stimulates an endless cycle of violence that reduces all to brutes. It creates a symbolic context for "The Lynching Industry," a neighboring feature in the issue that appeared regularly in *The Crisis* to chronicle instances of lynching across the country. While the feature takes the form of a stark chart of names, locations, and alleged crimes, the poem give these horrific events an air of intelligibility and moral lesson. To precipitate a dialogue, the poem contrives that the lynched figure is guilty, and that the white mob is surprised: "Are you not from / That docile, child-like, tender-hearted race / Which we have known three centuries? Not from / That more than faithful race which through three wars / Fed our dear wives and nursed our helpless babes / Without a single breach of trust?"²⁶¹ The black figure replies: "I am, and am not... // The bitter fruit I am of planted seed; / The resultant, the inevitable end /

²⁵⁹ Johnson, "The White Witch."

²⁶⁰ Ibid.

²⁶¹ "Brothers – American Drama," *The Crisis* 11.4 (February 1916): 199.

Of evil forces and the powers of wrong.”²⁶² His symbolic crimes include murder and rape, “the muttered curse of dying men” and “the stain of conquered women.”²⁶³ He rejects racial identification, passing moral judgment on himself, but also on the society that produced him, figured in Christian terms: “I claim no race, no race claims me; I am / No more than human dregs; degenerate; / The monstrous offspring of the monster, Sin.”²⁶⁴

The mob interrupts before he can explain the circumstances under which the faithfulness of the black race would be restored, the suggestion of a larger context for his actions provoking its anger. The rational perspective of the lynched figure contrasts with the febrile sadism of the mob, his crime supplanted by theirs, perpetuating the cycle. The poem ends with the mob dividing up the lynched man’s bones as tokens of vengeance, though pausing to ask themselves the meaning of his last words: “Brothers in spirit, brothers in deed are we.” As Richard A. Long has observed, this also resembles “the casting of lots of Christ’s clothes,”²⁶⁵ drawing a parallel between Christ and lynching victim. Although “The White Witch” and “Brothers” could be thought of as companion poems, “Brothers” presents the shadow cast by the moral landscape that Johnson presents in “Fifty Years,” one he associated with the South. The cycle of sin could only be escaped by rigid adherence to social norms of morality, the compilation and promotion of African Americans’ cultural heritage, the maintenance of a steadfast faith in progress, and

²⁶² Johnson, “Brothers.”

²⁶³ Ibid.

²⁶⁴ Ibid., 200.

²⁶⁵ Richard A. Long, “A Weapon of My Song: The Poetry of James Weldon Johnson,” *Phylon* 32 (Autumn 1971), 376.

the establishment of a racial brotherhood based on mutual welfare rather than mutual vengeance, one couched in Christian terms.

“The White Witch” and “Brothers” were both collected in *Fifty Years and Other Poems*, but the book did not sold poorly and received little notice. They appeared after Johnson had taken over the editorial page at *The New York Age*. In one of his first editorials, from October 1914, he wrote that “race papers” were “organs of propaganda. Their chief business is to stimulate thought among Negroes about the things that vitally concern them,”²⁶⁶ and the poems in *The Crisis* must also be seen in this light. By contrast, a newspaper like the *Times*, which was not marked as a “race paper,” presented the exclusive conversation of “Fifty Years” to white readers with special care. The introduction suggested that readers had the benefit of eavesdropping on a conversation that flattered their most charitable views of themselves. A *New York Times* editorial the following day, called “The Negro Speaks For His Race,” separated the artistic achievement of “Fifty Years” from its authority on the “race problem,”²⁶⁷ using poetic measures of skill as a wedge between the poem’s artistic and political qualities. On one hand, “the excellence of the verses was absolute, not relational”²⁶⁸ to Johnson’s race. The poem featured “a great subject...greatly treated,”²⁶⁹ and showcased Johnson’s “elevation of sentiment, his power of creative imagination, and his thorough knowledge that for the

²⁶⁶ Johnson, “Do You Read Negro Papers?”, in *Writings*, 607.

²⁶⁷ “A Negro Poet Speaks for His Race,” *The New York Times*, 02 Jan 1913: 10.

²⁶⁸ *Ibid.*

²⁶⁹ *Ibid.*

production of strong emotional effects simple language is the best.”²⁷⁰ However, “the telling of the whole truth he properly left for others and through another medium.”²⁷¹ In particular, the editorial bristles at the lines beginning “This land is ours,” aggressively commenting, “Theirs, in any exclusive sense of the that word, the land certainly is not,”²⁷² even though the broader context of the poem clearly disclaimed this exclusive sense. A letter to the editor published on the editorial page, signed “Caucasian,” provided similar glowing commentary on the poem, but in more clearly patronizing racial terms: “Having read those verses I would like to say that in my opinion there are few Caucasian versifiers who can summon the spirit and give the swing to their lines that he does.”²⁷³ That the poem’s utterly conventional iambic tetrameter lines read as black “spirit” and “swing” to this correspondent revealed him to be a poor, crassly racializing literary critic and self-appointed spokesperson for the white race.

IV. The Talented Voice of the “Old-Time” Preacher

Between the *Fifty Years* period (1913-17) and the publication of *God’s Trombones* in 1927, Johnson became, first, national field organizer for the NAACP, building up its branch of nationwide networks and financial support by going on long speaking tours across the country, and then, in 1920, permanent secretary, the head position in the organization. According to Johnson’s autobiography, the basis of *God’s*

²⁷⁰ “A Negro Poet Speaks for His Race.”

²⁷¹ Ibid.

²⁷² Ibid.

²⁷³ “Caucasian,” *The New York Times*, 02 Jan 1913: 10.

Trombones was in an experience with a Kansas City congregation in 1918 during one of his speaking tours. Scheduled to speak late in the evening, Johnson worried about exhaustion on the part of both him and the congregation. The listless performance of a preacher who preceded him did nothing to assuage this worry. Another preacher, a renowned itinerant evangelist, mounted the stage. After starting with a formal text, to little response, the evangelist “slammed the Bible shut, stepped out from behind the pulpit, and began intoning the rambling Negro sermon that begins with the creation of the world, touches various high spots in the trials and tribulations of the Hebrew children, and ends with the Judgment Day. There was an instantaneous change in the preacher and in the congregation. He was free, at ease, and the complete master of himself and his hearers.”²⁷⁴ This display of complete mastery brought Johnson back to sermons he had heard in his childhood, “stirred” “something primordial,”²⁷⁵ and prompted him to take notes for the poem that would become “The Creation,” the first of the verse sermons in *God’s Trombones*, which was first published in *The Freeman* in 1920.

In this highly mediated account, the closing of the Bible and retreat from the pulpit, in giving the personality and oratorical skill of the preacher center stage, perfectly captured the difference between the black church as such and the voice of the old-time Negro preacher that Johnson celebrated in *God’s Trombones*. He completed the book in late 1926, at the height of the Harlem Renaissance, which, as David Levering Lewis observes, was “presided over by the Civil Rights Establishment of the NUL and the

²⁷⁴ Johnson, *Along This Way*, 504.

²⁷⁵ *Ibid.*

NAACP.”²⁷⁶ The Preface to *God’s Trombones* described the political impact of the old-time Negro preacher as an effect of his artistry, and was as integral to the book as the verse sermons themselves. Material features of the first edition established this importance by calling attention to the Preface as an original composition.²⁷⁷ Around a quarter of the text’s pages were given over to it; “Preface” was rendered in typographically identical fashion to the poems in the table of contents and, in gold calligraphic lettering, on the Preface’s first page. This originality jarred with Johnson’s description of the poems, but resonated with his call for the transformation of folk materials into high art. While he took credit for creating the language of the sermons in the Preface, he stipulated that they were based on firsthand memories of actual sermons, and also brushed off the responsibility of accurate reconstruction: “I claim no more for these poems than that I have written them after the manner of the primitive sermons.”²⁷⁸

This disclaimer, drawing on the license of homage rather than the fallibility of memory and imitation to explain the sermons’ originality, contradicts the Preface’s closing lines, which validate a series of bold historical claims about the preacher figure whom the poems ostensibly brought to life with a statement suggestive of an ethos of preservation, kin to that of Johnson’s anthologies of Negro spirituals: “The old-time Negro preacher is rapidly passing. I have here tried sincerely to fix something of him.”²⁷⁹ That “something” answered to Johnson more than to the preacher. The poems, together

²⁷⁶ David Levering Lewis, Introduction, *Portable Harlem Renaissance Reader* (New York: Penguin, 1994), xv.

²⁷⁷ Johnson, *God’s Trombones*.

²⁷⁸ Johnson, *God’s Trombones*, 10.

²⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 11.

with the Preface, a statement of poetics instructing the reader in how to use them, were designed to “fix” the old-time Negro preacher in two senses. It produced evidence of his legacy and style that might otherwise have disappeared, and it manipulated that evidence to serve contemporary ends. Johnson’s secular impersonation of the preacher’s complete mastery touches the verse sermons at many points – their order, address, and adjustments of voice, figuration, and allusion.

Yet Johnson straddled the fence between reconstruction and recreation because he coveted the power and resources of the black church. The threatened passing of the old-time Negro preacher was not the passing of African American Protestantism, but the passing of the type of sway that the old-time preacher had over his congregants, which the populist voices like Hughes and McKay were trying to use the platform of the Harlem Renaissance to shatter. Accordingly, the Preface offered a brief history of the preacher figure that spoke to the qualities he might offer the present. Johnson noted that this figure intermittently had the opportunity to preach to mixed congregations: “Before the Revolutionary War...there were famed black preachers who preached to both whites and blacks.²⁸⁰” Johnson can remember from his youth “one Negro sermon that in its day was a classic, and widely known to the public. Thousands of people, white and black, flocked to the church of John Jasper in Richmond, Virginia...”²⁸¹ This served not just as confirmation of oratorical prowess, but as an indication that religion could be a force that brought the races together in America, because it happened selectively before. By extension, it was also true that Johnson was not rejecting the entire history of race

²⁸⁰ Johnson, *God's Trombones*, 11.

²⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 2.

relations, but picking and choosing to adorn his representation of the old-time Negro preacher to be of most use to the late 1920s.

As a whole, the preacher's legacy was divided between the solidarity and hope that he gave his congregations, and the promise of otherworldly relief that he bid them to wait for: "It was through him that the people...who were...thrown into slavery were given their first sense of unity and solidarity....It was the old-time preacher who for generations was the mainspring of hope and inspiration for the Negro in America. It was also he who instilled into the Negro the narcotic doctrine epitomized in the Spiritual, 'You May Have All Dis World, But Give Me Jesus.'"²⁸² The equation of salvation with heaven removed it from the social and economic conditions of slavery. Johnson's use of the phrase "narcotic doctrine" borrowed the Marxist language of religion as false consciousness, as in "Fifty Years," to gain leftist credibility before lurching right. He stops short of applying this reading to the black church as a whole. At a deeper level, the association of black solidarity and hope with the preacher's mediating role in the church, rather than with the full complement of aspects of the religion itself, reflected Johnson's agnosticism over whether Christian beliefs were, whether true, of particular value to what the old-time Negro preacher did. To return to Johnson's origin story, it is difficult to see the connection between this portrait of the preacher and the preacher Johnson witnessed in Kansas City, except if we take the latter as a proxy to pass the baton of leadership on to Johnson, passing through as representative of the NAACP, which was committed, as

²⁸² Johnson, *God's Trombones*, 2-3.

Johnson's biographer observed, to being "interracial in philosophy and Northern in viewpoint."²⁸³

Johnson's portrait of the old-time Negro preacher also took pains to establish that the specifically Protestant nature of the Christianity to which the old-time Negro preacher belonged was a crucial reason why he had the effect he did. Johnson offered as a basis for comparison "the social and religious trends of the Negroes of the Old South and of the Negroes of French Louisiana and the West Indies, where they were within and directly under the Roman Catholic Church and the Church of England."²⁸⁴ This ecclesiastical language – "within and directly under" – conveyed a difference of religious and national polity, indicating the degree of control that the church hierarchies and their overseas bases exercised over black worship, which left little latitude for the oratorical dynamism of the old-time Negro preacher. It confirmed prejudices about the tyranny of the Roman Catholic Church, and used "Church of England" as a national wedge. Anti-Catholic prejudice belonged, like opposition to immigration, to the interwar language of nativism. What bringing the story back to the eighteenth century accomplished was affirming the social legitimacy of the Protestant establishment back to colonial period, by claiming that it allowed the old-time Negro preacher to carve out space that he turned to the advantage of his race. By contrast with those in thrall to the Roman Catholic Church, or to England, the Protestant congregations led by the old-time Negro preacher were "separate and independent places of worship,"²⁸⁵ which "provided the first spheres in which race

²⁸³ Levy, *James Weldon Johnson*, 230.

²⁸⁴ Johnson, *God's Trombones*, 4.

leadership might develop and function.”²⁸⁶ Writing as acting secretary of the NAACP in 1927, Johnson granted that the power concentrated in these spaces still outstripped that of his organization: “These scattered and often clandestine groups have grown into the strongest and richest organization among colored Americans.” Johnson continued to attribute this strength and richness to the persistent influence of the old-time preacher’s successors: “This power of the old-time preacher, somewhat lessened and changed in his successors, is still a vital force; in fact, it is still the greatest single influence among the colored people of the United States. The Negro today is, perhaps, the most priest-governed group in the country.”²⁸⁷ Protestant clergy tend to take the titles minister, reverend, or pastor; Martin Luther described his vision of Christianity as a “priesthood of all believers.” Accordingly, Johnson’s looseness marks his distance from fine religious distinctions and paradoxically draws on the connotation of Roman Catholic tyranny, and on the association of religious and political identity, in describing African Americans as “priest-governed.”

One feature of these separate and independent places of worship that Johnson conspicuously omits, is their importance as sites fostering literacy. Johnson only discusses the subject of literacy in reference to the preachers themselves, hence the phrase “priest-governed.” This augments the sense that Johnson thought of himself and the old-time Negro preacher as simultaneously poetic representatives and elite managers of their people. Starting from the premise that the power of the preacher’s contemporary

²⁸⁵ Johnson, *God's Trombones*, 3.

²⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, 4.

²⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, 2-3.

descendants was “somewhat lessened and changed” allowed for the possibility that Johnson could step in. It also bears on the paradox of “fixing” the oral form of the stereotyped sermon, which was common property among preachers, in a book of poems authored by one man, so that it became an aggressive gesture of individual achievement – but an achievement on others’ behalf. This parallels the backdrop of Johnson’s story about the Kansas City visit, in that he viewed the churches as the most natural basis on which to build up the branch system of the NAACP, but recruitment begun in the churches did not have to stop at their doors. If the NAACP could attack the legal bases of disenfranchisement and segregation, the establishment Protestantism erected on the memory of the old-time Negro preacher could attack the cultural bases of segregation, by subsuming the black church into the national church, which extended far beyond the institution of the church.

Lastly, Johnson’s description of the oratorical skill of the old-time Negro preacher borrowed language about poets and musicians from his editorials and anthology prefaces. Writing in *The New York Age* in 1922, by which time he had written at least “The Creation” and begun “Noah Builds the Ark” and “The Last Judgment,”²⁸⁸ he argued that poets “blaze out brightest” among the names of history, and that “it is chiefly upon the achievements of such poets that races and peoples claim greatness for themselves.”²⁸⁹ After explaining why Buddha, Confucius, Christ, and Mohammed stood above all other poets, Johnson concluded by suggesting that the role of great ethical poet of the occident was open, and that African Americans should jump into the fray: “I wish my readers to

²⁸⁸ Levy, Ch. 13.

²⁸⁹ Johnson, “A Real Poet,” 645.

think of the production of poets by a race as a vital thing. It is vital not only as an indication of the development of the race but it is vital as to the place and recognition which that race is given by the world at large....I am driving at the truth contained in the words of Jesus Christ when He said, Man shall not live by bread alone.”²⁹⁰ Sustenance, read as physical and economic security, helped African Americans get by, but it would not catalyze the wider recognition that allowed them to thrive and integrate. Johnson wrote these words two years after ascending to the head of the NAACP, fully aware of the precariousness of basic forms of security for African Americans, seeking an arena beyond legislative politics, military service, and economic advancement in which they could proof of their greatness could be seen.

In this vein, Johnson listed the cultural products for which African Americans were been recognized in the Preface to *God's Trombones*, and announced his intention to add the old-time sermon to the conversation: “A good deal has been written on the folk creations of the American Negro: his music, sacred and secular; his plantation tales, and his dances; but that there are folk sermons, as well, is a fact that has passed unnoticed.”²⁹¹ The most popular of the secular music was ragtime, which Johnson had described in the preface to his *Book of American Negro Poetry* as “now national, rather than racial...But that does not abolish the claim of the American Negro as its originator.”²⁹² Johnson’s literary labors between this anthology and *God's Trombones* were devoted to two monumental anthologies of the sacred music – spirituals. These musical forms differed

²⁹⁰ Johnson, “A Real Poet,” 646-7.

²⁹¹ Johnson, *God's Trombones*, 1.

²⁹² Johnson, “Preface to *The Second Book of Negro Spirituals*,” 742.

from the sermons in that they were gathered for the purposes of preservation from documentary records. Except for scribbled notes during the sermon in Kansa City, Johnson wrote the poems in *God's Trombones* from scratch. The distinction between preservation and creation might not have mattered to Johnson in the context of the types of cultural productions he was dealing with. As Sarah Kerman has argued, part of the impetus behind Johnson's anthologies was to "reclaim imitation as a serious and potentially productive force, both aesthetically and politically."²⁹³ But he flouted this distinction on a different scale with *God's Trombones*, as I pointed out earlier with respect to Protestantism and literacy, in this his imitation there occurred at a conscious remove from the oral tradition claimed to respect, with no obvious invitation for others to imitate him. In other words, he celebrated the imitative quality of the "stereotypical sermon" in a different way than with the spiritual, belying the calculated creativity and fixity of his own "imitations."

In the same poetry anthology preface, Johnson tasked the poet, not just with gaining recognition for the race, but also with refining these cultural products into durable, universal form. The poet "gathers" "the best he gives the world" "from the hearts of the people, and runs it through the alembic of his genius."²⁹⁴ Johnson supported this call with the racialist claim that African Americans, "due to a remarkable racial gift of

²⁹³ Sarah Kerman, "Authentic Imitation: Modernist Anthologies and the Pedagogy of Folk Culture," *Arizona Quarterly* 68 (Spring 2012): 88. Kerman argues that Johnson's search for an authentic black past caused him to exaggerate the political efficacy of re-evaluating black imitative art. I argue that *God's Trombones* is the culmination of this tendency, and that the Protestant establishment gave him reason to believe in such political efficacy.

²⁹⁴ Johnson, "Preface to *The Book of American Negro Poetry*," 693.

adaptability,”²⁹⁵ could “suck up the national spirit from the soil and create something artistic and original.” Dialect, however, inhibited this adaptability. The African American poet “needs a form that is freer and larger than dialect, but which will still hold the racial flavor.” The “fusion” of African American idiom and biblical English in *God’s Trombones* represented one such, freer, larger form. Johnson’s creation of the sermons themselves from the wellspring of memory signaled his willingness to become such a poet, with the refining skill and resulting universality for which that would allow, and the passage from a racial to united national Protestantism that it could effect.

Johnson’s description of the musicality of the preacher’s art borrowed from his own novel, *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man* (1912), which was rediscovered and celebrated during the Harlem Renaissance. The black Southern preacher, named, like the martyred white abolitionist, John Brown, delivers a sermon that the protagonist recounts in identical language to the description of the stereotypical sermon in the *God’s Trombones* preface. The protagonist laments that figures like John Brown “are now looked upon with condescension or contempt by the progressive element among the colored people,”²⁹⁶ even though “it was they who led the race from paganism and kept it steadfast to Christianity through all the long, dark years of slavery,”²⁹⁷ echoing “Lift Every Voice and Sing” and “Fifty Years.” Even though “a more or less sophisticated and non-religious man of the world,” the sermon “swept...along” the ex-colored man,

²⁹⁵ Johnson, “Preface to *The Book of American Negro Poetry*,” 697.

²⁹⁶ Johnson, *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man*, Ed. William L. Andrews (New York: Penguin, 1990), 127.

²⁹⁷ Johnson, *Autobiography*, 127-8.

“glowing with the eloquence of primitive poetry.”²⁹⁸ He feels more drawn to the music leader at the religious meeting than to the preacher, in keeping with his character, that of an aspiring composer unsure whether to refine the music of his race or to continue passing. But by the 1920s, Johnson had become more interested in the poetry, but the basis of his thoughts about the preacher can be seen in the novel. His borrowing suggests that he might have fabricated the special importance of the Kansas City sermon, given that he already felt the way he did about the figure of the preacher in 1912, when the novel was published, so that in retrospect the revelation of the sermon would be attributed to a point in his career by which poetry had become his chief literary ambition.

Johnson preserved his musical interest in providing musicological justification for the force of the old-time preacher’s eloquence. His class is the eponymous figure of *God’s Trombones*, drawing a comparison between the most talented voice in the realm of African American cultural expression and the instrument in the orchestra with the widest chromatic range: “He brought into play the full gamut of his wonderful voice, a voice – what shall I say? – not of an organ or a trumpet, but rather of a trombone, the instrument possessing above all others the power to express the wide and varied range of emotions encompassed by the human voice – and with greater amplitude.”²⁹⁹ This musical range was correlated with rhetorical skill, and their conjunction distinguished from prose: “He was a master of all the modes of eloquence. He often possessed a voice that was a marvelous instrument, a voice he could modulate from a sepulchral whisper to a crashing thunder clap....He had the power to sweep his hearers before him; and so himself was

²⁹⁸ Johnson, *Autobiography*, 129.

²⁹⁹ Johnson, *God’s Trombones*, 5.

often swept away. At such times his language was not prose but poetry.”³⁰⁰ *God’s Trombones* dispenses with the prose and puts the poetry front and center.

Michael North reads the voice of *God’s Trombones* in relation to the experimentation of modernist writers with dialect, arguing that Johnson “carefully avoided the very voice, Eliot, Anderson, H.D., and the other envied to the point of mimicry.”³⁰¹ Yet Johnson’s taste in poetry was too conservative to pay much heed to the experimentation of Eliot and H.D. His own experience writing dialect poetry had led him to the conclusion that its conventions had been utterly exhausted. Moreover, Johnson constructed a purpose for the person of the old-time Negro preacher that was neither dialect nor standard English. He positioned it instead in relation to Biblical English, which inspired the enlargement of African American “idioms”:

The old-time Negro preachers, though they actually used dialect in their ordinary intercourse, stepped out from its narrow confines when they preached. They were all saturated with the sublime phraseology of the Hebrew prophets and steeped in the idioms of King James English, so when they preached and warmed to their work they spoke another language, a language far removed from traditional Negro dialect. It was really a fusion of Negro idioms with Bible English; and in this there may have been, after all, some kinship with the innate grandiloquence of their old African tongues.³⁰²

The key claim embedded here was that the “freer but larger” poetic language that contains “the racial flavor” he called for in the preface to the *Book of American Negro Poetry* involved the Protestant Bible and carried through the “innate grandiloquence of [the old-time Negro preacher’s] old African tongues.” Johnson identified the racial flavor

³⁰⁰ Johnson, *God’s Trombones*, 5.

³⁰¹ Michael North, *The Dialect of Modernism: Race, Language, and Twentieth-Century Literature* (Oxford University Press: New York, 1994), 10.

³⁰² Johnson, *God’s Trombones*, 9.

that remained in the discourse of the old-time Negro preacher as idiom, not dialect, which the preachers used “in their ordinary intercourse,” as a way of relegating dialect to a past that had been sufficiently preserved and which was counterproductive for contemporary artistic production. Like many of Johnson’s historical claims in the preface, the notion that preachers were especially fluent in this linguistic fusion “when they...warmed to their work,” whether true or not, functioned most immediately to set the stylistic politics of the collection into a contemporary framework he had fashioned as attractive and necessary. He would also go on to praise the Bible as literature, writing that “the King James Version is the greatest book in the world,”³⁰³ giving it independent artistic power.

This qualification of the historical representativeness of the poetic sermons fell within the scope of Johnson’s many “refinements” of his material to eliminate the static of inconsistency and excess. As Eric Sundquist has argued, what is as striking as the absence of dialect in the poems is the absence of “the black folk voice”: “In Johnson’s diction and form, vernacular is almost entirely submerged in memorial precision: dialectical invention and altiloquence give way to concertized voicing and diction as he invents a cultivated equivalent to the classic African American sermon...in an electrifying pastiche.”³⁰⁴ In other words, in trying to “fix” dynamic qualities of the old-time Negro preacher’s sermon, Johnson hypostatized them, creating a dazzling but consistent stylistic vocabulary. Summarizing Johnson’s literary endeavors, with special emphasis placed on *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man*, Sundquist claims that

³⁰³ Johnson, *Along This Way*, 167.

³⁰⁴ Eric J. Sundquist, *The Hammers of Creation: Folk Culture in Modern African-American Fiction* (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 1992), 63.

Johnson “stood not quite on the color line...but on the culture line.”³⁰⁵ What Sundquist neglects is that, especially if *God’s Trombones* is taken as a consummation of Johnson’s writing, Johnson brought African American culture closer to, not further from, American Protestantism, by reimagining it within the Protestant establishment. What Sundquist rightly sees as the polemical jettisoning of dialect as a struggle to refine outdated and derogatory literary conventions should conversely be understood as part of an effort to utilize an advantageous set of religious conventions.

The chasm between Johnson’s stated goal of preservation and his creative initiative becomes clearest when the contents of the stereotypical sermon of the old-time Negro preacher are compared to the poetic sermons in *God’s Trombones*. Prefiguring his later description of the Kansas City preacher slamming the Bible shut, he noted: “A text served mainly as a starting point and often had no relation to the development of the sermon.”³⁰⁶ The poems hew closer to scripture than this would suggest, albeit with crucial deviations. The stereotypical sermon of the preacher as Johnson recalled it covered the history of the world from the Creation till the Day of Judgment; whereas, *God’s Trombones* follows the same arc, but breaks the poems up into seven distinct sermons. The stereotypical sermon narrates history in chronological order, while *God’s Trombones* places the Exodus narrative well out of chronological order, in the penultimate position, after the Resurrection and just before Judgment Day. The incorporation in *God’s Trombones* of subgenres like the funeral sermon, and of other scriptural genres like the parable, differs from the stereotypical sermon, in the former by

³⁰⁵ Sundquist, *The Hammers of Creation*, 48.

³⁰⁶ Johnson, *God’s Trombones*, 6.

evoking the life of the preacher's congregation, in the latter by taking a set text not of major historical or doctrinal significance, which Johnson indicates the text-less preacher often did.

Discerning the logic of *God's Trombones* as a poetic sequence also reveals a comprehensive narrative that Johnson did not ascribe to the stereotypical sermon. Unlike that sermon, which in the broad outlines he gave could be located historically at any point in the nineteenth century, this comprehensive narrative addressed the readership of Johnson's day. While "Lift Every Voice and Sing" and "Fifty Years" surveyed the present and oriented their singers and readers toward the future, the first four sermons in *God's Trombones* are addressed to overlapping generations of African Americans in the present. They prescribe a patriarchal kinship structure preserved by the morality and prudence of men. "The Prodigal Son" depicts the father/son relationship as fundamental to the future of the race. The son's departure from his father's house is analogized to a futile quarrel with God, the ultimate patriarch: "Young man – / Your arm's too short to box with God."³⁰⁷ The temptations of independence are equated with those of the city of Babylon, "drinking dens," "gambling dens," and "the sweet-sinning women."³⁰⁸ "Go Down Death" allows a weary mother figure the rewards of the afterlife that Johnson otherwise wants to denigrate as narcotic. Out of "everlasting pity,"³⁰⁹ God sends Death, who brings the congregation's "Sister Caroline" to Jesus, who "wiped away her tears, /

³⁰⁷ Johnson, *God's Trombones*, 21.

³⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, 23-4.

³⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, 27.

And...smoothed the furrows from her face... / And kept a-saying: Take your rest, / Take your rest, take your rest.”³¹⁰

“Noah Built the Ark” conventionally introduces Adam and Eve as the parents of the race, placing the blame for banishment from paradise on Eve’s vanity, precipitating Noah’s covenant with God. The next sermon, “The Crucifixion,” places the cross-bearer Simon on the Road to Calvary as a privileged black spectator of the agony that created the conditions of possibility for the redemption of mankind. The last two poems are prophetic, a typological reading of the Exodus narrative as a history of African Americans and a narration of Judgment as the culmination of this history, rather than as an end to history, but also as an exhortation to white Americans to repent. The universal address of this last sermon bursts out of the implied congregational setting of the previous six. Johnson does not call the lay invocation that opens the collection a sermon, interestingly, setting aside the importance of the only female voice in the work.

“Let My People Go,” the verse sermon narrating the escape of the Israelites from captivity in Egypt, is the longest in *God’s Trombones*, befitting its special importance, not just in the African American Protestant imagination, but also, in a contradictory sense, in the American imagination. As Eddie Glaude observes, “The journey in the Exodus story...provided a crucial source for the construction of a national identity for African Americans.”³¹¹ Bringing African American uses of Exodus into conversation with the work of Sacvan Bercovitch, Glaude notes that “the image of America as the New

³¹⁰ Johnson, *God’s Trombones*, 30.

³¹¹ Glaude, Jr., *Exodus!*, 5.

Canaan is reversed within African American reenactments of the Pharoah story.³¹²” In the African American Protestant typological reading of Exodus, blacks in America remained in bondage, even after the abolition of slavery. Yet the interpretation of the Promised Land, on this reading, was not geographically distant and distinct, but the nation where they live, transformed.

This doubleness of the narrative is reflected in the structure of the poem, which begins with God bidding Moses to demand freedom for the Israelites from Pharaoh, and ends with a jarring second-person address connecting the completed past to the unfolding present:

...God unlashd the waters
 And the waves rushed back together,
 And the Pharoah and all his army got lost,
 And all his host got drowneded.
 And Moses sang and Miriam danced,
 And the people shouted for joy,
 And God led the Hebrew Children on
 Till they reached the promised land.

Listen! – Listen!

All you sons of Pharaoh.

Who do you think can hold God’s people

³¹² Glaude, Jr., *Exodus!*, 48.

When the Lord God himself has said,
 Let my people go?³¹³

The pivot from apparent triumph to urgent crisis, from freedom to slavery, brings the story full circle, but with a difference. Instead of demanding freedom for African Americans on direct authority from God, the preacher poses the demand as a question to white American oppressors, rechristened as descendants of Pharaoh. This doubles as a transgressive scene of racially integrated preaching. The preacher's doubled cry of "Listen! – Listen!" projects out of the black congregation that Johnson indicated as his persona's original context, addressing a white audience as well.³¹⁴ The implication is that the docent has chosen to be a descendant of the nation over whose beginnings Washington presided, because of what the nation stands for, and its progress toward extending those ideals to include him. However, Moore's poem, with paternalistic praise, represents the question as having been settled to the extent that it needed to be for its figure of stalwart African American faith.

Another importance feature of the poems' sequencing is that "Let My People Go" follows "The Crucifixion." The poems based on narratives from scripture are out of order because the question of African American bondage is unresolved, and thus the covenant the Israelites had with God not supplanted by the New Covenant through Christ.³¹⁵ In

³¹³ Glaude, Jr., *Exodus!*, 52.

³¹⁴ Marianne Moore's poem "The Hero," published five years later, would single out a black docent at the tombs of George and Martha Washington as worthy of honor in similar terms: "Moses would not be grandson to Pharaoh;" Moore, *Poems of Marianne Moore*, Ed. Grace Schulman (New York: Penguin, 2005), 423.

³¹⁵ Typological reading allowed for this suspension of chronology, but that suspension is not otherwise reflected by the logic of the sequence.

terms of theology, the Exodus story takes precedence over the Passion, the doctrinal center of Christianity. Even if Christianity represented the possibility of national redemption for slavery, and Christ could be celebrated along with Buddha, Confucius, and Mohammed as great “religious teachers” and “ethical poets,” Johnson ultimately responded to the moral judgment of the Old Testament more strongly than to the redemptive forgiveness of the New Testament. Through his proxy in *Autobiography*, he complained that Christ, “notwithstanding the great power he possessed...did not make use of it when, in my judgment, he most needed to do so,”³¹⁶ effectively rendering the logic of the Passion moot in modern historical circumstances, the tactical value of martial sacrifice set aside. In a poem from *Fifty Years*, suggestively titled “Fragment,” Johnson wrote, “God is not love, no, God is law.”³¹⁷ Yet institutionally this meant, as Jon Michael Spencer argues, support for the Social Gospel strains in the black church at the expense of the “narcotic doctrine.” The emphatic point in “The Crucifixion” is not resurrection and redemption, but Christ’s suffering, in which African Americans participated. This is enforced by the repetition of the accusatory exclamation of “Crucify him!” from the crowd threefold,³¹⁸ of the clanging strikes of “The hammer!” fivefold,³¹⁹ and the “shivering” and “groaning” of Jesus at the impact of nails and spear twice each.³²⁰ In this respect, the poem also races Simon, who briefly helps Christ on the road to Golgotha in

³¹⁶ Johnson, *Along This Way*, 16.

³¹⁷ Johnson, *Writings*, 821.

³¹⁸ Johnson, *God’s Trombones*, 32.

³¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 33.

³²⁰ *Ibid.*

the synoptic Gospels by taking up the cross: “And then they laid hold on Simon, / Black Simon, yes, Black Simon; / They put the cross on Simon, / And Simon bore the cross.”³²¹

The final verse sermon, “The Judgment Day,” also complements the placement of “Let Me People Go.” Like the conclusion of the Exodus poem, it is exhortatory, but directed to the end of time instead of to present crisis. The eschatological setting bears on that present, however, because those responsible for enslaving and oppressing African Americans would undergo bodily resurrection to be judged, and those who were enslaved and oppressed would be vindicated. As with the preacher’s other percussive repetitions and evocations of powerful sounds, the resurrection would bring these two opposed parties face to face with each other before God: “What sound is that I hear? / It’s the clicking together of the dry bones, / Bone to bone – the dry bones. / And I see coming out of the bursting graves, / And marching up from the valley of death, / The army of the dead.”³²² While this, like other imagery in the poem, is derived from the Book of Revelation, “dry bones” is a reference to Ezekiel, one of the major prophetic books in the Old Testament, in which God charges Ezekiel with calling Israel to repent. Again, the poem adopts second-person address at the climax, reminding the reader that he will have a place in the apocalyptic scene: “Sinner, oh sinner, / Where will you stand / In that great day when God’s a-going to rain down fire?”³²³ By juxtaposing the typological reading of Exodus and Judgment Day, *God’s Trombones* both appeals to the Protestant establishment’s visions of American as chosen and driven by morality as values shared

³²¹ Johnson, *God’s Trombones*, 41.

³²² *Ibid.*, 54.

³²³ *Ibid.*, 56.

between white and black American Protestants, and reinforces the urgency of the race question as the pressing contemporary crisis of these values.

VI. Conclusion

Johnson's approach to advancing the social causes of African Americans was the product of a cautious temperament that sought to exemplify to fellow black citizens the virtues of strength, confidence and self-control, yet the claims he allowed himself to make for art, and poetry in particular, were grand. As had been evident to Johnson when he wrote *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man*, preachers could move black audiences en masse in ways that propaganda from other sources could not. *God's Trombones* was Johnson's most successful impersonation of this figure's voice and artistic power, with a message, however, that was rewritten, reordered, and, to a certain extent, by foregrounding artistic and political aspiration, secularized. Johnson's refinement of the preacher's folk sermon was not an act of preservation but, in his view, the fulfillment of the preacher's opening salvoes in saving from Christianity what was worth saving for African Americans. That Johnson received the Harmon Award from the Federal Council of Churches in Christ showed that his cautious, gradualist approach with respect to the factions debating the black church in the Harlem Renaissance was religious enough, but the critical status of the text as a neglected masterpiece of modernist poetry demonstrates that it did not come close to meeting Johnson's most ambitious secular artistic and political goals for it. Nevertheless, the poetic sermons effectively

incorporated the establishment values he wanted African Americans to assimilate, and the book stands as a testament to his dream of the social fusion behind the linguistic fusion of black idiom and Bible English. This fusion would have reconciled through art the racial division between African and white American Protestant cultures. It required the message of the old-time Negro preacher, translated into text and carried into the future by Johnson and the NAACP, that God was the God of the Protestant establishment – that His law was racial justice, but also that He was in the flag.

Liberal in Theology, Conservative in Politics:

Marianne Moore's Culture War

The sinless man
 Who dares to publish truth has surely found
 Though sins abound,
 None may confound him.³²⁴

I. Moore's Janus-Faced Protestantism

Over the last two decades, evidence has mounted that Marianne Moore's Protestantism had a substantial impact on her poetry.³²⁵ It is remarkable that this dimension of her poetry did not receive attention sooner, given that her faith was continuous throughout her life, and that she was one of the few modernist poets to attend church throughout what most scholars identify as a watershed period of secularization. An important reason is her characteristic reticence, which caused Randall Jarrell to read as self-description the words of Moore's animal poem "The Pangolin" – "another armored animal"³²⁶ – applied especially to her faith. This reticence complemented the

³²⁴ Moore, "Axiomatic," *Poems*, 135.

³²⁵ Andrew J. Kappel, "Notes on the Presbyterian Poetry of Marianne Moore," *Marianne Moore: Woman and Poet*, Ed. Patricia C. Willis (Orono, ME: National Poetry Foundation, 1990), 37-51, and "The world is an orphan's home: Marianne Moore on God and Family," *Reform and Counterreform: Dialectics of the Word in Western Christianity Since Luther*, Ed. John C. Hawley (Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter, 1994: 173-92); Jeredith Merrin, "Sites of Struggle: Marianne Moore and American Calvinism," *The Calvinist Roots of the Modern Era*, Ed. Alik Barnstone, Michael Tomasek Manson, and Carol J. Singley (Hanover, NH: University Press of New England, 1997), 91-106; Luke Carson, "Republicanism and Leisure in Marianne Moore's Depression," *MLQ: Modern Language Quarterly* 63 (Nov 2002): 315-42; Cristanne Miller, "Marianne Moore and a Poetry of Hebrew (Protestant) Prophecy," *Sources: Revue d'Études Anglophones* 12 (2002): 29-47; Jennifer Leader, "'Certain Axioms Rivaling Scriptures': Marianne Moore, Reinhold Niebuhr, and the Ethics of Engagement," *Twentieth Century Literature* 51 (2005): 316-40; and Benjamin Johnson, "The Poetics of the Fall in Marianne Moore's 'The Jerboa,'" *Arizona Quarterly* 63 (Autumn 2007): 61-89.

religious references in her poetry, which were as oblique and tangential as its approach to other subjects. In the major long poem “Marriage,” Adam and Eve’s relationship is modernized and recast to uncertain effect;³²⁷ Christ and the apostles enter the topical World War II poem “Keeping Their World Large” through a dropped quotation.³²⁸ It would be tendentious to claim that the primary purpose of these poems was to affirm or explore religious faith. The obliquity of their religious reference contrasts markedly with devotional poetry, including that which has a wide, modern experiential purview, like Eliot’s *Four Quartets*. As a result, critics have downplayed the religious dimension of Moore’s poetry by discussing it in terms of ethics, politics, and culture. For example, Rachel Blau Du Plessis’ reading of “The Labors of Hercules,” which quotes a sermon combating negative racial stereotypes, treats the quotation’s clerical origin as secondary to its position on race.³²⁹ Cristanne Miller, a prolific Moore scholar, has argued along these lines that the central themes of “In Distrust of Merits,” one of Moore’s most renowned poems, arose out of her Protestantism but were secularized over the course of successive drafts so that the poem addressed the widest possible audience.³³⁰ Both causes

³²⁶ Randall Jarrell, “The Humble Animal,” in *The Critical Response to Marianne Moore*, Ed. Elizabeth Gregory (Westport, CT: Praeger, 2003), 135.

³²⁷ Moore, “Marriage,” in *Poems*, 155-62.

³²⁸ Moore, “Keeping Their World Large,” in *Poems*, 264-6.

³²⁹ Moore, “The Labors of Hercules,” in *Poems*, 147; DuPlessis, *Genders, Races, and Religious Cultures*, 159. DuPlessis has written more entertainingly elsewhere, “Some of her reception is about her choices, but some not. For example: her faded, later poems, her Upstanding Protestantism: BORING!—but T.S. Eliot’s faded, later poems, his Upstanding Protestantism—CULTURALLY HEGEMONIC! What, as the kids say, was That About?”; DuPlessis, in Benjamin Friedlander, “Marianne Moore Today,” in *Critics and Poets on Marianne Moore: ‘a right good salvo of barks,’* (Cranbury, NJ: Bucknell University Press, 2005), 224. I would argue that mainline Protestantism was far more culturally hegemonic in America than Anglo-Catholicism.

for quieting the Protestantism in Moore's poetry – its obliquity and apparent inclusivity – assume that she yielded to the secularizing tendency of her age, whether by refusing to write devotional poetry or by respecting the constraints of secular pluralism when she did. This gets it wrong on both counts, I argue. Some of Moore's poetry, including "In Distrust of Merits," expressed devotion, and the apparent pluralism of several such poems was the result of calculated support for the interests of the Protestant establishment.

This argument will explain why Moore's Protestantism did not receive attention sooner, as well as the striking quality of recent scholarship on the subject - that to contemporary critical sensibilities, her Protestantism's social and cultural expressions seem Janus-faced. In a recent review of two expansive facsimile editions of Moore's 1930s poetry, Siobhan Phillips captures this quality nicely, dubbing Moore "the progressive Puritan."³³¹ Yet this paradox is less "quintessentially American" than a sign of Moore's identification with the Protestant establishment. Puritans *per se* did not exist in twentieth-century America, the complaints of H.L. Mencken aside. Recent Moore critics more commonly invoke Calvinism than Puritanism, observing the language of election and strict morality that circulated within Moore's family.³³² Another tendency, however, identifies Moore's Protestantism with two of the theological currents in American Protestantism that flowered in Calvinism's wake – particularly the Social Gospel

³³⁰ Miller, "'Distrusting': Marianne Moore on War and Feeling in the 1940s," *American Literature* 80.2 (June 2008):359.

³³¹ Siobhan Phillips, "The Progressive Puritan," *Boston Review* (13 May 2013) <<http://www.bostonreview.net/poetry/siobhan-phillips-progressive-puritan>>.

³³² Kappel, "Notes on the Presbyterian Poetry of Marianne Moore," "The world is an orphan's home;" Merrin, "Sites of Struggle;" Carson, "Republicanism and Leisure."

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movement in the early twentieth century,³³³ and neo-orthodoxy in the 1930s.³³⁴ The Social Gospel movement and its liberal fellow travelers – whom William Hutchison collectively calls American Protestant “modernists” – preached the adaptation of religion to modern culture, the presence of God in society, and historical progress.³³⁵ Neo-orthodoxy, by contrast, preached the sinfulness of human nature, God’s transcendence, and the inevitable failure of earthly reform.³³⁶ The question is, how can Moore’s Protestantism reflect both?

One answer is that the theological bearings of Moore’s Protestantism changed over time, and the heydays of the Social Gospel and neo-orthodoxy would accord with the standard early (1915-40) and late (1940-70) phases into which her poetry has been divided. But I argue that the Protestant establishment provides a context for her faith larger than theology that brings the compatibility of these bearings into focus. The Protestant establishment was dominated by Social Gospel voices through World War I; when the threat of fascism arose in the late 30s, neo-orthodoxy began to become the new mainstream. Neo-orthodoxy did not override many of the progressive features of the Social Gospel, namely, a very liberal idea of scriptural interpretation, belief in the progress and authority of scientific knowledge, and a commitment to social justice along gender, race, and class lines. These aspects of the Social Gospel carried through into Moore’s later poetry, even as neo-orthodoxy became important to her, especially in the

³³³ Miller, “Marianne Moore and Poetry of Hebrew (Protestant) Prophecy.”

³³⁴ Leader, ““certain axioms rivaling scripture;”” Johnson, “Poetics of the Fall.”

³³⁵ Hutchison, *The Modernist Impulse in American Protestantism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1976), 2.

³³⁶ Hutchinson, *Modernist Impulse*, 289-98.

figure of the theologian Reinhold Niebuhr. The most important context in which the Social Gospel gave way to neo-orthodoxy was on the question of war. Some of Moore's earliest poetry derived pacifist principles from Social Gospel bible study to speak out against World War I.³³⁷ Yet this ran against the current of establishment opinion, which shared in the jingoism of the political effort to enter the war. Chastened by the war's horrors, the establishment adopted a pacifistic, isolationist stance. Only with the spread of neo-orthodox justifications of war, and the creation of coalitions with lay, Jewish and Catholic, and secular compatriots, did the pacifist tide begin to turn.³³⁸

One major part of this campaign was the magazine *Christianity & Crisis*, which Niebuhr founded to oppose the pacifism of the *Christian Century*, the largest mainline Protestant periodical.³³⁹ Moore was a subscriber, and eventually became Niebuhr's correspondent.³⁴⁰ Niebuhr also served as an editor at *The Nation*, and "In Distrust of Merits" first appeared there side-by-side with a book review by Niebuhr defending democracy and just war. The liberalism of neo-orthodoxy complemented, however, the Calvinism Moore imbibed at home, in that its critique of the idealism of pacifism also extended to the dangerous character of collective utopian projects. Hence what became a

³³⁷ Miller, "Marianne Moore and Poetry of Hebrew (Protestant) Prophecy."

³³⁸ Heather Warren, *Theologians of a New World Order: Reinhold Niebuhr and the Christian Realists, 1920-48* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997); "The Realist-Pacifist Summit Meeting of March 1942 and the Political Reorientation of Ecumenical Protestantism in the United States," in Hollinger, *After Cloves Tongues of Fire*; Kevin D. Schultz, *Tri-Faith America*; and Mark Hulsether, *Building a Protestant Left: Christianity and Crisis Magazine, 1941-1993* (Knoxville, TN: University of Tennessee Press, 1999).

³³⁹ Hulsether, *Building a Protestant Left*, Introduction.

³⁴⁰ Moore, Reinhold Niebuhr Correspondence, Marianne Moore Collection, Rosenbach Library and Museum, V:45:16.

progressive international theology of engagement for Moore, one which conceived of Christianity in highly rationalistic, allegorical terms, nevertheless remained conservative in its relation to domestic politics. This is why I evoke Eliot's tripartite declaration of allegiance – "classicist in literature, royalist in politics, and anglo-catholic in religion"³⁴¹ – in calling Moore progressive in theology and Republican in politics – because the polarities of her identity differed from Eliot's neatly constructed alignment. Where Eliot's were publicly explained and projected onto his adopted church, Moore's were lived, and attuned to the dominant frequencies of the Protestant establishment.

Although hints and clues of this alliance with the establishment pervade Moore's poetry, I argue that it becomes highly visible during the first decade of the Cold War. It is at this point that the stakes of Moore's culture war against the New Deal welfare state came to seem global, and thus in desperate need of airing. Unlike Frost, who embraced the welfare state after substantial doubt, Moore came to believe that it risked sliding the US in the direction of communist totalitarianism. Her culture war poetry sermonized, partly with the goal of persuasion, partly of inflicting sidelong devastation, as though whatever fell in the shadow of its strong praise would wither. It started with a belief in Great Men, exemplary American Protestants, particularly Republican presidents, who ostensibly served as embodiments of national history, character, and morals. It extended to the figures, institutions, and laws of the Protestant establishment. But it came to settle on war. This movement can be traced from "The Steeple-Jack," written to benefit President Hoover's re-election campaign in the face of the Depression in 1932, to "In

³⁴¹ Eliot, *For Lancelot Andrewes: Essays on Style and Order* (Garden City, NY: Double and Doran, 1929), Introduction.

Distrust of Merits,” written to drum up greater support for the war effort in 1942 and 1943, and “Blessed is the Man,” written to praise President Eisenhower’s Cold War leadership in his re-election year. By the time of “Blessed is the Man,” the sectarian, partisan bent of her culture war was beginning to become clear for her readers. In addition to locating the theological complexity of Moore’s Protestantism within the larger context of the Protestant establishment, these poems also locate it within a politically conservative American Protestant political tradition that survives in modified form to this day. As such, these poems cut against the grain of the scholarly tendency to represent Moore as the progressive antithesis of male modernist contemporaries like T.S. Eliot and Ezra Pound, which has predominated in scholarship on non-religious aspects of her poetry.

II. The Establishment Paradox of Religious Freedom

Moore’s submission to the *Partisan Review* symposium “Religion and the Intellectuals” (1950) at the dawn of the Cold War spelled out several of the assumptions underlying her belief in the Protestant establishment. The symposium’s premise was that the revival of religion among artists and intellectuals was the result of experiences of historical and political crisis. Because the tenor and phrasing of the symposium questions indicated a skeptical perspective, Moore’s responses had a dry, guarded quality. When asked whether culture could “exist without a positive religion,”³⁴² Moore replied:

³⁴² Moore, *Complete Prose*, 677.

“Culture so far, has not existed without religion and I doubt that it could.”³⁴³ This closely echoed the central claim of Eliot’s *Notes Toward the Definition of Culture*, published the previous year: “[N]o culture can appear or develop except in relation to a religion.”³⁴⁴ In Moore’s case, this statement left two corollaries implicit – that she identified with American culture, and that she belonged to America’s dominant religious tradition. Addressing the premise of the symposium directly, Moore contrasted the “contrition” induced by “catastrophe” with “convictions,” which were paradoxically “[c]orroborated by the thinking of others – and the moral law (which is self-demonstrating, most of us admit),”³⁴⁵ that is, both individually reasoned and socially reinforced. If “the thinking of others” could not lead one to religious convictions – and Moore’s elision of the adjective “religious” tellingly reflects her presumption of inquirers hostile to religion – then the obviousness of the “moral law” could.

As a matter of tone, the dryness of Moore’s answers in the symposium, like the obliquity of religious references in her poetry, was a double-edged sword. It could suggest perceived contexts of reception that offered the threat of controversy or the safety of consensus. Jeredith Merrin and Luke Carson have identified Moore’s close-knit family, which consisted of her devout mother Mary and brother Warner, a Presbyterian minister and naval chaplain, as the inner circle of this consensus. Although Mary died in 1947, she lived with Moore until her death. Moore’s first biographer observed that Mary

³⁴³ Moore, *Complete Prose*, 677.

³⁴⁴ Eliot, *Christianity and Culture: The Idea of a Christian Society and Notes Toward the Definition of Culture* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1968), 100.

³⁴⁵ Moore, *Complete Prose*, 677.

and Warner thought of her poetry “as something very like the missionary work of a religious figure.”³⁴⁶ Admirers outside the circle preferred analogies that seated them in Moore’s congregation. Louise Bogan described Moore’s poems as “sermons in little, preached in the ‘plain style’ but with overtones of a grander eloquence.”³⁴⁷ W.H. Auden praised “In Distrust of Merits” in particular as a happy riposte “to those who think of Miss Moore as a poet incapable of, or too reticent to employ, the organ note.”³⁴⁸ The same year Moore published “Blessed is the Man,” she gave a reading from the Amherst Chapel pulpit, and relished the steadying effect of her prop in correspondence: “Speaking from a pulpit is always a pleasure,—*help*, I should say.”³⁴⁹ That, to her, the chapel was enabling and a welcome respite from the settings in which her poetry was normally received indicated her uncertainty about whether the religious messages of her poetry were getting through to readers. Whether Moore wanted them to imagine her behind the pulpit, or whether it threatened the effectiveness of any proselytizing in which her poetry might have been engaged, is a question raised by the histories of these three contentious political poems.

Also in the symposium, Moore rejected an argument attributed to Charles Maurras, the reactionary French Catholic at one time admired by Eliot, that institutional religion was an indispensable tool of social stability which preserved civilization. Moore retorted that civilization without religious freedom was not civilized. Talking past her

³⁴⁶ Charles Molesworth, *Marianne Moore: A Literary Life* (New York: Atheneum, 1990), 283.

³⁴⁷ Louise Bogan, “The Season’s Verse,” in *The Critical Response to Marianne Moore*, 144.

³⁴⁸ W.H. Auden, “New Poems,” *New York Times Book Review*, October 5, 1944: 7-8.

³⁴⁹ Moore, *Selected Letters*, 527.

questioner, she gave her account of this freedom. *Partisan Review* asked: “Is a return to religion necessary to counter the new means of social discipline that we all fear: totalitarianism?”³⁵⁰ Moore responded that the discipline religion provided depended on whether the individual respected it apart from its social utility: “Religion that does not result first of all in self-discipline will never result in social discipline and could be the prey of any form of tyranny.”³⁵¹ The answer inverted the values implied by the question, implying that social discipline was the result of being religious, but inappropriate as a practical reason in its favor. Where the *Partisan Review* question associated religion with the control of an institution over the masses, and debated the merits of religious versus totalitarian social discipline, Moore’s answer associated religion with the bedrock guarantee of individual freedom.

This reflected a voluntaristic establishment understanding of the nature of religion as a personal faith that sustained American democratic political structures. Elaborating on the threat of totalitarianism, Moore went on to explain that coerced faith was contrary to “religion”:

That belief in God is not easy, is seemingly one of God’s injustices; and self-evidently, imposed piety results in the opposite. Coercion and religious complacency are serious enemies of religion – whereas persecution inevitably favors spiritual conviction. But this is certain, any attempted substituting of self for deity, is a forlorn hope.³⁵²

This did not grant that alternative worldviews were sound, but insisted that coerced faith was weaker than other types. Belief in God might have been difficult – though Moore

³⁵⁰ Moore, *Complete Prose*, 677.

³⁵¹ *Ibid.*

³⁵² *Ibid.*, 678.

made a point to state in another reply that science was not one such cause of difficulty – but individuals had to come to it of their own accord. However, the “persecution” of faith, Moore suggested, actually eased the path to “spiritual conviction,” by clarifying the contrast between the difficult self-discipline of religion and the insidious social discipline of totalitarian communism. Moore echoed this description of communism as an idolatrous political religion in a contemporaneous essay for a local church bulletin: “Russia substitutes self for God and makes experience, Deity.”³⁵³ To her, coercion and complacency represented two extremes of weak faith, but communism threatened the freedom that made true faith possible.

Tracy Fessenden has identified American Protestantism, especially in this covert interdependence of Protestant conceptions of religious and democratic freedom, as a crucial unmarked category in American religious and literary history, one that has licensed oppression on the ground that other religious, political, and racial identities were obstacles or threats to American democracy.³⁵⁴ The understanding of the Cold War set out in these replies reflected this conservative Protestant idea of interdependence, and the self-image of centrality that the authority of the Protestant establishment lent it. Fostering moral self-discipline by charting one’s personal relationship to God is a radically circumscribed understanding of religious freedom, as is the intimately related understanding of American democracy as built on this self-discipline. In speaking for the values of the free world against the values of the world envisioned by the Soviet Union, Moore treated the Soviet Union’s political and religious defects in tandem, contrasting

³⁵³ Moore, “Conscience,” in *Complete Prose*, 651.

³⁵⁴ Fessenden, *Culture and Redemption*.

them with the strength of the West. The chief paradox of this understanding of freedom was that the opposition of freedom and tyranny, of welcome and insidious social discipline, when translated from the religious into the political register, presumed to speak for a religiously diverse population. Yet it held that only one constellation of religion and politics, closely identified with national tradition, could counter communism, a constellation Moore invoked indirectly, as though it would be counterproductive to explicitly remark on it.

This paradoxical freedom that Moore believed in fighting for was reflected in her description of her poetics in the postwar period. The lecture “Humility, Concentration, and Gusto” (1948) began with a case for subtle poetic activism. Moore set the Cold War struggle for freedom as the inescapable context for the lecture, beginning, “In times like these we are tempted to disregard anything that has not a direct bearing on freedom.”³⁵⁵ Moore then corrects herself, substituting “obvious” for “direct,” and observes that poetry “works obliquely and delicately.”³⁵⁶ This obliquity might be an asset, allowing the poet “to persuade the enemy to change his mind.”³⁵⁷ She emboldened poets to imagine themselves as playing a vital social role in the Cold War, attributing the analogy between war and persuasion to the British naval officer Stephen King-Hall in his book *Total Victory* (1942).³⁵⁸ In light of this analogy, the figure of armor throughout Moore’s poetry might be re-interpreted as the tactful subtlety that kept ideas above the fray of ideological

³⁵⁵ Moore, “Humility, Concentration, and Gusto,” *Complete Prose*, 420.

³⁵⁶ *Ibid.*

³⁵⁷ *Ibid.*

³⁵⁸ *Ibid.*

argument, its insinuating but circumspect power amalgamating “the thinking of others” and fostering faith that, whether coerced or complacent, reliably gained force from the fear of totalitarianism, without seeming to speak as from a pulpit.

Moore celebrated the evasion of argument as a desirable skill when writing about the first Republican president, Abraham Lincoln, who, she wrote, “won juries and disinterested observers alike, by anecdote or humorous implication that made argument unnecessary.”³⁵⁹ She listed Lincoln, along with Socrates, Polycarp, Giordano – four martyrs, three of them Christian – and “men in our own time,”³⁶⁰ as manifestations of the “greatness” that “has come to us...as the over-ruling power of the Moral Law, combined through the Grace of God,³⁶¹ with human experience...codified by Moses in the Ten Commandments; expanded and modified when tested by reason, from potentiality or spiritual apperception, into what we call a sense of duty.”³⁶² This Protestant history of human progress would include Herbert Hoover and Dwight D. Eisenhower as men of greatness in their own times, placing them in Lincoln’s lineage. By the time Moore wrote “Blessed is the Man,” the existential threat of the Soviet Union, her belief in Eisenhower’s “greatness,” and the popularity of this belief, coupled with the decade’s upswing in public religiosity, impelled her to a more direct poetic endorsement, leading to the spectacle of a high modernist poet, famed for her difficulty and eccentricity, coming out for Eisenhower in *Ladies’ Home Journal*.

³⁵⁹ Moore, “Abraham Lincoln and the Art of the Word, in *Complete Prose*, 529.

³⁶⁰ Moore, “Conscience,” 651.

³⁶¹ *Ibid.*

³⁶² *Ibid.*

III. “The Steeple-Jack” and the Culture War Against the State

The designs of “The Steeple-Jack” and “Blessed is the Man” become more evident when considered in their initial contexts of periodical publication, reprinting, and reception, which were a vital part of the textuality of the poems as initial readers encountered them.³⁶³ “The Steeple-Jack” began its print career as a part of a sequence, “Part of a Novel, Part of a Poem, Part of a Play,” first published in *Poetry* in 1932, consisting of the poems “The Steeple-Jack,” “The Student,” and “The Hero.” Later editions of Moore’s poetry and republications of the poem broke up the sequence and obscure the poems’ common purpose. Each “part” introduces a figure who functions as a metonym for the consistent integration of Protestantism into American life. “The Steeple-Jack” observes a steeple-jack named C.J. Poole, working on a church the pitch of which a local college student named Ambrose “knows by heart,”³⁶⁴ making it an object of intimate knowledge. “The Student” profiles the American student in the abstract, embodying the Protestant interrelation of scholarship, egalitarian politics, and moral instruction in the educational institutions of the establishment, riffing on a conglomeration of the Yale and Harvard mottoes – “*lux et veritas, Christo et ecclesiae, sapiet felici*,”³⁶⁵ roughly, light and truth bode well for Christ and church. “The Hero” depicts a black docent working at George Washington’s tomb, compared to Moses and Bunyan’s Pilgrim, whose reverence for the first President reflects a solemn appreciation

³⁶³ On the importance of material textuality to modernist literature, and to Moore’s poetry, see George Bornstein, *Material Modernism*, and Moore, *Becoming Marianne Moore: Early Poems 1907-24*, Ed. Robin G. Schulze.

³⁶⁴ Moore, “Part of a Novel, Part of a Poem, Part of a Play,” *Poetry: A Magazine of Verse* 40.3 (Jun 1932), 121.

³⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 123.

for the moral progress of the republic toward abolition and civil rights. “The Steeple-Jack” draws the three poems together – “The hero, the student / the steeple-jack, each in his own way, / is at home”³⁶⁶ – by equating American society with the values of the Protestant establishment. It marks the first time in Moore’s career that her poetry presented an integrated vision of the importance of the establishment. This is likely why it retained the first position across Moore’s subsequent collections from the *Selected Poems* onwards,³⁶⁷ through the *Collected Poems*,³⁶⁸ *Marianne Moore Reader*,³⁶⁹ and *Complete Poems*.³⁷⁰

The sequence appeared in the year of the first presidential election since the onset of the Great Depression. Luke Carson has argued that Moore supported Hoover in the presidential elections of 1928 and 1932 because her Calvinist republicanism, which devalued material wealth and modeled politics as moral self-sacrifice, judged Roosevelt’s calls to fight Depression unemployment and scarcity to be immoral.³⁷¹ Where Carson interprets Moore’s assessment of the stakes of the election according to the economic morality of the Calvinist ethic and civic republican political thought, setting aside the appearance of Hoover in “The Steeple-Jack” as a byproduct of her support, I see the poem as a demonstration that the outcome of the election would determine whether the

³⁶⁶ Moore, “Part of a Novel,” 122.

³⁶⁷ Moore, “Part of a Novel, Part of a Poem, Part of a Play,” *Selected Poems* (New York: Macmillan, 1935), 1-3.

³⁶⁸ Moore, “The Steeple-Jack,” *Collected Poems* (New York: Macmillan, 1952), 13-14.

³⁶⁹ Moore, “The Steeple-Jack,” *The Marianne Moore Reader* (New York: Viking, 1961), 3-5.

³⁷⁰ Moore, “The Steeple-Jack,” *Complete Poems* (New York: Viking, 1967), 5-7.

³⁷¹ Carson, “Republicanism and Leisure,” 714-21.

nation would continued to be ruled by Protestant morality and preserve the corresponding social order of the establishment. Averting argument, this demonstration takes the form of a description of an idyllic seaside town, which gradually rises to a crescendo in tribute to Hoover's moral character.

The town balances natural and civilized wealth, offering imaginative proof that the economic crisis resulted from moral failings of personal greed and vanity, not from political failings of policy and ideology. Averting one's eyes from the frenzy of the metropolis and centers of finance would, as Moore had it, recalibrate readers' impressions of the relation between material and spiritual well-being. The first eight stanzas methodically inventory the town's ecology in economic terms, ranging from commercially-fished lobsters to diverse plant life. Local animals and vegetation represent a form of wealth, and yet "nothing that ambition can buy or take away."³⁷² Not overly plentiful, the "sea- / side flowers and // trees" are "disguised by what might seem like austerity,"³⁷³ and framed for inspection by patches of fog off the water. Ambrose the student watches "boats // at sea progress white and rigid as if in / a groove,"³⁷⁴ hinting at the unabated pace of commerce. These lines remain in the poem for the *Selected Poems*, but are removed for the *Collected Poems*, published at a time of postwar economic growth, and only partially restored for the *Marianne Moore Reader*, and *Complete Poems*, suggesting their particular fit to America in the Depression era. Far from being sleepy or merely of natural beauty, the town is a vibrant hub of activity, laid bare by

³⁷² Moore, "Part of a Novel," *Poetry*, 120.

³⁷³ *Ibid.*

³⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 121.

Ambrose's omniscient prospect. One sign of trouble tests the town's resilience, a storm that "disturbs stars in the sky and the / star on the steeple."³⁷⁵ A symbol of the Depression, the storm enlarges the thematic harmony of nature and civilization to account for natural disorder. By linking the celestial stars with the star on the steeple, the poem represents the church as a fixture in the naturalized order that the Depression cannot fundamentally threaten.

The storm calls for, and reminds of the need for, a steeple-jack. To foreground this occupation was to insist that Christianity was a material, institutional religion that required maintenance – allegorized, continual reformation. The steeple-jack teaches that the faith can be in need of repair. Poole's identifying placard sits beside a sign cautioning passersby about the disturbed and perhaps falsely disturbing star: "...on the sidewalk a / sign says C.J. Poole, Steeple-Jack, / in black and white; and one in red / and white says // Danger."³⁷⁶ The sign also invokes the church's educational function in steering the townspeople away from sin. To reinforce the connection of the church to the social order, and that the fate of the church depends on Poole, the conclusion of the poem brings the entire town into the orbit of the steeple-jack and the church: "it could not be dangerous to be living / in a town like this, of simple people, / who have a steeple-jack placing danger signs by the church / while he is gilding the solid-pointed star, / which on a steeple stands for hope."³⁷⁷ Poole is a proxy for the poet, whose poem, in the storm of the moment, patiently keeps sight of larger truths, offering practical labor in addition to hope, and

³⁷⁵ Moore, "Part of a Novel," 120.

³⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 122.

³⁷⁷ *Ibid.*

helping to distinguish true from false dangers. While “gilding” can imply luxury, to gild something is also to give it luster, or in this case to restore it. In light of the evident lack of danger, the earlier lines, “The climate... // is not right... / ...for exotic serpent life” take on the luster of paradisaical promise.³⁷⁸

Between the introduction of Poole and the end of the poem, the church is supposed to extend unnamed “presidents” an offer of asylum from the corruption of Washington. The town is not just the “home” of Moore’s representative figures but a “haven” for them, such presidents, and a cast of social pariahs: “This would be a fit haven for / waifs, children, animals, / prisoners, / and presidents who have repaid / sin-driven // senators by not thinking about them.”³⁷⁹ Preceded by a description of the church, these lines obscure the referent of “this” to suggest that the town and church are interchangeable antecedents. Town and church affirm the values of moral presidents and shelter the vulnerable populations who might come under the control of sinful politicians. The implication is that communal charity and Christian regeneration enhanced well-being and the spirit of self-sacrifice, while redistributed wealth vitiated them. That this mention of the presidency turns on the question of charity versus federal aid confirms that the president most clearly alluded to here is Hoover. Conflating his political unpopularity and the suffering of the downtrodden audaciously reversed the charge that he had done nothing in office to lessen the Depression’s widespread suffering.

Moreover, placed in a town with a symbolic relationship to history, with a persecuted president inside, the sole place of worship could not stand for religion in

³⁷⁸ Moore, “Part of a Novel,” 120.

³⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 122.

general. For one, its description engages in Protestant anti-Catholicism, praising the plainness of the church's exterior as a sign of its moral and theological correctness: "The Church portico has four fluted / columns, each a single piece of stone, made / modest by white-wash."³⁸⁰ The purified columns, with their unassuming classical simplicity and unitary integrity, stand in opposition to the ornamental detail and excess of Catholic aesthetics. These aesthetic deficiencies correlate to the theological corruptions of superstition and idolatry, which have historically defied, in the American Protestant imagination, religious voluntarism and the freedom of conscience. In contradistinction, the town church's communal function takes precedence over its appearance, as the portico is both relay point to the world beyond and barrier against the world's sin. Moreover, the association of Hoover with the strict morals of the church reflects the interconnected vision of the Protestant establishment, which extended to the values underlying federal law, what David Sehat has called the Protestant moral establishment.³⁸¹ One of the many reasons Moore supported Hoover was his temperance platform,³⁸² and the passage of the Eighteenth Amendment to the Constitution in 1919 had been "the crowning triumph of the moral establishment."³⁸³ In 1928, the Democratic candidate, Gov. Al Smith of New York, had supported repeal, and his Roman Catholicism prompted the oppositional slogan of "Rum and Romanism." The high-minded act of "not thinking about" "sin-driven // senators" is mitigated by these recent

³⁸⁰ Moore, "Part of a Novel," 122.

³⁸¹ Sehat, *Myth of American Religious Freedom*, 5.

³⁸² Molesworth, *Marianne Moore*, 143

³⁸³ Sehat, *Myth of American Religious Freedom*, 214.

conflicts of religion and politics that cast a shadow on the poem. And accusing the senators of being sinful assumes that they should be judged by Christian standards.

Following the publication of “The Steeple-Jack,” and shortly before Roosevelt’s landslide victory, Moore sought to make the case for Hoover more directly. She unsuccessfully attempted to place a poem comparing Hoover’s detractors to Judas Iscariot, first in the *New York Times Herald Tribune* and then in a Republican newspaper in Illinois.³⁸⁴ Morton Dauwen Zabel, associate editor of *Poetry: A Magazine of Verse*, bore the brunt of her indignant support in a letter several months after Hoover’s defeat. Moore had been offended by Zabel’s mockery of the religious language Hoover used in a stump speech. In a review of an anthology of poems by Iowan women’s club members in the February 1933 issue of *Poetry*, Zabel prodded Hoover for the line that “upon the rock of such spiritual heroism as that of the Iowa cornlands the civilization...of America is based.”³⁸⁵ Zabel also scorned, in a mocking pairing, Hoover’s promises of “regeneration of soul and of international trade.”³⁸⁶

Moore in response relayed her “possible feeling of estrangement from the February issue” and developed the Christological images of Hoover the betrayed and Hoover among the outcasts, writing that he “is one of our great men” and “has worked for the good of the country, to the point of martyrdom,”³⁸⁷ arguing that self-sacrifice

³⁸⁴ Molesworth, *Marianne Moore*, 259.

³⁸⁵ Morton Dauwen Zabel, Rev. of *Silk of the Corn: Poems by Members of the Iowa Federation of Woman’s Clubs*, *Poetry: A Magazine of Verse*, Volume 41.5 (February 1933), Chicago: Harriet Monroe, 287.

³⁸⁶ *Ibid.*

³⁸⁷ Moore, *Selected Letters*, 288-9.

bound together Hoover, the poor, and Christ in national religious community. She also suggested submitting another pro-Hoover poem to *Poetry*: “It would be more to the point if instead of this, I sent you a poem – and if I were ready writer enough to do this, it would be as a patriot and not as a traitor that I spoke. That is to say the dedication of the piece would be implicit and not a partisan label...” (289) A sense of implicitness, and of the unobjectionable quality of patriotism, rationalized her presentation of partisan poetry as nonpartisan. Giving the right religious coordinates for Hoover’s patriotic morality could not but show detractors like Zabel the error of their ways.

T.S. Eliot’s sequencing of “The Steeple-Jack” first in the 1935 *Selected Poems*,³⁸⁸ its second republication – after *Poetry*’s 1933 prize issue – suggests that he read “The Steeple-Jack” in a similar way. It explored the idea of rural, organic, Protestant community that he had recently considered in *After Strange Gods* and would return to in “East Coker.”³⁸⁹ Poole’s servicing of the church would also have reminded Eliot of the cause for which his pageant play, *The Rock*, was commissioned in 1934 – the construction of additional parish churches in London, which were supposed to stimulate revival in the Church of England.³⁹⁰ Unlike most of Eliot’s contemporaries, or critics since, Moore had a strongly positive response to the text of the play: “When taken to task for going to church, I have sometimes answered that we do not refuse to have money because there are counterfeits, but the reply seems to need reiterating. *The Rock* is

³⁸⁸ Kappel, “Presenting Miss Moore,” 132-5.

³⁸⁹ Eliot, *After Strange Gods*,” 182-3.

³⁹⁰ Eliot, *The Rock: A Pageant Play* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1934).

unanswerable.”³⁹¹ For Moore, if not for Eliot, the prospects improved. Hoover might have stolen away to the village church in 1932, but, by the 1950s, a pious Republican had recaptured the White House.

IV. “In Distrust of Merits” and Establishment Coalition-Building

Realizing these prospects required more assertive means of persuasion. In a letter to Elizabeth Bishop in 1938, Moore argued, “Christianity is too much on the defensive.”³⁹² She explained that Christianity offered “comprehensive” and “lastingly deep and dependable” resources for understanding the volatility and violence of modernity unmatched by competing belief-systems. Moore attributed these ideas to Reinhold Niebuhr, a rising Protestant theologian whose writings and lectures she had first encountered earlier in the decade. Critics have overlooked the fact that “In Distrust of Merits,” a World War II poem that extends Moore’s argument in the letter to Bishop, was printed alongside a book review by Niebuhr in the Books and the Arts section of the May 1, 1943 issue of *The Nation*.³⁹³ Niebuhr was on the editorial board, suggesting that, at the very least, an editor familiar with his ideas made the conscious decision to place the pieces side by side. Prompting military offensives instead of the search for a “haven,” World War II held not electoral politics and economic hardship but the very existence of Moore’s Christian society in the balance. “In Distrust of Merits” thus reasons that

³⁹¹ Moore, *Selected Letters*, 324.

³⁹² *Ibid.*, 391.

³⁹³ Moore, “In Distrust of Merits,” *The Nation* (1 Jun 1943): 636.

sacrificing oneself for the war effort advanced the universal good, which for Moore was salvation through Christ and the transformed political reality it would bring about, but which the poem presented in slightly more equivocal terms.

Niebuhr's materially adjacent book review had a similar agenda. In response to a polemic in favor of *realpolitik* over democracy, Niebuhr defended democracy, arguing that, while "national self-interest is a more powerful motive than the democracies admit,"³⁹⁴ it might be possible in a democracy for "the mutual security of all nations" to take precedence over "the pride of a nation."³⁹⁵ He did not name the basis of his "proper realism,"³⁹⁶ but his call for "transcendence over the power impulse" made clear his commitments to humility and transcendence.³⁹⁷ Christianity, in other words, could tame the necessary evil of nationalism, reconciling democracy and original sin, the doctrinal center of the neo-orthodox movement with which Niebuhr identified.³⁹⁸ Arranged on the page to frame the first lines of Niebuhr's review, "In Distrust of Merits" opened by rejecting raw power politics as compulsions to service: "Strengthened to live, strengthened to die for / medals and positioned victories?"³⁹⁹ The benefits of individual acts of war were insufficient justifications of self-sacrifice. The answer was foreclosed; merits, or works, cannot lead to salvation. The merits of the medals and positioned

³⁹⁴ Reinhold Niebuhr, "Study in Cynicism," *The Nation* (1 Jun 1943), 637.

³⁹⁵ *Ibid.*

³⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, 638.

³⁹⁷ *Ibid.*

³⁹⁸ Hutchison, *Modernist Impulse*, 295-7

³⁹⁹ Moore, "In Distrust of Merits."

victories lacked a transcendent reference point because they did not track history from the perspective of eternity and the state of the soldiers' souls. The poem counseled self-imposed humility to allay the tension this reference point created between American military supremacy and the pursuit of lasting peace. This humility had to eclipse the false humility of withdrawing from militarism in moral revulsion that Moore had entertained in her World War I poetry.

A pattern of anaphora, word repetition, and antithesis gives the poem the quality of fanatical insistence. Through resonant abstractions like "power," "faith," "peace," "sorrow," "hate," "beauty," Moore imbued the war with transcendent significance while simultaneously harnessing secular appeals to personal and national interest. The verbal texture created by rhetorical anomalies modeled an exemplary way of internalizing the war. The triple "fighting, fighting, fighting" – triply repeated – captures the sentiment of war as an inexorable experience.⁴⁰⁰ Repetition brings the war into the poem, juxtaposing the battles that rage abroad and the process of thought and composition at home. Moore's writing, though sinuous, normally relied on standard grammar and syntax. Here, however, the absence of commas in the third triplet of the poem evokes a loss of composure different from her habitual breaches of poetic decorum. Likewise, commas fall out in the poem's first apostrophe – "O shining O / firm star"⁴⁰¹ – the excited repetition rehearsing the profane/sacred paradox by proclaiming certainty about the solidity of the star. Firmness gives the abstract qualities of steadiness, endurance,

⁴⁰⁰ Moore, "In Distrust of Merits."

⁴⁰¹ Ibid.

guidance, and loyalty an immanent presence, recalling the church's "solid- / pointed star" in "The Steeple-Jack."

Such moments of apostrophe assume that religious authority subsumes both military and civilian kinds. The repeated use of "O" as a pathetic device establishes an impassioned relation between Moore and the soldiers that obliges her to give witness to and reckon with the war. The poem addresses a dead soldier, the "quiet form upon the dust" whose photograph was one occasion for the poem,⁴⁰² and through him all Allied soldiers and all Americans. The crucial moral is stated as a hypothetical: "If these great patient / dyings-all these agonies / and wound bearings and bloodshed- / can teach us how to live, these / dyings were not wasted."⁴⁰³ This "If" might seem to deliberately leave open the possibility that the collectivity ("us") would not learn the proper lesson, just as the shift between single and plural first-person pronouns throughout the poem might seem to represent a careful alternation between "highlighting self-doubt and the construction of a larger authority."⁴⁰⁴ However, the poem, by suggesting that the "dyings" – again, the urgent gerund – should be didactic, assumes authority based on doctrine, not doubt. Moore renders the paradox that the war dead could "teach us how to live" in salvific form several lines earlier: "They / are fighting fighting fighting that where / there was death there may / be life."⁴⁰⁵ On the most likely reading, the poem only

⁴⁰² Laurence Stapleton, *Marianne Moore: The Poet's Advance* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press), 134.

⁴⁰³ Ibid.

⁴⁰⁴ Miller, *Marianne Moore: Questions of Authority* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1995), 164

⁴⁰⁵ Moore, "In Distrust of Merits."

predicates this verb of the Allied forces. As Christ's passion and resurrection made the promise of redemption at the core of Christian theology possible, so the outcome of the war would determine the possibility of extending the reach of democracy and faith around the world.

The poem also depicts those on the home front as combatants. Moore likens the war to the struggle to self-impose humility: "they're fighting that I / may yet recover from the disease, My / Self; some have it lightly; some will die."⁴⁰⁶ While these lines reflect a traditional Christian narrative of spiritual trial that "recounts an essential, universal struggle within all selves for perfection of the soul,"⁴⁰⁷ the pronoun read against the rest of the poem betrays intensely national self-scrutiny. Even if "I" was not Moore speaking for herself, it laid out an American Protestant justification of the war. If the state of the civilian's soul mirrored that of the battlefield, and the Allied forces and Americans at home were ultimately engaged in the same battle, then Axis soldiers and civilians were beyond the poem's worldview. Theologically and rhetorically universal, the "I" of the poem, read in this historical context, comes through as militant, national, and partisan. What might seem like self-doubt in lines like "Shall we never have peace without sorrow?" and "...am I what / I can't believe in?" expresses intense emotion at moments of foreclosed decision.⁴⁰⁸ Rhetorical questions suited the paradox of humble assertion.

⁴⁰⁶ Moore, "In Distrust of Merits."

⁴⁰⁷ Susan Schweik, *A Gulf So Deeply Cut: American Women Poets and the Second World War* (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 1991), 39.

⁴⁰⁸ *Ibid.*

Moore's recollection of a guest sermon at her church by Presbyterian minister John A. MacSporran several months after the publication of "In Distrust of Merits" demonstrates that she was encouraged in her capacity as an American Protestant there to wage a covert war to bring people around to this set of views:

We are fighting to defend ourselves and to save our country from tyranny but if that's all, we would do well to remember that he who saveth his soul shall lose it. We are fighting that the defenseless, the poor, that the oppressed in other lands may know what liberty is, and what it is to praise and serve God. We must enlist secretly as a vast army, with those powers of self-command that make restraining walls and regulations 'from above' feeble by comparison.⁴⁰⁹

Like this sermon, "In Distrust of Merits" countered the impression that American soldiers were fighting an optional or defensive war. The greater selflessness of America's military involvement in Europe and the Pacific lay in the opportunity to bestow the gift of free worship to other lands. The idea that members of the congregation had to "enlist secretly as a vast army" echoed the unassuming aggression of Moore and Niebuhr's writing in *The Nation*, where each would have hoped to convince liberal, non-religious intellectuals and literati to subscribe to their interpretation of the war. The absence of the president was due to Moore's strong dislike of Franklin Delano Roosevelt.⁴¹⁰ Of course, writing to the presumed readers of *The Nation* would not have prevented Protestant readers of the poem from identifying its theology. As stated earlier, Auden, who had joined the Church of England in 1940, heard in "In Distrust of Merits" "the organ note."⁴¹¹ Writing four

⁴⁰⁹ Moore, Religious Notes 1942-56, Marianne Moore Collection, Rosenbach Museum and Library, VII:09:11.

⁴¹⁰ Moore, *Selected Letters*, 279; see also Carson, "Republicanism and Leisure," 720.

⁴¹¹ Auden, "New Poems," *New York Times Book Review* (5 Oct 1944), 8.

decades later, the Reformed minister Daniel T. Jenkins claimed that the poem expressed “a Christian passion which is reminiscent of the best kind of preaching.”⁴¹² Nevertheless, by couching exclusionary ideas in inclusive language, the poem tried to swell the ranks of the church militant and the consensus in favor of the war.

The submission history of the poem might also be telling. Moore vowed in the early 1930s to publish only when solicited – also inconsistent with the Hoover situation – but her biographer suggests that she took the initiative to submit “In Distrust of Merits” to *The Nation*.⁴¹³ This would reaffirm her sense of the poem’s importance, and of a desire to rationalize her way of understanding the war to a leftist audience. Niebuhr’s reason for writing in *The Nation* had to do with shifts in the magazine’s politics, from pacifism to internationalism.⁴¹⁴ The circulation of *The Nation* trumped *Christianity and Crisis* fourfold, and thus introduced non-Christian readers to Niebuhr’s ideas.

The ironies of “In Distrust of Merits,” then, are twofold, that a poem questioning the value of merits played a substantial role in bringing Moore prestigious and portable literary merits, and that a poem about self-reproach actually functions to condone messianic nationalism. In 1952, she received the triple crown of awards whose prestige would follow her for the rest of her life and set the tone of her reception – the Pulitzer and Bollingen Prizes and the National Book Award. The same year, Niebuhr published a book explaining the irony of American history. First, the advent of the nuclear age meant

⁴¹² Daniel T. Jenkins, “Marianne Moore: a Presbyterian Poet?”, *Theology Today* 41.1 (Apr 1984), 37.

⁴¹³ Molesworth, 251, 262.

⁴¹⁴ Hulsether, *Building a Protestant Left*, 234.

that wars could render the world uninhabitable for the victor. Second, communists espoused a “religio-political” creed promising simplistic, tyrannical solutions to the failures of liberalism that America had finally, in Niebuhr’s view, begun to grapple with in earnest.⁴¹⁵ Third, and most importantly, America’s assumption of responsibility for the global balance of power punctured illusions about the blessings of innocence and providence that had enabled America’s economic rise. The solution was not utopian progress toward world government, but the promotion of democracy wherever possible and military confrontation of communism wherever absolutely necessary. Again, nationalism had to coexist with religious humility. As Niebuhr wrote, “It is significant that most genuine community is established below and above the level of conscious moral idealism. Below that level we find the strong forces of nature and nature-history, sex and kinship, common language and geographically determined togetherness, operative. Above the level of idealism the most effective force of community is religious humility.”⁴¹⁶ In addition to tempering utopian hopes, religion appealed to the cohesiveness of the nation-state as a catalyst for “genuine community.” However, the cohesiveness of the nation-state, like critics’ cultural consensus about contemporary poetry, is established by elites far below the level of moral idealism, whether created through coercion – a catalyst left off Niebuhr’s list – or projected through rhetoric that

⁴¹⁵ In Niebuhr’s formulation, “Marxism is a secularized version of Christian apocalypse in which the beatitude, “Blessed are the poor,” becomes the basis of unqualified political and moral judgments,” *The Irony of American History* (New York: Scribner’s, 1952), 163. Moore preferred the language of idolatry: “We say that Russia substitutes self for God and makes experience, Deity,” *Prose*, 651.

⁴¹⁶ Reinhold Niebuhr, *Irony of American History* (New York: Scribner’s, 1952), 139.

presented the exclusionary as the given. In the 1950s, the richest site for such coercion and projection was, happily for Moore, the president himself.

Recalling Moore's letter to Bishop, Moore believed that the crisis of World War II called for the Protestant establishment to go on the offensive, to create new coalitions in support of its goals by providing a deep, comprehensive, mysterious vision of American purpose that relegated alternative narratives and justifications of American force to the margins. While throwing herself into the Allied cause certainly had to do with, in Miller's words, a "fight to prevent further aggression and to free those enslaved in German concentration camps,"⁴¹⁷ it also had to do with the establishment agenda of promoting democracy around the globe. The pretexts under which the war was fought were multiple. Randall Jarrell, critiquing Moore's war poetry, argued that her narrative occluded particular causes, namely, the instability and anger precipitated by the economic spoils of the Treaty of Versailles: "If Miss Moore had read a history of the European 'colonization' of our planet...she would distrust us and herself, but not at the eleventh hour, not because of the war (something incommensurable, beside which all of us are good): she should have distrusted the peace of which our war is the only extrapolation. It is the peace of which we were guilty."⁴¹⁸ Jarrell's indictment, unlike Moore's, was not exclusively directed at American conduct, and not at self-interest in a universal sense but in a local one. Robert Lowell's year in prison as a conscientious objector, during his time

⁴¹⁷ Miller, "Distrusting," 362. Moore was apprised of the camps personally in a letter from Emergency Committee to Save the Jewish People of Europe. The letter asked Moore to bring the plight of Jews facing extermination to the attention of local newspapers, national periodicals, and Congressmen, on the grounds that her word carried weight. Illegible notes toward a response are on the verso. See Religious Notes 1942-56, Marianne Moore Collection, Rosenbach Museum and Library, VII:09:11.

⁴¹⁸ Jarrell, "Poetry in War and Peace," *The Critical Response to Marianne Moore*, 140-1.

as a Roman Catholic, on the basis of his objection to the Allied bombing of civilian targets, constituted another response.⁴¹⁹ Lowell recalled the period as shot through with Catholic values that countered those of the state:

I was a fire-breathing Catholic C.O.,
and made my manic statement,
telling off the state and president, and then
sat waiting sentence in the bull pen
beside a negro boy with curlicues
of marijuana in his hair.⁴²⁰

In this vignette, the state marginalizes Lowell by jailing him for conscientious objection, a marginalization likened to racial prejudice. Moore supplied a narrative of the war that had an ending, America's victory on behalf of the cause of human freedom. Miller's identification of the Judeo-Christian "star of David" and "star of Bethlehem" at the beginning of the poem with the Emperor of Ethiopia (the "black imperial lion") and other military liberations fit with the narrative, but only insofar as America's exceptional responsibility allowed, while extending the poem's appeal to include Jews, whose special precariousness in Europe was not otherwise mentioned.⁴²¹

Although Moore, speaking well after the war, in 1961, rejected "In Distrust of Merits," calling it "haphazard," "disjointed," and, most importantly, "overpowered" by emotion, she affirmed the poem's "sincerity."⁴²² The desideratum of a politically committed modernist poem aspiring to representativeness had elevated "In Distrust of

⁴¹⁹ Robert Lowell, *Interviews and Memoirs*, Ed. Jeffrey Meyers (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press), 164.

⁴²⁰ Lowell, "Memories of West Street and Lepke," in *Collected Poems*, Ed. Frank Bidart and David Gewanter (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2003), 187.

⁴²¹ "Distrusting," 360.

⁴²² Moore, *Marianne Moore Reader*, 261.

Merits” to prominence in her corpus. Reviewers praised its marriage of modernist style and social responsibility: “In a war newly perceived as ‘total,’ Moore’s work could exemplify the power of a representative civilian voice. It could also represent modernism provisionally embracing realist and didactic functions, coming round to correcting earlier trends toward self-referentiality.”⁴²³ The wartime climate of the 1940s and 50s pressured critics of modernist poetry to esteem these functions. This reading of the poem also would have stood out against the backdrop of what Alan Filreis has described as the anticommunist rewriting of modernism.⁴²⁴ “In Distrust of Merits” was one of Moore’s most-anthologized poems in her lifetime,⁴²⁵ and it was the first of her poems added to the popular New Critical textbook *Understanding Poetry*, for the 1956 edition.⁴²⁶ “In Distrust of Merits” benefited from the diverse readings it could sustain, whether the formal balance of irony and paradox teased out by New Critics, the topical responsibility asked of the patriotic modernist, or what I have identified as the poem’s justification of the fight for the Protestant establishment to a wider coalition of supporters.

When Niebuhr delivered a guest sermon at Moore’s church in 1946, he asked the congregation to pray for “the President and his associates, that they may come to

⁴²³ Schweik, *A Gulf So Deeply Cut*, 33.

⁴²⁴ Alan Filreis, *Counter-revolution of the Word: The Conservative Attack on Modern Poetry, 1945-1960* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2009).

⁴²⁵ Craig S. Abbott, *Marianne Moore: A Descriptive Bibliography* (Pittsburgh, PA: University of Pittsburgh Press), 141-71.

⁴²⁶ Cleanth Brooks and Robert Penn Warren, *Understanding Poetry* (New York: Henry Holt, 1956), 499-500.

themselves, that they may sink justice in humility.”⁴²⁷ “Blessed is the Man,” written a decade later, celebrated the ascension of a president who supposedly matches this description, Dwight D. Eisenhower. If “In Distrust of Merits” pinned military success on the carriage and scrutiny of the domestic self, “Blessed is the Man” turned to a successful general drafted into politics whose positive example was supposedly grounded in Christ’s. Speaking at the Annual Breakfast of the International Council for Christian Leadership, the precursor to today’s National Prayer Breakfast, in early 1955, Eisenhower set the goal of getting the world to believe that America was “truly trying to follow in the footsteps of the Prince of Peace.”⁴²⁸ “Blessed is the Man” put the reader in the position of following President Eisenhower’s footsteps.

V. “Blessed is the Man” and Eisenhower’s Example

On June 11, 1953, Marianne Moore traveled within Brooklyn to receive an honorary degree at Long Island University’s Commencement ceremony. While such awards were becoming routine for Moore, on this occasion she nearly also had the honor of meeting Eisenhower. She revered him, having singled him out as one of the world’s “few real enemies of enslavement” in an autobiographical statement published in the *New*

⁴²⁷ Moore, Religious Notes, 1942-46, Rosenbach Museum and Library, Marianne Moore Collection, VII:09:11.

⁴²⁸ Gastón Espinosa, *Religion and the American Presidency: George Washington to George W. Bush* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2009), 281.

York Herald Tribune Book Review in 1951,⁴²⁹ as well as deployed, awkwardly, a quotation attributed to him about the necessity of “selfless leadership at all levels of society” at the end of a review of a historical novel of Bryher’s published in the *New York Times Book Review* during his campaign year of 1952, in a reprise of the language of self-sacrifice she used to describe Hoover.⁴³⁰ Writing to Ezra Pound during his incarceration, Moore described General Eisenhower as “the best compound psychically whom we have had during our battered lives, and a real general.”⁴³¹ who “consented to help us grapple with the Washington model of the welfare state.”⁴³² Invited to speak, Eisenhower instead filmed an address for broadcast, but his message must have resonated strongly with Moore. He praised the university’s Cold War role of fostering democratic behavior: “We in America today are involved in a world struggle for freedom, and we must realize the urgent need for conducting ourselves at home as to be worthy exemplars of democracy everywhere.”⁴³³ As Moore listened to the large projection of the president explaining the strategic value of the institution honoring her poetry, she must have enjoyed the assurance that she played a definite role in the fight against communism. When she decided to write a praise poem about Eisenhower several years later, she picked up the thread of higher education, drawing on a review of *The Citadel of Learning*, a book on the strategic value of higher education by James Bryant Conant, a

⁴²⁹ Moore, “Some of the Authors of 1951 Speaking for Themselves,” in *Complete Prose*, 648.

⁴³⁰ Moore, “In Harald’s Service,” in *Complete Prose*, 437-8.

⁴³¹ Moore, *Selected Letters*, 539.

⁴³² *Ibid.*, 534.

⁴³³ “Eisenhower Lauds L.I.U. Fight On Bias,” *New York Times*, June 12, 1953, 18.

former president of Harvard.⁴³⁴ Moore appropriated language from the review describing the American educational system and applied it to Eisenhower. He became an intellectual president, and the university became the Oval Office: “‘Diversity, controversy, tolerance’ – in that ‘citadel / of learning’ we have a fort that ought to armor us well.”⁴³⁵ Where Moore had materialized Christian spiritual armor in the figure of the steeple in “The Steeple-Jack,” here she materialized it in the figure of the Oval Office.

This reflected the position of mainstream observers that a nationwide religious revival was underway in America in the 1950s. The cover story of an issue of LIFE from the middle of the decade began, “As the Christian era moved toward its 1,956th year, the sights and sounds of an unprecedented revival in religious belief and practice were everywhere in the U.S. Religion was commanding the attention and energies of men as it had not since the days of the country’s first devout settlers.”⁴³⁶ President Eisenhower assumed the responsibility of sponsoring expressions of national religious consensus, justifying them as a way of protecting American freedoms at home and extending them across the globe in competition with the Soviet Union.⁴³⁷ Will Herberg described this consensus as “the American Way of Life” or “secularized Puritanism” in his influential

⁴³⁴ See Patricia C. Willis, *Marianne Moore: Vision Into Verse*, Rosenbach Museum and Library: Philadelphia, 1987, 76-77. The review is a Books of the Times column written by Charles Poore, who later the same year would return Moore the favor of quoting his review by quoting her poem featuring his lines to stir readers’ hearts about the situation in Hungary.

⁴³⁵ Moore, “Blessed is the Man,” *Ladies Home Journal* 73 (Aug 1956), 101.

⁴³⁶ “Mighty Wave Over the U.S.,” *Life*, 39.26/40.1 (26 Dec 1955): 46.

⁴³⁷ Jonathan P. Herzog, *The Spiritual-Industrial Complex: America’s Religious Battle Against Communism in the Early Cold War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011).

1955 sociological study, *Protestant-Catholic-Jew*.⁴³⁸ As Kevin Schultz has shown, Roman Catholics and Jews were invited to join, so long as their beliefs were articulated in terms that were amenable to the Protestant establishment.⁴³⁹ The resulting dynamic was not genuinely pluralist, as “Protestantism retained its privileged position within the new tripartite mainstream.”⁴⁴⁰ A 1955 *Presbyterian Today* profile of Moore reveals Moore subscribing to this consensus: “While...she still prefers [the Presbyterian Church] to any other...Marianne deplors the lines drawn between the Protestant, the Roman Catholic, and the Jew. She believes that ‘the day of denominations is over.’”⁴⁴¹ American Catholics, Jews, and Protestants were different religions, not denominations, except when imagined in terms of their political commonalities.

Apart from the language of the university, Eisenhower’s service in roles of military and civilian leadership influenced the adoption of martial language for “Blessed is the Man,” and explains Moore’s seed text for the poem, the first Psalm. “Blessed is the Man” represented the tri-faith consensus – from a thinly-veiled sectarian Protestant perspective – by combining the Judeo-Christian genre of psalm and the Christian genre of spiritual biography to portray Eisenhower as a man graced by God with the virtue to lead the Protestant establishment in vanquishing its enemies. The poem’s hybrid form collapses the distance between humble speaker, exemplary subject, and worshipping

⁴³⁸ Will Herberg: *Protestant-Catholic-Jew: An Essay in American Religious Sociology* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1955).

⁴³⁹ Schultz, *Tri-Faith America*.

⁴⁴⁰ Hutchison, *Religious Pluralism in America*, 209.

⁴⁴¹ Mary Seth, “An Instinctive Wish to Share, what has done me good to look at or to know.” *Presbyterian Life* 8 (16 Apr 1955), 16.

congregation. The First Psalm supplies the poem's structure, which has the effect of likening Eisenhower to David, the traditional psalmist and typological predecessor of Christ. David began as a military leader before becoming King of Israel, and, according to Christian tradition, prefigured Christ. Moore mapped this biblical life onto Eisenhower's biography, his leadership of the Allied Forces in Europe during World War II followed by his assumption of high political office. Although no critic has argued that Eisenhower is the man of the title, the second stanza of the poem makes this clear, reflexively comparing the poem itself to a self-portrait of Giorgione as David that Moore had seen in *Life*; David was also Eisenhower's middle name.⁴⁴² The reverence underwriting the act of exegesis on the source text and the postulated congruence of text and contemporary application contrast with many notable instances of quotation in Moore's poetry.

The scale and purpose of the poem's account of Eisenhower's leadership also recalls the Protestant variant of Christian spiritual biography, which, as Sacvan Bercovitch argues, appealed especially to early modern Puritans because exemplary lives of political figures were "counter-subjectivist" – "a stabilizing human-divine center of authority...mediating between the needs of personal religion and the claims of a transcendent ideal."⁴⁴³ The subject of Protestant spiritual biography was a type of Christ, both outside of history and the manifestation of divine providence in the affairs of

⁴⁴² Moore, Notes to "Blessed is the Man," *Like a Bulwark* (New York: Viking, 1956), 32.

⁴⁴³ Sacvan Bercovitch, *The Puritan Origins of the American Self*, Rev. Ed. (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2011), 25.

unfolding, secular time.⁴⁴⁴ In other words, traditional spiritual biography subjected the devotion of individuals to figures of secular authority. This typographical approach to history places Eisenhower's terms in office within the full sweep of eschatological history, as though the enormity of the challenges he faced could not be imagined otherwise.

Thematically, the poem follows "The Steeple Jack" in harshly judging critics of the president, and in identifying American law with God's. The poem begins with a litany of negative definition that intensifies Eisenhower's virtue by stressing the despicable behavior of his political opponents:

Blessed Is the Man

who does not sit in the seat of the scoffer –
 the man who does not denigrate, depreciate, denunciate;
 who is not "characteristically intemperate,"
 who does not "excuse, retreat, equivocate; and will be heard."⁴⁴⁵

According to Moore's notes, the first quotation belongs to Eisenhower's re-election campaign manager, the second to Lincoln. The Lincoln quotation was taken from a *New York Times* review of *The Citadel of Learning*, the title of which Moore uses to describe Eisenhower six lines later.⁴⁴⁶ The first two verses of the Psalm define the man's chief virtue positively: "Blessed is the man who walks not in the counsel of the wicked, nor stands in the way of sinners, nor sits in the seat of scoffers; but his delight is in the law of

⁴⁴⁴ Bercovitch, *Puritan Origins*, 35-7.

⁴⁴⁵ Moore, "Blessed is the Man."

⁴⁴⁶ Moore, Notes to "Blessed is the Man," in *Like a Bulwark* (New York: Viking, 1956), 32.

the LORD, and on his law he meditates day and night.”⁴⁴⁷ Reflecting the logic of the moral establishment, because Eisenhower meditated day and night on God’s law, he knew which laws to veto, asking himself, a few lines later, “Would it solve the problem? Is it right as I see it? Is it in the best interests of all?”⁴⁴⁸ Moore’s note on this expression of moral integrity revealed the debate over agricultural subsidies that occasioned the poem, “All” referring to all Americans.⁴⁴⁹ While Eisenhower’s greatness might have been most important for the Cold War, “Blessed is the Man” typologically interpreted the management of one sector of the domestic economy. Unlike Hoover in “The Steeple-Jack,” this president, buoyed by popular support, upheld the law of the Lord against “sin-driven senators.”

Even as the paradox of humble assertion rode this wave of support, it strains in the poem under the weight of inveterate partisanship. The president “will be heard” but humbly knows “that egomania is not a duty,”⁴⁵⁰ is not “characteristically intemperate” but assertively “unaccommodating,”⁴⁵¹ keeps faith that “is different from possessiveness” but “will not visualize defeat, too intent to cower.”⁴⁵² His morality is apolitical: “Alas. Ulysses’ companions are now political - / living self-indulgently until the moral sense is

⁴⁴⁷ Bible, Revised Standard Version, Psalms 1.1.

⁴⁴⁸ Moore, “Blessed is the Man.”

⁴⁴⁹ Moore, Notes to “Blessed is the Man.”

⁴⁵⁰ Moore, “Blessed is the Man.”

⁴⁵¹ Ibid.

⁴⁵² Ibid.

drowned...”⁴⁵³ In Moore’s translation of one of Fontaine’s *Fables* adapted from the *Odyssey*, sirens transform the companions of Ulysses into a lion, a bear and a wolf. Because the “sagacious and / valiant” Ulysses “scorned the draught which he knew to be / treacherous,”⁴⁵⁴ he could bargain for their return to human form, only to find them smitten with the baser powers of their animal states. This figures the contrast between Eisenhower and his opponents in Congress as one between selflessness and egotism. The supporters of the farm subsidies bill were deluded by self-interest: “Brazen authors, downright soiled and downright spoiled, as if sound / and exceptional, are the old quasi-modish counterfeit, / *mitin*-proofing conscience against character.”⁴⁵⁵ They were “slaves whom they themselves have bound,”⁴⁵⁶ another quotation from Moore’s fable and invocation of the Pauline figuration of sin as bondage. This also echoed Moore’s earlier citation in the *New York Herald Tribune* of Eisenhower as a “real enem[y] of enslavement.”

The poem’s publication history reflected high opinions of Moore and Eisenhower. In addition to appearing in *Ladies’ Home Journal*, it was also reprinted the same year in *The Ladies’ Home Journal Treasury*,⁴⁵⁷ *The New York Times*,⁴⁵⁸ and Moore’s volume

⁴⁵³ Ibid.

⁴⁵⁴ Moore, Trans., *Fables of La Fontaine* (New York: Viking, 1954), 278.

⁴⁵⁵ Moore, “Blessed is the Man.”

⁴⁵⁶ Ibid., and Moore, *Fables*, 278.

⁴⁵⁷ Moore, “Blessed is the Man,” in *The Ladies’ Home Journal Treasury* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1956), 563.

⁴⁵⁸ “Poets’ Column,” *The New York Times Book Review* (18 Nov 1956): 2-3.

Like a Bulwark.⁴⁵⁹ Elizabeth McFarland, poetry editor of *Ladies' Home Journal*, suggested that Moore's notes would confuse readers not accustomed to annotated poetry and excised them from the poem.⁴⁶⁰ Moore's initial acquiescence suggests faith that readers of the *Journal* would comprehend its religious politics. Some might have compared the texts, or held both in mind. As with "The Steeple-Jack," however, Moore later expressed misgivings about whether the poem was sufficiently clear, writing in a letter to her good friend Hildegard Watson, wife of former *Dial* co-owner James Sibley Watson, "You will see that they [the lines of the poem] are not entirely the ravings of a ne'er do well when you see the notes, in October (or whenever the book comes out). I don't know how anyone could want them without the Notes which really are the thing to read and the stanzas, just a schoolroom try at composition."⁴⁶¹ Devaluing the poem at the expense of the notes was not just a characteristic reflection of humility, but also an expression of concern that, without Eisenhower clearly identified, the point of the poem would be lost.

Reprints in *The New York Times* extended the poem's resonance beyond the Agricultural Act of 1956 and the presidential campaign, pushing readers to associate it with the Cold War. The *Book Review* ran "Blessed is the Man" and "Bulwarked Against Fate" (later renamed "Like a Bulwark") together in "Poets' Column." The choice of the two as bookend poems in the *Like a Bulwark* collection could have inspired this pairing.

⁴⁵⁹ Moore, "Blessed is the Man," in *Like a Bulwark*, 30-31.

⁴⁶⁰ Daniel Hoffman, Introduction, *Over the Summer Water: Poems by Elizabeth McFarland* (Alexandria, VA: Orchises Press), 12-14.

⁴⁶¹ Moore, *Selected Letters*, 530.

Columnist Charles Poore called “Like a Bulwark” “a good poem to read as we think of the valiant patriots in Hungary” in the aftermath of the Hungarian Revolution.⁴⁶² Its cramped, jagged, stress-heavy lines and sentence fragments enacted what it calls the “paradox” of the Cold War logic of containment,⁴⁶³ which in the poem was massive American strength finding at best an equivocal outlet in difficult calculations over when to use it – and when not to use it, as happened in Hungary. The poem imagines that this strength, Eisenhower as metonym for the nation, “take[s] the blame” and yet is “inviolable,” that it is “Pent by power that holds it fast.”⁴⁶⁴ The strength, “Affirmed,” “Compressed,” and “compact, like a bulwark against fate,”⁴⁶⁵ was the paragon of patriotism, “As though flying Old Glory full mast.”⁴⁶⁶ This vindication under pressure brought out the containment rhetoric in “Blessed is the Man” of Eisenhower as “a citadel of learning,” a free but disciplined, assertive but humble bulwark against Soviet aggression and American corruption, and tied Eisenhower’s faithful resolve in domestic politics to theaters of the Cold War.

Reviewing *Like a Bulwark* in 1957, M.L. Rosenthal, identifying Eisenhower as later critics have not, reacted negatively to Moore’s exalted claims for him: “Woe’s us, she chooses Mr. Eisenhower as the...symbol in our political life of the most creative pragmatic tradition....If she errs in this matter, and if most Americans err with her, it is

⁴⁶² Charles Poore, “Books of the Times,” *The New York Times* (4 Dec 1956), 37.

⁴⁶³ “Poets’ Column,” 2.

⁴⁶⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁶⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶⁶ Ibid.

not for lack of faith in the qualities thought to inhere in the president.”⁴⁶⁷ He did not, however, dispute the majority faith of the American public. The reception of “Blessed is the Man” as partisan delusion or Cold War article of faith confirms that Moore’s concern about the notes was about audience, what the poem could do as a poem without attracting argument. She continued to defend the poem’s sincerity, singling it out in public twice. She quoted it in full in the October 1956 lecture “Idiosyncrasy and Technique,” in which she describes it as oriented to the public at large, and as having been written despite her “incapacity as an orator.”⁴⁶⁸ At the same time, she admitted that “what [she] was so urgent to emphasize is reduced in the First Psalm to a sentence: Blessed is the man who does not sit in the seat of the scoffer.”⁴⁶⁹ Armoring herself with the psalm, like armoring herself with the notes, shielded Moore’s configuration of both to present her establishment conception of Eisenhower.

The poem’s purported distance from politics clashed with the lecture’s later summary of its moral lesson, “denigration as treason,”⁴⁷⁰ suggesting that challenging Eisenhower was tantamount to betraying the nation. Moore awkwardly tried to resolve the paradox: “Convinced that denigration is baneful, one readily sanctions the attack prompted by affection.”⁴⁷¹ Many would not have sanctioned the defense of Eisenhower, for a variety of reasons, and in the Foreword to *A Marianne Moore Reader*, published

⁴⁶⁷ M.L. Rosenthal, “Ladies’ Day on Parnassus,” in *The Critical Response to Marianne Moore*, 194.

⁴⁶⁸ Moore, *Complete Prose*, 512.

⁴⁶⁹ *Ibid.*

⁴⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 513.

⁴⁷¹ *Ibid.*

five years later, Moore quotes a critic who “deplored” her “for extolling President Eisenhower for the very reasons for which I should reprehend him.”⁴⁷² She defends herself by comparing the hypothetical effects of the agricultural bill to a contemporaneous book about the horrors of collective farms in China, denouncing her critics as “political aesthetes,”⁴⁷³ unfit, by way of contrast with her and Eisenhower, to perceive the high stakes of political conflicts.

Another anticommunist poem Moore wrote during this period, “Enough: Jamestown, 1607-1957,” related the Cold War to a Protestant myth of national origin, what the LIFE cover story on Christianity referred to as “the days of the country’s first devout settlers.”⁴⁷⁴ Written to commemorate the 450th anniversary of the establishment of the Jamestown colony, Moore seized the occasion to censure the beginning of North American Anglo-Protestant settlement as a false start: “Marriage, tobacco, and slavery / initiated liberty.”⁴⁷⁵ The failure of the “too earthly paradise” is blamed not just on these illicit and untoward activities,⁴⁷⁶ but on the colony’s initially communistic political economy: “The same reward for best and worst / doomed communism, tried at first. / Three acres each, initiative, / six bushels paid back, they could live.”⁴⁷⁷ After a brief, failed experiment, private property and individual initiative won the day. The implied

⁴⁷² Moore, Foreword to *Marianne Moore Reader*, in *Complete Prose*, 552.

⁴⁷³ *Ibid.*, 552-3.

⁴⁷⁴ “A Mighty Wave,” 46.

⁴⁷⁵ Moore, “Enough: Jamestown, 1607-1957,” in *Poems*, 305.

⁴⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 3054.

⁴⁷⁷ *Ibid.*

contrast in the poem is with the Massachusetts Bay colonies. As a question of mythic history, one embodied blind, predatory colonialism, the other escape from religious persecution and the attempt to establish a Protestant city on a hill – two alternative trajectories for conceiving of national history and progress. One of Moore’s notes pointed out the disparity between her critical treatment of the colonists and a gauzy *New York Times Magazine* piece that described how the Jamestown colonists had, upon arrival, “with streaming eyes, gave thanks unto God.”⁴⁷⁸ Moore glosses the poem’s concluding couplet – “It was enough; it is enough / if present faith mend partial proof”⁴⁷⁹ – attributed to a former Yale chaplain, as indicating that “past gains are not gains unless we in the present complete them.”⁴⁸⁰ Eisenhower’s leadership was a bulwark against a strain of thinking with roots in the American body politic itself, one built on misunderstandings of the nature of freedom and providence.

That Eisenhower represented the “compound” of Moore’s hopes for America explains why “Blessed is the Man” represents him as Moore might have thought of herself, as a spokesperson for the establishment – an acclaimed, moral, humble, representative American Protestant artist. The president’s veto of the Agricultural Act “takes the risk of a decision,” language Moore appropriated from an article on poetics by Canadian modernist Louis Dudek.⁴⁸¹ Moore’s choice of this phrase imagined Eisenhower as an author, not “brazen” like his opponents but suited like Moore in spiritual armor for

⁴⁷⁸ Moore, *Poems*, 399.

⁴⁷⁹ Moore, “Enough,” 305.

⁴⁸⁰ Moore, *Poems*, 399.

⁴⁸¹ Moore, Notes to “Blessed is the Man,” 32.

the protection and unification of the nation. By praising the virtue of humility, submerging the individual voice of the psalm into the corporate voice of national worship, and yet very much blessing Eisenhower at others' expense, Moore effectively put her voice in his mouth. If David was the psalmist, and Eisenhower was David, then the poem was the reverie Moore wanted to share with Eisenhower, one of affirmation through self-abnegating religious humility that managed to sacralize American politics. Moore located a biblical type for this creativity in the peroration of "Idiosyncrasy and Technique" when she suggested that her "master" "creative secret" "may be" the "steadfastness" of Nehemiah,⁴⁸² who spurred the rebuilding of the walls of Jerusalem and led the Israelites back to stricter observance, another resonant type of Eisenhower.⁴⁸³ While David combined fighting faith with the figure of the poet, Nehemiah – also an exemplary figure in Eliot's *The Rock* – reflected the persuasive power to foster unified piety. Moore deployed these biblical figures in the forms of Protestant spiritual biography and the psalm to give voice to a vision of the Protestant establishment that, in her eyes, promised to restore the country with the global fate of freedom in the balance.

VI. Conclusion

Conservative Protestants have tried throughout American history to exert their influence through secular institutions, under the belief that such institutions valuably translated their convictions into social and political realities binding on the whole country. In the poems I have read, Moore participated in this pattern of exertion,

⁴⁸² Moore, *Complete Prose*, 516-17.

⁴⁸³ Bible, Revised Standard Version, Nehemiah.

beginning with opposition to the New Deal in the 1930s and, as the stakes of the opposition grew against the backdrop of permanent war, by demonizing the voices of pacifism and collectivist politics. She utilized the resources that the major theological developments of the twentieth-century offered her. After the decline of the Protestant establishment, Protestants carrying the banner of this interdependence of religion and freedom found common cause with conservative Catholics, evangelicals, and fundamentalists.⁴⁸⁴ While Protestant dominance is less important than Christian dominance to these “cobelligerents”⁴⁸⁵ – Jerry Falwell’s coinage – their enabling paradox of imposing religious freedom remains the same. It would be wrong to speculate that Moore would join the Tea Party if alive today – she admired Niebuhr’s humble demeanor and intellectualism⁴⁸⁶ – but it would be just as wrong to sever the Tea Party’s nationalistic, conservative Christianity from the conservative American Protestant political tradition to which Moore also belonged. Their costumery shares the tricorne hat, that defining Moore accessory, as a sign of political zeal. Conservative politicians escaping the capital for the strong, simple faith of the countryside, or imposing their values on a corrupt legislature, are still important tropes in conservative American Christianity. And this trope belongs to a stockpile of largely fictive cries of persecution,

⁴⁸⁴ Sehat, *Myth of American Religious Freedom*, 255-82.

⁴⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 265.

⁴⁸⁶ Niebuhr’s legacy is mixed, with journalists reporting his influence on President Obama’s liberal internationalism, while others have argued that he provided strong justifications for American imperialism. On Obama, see David Brooks, “Obama, Chapter and Verse,” *New York Times* (26 Apr 2007), and John Blake, “How Obama’s favorite theologian shaped his first year in office,” *CNN*, *CNN.com* (5 Feb 2010) <<http://www.cnn.com/2010/POLITICS/02/05/Obama.theologian/index.html?hpt=C2>>; on Niebuhr’s imperialism, see Warren L. Vinz, *Pulpit Politics: Faces of American Protestant Nationalism in the Twentieth Century* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1997), Chapter 7.

in which, in recent years, the euphemism of morality has given way to that of values, secularism has replaced communism as the force supposedly bent on tyrannically rooting Christianity out of public life, and the existence of the welfare state in any form continues to threaten the power of a vocal religious minority to dictate the freedom that supposedly only it truly values to the whole country. Although Moore denied affiliation with “any political or politico-economic party or creed,”⁴⁸⁷ she labeled conservatism as the principle that vouchsafed individual freedom despite tyranny foreign and domestic: “I am conservative; opposed to regimentation.”⁴⁸⁸ She did not consider the protection of establishment prerogative an instance of regimentation.

As far as Moore was concerned, she wavered as to whether “Blessed is the Man” and “The Steeple-Jack” were more than uncharacteristic outbursts of conviction, and I do not claim that they changed many people’s minds. Her poetry became less politically charged in the decade and a half she was alive after 1956, because her readiness to experiment with persuasion through poetry flagged, if not her convictions. Certainly too the constraints on what she could express without being subjected to what she called, in her letter to Morton Zabel about Hoover, “a partisan label,” had shifted. Bishop wisely observed that Moore’s sincerity did not always allow her to respect these constraints, writing to Lowell, “I suspect that Marianne’s *Ladies’ Home Journal* poem was about Eisenhower...Do you know that she did some campaign writing for Hoover once? – in 1929 or thereabouts. But sometimes I think that that dogmatism *works* in her poetry –

⁴⁸⁷ Moore, “Answers to an Enquiry,” in *Complete Prose*, 674.

⁴⁸⁸ *Ibid.*

sometimes, of course, not.”⁴⁸⁹ Moore had wished in a 1938 letter that Bishop, an agnostic, “would...risk some unprotected profundity of experience.”⁴⁹⁰ Yet these poems of Moore’s were ultimately less important for the work they did or failed to do on readers like Bishop, than for what they tell us about Moore’s sincere, complex identification with the Protestant establishment.

⁴⁸⁹ Bishop, Elizabeth, and Robert Lowell, *Words in Air: The Complete Correspondence Between Elizabeth Bishop and Robert Lowell*, Ed. Thomas Travisano (New York: Macmillan, 2010), 190.

⁴⁹⁰ Moore, *Selected Letters*, 391.

Robert Frost's Designs and Tri-Faith America

You know the most inclusive word in the world, the greatest generalization of all? One word, three letters: "God," of course.... And you don't need that word. You know, the most wonderful word to me, short of that, is 'purpose' – to generalize again. That's a big one: purpose, design, intention.⁴⁹¹

I. Placing Frost in Tri-Faith America

In this chapter, I argue that one strain of Robert Frost's late poetry gave ballast to a form of religious pluralism that became prominent in American society during the 1940s. This pluralism advocated increased cooperation among Protestants, Catholics, and Jews through the definition of their shared commitment to American values and the image of what Kevin D. Schultz has termed "tri-faith America."⁴⁹² I track the emergence of support for this pluralism in the evolving meaning of design in Frost's poetry. Design changed from provoking anxious questions about scientific knowledge, in the sonnet "Design," to being an article of civic and political faith. This shift coincided with the one in American society away from the contested but nevertheless dominant perception that America was a Protestant nation and toward that of the present day, in which political and religious liberals promote religious diversity decoupled from national identity and political and religious conservatives argue for what they see as the restoration of laws and values proceeding from America's Judeo-Christian identity. In this light, Frost's

⁴⁹¹ Frost, *Robert Frost Speaking on Campus: excerpts from his talks, 1949-62*, Ed. Edward Connery Lathem, New York: Norton, 2009, 139.

⁴⁹² Schultz, *Tri-Faith America*.

participation in the Inauguration of John F. Kennedy is best read not only as the successful culmination of his postwar designs on national poetic authority, empowering him to deliver historically significant expressions of national maturation, unity, and strength, but also as a moment in which this supposed descendant of the Puritan and Yankee line in American culture, in giving his blessing to the first Roman Catholic president, became a stand-in for the Protestant establishment, validating its support for tri-faith America. Frost's distinctly Protestant articulation of this pluralism represented the Protestant establishment's last successful public gesture of national proprietorship. It also explains the resonance of Frost's description of himself as an "Old Testament Christian," that is, as a Christian (not a Protestant or Catholic) who identified with the part of the Bible to which Judaism also laid claim. This description and the poems that fleshed it out allowed Frost to occupy what in the middle decades of the century was constructed as the most representative religious position in America.

After taking "Design," drafted early in Frost's career and collected in *A Further Range* (1936), as representative of the stance toward Christianity in his early poetry, I focus on four late poems that revalue the religious significance of design for American society – *A Masque of Reason* (1945), *A Masque of Mercy* (1947), "Kitty Hawk" (1956, rev. 1957 and 1962), and "For John F. Kennedy His Inauguration" (1961). These poems adopt poetic subgenres otherwise absent from Frost's poetry as signals of their civic import. The court masque in early seventeenth-century England reflected the authority of the state back to itself in spectacular, allegorical performance, combining national and religious mythology. Frost's masques refract these functions through a combination of

the pronounced discursiveness and theological intricacy of Milton and the aggressive but piquant skepticism of Shelley. Milton's country house masque *Comus* and Shelley's *Mask of Anarchy*, although not important sources of allusions for Frost's masques in and of themselves, have been important points of reference for the masque in English poetic tradition, and so Frost would have associated the masque form with Milton and Shelley.⁴⁹³ In contrast with *Reason* and *Mercy*, "Kitty Hawk" and "For John F. Kennedy" are occasional poems, the former celebrating the fiftieth anniversary of the first airplane flight, the latter a poem of state celebrating Kennedy's electoral victory. I argue that they bring the general lessons of the two masques to bear on particular events in American history. The masques are written in loose blank verse and the occasional poems with an iambic rhyming couplet base. The latter, especially the Inaugural Poem, which is written in heroic couplets, indicated Frost's increasing comfort with imitating the Augustan Age's elevation and sober, sententious flattery of power, glimpsing, in the people who elected Kennedy, "the prophet in us all presage / The glory of a next Augustan age" (70-1).⁴⁹⁴ Asked by reporters the day after the Inauguration to explain these lines, he responded, "It means an age of poetry and power – and please emphasize the power."⁴⁹⁵ Frost believed that his poetry had finally come to enjoy a symbiotic relation to this power.

⁴⁹³ Lauren Shohet has observed that, prior to the 1960s, scholars erroneously treated masques as theatrical but not importantly literary. This supports the contention that the form's literary association with Milton and Shelley was prominent in Frost's mind. See *Reading Masques: The English Masque and Public Culture in the Seventeenth Century* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), Introduction.

⁴⁹⁴ Frost, *The Poetry of Robert Frost*, Ed. Edward Connery Lathem (New York: Owl Books, 1979), 424.

⁴⁹⁵ Tony Gieske, "'Poets' Pittance' in Augustan Age – Or Robert Frost Looks Ahead," *Washington Post*, 23 Jan 1961, A8.

While the masques concern the theological component of the image of tri-faith America, the occasional poems concern its civic component. Both components circulated widely during World War II and the first decade of the Cold War at the behest of interfaith groups, the US Armed Forces, and the federal government. The less controversial nature of the civic dimension made it easier to adopt but also an instrument of secularization that prioritized political unity and social welfare at the expense of religion. The theological component stressed the common origins of all three religions, the centrality of the Bible as a common repository of wisdom and morality, and the potential to speak on the subjects of the day with a single prophetic voice. The civic component, by contrast, stressed the loyalties and interests that all three religious groups' members had by virtue of being Americans, the compatibility of these loyalties and interests with each distinct religion, and the ostensible freedom of Catholics and Jews from Protestant hegemony.⁴⁹⁶ The contrast between theology and civics correlated to the poles of ecumenical religious dialogue and strategic secular cooperation. As I have argued in my other chapters, the American poets who allied themselves with the Protestant establishment navigated between these two desiderata. When reading Frost's poetry it becomes clear that they were responses, respectively, to the demands of pluralism and scientism. At the most abstract level, these two concepts guided American Protestants' accommodation of the Enlightenment.⁴⁹⁷ Frost exhibited even more audacity than Monroe, Johnson, and Moore in assuming that poets had the authority to direct this accommodation on behalf of the Protestant establishment.

⁴⁹⁶ Schultz, *Tri-Faith America*, 58-9.

⁴⁹⁷ Hollinger, *After Cloven Tongues of Fire*, 6-11.

The four poems I will examine at length in this chapter chart the development of the explicit engagement with Christianity in Frost's poetry. Christian motifs appear throughout his corpus, as in the early "Christmas Trees" or the Grail Quest narrative of "Directive," but the explicitness of *A Masque of Reason* (1945) represented an unexpected departure. This explicitness signaled both new interest in public religion and an increase in poetic ambition. *Masque* did not simply retell and update the story of the Book of Job, as Archibald MacLeish would soon do, also in blank dramatic verse, in *J.B.* (1958).⁴⁹⁸ Rather, it professed to add to the biblical Book of Job, representing events that occurred after the biblical narratives, and concluding with the pronouncement, "*Here endeth Chapter Forty-three of Job.*"⁴⁹⁹ Likewise, when *A Masque of Mercy* was first published in *The Atlantic Monthly* in November 1947, the prefatory note, written by Frost in the third person, indicated that he had interrupted his process of getting New England "pretty well covered" in poetry to indulge an excursus on the Bible:

Robert Frost seems fated to keep on till he has pretty well covered New England, its stone walls, birches, belilaced cellar holes, its characters and weather. Now in this *Masque of Mercy* and his last year's *Masque of Reason* the Bible is taken care of. The two are intended to be brought into juxtaposition some time under the title TWO NEW ENGLAND BIBLICALS.⁵⁰⁰

⁴⁹⁸ Archibald MacLeish, *J.B.: A Play in Verse* (New York: Samuel French, 1958). One other possible model for Frost's masque on Job is the 1931 British ballet *Job: A Masque for Dancing*; see "Job," *Royal Opera House Collections Online*, <<http://www.rohcollections.org.uk/work.aspx?work=844&row=5&letter=J&genre=Ballet&>>. Although there is no evidence that Frost knew of or witnessed the production, the staging was based on Blake's illustrations of the Book of Job, and Job's wife in Frost's masque recognizes God from Blake's illustrations: "It's God. / I'd know Him by Blake's picture anywhere;" see Frost, *Poems*, 474, l. 17-18.

⁴⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, 490.

⁵⁰⁰ Frost, *The Collected Prose of Robert Frost*, Ed. Mark Richardson (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 2007), 57. Frost's original titles for the masques, as reported in a 1943 letter, prescribed a similar contrasting relationship between them - *Forty-third Chapter of Job*, *A Masque of Reason*, and *The Whole Bible*, *A Masque of Mercy*; see Lawrance Thompson and R.H. Winnick, *Robert Frost: The Later Years, 1938-63*, Vol. 3 (New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, 1976), 114. What these titles emphasize is

In admitting that Frost was finally writing about a subject of great importance, this note also implied that the masques realized what Frost had to say about the Bible more completely than would ever be possible for what he had to say about New England. The religious authority it claimed was partly equivocal, because the idea that the Bible could be “taken care of” cut both ways, as a performance of contrite, humorous understatement about Frost’s long oversight, and as a virile boast that his poetry could knock the Bible off its pedestal. Frost’s celebrity only grew during this period, but humor could not have completely neutralized the arrogance lurking in the phrase. The boast’s arrogation of religious truth to poetry laid claim to special knowledge about the foundational scripture of most religious Americans, while claiming to have spent long enough with it to be able to leave it behind. This arrogation happens linguistically in the transformation of “biblical” from an adjective into a noun, deemphasizing one particular book and its unique authority at the expense of the qualities ascribed to it by its readers, who thus could ascribe them instead to Frost’s poetry. This complemented the theological reality of the last half-century that, even as the Protestant establishment continued to be steeped in the language of the Bible, its belief that contemporary culture was filled with opportunities for revelation, and that the texts that comprised the Bible were essentially the inspired instances of earlier cultures, and its effort to distance itself from fundamentalism, destabilized the Bible’s primacy.

that *Reason* is supplemental and *Mercy* substitutive, the former adding to the Old Testament and the latter replacing the typological reconciliation of Old and New Testament with theological argument that treats the terms of both testaments as contemporary.

Frost's assumption of Christian authority occurred in the 1940s for several reasons. One had to do with the dynamics of the poetry world, in which any bid for supremacy would have meant competition with T.S. Eliot. In terms of poetic accolades and public celebrity, only Frost, among living Anglophone poets in the 1940s, approached Eliot. Frost expressed private and public animosity toward the formally experimental poetry that Eliot's *Waste Land* had sanctioned, which made the rivalry as much about aesthetic values as prestige. Christianity and drama could easily have become focal points for this rivalry.⁵⁰¹ Because Eliot's cultural eminence only increased after, even if it not was caused by, joining the Church of England, he was able to make a bid for greater popularity by writing and staging verse drama. This drama tried to render his stringent Anglo-Catholic faith attractive. Christian drama might therefore have represented to Frost an area in which to engage and best Eliot, even if none of Eliot's plays prior to the early 1940s – *The Rock* (1934), *Murder in the Cathedral* (1935), and *The Family Reunion* (1939) – had been particularly successful, or had American runs, as *The Cocktail Party* (1949) would in 1950. Frost did meet once with a Broadway producer about staging the masques, backing off when he realized how little he knew about the theater.⁵⁰² Even if the masques were not born of competition with Eliot, they were nevertheless competitors in the mode in which Eliot was increasingly investing his talents and faith.

⁵⁰¹ As for religion as a focal point, Richard Poirier cites Louis Untermeyer's reported conversation in which Frost said disparagingly of Eliot, "I like to play euchre. He likes to play Eucharist." The charge that Eliot enjoyed the performance of his religiosity is suggestive. Poirier quotes Louis Untermeyer's report of this in *Poetry and Pragmatism* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1992), 186.

⁵⁰² Lawrence Thompson, *Robert Frost: The Later Years*, 117.

Another reason for Frost's assumption of Christian authority was that Christianity would have been a tool with which to court popularity in America – as it could not quite have been for Eliot in England, belonging to a vanguard movement of religious revival operating within a society that on the whole was secularizing at a dramatic rate. The swell of patriotism around the entry of the United States into World War II, which continued through the triumphalism and first decade of the Cold War, created conditions in which a mainstream faith that prioritized cultural and political community and consensus over doctrine was not only legible but admirable to lay American Protestants. Many of the major churches had for some time respect on many points a denominational ethos that subsumed differences among Episcopalians, Presbyterians, Methodists, etc. under a common American Protestant identity. In the twentieth century, denominationalism graduated to interchurch cooperation, which became an organizing principle for the way that many Protestant churches intervened in public life.⁵⁰³ Interchurch cooperation encouraged the founding of nondenominational churches, which welcomed members of numerous Protestant denominations into an undifferentiated fold. Subsequently, the appearance of adherence to a nominal faith along these lines would not have been very difficult for Frost to cultivate. Lawrence Thompson, Frost's turncoat Boswell, endorses this cynical interpretation of Frost's sudden Christianity, describing the man who wrote *Reason* as one "who, though he had no use for calcified church ritual or narrowly pious

⁵⁰³ One oft-cited example is the founding of the Federal Council of Churches in Christ in America in 1908, which consolidated the liberal elements in Protestant churches to augment their power and create a bulwark against the rising tide of fundamentalism; for more on the creation of a "two-party system" in American Protestantism, see Martin Marty, *Righteous Empire*, Chapter 17. The spirit of cooperation in pursuit of secular influence behind such developments relegated denominational difference among liberal Protestants to the background. As Schultz documents in *Tri-Faith America*, interfaith organizations like the National Council of Jews and Christians, founded in 1928, became increasingly influential in the 40s and 50s, during the period covered by this chapter.

orthodoxy, would not object to being regarded as one of the most profoundly religious men of his age.”⁵⁰⁴

One aspect of Frost’s life that placed him squarely in this nondenominational Protestant context were the annual Christmas cards that he began sending out in 1929 and then almost annually after 1937. Between 1929 and 1962, his mailing list swelled from several hundred to over fifteen thousand.⁵⁰⁵ It would be instructive to know, before the advent of euphemistic “holiday” cards, what these Christmas cards meant to the non-Christian recipients on Frost’s list. They were printed by small New England presses and featured illustrated Frost poems in part or in their entirety. Some had been composed for the occasion and would only later appear in collections of Frost’s poetry. “Kitty Hawk,” which I will read below, was one such poem. While the first card featured “Christmas Trees” and a corresponding image, a later issue featured “Neither Out Far Nor In Deep,” one of Frost’s bleakest poems.⁵⁰⁶ The cards stretched the limits of what was seasonally appropriate, but, at the same time, recognized and acceded to the authority of Christianity in American culture. This would have had the effect of combating assessments of Frost’s poetry that anticipated critics like Jarrell and Trilling, who discerned a terrifying worldview (in poems like “Neither”) inconsistent with saving beliefs in God and country. The cards that Frost signed he signed from his family, implicating that unit in perceptions of his beliefs.

⁵⁰⁴ Thompson, *Robert Frost: The Later Years*, 121.

⁵⁰⁵ Timothy D. O’Brien, *Names, Proverbs, Riddles and Material Text in Robert Frost* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 141-4.

⁵⁰⁶ *Ibid.*

While Frost's explicit engagement with Christianity reflected, to varying degrees, both professional competition and popular concession, I argue that it was largely in earnest, and built on ways of thinking that he had consistently displayed up to that point. Frost openly counseled a flexible relation to belief. This reflected his identification with the pragmatist tradition in American thought represented most notably for him by William James.⁵⁰⁷ Pragmatists like James argue that belief is not foundational and fixed but rather situational and dynamic. This position limits affiliation with established systems of religious belief to whatever in those systems becomes most useful in the course of experience. Usefulness is defined in terms of the amalgamation of personal beliefs and desires, and thus cannot be judged in advance from the vantage of any particular belief-system. As James put it in "The Will to Believe," "A live hypothesis is one which appeals as a real possibility to him to whom it is proposed....deadness and liveness in an hypothesis are not intrinsic properties, but relations to the individual thinker. They are measured by his willingness to act."⁵⁰⁸ Even if Frost's starting points were not liberal Protestant in nature – as he credits them with being, citing Presbyterian, Unitarian and Swedenborgian parentage⁵⁰⁹ – a flexible relation to belief complemented James's essentially Protestant understanding of religious experience. W. David Shaw

⁵⁰⁷ On Frost's pragmatism, see in particular Richard Poirier, *Robert Frost: The Work of Knowing* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977), and *Poetry and Pragmatism*; W. David Shaw, "The Poetics of Pragmatism: Robert Frost and William James," *The New England Quarterly* 59.2 (Jun 1986): 159-88; Robert Faggen, *Robert Frost and the Challenge of Darwin* (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 1997); Siobhan Phillips, *The Poetics of the Everyday: Creative Repetition in Modern American Verse* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010); Ann Marie Mikkelsen, *Pastoral, Pragmatism, and Twentieth Century American Poetry* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010).

⁵⁰⁸ William James, *The Will to Believe and Other Essays in Popular Philosophy* (New York: Longmans Green, 1897), 2-3.

⁵⁰⁹ Frost, *Collected Prose*, 200.

argues that Frost, like James, embraced a “pragmatic theism” with three qualities – openness and freeness, plurality, and intelligibility and purposiveness.⁵¹⁰ Yet Shaw does not name any of religious options available to Frost that reflected these qualities. The tri-faith option answered to all three.

Frost turned to Christianity because it became useful for thinking about the place of the United States in the world. *Mercy* depicts a dialogue between recognizably Protestant, Roman Catholic, and Jewish American participants in this debate. What it concludes – and this is a conclusion that “Kitty Hawk” and the Inaugural poem reinforced – is that these participants had to balance out the emphases of each others’ theologies, and the politics derived from them, to improve their communities’ common lot and advance the national interest. Although the explicitly Protestant voice in *Mercy* is that of the sentimental evangelist, the structure and course of the debate orchestrates tri-faith American belief to conform to the wishes of the Protestant establishment. The endpoint was clear, but the drama set a roadmap. The pragmatic dimensions of justifying tri-faith America were the representative power that Frost stood to gain from becoming this faith’s Protestant spokesperson, the confirmation of national purpose evident in the good that Protestants, Catholics, and Jews could jointly do, and the realization that Protestant hegemony in public culture had to transform if not weaken to retain its legitimacy.

The suggestion that poetry, religion, and politics could have been so closely linked for Frost, and that poems as admittedly anomalous as the masques were pivotal vehicles for the expression of such links, might seem unlikely. Yet one of Frost’s most

⁵¹⁰ W. David Shaw, “The Poetics of Pragmatism,” 175.

important statements of poetics, “The Constant Symbol,” published the year in between the two masques, drew parallels between the task of poet, President, and preacher. It depicted the necessary frustration of the intention of the inhabitant of each role, each “a figure of the will braving alien entanglements.”⁵¹¹ Not only was the will at the mercy of “obligations and answerabilities,”⁵¹² but also cognizant of having come to occupy the role as the result of a particular familial and social history. These environmental factors constrained what the will could accomplish, but, according to Frost, they only highlighted the importance of the individual courage to act emphasized by James. Of the preacher, Frost wrote, “All that concerns *us* is whether his story is one of conformance or performance,”⁵¹³ evoking American nonconformist individualism but also, behind that, the Dissenting tradition in English poetry that included Milton and Blake, who figured into the masques. The essay insisted that readers evaluate poetry, politics, and religion based not on the intention of the poet/politician/preacher, but rather whether, when met with obstacles and demands to bow to party and church orthodoxy, these individuals retreated to nurse their ideals and conform to expectation, or whether they accepted that performing their role required the transformation of intention in light of limitation and opportunity.

This argument asked readers to acknowledge the contingency of what party or religion Frost belonged to and to judge him as a Democrat and a Protestant while treating these labels as baselines against which to judge how he performed above and beyond

⁵¹¹ Frost, *Collected Prose*, 148.

⁵¹² *Ibid.*

⁵¹³ *Ibid.*

their conforming pressures. His vignette of the preacher, “in the pulpit of a Sunday wrestling with the angel for a blessing on his self-defensive interpretation of the Creed,”⁵¹⁴ opened up a divide between private conviction and public action that reads as a microcosmic account of his Christian turn. Needless to say, the appeal to conscience here, that the preacher knows as no one else but God could whether his performance was useful, depended on Protestant understandings of the primary scene of faith. As the character of Paul puts it at the conclusion of *Mercy*, “May my sacrifice / Be found acceptable in Heaven’s sight.”⁵¹⁵ Frost put these words in the mouth of the archetypal convert and Christian ecclesiast’s contemporary avatar, but, if Thompson is to be believed, Frost appropriated them from a prayer he heard at Rockdale Avenue Temple in Cincinnati, where one of his acquaintances was a rabbi.⁵¹⁶ This effectively makes the prayer Judeo-Christian. Frost delivered a sermon at the synagogue explaining his pragmatic view of religion: “Now religion always seems to me to come round to something beyond wisdom. It’s a straining toward wisdom that will do well enough in the day’s work, you know, living along, fighting battles, going to wars, beating each other, striving with each other, in war or in peace – sufficient wisdom.”⁵¹⁷ Frost’s appropriation affirmed that sufficient wisdom could come from Jewish or Christian sources.

“The Four Beliefs” (1944), a shorter prose work, sheds light on the opportunistic political resonances that this flexible relation to belief made possible. It styles itself a

⁵¹⁴ Frost, *Collected Prose*, 148.

⁵¹⁵ Frost, *Poems*, 520, l. 724-5.

⁵¹⁶ Thompson, *Robert Frost: The Later Years*, 139-41.

⁵¹⁷ Quoted in Jay Parini, *Robert Frost: A Life* (New York: Henry Holt, 1999), 366.

credo, one that, like Frost's Christmas cards, was printed around Christmas in a small run by a Dartmouth printer. It identifies a set of beliefs Frost claimed to "know more about from having lived with poetry"⁵¹⁸ – the "self-belief," "love belief," "national belief," "one in every work of art," and "our belief in God."⁵¹⁹ The description of what they have in common places belief and knowledge in the realm of experience rather than rational contemplation, while the order suggests an ascending hierarchy. The national belief is one that "people enter into socially with each other to bring on the future of the country,"⁵²⁰ while the God belief is "that by which we believe the future in."⁵²¹ God is stripped of human characteristics and abstracted to the degree that He becomes a guarantor of continued existence. All of the beliefs involve faith without proof of future happiness or success, but the language of these two exhibits interesting overlap, blurring the distinction between belief in God and belief in the nation. The implication is that belief in America's future is incorporated into a more comprehensive belief in God. Again, the nature of the hierarchy, with the self at one end, God at the other, and the cosmos, viewed as a sequence of mediating affiliations, in between them, marks Frost's Protestant belief, affirmed by James, in the individual character of religious experience. Yet this individualism remained compatible with the project of bringing on America's future and faith in the future itself.

⁵¹⁸ Frost, *Collected Prose*, 145.

⁵¹⁹ Ibid.

⁵²⁰ Ibid.

⁵²¹ Ibid.

The pragmatism of Frost's relationship to belief is also evident in the ambiguity around the number of these core beliefs. There are five, and the piece is accordingly broken into five paragraphs – and yet it was titled “The Four Beliefs.” Mark Richardson observes that Frost was aware of the discrepancy, having crossed out “four” and written “five” on an “uncompleted revision” of “Education by Poetry,”⁵²² the essay from the conclusion of which the credo was taken. At one point in that essay Frost wavers as to the number and, consequently, the integrity of the essential beliefs he demarcates: “There are two or three places we know belief outside of religion.”⁵²³ What made Frost settle on a fixed number?

I argue that Frost chose four so that the credo would resonate with the one offered by FDR in his Four Freedoms speech of 1941. The speech affirmed the social policy of the New Deal, laying out an activist role for government in guaranteeing the freedoms of speech and worship and from want and fear to every American, and expansive groundwork for the rationale of a war with Germany that FDR already saw as inevitable. As Michael Szalay has argued, the political liberalism in Frost's poetry participated in the legitimatization of the New Deal welfare state.⁵²⁴ Although one of the four freedoms was worship, FDR famously said, in the presence of Catholic and Jewish members of his administration in 1942, that the US was “a Protestant country” and that “Catholics and

⁵²² Frost, *Collected Prose*, 308.

⁵²³ *Ibid.*, 109.

⁵²⁴ Michael Szalay, *New Deal Modernism: American Literature and the Invention of the Welfare State* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2000), Chapter 5.

Jews are here under sufferance.”⁵²⁵ At the same time that FDR balanced the assurance of free worship against the demand for traditional and demographic deference, the maintenance of the Four Freedoms and their extension to the rest of the world were not solely envisioned in secular terms, but as consonant with God’s plan for humanity. Job’s wife in *A Masque of Reason* jokes that “tak[ing] care of... / freedoms on the party docket” might be synonymous with the establishment of God’s Kingdom on Earth,⁵²⁶ asking skeptically whether these freedoms could be reduced to four and might merely represent the electoral interests of the Democratic party. Yet in the plotting of the masque her cynical carping is instrumental to Job’s lesson that progress can only be appreciated relative to the chaos from which it emerged, the entanglement of God’s will and man’s embedded in the anxiety about whether politics was part of the problem or part of the solution. Frost supported the image of tri-faith America as an appropriate outgrowth of New Deal liberalism, which could be construed to tie national welfare to freedom from want just as religious pluralism tied national welfare to freedom of worship. Poirier, who judges Frost conservative rather than a conservative liberal, judges that he lacked “the historical vision” to consider the possibility that Christianity was “an unnatural imposition upon life” to be resisted as stridently as the homogenizing economic planning that he worried about but did not reject in the New Deal.⁵²⁷ But as we shall see, the masques firmly embraced both.

⁵²⁵ Quoted in Schultz, *Tri-Faith America*, 10.

⁵²⁶ Frost, *Poems*, 484, l. 310-11. The editors of the LOA Frost pick up on this reference, but do connect it to “The Four Beliefs;” see Robert Frost, *Complete Poems, Prose, and Plays*, Ed. Richard Poirier and Mark Richardson (New York: Library of America, 1995), 984.

II. The Beginning of Design

Before detailing how the masques worked out the design of postwar America, it is necessary to look at a poem to which Frost had an ambivalent relationship throughout his career – “Design.” It dates back to 1912, before the publication of his first book, before English-language poetic modernism had gotten fully underway, and before the war. Originally titled “In White,” it was significantly revised and published in 1922, when it appeared in an annual anthology. Frost published two collections before including it in *A Further Range* (1936). While this publication history complicates attempts to peg it as a response to any particular set of historical events, the setting of *A Further Range*, in which poems like “Two Tramps in Mud Time,” “Provide, Provide,” “Build Soil” and “To a Thinker” worked out ideas about the Depression and the New Deal, lends “Design” sinister overtones, as though the sonnet’s fatal encounter between white spider and white moth, the former’s victory assured due to the camouflage lent by a white flower, were proof that certain people were purely at the mercy of circumstance, their death no part of ensuring the fitness of the species, but simply the result of predatory forces. Poirier suggests that design in the poem acquired the “surplus meaning” of social planning through the coercive language of mass advertising and political appeal in surrounding poems.⁵²⁸ This negative valuation is consistent with the speaker’s appalled reaction, but the concluding notes of “The Strong are Saying Nothing” – “There may be much beyond

⁵²⁷ Poirier, *Robert Frost: The Work of Knowing*, 233.

⁵²⁸ *Ibid.*, 257.

the grave, / But the strong are saying nothing till they see”⁵²⁹ – and “Neither Out Far Nor In Deep” – “They cannot look out far. / They cannot look in deep. / But when was that ever a bar / To any watch they keep?”⁵³⁰ – demonstrate that religious questioning is also a distinct thread running through the volume. I would argue that the interweaving of the political and religious threads is absent from “Design,” and from Frost’s poetry, until the *masques*, which is why they represent a major turning point, apart from their explicit engagement with Christianity.

“Design” rehearses a humanistic activity foundational to post-classical Western Christian thinking, the inference of God’s attributes, the attributes of the Creator, from empirical inquiry into aspects of His creation. This activity has been imagined to supplement the revelations of scripture with the revelations of God’s “other book,” nature. During the Enlightenment, the idea of the book of God gave rise to the discourse of natural theology and corresponding Deistic arguments from design. The watchmaker God of Deism designed the Earth perfectly, and evidence of this could be found everywhere. “Design” undermines the assumption that the minute operations of nature confirmed the benevolent wisdom of the natural laws that God established. The white spider easily preys on the white moth, thanks to the whiteness of the flower on which it hides, as though the insensate flower were conspiring in the moth’s demise. Instead of harmonic, economical, symbiotic interrelation, nature evinces conflict, waste, and carnage, red in tooth and claw. Yet the movement of the poem, in complicating the Book of Nature assumption, is not towards doubting God’s existence but His presence on this

⁵²⁹ Frost, *Poems*, 299-300.

⁵³⁰ *Ibid.*, 301.

particular scale.⁵³¹ The speaker's protective irony and the soft frivolity of the minor scene of death give way to the vulnerability of his questions and the stark challenge posed by the scene's dynamics.

Inverting the traditional problem/solution structure of the sonnet, this change occurs at the volta:

I found a dimpled spider, fat and white,
 On a white heal-all, holding up a moth
 Like a white piece of rigid satin cloth –
 Assorted characters of death and blight
 Mixed ready to begin to the morning right,
 Like the ingredients of a witches' broth –
 A snow-drop spider, a flower like a froth,
 And dead wings carried like a paper kite.

What had that flower to do with being white,
 The wayside blue and innocent heal-all?
 What brought the kindred spider to that height,
 Then steered the white moth thither in the night?
 What but design of darkness to appall? –
 If design govern in a thing so small.⁵³²

The sonnet begins in aesthetic detachment – organizing by color, in the repetition of “white” in “spider, fat and white,” “white heal-all,” and “moth like a white piece of satin cloth” (1-3), and by shape, in the “dead wings” as a “paper kite” (8) and in the amoral rhymes of moth/cloth and blight/right (2-3, 4-5) – and ends in theological inquiry. The

⁵³¹ In this way, the poem could almost be thought of as a holdover from the trope of God's disappearance so common in Victorian poetry like that of Matthew Arnold. See J. Hillis Miller, *The Disappearance of God: Five Nineteenth-Century Writers* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1963). Miller's following book argued that God's death, not disappearance, was the starting point for most twentieth century writers; see *Poets of Reality: Six Twentieth-Century Writers* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1965). In the Introduction to the 2000 paperback edition of *The Disappearance of God*, however, Miller qualifies the claims of the book, restricting the arc of secularization from one century to the next not just to particular Western countries but to the group of writers – poets mostly – under consideration; see Miller, *The Disappearance of God: Five Nineteenth-Century Writers* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2000), x-xi.

⁵³² Frost, *Poems*, 302.

spider and moth are glossed across the first two quatrains as “Assorted characters of death and blight” (4), the speaker callous toward their nondescript quality (“assorted”), a quality which nevertheless rises to the level of being emblematic (“characters of death and blight”). This jaunty foreknowledge of the lesson to be learned from the moth’s death is reinforced in the following line, “Mixed ready to begin the morning right” (5), which supplements knowingness with ironic cheer. The sestet begins by probing the whiteness of the flower’s surface, like Ishmael probing the whiteness of the whale, and expands the speaker’s frame of vision to include a flower that would not have allowed for the same easy preying, a “wayside blue...heal-all” (10). This raises the question of why the death happened the way it did by introducing a counterfactual, which then prompts the first moral term in the poem, that the expected blue heal-all, in contrast with the present white one, is “innocent” (9). Color becomes moral, as a result of which white comes to signify, not goodness, its conventional association, but either evil or indifference.

In the closing couplet, the apparent inversion or confusion of values prompts the revision of the scene as an instance of design. Although the poem features the octave/sestet structure of the Petrarchan sonnet, the rhyme scheme is Shakespearean, placing extra pressure on this couplet: “What but design of darkness to appall? – / If design govern in a thing so small” (13-14). The question is the third in a sequence, the first being about the flower’s role in the moth’s death, and the second about the timing that brought moth and spider together. The design could not be that of a Creator who can be inferred as omniscient and benevolent, and the whiteness of the elements of the scene belies the dark design responsible for their interaction. That the second line of the couplet

undermines the first, meeting an emphatic rhetorical question with a nagging hypothetical, amplifies the speaker's discomfort, the bifurcating dash producing an extended, self-divisive pause. It also subverts the Shakespearean sonnet form as ably as the relation between octave and sestet subverts that of the Petrarchan. If the subversion of the Petrarchan form complements the darkness lurking in whiteness, suggesting a world upside down, then the subversion of the Shakespearean form suggests the speaker's inconclusive posture at what is either traditionally a moment of wise, epigrammatic summary or of clear, witty subversion. Like other Frost poems that put questions to common wisdom, "Design" discovers urgent, teeming uncertainty beneath a placid surface. It does not affirm that God is malevolent, that his design is imperfect, or that he is indifferent to carnage. It depicts these possibilities coalescing around the traditional idea of design and questions their application to a particular case, leaving the idea that there is some definite design implicit and untouched.

I have suggested that this poem requires a division between the important world of human affairs and the insignificant world of insects, in order for the confidence in this division to be shaken in the sestet. But it is also the case that the poem's publication in a Depression-era volume invited the reading that it concerned the possibility of fruitless suffering, and thus counterbalanced the Depression poetry of modernists like Marianne Moore, who counseled thrift and a renewed emphasis on spiritual values as the only sound responses to poverty.⁵³³ "Design" might suggest that perhaps what happened in a society economically modeled on the state of nature was comparable to the invisible hand

⁵³³ Carson, "Republicanism and Leisure in Marianne Moore's Depression."

that “brought the kindred spider to that height” and “steered the white moth thither in the night” (11-12), kindred taken as a belief in shared interests rather than taxonomic classification or proximity.

The use of the verb “govern” in the concluding line is particularly interesting in this respect. Even as it gestures to a conventional figurative use in referring to God’s power,⁵³⁴ it also contributes to the line’s confused intimation of scale, by wondering whether “a thing so small” as the confrontation between two “assorted” beings of uneven power could possibly be an object of governance. The opposing political valence the line suggests, instrumental in the suggestion that God might be evil, is that the moth’s death was an execution ordered arbitrarily somewhere along a long chain of causes by a ruler with absolute power. Compare the ringing assertion of Frost’s Inaugural poem that American political leadership is “A democratic form of right divine / To rule first answerable to high design.”⁵³⁵ The hypermetrical “answerable” might be an example of the “healthy independence of the throng” touted in just the previous line (62), but the heroic couplet base of the poem, and the message of the lines, signal conformity and decorum rather than interrogation and self-division. In America, the lines suggest, the divine right to rule was no longer identified with kings because it had been given to the people. Radical Enlightenment thinkers like Thomas Paine had questioned the divine for its sanctification of monarchy, but the American Protestant tenor that Frost adopts here rejects this guilt by association. The right of self-rule remains guaranteed by God. In being “first answerable to high design,” this right is described as fundamental and as

⁵³⁴ “govern,” Oxford English Dictionary, 15 May 2013.

⁵³⁵ Frost, *Poems*, 424, l. 64-5.

integral to God's providential plan for humanity. Given the Cold War context, it also answered to the design of history in a way that communism did not. In such future instantiations of design in Frost's poetry, the idea referred to something other than God's presence or absence in nature. It referred to God's ultimately providential plan for society, politics, and culture. In other words, God became, as in the abstraction of "The Four Beliefs," less of a governor and more of an underlying fundament to history, that which "brings the future in." It is this shift of context for design, from nature to culture, science to politics, that the masques effected.

III. The Renovation of Design in the Masques

Readers could not have been more surprised or puzzled by the appearance of Frost's masques, which garnered a wide range of reactions. Lawrence McMillin objected that the "philosophical banter" between Job and God in *Reason* was "revolting to the orthodox, bewildering to the faithful, and unconvincing to the secular mind,"⁵³⁶ that is, unacceptable to any audience. Lawrence Thompson lambasted *Reason* in the *New York Times Book Review* for similar reasons, warning more explicitly that Frost was risking part of his readership: "Although the ideas expressed in 'A Masque of Reason' are but satirical variations on themes already hidden away in his poems, it is inevitable that he *will* catch hell from his more orthodox admirers because he has dared to make light of

⁵³⁶ Lawrence McMillin, "A Modern Allegory," *The Hudson Review*, 1.1 (Spring 1948), 106.

sacred themes.”⁵³⁷ The title of Thompson’s review, “Robert Frost Rediscovered Job,” along with a story about Frost’s bout with pneumonia, gave a biographical reading of the masque’s impetus suggesting that Frost had miscalculated in treading on Christian ground. *Mercy*, by contrast, received a very positive review from none other than William Carlos Williams, who praised Frost for attempting to renovate, rather than simply reject, Christian material for contemporary poetry, claiming that *Mercy* proved “we may still use the Bible heritage of our environment for pithy statement if we use pursue it diligently enough under the right circumstances.”⁵³⁸ That a dyed-in-the-wool modernist like Williams would grant that the Bible remained “the heritage of our environment,” and that McGillin and Thompson would distinguish among the possible religious orientations of the audience for the works in the way they did, suggests that the primary question in the reception of the masques was what someone like Frost who had not been legible in his poetry as a Christian was doing writing about Christianity. Williams gave the response of the astute cultural observer, that whatever the progress of secularization, Christianity’s traditional authority in America persisted, and therefore could be the object of artistic experiment, in contrast with McMillin’s ideologue, who demanded to know Frost’s intentions and allegiances more clearly, except in the event that Frost desired no more than to play the role of provocateur.

McMillin’s difficulty began with the tone of the masques, which, in veering between plaintive inquiry and throwaway sarcasm, is difficult to determine. Anna Juhnke suggests that their irreverent playfulness is part of a pattern in Frost’s poetry of

⁵³⁷ Thompson, “Robert Frost Rediscovered Job,” *New York Times Book Review*, 29 Mar 1945, 2.

⁵³⁸ William Carlos Williams, “The Steeple’s Eye,” *Poetry* 72.1 (Apr 1948): 40.

demonstrations of mastery and self-possession, “a deliberate enactment of doubtful searching, hopes, and fears in poetic forms that control and distance them, often with humor.”⁵³⁹ The distancing effect of the masque form might be described as the effect of deliberate archaism, one at odds with the modernist call for formal contemporaneity. However, as the Williams review points out in focusing on Frost’s poetic language as much as his idea, while a masque created the expectation of a swerve away from Frost’s association with blank verse and regional and colloquial speech, the poems preserved these features in practice. And the masque could also be considered a classicist gesture, as with the structuring of “Build Soil” around a dialogue between characters from Virgil’s *Eclogues*.

The anomalousness of the masques is reflected in their posthumous treatment by Frost’s editors. Both the collected poems edited by Frost’s acquaintance Edward Connery Lathem in 1963 and the more comprehensive edition of his writing edited for the Library of America by Richard Poirier and Mark Richardson in the mid-1990s relegate the plays to the end of their volumes. The decision is more glaring in Lathem’s edition, in which they are out of chronological order in an otherwise chronologically arranged volume. Poirier and Richardson organize the LOA volume generically, but place prose before plays, creating a hierarchy of generic importance. As for their original publications, only *Mercy* appeared in periodical form first, in *The Atlantic Monthly*. Each was printed in a limited edition of around eight hundred personalized copies, which was common for

⁵³⁹ Anna K. Juhnke, “Religion in Robert Frost’s Poetry: The Play for Self-Possession,” *American Literature* 36.2 (May 1964), 153.

Frost's collections of poetry, giving no suggestion of a special marketing technique or distribution method.

The time that passed between "The Four Beliefs" (1942) and *A Masque of Reason*, which Frost was writing in 1942 but did not publish until 1945, spanned the length of American involvement in the Second World War. I argue that *Reason* should be read as a comment on the doubts that the war, coming on the heels of the Great Depression, raised about national greatness and historical progress. Because it supplements one of the wisdom books of scripture, was found offensive or incoherent, and has found a biographical context in Frost's health scare and the numerous deaths in his family during the late 1930s and early 1940s, the temptation has been to slight its capacity for historical allegory. The theological crux of the masque, which takes its cue from "Design," is whether humans have the capacity to discern the modes and scales of divine order in the observable world, and so what extremes of suffering and evil a God's-eye view can justify. These questions were of palpable importance throughout the war and at its close. The conceit of the masque is that Job and his wife, residing comfortably in the afterlife sometime after the scriptural close of their story, have the opportunity to press God to answer for Job's trials. What God reveals is that His design relies on chaos for progress, as unchanging metaphysical wisdom relies on "self-superseding" science (l. 190-197),⁵⁴⁰ reason relies on occasional submission to unreason, with war given as the chief example (209-14), and God himself relies on the galvanizing challenge of Satan/the Adversary, whom Job's wife Thyratira calls "God's best inspiration" (382-435). So part

⁵⁴⁰ Frost, "A Masque of Reason," *Poems*, 473-90.

of Job's hearing is learning that even wars that seem pointless have driven progress and thus deserve obedient support.

The attention to war in this dualistic view of history is not central however, unlike the relationship between Job and God, which eventually comes to seem, in the blasphemous tone on which readers picked up, like a doubling. In their central confrontation, they address each other as artists. Job reverses the scenario of "Design" in explaining his pathos:

I'm curious. And I'm a grown-up man:
 I'm not a child for You to put me off
 And tantalize with another "Oh, because."
 You'd be the last to want me to believe
 All your effects were merely lucky blunders.
 That would be unbelief and atheism.
 The artist in me cries out for design. (255-61)

Where the speaker of the earlier poem recoils from the insect world on the possibility that its carnage is intentional, Job wishes for grounds on which he can identify with his suffering's prime mover. That the speech in which this line appears ends with a suggestive allusion to another Frost poem, "The Gift Outright," foregrounds it further: "I am reduced / To asking flatly for the reason – outright" (268-9). God, by contrast, describes himself as a dramatist who requires "Devoted actors at a sacrifice" because "Society can never think things out" (224, 223). He opposes Job's static conception of artistic form to a dynamic conception of artistic ritual that invokes pagan human sacrifice as much as the Passion, trading one view of design for another. Like God's other attempts to satisfy Job, this one is insufficient. God also credits Job with being "the Emancipator of your God" (78), Job's story detaching pious worship from the expectation of divine

favor. I suggest that we read the nature of this achievement, combined with the account of “Devoted actors” demonstrating what society cannot “think...out,” as directed not just to Job, but to all those affected by the war.

Yet the historical resonance of this message is cheek-by-jowl with moments of deflationary humor in the depictions of God and Satan. It is such moments that take the masque out of the realm of scriptural supplement and open up a rich vein of bile and dark humor. God’s high-minded appeal to Job’s ignorance of the level at which providential design operates gives way at one point to a pedantic, brutal admission of frailty that Job quickly terms human: “I was just showing off to the Devil, Job, / As is set forth in Chapters One and Two” (327-8). Both God and Job are victims, put in the unfortunate position of having to desperately validate design. God tries to placate Job – “I would do anything for you in reason” (374) – where the standard of reasonableness is whatever is consistent with the mysterious unfolding of His design. The specter of God’s proud boast throws His reasonableness into question, however. What saves Him is visual proof of the Adversary, Satan, who appears, in God’s words, as “a shadow of himself” (425), made so by “Church neglect / And figurative use” (423-4). This moment, alongside God’s dismissal of the idea that Job somehow deserved his torments as “Browning and sheer Chapel Non-conformism” (365), actually militates against a key development in liberal Protestant theology, the weakening of the doctrine of original sin, which involved the rejection of innate human depravity and the view of evil as privative that makes Satan appear “diaphanous” (427). This reflected the neo-orthodox movement in American Protestantism, epitomized in America by theologians like Reinhold Niebuhr, who became

an unofficial spokesperson for the establishment in the 1940s and 50s.⁵⁴¹ God “brought him in, / More to give his reality its due / Than anything” (432-4), throwing a “good old get-together celebration” (380) with Himself, Satan, and Job that Thyratira commemorates by taking a picture of the trio with her Kodak.

This mass art form postcard from Heaven ironically affirms old verities, while shifting the scale of design from that of individuals to that of abstract forces beyond human comprehension. Thyratira stages the picture to be as kitschy as possible: “Now someone can light up the Burning Bush / And turn the gold enameled artificial birds on” (459-60). This might signal anxiety about whether the masque simply reiterated conventional wisdom, but it is also the last dualism the poem acknowledges, one familiar to readers of Frost, that between the truth in conventional wisdom and the circumstances of its ossification, which Job breaks through in getting his hearing with God. And, as Poirier points out, beginning in the 1930s, when Frost accepts that his literary and social politics have become fundamentally at odds with the modernist intelligentsia, this dialectic between ossified convention and nonconformist courage became wrapped up in the question of Frost’s image. That is, Frost both performed the role of plainspoken populist and distanced himself from it. Ending *Reason* with a photograph – another static art form, in keeping with Job’s earlier, incorrect thinking – brings this question of image to the fore. Also, the very last couplet, as in “Design,” is a conditional that succinctly encapsulates the ambivalence produced by the understanding of design as a mysterious and hence seemingly irrational dualism: “Now if you three have settled anything / You’d

⁵⁴¹ Hutchison, *Modernist Impulse*, Epilogue.

as well smile as frown on the occasion” (464-5). This ambivalence makes sense as a statement authored at the beginning of American involvement in the war and finally published at its close; its wisdom is not palliative but, like that of Job, tragic.

Another extrapolation from my argument that Job’s lessons bear on the war, and that the poem’s humor should be read as unsettling readers to keep these lessons from being taken as fatuous, is that *Reason* ultimately redefines design as a faith in progress that unites artist and society under God’s watchful eye, if not his explicit direction. Instead of design being a question about the purpose reflected in a particular death, as in the sonnet, it is an article of faith about the purpose reflected in a broad human context of suffering. This faith must be held, Job granting, in the language of action from “A Constant Symbol,” that “we seem to know enough to act on” (290), and supposing that “what seems to us confusion / Is not confusion, but the form of forms” (338-9). *Reason* takes design as an article of faith on the abstract level of “The Four Beliefs.”

Mercy develops *Reason*’s account of design with an eye toward defining the proper social organization for the postwar American scene, and was the beginning of tri-faith thinking in Frost’s poetry. This focus on what to do in the future presupposed that the Allied powers would win the war. Although both masques were underway in 1943, Frost’s response to the war ranged from callous indifference to the same measured opposition to apocalypticism that he displayed in his 1935 letter to the students of Amherst.⁵⁴² In either case, he confidently looked forward to the war’s end rather than see it as a threat to his poetry, career, or the engagement with Christianity represented by the

⁵⁴² See Thompson, *Robert Frost: The Later Years*, and Frost, “‘Letter’ to *The Amherst Student*,” *Collected Prose*, 114-5.

masques. This confidence carried over to *Mercy*'s bid to negotiate among the distinct groups in American religious culture that contributed to the formation of tri-faith America. However, as I will show, it conducts this negotiation from an Archimedean point beyond the fray of competing voices, the perspective of the Protestant establishment.

The turn in *Mercy* to representing recognizable social types begins with the setting. *Reason* picks up with Job and his wife in Heaven, while *Mercy* is set at a bookstore on the outskirts of New York City. The owner, My Brother's Keeper, runs the store with his maladjusted wife, Jesse Bel, a modern Jezebel. An ascetic lodger named Paul lives in the cellar. One night just after closing, a strange man demands asylum. The man turns out to be an evangelist named Jonah who absconded from the revivalist meeting in the city he was meant to lead and now fears God's judgment. Having intended to preach on the sinfulness of city life, and the resulting imminent wrath and destruction should the city dwellers not repent, he realized that he had been making an empty threat for too long. This feeling of fraudulence brought on a crisis of faith that prevented him from taking the stage. Over the course of the masque, as the three main characters engage in theological debate, Jonah regains his faith – defined, as in "The Constant Symbol," in terms of courageous action – but only after learning that the worldly justice he expected from God is less important than abstract faith in the design of God's justice and His mercy towards those who act courageously in His name. *Mercy*, however, is not only introduced as a Christian value that Jonah has forgotten, but as a Judeo-Christian one that closely resembles tolerance and which chastens Keeper, Paul, and Jonah alike. As with

the shrill characterization of Thyratira the nag in *Reason*, Jesse Bell is a helpless voice of discontent, unaided by psychoanalysis, the symptom of a problem men must solve, even as she contributes occasional flashes of insight.

The tri-faith union is worked out through the clash of the three main characters. Each has three distinct layers of allegorical identity, one that is theological, one that relates theology to one of the tri-faith groups, and one that relates this group to a sociopolitical understanding of design. My Brother's Keeper, Paul, and Jonah Dove are respectively depicted as moralistic, ecclesiastical, and evangelical in theology. That is, their standards for orienting oneself to God are about doing social good, being part of an orthodox church, and saving souls. The religious groups that these theological orientations respectively represent in the masque are Jews – moralism construed as adhering to the Law – Roman Catholics – ecclesiasticism construed as granting the authority of Church hierarchy – and evangelical Protestants – evangelicalism construed as bearing the Word. These orientations are not depicted as theological models in timeless conflict but as having modern stances in relation to one another. Keeper's moralism is modernist, Jonah's fundamentalism is counter-modernist, and Paul's orthodoxy is anti-modernist or traditional, a roughly accurate description of the tri-faith groups in the 1940s, with the exception of the fundamentalist, which is why Keeper is given shades of liberal Protestant identity as well, and becomes the closest proxy for Frost, in keeping with Frost's description of himself as an Old Testament Christian.

In the masque's structuring theological conflict, Keeper and Jonah preach radically opposed understandings of justice – modernist social justice versus the

fundamentalist justice of God's punishment – while Paul tries to convince them that mercy irrespective of human action is more important than either. The debate among them, prompted by Jonah's demand for punishment, turns on what actions will bring about justice and on how interpersonal relationships and the relation between state and citizen varies with different answers to this question. The relation between the ideas of Jonah and Paul recasts the dialogue between God and Job in *Reason* about whether or not Job merited his trials, introducing Keeper as a mediator between their positions who comes to see the relative importance of justice and mercy. Yet Keeper decisively shifts the posthumous, retrospective justification at issue in *Reason* to the "mercy" possible on earth. Keeper concludes for the others that their priority ought to be their courage to act in pursuit of their own senses of what it means to realize God's design. The lines of his that end the masque juxtapose this courage with what Frost called, in the title of a poem from the same period, "The Fear of God": "I'm too much afraid of God to claim / I have been fighting on the angels' side" (705).⁵⁴³ Even as this fear robs his actions of any guarantee of righteousness, he warns that it must not breed paralysis in himself or Jonah: "My failure is no different from Jonah's. / We both have lacked the courage in the heart / To overcome the fear within the soul / And go ahead to any accomplishment. / Courage is what it takes and takes the more of / Because the deeper fear is so eternal" (727-32). This fallibilism was not part of tri-faith discourse, as each group had to present unvarnished confidence in its identity in order to make good on its essential contribution to American

⁵⁴³ "The Fear of God" and "The Fear of Man," which first appeared in *The Steeple Bush* (1947), are counterpart poems that conduct this dialogue in miniature, without tri-faith personae.

life.⁵⁴⁴ However, it complements the spirit of ecumenical toleration that the tri-faith image demanded, which, in diminishing doctrinal differences, brought new religious populations together, just as Keeper and Jonah, the most starkly opposed characters in the masque, come together by the end through this shared acceptance of, if not triumph over, fear. Rejecting “all-fired belief” (602), Keeper offers the summary credo “Live and let live, believe and let believe” as “our greatest hope of rest from war” (593-4). This tri-faith sentiment wins out eventually, but not before Paul and Keeper have had it out.

Keeper’s political orientation takes center stage in the debate, just as the masque is set in his bookstore.⁵⁴⁵ The political orientations of Jonah and Paul are defined in opposition to his. Keeper is a democratic socialist who defends the rise of the New Deal welfare state as an indication of human progress toward justice: “The future state is springing even now / From the discovery that loss from failure, / By being spread out over everybody, / Can be made negligible” (320-3).⁵⁴⁶ The pun on Heavenly utopia in the phrase “future state” refers to the full-scale realization of the Brook Farm community in which Jesse reveals Keeper’s parents participated. The stereotypically Judaic qualities attributed to this socialism are tribal particularism, legalism, and worldliness. Keeper observes to Paul, “Our disagreement when we disagree, Paul, / Lies in our different

⁵⁴⁴ It is, however, an idea with plenty of support in the religious traditions themselves, and as mentioned earlier, Frost was encouraged in the sentiment by the earlier-mentioned prayer he heard in a Cincinnati synagogue.

⁵⁴⁵ Peter Stanlis describes the transition in the scale on which justice is treated from *Reason* to *Mercy* interestingly: “*A Masque of Mercy* makes it clear that Frost believed the main problem of modern man is not commutative justice in the courts of equity, between one individual and another [as between Job and God], but a conflict over social distributive justice and the various means by which it is brought about;” Peter Stanlis, “Frost and Religion: The Two Masques,” *Robert Frost: The Poet as Philosopher* (Wilmington, DE: Intercollegiate Studies Institute), 2007, 189.

⁵⁴⁶ Frost, “A Masque of Mercy,” *Poems*, 493-521.

approach to Christ, / Yours more through Rome, mine more through Palestine” (516-19), which suggests that Keeper believes in the Jewish identity of Jesus. Keeper jokes at another point, unstably given his political commitments, that Marx is the Messiah (577-8). Lastly, Paul, formerly Saul, calls him a “Wandering Jew” with affectionate condescension (133). Paul counters Keeper’s political declaration by arguing that his socialism is tantamount to Leninism, complimenting his “holy impulse toward redistribution” but warning that “[t]he thing that really counts, though, is the form / Of outrage – violence – that breaks across it” (419, 430-1). Keeper defends himself by affirming existing political structures: “No revolution I brought on would aim / At anything but change of personnel” (457-8). Paul nevertheless introduces Christ to Keeper and Jonah as a revolutionary figure of mercy – “Christ came to introduce a break with logic” (475) – and quotes God from *Paradise Lost* [masque] to argue for mercy’s preeminence: “Mercy first and last shall brightest shine” (381). Paul is associated with orthodoxy and asceticism, an escape from the things of this world. He counsels Jonah, “Contemplate Truth until it burns your eyes out” (630). But this prescription of the painful quest for clarity paradoxically allows Paul to introduce that idea of mercy that crucially corrects the way that Keeper and Jonah see acting in the world.

Jonah Dove is associated with proselytizing and anti-intellectualism. He enters the fray of the ongoing debate between Keeper and Paul as a rural, unlettered doomsayer, questioning the urgency of anything beyond widespread sinfulness, in the mode of Dwight L. Moody or Billy Sunday. Having skipped his own revival, he is desperate to assert himself. His fundamentalism manifests in his dismissal of Keeper’s occupation:

“You see the Lord God is a jealous God! / He wrote one book. Let there be no more written” (289-90). Once he has shared his giddy visions of God’s judgment, whether an earthquake – “the fault / In nature would wipe out all human fault” (231-2) – new Babel – “everyone developing / A language of his own to write his book in” (240-1), a barb directed at radical literary modernists – or proletarian revolution – “A question who was getting the most out / Of business, might increase into a madness” (248-9) – he largely expires as an interlocutor and spends most of the masque listening to Paul and Keeper. He reveals himself to be a Social Darwinist of sorts, decrying “the modern tendency...in [God] / To take the punishment out of all failure / To be strong, careful, thrifty, diligent, / Anything we once thought we had to be” (312-15). Like Thyratira in *A Masque of Reason*, Jonah is both the most ridiculed character and the most important plot device. His “disease of...imagination” presents what comes across as a parody of justice that catalyzes a conversion experience in Keeper (258), forcing him to see the faults in his fearless approach to justice as well as the merits in Paul’s theological arguments.

For Keeper, prostrating himself before God means transforming from a revolutionary socialist into an incrementalist liberal, afraid of going too far: “I can see that the uncertainty / In which we act is a severity, / A cruelty, amounting to injustice / That nothing but God’s mercy can assuage” (705-6). This line recalls Frost’s description of a liberal as one “who can’t take his own side in a quarrel.”⁵⁴⁷ Where Keeper begins by professing to subordinate theology to the revolution, he comes to view unmitigated belief in revolution as insufficiently fearful of God. At the same time, Keeper’s newfound

⁵⁴⁷ Quoted in George Monteiro, “Robert Frost’s Liberal Imagination,” *Iowa Review* 28.3 (Winter 1998): 125.

interest in Christ-like mercy does not involve a repudiation of his theological modernism as regards the nature of God, which Paul would also do away with. Keeper maintains, “In our subscription to the sentiment / Of one God, we provide He shall be one / Who can be many Gods to many men, / His church on earth a Roman pantheon” (589-92). Nevertheless, Paul’s contentions that the Sermon on the Mount sets out an impossible ideal toward which humanity must strive, and that equality before God outstrips the achievement of social and economic equality at any cost (475-511), are validated. By dropping to his knees a penitent, Keeper assumes before Paul the posture that Jonah had intended to induce en masse, and comes to occupy the middle position between Jonah’s diseased justice and Paul’s unfathomable mercy. This confirms that his role is to synthesize their distinct positions, and through them the tri-faith groups, and that the purpose of the masque as a whole is to justify the tri-faith image to man.

To put the political implications of this position more schematically, the religious terms of *Mercy* are translations of the terms of Frost’s New Deal liberalism. Frost’s legitimatization of the New Deal welfare state acquired a distinctly religious dimension in the masques. Keeper’s endpoint points to this state as positive evidence of God’s design and the progress of history toward justice, even as he tempers his call for peaceful revolution. Szalay defines Frost’s liberalism as “[t]he unresolved double bind...between an ostensibly homogenizing social totality on the one hand, and individual or personality on the other.”⁵⁴⁸ It is in this vein that Paul critiques Keeper’s understanding of justice as an effort “to homogenize mankind” (420), and seeks to temper it with mercy dictated not

⁵⁴⁸ Szalay, *New Deal Modernism*, 233.

by human needs but by an orthodoxy of boundless divine love that embraces human success and failure alike. But the most damning charges Paul and Keeper exchange – that Paul “theologized / Christ almost out of Christianity” (128-9), that Keeper believes, not in God, but in “father putative to sort of / Legitimize the brotherhood of man” (123-4) – eventually take on the character of a necessary fraternal quarrel. The double bind of Frost’s political liberalism has primarily been understood in terms of liberalism and conservatism, or, as in Szalay, in terms of the balancing out of socialism with the conservation of individual personality. To this I would add an understanding of it in religious terms, as the balancing out of messianic Marxism by the conservatism of a Judeo-Christian sense of individual dignity and morality.

Stray lines, some but not all of them jokes, create static in the assignment of representative identities and create a fluidity of affiliation that enhances the case for the masque as a tri-faith affair. For instance, when Jonah claims that he is on the run from God, and Jesse Bel calls that impossible, Jonah responds, “Haven’t you heard of Thompson’s ‘Hound of Heaven’?” (21). In addition to clashing with a characterization that predominantly treats Jonah as unlettered, Thompson was a Catholic poet, and conservative Protestants like Jonah’s revivalist preacher were more likely to be prejudiced against Catholics. Jonah’s appreciation for Thompson’s poetic sermon, which was one of the most admired English poems of the late nineteenth century, indicates that he can sporadically see beyond confessional boundaries. Paul, the Catholic figure, steps in to quote Thompson from memory at Jonah’s mention of the poem, confirming his allegiance, although he later quotes Milton, who vehemently opposed the Roman

Catholic Church, and Christina Rossetti. The other major instance of this fluidity is Keeper's pulling double duty at points as a liberal Protestant. His patently ridiculous name not only places him in the Pentateuch but also in the liberal Protestant position of denying original sin, one of the major theological breaks with the strong Calvinist heritage in American Protestantism that Frost toyed with in the representation of Satan in *Reason*. Keeper's name suggests that Cain's apparent confirmation of original sin – his rhetorical “Am I my brother's keeper?” – is anything but, Keeper's politics antithetical to the doctrine. The Transcendentalist Brook Farm community to which Keeper's parents reportedly belonged also gives him a liberal post-Protestant background, while another moment locates him in the Transcendentalist tradition: “I say I'd rather be lost in the woods than found in church” (515). Moreover, his pun on “future state” in his description of the welfare state not only suggests the afterlife but also the millennialist American Protestant belief that the Kingdom of God would be brought about on earth through the actions of social reform.

Keeper if anyone is thus a proxy for Frost and the Protestant establishment standpoint I am attributing to the masque as a whole. That Keeper articulates its ultimate social vision only confirms this. The idea that Jews and liberal Protestants were disproportionately attracted to socialism or that Catholics resisted it and were removed from the world, even when taken to the level of intellectual abstraction, as the masque apparently takes them, reflected prejudices against each of these groups that when taken further frequently erupted into open displays of contempt, hatred, discrimination, and even violence. In any event, I would like to stress that we should read these

representations as establishment impressions of the components of the tri-faith group, because the characteristics of each group are treated as distinct obstacles in the formation of a tri-faith consensus. Peter Stanlis glosses over this operation, reading the end of the masque as “in essence Christian and Hebraic, and...reconcil[ing] the justice of the Old Testament with the mercy of the New Testament,”⁵⁴⁹ but in a timeless manner – not within the 1940s. Moreover, the ultimate concern with conscience and right belief, along with the presumption that religion was synonymous with monotheism, and that God flattered America’s political development, marks *Mercy* as an earnest product of American Protestant culture, one that sought to give its proximate religious others a sense of common cause.

This common cause was tied to the national interest in the 1940s and 50s by Protestant-dominated institutions. During World War II, tri-faith prayer cards were printed en masse and distributed throughout the American Armed Forces, and “tolerance trios” visited troops all around the world to dispel misconceptions about each others’ religions and explain the shared values for which the troops were fighting.⁵⁵⁰ After the war, advertising campaigns promoting tri-faith toleration were presented as a means of self-definition that projected strength and the incompatibility of American democracy with totalitarian communism.⁵⁵¹ Even as Frost openly said that the programs of the New Deal existed on a continuum with communism, and rejected atomic, apocalyptic Cold War rhetoric in favor of that of continually dueling opposites, he as few other American

⁵⁴⁹ Stanlis, “Frost and Religion: The Two Masques,” 192.

⁵⁵⁰ Schultz, *Tri-Faith America*, Chapter 2.

⁵⁵¹ *Ibid.*, Chapter 3.

poets became a Cold Warrior, and patriotic support of the war was a cause with which his poetry and public persona would increasingly become identified.⁵⁵² In the progress from *Reason to Mercy*, we can see the progress from generally “believing in” the future design of the country, as Frost put it in “The Four Beliefs,” to specifying in *Mercy* that this was a tri-faith design. In other words, as I have been arguing about the poetry throughout my dissertation, the masques were not just religious texts but strongly political ones, and we should not see these tendencies as being at odds. This combination, alongside the audacity of Frost’s joke that the masques took care of the Bible only affirmed their place in a tradition of poetic rewritings of Christianity from Milton, to Blake, to Shelley. Next I will read “Kitty Hawk” and several of Frost’s campus talks from the 1950s, in which the septuagenarian left the complexity of the masques behind for cruder, more direct statements of tri-faith allegiance focused on American unity and leadership of the West, which transitioned from tri-faith theology to tri-faith civics, and which culminated in his Inaugural poem.

III. Poetry and Power in the Late Frost

“Kitty Hawk” was written in several stages between 1956, when a short version was distributed among Frost’s network of Christmas Card recipients, and 1962, when a version over three times that size appeared in his last volume, *In the Clearing*.⁵⁵³ However, it is dated 1953, the fiftieth anniversary of the first airplane flight, when Frost revisited the area for the first time since before the turn of the century. As an assessment

⁵⁵² See Monteiro, “Frost’s Politics and the Cold War,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Robert Frost* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 221-40.

⁵⁵³ Joan St. C. Crane, “Robert Frost’s ‘Kitty Hawk,’” *Studies in Bibliography* 30 (1977), 241.

of American invention past and future, the poem provided Frost with an opportunity to reflect on that reasons that American progress outpaced the rest of the world. As Joan St. C. Crane puts it, though without attending to the poem's chauvinistic cues, "The poem is a profession of faith in the spirit of man, in his ultimate spiritual triumph over the phenomena of creation."⁵⁵⁴ Frost thought of the Wright Brothers as the latter-day equivalent of Christopher Columbus, sowing the seeds for America's continued leadership.⁵⁵⁵ Two aspects of the poem related the history of discovery to which Columbus and Wright Brothers belonged to the liberal Protestant leadership of tri-faith America – a highly idiosyncratic pseudo-Christian interpretation of the Western penchant for discovery that drew on *Mercy's* pair of courage and fear, and the contrast of the West with the slumbering, sluggish East, a pair glossed with one rhyming pair as "US" and "our friends the Russ" (298, 9).⁵⁵⁶ These aspects are affirmed with a notion of design that is equally naturalistic and social.

The poem affirms the courageous willingness to act valued in *Mercy*, but places this courage not within the context of pleasing God but within that of heeding an innate desire – what Frost calls spirit – to confront and understand the materiality of the world, science's "on-penetration / Into earth and skies" (232-2). The poem explains the relation of the human spirit to matter in terms borrowed from the story of the Incarnation:

⁵⁵⁴ Joan St. C. Crane, "Robert Frost's 'Kitty Hawk,'" 241.

⁵⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 242.

⁵⁵⁶ Frost, "Kitty Hawk," in *Poems*, 428-43. Where Monroe's "Our Canal" envisioned East and West finding fellowship, "keeping their ancient tryst," "Kitty Hawk" envisions them locked in fierce competition, the East well behind. Ironically, given the premonition of space travel in the poem, *Sputnik* would be launched late the following year.

Pulpiteers will censure
 Our instinctive venture
 Into what they call
 The material
 When we took that fall
 From the apple tree.
 But God's own descent
 Into flesh was meant
 As a demonstration
 That the supreme merit
 Lay in risking spirit
 In substantiation.
 Westerners inherit
 A design for living
 Deeper into matter –
 Not without due patter
 Of a great misgiving. (219-229)

In the terms of *Mercy*, the West was courageous in “risking spirit in substantiation” even as it retained the fear of “a great misgiving.” To apply descriptive terms for the Incarnation to this dynamic without naming Jesus/Christ was neither strictly denial of his godhood nor strategic tri-faith avoidance of his name but in either case an instrumentalization of one of the central doctrines of Christianity. The discovery of Gravity is similarly described in terms of Genesis, as humanity’s “fall / From the apple tree” – knowledge of matter replacing the knowledge of good and evil, humanity’s fall provocatively analogized to God’s, the Original Sin to the Incarnation. The understanding of Incarnation in particular as a mythological construct that could be more important for describing the history of human discovery than of any essentially religious truth both preserved the liberal Protestant position in the tri-faith scheme and shifted it to a civic dimension. “Design” as well becomes the Western habituation to courageously acting with the proper fear of God, a blueprint for ordinary behavior, rather than God’s steering

of history in the direction of progress and justice. The social import of design was the same, but the scale on which it was imagined became newly human. This emphasis on what man did in spite of his not being God is reemphasized toward the end of the poem by secularizing man's covenant with Him: "...while meditating / What we can't or can / Let's keep starring man / In the royal role. / It will not be his / Ever to create / One least germ or coal. / Those two things we can't. / But the comfort is / In the covenant / We may get control, / If not of the whole / Of at least some part" (413-24). The fulfillment of this covenant, more of the Old Testament than the new, was in the West, i.e. America, getting control of as many resources as possible, which was closer to the covenants of the Hebrew than the Christian Bible. The "pulpiters" who would sanction material progress, the poem suggests, are standing in the way of the realization of the true meaning of the fortunate fall, Covenant, and Incarnation, driving a political wedge between religious leaders who questioned the congruence of religious faith and national interest dictated by tri-faith discourse. The Soviet Union, by contrast with America, "has ceased / From its long stagnation / In mere meditation. / What is all the fuss / To catch up with us? (239-43), foreshadowing the US/Russ rhyme to come. In a 1958 lecture to the Great Issues Course at Dartmouth, Frost explicated several passages from the poem and expanded on his portrait of the East, separating out the Soviets from it – as sorry imitators of the West – and using simplistic understandings of South and East Asian religions to firm up Western Judeo-Christian identity: "I belong to the West. I'm not interested in the detachment and dispassionateness that saves a man from getting born again. That's the

Eastern way, to get off the wheel.”⁵⁵⁷ Westerners stayed on the wheel, the love of motion over stasis furthering the images of flight in “Kitty Hawk,” and kept penetrating deeper into matter.

The penultimate stanza develops the poem’s secular humanistic idea of “design” and prefigures the language of democratic “right divine” in the Inaugural poem:

Nature’s never quite
 Sure she hasn’t erred
 In her vague design
 Till on some fine night
 We two come in flight
 Like a king and queen
 And by right divine,
 Waving scepter-baton,
 Undertake to tell her
 What in being stellar
 She’s supposed to mean. (451-61)

In this scene, humanity reaches God as “royal,” “starring man” flying up to get close to a feminized Nature. The design of Nature becomes clear to these human figures once they develop the technology to perform this act of ritual greeting, but the balance of anxiety is on the side of Nature/God, not theirs. Humanity quells Nature’s anxiety about the obscurity of design, rather than the other way around. (In *Reason*, several lines suggest that Job’s life served precisely this function for God). So “Kitty Hawk,” in partially secularizing the Judeo-Christianity of the masques, emphasized the civic pride and imperative to national protection and advancement that tri-faith discourse equally promoted.

⁵⁵⁷ Frost, *Robert Frost Speaking on Campus*, 93.

Frost had completely renovated design from the time that it signified human doubt about the goodness of the world; what remained was the need for a platform on which to speak of this design authoritatively as the national poet. His campus talks from the late 1950s evidence furtherance of the ideas of “Kitty Hawk” and of the explicitness with which he talked about his religiosity and patriotism. In one case, speaking to an assembly at Phillips Exeter Academic in October 1960, several days before the presidential election that pitted Senator John F. Kennedy against Vice-President Richard Nixon, Frost riffed on the Calvinist and American democratic meanings of “election”: “The ‘elected’ and the ‘elect’ – two different words, really. The same thing, really, only one’s elect of God, chosen of God, and the other’s chosen of the mob rule in America.”⁵⁵⁸ He had begun by attacking the Calvinist idea of election, that, as he puts it, many believers were hypocrites because only the elect could be “sincere” in their belief. Then he took the lesson at the end of *Mercy*, that one could never be sure that one’s actions would be acceptable in God’s eyes and must act accordingly, and used it to puncture this confidence in election. He mischievously claimed that his New England ancestors were “very worldly,” unlike “the ones that ruled the colony and all that,” who “had to be pretty sure they were elect,” the Frost family nonconformists from the start.⁵⁵⁹ Implicitly celebrating the passing of such rulers, Frost comments, “We say one person seems ‘sincere’ But who’s to decide? Nobody else can decide.”⁵⁶⁰ No pronouncement about which of the presidential candidates was insincere follows, and Frost denies any partisanship. Nevertheless, the

⁵⁵⁸ Frost, *Robert Frost Speaking on Campus*, 129.

⁵⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 25.

⁵⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 126.

conceit of the talk quelled any doubts about Frost's religious sincerity, struck a populist note with the audience, and involved the cautious refusal to pick a horse.

This avoidance of expressing kinship with Kennedy – added to the closeness of the election itself – only underscores the contingent turns of events that led to Frost's becoming the first Inaugural Poet. Even after Frost had been asked to read, he originally indicated, according to Harvey Shapiro, that occasional poetry “was not his style,” and so Kennedy asked him to read “The Gift Outright.”⁵⁶¹ This means that Frost wrote the dedicatory inaugural poem, “For John F. Kennedy His Inauguration,” of his own accord, and it is tempting to take the glare that prevented Frost from reading it as at the event as a karmic rebuke to his insistence on using the platform to announce what he been calling for for some time – greater respect afforded poetry by statesmen. In the days leading up to the occasion, Frost bettered the poem's description of a new Augustan Age of poetry by indirectly comparing himself to Shakespeare: “Isn't it wonderful you know, that in 1588 the Armada was destroyed and about that time things were booming in England and the greatest queen who ever lived was in power, and that it was then England had her greatest poets? Shakespeare's sonnets, if you want, had the power of England behind them.”⁵⁶² And Frost also came around to the conclusion that Kennedy's election was hardly the equivocal result of mob rule, but rather, writing in an essay for the *Official Program of the Inaugural Ceremonies of John F. Kennedy and Lyndon B. Johnson*, “a turning point in the history of our country, even perhaps in the history of Christendom,”

⁵⁶¹ Harvey Shapiro, “Story of the Poem,” *New York Times* (15 Jan 1961), SM6.

⁵⁶² *Ibid.*, 7.

in that America had healed the rift between Protestants and Roman Catholics.⁵⁶³ Frost takes this to mean that “the church’s reformation from within and from without had been accomplished,” and that “our founders were not wrong; safety lay in a plurality of denominations and doctrines unenforced by secular law,” in other words, that religious pluralism – unity in diversity – ruled the day.⁵⁶⁴

Sacvan Bercovitch reads the Inaugural poem as indebted to the American Puritan rhetoric of errand as it came to be focused on spreading democracy.⁵⁶⁵ Indeed, Frost anticipates aspects of Kennedy’s Inaugural, addressing to postcolonial and aspiring nationalisms the idea that America inspired “the races... / In their attempts at sovereignty and form” and will “teach them how Democracy is meant” (34-5, 38). The poem also tied together the threads that I have been following throughout this chapter. It gestures to “Kitty Hawk,” praising “the glory of the twain / Who gave America the aeroplane / To ride the whirlwind and the hurricane” (47-8).⁵⁶⁶ In keeping with the long, vaguely realized timescale of progress presented in *A Masque of Reason*, the poem invokes God in connection with American currency, attributing postwar economic abundance to a providential design steadily realized from the founding: “Now came on a new order of the ages / That in the Latin of our founding sages / (Is it not written on the dollar bill / We carry in our purse and pocket still?) / God nodded His approval of as good” (19-23). It senses a new spirit of courage at work in the country, like that advocated in *A Masque of*

⁵⁶³ Frost, *Collected Prose*, 222.

⁵⁶⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁶⁵ Bercovitch, *Puritan Origins of the American Self*, xix.

⁵⁶⁶ Frost, “For John F. Kennedy His Inauguration,” in *Poems*, 422-5.

Mercy, alluding to Kennedy's Pulitzer-winning *Profiles in Courage*: "Courage is in the air in bracing whiffs / Better than all the stalemate an's and if's. / There was the book of profile tales declaring / For the emboldened politicians daring / To break with followers when in the wrong" (58-62). Yet the errand of spreading democracy also ostensibly gathered strength from the turning point that Frost announces in his inaugural program essay, and the poem ends by endorsing the Cold War as a competitive "sport" and the US as "eager to be tried, / Firm in our free beliefs without dismay, / In any game the nations want to play" (73-5). The ability to back up this bravado depended on beliefs that are plural, firm, and free – the beliefs of the tri-faith order.

IV. Conclusion

Frost became the official poet of the Protestant establishment at the very moment that signaled the beginning of its decline. In 1961, he could say for the Inauguration that God had approved of the United States from the beginning. In 1965, an issue of *TIME* bore the headline, "Is God Dead?" The general decline of mainline Protestant churches, and the cultural fragmentation around race, war, and other causes of social unrest in the 1960s, robbed Frost's faith in design of reasonability and pragmatism. The total absence of race and ethnicity, gender, and class from this image – set against the imagery of penetrating great male leadership in "Kitty Hawk" and the Inaugural poem⁵⁶⁷ – constitutes only its most conspicuous set of blinders. Frost's participation in the

⁵⁶⁷ Bob Perelman has noted this undercurrent in "The Gift Outright;" Perelman, *The Marginalization of Poetry: Language Writing and Literary History* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1997), 111-13.

Inauguration also gestured toward elements of what Robert Bellah called American civil religion, a nonsectarian state religion first imagined by Rousseau that attributed a transcendent importance to the political process.⁵⁶⁸ Bellah distinguished civil religion, with its nonsectarian politics and distinctive ceremonies and holidays, from public theology, which emerged from committed religious perspectives, arguing that the two interacted to coordinate usefully “between generality and particularity.”⁵⁶⁹ At least on the surface, civil religion more closely explains the significance that Frost bestowed on the dollar bill, the Founding Fathers – with whose portraits he achieves “communion” in his Inaugural program essay – and above all the guiding inspiration of the American democratic political system to emerging nation-states around the world. The extent to which American civil religion provided a nonsectarian front for what Tracy Fessenden calls Protestant secularism remains up for debate, but in any case, the ideas, sentiments, and illustrations that Frost availed himself of to speak for tri-faith America are still with us today.⁵⁷⁰ Now, as Kevin Schultz points out, it is largely conservative evangelicals and Roman Catholics and neoconservatives who appeal to the idea of Judeo-Christian heritage to argue for a religiously partial state, failing to acknowledge the recent vintage of the idea of Judeo-Christian America.⁵⁷¹ It is hard to see, given the Protestant language in which Frost so often spoke, just as earnestly when in jest, on which side Frost would

⁵⁶⁸ Robert Bellah, “Civil Religion in America,” *Daedalus* 96.1 (Wint 1967): 1-21. The essay takes Kennedy’s Inaugural speech as an exemplary text of American civil religion and also quotes Robert Lowell’s analysis of Lincoln’s second Inaugural.

⁵⁶⁹ Bellah, “American Civil Religion in the 1970s,” *American Civil Religion*, Ed. Russell E. Richey and Donald G. Jones (New York: Harper and Row, 1974), 259.

⁵⁷⁰ Fessenden, *Culture and Redemption*.

⁵⁷¹ Schultz, *Tri-Faith America*, 198-202.

have come down. He did not even live to see Kennedy's assassination, though he did get to be cultural ambassador to the Soviet Union in 1962. He recounted his meeting with Premier Khrushchev too cavalierly to the American press, and lost Kennedy's ear. He had finally chosen performance over conformance at the wrong time.

Conclusion: Directions for Revision and Further Research

This dissertation has set American poetry alongside the history of the Protestant establishment's decline and argued that reading the two together improves our understanding of secularization in modern American poetry. Selecting primary texts has involved balancing the claims of historical generality and aesthetic particularity – put another way, the relative determinacy of context and spontaneity of text. I have not wanted to read poems as mere illustrations of important historical shifts, but as evidence of the political changes that poets tried to further in light of such shifts. Having gathered poetry that met this criterion, I still sense the need to justify to other modern poetry and poetics scholars the grouping of poets who were profoundly accomplished (Frost and Moore) with those who more unevenly so (Monroe and Johnson), and, further, an eccentric selection of the accomplished poets' poetry – reading poems that have become canonical (Moore's "The Steeple-Jack" and Frost's "Design") alongside those that never will (Moore's "Blessed is the Man" and Frost's "Kitty Hawk"). That is, I need methodological language clarifying my partial subordination, but not suspension, of the categories of aesthetic affiliation (modernist/modern) and value (good/bad, important/unimportant, influential/not influential). The implicit justification is sociological, demarcating a distinct logic for the social field of literature that mediates between its literary and extra-literary contexts. I reference this justification through the work of Lawrence Rainey and Mark Morrisson, but identify it more eagerly, in the field of modern poetry and poetics scholarship, with the work of Robert Von Hallberg, Alan Golding, Jed Rasula, Robert Archambeau, and Hank Lazer, which does not bear as

directly on my project. As I revise the dissertation into a book manuscript, I would like to bring this methodological commitment to the fore in each chapter's argumentation and analysis.

Even as I clarify this commitment, I believe that the project is vulnerable to the charge that its relevance to modern American poetry generally is slight, that it avoids the major aesthetic debates of modernism in favor of treating poetry as a soundtrack to history. This leads me to the conclusion that I should endeavor to add at least one chapter in which debates internal to poetry and poetics enjoy pride of place. I believe that a promising subject for one such chapter exists – the American New Critics. John Crowe Ransom, Allen Tate, and Cleanth Brooks were instrumental in the canonization of modernist poetry in America, and derived from it a theory of poetry and method of close reading that became foundational to the academic discipline of literary study. Adopting T.S. Eliot as an authority from the perspective of Southern reactionaries, they opposed secularization, and evidence of this opposition crept into their theory and method at the level of Christian motif. My chapter would examine the writings of these critics with an eye to whether the American New Criticism advanced a crypto-Protestant agenda. I also would like to consider adding a chapter on Robert Lowell – of whose poetry the New Critics were early champions – identifying him as a secular establishment figure caught in the thick of the social turmoil I invoke as a contributing factor to the ultimate demise of establishment authority in the 1960s. I am struck by the coincidence of the breakthrough of *Life Studies* (1959), commonly explained with reference to Lowell's loosening of prosody and level of autobiographical disclosure, with his departure from

the Roman Catholic Church and reengagement with his Boston Brahmin heritage. In other words, the self-critical but authoritative civic voice that Lowell cultivated in the 60s might be the poetic sound of the establishment's demise. It would also provide a literary-historical counterpoint to the hopefulness of late 50s Moore and Frost, who belonged to an earlier generation. Regardless of whether these arguments hold, the writing of the American New Critics and Robert Lowell strike me as fertile sites at which to continue thinking through the intersection of modern American poetry, the Protestant establishment, and secularization.

In addition to writing these new chapters, I would like to bolster my research for the chapters currently drafted. To bolster Chapter 1, I need to reread the full run of *Poetry* between 1912 and 1922 and compare it more systematically to interlocutors during that period, namely, *The Little Review* and *The Crisis*. This would hopefully yield more evidence for the tapering off of establishment support in *Poetry* and set off Monroe's "poetic spirituality" from the wider interest in spirituality and spiritual religion in the period. In the case of Chapter 2, I need to study the circulation and reception of *God's Trombones* in greater depth, to validate my sense that Johnson encouraged the secular interpretation and applications of its message. For Chapter 3, I need to spend more time with Moore's religious notebooks, to see whether they manifest the blurring of the line between liturgical and homiletic texts and poems that I have attributed on the basis of close reading to Moore's poetry. For Chapter 4, I need to examine records and a cross-section of Frost's Christmas cards, to determine whether they can bear being interpreted as pragmatic displays of religiosity. Lastly, with both Moore and Frost, I need to collect

and discover more reviews, advertisements, and documents of publicity that developed their images as patriots, and to identify the features of those images that also signified as Protestant.

As I take leave of the project in its present form, I would like to pose several questions geared toward helping myself think about its larger frames and implications. First, with respect to the narrative of modern American poetry's secularization, at what point in the century did the Protestant and poetry establishments diverge, if there was one major point of divergence? On a related note, with respect to the uptake of the Talad Asad critique of Protestantism in Americanist studies, does Tracy Fessenden's critique of contemporary American secular liberal democracy as a reconstitution of Protestant intolerance apply to popular understandings of contemporary American poetry? Third, with respect to my secularization narrative's messages for scholars of the sociological and religious turn in modernist studies, does the special importance of print publicity for the poets in my dissertation relate to the importance Protestant cultures place on literacy, or, as Charles Taylor and Michael Warner might suggest, did literacy simply become integral to the modern Western social imaginary through the twentieth century thanks to Protestantism? Fourth, with respect to the questions about the relation between Victorian Protestant history and the history of post-Romantic poetics raised by Charles LaPorte, what relation does the Protestant establishment poetry in my dissertation have to the twentieth-century offspring of the poetic religion envisioned by Arnold, whether identified with poetry or high culture generally? It is my hope that pursuing the directions

indicated above will put my project in good position to advance the scholarly conversations in which it is participating.

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