

An abstract painting featuring swirling, organic shapes in shades of yellow, green, red, and brown. Two prominent circular motifs are visible: one in the upper left and a larger one in the lower right, both containing a light blue and white center. The overall texture is rich and layered, suggesting a sense of depth and movement.

Wide Angle

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Mission Statement

A joint publication between English majors and faculty, the journal embodies the interdisciplinary nature of the Department of English at Samford University. It provides a venue for all Samford students, faculty, and alumni to publish their best critical and creative work.

Literature and film continually reimagine an ever-changing world, and through our research we discover our relationships to those art forms and the cultures they manifest. Publishing one issue per year, *Wide Angle* serves as a conduit for the expression and critique of that imagination. The journal provides a venue for undergraduate research and an opportunity for students to gain experience in editing and publishing. As a wide-angle lens captures a broad field of vision, this journal expands its focus to include critical and creative works, namely academic essays, book and film reviews, and commentaries, as well as original poetry, short fiction and non-fiction, and screenplays. (Revised, spring 2022)

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Essay

Rebekah Crozier

“I cannot live without my soul”:

Evangelicalism, Soul Talk, and Eternity in Emily Brontë’s *Wuthering Heights*

“Whatever our souls are made of, his and mine are the same.”

(Brontë, *Wuthering Heights* 113)

Introduction

This quote is only one of many in Emily Brontë’s *Wuthering Heights* that contain “soul talk,” or language relating to the soul. The soul talk in this quote is used by Catherine Earnshaw, or Cathy, as she talks about Heathcliff and claims they have the same soul. From the beginning of *Wuthering Heights*, Catherine and Heathcliff are so enmeshed that both parties repeatedly claim that they *are* each other and that neither one could exist without the other, indicating an almost worshipful idolization of each other. Through religious phrasing and mentions of eternity, the text itself shows readers that Heathcliff and Catherine are nothing less than each other’s religion. Of course, their worship of each other eventually leads to their destruction.

The romance of Heathcliff and Cathy seems atypical to the usual Victorian romance story, so much so that early readers had no idea how to respond. I believe that one of the clearest ways to understand the relationship between the two characters in Emily Brontë’s 1847 novel is to look at the novel’s religious themes, a type of literary analysis that *Wuthering Heights* scholars have neglected in the past. A lack of obvious references to God and of spirituality amongst Brontë’s characters contributed to this neglect, but this gap in criticism was also common of

Gothic literature in the Victorian era. Victorian-era scholar John Maynard writes, “Although their works are filled with striking and prominent religious characters and scenes turning on religious issues, critics of the twentieth century did not much view the Brontës within religious structures of understanding” (192). Jonathan Greenaway and Simon Marsden agree with Maynard’s claim, both scholars claiming that the complexities of religious discourse in the Brontës’ novels were often ignored. This neglect of a key element of the novel and of Emily Brontë’s life has shaped the novel’s critical conversation over the years. Despite this apparent lack in criticism, history shows that the Victorian era was one during which people were hyper-focused on religion; Maynard writes, “No subject occupied the Victorians, certainly not identity politics, or sexuality, or the empire, or even politics, as much as religion” (192). As the religious current shifted in Victorian England, dissent amongst churches and a widespread growth of evangelical Christianity contributed to a fresh fascination with religion and theology.

The Brontë sisters were no exception to this, especially because their own father, Patrick Brontë, was a clergyman. Historical accounts and letters written by Charlotte Brontë, Emily’s sister, show us that the Brontë household was home to countless theological books, and all three women were learned on theological topics. Knowing this, it is easy to see the important role that religion played in Emily Brontë’s life, which overflowed into her poems and her singular novel. Although older critics of *Wuthering Heights* thought the novel to be secular, the complicated relationship between Heathcliff and Catherine manifests in a soul bond that must be considered within the context of evangelical Christianity in the Victorian era and in Emily Brontë’s religious beliefs. Victorian-era evangelicalism changes the way we understand Heathcliff and Cathy’s relationship because the soul connection of evangelicalism is reflected in the soul connection of

their romance. Both characters sustain a spirituality and posture of worship throughout their lives as they replace the religion of their youth with that of each other.

Evangelical Christianity in the Victorian Era

In order to thoroughly comprehend Heathcliff and Cathy's relationship—and Victorian romance in general—one must first understand the religious dimensions of the Victorian era. Timothy Larsen claims that the Victorian age was a very religious one, with more Victorians reading and talking about a crisis of faith than actually experiencing one themselves. Larsen writes that instead of more people doubting Christianity and their faith during the nineteenth century, people were instead showing more honesty regarding their faith experiences. This he attributes to the rise of the evangelical movement in England. Larsen continues, "The Victorian crisis of faith was actually a by-product of the religiosity of the Victorians and, in particular, the influence of evangelicalism. . . . Evangelicalism is a form of Protestantism that emphasizes personal religious experiences: a conversion experience and a life of intimacy with God through prayer, Bible reading, worship, divine guidance, and the presence of the Holy Spirit" (10–11). Larsen's view that evangelicalism spurred a newly religious atmosphere in Victorian England coincides with that of other scholars that the evangelicalism movement was a direct result of turmoil within the Church of England. Marianne Thormählen writes that the evangelical movement "emerged in the eighteenth century as a reaction against the secularity and spiritual shallowness that were felt by many to prevail in the Established Church" (15). Inspired by the continual "shallowness" that many Christians were battling within both the Church and their spirits, the Victorian evangelical movement prospered.

The growth of the evangelical movement moved in tandem with Victorians grappling with their religious beliefs. In her pivotal 1979 book on evangelicalism and the Victorian novel,

Elisabeth Jay writes that many Victorians began to believe “in the supremacy of the Church Invisible over the Church Visible” (19). As Victorians extensively debated theology and religion, many began to question the doctrines which they had been taught in church. Jay continues, writing, “The Evangelical view, that membership of the Church of England was not necessary to salvation but expedient, was probably reflected in the average lay mind” (19). Gradually, this “Evangelical view” began to spread. Attending church and obeying the Church’s doctrines does not make a person a Christian.

The conviction that the Church of England has no bearing on the weight of a person’s salvation led Victorian evangelicals to be “less interested in controversy over theological orthodoxy than in bringing Christian conviction into hearts and Christian morality into lives” (Maynard 195). What occurred inside a person’s heart relating to their faith became more important to the Victorian evangelical community than theological controversy. Thormählen writes that for the evangelicals, “Conversion did not necessarily take place in a moment: it was often preceded by months and years of spiritual agonizing” (15). As Thormählen claims, evangelical Christians preferred authentic faith from “years of spiritual agonizing” to blind, shallow faith often portrayed through Church activity. Victorian evangelicals believed that a person’s spiritual transformation in his or her soul is more important than any “religious” actions he or she could perform.

These evangelical ideals contributed to the movement of Victorians, Emily Brontë included, who began to join dissenting churches or even abandon church going altogether in favor of an evangelical approach to Christianity. Mark Knight emphasizes the impact that dissent had on the growth of the evangelical movement. Knight writes, “Evangelicals were a party within the Church of England *and* a pan-denominational Christian movement, and adherents

could be Calvinist or Arminian, Tory or Whig, pro-imperialist or critical of the British Empire” (2). The evangelicals included members of a variety of Christian denominations, political parties, and social parties who esteemed individual religious experiences over debating controversial theological topics.

Not only is evangelicalism important to understanding Victorian-era dissent, but the relationship between the two is necessary in analyzing Victorian literature that has previously been deemed secular. Brontë scholar Graeme Tytler agrees with Knight that the religious context of Victorian England helps readers better understand the literature that arose from that period. Knight writes, “Recognizing the contribution of dissent has the additional advantage of helping us to see how material that has frequently been read as evidence for secularization can be seen as demonstrating the vitality of Protestant dissent throughout the nineteenth century” (7). Whether or not Emily Brontë was a dissenter herself, her novel and poems portray a challenge to the Church of England’s doctrines and ideals in a way indicative of Protestant dissent and evangelicalism, both in the ways her works address religion and the ways in which her characters interact with each other.

Religion in the Brontë Household

As divisions amongst churches increased in number, and faith and doubt were debated in educated circles, the Brontës received most of their religious education from within their own home. Tom Winnifrith writes, “General studies of the Brontës have tended to minimize the part played by religion in their lives, or to portray it in too crude colours, ignoring the variety of religious sects in nineteenth-century England, and ignoring the ability of the Brontës to react against or reject some of the religious teaching they had to endure” (28). The Brontë children received Christian educations, spent time in religious circles, read religious texts, and attended

church at one time in their lives, all of which contributed to the religious sphere in which they grew up.

In her letters, Charlotte Brontë continually wrote about the primitive town in which she and her siblings grew up and about how they were, for the most part, unlearned. Despite Charlotte's attempt to portray herself and her siblings in this manner, Juliet Barker writes that the Brontës would have had a plethora of reading material at their fingertips because of their father's position in the Church. Not only that, but Barker writes that the town of Haworth, where the family spent most of their lives, was a bustling, industrial town, and the three sisters would have had many social connections, many of these within the Church. Even Emily, who seldom attended church herself, would have known many people within the Church and English society (Maynard 196). However, their biggest religious influence was their father, Patrick Brontë. According to his sermons, Patrick Brontë preached from a very evangelical stance, "having more concern with reaching the poor, with good works, and with true inner spirit than with ritual or dogma" (Maynard 195). Each of these factors impacted the Brontë children and how they viewed the religious current of their day.

Emily Brontë's individual views on religious doctrine are reflected most evidently in one of the poems she published in 1846, a year before the publication of *Wuthering Heights*. In "No coward soul is mine," Brontë writes about her own soul and the Spirit of God that she knows resides in her soul. After beginning with the famous line, "No coward soul is mine," she continues to write about *why* she has no fear in her soul. She writes,

O God within my breast

Almighty ever-present Deity

Life, that in me hast rest

As I Undying Life, have power in thee (ll.4–8).

Because God dwells “within her breast” and takes “rest” there, Brontë has received the “power” of God that “arms [her] from Fear” (l.4). The language Brontë uses here indicates a closeness with God that has to do with God’s proximity to her soul and heart, as she writes about God living within her breast, being “ever-present,” and resting within her. This proximity language emphasizes an importance that Brontë places on the soul over the body. She is not assured of her faith because of a list of actions she undertakes, but she has assurance of faith because she is confident that God dwells within her soul. Brontë goes on to write,

Vain are the thousand creeds
 That move men’s hearts, unutterably vain,
 Worthless as withered weeds
 Or idlest froth amid the boundless main (ll.9–12).

One analysis of the poem reveals that the creeds she writes about in these lines refer to the doctrine and theology on which the government-established Church of England depended and because of which churches separate or dissent. Here, she calls those creeds “vain” and “worthless as withered weeds.” According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, the word *froth* during Brontë’s time could also mean “scum” or “something that is unsubstantial or of little worth.” Both definitions of the word speak to Brontë’s opinion of those people who live their lives by way of these religious creeds. Brontë concludes her poem by painting a picture of the Holy Spirit as something tangible that she herself has experienced (ll.17–20).

Brontë’s words in “No coward soul is mine” point to those evangelical ideals that were growing in popularity. Simon Marsden writes that Brontë’s poem “finds the solution to sectarian division not in a reconciliation of the denominations but in a religious experience located outside

the institution of church” (239–240). The poem speaks to that sentiment, as Brontë writes that the men who live by those “thousand creeds” do so in vain and are, essentially, scum. Not only that, but her poem emphasized the religious experience itself over that of any ritual or tradition valued in the church setting. Jay writes about that tension between evangelicalism and the Church, saying, “Evangelicalism’s emphasis on a personal relationship with God, its rejection of the corporate authority of the Church, and the premium it placed upon the individual’s judgement assured a man of a significance frequently denied him in secular society” (7). These characteristics of evangelicalism are reflected within the words of “No coward soul is mine,” showing Brontë’s focus on the evangelical ideal of religious experience over church doctrine.

Soul Talk in *Wuthering Heights*

Now that I have established Emily Brontë’s place within the evangelical movement of the Victorian period, I will return to my argument regarding the romantic relationship of Heathcliff and Catherine in *Wuthering Heights*. For years, scholars have tried to analyze the complex relationship that dominates the novel’s plot. Among the first critics to discuss this, and the one to set the tone for future critical conversation, was Emily’s own sister, Charlotte. In Charlotte Brontë’s “Editor’s Preface to the New [1850] Edition of *Wuthering Heights*,” she offers both an explanation and a criticism for her sister’s novel, two years after Emily’s death. The relationship between Heathcliff and Catherine has always raised a lot of questions in literary critical circles. As a sort of explanation for her sister’s writing decisions, Charlotte wrote, “Having formed these beings (Heathcliff and Catherine), she (Emily) did not know what she had done” (xxvi). I argue, however, that Charlotte is wrong. I believe that *Wuthering Heights*, with its questionable characters and relationships, points to a reversal of the rules and doctrines of “civilized society” through its evangelical themes. In the same way that evangelicalism challenged nominal

Christianity in Brontë's day, Heathcliff and Cathy's relationship challenges a Victorian ideal of romance and relationships.

One of the ways in which evangelical ideals emerge in Heathcliff and Cathy's relationship is through the extensive use of soul talk in the novel. Heathcliff and Cathy always talk about their relationship using soul language rather than language that relates to their physicality or bodies. This soul talk appears in many forms throughout the novel, sometimes through the actual use of the word *soul*, and sometimes in a more abstract way that indicates that there is almost nothing physical about their relationship. No matter the way it appears in the text, the language Brontë uses depicts Heathcliff and Cathy's relationship as one that exists outside of the physical world. The two characters constantly describe their romantic connection as one bound by their souls and one that pervades time. This soul talk sets the spiritual tone of the novel, indicating that the two characters are spiritually connected in a way that resembles an evangelical Christian's connection to God.

Perhaps the most notable scene in the entire book discussing Heathcliff and Catherine's romantic connection is the one that occurs right after Edgar Linton asks Cathy to marry him and Cathy accepts. Cathy goes to Nelly seeking advice; she asks Nelly to tell her whether or not she made the right choice. Nelly proceeds to ask her a series of questions about why she loves Edgar, to which Cathy replies, "Well, because he is handsome, and pleasant to be with... because he is young and cheerful. . . . And because he loves me" (110). Nelly, rightfully so, tells Cathy that these are horrible reasons to marry someone; yet, Cathy proclaims, "I *shall* marry him" (111). Nelly, noticing she is still unhappy, then says, "All seems smooth and easy—where is the obstacle?" "Here! and here!" replied Catherine, striking one hand on her forehead, and the other on her breast. "In whichever place the soul lives—in my soul, and in my heart, I'm convinced

I'm wrong!" (111–112). Catherine then explains to Nelly why she was wrong to say yes to Edgar: ““It would degrade me to marry Heathcliff, now; so he shall never know how I love him; and that, not because he’s handsome, Nelly, but because he’s more myself than I am. Whatever our souls are made of, his and mine are the same, and Linton’s is as different as a moonbeam from lightning, or frost from fire” (113–114). Catherine’s famous words represent a turning point in the novel, as the romance that Nelly feared and that readers had anticipated, finally comes to light. In the eyes of any onlookers, Catherine’s betrothal to Edgar Linton made perfect sense. As Nelly said, ““Your brother will be pleased . . . the old lady and gentleman will not object, I think—you will escape from a disorderly, comfortless home into a wealthy, respectable one; and you love Edgar, and Edgar loves you” (111). Catherine never denies loving Edgar; in fact, she repeatedly affirms that she does love him. Yet, she says that her love for Edgar could never compare to the connection she shares with Heathcliff. She even says that she has ““no business to marry Edgar Linton,”” implying that a life with Edgar is something to which she could never truly belong. She uses soul talk throughout her entire speech, referring to her connection with Heathcliff as something to which her soul is bound. It is in her soul and her heart, not in her mind, that she says she knows she is wrong to marry Edgar.

Catherine does not stop her soul talk there. She continues to expand on her feelings towards Heathcliff in the following pages, when she tells Nelly that one of her reasons for accepting Edgar’s proposal is that she can help Heathcliff overcome his unfortunate circumstances with Edgar’s money. If she married Heathcliff, however, they would both be destitute. She says that Heathcliff is not only her soul, but her one purpose in living; even her marriage to Edgar is motivated by a love for Heathcliff. Catherine says, ““Surely you and everybody have a notion that there is, or should be an existence of yours beyond you. What were

the use of creation if I were entirely contained here? My great miseries in this world have been Heathcliff's miseries, and I watched and felt each from the beginning; my great thought in living is himself" (116). What Catherine describes here is unarguably how most people view their religion and spiritual beliefs. Robert Polhemus and theologian Lisa Wang agree that Catherine's statement is one of "religious seeking" (Polhemus 167). A Christian believes in God because that is how they choose to reconcile the feeling that there is an existence beyond this earth that gives them purpose for being created; a Muslim believes in Allah for the same reason, and so on. In this statement to Nelly, Catherine clearly exclaims that her religion is Heathcliff himself. However, she then wildly claims that Heathcliff is more than simply her religion and her purpose; Heathcliff *is* herself. She says, "Nelly, I *am* Heathcliff—he's always, always in my mind—not as a pleasure, any more than I am always a pleasure to myself—but as my own being." Not only is Heathcliff a God-like figure that Cathy seems to worship, but she claims that he literally exists to be her soul and she exists to be his, taking her worshipping of Heathcliff even further.

Cathy views Heathcliff as part of her own being, in the same way that the Victorian evangelical Christian believed that God is part of their own being. Maynard writes that Brontë's speakers find eternal power within themselves, but I would go even further to say that Heathcliff and Catherine find this "power of something eternal" in *each other*, in a manner similar to an evangelical finding God within themselves. Evangelicalism views God as more than something to attain through doctrines or "creeds," but through his or her own heart and soul. Brontë writes in "No coward soul is mine," "Thy spirit animates eternal years . . . / Though Earth and moon were gone / And suns and universes ceased to be / And thou wert left alone / Every Existence

would exist in thee” (ll.18, 21–24). I believe Catherine would say these same words, that Brontë writes about the Holy Spirit, about Heathcliff.

In the same way evangelicalism supports a religion that comes from within the heart and soul, Brontë suggests that young Heathcliff’s and Cathy’s personal views of heaven hold more weight than anything a preacher could tell them. The character of Nelly, who narrates most of the novel, uses soul talk in an earlier passage when discussing the two characters in their youth. As the narrator, Nelly’s usage of soul talk is just as significant as that of other characters because Nelly’s is the sole perspective that Brontë gives her readers of the main story. Nelly’s soul talk indicates that, not only do other characters in the story notice the spirituality within Heathcliff and Cathy’s relationship, but that the readers should also, through Nelly’s perspective, take note of the relationship’s soul connection.

In this passage, Nelly tells the story of Cathy’s father’s death. Both young Heathcliff and young Cathy are distraught by his sudden passing, and Nelly overhears them comforting each other in bed that night. She says, ““The little souls were comforting each other with better thoughts than I could have hit on; no parson in the world ever pictured heaven so beautifully as they did, in their innocent talk . . .”” (61). Even Nelly’s seemingly offhanded use of the word “souls” to refer to Heathcliff and Cathy in this intimate, emotional moment shows us that Heathcliff and Cathy are bound together as two souls even from a young age. Not only that, but Nelly compares their innocent discussion with that of a parson preaching about heaven. She states that Heathcliff and Cathy’s view of heaven, with its intimacy and heart, is a more beautiful way of picturing heaven than that of a parson preaching about it to his congregation.

Years pass in the novel, during which Catherine marries Edgar Linton, and Heathcliff marries Isabella Linton. Naturally, neither party is happy when they are not together, leading

Catherine to be in a “depression of spirits” (131). Their off-and-on contact and a run-in between Heathcliff and Edgar leads to Catherine falling ill and eventually dying. During Catherine and Heathcliff’s last living interaction, Catherine once again refers to Heathcliff as being in her soul, saying, ““That is not *my* Heathcliff! I shall love mine yet; and take him with me—he’s in my soul”” (230). Despite all their time apart, Catherine still views Heathcliff as in and a part of her own soul, so much so that she knows she will carry him with her when she dies, as one may carry their religion. A religious person cannot carry with them the doctrines and creeds by which they lived on earth, but that which their soul is tied to will persist even in death.

While Catherine and Nelly are the most frequent users of soul talk, Heathcliff uses it extensively upon hearing about Catherine’s death. This increase in frequency of Heathcliff’s soul talk shows the emptiness Heathcliff feels in his soul and in his very being, having lost the one person with whom he has ever felt any soul-deep connection. The first evidence of this shows up in the present day, or a narrative instance before the novel enters its analepsis, after Lockwood witnesses Cathy’s ghost at the window of a room in Wuthering Heights. As Lockwood leaves the room, he hears Heathcliff speak to the ghost, calling Cathy his ““heart’s darling”” (39), a pet name that emphasizes Cathy’s place in Heathcliff’s heart, even implying that she *belongs* to his heart, because of the name’s possessive construction.

The next instance of soul talk shows up further along in the novel. In his anguish and despair, Heathcliff says, ““I *cannot* live without my life! I *cannot* live without my soul!”” (241). Here, Brontë clearly distinguishes between body and soul, referring to the evangelical idea that the soul is more important than the body. Even though Heathcliff’s body continues to live for eighteen years after Cathy dies, he claims that his soul died with Cathy, therefore, he is not *really*

living. Heathcliff believes that his soul exists only alongside Cathy's and that this connection continues even in death.

Souls in Eternity

Heathcliff's and Cathy's beliefs that even death cannot separate them appears in the novel almost as much as their soul talk. Both characters repeatedly talk about heaven and hell and how their eternities relate to each other. Heathcliff specifically refers to Cathy numerous times as his heaven. He says about Edgar, "Every day I grow madder after sending him to heaven!" (159). For Heathcliff, Cathy is his heaven, and anything apart from her is hell. Not only that, but he cannot imagine life, much less an eternity, without her. Upon hearing about her illness, he says, "Two words would comprehend my future—*death* and *hell*—existence, after losing her, would be hell" (215). Weeks later, after Cathy dies, Heathcliff says, "Where is she? Not *there*—not in heaven—not perished—where?" (240). Because his existence is so wrapped up in hers, an afterlife is incomprehensible for Heathcliff unless he is with Cathy.

While to Heathcliff, Cathy is his heaven, Cathy speaks of heaven and hell in a much different way. Cathy does not speak of heaven as a place for which she longs, but instead, a place in which she would be unhappy. When she first tells Nelly of her feelings for Heathcliff, Catherine says,

"If I were in heaven, Nelly, I should be extremely miserable... I dreamt once that I was there. . . . Heaven did not seem to be my home; and I broke my heart with weeping to come back to earth; and the angels were so angry that they flung me out, into the middle of the heath on the top of Wuthering Heights, where I woke sobbing for joy. That will do well to explain my secret, as well as the other, I've no more business to marry Edgar Linton than I have to be in heaven." (113)

Cathy's dream makes it clear that she desires no heaven, no afterlife, without Heathcliff. She says that in her dream, the angels returned her to Wuthering Heights; therefore, they returned her to Heathcliff. Just as she has "no business to marry Edgar Linton," Cathy feels that she has no business in heaven. She belongs with Heathcliff and her dream reflects this, leading her to talk negatively about the very idea of going to heaven.

Cathy talks negatively about heaven because she only cares about eternity when that eternity includes Heathcliff. Mason writes about this phenomenon, describing Catherine's desire to return to earth after death, shown through her dream and in her reluctance to leave Heathcliff, is an "invocation of a greater spirituality than orthodox religion" (67). To both Heathcliff and Cathy, being together matters far more than dwelling forever with God, and heaven exists for them only when they are together. Because they are so bound together in their worship of each other, Heathcliff and Cathy prefer to torturously desire an uncertain eternity together instead of hopefully await a life in heaven with God in the manner of an evangelical Christian. In this way, they have replaced God with each other, not just during life on earth, but also in whatever may come after death.

Brontë uses this language of heaven and hell to emphasize that Heathcliff and Cathy's relationship goes further than life; death cannot stop their spiritual and romantic connection. In the beginning of the novel, Brontë writes about Heathcliff interacting with Cathy's ghost (39), a scene that sets both the gothic tone of the novel and the idea that Catherine still lives on, or at least she does to Heathcliff. Brontë continues to emphasize the two characters' unbreakable spiritual connection throughout the novel. In response to Catherine's tirade, Heathcliff says, "Why did you betray your own heart, Cathy? . . . You loved me—then what right had you to leave me? . . . Because misery, and degradation, and death, and nothing that God or Satan could

inflict would have parted us, *you*, of your own will, did it” (231). Heathcliff tells Cathy that it is only she who separated them, because no other powers could ever have. He lists the greatest powers—death, God, Satan—and says that even those would not have been able to separate the two of them. Clara Poteet makes the connection between this exclamation from Heathcliff and Romans 8:38–39, which states that no powers in heaven or hell or on earth could ever separate a Christian from the love of God. Similar to this claim from Romans, Heathcliff believes no existing power could ever separate him from Cathy. Heathcliff’s exclamation is another example of their spiritual connection; yet here, Heathcliff even elevates their relationship above God.

Brontë writes about Heathcliff and Cathy’s relationship enduring past death in several other places throughout the novel. Heathcliff says that when Cathy dies, he “‘could as soon forget [her], as [his] own existence”” (229), and when he finds out Cathy has died, he pleads, “‘Catherine Earnshaw, may you not rest, as long as I am living! . . . Be with me always—take any form—drive me mad! Only *do* not leave me in this abyss . . .”” (241). Both characters think not of where Catherine will go when she dies or what will become of her soul spiritually; they think only of each other and how they will not be separated even in death. This perspective elevates their love above the spiritual powers, an outrageous claim, but one that neither character hesitates to make. The way they discuss eternity and their disregard for an eternity without each other further impresses on readers that Heathcliff and Catherine are spiritually bound in a way that not even death can separate.

Challenging the Victorian Romance Story

Cathy and Heathcliff’s claims that their love surpasses all spiritual powers not only serve as a window into their religion of each other but also show how their romantic relationship challenged the normal romantic relationships of the day. Since the sixteenth century, when *The*

Book of Common Prayer was published, most traditional wedding vows have included this phrase: “Until death do us part.” However, Heathcliff and Catherine are declaring that their romantic connection is so deep and so spiritual that it surpasses that of a normal marriage because not even death can part them.

In this way, Brontë turns the entire story on its head, deciding for her driving plot to focus on the destructive nature of a religious love, rather than the saving nature of a seemingly picture-perfect love, and allowing no character to receive what their souls truly want. Everything about Heathcliff and Catherine’s relationship challenges the typical Victorian romance novel, especially those written by women. Catherine’s eventual rejection of Edgar Linton appeared to make no sense to her peers. Nelly told Catherine that marriage to Edgar was expected and easy, and everyone’s parents or guardians would be happy about the arrangement. Despite this, Cathy talks about Edgar as a love completely different than the love she has for Heathcliff. She says, ““My love for Linton is like the foliage in the woods. Time will change it, I’m well aware, as winter changes the trees. My love for Heathcliff resembles the eternal rocks beneath—a source of little visible delight, but necessary”” (116). Cathy describes her love for Edgar as something surface-level; any change in weather will alter it immediately. Yet, she still marries him. Edgar Linton, the man whose wealth and personality make him *look* like the romantic hero, is the one whom Brontë’s nineteenth-century audience screamed at Cathy to love.

Although she chooses Edgar in body, her heart and soul are connected to Heathcliff: the rough, dark-skinned, fatherless boy with no inheritance or status to his name. Johanna Schakenraad writes that Edgar represents a world of worldly goods and success, while Heathcliff represents that which does not change: the soul and eternity (347). Edgar and Catherine had a marriage that seemed perfect to any outsider, but Brontë makes it clear that Catherine feels as if

she belongs with Heathcliff. In this way, Brontë challenges conventional ideas of marriage and love in the Victorian period, possibly viewing those conventions through the same lens as the “thousand creeds” she challenges in “No coward soul is mine.”

Catherine’s decision to choose Edgar in body but Heathcliff in soul results in misery for all parties involved. Misery and grief are woven throughout the entire novel, from the death of Mr. Earnshaw—one of the only people who ever loved Heathcliff—to the death of Heathcliff himself. Evangelicals believed strongly in innate human sinfulness, as Mark Knight and Emma Mason demonstrate, and I believe Brontë’s characters embody this belief and that their sinfulness contributes to their downfall. Brontë inverts the average nineteenth-century romance plot: she takes her evangelical views of the soul and shows her readers how, when these evangelical-inspired ideals are portrayed in any way other than in a relationship with God, only grief and misery will follow.

Yes, Heathcliff grieves because he loses his one true love to death, but I argue that his sorrow is more than his heartbreak because *Wuthering Heights* is more than a love story. Towards the end of his life, we do not see Heathcliff eating or drinking, nor do we see him taking pleasure in ruining the lives of those who ruined his own life. Heathcliff says, “I cannot continue in this condition!—I have to remind myself to breathe—almost to remind my heart to beat! . . . It is by compulsion, that I do the slightest act, not prompted by one thought, and by compulsion, that I notice anything alive or dead, which is not associated with one universal idea . . . I have a single wish, and my whole being and faculties are yearning to attain it” (*WH*, 466–7). Heathcliff grieves, not just because he has lost Cathy, but because he has lost himself. He gave up himself in his decision to make Catherine his religion, rejecting the worship of any other thing or god. Both Heathcliff and Catherine fail to live up to evangelical Christian tenets, instead

making each other their objects of worship. This decision leads to grief and misery and the loss of all that they love. *Wuthering Heights* is a novel about grieving what has been lost when the things which were lost were themselves a form of religion.

Catherine dies before getting to meet her newly born daughter and without getting to have in body what she has in soul: Heathcliff. Edgar Linton loses his wife, who dies younger than expected and who, in the later years of her life, neglected any love she ever had for him in her desperation for another man. Heathcliff never gets to have Catherine, his “heart’s darling” (39) and his “soul” (241), and he is forced to live (if one could call it living) eighteen years without her. *Wuthering Heights* is a Gothic tragedy, redeemed only in part by the happiness found by Hareton, son of Heathcliff and Isabella Linton, and Catherine, daughter of Cathy and Edgar Linton, who find a pure love in each other that their parents were never able to sustain. However, even with the next generation’s happy ending, this novel is no love story. Although readers have deemed it a love story since its publication because it focuses on the relationship between one man and one woman, *Wuthering Heights* tells more of a story about losing love than it does about love itself. Instead of a love story, it is a novel of grief and misery, with all its characters, but especially Heathcliff and Cathy, intertwined in a spiritual battle that reaches into the depths of their souls.

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Corrie Parks

The BACHE Visiting Writers Series: Katy Simpson Smith

I wholeheartedly believe that the seemingly trite advice “Write what you know” rings true more often than not. In my own experience, my best creative work has been loosely inspired by the inner workings and events of my own life, as well as the books I have been reading and the courses I have taken. I found this truth echoed in the works of Katy Simpson Smith, a novelist by profession and historian by education, who brings the past and present into conversation with one another in her most recent publications, *The Everlasting: A Novel* and *The Weeds: A Novel*. After Smith introduced herself at the English Department’s BACHE Visiting Writers Series, I was struck by how significantly her unique life experiences and career path built on each other and informed her prose.

Before introducing her novels, Smith explained that in her high school, undergraduate, and even graduate years, she never considered herself to be a writer. Subsequently, she asked the audience, “How many of you write stories and poems but did not raise your hand because you don’t consider yourself to be a writer?” After a smattering of students raised their hands, she insisted, “You are a writer. You *are* a writer.” Smith outlined her path to becoming a full-time creative, which took seed in her early childhood love of stories, emerging in her undergraduate affair with the film medium and finally blossoming when she entered a master’s program in creative writing at Bennington College. In the years between entering university for the first time to finally ceding to her urge to write, Smith poured her energy into bachelor and doctorate degrees in history, which she admitted was only a slightly less lucrative field. Her final

dissertation explored the realities of postcolonial Southern-American motherhood, in which she sought to explore a diverse array of perspectives (white, black, and indigenous mothers). However, her research fell short, and she could only find documentation of southern white mothers, leaving the experiences of black and indigenous women up for educated speculation. Adamant in pursuing diversity and inclusion in her paper, Smith attempted to do just that—speculate on the experiences of mothers in minority cultures of the American South. She spent time at odds with her advisors, who rejected her attempts to simulate black and indigenous motherhood in the context of a historical dissertation. Ultimately, Smith realized that her penchant for imagination was better suited for fiction.

The first novel Smith read from during BACHE was *The Everlasting*, which features the points of view of four fictional outsiders with stories that have evaded historical documentation. Published in 2020, the book is set in Rome during four different time periods, haunted by a child-martyr, a monk sorting through his sexuality, a pregnant Italian princess, and a present-day biologist conducting an illicit affair. These unique storylines, spanning two thousand years, unravel in careful dialogue with each other. Smith's academic background, saturated with years of experience in professional research, aided her creative work immensely: “All the research that I was doing for my dissertation . . . those skills are the exact same skills I applied in writing these novels,” she said. She expressed notions of regret that she had not pursued creative writing earlier in her career but concluded that her years in history were not “wasted.” For BACHE, Smith read from the perspective of *The Everlasting*'s girl martyr, which she noted was a commentary on the relationship between gender, age, and power. Her excerpt was incredibly rich in detail and era-appropriate allusions, telling of her extensive expertise in research.

Smith's second and most recent novel she read from, *The Weeds*, adheres to a familiar format. Drawing upon the knowledge she collected in writing about Rome in *The Everlasting*, Smith weaves the stories of two female biologists studying plants around the Colosseum—one living in the present day, and the other in the nineteenth century. Smith hyper-focuses her previous exploration of gender and power, drawing upon some of her *own* negative experiences in academia and her relationships with superiors for inspiration. "Both of them are working for male professors or advisors, and they are identifying with the plight of these weeds that are overlooked, trodden underfoot, no one really pays attention to or cares about," she said. The stories' mediums lie in diary entries disguised as botany journals; within each entry lies a description of a plant that rapidly dissolves into complex metaphor and then narrative. Smith was able to read from five of these flora entries, allowing the audience a wide window into these two perspectives. Smith's unnamed nineteenth century botanist struggles both with her boss's tight leash as well as her unrequited love: a woman who has married another man and is on a ship to America. This storyline, an exploration of queerness during times when it was even more dangerous than it is now, parallels *The Everlasting's* character of Felix, a holy man whose urges are at odds with his sacred profession. The second current-day narrator is a graduate student hailing from Jackson Mississippi, Smith's hometown. Thus, there are no shortages of resemblances between this narrator and Smith herself.

While listening to Smith's readings, I found strange satisfaction in knowing that these magnificent works of art did not simply spawn from a prodigy's imagination. These novels, while obviously exemplary and reflective of a graduate-level education in creative writing, found their true roots in Smith's personal journey. Furthermore, Smith's initial distance from the creative community did not stunt her ability to write an interesting and fleshed-out narrative. Her

outside experiences instead bolstered her writing to a level of sophistication that she may not have achieved without her prior immersion in history. As a college senior myself with a vague interest in eventually pursuing a creative career, it is comforting to recognize that good fiction writing is *personal*, and that there are no such things as “wasted years.”

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Julianne Sandberg, PhD

Shakespeare's Theology

As I finished my senior year in college, having chosen an English major without any real sense of what I would “do” after I graduated, I began explaining to curious inquirers my post-graduation plan. I spoke with far more confidence and clarity than I felt, but my answer seemed to do the trick. “I’m planning to go to grad school,” I said, “to get a PhD in English. I want to be a professor.”

This vocational assertion inevitably led to follow-up questions. My answer to why I had chosen this path had something to do with Sir Philip Sidney’s argument, in his *Defense of Poesy*, that literature is meant to “teach and delight,” and what, after all, could trump such a transcendent field of study?

To their questions of where I would study, I had no idea. But when they asked, “What kind of literature will you focus on?” I spoke with certainty: “Early modern British literature . . . but not Shakespeare.”

As a sophomore, I sat in a required Survey of British Literature and found myself newly captivated by the world of Renaissance England, with its lyrical flowering, religious flip-flopping, theatrical innovations, and gossip-inducing monarchs. But when it came to Shakespeare, I was less intrigued.

If you had asked me at the time, I may have said my resistance to Shakespeare stemmed from his fame. This stage of my literary rebellion came in the form of critique and disinterest in this all-too-highly-rated man.

In truth, I was intimidated. His knotty language demanded my intellectual labor and often left me confused, unsure if I was really understanding what the words meant, let alone how to interpret them. But more than confused, Shakespeare left me uncomfortable, for reasons I couldn't yet name.

As I entered graduate school, I focused my research at the intersection of early modern religion and literature, tracing how the prevailing tides of the Reformation shaped England's literary culture. I regarded myself as biblically literate and theologically astute, confident to position a text within its religious context and trace the theological underpinnings of its author.

Shakespeare, however, continued to elude me. His work didn't fit these interpretive frameworks. He couldn't be easily pigeonholed into a particular religious category. He seemed less to reflect the religious culture—whether Protestant or Catholic—than to muddle the categories entirely. At the time, I would not have named this as the source of my discomfort. But I wonder now if my resistance to Shakespeare stemmed from how humbling it was to confront the limits of my theological frameworks.

One of the reasons I found Shakespeare theologically elusive might be because of how secular his work is compared to the overtly religious texts of his contemporaries. For example, Christopher Marlowe in *Doctor Faustus* explicitly probes the relationship between free will and divine sovereignty and graphically depicts the way of salvation versus damnation. John Donne and George Herbert write devotional lyric with theological acuity and pastoral acumen. Amelia Lanyer uses the pages of scripture to reimagine the story of Jesus's death for her female readers. John Milton can barely write a single line that isn't layered with biblical allusion. And some of these same writers also wrote sermons and theological treatises in addition to their poems and plays. As such, their work invites, even necessitates, a literary methodology that includes robust

theological inquiry. These were the authors I felt confident to engage, their work so explicitly religious that it gave me something to grasp onto.

Not so with Shakespeare. He left me unmoored, without an anchor to ground my interpretation.

This is not to say, however, that his work is absent of religious or theological language. It's simply that he's far more subtle in how he treats these themes. In *Hamlet*, for example, the one-line detail that Hamlet is a student at Wittenberg casts the entire play in the shadow of Luther's reform efforts, even as the ghost of Hamlet's father seems confined to a Catholic purgatory—but neither of these religious references seem particularly central to the play. While *King Lear* certainly grapples with the divine origins of suffering, the play is set in a pre-Christian pagan world, the characters left crying to the seemingly silent gods of a mythical realm. Shakespeare's classic comedies, such as *Much Ado About Nothing*, *Twelfth Night*, and *As You Like It*, make only the most passing references to religious themes. Granted, biblical allusions abound in many of Shakespeare's scenes, but I would argue this says more about the era's high rates of biblical literacy than it does Shakespeare's own religious commentary.

In short, his plays—unlike so many other texts of the era—do not seem to be primarily “about” religion, nor are they explicitly promulgating particular theologies. The absence of heavy-handed, didactic religious themes has no doubt contributed to Shakespeare's continued popularity, but it wasn't particularly inviting to a reader, like me, who was looking for theological particularity.

Recently, I re-confronted this conundrum as I was working on an essay on *Comedy of Errors* and *Twelfth Night*. Both plays, I argued, were very subtly gesturing to the era's eucharist controversy. In sixteenth-century England—rocked as it was by the political and religious

changes rippling across Europe in the wake of the Reformation—there were few debates that were livelier or more heated than that over the eucharist. For both Protestants and Catholics, the stakes were exceedingly high, leading to martyrdoms on both sides and prompting decades of vitriolic discourse, often pedantic but always urgent and marked by keen sincerity. Given this historical context, it's not surprising that Shakespeare would engage the eucharist controversy. But while it was clear the plays invoked eucharistic language, it was frustratingly unclear to me what in the world Shakespeare was *doing* with this imagery. Was he subverting or propelling Catholic eucharistic theology? Was he subverting or propelling Protestant eucharistic theology? Or did the plays posit some sort of theological middle ground?

As it turns out, Shakespeare is not all that interested in commenting on, and certainly not settling, the eucharist debate. I was seeking clues to a theological treasure hunt, but the plays simply wouldn't oblige my search for a cohesive theological claim. That was not, after all, why they were written.

To be sure, the absence of such clarity does not necessarily mean Shakespeare was ambivalent toward faith. Nor does it mean that his plays bear little relevance to the religious and theological landscapes of early modern England. But it does mean that his plays are asking to be read through a different lens. They function not as theological treatises, as I wanted to treat them, but as cathartic mirrors, inviting his predominantly Christian audience to see themselves in a new light. His plays depict how proponents of religion use—and so often misuse and abuse—the tenets of their faith.

There are no better examples of this self-reflective impulse than *Measure for Measure* and *The Merchant of Venice*. Both plays center on the clash of religious paradigms and the fallout

of religious hypocrisy, all to expose the audience's potential complicity in the supposedly righteous maneuverings that inflict harm rather than bring justice.

In *Measure for Measure*, the Puritan-like Angelo—by all accounts a pious and morally upstanding Christian—is left in charge of Vienna, appointed to weed out immorality and punish citizens to the full extent of the law. He takes this role with the utmost seriousness, which is how the well-intentioned Claudio finds himself on the execution block for having sex with his fiancée Juliet, who is now pregnant. While Claudio and Juliet are quick to acknowledge their moral shortcomings (though perhaps not altogether remorseful), Angelo sinks into a self-perpetuating pit of hypocrisy. Not only has he been unfaithful to his own marriage vows, having abandoned his fiancée several years before, but he also abuses his power by pressuring Isabella, a soon-to-be-nun and the sister of Claudio, to have sex with him, promising to release her brother if she does. When Isabella pledges to “tell the world aloud / What man thou art” (2.4.150–151) and expose his hypocrisy, he threatens her with the certainty of his presumed righteousness:

Who would believe thee, Isabel?
 My unsoiled name, th'austereness of my life,
 My vouch against you, and my place in the state,
 Will so your accusation overweigh
 That you shall stifle in your own report
 And smell of calumny. (2.4.151–156)

By the end of the play, the former Duke returns to Vienna to set things right, transforming what felt like a tragedy into a comedy, but not before the tides of grief, death, disappointment, loneliness, and betrayal have rippled across the characters' lives. While some of this chaos should surely be laid at the feet of the Duke, who abandoned his post to an unworthy leader,

Angelo bears the brunt of the play's critique, as an "outward-sainted deputy" (3.1.88), whose patterns of self-deceit and hypocrisy bring harm to his fellow citizens, and to vulnerable women particularly.

For a play with sex at its center, *Measure for Measure* does not offer a clear, unequivocal sexual ethic. Each character embodies different stances on what constitutes sexual health versus sexual offense. What the play is far clearer about, however, is that virtue is more than personal piety: it should be exercised toward the benefit of the larger community. As the Duke states,

Heaven doth with us as we with torches do,
 Not light them for themselves. For if our virtues
 Did not go forth of us 'twere all alike
 As if we had them not. (1.1.32–35)

In other words, virtues should "go forth" from a person, oriented outside the self rather than functioning as interior marks of moral alignment. Without embodied expression, such virtues are negated, "as if we had them not." For all Angelo's commitment to moral fervor—which he executes with passion and precision—he falls far short of the play's vision of an embodied virtue oriented toward mercy.

Like Angelo, Portia in *The Merchant of Venice* carries a rigid sense of justice, despite her ardent claims that "the quality of mercy is not strained" and that mercy must always "season justice" (4.1.182, 195). But unlike Angelo, Portia directs this severity not toward a fellow citizen but against an excluded outcast, Shylock the Jewish merchant. This difference casts Portia not as a villain, like Angelo, but as the hero of the play, the one who will set all things right and catalyze the comedic ending. Once she is cast as the lauded hero, however, it becomes more

difficult to see her underhanded dealing and her utter lack of compassion for those of cultural and religious difference.

It is against this sense of ethnic privilege that Shylock directs his vision of shared humanity: “Hath not a Jew eyes? Hath not a Jew hands, organs, dimensions, senses, affections, passions? Fed with the same food, hurt with the same weapons, subject to the same diseases, healed by the same means, warmed and cooled by the same winter and summer as a Christian is? If you prick us, do we not bleed? If you tickle us, do we not laugh? If you poison us do we not die? And if you wrong us, shall we not revenge?” (3.1.49–55). To this passionate plea, the other characters render no answer, negating Shylock’s voice despite his clarity and conviction.

When, toward the end of the play, Portia executes her justice against Shylock, he finds himself alone, destitute, and disrespected: his daughter is married off to a Christian, his wealth and property are distributed to his Christian enemy, and he is forced to convert to Christianity. The audience, like the Christian characters in the play, might be inclined to see Shylock’s demise as a rightful comedic ending as the antagonist is brought to justice by the delightfully clever and seemingly saintly Portia. But if they do so, they prove Shylock’s very point: the Christian community does not recognize the shared humanity of those they deem inferior or dangerous.

The play, even as it purportedly heralds Portia’s virtue, invites its audience—both then and now—to confront their own potential for ignoring, ostracizing, and even condemning those whose beliefs and practices are different from their own. The play ends with Portia never having acknowledged her own hypocrisy in heralding the merits of mercy but rejecting it at every turn. When, in her final line, she promises to “answer all things faithfully” (5.1.299), the attentive reader wonders just how faithful—whether defined as honest or devout—her answer could ever be.

While Portia seems incapable of imagining Shylock's experience and exercising even a small degree of compassion toward him, Shakespeare offers an alternative possibility in *King Lear*. When the play opens, Lear has lived a long life as a prosperous king and is making plans to divvy up his kingdom and live a life of leisure before he "unburdened crawl[s] toward death" (1.1.39). This plan takes a sudden and tragic turn when, through a series of foolish choices that are due in large part to his own psychological and spiritual blindness, Lear finds himself stripped of all that he holds dear: crown, home, family, power, security. It is in this state of loss and disorientation that Lear gains a surprising sense of self-awareness as he glimpses his pride and misplaced self-reliance for the first time.

One of the first flickers of clarity comes as he wanders outside during a torrential thunderstorm and begins to imagine those "poor naked wretches" whose "houseless heads and unfed sides" leave them vulnerable to the elements (3.4.28, 30). For Lear, this recognition immediately implicates him in their suffering:

O, I have ta'en

Too little care of this! Take physic, pomp;

Expose thyself to feel what wretches feel,

That thou mayst shake the superflux to them,

And show the heavens more just. (3.4.32–36)

The experience of physical vulnerability awakens him to the fact that he, in his life of luxury and comfort, had cast a blind eye toward the impoverished. Since the first moments of Lear's own suffering, he had wondered whether he would experience divine intervention that would set things right and reorder the chaos of his rapidly changing world. It is in a state of his own vulnerability, as he "feels what wretches feel," that he realizes that the justice of God would not

come in the form of *deus ex machina*, a disembodied divine hand reaching from the sky to rescue humans from suffering. Instead, the justice of God might be carried out by humans like Lear, those with an abundance of wealth and power, who might “shake the superflux” to the least of these. As an embodiment of this newfound compassion, Lear begins to take off his clothes, putting himself in the physical posture of one without food, clothing, or shelter.

As a play centered on suffering and grief, *King Lear* might evoke theological questions—Where is God when things fall apart? How do we reconcile the prevalence of suffering to the love of God?—but it bypasses any attempt to answer them. Once again, Shakespeare has little interest in engaging a theological problem. And once again, he invites his audience to consider their own lived and embodied response to suffering.

While *King Lear* includes, like all tragedies, an ample number of characters who inflict pain, it also includes a surprisingly large cast of characters who embody goodness. Despite being rejected and banished by the very people they love, Kent, Cordelia, Edgar, and the Fool are harbingers of grace. Rather than choosing their own comfort and safety, they return to the place of suffering and become companions to those most vulnerable. Edgar articulates this philosophy of shared suffering when he states,

Who alone suffers, suffers most in the mind,
 Leaving free things and happy shows behind.
 But then the mind much sufferance doth o’erskip,
 When grief hath mates and bearing fellowship. (3.7.55.3–6)

While he doesn’t use the word *compassion* here, Edgar is expressing the literal sense of the word, meaning “to suffer with.” Solitary grief augments suffering, but a faithful companion—one who draws near in the midst of unexplainable suffering—becomes a source of comfort.

Despite its gesturing toward theological questions, *King Lear* does not offer theological solutions or resolve spiritual conundrums. But it does, like so many of Shakespeare's plays, cast these questions in terms of a lived experience whereby mere humans become conduits of divine presence. Shakespeare turns the interpretive mirror onto his readers, inviting them to see themselves with new eyes, as Lear learns to do, able to diagnose their own complicity and hypocrisy, equipped with a renewed vision for the healing role they might play in the world.

While I still find myself, at times, trying to ramrod Shakespeare's plays into theological frameworks, I'm learning to see his bypassing of theology as a gift, and perhaps his very point. If his plays do indeed "teach and delight," to use Sidney's words, it's a lesson that beckons us not to the transcendence of heavenly pleasures alone, but to earthly realities, often harsh and disorienting, in which we ourselves learn to embody the mercy, love, and justice of God. This, too, is a kind of theology, a lived theology, and perhaps the kind that matters most.

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Preston S. Blakeley

Consider My Servant Larry:

Fideism and Nihilism in the Book of Job and *A Serious Man*

When asked whether their film *A Serious Man* was based on the ancient text the *Book of Job*, Joel and Ethan Coen replied, “We hadn’t thought of it in that way. That [*Job*] does have the tornado, like we do, but we weren’t thinking of that” (Tollerton 2). But these brothers have a comic history of duping their audience. Between sudden misfortune, the presence of a frame narrative, the advice of three religious friends, and an intolerant spouse, the similarities between these two texts are far too damning to not read *A Serious Man* as an adaptation of its Near Eastern counterpart the *Book of Job*. While the *Book of Job* privileges fideist anti-rationalism through the comforters’ powerlessness to perceive the nature of sudden suffering, *A Serious Man* translates anti-rationalism through Larry’s comic yet futile quest for cosmic answers but critiques the fideist component of its source text by privileging the absolute metaphysical isolation of the individual.

Critical Quandaries: Fideism and Nihilism

We can understand the concept of fideism when we consider the history of interpretation regarding the relationship between human reason and faith. The Patristic theologian Tertullian inquires into the intersection between reason and faith when he asks, “What indeed has Athens to do with Jerusalem?” (36). The intersection between human reason—Athens—and faith—Jerusalem—has haunted theologians and philosophers for centuries. Though thinkers from the pre-classical era to the Renaissance pondered the relationship between reason and faith, it serves

our purposes best to begin our investigation in the Enlightenment period. There are two crucial intellectual transitions, beginning with the Enlightenment rationalists and concluding with the atheist existentialists, that will aid our reading of the intersection between reason and faith in *Book of Job* and *A Serious Man*. The first pertains to the shift between Hegel's celebration of reason and Barth and Kierkegaard's elevation of faith. The German idealist philosopher G.W.F. Hegel asserts an inextricable compatibilism between reason and faith. His concept of the Absolute Mind entails that the human intellect is inseparable from the so-called external world and thus all forms of temporal experience—the experience of art, beauty, and religion—are apprehended through the rational power of the mind (10). Since the rational mind and the external world are one, Hegel regards religious faith as a subordinate experience subject to the reign of reason (10). Although reason and faith are compatible with one another insofar as faith is understood in the context of the rational dominion of the Absolute Mind, Hegel's declaration that faith is subservient to reason signals that he privileges Athens over Jerusalem. This scientific, rationalist assent to faith finds favor among other Enlightenment philosophers such as Bacon and Descartes, but existential thinkers such as Kierkegaard and Barth deem reason incompatible with faith. The quest to conceptualize faith in terms of rational systematization is a crude and fruitless enterprise because "faith," says Kierkegaard, "begins precisely where thinking leaves off" (82). Faith is an expression of the inexpressible—*that is*, the divine—who transcends the temporal limitations of human thought. If one enters the kingdom of faith, they exile themselves from the dominion of rational discourse. This is precisely the principle of fideism: the transcendent being is impenetrable to human reason and, if one wishes to commune with the divine, they must *sola fide*. The Swiss theologian Karl Barth expands Kierkegaard's fideism when he asserts God's supreme *otherness* as a foil to Hegel's anthropocentric claim that

human reason apprehends faith (57). Fideistic otherness suggests that the divine being is an omnipotent and alien power whose inscrutable existence resists rational comprehension. In this sense, Athens and Jerusalem are incompatible entities. Put simply, Barth's declaration that God is *totaliter aliter*, or wholly other, "locates God beyond everything man is capable of knowing" (Smith 5). This otherness decenters the human subject in the religious relationship and centers the transcendent. Hegel's Babel-esque triumph of human reason over faith finds its replacement in the form of Barth and Kierkegaard's anti-anthropocentric celebration of fideistic otherness. In response to the rational idealism of Hegelian thought, Kierkegaard and Barth widen the abyss between worshiped and worshiper, elevating God's preeminent otherness over the fragile human intellect.

The second significant intellectual shift that is crucial to our reading of these texts occurs between the religious and atheistic existentialists. Although religious and atheistic existentialists alike privilege anti-rationalism over rationalism, atheist philosophers such as Camus, Sartre, and Nietzsche deconstruct Barth and Kierkegaard's fideism and champion the absolute isolation of the individual. The anti-rationalist component of fideism is echoed in Nietzsche's notion of the theoretical man. He introduces this concept in *The Birth of Tragedy* when he states, "Socrates is the archetype of the theoretical optimist who . . . attributes the power of a panacea to knowledge and science, and sees error as the embodiment of evil" (74). The theoretical man is the rational optimist who celebrates the Enlightenment values of truth and knowledge as comprehensive components that he uses to construct an ordered view of the cosmos. Theoreticians such as Socrates, Hegel, and Dawkins determine that the world ought to be conquered through reason. But Nietzsche indicates that the theoretician "inevitably reaches that peripheral boundary, where he finds himself staring into the ineffable" (75). Reason is but a futile and vain attempt to

articulate the ineffable and infinite nature of the universe. “The world in itself is not reasonable,” thunders Albert Camus, “and that is all that can be said” (21). The world is irrational and chaotic at the most fundamental level and consequently evades rational categorization. Notwithstanding their dissension regarding faith, Camus and Nietzsche’s disregard for rationalism correlates with Kierkegaard’s dissatisfaction with Hegel’s systemization of faith through the undistorted rational vision of the Absolute Mind (Kierkegaard 11). The correlation lies in the fact that, although for distinct reasons, these thinkers assert a collective suspicion of the capacity of reason to comprehend an inscrutable cosmos. While Camus and Nietzsche conclude that reason fails to grasp what is ultimately a meaningless universe, Kierkegaard and Barth claim that reason cannot bridge the abyss that separates God and humanity. Although religious and atheist thinkers differ on the subject of the transcendent, all existentialists we have discussed declare that the celebration of rationalism is a vain and Promethean affair in the face of the vast and inexplicable state of existence. Thus, Athens wastes away in ruins.

Despite their collective dismissal of rationalism, the atheist existentialists digress from the religious given their contention regarding the absolute metaphysical isolation of the individual. This isolation stems from Friedrich Nietzsche’s declaration that “God is dead. God remains dead.” (*The Gay Science* 120). The death of God necessitated the demise of the traditional sources of meaning—meaning both moral and metaphysical—that were tethered to what the German deemed crumbling religious institutions. The French philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre formulates this point when he proclaims, “There could no longer be any *a priori* good, since there would be no infinite and perfect consciousness to conceive of it” (28). Since God served as the infinite and perfect standard for the perennial Platonic Good, the source for immutable values such as objective truth and ethics, this divine death facilitated the fated

collapse of those old changeless certainties that Western civilization once so zealously celebrated. Although these atheist philosophers postulate a godless universe, they find this reality is more lamentable than triumphant. “It is disturbing that God no longer exists,” says Sartre, “[for] there is no determinism [and] man is free . . . left alone and without excuse (28-29). This absolute ontological isolation is disturbing for it signals the annihilation of essential meaning but also crystallizes the crisis of nihilism. Though some falsely claim nihilism is a comprehensive metaphysic, it is rather a condition of disorientation that results from the deconstruction of transcendental order. The damnation of *a priori* value condemns the isolated individual to a disordered and nihilistic universe in which once essential values are rendered empty and vacuous. This nihilistic disorientation is perhaps best represented in Nietzsche’s *Parable of the Madman* in which he describes a deranged prophet who roams the streets and shouts, “But how did we do this [kill God]? Are we not continually falling? And backwards, sideways, forwards, in all directions? Is there still an up and a down?” (*The Gay Science* 120). The perplexing and swirling language in this excerpt, “falling . . . backwards, sideways, forwards . . . up and down,” signals the nihilistic disorientation one encounters amidst the deconstruction of traditional sources of meaning. This nihilistic disorder infuses the expressionist composition of Munch’s *Golgotha*, whose distorted Christological subject signals the emptiness of divinity, and the fluid diction of Faulkner’s prose, which heightens the fragmented state of existence. Nevertheless, it is this disordered nihilistic cosmos that the individual must confront alone. Furthermore, the atheist existentialists subvert Barth and Kierkegaard’s celebration of transcendent otherness and instead privilege an absolute metaphysical isolation that negates the existence of the divine figure. Although all the existentialists assert the irrational nature of being, and consequently set themselves apart from Athens, the atheists tear down the walls of Jerusalem altogether. While the

Book of Job and *A Serious Man* negotiate the relationship between Athens and Jerusalem insofar as they share their suspicion of reason yet digress in their distinct dispositions towards the divine, their similarities are not limited to *this* ancient question. The numerous thematic and plot-level similarities between these two texts suggest that *A Serious Man* is an adaptation of its ancient counterpart. Both works contain frame narratives, inscrutable suffering, professions of the sufferer's innocence, familial isolation via death or estrangement, a disloyal spouse, three comforters who fail to explain suffering, and a powerful whirlwind that thunders through the conclusion of each text. The sudden and unexplainable presence of suffering—suffering that necessitates the protagonists' search for answers—signals that both texts are artistic endeavors in theodicy. The wild wind that strikes Job's family home and slaughters his sons and daughters and the sudden news of Larry's undeserved divorce invites indistinguishable inquiries regarding divine justice. How could an inherently benevolent cosmic being allow such brutal and needless suffering? This question proves one of the central preoccupations in both texts. Although current critics in adaptation studies claim that an adaptation cannot ascertain *the* one essential spirit of its source text due to the automatic difference endured by the change in mediums (Stam 55), the striking thematic similarities between the two texts suggest that *A Serious Man* is adapting *some* spirit—the human yearning for rational answers to the cosmic question of theodicy—from the *Book of Job*. Though these critics are apt to posit that all texts exist in an intertextual relationship with one another, which implies that “all texts are tissues of anonymous formulae” (Stam 64), there must be some substantial seed of thematic or plot-centric connection between *Job* and *A Serious Man* to necessitate a grounded adaptation reading of the two texts *in tandem*. The crux of our interpretive connection, which allows an adaptation study, lies in both texts' negotiation of

the limitations of human reason to apprehend the divine amidst unexplained suffering that prompts inquiries of divine justice.

The *Book of Job*: The Irrational and the *Other*

The Near Eastern text the *Book of Job* presents us with an inscrutable world in which rational explanations to the titular protagonist's suffering are rendered meaningless. The futile nature of human reason, which is evident in the dialogues between Job and his comforters, anticipates Kierkegaard and Barth's dismissal of Enlightenment rationalism and their subsequent celebration of fideist anti-rationalism. Although the comforters represent the rational perspective through their association with Deuteronomic logic, their failure to ascertain the sufferer's blamelessness signals the subversion of their Enlightenment-esque elevation of reason. Eliphaz invokes the Deuteronomic theology of history in an attempt to conceptualize suffering within the scope of human reason. This theological principle posits that obedience to Yahweh springs blessings while disobedience renders suffering and misfortune (Walton 89). Eliphaz's initial response to the sufferer, "What guiltless man has gone under? Where have the upright perished?" (Scheindlin 61), implies that Job must be, according to Deuteronomic logic, far from "guiltless . . . [and] upright" because of his present suffering. Similarly, Bildad echoes Deuteronomic logic when he declares, "God would not reject the innocent . . . [nor] take hold of a bad man's hand" (71). For the comforters, Job's affliction is necessarily a result of disobedience, and his suffering negates his innocence. He cannot be guiltless in his present condition. Thus, his profession of innocence, "for never have I suppressed the Holy One's commands" (65), is a baseless claim in the scope of the comforter's Deuteronomic logic because obedience to Yahweh, which Job maintains, cannot manifest misfortune. Yet the irony lies in the fact that Job *is* innocent. Yahweh even claims he is so in the opening prose narrative (55). Through their reliance upon rational

categories—categories that cannot apprehend a universe in which innocent suffering exists—the comforters anticipate the Enlightenment-era emphasis on the inextricable relationship between faith and reason. These two entities are one. Their use of Deuteronomic logic to locate the so-called cause of Job’s plight foresees the Hegelian postulation that faith is understood through rational categories constructed by the power of the human intellect. Furthermore, their desire to discern Job’s suffering through rational dialogue, through a pseudo-Socratic series of questions and answers, indicates their Hegelian-esque conviction that the human mind is one with the external world and has the capacity to comprehend the external matters of faith and suffering. But since the transcendent being confirms the sinlessness that the comforters reject, and subsequently condemns their actions in the concluding prose narrative (156), their dependence upon rationalist categories not only fail to apprehend the reality of Job’s righteousness but is also the subject of Yahweh’s omnipotent wrath. Their reliance upon rational categories to understand Job’s suffering is rendered fruitless.

The rational categories that the interlocutors use to interpret Job’s suffering fail to apprehend his sinlessness but are also futile tools for determining the transcendent mysteries that underpin his temporal torment. The presence of impermeant and primeval diction in the text deconstructs the rationalist perspective while it also anticipates Kierkegaard and Barth’s favor for fideist anti-rationalism. The text subverts the comforters’ rationalism when Job says, “As for my friends . . . [they] wandered off, like water in a wadi . . . they flow one moment, then are gone; when it is hot, they flicker away . . . [and they] wander into [a] wasteland, [then] vanish” (66). This fleeting, Ecclesiastes-esque language, “wandered off . . . flow one moment, then are gone . . . flicker away . . . vanish,” implies that the comforters’ response, which hinges upon rationalist dialogue and logic, is nothing but *לִּבְזָז* or *vanity*. Since the masculine noun *לִּבְזָז* is

translated as *vapor* or *breath* elsewhere in the Hebrew scriptures, the reader apprehends that relying on the rational to ascertain the divine meaning that lies beyond sudden suffering is an insubstantial and impermeant quest, much like attempting to capture a mist that appears one moment and vanishes the next. It is meaningless. This subversive stance towards rationalism as vanity correlates with Kierkegaard and Barth's conception of the fideist who "cannot say what faith is from any 'systematic' or scientific point of view . . . [because] faith simply has no place in a system of thought" (Kierkegaard 10). Since the fideist "urges reliance on faith rather than reason . . . [and] disparages and denigrates reason" (Plantinga 87), the divine mysteries of suffering and faith are impenetrable to the interlocutors' Hegelian-esque dependence upon the systematic and scientific power of the human intellect.

Rather than reason ascending the Babel-esque heights of understanding and grasping divine knowledge, Job believes that the comforters' categorical quest for transcendent *gnosis* forces them to "wander into [a] wasteland, [then] vanish." Since the masculine noun *וַיִּהְיֶה* or *wasteland*, which is otherwise translated as *nothingness* or *formlessness*, accompanies literary images of chaos often associated with the primordial waters, the function of this word in *Job* echoes its previous connotations and creates a primeval and chaotic tone that deconstructs the comforters perceived categorical and rational order.¹ When used to describe the primordial seas in Near Eastern cosmologies, the word *וַיִּהְיֶה* invokes a threatening sense of unknown (Whatham 330), which replaces the comforters' celebration of knowledge with the reality of their

¹ Perhaps the primary use of the word *וַיִּהְיֶה* occurs in the first chapter of Genesis when the narrator says, "The earth was *formless* and void." In various Near Eastern literatures beyond the Jewish Torah, water is tethered primordial chaos. This is certainly the case in the Babylonian creation myth *Enūma Eliš*. The central conflict of the narrative occurs because Marduk, the high king of all gods, invokes Tiamat, the goddess of watery chaos, and incites her rage. Their primordial battle ensues in the formless yet chaotic seas that spring creation.

ignorance. As in the fideist metaphysic, the interlocutors' categorical quest to uncover the cosmic secrets of justice and suffering becomes inscrutable and meaningless. Although the comforters think they offer the sufferer divine solutions via Deuteronomic logic, Barth stresses that they "fail to understand that they have no categories for what is taking place between God and this man" (458). Even the fluid motion in this passage, "wandered off, like water in a wadi . . . they flow one moment," subverts the static and ordered spirit of the rational dialectic, damning the *ethos* of knowledge while elevating the fideist favor for the irrational. Therefore, the text's invocation of impermeant and primeval language sinks the vessel of reason in a sea of chaos and formlessness. In doing so, it anticipates Barth and Kierkegaard's fideistic anti-rationalism.

The cosmic reason for sudden suffering is inscrutable and hidden from humans due to the transient and impermeant state of our rational capabilities. But what does prove discernable in the *Book of Job* is the supreme *otherness* of the divine being. The transcendent response from the whirlwind decenters the human in the religious relationship through the elevation of natural and animal imagery and anticipates Barth and Kierkegaard's anti-anthropocentric celebration of fideistic otherness. This otherness is present when Yahweh responds from the storm and says, "Who dares speak darkly words with no sense? I will put questions, and you will inform me: Where were you when I founded the earth?" (143). This response confirms the rational distance that separates the human and the divine given Yahweh's indictment of the comforters whose reliance upon scientific categories signals their ignorance as those who "speak darkly words with no sense." But as the supreme being flaunts his threatening omnipotence through his series of sarcastic quips, "Where were you when I founded the earth. . . . Where was the ground where He sank its foundations" (143), Yahweh also asserts his supreme *otherness* over the human. The

natural symbol of the storm from which Yahweh shouts his sarcastic insults, which is otherwise translated as *whirlwind*, indicates the wild and uncontrollable essence of a God whose supreme might supersedes the Promethean elevation of human reason. Fastened to the vessel from which he speaks, Yahweh acquires the untamable spirit of the whirlwind and reigns preeminent and *totaliter aliter*, as Barth proclaims. In tandem with the uncontrollable symbolism of the storm he embodies, fideist otherness formulates that “God is different from everything man knows . . . [and] acts otherwise than as religious man expects” (Smith 4). The human cannot comprehend the storm. It exists beyond knowledge and expectation. Similar to the spirit of the storm, God’s otherness is located in his inscrutable and omnipotent power.

But while fideist otherness elevates the omnipotence of God, it also subverts the status of the human in the religious relationship. In his *Christian Discourses*, Kierkegaard crystallizes this concept when he says, “[God] grows mightier and mightier . . . [while the] worshiper grows weaker and weaker” (137). The fideist subordination of the human is substantiated in the text when the supreme power proclaims, “He [the River Beast] is the first of God’s ways” (151). Though humans are often thought to have primacy over animals, the notion that the River Beast or *Behemoth* “is the first of God’s ways” subverts the theological anthropocentrism that accompanies the comforters’ Hegelian conviction that the human mind can discover divine mysteries. Rather than asserting “dominion . . . over all the earth,” Yahweh’s elevation of *Behemoth* suggests that humans are subject to “every creeping thing that creepeth upon the earth” (*KJV*, Gen. 1:26). It happens that humans are further subject to the River Coiler or *Leviathan*: “Nothing on dusty earth is like him [the River Coiler]. . . . He gazes at lofty creatures, king of the haughtiest beings!” (154). In comparison to the River Coiler who dwells in those formless seas that incite primordial chaos, and who reigns as “king of the haughtiest beings,”

those creatures who think themselves lofty and superior are yet subject to creeping things they once thought subordinate and find themselves left to toil the “dusty earth.” The connection between humans and the masculine noun , אֲדָמָה which is otherwise translated as *dust*, *rubbish*, or *ash*, and is also used when God expels the first humans from the garden and declares “for dust thou art, and unto dust shalt thou return” (*KJV*, Gen. 3:19), signals the transgressive and transient status of the fallen and feeble human race. While humans amount to nothing more than dust and remain under the governance of a wild and untamed River Beast whose inexplicable existence proves beyond temporal comprehension—and whose characteristics are illustrative of Yahweh’s otherness—their subjugation implies the absolute annihilation of the interlocutor’s anthropocentric accent to reason. Since Job finds himself subservient to the wild will of Yahweh’s otherness, which is represented by Leviathan and Behemoth’s chaotic and inscrutable characteristics, the sufferer is left to follow the fideist schema: (1) accept the limitations of reason and (2) admit that Yahweh is *totaliter aliter*. “I spoke with no wisdom,” proclaims Job, “of things beyond me I did not know” (155). The sufferer declares that the surpassing secrets of faith, those transcendent mysteries, exist beyond human *wisdom* or knowledge.² This acceptance of rational limitations signals the first move in the fideist schema. Furthermore, Job responds to Yahweh, “I know that You are all-powerful, and that no plan is beyond You” (155). By accepting Yahweh’s omnipotence, “I know that You are all-powerful,” Job indicates his own weakness before the throne of God’s sovereign, “no plan is beyond You,” transcendental

² I use the language *surpassing secrets of faith* in this sentence because the Hebrew word אֲדָמָה, which is glossed *of things beyond me* in this edition of the *Book of Job*, is often translated to *what is most surpassing*, *extraordinary*, and *difficult*. These alternate translations of the word אֲדָמָה are frequently rendered in contexts where the biblical authors describe the miraculous works of the divine being. Nevertheless, these various translations strengthen the sentiment that the secrets of faith and suffering (i.e. theodicy) are most surpassing, extraordinary, difficult, and ultimately beyond the very limited capabilities of human reason and knowledge.

otherness. The second move is complete. The sufferer accepts that the mysteries of faith are precisely that—mysteries that transcend the confines of rational thought. All that remains is to, despite one’s cosmic ignorance, trust in divine otherness *sola fide*.

A Serious Man: A Whirlwind of Nothingness

Although *A Serious Man* critiques the fideist metaphysics of its source the *Book of Job* through its presentation of a nihilistic and vacuous world that evades explanation and order, the film translates the irrational spirit from the Near Eastern text through the protagonist Larry Gopnik’s futile obsession with the rational. The medium through which *A Serious Man* translates the irrational from its source text is Larry himself. Similar to the comforters’ reliance upon rational categories to comprehend sudden suffering, Larry embodies rational modes of explaining existence. The scene in which we meet the midwestern physics professor portrays him hunched over his chalkboard while he writes in a mechanical yet furious temper (00:14:10). “So, if that’s that,” says Larry while he completes an incomprehensible equation, “then we can do this” (00:14:30). Larry speaks in mathematical terms of logical association. The straight-on, close-up still shot of Larry who stares at his puzzled students while an inscrutable proof lies on the blackboard behind him creates an equilibrium between his psyche in the foreground and the physics equation in the background (00:14:24). This juxtaposition between the dimensions of the shot, and the close-up camera distance that calls attention to his psyche, signals that Larry’s mind functions just like the mass proof that looms behind him. His intellect operates in parallel to the physics that enshrouds his presence in the shot. He does not simply speak in mathematical terms, he *lives* them. His quest for theory is not just vocational but dispositional. In her article “How Job Begat Larry: The Present Situation in *A Serious Man*,” K.L. Evans echoes this point when she says, “Rather than espouse Theory, however, Larry lives it” (291). Larry *is* theory. Perhaps

his inherent favor for the rational is best illustrated through his quintessential inquiry, “What’s going on?” (00:25:22). This phrase epitomizes Larry’s conviction in what he thinks are concrete rational categories. Furthermore, Larry’s assurance that mathematics is an absolute extension of reality, “The math tells how it [physics] really works. That’s the real thing” (00:15:29), echoes Nietzsche’s notion of the theoretical optimist “[who] attributes the power of a panacea to knowledge and science” (74). Similar to Enlightenment *optimists* who triumph science and reason as exhaustive structures they use to elucidate the true and ordered state of existence, Larry clings to the art of mathematics as his *theoretical* panacea. Larry is so inextricably tied to theory that he takes to construct his own mathematical map of the universe—what he calls “The Uncertainty Principle” (01:09:43). While the principle does address the uncertain state of existence, it does so via a theory that Larry believes exists in certain, scientific terms, “Well, yes, it’s convincing. It’s a proof. It’s mathematics” (01:10:32). Notwithstanding his ironic confession of the uncertain spirit of life itself, which does not hinder his quest to ascertain *what’s going on*, Larry’s sustained fixation with the rational crystallizes his function as a theoretical optimist.

But similar to its source text the *Book of Job*, *A Serious Man* subverts its protagonist’s conviction in the profit of theoretical modes of perceiving what lies behind his sudden suffering. In the same vein as the parallels shared among the religious and atheist existentialists, these texts share in their angst over the fleeting nature of human reason. Both texts declare that human reason is *לְזָרְזֵר* or *vanity* but what remains distinct in *A Serious Man* is the generic form of its delivery. The film *parodies* the pilgrimage for human knowledge rather than simply announcing its meaninglessness. Film adaptation scholar Thomas Leitch elucidates the role of parody, claiming, “They are all unexpectedly humorous departures [from the source text]” (118). Thus, we find that the film mocks the very notion of knowing. The parodic translation of the irrational

is present in the scene between Rabbi Nachtner and Larry. The opening overhead shot, which focuses downward on Larry's disheveled disposition and sinking psyche, signals a comic condemnation of his rational pursuit for answers (00:55:51). The juxtaposition between Nachtner's stoic stature in the elevated desk and Larry's hunched posture in the lowered chair implies that the Rabbi (00:55:58), who occupies the exalted seat of authority, ought to provide celestial solutions to his despairing patient's thirst for answers: "What does it all mean?" (00:56:50). But all Larry receives from Nachtner is a convoluted parable about a dentist named Sussman who finds a message in Hebrew inscribed in a Gentile's lower incisors that concludes without certain resolution. Throughout the sequence, dutch-angle shots perpetuate Larry's growing psychological disorientation (00:58:38).

While the abrupt end to the parable incites Larry's longing for answers, "So? What did you tell him?" (01:01:23), his desire for rational resolution is parodied by the Rabbi's comic response: "Sussman? Is it relevant?" (01:01:30). Just as the Yiddish frame narrative does not aid the audience in their apprehension of the film—for the Coens even claim that the prologue "doesn't really have any direct relationship to the rest of the movie" (Evans 296)—Nachtner's inexplicable and almost tangential parable implies that human stories, whether they be religious or theoretical stories, cannot address our craving to comprehend cosmic secrets. Nachtner's parable provides no answers. It perpetuates questions. Larry inquires, "Why does he make us feel the questions if he's not going to give us any answers," to which Nachtner responds, "He hasn't told me" (1:02:55). This humorous and clever turn of phrase renders Larry's optimistic longing for answers perpetually suspended—and certainly subverted. And while Nachtner almost exclusively speaks in queries, which incites the protagonist's frustration and our laughter, Larry's theoretical need for categorical resolution is further suspended into the metaphysical

unknown. One finds that Larry is a theoretical man in an irrational world. The film translates the fleeting state of human reason from its source text, although in its parodic and comic form. Perhaps the particular spirit of the film's subversive stance on the meaningless longing for categorical explanations to satisfy the mysteries of human suffering is most aptly represented in Nachtner's comic question: "Is it relevant?" (01:01:30).

Although *A Serious Man* translates the irrational from its source text, albeit in its distinct parodic form, the film critiques the fideist otherness celebrated in *Job* with its penchant for the absolute metaphysical isolation of the individual. The text privileges the absolute metaphysical isolation of the individual, and critiques the fideist otherness from its source text, in the scene between Danny and Rabbi Marshak. It must be noted that Marshak serves as the most *other* figure in the film. Similar to Job's inability to call upon Yahweh, Marshak is unreachable, not accepting visitors, and thinking behind closed doors (01:23:03). He is busy, impenetrable, other. When the audience does encounter Marshak—but through Danny's perspective—his throne room includes ancient books, foreign fossils, and Caravaggio's *The Sacrifice of Isaac* (01:32:30).³ The addition of what appears to be animal fossils, skulls, and molds in the set design accentuate Marshak's otherness because of the intertextual association between Yahweh and the pseudo-mythical animal powers in *Job* that serve the same function (01:32:10). It is also curious that Marshak has *The Sacrifice of Isaac* given its echoes of Kierkegaardian fideism. These set choices elevate the venerable Marshak's otherness and, for those familiar with *Job*, create an expectation that the age-old Rabbi will deliver some sacred parable or divine message much like

³ Caravaggio's *The Sacrifice of Isaac* is of particular significance to fideism because the story of Abraham and Isaac, which Søren Kierkegaard explores in his book *Fear and Trembling*, and which also remains the artistic frontmatter to Alastair's Hannay translation of the text, embodies the irrational accent to faith that proponents of fideism such as Karl Barth, who was himself a student of the Dane, champion.

Yahweh's response from the storm. But the only wise words that the sage offers Danny come in the form of lyrics to psychedelic rock band Jefferson Airplane's track "Somebody to Love." The Rabbi thunders, "When the truth is found to be lies / And all the hope within you dies / Then what? (01:33:47). Marshak's admission that the *truth* is indeed *lies* implies his acceptance of the deconstruction of the once-lauded structures of religious meaning that atheist existentialists such as Nietzsche and Sartre—and bands that belong to the psychedelic rock genre—dismiss in their philosophical work. Sartre exclaims that this divine deconstruction leaves us in a world where "there is no determinism [and] man is free . . . left alone and without excuse (28–29). The absence of determinism condemns the individual to absolute cosmic isolation. Marshak's invocation of Jefferson Airplane facilitates this total isolation and introduces a subversive, parodic critique of the fideist otherness in the source text. Consequently, this metaphysical isolation renders the set design, which depicts Marshak as *other*, as fundamentally ironic, a threatening *façade* whose core proves a vacant comedy. Similarly, the linguistic signs of religious meaning that Danny's Hebrew teacher scribbles on the blackboard without translation are met with an inscrutable silence in which all the audience discerns is the low hum of Jefferson Airplane in his earbuds, which signals the hollow, emptied state of religious instruction in a world haunted by isolation and nothingness (00:09:26). In *A Serious Man*, the religious signs of omnipotent otherness that thunder so threateningly in *Job* are diluted of their meaning. The subversive music score renders them replaced—and critiqued—by the metaphysical reality of absolute isolation.

This cosmic isolation, the underlying sickness, is also manifested in the text through its resultant symptom—the crisis of nihilism. Following the atheist existential metaphysic, the destruction of *a priori* values facilitates the nihilistic drama, aiding the film in its critique of the

fiedist spirit of its source text. Similar to how Yeats, Nietzsche, and Faulkner depict the crisis of nihilism through kinetic diction in their respective artistic works, this condition is chiefly crystallized in *A Serious Man* through fluid *motion* that is present via plot and film form. The scene in which Danny attends his *bar mitzvah* abounds in this particular motion. The swaying, first-person camera angle and blurred, dutch-angle shots most literally represent Danny's weed-wrecked psyche (01:28:19). But these unfixed camera techniques also create a disorientating, unsteady motion whose fluid and wobbled movement mirrors the nihilistic dismissal of static, essentialist truths. The inconstant and fluid camera motion subverts the unchanging and concrete precepts of the *bar mitzvah* tradition. The cuts between blurred dutch-angle shots swing our perception of the temple congregation from side to side, creating a kinetic current whose disorientating effect ruptures what should be an otherwise static viewing experience (01:28:11–40). While the fluid character of the camera motion mirrors the postmodern preference for subjective fluidity as opposed to objective dogmas, it also echoes the fluid and circular diction that modernist thinkers use on an aesthetic level to illustrate the nihilistic destruction of religious structures. The fluidity of camera movement and our obscured perception of this sacred religious event, parallels Yeats's declaration that we are "Turning and turning in the widening gyre / The falcon cannot hear the falconer" ("The Second Coming"), and the Madman's cries, "But how did we do this [kill God]. . . . Is there still an up and a down?" (120). The turning and twisting camera oscillation renders the falconer, the divine power, absent. The fluid motion in *A Serious Man* paints a nihilistic philosophical portrait of existence in which the characters cannot discern up from down.

Yet the most compelling motion-related evidence for this nihilistic universe, and its subsequent critique of divine otherness, lies in the tornado that barrels towards the Hebrew

school at the conclusion of the film (01:39:50). Although some claim that the tornado signifies some cosmic punishment for Larry's acceptance of the bribe (Evans 291), which proves a reading that posits divine order within the scope of the film, the whirlwind that approaches as the audience receives news of the sufferer's tenure *and* cancer challenges this interpretation. These events—one positive, one negative—contradict one another. There is no one-to-one connection between virtuous actions, good fortune, evil, and punishment. In K.L. Evans's words, "Larry learns that you don't get what you deserve—you get what you get" (291). The deuteronomic schema be damned. With its fluid and disorienting motion—motion which signals the crisis of meaning itself—the tornado serves as the film's final nihilistic crescendo. Its fluid motion and impenetrable presence accentuates the nihilistic crisis and critiques the signs of sacred otherness that are fastened to the whirlwind in the source text. In *A Serious Man*, there is no thundering omnipresence, no fideist accent to faith, just a whirlwind of nothingness. Following the atheist existentialists, the unstable and fluid motion of the camera techniques and the tornado signal that the individual is left completely alone in a nihilistic universe. While the disorientating motion of the tornado barrels towards the schoolchildren and Jefferson Airplane blares in the background (01:40:02), one senses there is no escape from this nihilistic isolation. The frame cuts to black (01:40:09). There is no response from Yahweh. No intervention. No otherness. No hope. Only lies and motion.

What is consistent between these two texts is the subversion of the rationalist perspective. The comforters' reliance upon Deuteronomic logic negates their ability to discern the temporal reality of Job's righteousness but also proves a futile, meaningless tool for determining the transcendent mysteries that drive his sudden suffering. This elevation of the irrational in the religious context is consistent with fideist thinkers such as Barth and Kierkegaard who privilege

faith over reason. The rational amounts to *לִצְדָּקָה* or *vanity*. Similarly, *A Serious Man* translates the fleeting state of the rational metaphysic from its source text, although in its distinct parodic form. Larry embodies the comforters' categorical quest for the rational through his inextricable association with Nietzsche's theoretical optimist. Larry *is* theory. But Rabbi Nachtner's query-riddled and convoluted parable incites our laughter at Larry's theoretical quest to understand *what's going on* and signals a parodic subversion of the rational attitude. The film and ancient text alike share in what Albert Camus calls "the impossibility of reducing this world to a rational and reasonable principle" (51). Yet the divergence between these texts lies in the fact that *Job* does posit one, albeit irrational, principle. The response from the whirlwind elevates the divine being as the *totaliter aliter* principle to which humans fail to understand but must nevertheless submit to *sola fide*. This transcendent response from the storm exists *in tandem* with the fideist elevation of Yahweh's *otherness*, which demands worship. But while *Job* elevates the divine in an irrational world, *A Serious Man* critiques its source text's celebration of fideist otherness by asserting the absolute metaphysical isolation of the individual. The disorienting motion present both in film techniques and the concluding tornado, along with Rabbi Marshak's endorsement of the psychedelic rock score, replaces the sacred signs of fideist otherness with a nihilism that is indicative of cosmic isolation. This adaptive reversal favors the atheist existentialists who posit a world absent and devoid of meaning. While in *Job* the worshiper hears Yahweh thunder from the storm in all His otherness, *A Serious Man* concludes in a whirlwind of nihilistic nothingness. Despite their metaphysical divergence, *A Serious Man* and the *Book of Job* chronicle that the age-old theoretical quest for categorical knowledge amidst sudden suffering, which extends as far back as language itself, does not provide the answers it promises but rather elevates human ignorance. These texts postulate the practical spiritual message that we exist in a world that

eludes our absolute understanding. No dogma or system fully captures the vapor of human suffering and experience.

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Essay

Corrie Parks

"... women mean trouble": How the Representation of Women and Children in Two Neorealist Films Calls for the Restoration of Patriarchy in Postwar Italy

Introduction: Neorealism and Reconstruction

The Nazis abandoned Rome on June 4, 1944. In January 1945, when Roberto Rossellini began to shoot the film *Roma, Citta Aperta (Rome, Open City)* on location, there was still rubble on the ground. *Rome, Open City* (1945) was a landmark film for the Italian neorealist cinematic style, a genre steeped in stark realism that processed the grim and recent events of Italy under fascism in World War II, and the poverty and societal unrest that simmered in its aftermath. *Rome, Open City* explores the Italian resistance movements against the occupying Germans and Italian Fascists by following the lives of fictional civilians involved in Rome's underground resistance. Similarly, Italian director Vittorio De Sica's *Ladri di Bicicleta (Bicycle Thieves)*, 1948, tells a story about an ordinary civilian in Rome trying to make ends meet for his family in post-revolution Italy. Cesare Zavattini co-wrote *Bicycle Thieves* and is credited with defining the Italian neorealist movement. Both films exemplify neorealism's trademarks in that they shoot on location in Rome, incorporate non-actors, are minimalist in design, and tell nonlinear stories about Italy's marginalized communities.

Among those marginalized groups in *Rome, Open City* and *Bicycle Thieves* are Italian women and young children, individuals who traditionally should have had little to do with men's politics in the early 1940s. While these characters do not serve as protagonists in their respective

films, they are nonetheless important players in their stories, displaying agency in their actions and their sheer on-screen representation. While Italy would not see major feminist movements until the 1970s, the strikingly Marxist eye of these neorealist films, made strong by the Communist and otherwise anti-fascist sentiments of the period, demands that women and children are represented, as they composed much of the post-war working class. *Rome, Open City* tells the stories of Pina, the dedicated fiancée of a resistance leader; her son Marcello, who finds himself directly involved with resistance movements; and Marina, a sensual cabaret performer whose actions determine the fates of the protagonists. *Bicycle Thieves* primarily tracks a few days in the life of young husband and father Antonio Ricci but presents his wife Maria as significantly braver than him, and his son Bruno as an equally fearless companion and provider. It appears that Italian women and children are allowed radical agency in these films, subverting social and gender norms. But the evidence of women's heroism in these films, particularly in *Rome, Open City*, serves as no sort of feminist statement. Rather, they depict a tragic fall of masculinity in the Italian population. On the other hand, the valor of young boys, which I will address mostly through an analysis of *Bicycle Thieves*, is heart-wrenching but emblematic of a national hope to rebuild Italy to its former patriarchal strength.

The Women of *Rome, Open City*

The Italian anti-fascist movement, the *Resistenza*, lasted about twenty months and was intrinsically diverse. In Rome, the Communist, Socialist, Christian Democratic, Liberal and Action Parties unified to form the Committee of National Liberation, and other cities would follow suit, forming their own liberation committees. During the *Resistenza*, liberation committees encouraged all Italians, the young and the old, the men and the women to fight against the common German enemy. And so they did. Historian Jomarie Alano recounts the

significant contributions of the Women's Defense and Assistance Groups (*Gddd*), the largest anti-fascist women's organization that was formed in Milan in November of 1943 and would grow to roughly 70,000 members in 1945. The *Gddd* was composed of women from every walk of life who would contribute to the resistance movement through organizing strikes, work stoppages, demonstrations and would use even violent means in order to receive necessities such as higher rations and housing for displaced families. Along with these demands, they even advocated for higher women's wages to better support their families, and very clearly stated the importance of female activism. Alano tells us that by the end of the *Resistenza*, 35,000 of these women would have died for their cause, but much of their contribution was inevitably written out of history: "Up until recently most historians and politicians have praised only the activities of assistance to male partisans and their families carried out by the women of the *Gddd*. This view fits comfortably with attempts by the right-wing parties in power in Italy from the last 1940s to the mid-1960s to construct a collective memory of the *Resistenza* that upheld paternalistic notions of Italian society" (616). I argue that it is this patriarchal view that Rossellini channels in his film *Rome, Open City*. He displays the heroism of women such as Pina only because he is obligated to; it is a fact that women served in the *Resistenza*. However, while Pina's character is fearless and lovable, her life is cut short halfway through the film because of her emotional impulsivity, and through her senseless death we come to see her as less of an activist and more of a martyr. Additionally, the other women that Rossellini characterizes on-screen are not heroes at all; they are collectively villainous, traitorous, and shallow. In De Sica's *Bicycle Thieves*, which takes place shortly after the *Resistenza*, Ricci's wife Maria is the only woman with more than a handful of lines. While she is portrayed as far more industrious in the movie's first few minutes, it is evident that she is only so because of her husband Ricci's failure to adequately provide for

his family. Maria's acts are in no way celebrated in the film. Ricci never thanks her for her assistance. Therefore, *Bicycle Thieves*, at the very least, does not refute Alano's contention that figures of influence in 1940s Italy strove to write paternalistic national stories.

Female representation in *Rome, Open City* cannot be discussed without first analyzing the memorable portrayal of the film's loveable martyr, Pina. Pina, engaged to the resistance leader Francesco and pregnant with his child, first appears on film as a participant in a strike where women and children storm a bakery to receive more rations. Her presence is imposing and masculine. Played by Anna Magnani, she has a heavysset jaw, wears little cosmetics, has her hair in a no-nonsense bun, rolls up her shirtsleeves and walks around briskly with her shoulders back. Shortly after the bakery riot, wanted resistance leader Giorgio Manfredi appears at her apartment. Although he had originally appeared at her doorstep looking for his mistress Marina Mari, Pina urges him to stay and the two sit down and seem to speak as equals, neither dominating the conversation. Manfredi asks her offhandedly, "How are the women?" speaking about the ladies at the bakery, to which she replies, "Some know why they're doing it, but most just grab all the bread they can. This morning someone filched some shoes and a scale" (00:11:30). She rolls her eyes, and this subtle jab at the other women in her community immediately sets her apart from the other women in the film. This belittling remark reads as a rejection of the feeble and uninformed "feminine" mindset in turn for a more noble "masculine" one, which would have better grasped the politics of the strike.

Indeed, after Pina's line ". . . someone filched some shoes and a scale," her sister Laura's voice can be heard calling from a distance, crying, "I'd like to know who filched my stockings!" (00:11:40). Laura, a cabaret performer whose hair is done up in curlers and makeup is spotless, is immediately juxtaposed against her rough-around-the-edges sister. She is far more feminine, and

likewise far less bright. When Laura leaves the room in a tizzy, Pina remarks to Manfredi, “I wonder what lies she’s told you about where she lives. She is ashamed of us ‘starving workers.’ Says she’s an artist. But I wouldn’t trade places with her. Not because she’s bad. She’s just stupid” (00:12:25). This statement is evidence enough that Pina herself carries her own sexist notions. To call her sister simply “stupid” discredits and insults Laura far more than any other remark (i.e., “ignorant” or “shallow”) in that it attacks Laura’s basic intelligence and discernment. However, Pina’s low opinions of her naive sister are not entirely unfounded. The character of Laura herself does the plight of women no good; she is written to be shallow and ignorant, and after having a spat with Pina, refuses to attend Pina and Francesco’s marriage. Her association with Marina Mari equally villainizes her.

Pina’s own biases are evident of Rossellini’s worldview, but so is her function as a character in the film. Pina’s ultimate purpose as a plot device in *Rome, Open City* is revealed at the event of her death. Pina’s murder is renowned as one of the most iconic scenes of the neorealist film genre: sudden, unexpected, and achingly realistic. Critic Millicent Marcus credits it even further in her article “Pina’s Pregnancy, Traumatic Realism, and the After-Life of *Rome, Open City*,” when she comments, “It is in Pina’s death scene . . . that we may discern the true birth pangs of neorealism, a cinematic development originating from the conditions of trauma and rupture wrought by the wartime ordeal” (430). Marcus unpacks the reasons Pina’s death is so impactful, one reason being that when Pina is gunned down, so is the child inside her, creating a death “en abyme.” Another reason is that this scene was based on the true murder of Teresa Gullace, a pregnant woman who dared to chase after Nazi officers as they rounded up her husband. Marcus explains that this image would have “activated an immediate spark of recognition” in local audiences, a sort of “deja vu” that would have “underwritten, even at some

very inchoate psychological level, the truth claims of the film” (431). *Rome, Open City*’s neorealist, documentary-style treatment of Pina’s death, while poignant and politically iconic, reduces Pina’s importance as a character to the impact of her traumatic death. The death haunts him, and he clings to his fiancée’s last words as he is tried and tortured by Nazi officers.

Before Pina’s passing, and before Pina and Francesco prepare for their unceremonious nuptials, the pair share a heavy-handed political conversation in the stairwell outside of Pina’s place. Pina lets her guard down, and the two discuss the endless violence in broad terms. “Doesn’t Christ see us?” Pina asks, “When is it going to end? Sometimes I just can’t go on” (00:43:10). Francesco suddenly becomes Pina’s counselor, which feels almost unnatural after having observed her as the masculine and commanding head of her own small household, over her son Marcello and her younger sister. Francesco tells her equally vague things to reassure her, that are obviously targeted more to the audience than they are to Pina: “The road may be long and hard, but we’ll get there, and we’ll see a better world. . . . That’s why you mustn’t ever be afraid, whatever happens. Right?” And to this, Pina responds, “but I’m never afraid” (00:43:10). This statement of fearlessness from Pina is set up to be undercut by the tragedy of her own death, and by a strangely striking statement from Marcello just a few minutes prior.

Marcello returns to the apartment after having participated in a children’s rebel group composed entirely of young boys. His character is abnormally mature and confident, immediately juxtaposed against his younger sister, whom he greets upon returning to his room. She does not seem to possess this accelerated intelligence. She complains to him as a sibling would, crying, “You never take me along!” to which Marcello retorts, almost comically, “You’re a woman!” Sensitively she asks, “So? Can’t women be heroes, too?” and Marcello comes back with, “Sure, but Romoletto [the children’s gang leader] says that women mean trouble”

(00:39:21). This interaction, while only seconds long, is a nutshell of the existent patriarchal mindset: that women were seen as oversensitive and too naive for the political realm—just like little sisters that needed to be taken care of. Marcello’s statement, “women mean trouble,” while made humorous from the fact that it is uttered from a little boy’s mouth, nonetheless rings true later in the film when we learn of Marina Mari’s deceit.

Marina, a stylish cabaret singer along with Pina’s sister Laura, seems at first glance equally intelligent as she is beautiful: the picture of femme fatale. When she first appears on screen, she is framed in gauzy light reclining on her bed, attempting to call Manfredi over (00:04:12). Critics Dom Holdaway and Dalila Missero describe her similarly in “Re-Reading Marina: Sexuality, Materialism, and the Construction of Italy”: “a materialistic, sexually active girl who moves consciously between the other groups in the film. Unlike the Partisans, Marina occupies a grey area: she interacts and collaborates with the Nazis, and yet does not appear intentionally evil as much as misguided; she is dislocated and indifferent to the Resistance, instead preoccupied with her bourgeois lifestyle and love affairs” (5). Marina finds herself involved in a love affair with Manfredi, and thus entangled in the Resistance efforts. However, there is no evidence that Marina holds any sort of malice towards the *Resistenza*. She is merely caught up in politics, where she obviously does not understand the discourse and does not belong in it. She gives up information about Manfredi, Francesco, and the priest’s location under the belief that the Nazis would not physically harm Manfredi, but is villainized as the betrayer, her fault being her naivety as a feminine woman and the sexually promiscuous lifestyle that brought her this sort of attention in the first place. Marina carries more agency in this film than any other woman (aside from overtly evil Nazi officer Ingrid, who does not require any scrutiny to determine that she is so), but in the film’s tragic resolution in which all three resistance members

are brutally murdered by Nazis, it is determined that female involvement in intrinsically patriarchal politics can indeed, as Marcello said can only bring trouble.

Children and the Patriarchy in *Bicycle Thieves*

Rome, Open City, released three years prior to *Bicycle Thieves*, establishes first that the surviving children of World War II and of the Nazi occupation period now carry Italy's legacy and future on their shoulders. After the last, heartbreaking killing of Don Pietro, the camera shifts to Marcello's gang of boys, who have been watching the entire thing happen from behind a wire fence. They retreat with their heads bowed solemnly, arms around each other for comfort, and return to the city in a poignant closing image where they are framed against a spectacular view of central Rome (01:41:00). In a strikingly similar closing image, *Bicycle Thieves*' story ends with Ricci and Bruno in tears, walking on foot through the crowds in Rome. In an act of strength, forgiveness, and compassion, Bruno reaches for his father's hand and squeezes it before they disappear into the street. While both images leave the viewer reeling with emotion, they also instill in us the idea that there is yet a better nation to rise from the rubble of postwar Italy, built up by a new generation. The question of Italy's future was one that defined the postwar years, as historian Pamela Ballinger notes in "Borders of the Nation, Borders of Citizenship: Italian Repatriation and the Redefinition of National Identity after World War II": "the defeat of the fascist regime in 1945 opened up the question of Italy's territorial boundaries. . . . So too did it broach the question of the boundaries of Italian-ness. In the aftermath of fascism and its disastrous defeat, the perennial project of "making Italians"—or, in this case, remaking them—weighed heavily on the minds of Italy's new political class" (Ballinger 714–715). It could be contended that this "remaking" of Italians is a concept that De Sica and Zavattini explore

thoroughly in *Bicycle Thieves*, and that their idea of restoring Italian culture entails, first and foremost, a reinstatement of strong Italian patriarchy.

Ricci, the male protagonist of *Bicycle Thieves*, is a visibly downtrodden man, whose agency and masculinity have been robbed by Rome's disastrous economic state of the late 1940s. Played by non-professional actor Lamberto Maggiorani (who was a factory worker), Ricci carries himself with little confidence in his speech and posture. When we are first introduced to him, he is unemployed, sitting in the dirt by himself, lanky arms and legs cut off at the bottom of the frame, drawing in the dirt (00:02:08). After Ricci receives mixed news about his job offer, he runs to tell his wife. He meets her outside of the local well, and critic Frank P. Tomasu notes that in the composition of this scene, the couple is "bisected by a pole, plac[ing] Maria on screen left with a deep-focus background extending into deep space behind her" and that Ricci's side is "restricted by the background barbed wire" (6-7). Tomasu further argues that many of the film's compositions suggest that Ricci is, "indeed imprisoned, trapped in a net of selfhood, which he could never overcome by making meaningful contact with his environment" (6-7). The composition of this scene doubles a visual of both Ricci's financial immobility and innate lack of confidence in his masculinity; framed against the fence, he is trapped in a state of powerlessness and emasculation, whereas his wife's horizons seem to expand far beyond his own.

In the following conversation, Ricci expresses his discouragement to Maria when relaying the news, believing that it is too late for him to take the job, but Maria insists otherwise. All the while, Maria bears the burden of a heavy bucket of water that acts as a physical representation of the burden she has carried as an unsupported wife. Childishly, he shouts, "I curse the day I was born!" and "I feel like jumping in the river!" to which she sharply replies "Quiet!" both times (00:05:09), frustrated with his lack of ambition. In a poignant series of shots,

the couple enters their apartment, and Maria continues to walk ahead of him in the hallway, carrying her bucket. She places it on the table and comes back to take Ricci's as well, taking matters of the family into her own hands on a microcosmic scale. She is displayed in the foreground, visually the dominant person in the relationship (00:05:30). When Ricci sits back down on their bed in defeat, Maria, irritated, yanks him back into a standing position, mutters "Get up!" and begins to strip the bed so that they can sell her dowry sheets to buy the bike (00:06:00). Significantly, her initiative does not seem to be provoked by excitement or merely faithfulness to her family. She is forced to act because Ricci remains stationary and does so out of spite.

Ricci's young son, Bruno, also serves as a stark contrast to Ricci's downtrodden incompetence. When first onscreen, Bruno, much like his mother, stands in the foreground in the apartment framed behind the spokes of Ricci's bike, and Ricci appears behind him (00:14:29). Though no more than eight years old, Bruno has taken the initiative to clean the bike, and proceeds to take charge of the set, opening the windows. Bruno even suggests that he would have mentioned one of the dents to the store owners if he had been in Ricci's shoes. Bruno's mannerisms also make Ricci look like the adolescent: he speaks loudly, takes confident strides, and stands straight. When Bruno and Ricci get ready to leave for work in the same scene, they are wearing near-identical jumpers, and when Bruno stands on a stool to reach the mirror, he is roughly his father's height, if not taller (00:15:52). If these small moments are not enough to signal that Bruno has been the acting man of the household when the two start off for work and Bruno is dropped off at the gas station, we are forced to assume that Ricci's family has been living off Bruno's salary alone for an indeterminable amount of time.

When Ricci loses his bike and begins his futile attempt to get it back, Bruno sticks loyally by him the entire time, proving himself to be helpful, intelligent, and rather independent for his age. When Ricci and some other male acquaintances go to search for pieces of his bike in the marketplace, Bruno joins the men in looking at the pumps and bells, just as confident and comfortable in this public place as the other shoppers, even after strangers at a stall tell him to “beat it,” taking him for a thief (00:33:11). When the rain begins to pour shortly afterward, and Bruno slips and falls attempting to follow his father to shelter, he does not cry even though he has been hurt and quickly brushes himself off. When a group of German men crowd under the shelter and accidentally squish Bruno into the wall, not seeing him, Bruno uses his entire body to push the man away from him, without Ricci even noticing (00:41:13). When Ricci gets in a scrap with the man who stole his bike, Bruno calls over the police to protect Ricci from the mob (01:14:43). All the while, despite all of the discomfort that the situation puts him through, despite Ricci’s own self-absorption that leads him to oftentimes neglect his son, Bruno still looks to his father for approval, wishing no more than to help him win back the bike and, in doing so, reinstate him as the proper head of the household.

A last noteworthy scene between father and son occurs just after Ricci has resorted to the unthinkable to provide: he steals another man’s bike. Bruno, unfortunately, bears witness to the momentary crime, and his idyllic perception of his father is shattered. Nonetheless, he chases after his father, crying “Papa!” and attempts to wrestle him from the mob (01:25:21). Bruno picks up his father’s hat, which has fallen in the fight, and in an introspective and solemn moment, begins to dust it off, beating it with his fist, altogether grieving, angry, and righteous. When he reapproaches the men, who have Ricci in their grasp, the leader takes one look at Bruno and tells his posse “Forget it. Let him go” (01:26:32). After Bruno, now firmly established as

Ricci's last sense of moral compass and only true companion, saves him one last time, the two exchange no more words for the rest of the film. Bruno only reaches out his hand for Ricci to hold, forgiving his father for his past mistakes and leading him into a future of unknowns, the only certainty being the unshakable, fraternal bond that they share. It is this bond between the new and the old generation, between men, that *Bicycle Thieves* decides is the ultimate hope for the restoration of a collectively suffering nation.

Conclusion: Who Can Resurrect Rome?

The stories told by *Rome*, *Open City* and *Bicycle Thieves* are drastically different in their scope: the former is about revolution, and the latter about a petty crime, but they are parallel in their messages about Italy's state of confusion. In the wake of WWII and the Nazi occupation, there were power vacuums waiting to be filled, and many different political parties waiting to fill them. On February 1, 1945, women were at last allowed suffrage in Italy. On June 2, 1946, the monarchy in Italy was officially abolished, and the nation's fate was left in the hands of an infant government, now under the sway of many new political parties and many new eligible voters. *Rome*, *Open City* and (likely) *Bicycle Thieves* were conceived before Italy's new constitution came into effect on January 1, 1948, which granted women equal rights under the law.

Just as the survivors of both films end their narratives by walking into a realm of uncertainty, so was Italy emerging from the rubble of a devastating national upheaval, beginning entirely anew. These films grasp to identify what this new nation required, and surprisingly, considering their social contexts, feminism does not seem to be acknowledged as a significant part of this conversation. While both allow room for interpretation in their conclusions, these films strongly suggest that the restoration of strong Italian masculinity and cultural patriarchal systems was most crucial to the country's painstaking reconstruction. In the wake of so much

violence and political strife, these directors casted an idyllic eye on the few remaining countrymen who had not been drafted, who had not known the prewar country long enough to be swayed by the depths of its downfall. They looked to the boys.

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Screenplay

Connor Loyd

“Land of the Living”

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Screenplay

Donovahn Wyatt

“Dragon Tamer”

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Poetry

Maddie Athearn

I Wish I Could Fly

I wish I could I fly
Like the others with wings,
But half of me lives
In the world underneath.

If I cannot fly,
Maybe I'll swim.
It's more natural to me,
Embracing my sin.

I know I can't fly
So I'll dive as far as I can
To the deepest of deep,
Forgetting dry land.

All I know is the sea.
Lord, give me gills.
I look like a fish,
I'm finally fulfilled.

I dress in bright scales,
Blow bubbles from my beak.
I sleep with the seaweed,
Neglecting to breathe.

But my throat feels so tight,
Pressure weighs on my crown.
I charge to the surface
Fear filled, sky bound.

The sun kisses my feathers,
The breeze brushes me dry,
Still frightened to face you.
Lord, don't make me fly.

I wish I could swim!
Sweetly drowning below,
Believing I'm hidden
Though you called me to grow.

The higher I soar,
The closer I'm to you.
I've heard you're my Father
Who created *me* too.

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Poetry

Clay Birchfield

Patience

The summer's night holds its breath for a sigh
that glides through evening unnoticed but felt.
Humidity mists through the air and lungs
of the forest's denizens as each breath
stagnates to mark minutes

waiting. Fireflies flicker as seconds pass.
Bullfrogs rumble in unison with the
electric expectancy buzzing from
tip to root in the fibrous web of veins,
leaves, and bark of the wood.

The moon wavers on waning and silvers
the to-be-dew that hangs between the bows
and strings of crickets' legs, ready to rouse
dirges from gilded cicadian wings.
The orchestra is tuned.

The last rivulets of sweat are suffused
with shivers. Nettled gives way to nestled.
Lightning bugs turn out their lamps and frogs rest
their voices. The trees groan, relieved, as the
weight of the soil and sky

and holding it all together lifts from
the boughs and branches. Now the crickets and
cicadas begin their benediction.

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Poetry

*Abi Doremus***August Under the Glass**

1. What I Knew Then

Four months ago I tied up my ends and prepared for the culmination of all my work.
I penned greatness about a hope I didn't have, praying it would spring forth and embolden me in
the next stage.

In a crescendo of flowers, praise, and *you will go so far's*, I rallied my limbs into a bow,
Before spending the next week unable to rise from the floor that bow had sunk me to.

Three months ago I screamed goodbye, and whispered it, too,
As my impending departure bittered the days preceding it.
On the morning of my graduation, I stood solidly on the paving stones that had known my
kindergarten innocence
And tilted my wet face upward in a ceaseless petition for peace.

A month ago that quietude arrived, awash with Summer's warmth and wellness.
I lolled in sunshine until it stuck to my skin like sand,
Covering me in color and spilled lemonade and that ebullience of eighteen.
These days stretched as if under Gibeon's sky, and I cradled every moment with two hands.

2. What I Didn't Know Yet

This moment is August, and I am embroiled with myself in this mortifying battle of *newness*.
Don't look at me in my freshman tangle; don't ask me to join you on the floor until I have
learned the steps.

The reassurances of friends older and wiser pull my protective hands from my ribs.
Their comfort settles into the cavity in my chest, and I am too thankful to move.

A month from now I will be so full of love and joy that I would bewilder April-me.
It is well with my soul—At long last, my stability has formed beneath me.
I will glory in Autumn's majesty as confetti lights from the trees and sunlit minutes tick away.
I will be bold on the road, well accompanied as I pick out my way through this new place.

Three months from now Winter chill will seep in, and fear will reintroduce itself.
Anxiety will eat me away and gnaw at the supports built in months prior,
As the deepening gaps between my ribs remind me that nothing leaves forever.
November marks the annual arrival of this interruption, come to uproot.

Five months from now my edges will start blurring, coming in and out of focus on the screen.
A stilling weight will take up residence in my stomach and won't allow for any neighbors.
I will pin August's clothes to fit on this new body,
And with near-slack hands hold shut Pandora's Box—*Stay in there.*

3. What I Don't Know Yet

But this January paralysis must pass, and maybe in a month or so my blood will begin to stir.
In slow steps I will pour full-fat milk in my coffee without questioning it and smile without fear
of being seen through
As the world sprouts new green buds; I will write about hope again and mean it this time.
I will revel in Spring without weighing it against Autumn.

And maybe a few months on from there I will find myself in some mirror,
Know myself again, and remember that no weight has yet broken these shoulders—
That there are more hilltops for me, more love, more months, and that I am still here,
Ongoing.

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Sarah Chew

Ontology in the Medium of Sight:

On Women Seeing and Being Seen in Middle English Literature

This essay will consider the significance of seeing as it relates to female characters in two fourteenth-century Middle English romances: *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* and *Sir Orfeo*, both of which were written by unknown poets. The poems adapt older chivalric traditions to retell the stories of King Arthur and Orpheus and Eurydice, respectively. The primary women in these works are Guenore and Heurodis, or, as they are more commonly known, Guinevere, wife of King Arthur, and Eurydice, lover of Orpheus. While female characters mostly enter the poems in order to spur their lovers to heroic deeds, the value they do possess is mostly produced by how they appear as “lovely ladies.” Specifically, they are centered in the “male gaze,” a term coined by Laura Mulvey, who finds women in the history of cinema bound silently as “bearer of meaning, but not maker of meaning” (Mulvey 804). For the men who see Guenore and Heurodis, sight leads to speech and action, but the women’s sense of sight renders them passive and inscrutable. Yet they do possess such sight, and the verb “to see” and its forms (“se”) appear frequently enough to provide a clue to their characterization. Contrary to the interpretation of critics like Mulvey, Guenore and Heurodis wield sight as a tool to exert their own agency in the text, resisting the impulse of the poet and reader to reduce these characters to the single trait of beauty.

Both Guenore and Heurodis are introduced with the epithet “beautiful,” thereby grafting a function of sensory perception onto their existence, and they are largely silent. The trope of the

“lovely lady” may stem from oral culture, where traits are grouped together for ease of memory, enabling the recitation and performance of these highly lyrical, narrative poems. Oral cultures “prefer . . . not the princess, but the beautiful princess,” a grouping that resists dissection or analysis; that is, the trope renders the woman invisible by conflating her qualities with her existence (Ong 39). If this is true, the poem is structured in a way that makes it difficult for the reader to conceive of or refer to Guenore or Heurodis without reference to their beauty, particularly because they do not speak for themselves. In *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, not only is Guenore beautiful, but she is in fact described as “the most beautiful to see,” “*Pe comlokest to discrye*” (*Sir Gawain*, line 81).⁴ Rather than this description merely reinscribing passivity, however, a linguistic analysis of this text complicates the trope mentioned above. Here, “comlokest” (and “lovelokkest,” which appears in line 52) appears to relate to “loke,” meaning ‘look’ (Middle English Compendium). In other words, Guenore is the “comely-looking” or “lovely-looking.” There is an ambiguity here that attaches the adjective “comely” to both the lady and to the gaze itself: the most beautiful lady creates sight that, as she is seen, is itself beautiful. It seems that the woman is trapped within the perception of the men surrounding her, but this ambiguity suggests that her beauty creates an exchange of action, which is furthered by the order of the lines in which Guenore features. Within these lines, the “subject who looks” shifts between Guenore herself and the hypothetical observer. The adjective “comlokest” immediately precedes a description of Guenore’s own eyes and is followed by another third-person observation that, “*A semloker þat euer he syȝe / Soth moȝt no mon say*” (“No man could say truthfully / That he had seen a lovelier woman”) (*Sir Gawain*, lines 83–84). The effect of this shifting perspective is to create a web of perception between Guenore and the observer where

⁴ All translations are my own.

“feminine” qualities such as beauty and silence seem to be transferred through the act of looking. The very action that would seem to strip Guenore of agency (to be seen as an object) creates a tangible effect on the masculine observer and deprives him of some power of speech.

The same connections between sight, beauty, and silence populate the text of *Sir Orfeo* through the character of Heurodis. Practically, her function within the text is to spur the action of Orfeo, its hero, who loses his love and must regain her by undergoing trials to prove his worth. Even more so than in *Sir Gawain*, the woman exists as a vessel for the man’s love and as a symbol for his quest, and the structure of the linguistic descriptors attached to her confirm this. Heurodis is both the fairest lady and the loved one, an intermixing suggested by the physical description of her “bodi and bones” alongside the description “ful of love” (*Orfeo*, lines 54–55). She is a queen “of priis” (“of prize”) because of the value Orfeo attaches to her, and she is so beautiful “ac no man may telle hir fairnise” (“no man may tell of her fairness”) (*Orfeo*, lines 51, 56). Just as with Guenore, Heurodis scarcely speaks in this poem, and her beauty is described through outsiders, but the perception of beauty transfers silence to those who perceive her. Beauty grants power to the woman, and this becomes important to the plot when Heurodis discovers someone more beautiful than her and correspondingly loses agency. One of the strangest problems presented by the story is why, after dreaming of the “fair folk,” Heurodis immediately surrenders her willpower and joins their train before their king even threatens her with dismemberment if she fails to obey. When “to fair knightes” (“two fair knights”) tell her to follow them, she initially answers with “wordes bold,” (“bold words”); but, as soon as she sees the king and his hundred maidens, she follows without protest (*Orfeo*, lines 135, 139). As she recounts this to Orfeo, she continually emphasizes not the might or strength of this entourage, but their beauty: in fact, she marvels that “Y no sei3e never 3ete bifore/So fair creatours ycore”

“I had never seen yet before/Such fair, choice creatures”) (*Orfeo*, lines 147–148). It is as if finding herself inferior in beauty to the faeries strips Heurodis of her power and speech.

What the linguistic analysis of these descriptions shows is that the observer and observed are textually interconnected, closing the distance between the ontological qualities of being perceived and of perceiving. Generally, we understand that to perceive is to be a subject and to be perceived is to be an object. However, we cannot assume that sight is an activity which requires a passive object, such that the flow of volition proceeds one way only. Appearance is the “*action in which or by which the object produces a specific correlative percipient state in the subject*” (emphasis in original), which inverts what we implicitly believe: that sight is uniquely key to the subject-object power relation, but not only through the action of the subject (Bliss 397). Even for inanimate objects, an image exists only in “correlations between specific properties of the object and of the mirror and similarly specific impressions and dispositions of the eye and brain of the subject” (Bliss 397). This theory of correlation follows from philosophical realism, which posits that signs and images can “accurately or convincingly represent a reality” external to the perceiver (Ronen 186). Although theories of anti-realism have been propounded by philosophers as diverse as George Berkeley and Timothy Leary, realism will frame this consideration of ontology, particularly because it is useful for scientific concerns of perception. We assume that when an object is seen, the qualities that make it visible require positive existence—that is, Being—from the observer (whose eyes and brain develop the image) and also, crucially, from the object.

Sight is unique among forms of perception due to a property that philosopher Hans Jonas describes as “neutralization of causation” (507). A visual stimulus “leaves me still entirely free as to actual commerce, as I see without doing and without the object's doing anything” (Jonas

514). Whereas with touch and even hearing, something external to the object must exist in order for it to produce its effect (sound waves are not produced ipso facto by the sound-maker, and touch requires intercourse which changes the subject-object relation), sight is disinterested and unaffected, preserving the ontological reality of both subject and object. The object exists as it is, without relying on any support or intervention from the subject, and from this comes “the concept of objectivity, of the thing as it is in itself as distinct from the thing as it affects me, and...the whole idea of *theoria*” (Jonas 515). With the lens of realism, the action of sight creates correlations between the subject and object that close the distance between them, and in fact empower the object as the center of theory, or objective truth. We cannot presume that Guenore and Heurodis are dehumanized or stripped of volition by the fact that their descriptions are enmeshed in the quality of perception. It may be that perception is the key to unlocking characterization, a notion that has escaped the notice not only of readers but of other characters in the story.

The descriptions of Guenore and Heurodis seem at first to reify their status as objects before an audience, particularly before their love interests. On a dais, Guenore sits “grayþed in þe myddes,” (*Sir Gawain*, line 74) where “grayþed” is descended from an Old Norse word meaning ‘set’ (Middle English Compendium). The participle indicates that she is the object of the action rather than the subject, implying that Arthur set her there. Rather than having agency for her own dress, she is “dressed on þe dere des, dubbed al aboute” (“dressed on the costly dais, fashioned all about”) in fine fabrics which, the text reminds the reader, are the best which can be bought, “of prys wyth penyes to bye” (*Sir Gawain*, lines 78–79). This note about their cost may be a subtle cue that Guenore did not dress herself, nor could she have afforded her own clothes without the value given to her by the king; it is only due to his fortune that she is able to wear

such expensive fabrics. Guenore does not seem to take much pleasure in her own dress, at least not as indicated through what she does.

Much as she is swallowed in gems and furs, Guenore's only action is submerged in this text about the appearance of everything surrounding her. In between descriptions of how she is seen, the text tells us "Per glent with y3en gray" ("She glances with gray eyes") (*Sir Gawain*, line 82). As she is looked at, so she looks back, even though she merely "glances." This is a notably understated action for a hallway that teems with laughter and carousing, suggesting that she finds her view less worthwhile than it finds her. Guenore is mentioned only four times in this poem and has no share in its action, so only undercurrents can be drawn from the text, but there is already the sense that eyes of the beautiful, gazing back at the adoring throng, do not always reciprocate adoration. This strange removal and silence are, themselves, an act of volition. That said, the text sweeps past Guenore to locate Gawain and his struggles for moral knowledge at the center of the action, and she is a byproduct of his victory. It is only through connections to other texts, like *Sir Orfeo*, and close analysis of what it means to see and be seen that the reader can rediscover Guenore. While other characters act as though Guenore exists only as she is seen, my theory of realism and ontology requires that she exist apart from them in order to exert the influence of beauty.

In *Sir Orfeo*, Heurodis seems to look for beauty, unlike Guenore, who is apathetic, or even hostile, toward what she sees. Unlike tropes which suggest that the man falls in love with the woman for her beauty and the woman with the man for his strength, Heurodis looks for that which mirrors herself. When she goes outside to play, she goes "to se þe floures sprede and spring" ("to see the flowers spread and spring") (*Orfeo*, line 66), and these are flowers that have already been remarked upon for their beauty (*Orfeo*, lines 60–62). While asleep, she sees fairies,

who are the most beautiful creatures she has ever seen, which is troubling since it displaces the superlative title formerly given to her. She cries out something incomprehensible and scratches her face with her nails when she wakes before appearing to the king. Orfeo complains that “thy lovesum eyyen to / Loketh so man doth on his fo!” (“Both of your lovely eyes / Look as a man does on his enemy”) (*Orfeo*, lines 111–112). This is a fascinating line: why does Heurodis look at him as an enemy? Her “love-full” eyes have been sated with the beauty of the fairies she saw while asleep, and now Orfeo looks ugly by comparison. This is why her first action upon waking is to tear apart her own beautiful face, as though in an equalizing trade. As his beauty is reduced in her eyes, she finds an appropriate vehicle to display her discontentment and pain: by diminishing the quality that is most satisfying to him to see. This, in turn, causes him to feel great “pite,” an empathetic experience of her anguish (*Orfeo*, line 101). Their love, once satisfactory and christened by beauty, is replaced by grief and powerlessness as that beauty disappears. Guenore is powerless to resist the faeries, and Orfeo is powerless to stop her from leaving.

What space in the poem, exactly, do Guenore and Heurodis carve out for themselves through the act of perception? In the end of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, Gawain invokes Guenore to condemn Morgan, who he discovers is the source of the witchery that led him on his quest; he claims she came “For to haf greued Gaynour and gart hir to dyze / With glopnyng of þat ilke gome þat gostlych speked” (“to grieve Guenore and to prick her to death / With terror of that ghouls ghostly speaking”) (*Sir Gawain*, lines 460–61). Ironically, both Arthur and Gawain seem to project their own fear onto Guenore, the queen who never acts except by disinterested gazing. It is Arthur who secretly feels “wonder,” a word associated with puzzlement as with reverential fear; but by attributing the need for reassurance to Guenore, he can voice his

uncertainty while retaining manly royalty (*Sir Gawain*, line 467). Guenore reveals no emotional weakness of her own by speaking, but all we know is that she does observe.

The role of Heurodis provides more evidence for sight as a means of female agency. At the end of *Sir Orfeo*, Heurodis is looked at from afar as she rides past Orfeo. Orfeo breaks his oath never to look at a lady again, and the sight provides him an occasion to laugh, which he has not done for years: “That seigh Orfeo, and lough” (*Orfeo*, line 314). Their sport is “fair game” in his eyes, not just a reminder of the hunting he enjoyed as king but quite literally a beautiful sight (*Orfeo*, line 315). As Orfeo approaches the ladies, he sees Heurodis in their midst, and “Yern he biheld hir, and sche him eke” (“Yearning he beheld her, and she him also”) (*Orfeo*, line 323). From the placement of the adverb, there is textual ambiguity about whether she reciprocates his yearning, or just his gaze, but the context of the plot favors the latter. While he has wandered the wilderness, exiled by choice from his court and his home, she has lived in luxury and is now sporting with a group of female companions. Even her “fair game” suggests that she is capable of joy in his absence in a way that he is not. It may be argued that her place among the fairies is forced, but the silence that follows between them is strangely cold for a woman separated from her beloved. When she does cry, it is not so much that she misses him, but “For messais that sche on him seighe / That had ben so riche and so heighe / The teres fel out of her eighe” (“For wretchedness that she saw on him / Who had been so rich and proud / The tears fell from her eyes”) (*Orfeo*, lines 324–26). It is his slovenliness, his fall of station, that troubles her. She is “maked hir oway to ride” by the other ladies, interrupting the reader’s chance to understand her own wishes—whether she wishes to stay with Orfeo or not is left ambiguous (*Orfeo*, line 339). The next time he sees her, she is not seeking him but is asleep and sightless; even after he rescues her, she says not a word for the remainder of the poem.

Ironically, Heurodis exhibits the most agency when she is separated from Orfeo, which may be no accident. The final feature of sight which Jonas identifies is that of distance, and he points out that distance is never a negative feature for the viewer, but rather “a positive and not a defective feature in the phenomenal presence of the object” (Jonas 518). Increased perceptual distance gestures to infinity because it implies there are always more objects to be seen outside of the range of immediate viewing. Among the fair folk, Heurodis finds equality in what she sees and how she is seen, but more importantly, her literal range of vision has been expanded by traveling from her homeland. This “perceptual distance may turn into mental distance, and the phenomenon of disinterested beholding may emerge, this essential ingredient in what we call ‘objectivity’” (Jonas 519). It may be that Heurodis has gained a crucial ingredient of objectivity in how she views the world by being separated from her home and Orfeo. This, in turn, explains the puzzle of why she makes no move to approach Orfeo but does cry when she sees him: she observes him “fallen from grace” and mourns not only his former station, but the loss of a narrow perception that allowed her to see him as “riche and heighe.” Does she return willingly? In the remainder of the text, she recedes to the status of object, the prize won by Orfeo for his faithfulness, “brought...into the toun” (*Orfeo*, line 588). The shroud is drawn, and the reader is not permitted to know.

Returning to the basic picture of Guenore and Heurodis presented by the texts, I suggest that the initial monikers conferred upon the women (“comlokest”) correspond to the positive action of sight attributed to them. It is no accident that the text focuses on their “glances” just as it does on their beauty. Through this medium, they transmit beauty, silence, and fear to those who perceive them, and the metaphysical distance between perceived and perceiver shrinks, guaranteeing them ontological definition even in a text that resists their agency. The glance,

though subtle and oblique, resists the objectification that Arthur, Gawain, and Orfeo attempt, even if unwittingly, to foist upon them. As they are looked at, silently, stubbornly, they look back.

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Megan Crowe

Revolution and Resurrection:

Enjolras as a Christ Figure in *Les Misérables*

The archetypal Christ figure was pervasive in nineteenth-century art and literature. The story of Jesus Christ has permeated our society so deeply that the Christ figure has become a common literary trope in fiction. Authors use the Christ figure as a vehicle to present truths about God, hope, and justice. As one scholar notes, fictional transfigurations of Jesus “enable us to look at the Gospels from a new perspective” (Du Toit 819). In Victor Hugo’s *Les Misérables*, a novel containing abundant religious symbolism, biblical allusions often compare the protagonist Jean Valjean to Christ. While Valjean is the most obvious allusion to Christ in the novel, I believe the Christ archetype takes the form of the less prominent and often overlooked character, Enjolras.

Published in 1862, *Les Misérables* was a bestseller that critics of the time deemed the novel of the nineteenth century. Hugo’s gripping tale presents a vast portrait of the turbulent Parisian political landscape in the wake of the French Revolution. Although *Les Misérables* can be interpreted as a religious novel and Hugo himself was a man of faith, he did not necessarily subscribe to an organized religion. One scholar writes that the novel “underlines a spirituality that might not be apparent to readers who did not understand Hugo’s own spirituality which had developed in a manner divorced from the established church” (Fey 172). One could argue that Hugo’s paradoxical relationship to his own spirituality is reflected in the character of Enjolras. As David Bellos notes, “Hugo’s God is an externalization of moral conscience and a guide to

what duty is” (258). Like Hugo, Enjolras’s religious-like devotion to his country conflicts with his disdain for the state of French society and his willingness to dismantle the establishment in pursuit of equality for all.

Enjolras does not appear until the midway point of *Les Misérables*. From the moment he is introduced in the text, Enjolras is depicted as an archetypal Christ figure through Hugo’s descriptions of his character. Just as Jesus is portrayed as pure from sin, Hugo describes Enjolras in a similar manner: “He was serious, he did not seem to know that there was a being on earth called woman” and “Before anything but the Republic, he chastely dropped his eyes. He was the marble lover of liberty” (643). Enjolras embodies the purity of the Christ archetype, whose sole purpose is to carry out justice for the French people. Enjolras’s mission to deliver the people of France from the constraint of the monarchy mirrors the goal of the archetypal Christ to deliver His people to the kingdom of God.

Although his storyline is brief in relation to the other characters, Enjolras is instrumental in driving the main action for the second half of the novel. As the uncontested leader of a student-led political group known as the *Les Amis de l’ABC*, Enjolras’s desire for France to become a republic once more comes to a head when the June Uprising of 1832 occurs, and he finds himself leading a force of revolutionaries attempting to overthrow the king. Enjolras’s actions after the uprising is underway exemplifies a major theme of the novel: justice. Hugo subverts the traditional Christ archetype by writing Enjolras as a harbinger of justice. While Christ figures are typically written as calm and always morally upright, instead Hugo writes that Enjolras is “a charming young man, who was capable of being terrible” (643). While they strived to wage an honorable revolution, Enjolras witnesses one of the insurgents, Claquesous, shoot a man who refused them entry into a house. Without hesitation, Enjolras sentences Claquesous to

death and executes him for killing an innocent man. However, Enjolras condemns his actions, saying ““what that man did is horrible, and what I have done is terrible. He killed, that is why I killed him. I was forced to do it, for the insurrection must have its discipline”” (1110–11). One scholar writes that by vanquishing Claquesous, “the archangelic Enjolras will help bring about the age of brotherly love” (Grossman 133). Just as Christ can show deep compassion and mercy, Enjolras also demonstrates that sometimes terrible things must be done to achieve a better future.

Enjolras especially aligns with the portrayal of Christ in the New Testament. Similarities can be found between Enjolras’s final speech and the famous Sermon on the Mount in the Gospel of Matthew. Both Enjolras and Jesus are skilled speakers who deliver powerful sermons to their followers, often inserting rich metaphors and imagery in their language. In Matthew 5:2–12, Jesus preaches to the kingdom of heaven, assuring them, ““Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for so they persecuted the prophets who were before you”” (ESV). In *Les Misérables*, Enjolras also preaches to a “kingdom,” but his is an imagined kingdom after a revolution not yet won. Just as Jesus spoke to his followers from the top of the mountain about a future in the kingdom of heaven, Enjolras stands atop the summit of the barricade as he says, ““Citizens, do you imagine the future?”” (1185). He paints the future he believes their revolution will bring, one where everyone is equal, labor and education are available to all, and war and bloodshed are rendered unnecessary.

However, Enjolras is most representative of the archetypal Christ through his martyrdom. In the text, Hugo reinforces the connection between Enjolras and Christ by alluding to Jesus’s crucifixion in the Gospels of Mark and Luke. This first occurs when the National Guard enters the wine shop behind the barricade and discovers Enjolras is the lone survivor. Resigning himself to his fate, Enjolras calmly sets down his musket and crosses his arms over his chest,

saying, “Shoot me” (1246). He is then asked if he is the one who killed an artilleryman, which he confirms with, “I am.” This scene echoes the passage from Mark 15:2 where Pilate asks Jesus if he is the King of the Jews, to which Jesus calmly replies, “You have said so” (ESV). Enjolras’s solemn demeanor when confronted by the National Guard is reminiscent of Jesus’s simple, affirmative response and calm appearance in the face of death. In addition, Enjolras is the only rebel at the barricade to remain unscathed up until this point, maintaining a menacing majesty while surrounded by death and bloodshed. Like Christ, Enjolras manages to exhibit a divinely calm, untouchable demeanor leading up to his death.

In addition, Enjolras’s martyrdom is like Jesus’s crucifixion in that they both must die in order to bring salvation. In the letters of Paul, he stresses the importance of Jesus Christ’s death as a sacrifice for the sins of humanity. Paul states in Romans 5:6, “For while we were still weak, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly” (ESV). Therefore, the purpose of Christ’s presence on the earth is to die for us. Similarly, Enjolras’s ultimate purpose in *Les Misérables* is to be martyred to help bring about the glorious future of France that he prophesized. Enjolras’s progressive spirit amid adversity originates from Victor Hugo’s own utopian vision for France, as one scholar claims, “His faith in the future universal redemption was largely unaffected by the numerous setbacks inflicted to his ideals during his own lifetime” (Ousselin 32). Although there is little chance of the revolution succeeding, Enjolras and the other revolutionaries go to barricades to fight for the people of Paris. Even if the citizens refuse to join their cause, the revolutionaries retain hope that their memory will inspire future generations to continue their fight against tyranny. Enjolras proclaims in his final speech to the rebels: “I will die with you, and you will be born again with me. From the heavy embrace of all desolations brings faith. Sufferings bring their agony here, and ideas their immortality. This agony and immortality will

mingle and make up our death. Brothers, whoever dies here dies in the radiance of the future, and we are entering a grave illuminated by the dawn” (1187). Through his sacrifice, Enjolras becomes a martyr whose death helps ignite the fiery revolts that eventually overthrow the monarchy. Enjolras is aware that he must die to free the oppressed, just as Jesus had to die to redeem mankind. Symbolically, Enjolras’s sacrifice means nothing if no one recognizes his death, as one cannot truly know the power of Christ if they do not know the crucified Christ.

Right before Enjolras is executed, Grantaire wakes up from his drunken stupor and asks Enjolras permission to be shot alongside him. The two men often clash throughout the novel, for Grantaire is a constant thorn in Enjolras’s side and a cynical drunk who lacks faith in the revolution. However, by asking to partake in Enjolras’s fate, Grantaire not only proves that he believes in Enjolras but also in the future he has promised. Enjolras chooses to forgive Grantaire for his skepticism and grasps his hand, welcoming him in sharing his martyr-like death. This scene is a striking parallel to the crucifixion in Luke 23: 32–43, where one of the men being crucified with Jesus says, “Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom.” Though the man did not lead a virtuous life, Jesus ultimately forgives him and tells him, “Truly, I say to you, today you will be with me in paradise” (ESV). It is notable that at the time of both Jesus’s and Enjolras’s deaths, one person is present to see them for their righteousness and willingly sacrifices their lives for them.

One final aspect of Enjolras’s martyrdom that is redolent of the Christ archetype is how his body is positioned when he dies. Hugo heightens the brutality of the scene by writing, “Enjolras, pierced by eight bullets, remained backed up against the wall as if the bullets had nailed him there. Except that his head was tilted” (1248). Enjolras’s upright position, coupled with the bullets “nailing” his body to the wall and his head tilted, is symbolic of the crucifixion

of Jesus. The text does not specify whether Enjolras's head was tilted up or down, leaving the reader to wonder whether his head was tilted up towards heaven, or bowed down towards the fallen Grantaire, his apostle lying dead at his feet. While many archetypal Christ figures are resurrected, Enjolras's death is final. However, the bullets that pierce him suggest that even in death the ideals he embodies will live on and be reborn in the continued fight against injustice.

Despite the considerable parallels to the life of Jesus Christ, Enjolras is still disregarded as a Christ archetype. A possible reason for this is the fact that Enjolras does not always align with our preconceived idea of Christ figures in literature. According to one scholar, "The Christ figure of modern literature in his moral actions often does not reflect Christ at all" (Ziolkowski 6). The interpretation of the Christ figure will largely be determined by the author's own beliefs. Characters like Enjolras who embody Christ-like characteristics are dismissed as Christ figures because their conduct or ambiguous morality do not fit the mold of what we expect from characters modeled after Jesus. For instance, Enjolras's execution of Claquesous and his militant personality is incongruous with the kind of morality associated with Christ. However, by creating an unconventional Christ figure in the form of Enjolras, Victor Hugo presents a character that readers can relate to and use to question aspects of morality and Christianity that they otherwise would never have considered.

Of the characters in *Les Misérables*, the overlooked Enjolras is one of the most tragic. He falls under the umbrella of Hugo's characters who, as one scholar notes, "persevere in the good throughout but lose their loves in defense of a lost cause" (Fortin 132). I would argue that, like the death of Christ, the futility of the revolution never once dissuades Enjolras's faith in the possibility of creating a classless, truly democratic republic. Despite the odds and unfulfilled dreams, Enjolras is empowered to become the leader the *Les Amis de l'ABC* needs—a

revolutionary whose leadership seemed to find him rather than actively seeking to lead. Enjolras knows what he is fighting for and is prepared, and willing, to die for it. Whether the Son of God is depicted as himself or reincarnated in the form of a nineteenth-century French revolutionary, the presence of Jesus Christ remains as alive ever in literature.

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Ellen Kesler

“pay[ing] attention”:

Patience, Prayer, and a Posture of Humility in the Poetry of Mary Oliver

A few months ago, I heard a sermon in which the pastor described the mysteries of faith as “an altar at which we should bow in worship.” While I was struck by this image and initially satisfied with the preacher’s phrasing, I continued to consider the implications of his words. Over time, I grew increasingly restless. The paradoxes of faith, the unanswerable questions, the stories that leave us confuddled rather than comforted kept my mind wandering, not worshipping. While I do not think that there will ever be a day where I have answers to the myriad of questions that faith necessitates, engaging with literature and poetry that are concerned with making sense of the senseless through the written word aids in my contemplation of the mystical and sublime. The poetry of Mary Oliver encapsulates the tension between the mystical and the perceptible. In three of her poems, “Praying,” “When I am Among the Trees,” and “Logos,” Oliver uses natural imagery and simple descriptions of the divine to explore what it looks like to embrace the mysteries of faith and take on a posture of humility in prayer while attempting to comprehend faith’s imperceptible qualities.

Born in a suburb of Cleveland, Ohio, Mary Oliver spent ample time in her youth exploring the natural world, retreating to the woods near her house to write poetry. The use of natural imagery traditionally found in Romantic poetry permeates Oliver’s verses, and readers encounter the combination of these natural elements with the contemplation of the divine in her poem “Praying.” The poem begins with the comparison of prayer to things growing from the

ground and the subsequent juxtaposition between “the blue iris” (2) and “weeds in a vacant lot” (3). According to the speaker, prayer does *not* have to be “the blue iris,” although we might often feel the need to produce “blue irises” in our prayers. No, our prayers need only to contain the weeds in the parking lot, as long as we are “pay[ing] attention” (5). In many ways, paying attention to the simple or unnoticed beauty of life means listening. Although we may feel as if prayer is contingent on speaking or producing something beautiful, quieting ourselves and focusing our energy on reflection rather than recitation is sufficient for communion with the divine. She goes on to write that prayer is not “a contest but the doorway / into thanks” (7–8). These lines are particularly striking when read by someone raised within a context in which prayer often *has* been a contest, rather than a doorway. Sometimes public prayer becomes so saturated with Christian jargon, that the depth and holiness of the practice fades away. Prayer, as modeled by Christ, can take on a beautiful form when practiced individually. This is not to negate the impact of public prayer or the potential for problematic individual prayer, but rather to emphasize the importance of humility, thoughtfulness, and even silence in our prayer. Viewing prayer as a “doorway into thanks” and as “a silence in which / another voice may speak” (9–10) takes the impetus from the sender of the prayer and turns the focus on the recipient. Once again, prayer through silence shapes our experience with the divine. Oliver appropriates our ability to experience and interact with the natural world to engage in practices that might appear too mystical or insubstantial.

Her poem “When I am Among the Trees” encapsulates the importance of this engagement with the natural world to an even greater degree. This poem provides a pertinent exploration of the natural world and how our place in it should inform our posture as we walk through life. The poem begins “among the trees” (1), the speaker asserting that when in this

space, the trees “save me, and daily” (5). She goes on to say that when walking through the trees she does not “hurry through the world / but walk[s] slowly, and bow[s] often” (8–9). This appropriation and application of pious language to the context of walking through swaying trees provides a beautiful picture of what it looks like to participate in the natural world with a reverence that mirrors piety towards a transcendent God. She goes on to personify the trees, ascribing language to their stirring and asserting that they say to her “you too have come / into the world to do this, to go easy, to be filled / with light, and to shine” (14–16). In this instance, the trees occupy the status of a divine figure, affirming the speaker’s place in the world and providing solace for someone grappling with the complexities of existence. The image of a tree speaking truth and life to those who walk among them is extremely comforting. In taking on a posture of one who pays slow, humble attention to the natural world, we can experience a glimpse of that divinity through the sublimity of nature.

The final poem, “Logos,” is less concerned with our role in the natural world but perfectly encapsulates the desire for answers coupled with the acceptance of what cannot be readily understood within certain expressions of faith. This poem begins with the blunt statement, “Why wonder about the loaves and the fishes?” (1). As someone who struggles to embrace the legitimacy of miracles, who wants to know exactly *how* the food multiplied, I was taken aback by this line on my first encounter with the poem. Oliver follows this line with “If you say the right words, the wine expands” (2), which some might read as near sacrilege, but within this poem Oliver is concerned with language, particularly how our interaction with language shapes the way we view the mysteries of faith. But how are we to not wonder? If one is to read the story of Jesus feeding the five thousand, there is no logical explanation for the occurrences, but according to Oliver this event was and is “reality,” “plain,” and “mysterious”

(8-9). And of these qualities she implores readers to not “worry” but rather to “accept the miracle” and to accept “each spoken word / spoken with love” (13-15). To Oliver, the “ferocity” and the “necessity” of the love with which Jesus spoke led to an incomprehensible miracle. While it is easier said than done to not “wonder” about the legitimacy of the factual details of this story, Oliver provides us with a hopeful alternative: to listen and to speak with love, and to accept the goodness that follows.

Engaging with the written word is an effective outlet for many as we move through life working towards embracing the mysteries of faith. As someone who values the factual and the concrete, turning to expressive and poetic language aids in my acceptance of non-understanding. The poetry of Mary Oliver has helped in my attempts to grapple with the implications of the existence of divine presence through my interactions with the natural world and scripture. While the questions concerning the mystical and incomprehensible tenets of faith will persist, both reading and writing poetry provide a cathartic outlet for those wondering about loaves and fishes.

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Juliana Mink

“Why have you forsaken me?”:

Divine Silence in Religious Cinema and Literature

There is something deeply existential about churches and cathedrals. The look of them. The structure of them. The feeling I encounter inside of them. As I cross their thresholds, I am met with an unmatched metaphysical experience other synthetic structures fail to inspire. The stone pillars shoulder the weight of the heavy, ornate ceilings. The high roofs, flanked by buttresses, dwarf those praying in pews below, peaceful and contemplative. And it is quiet. So quiet. A shoe squeak, an abrupt laugh, a loud voice, all intrude into the silent space and breaks a kind of spell.

I think these places are designed to generate silence. Today, noise is the norm; we rarely escape the clamor of our everyday lives. Cars, chatter, music, podcasts, television, and constant social media scrolling create a cacophony of endless sound. When I enter the silence of a church or cathedral, I contemplate an existential silence that the noise of the world usually allows me to ignore: the silence of God.

I was not always so conscious of divine silence. I grew up in a Christian household and believed that my inherited religion would provide me answers, not generate more questions. But the more I grow and the more I sit with my faith and my God, the more elusive God seems to me, the more silent he seems to me. I feel increasingly akin to the churches I’ve sat in—tiny in my pew, I reach my concrete arms to heaven and hear only echoed silence.

I do not believe I am alone in this feeling, nor am I afraid of feeling God's silence: its existence is a reality. I reflect Emily Dickinson's sentiment, "I know that He exists / Somewhere—in silence—" (Dickinson, n. pag.). If God exists, indeed we would feel his silence at some point in our lives. The questions are, "How do we process the silence?" and "How do we respond to it?" As with other complexities of human existence, I turn to art for answers.

Because, like Dickinson, I often feel the painful confusion divine silence can cause, I find myself drawn to the art that does not shrink from the reality of God's elusiveness. These works provide a church-like atmosphere, a space to experience and reflect on the silence. Religious films such as *Diary of a Country Priest* (1954), *Ikiru* (1956), *Winter Light* (1963), *The Tree of Life* (2011), *Silence* (2016), and *A Hidden Life* (2019) pulse with existential themes. While there is certainly no shortage of non-religious existential cinema—such as *The Truman Show* (1998), *Melancholia* (2011), and more—overtly religious existential films resonate with me in a way these other films do not. Furthermore, these religious films are the antithesis of other Christian films, like *God's Not Dead*, with more propagandist intentions. Instead, the aforementioned films explicitly engage with the emotional reality of experiencing the silence of God. By utilizing religious language and symbols, they directly engage the *mysterium tremendum et fascinans* of God, which translates to "the mystery that repels and attracts." The phrase captures the simultaneous experience of the dread-inducing and compelling effects of the elusive nature of the divine. This mystifying tension of God's repellent and attractive silence is illustrated in Terrence Malik's *The Tree of Life*.

The film is anti-narrative, veering from traditional plot structures and capturing the emotional experiences of the characters in their rawest form. Perhaps the most pertinent of these emotions and spiritual explorations is the question of suffering and divine silence even in unjust

and unbearable human adversity. Drawing heavily from the Book of Job, the mother, Mrs. O'Brian, questions the sudden death of her son and her undeserved pain. Like the biblical character Job, she receives no immediate answers from God. The sound of her intimate, whispered prayers is layered overtop epic, wide-screen shots of the galaxy. She interrogates God directly, questioning, "Where were you?" (00:19:57), and "Did you know?" (00:21:08). However, the sound of her prayers weakens when juxtaposed with the shots of the sublime, cosmic grandeur of the universe, which demonstrate God's all-powerful nature. His holy and omnipotent characterization in these shots awes and attracts the audience and character, but the simultaneous reality of his silence hurts and confuses us. This tension is illustrated further through the placement of the audible prayers alongside the visuals of the cosmic universe, which emphasizes God's lack of response. It asks the question, which Malik continues to explore throughout the film, "Can a prayer so personal and small reach the all-powerful ear of God?" If it could, why does he not respond? Is it true that "He has hid His rare life from our gross eyes" (Dickinson, n. pag.)? Why has he hidden himself? Why is he silent?

The coupling of human suffering with the heaven-oriented question "Why?" intensifies our experience of God's silence. We want a burning bush to direct our paths. We want a whirlwind to bring forth YHWH's explanations of our unwarranted suffering. But it is often during suffering that God feels the most silent. Martin Scorsese captures the collaboration between our suffering and God's silence in his aptly titled 2016 film, *Silence*. Adapting Shusaku Endo's novel of the same name, the film is set in seventeenth-century Japan and centers around the persecution of the *Kakure Kirishitians*, the hidden Christians. Around forty thousand were persecuted, tortured, and martyred during this historical period (Deweese-boyd 1). Two Portuguese Jesuit priests, Rodrigues and Garrpe, played by Andrew Garfield and Adam Driver

respectively, travel to Japan to find their apostatized mentor, played by Liam Neeson. The men are scarred by the suffering they witness, and Rodrigues becomes plagued by the deafening silence of God in the face of such severe suffering.

After witnessing the torturous death of local Christians, Rodrigues prays, “I’m afraid. The weight of Your silence is terrible. I pray, but I’m lost. Or am I just praying to nothing? Nothing. Because you are not there?” (01:05:32). Undergoing suffering and filled with terror, Rodrigues confronts his worst fear: the silent absence of God despite human agony. Facing his execution, Rodrigues prays, “My God, my God why have you forsaken me? Why have you forsaken me? . . . Ludicrous. Ludicrous. Stupid. Stupid. He’s not going to answer. He’s not going to answer” (01:55:51). Interspersed throughout this prayer are three God’s-eye-view shots. The first images a Christian’s headless body being dragged across the sand, his blood trailing behind him (01:55: 27). The second is Rodrigues’s friend, Garrpe’s, drowned body splayed in sparkling water (01:55:38). Finally, a God’s-eye-view shot peers down at Rodrigues curled on the floor of his cell, weeping. (01:56:24). The shot’s angles imply a divine distance between the suffering subject of the shot and the silent perceiver. This causes us to ponder whether God silently regards the pain and death of these characters. During these shots, the film is absent of score and sound, except for Rodrigues choking out his panicked lament. The shots of the two deaths and the silence accompanying them mirror Rodrigues’s memory of the events. Recalling the brutal deaths, Rodrigues also recalls God’s constant silence throughout them. The absence of sound and score mirrors Rodrigues’s perception of God’s silence and further emphasizes both the horrific nature of the suffering and the terrible weight of divine hiddenness when Rodrigues’s needs for the voice of God is at its greatest.

Rodrigues's experience of God's silence led him to doubt God's goodness and existence. Similarly, Thomas, a Lutheran pastor, in Ingmar Bergman's *Winter Light* reckons with divine elusiveness, which causes his crisis of faith. The film's cinematography frequently utilizes chiaroscuro to express the encroaching existential darkness surrounding Thomas. Several times Thomas is backlit: a thin, pale slice of light shining around his profiled face. The darkness enshrouding him mirrors his battle against doubt, which is inspired by God's silence. When Märta Lundberg, Thomas's lover, asks Thomas what is wrong, he answers, "God's silence" (00:22:36). "God's silence?" she asks. "God's silence" he retorts (00:22:41) and the still camera lingers on a close-up of Thomas's defeated face. As this shot suggests, the film is less interested in theology and more interested in the effects of divine silence on the individual. To echo Rodrigues again, the terrible weight of God's silence causes us to fear and to doubt his existence.

Again, I ask myself why I am so drawn to these films. They are dark, pessimistic, and heavy: the antithesis of propagandist Christian films like *God's Not Dead*. I believe these films are so attractive because they capture the emotional reality of living under the gap between the divine and the human and the silence that ensues. Many times, we feel hurt and confused by God's silence. These films remind me of the lament psalms and are filled with characters like the psalmists who cry, ". . . if you be silent to me, I become like those who go down to the pit" (Ps. 28:1, ESV) and "How long, O Lord: Will you hide yourself forever?" (89:46). Just as these psalms are necessary in the Bible, so too these films hold their place in the canon of religious cinema because of their honesty and cathartic effects. The psalms and these films perform Edgar's call in Shakespeare's *King Lear* to "Speak what we feel, not what we ought to say" (5.3.324). Indeed, it can be deeply cathartic when we represent the real, emotional experience of divine silence.

Not only is divine silence a reality of being human, but it is also a reality of divinity: Christ himself in his last moments viscerally experienced the silence of God. Sexton tells Thomas in *Winter Light*, “The moments before he died, Christ was seized by doubt. Surely that must’ve been his greatest hardship? God’s silence” (00:44:34). In the Gospel of Mark, the night of his death, Jesus prays saying, “Abba, Father, all things are possible for you. Remove this cup from me” (Mark 14:36). This poignantly signals Christ’s anticipation of his suffering and his doubt that his death is necessary. He is, as we are, scared of suffering, pain, and death. But despite Christ’s doubt, he still goes to the cross where he encounters God’s silence. Hanging on the brink of death, he cries, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” (Mark 15:34), does not obtain an answer, only receives silence, and in the silence, “uttered a loud cry and breathed his last” (Mark 15: 39). Not only do the films which capture the pain of the silence of God reflect our emotional experience, but they reflect Christ’s reality. The silence we feel from God is a silence that Jesus also felt. Therefore, these films can be cathartic and comforting as we are reminded Christ knows the feeling of God’s silence in suffering just as we do.

But despite the cathartic effect of these films, after contemplating the existence of divine silence, I feel at a loss. I am still unsure of how to respond to the silence. After all, it is not as if I can engage in traditional conversation. As Herman Melville writes in *Pierre*, “Silence is the only Voice of our God. . . . how can a man get a Voice out of Silence?” (Melville, *Pierre* n. pag.). Ironically, however, I think Melville offers an answer in another one of his works. Ahab, the monomaniacal captain of the Peaquot in *Moby Dick*, is beset with the problem of divine silence in a cruel, suffering world. Ahab heaps all the silence of God and the suffering of humanity on the whale Moby Dick, creating the whale as a symbolic stand-in for God. Yearning for answers and understanding, Ahab implores a whale to “Speak, mighty head, and tell us the secret thing

that is in thee” (Melville, *Moby Dick* 280). But the head, and the God behind it, remains silent. Ahab identifies that “There is some insuffusing thing beyond [God] . . . thou too has thy incommunicable riddle” (450). But in the face of divine silence, Ahab wrestles with God until his death. He, “to the last gasp of [his] earthquake life,” disputed the elusive nature of God. Ahab declares, “I leap with thee, I burn with thee . . . defyingly I worship thee,” (450) and to the last, Ahab grapples with the God-whale. While Melville’s Ahab is an extreme case, I do believe there is a grain of truth in Ahab’s response to divine silence.

I believe this primarily because I think Ahab’s defying worship mirrors Job’s response to divine silence. Job encounters his unjust suffering and an elusive God and for 36 chapters, Job fights with God’s perceived injustice and silence. “I desire to argue my case with God” (Job 13:3), he says, and for thirty-six chapters, he does. When YHWH does respond, he tells Job, “I will question you, and you make it known to me” (38:3). But in Job 42, Job answers God and says, “Hear, and I will speak: I will question you, and you make it known to me” (42:4), repeating God’s previous words to Job. God responds by declaring Job has spoken rightly in arguing his case with God (42:7). I believe the Book of Job presents us with the possibility that God desires we contend with him throughout our suffering and his silence.

Divine silence is a reality of our lives. Its representation in religious existential films provides catharsis as we encounter authentic expressions of our experiences. It also provides comfort because the ultimate sufferer—Christ—also suffered under the weight of God’s silence. Therefore, while God may be silent, he also empathizes with the pain that his silence causes. As we confront divine silence, we are invited to continue to wrestle with God like Ahab and Job, like the characters in the films, and like Christ himself. We are summoned to explain to God our doubts of him as Thomas does in *Winter’s Light*. To lament the endless stream of unjust

suffering like Rodrigues in *Silence*. To cry out, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” as we experience suffering ourselves. And to never stop wrestling with the elusive, silent God until the last gasp of our earthquake lives, after which God will be silent no longer.

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Commentary

Eddie Smith

Wide Angle

**“Seeing is believing. . . . Am I right?”: Hero Boy’s Journey of Sight and Sound
in *The Polar Express***

“Well, I want to believe. But . . .” (*The Polar Express*, 0:26:26)

Introduction: Hero Boy in *The Polar Express*

When it comes to Christmas tales and Santa Claus, Robert Zemeckis’s 2004 film *The Polar Express* is a classic story to return to during the holiday season. It’s a mystical adventure in which a young boy hops on a magical train that travels through winsome wintry woods and snowy mountain summits on its way to visit Santa Claus at the North Pole. Upon arrival at Christmas town, the children get an insider view of the workshop as they watch the horde of presents get loaded onto Santa’s sleigh with thousands of elves dancing around the town square awaiting his arrival. And by the end of the book, the boy protagonist receives a special gift from Santa Claus that he cherishes for the rest of his life: a silver bell from Santa’s sleigh that represents the true spirit of Christmas.

Inspired by Chris Van Allsburg’s 1985 children’s book, *The Polar Express* film was released by Warner Bros. in November of 2004. Yet, while the film retains the imagery, plot, and central characters of the original, director Robert Zemeckis alters the spirit of the story by questioning the protagonist’s faith in Santa Claus. The first words of the 1985 children’s book read, “On Christmas Eve, many years ago, I lay quietly in my bed. I did not rustle the sheets. I breathed slowly and silently. I was listening for a sound—a sound a friend had told me I’d never hear—the ringing bells of Santa’s sleigh. “There’s no Santa,” my friend had insisted, but I knew he was wrong” (Van Allsburg 1). These words, with special attention to the statement of knowing that the friend is wrong, establish the boy’s character as a kid who undeniably believes

in the existence of Santa Claus and the spirit of Christmas. He waits up on Christmas Eve to hear the bells on Santa's sleigh and never doubts that they are real.

Hero Boy's character, however, is designed differently in the film. Rather than being an avid believer in Christmas, he is a skeptic who wants to believe but finds it difficult without visual proof of Santa's existence. Staying true to the warm pastel illustrations of the children's book, the film's opening sequence carries the quiet, peaceful tone of Christmas Eve. After the title card comes on the screen, surrounded by the night sky and drifting snowflakes, the frame tilts down slowly to show a row of winter houses before panning to reveal Hero Boy, sound asleep, in his bedroom. With this transition, we hear the first words of the film, Hero Boy's older current self, spoken in narration: "On Christmas Eve, many years ago, I lay quietly in my bed. I did not rustle the sheets. I breathed slowly and silently. I was listening—for a sound I was afraid I'd never hear—the ringing bells of Santa's sleigh" (0:00:43). Though these words almost identically match the children's book, the film alters a key part. It does away with the line about the boy knowing his friend was wrong in thinking Santa doesn't exist and then replaces that concept with a display of suspicion on Hero Boy's face. As Tom Hanks, the voice, begins speaking about listening for sleigh bells, the camera frame gradually zooms in to a close-up of Hero Boy's face as he lies in bed. Still in close-up when the speech stops, we suddenly hear bells ring in the distance, prompting Hero Boy's eyes to open wide and hesitantly move to look towards the window side of his room (0:01:05). From the description of the 1985 character, I would imagine his face to light up at that sound and that Hero Boy would immediately jump out of bed to greet Santa. But in the film, Hero Boy fails to smile in this moment and his actions of getting out of bed to peer out the window are delayed and doubtful. Instead of waking up to see a miracle, he gets up to prove a falsity.

This stark difference between the two “identical” protagonists becomes even more prominent throughout the film as Hero Boy constantly faces a reality that he struggles to believe in. Like in the picture book, he gets on the magical Polar Express train to ride to the North Pole, he sees elves in Santa’s workshop, he meets Santa Claus, and the story concludes with his possession of the bell of Christmas Spirit. However, what’s different about Hero Boy in the film is that these steps appear *necessary* to his declaration of faith in the end. In the book, the boy trusts in the spirit of Christmas and in Santa from the start to the finish. In the movie, it takes a whole journey of magical scenes before Hero Boy decides to believe. But although the premise of the film—Hero Boy’s corporeal visit to the North Pole—suggests that “seeing is believing,” I would argue that *The Polar Express* involves a more complex interpretation of the human ascent to faith. Rather than relying solely on the film’s visual design, Hero Boy’s journey to believe in Santa is also constantly shifted by the influence of what he hears. This leads us to decide, which feature of *The Polar Express* is more indicative of faith: sight or sound?

“Seeing is Believing” vs. Listening is Believing

While watching and studying *The Polar Express* as a student in my senior year of college, I increasingly find myself perplexed at why this was one of my favorite Christmas movies as a child. Discovering Santa Claus wasn’t real—sorry to be a skeptic, maybe I’m wrong—was one of the worst days of my life. Children aren’t supposed to doubt Santa Claus’s existence until they are older, yet *The Polar Express*, questionably labeled as a children’s movie, is astutely aware of the Santa Claus debate and puts Hero Boy, a child, under an intense—and confusing—trial of his faith. Thankfully, for all the children watching the film, there is a happy ending: Hero Boy decides to believe. But this is only *after* he physically goes to the North Pole and witnesses various paranormal events. So, what about those of us who don’t see Santa Claus

or hear the sleigh bells on Christmas Eve? Do we need visible proof of the other-worldly to trust in its existence? And if we don't get that, will we inevitably lose our faith?

This question, "does faith rely on what we see," is one to ponder in analyzing the plot structure and cinematic design of *The Polar Express*. Along his journey with the magic train, as well as during his time at the North Pole, Hero Boy often seems to focus more on *what* he is seeing and *how* he can see it rather than enjoying his time experiencing the supernatural. From the audience's outlook, most of the scenes that prioritize sight have their frames alternate between being inside Hero Boy's perspective and outside of it, allowing us to watch what Hero Boy is looking at. First, tracing back to the opening scene of the film, Hero Boy gets out of bed to investigate if Santa is at his house. After the brief exchange of us watching Hero Boy look out the window with the tilting POV shot indicating that he sees nothing mysterious, the investigation continues as he heads downstairs, and we see Hero Boy's disappointment each time he looks at the living room and nothing has changed: no presents under the tree, nothing is inside the stockings, and the cookies and milk are just as they were left (0:01:25-0:02:23). As I established earlier in pointing out that Hero Boy of the film is a skeptic rather than a believer, the disappointment that we see relates to his theory that Santa isn't real rather than being upset that he hasn't visited their house. Additionally, because these shots all intercut between the objects of sight and Hero Boy's face, we know that his skepticism feeds off his perception of real objects. This trend continues as Hero Boy begins his investigation of Santa, peeping through the door at his dad wearing a Santa hat, looking at magazines and news articles of fake department store Santa's, and reading through "The World Book" to discover the impossibility of life at the North Pole (0:03:19).

In the beginning, Hero Boy doesn't accept something as real by its sounds alone. The film introduces the arrival of the Polar Express with a gradual, jarringly loud series of noises that culminate in the whistle of the train seen through the smoke of the bedroom furnace (0:05:20). Hero Boy should know it is a train for multiple reasons. First, earlier in the bedroom he heard his parents say that the "express train wouldn't wake him up now" (0:04:50). Then, to accompany the piercing whistle noise, we repeatedly hear the unmistakable sound of the "choo choo" train. Yet, though we, from the film's title alone, know it's the Polar Express train, this doesn't seem to be enough for Hero Boy. In a full shot of him sitting atop his bed, Hero Boy looks out the window for the object of this noise. Yet, all that's visible to us is bright white and yellow lights—and this time, the shot doesn't cut to our view of what he sees, leading to the assumption that maybe he couldn't view the train at all (0:06:05). Instead, Hero Boy runs outside for reassurance of what he heard, and only then can we see the large locomotive covered in a pool of fog (0:06:27). With this unexpected sight, Hero Boy's journey soon becomes filled with several mysterious sights and circumstances that confuse his notion of reality. Without putting it there himself, Hero Boy finds a shiny golden ticket to ride in his robe pocket and, with eyes gaping wide, examines it up close to be sure it is real (0:11:50). In the famous "Hot Chocolate" scene, Hero Boy drinks hot cocoa while using a table with no base. Indicated by his knocking on the table and attempting to peer underneath it, Hero Boy at first appears perplexed by the event. But, trusting in what he tastes, he soon forgets to question it as he enjoys the bodily act of drinking his refreshment (0:15:32).

Continuing to view extraordinary spectacles, in attempt to save Hero Girl, Hero Boy ventures on top of the train and sees the Hobo playing music at a campfire, which miraculously stays lit while on top of the snow-covered train, riding 100mph in winter wind (0:23:41). Really, the

likelihood of this happening on top of a train is near impossible—so he should gather that something is off (or ghostly) about the Hobo’s existence. Yet, Hero Boy decides to trust him. And though he is surrounded by several “real” people on the train, the Hobo is the first one he talks with about his doubts in Santa’s existence, saying “Well, I... I want to believe... but” before getting interrupted with Hobo’s monologue about how “seeing is believing” (0:26:26).

Despite how obvious it is to us that the Hobo is a suspicious character, Hero Boy’s initial trust in him likely stems from the fact that the Hobo is constantly making himself visible—and real—to Hero Boy while Santa’s presence is mostly just words in another’s mouth. When Hero Boy, Hero Girl, and the Conductor almost fall off the side of the train, we see the frame zoom in to show Hobo’s hand grab the back of Hero Boy’s robe to stabilize them and pull them to safety. Upon feeling the impact, Hero Boy turns around to look at the source and the shot cuts to a low angle view of the Hobo looking at Hero Boy, where he whispers “shh” and then disappears before the others can see (0:37:49). Earlier in the film, Hero Boy makes it known to the Hobo that while he wants to believe in Santa, he is sure he does not believe in ghosts. From this interaction, after their conversation atop the train, we can conclude that the Hobo is trying to convince Hero Boy of two things: seeing is believing, and ghosts are real.

In another scene shortly after, the Hobo comes back to confront Hero Boy through a Scrooge puppet. At first, we see the puppet only as it moves its arm to rest on Hero Boy’s shoulder and then as it dangles around, frightening him with “a bunch of humbug” (0:43:57). With this line, the frame tilts upwards to reveal the Hobo manipulating the puppet’s strings and mouthing the words Hero Boy hears the puppet speak (0:43:57). Then, after we see the Hobo, the scene cuts to Hero Boy’s face where his eyes move downwards to face the scrooge puppet—and with this, he becomes frightened and tries escape quickly from the train car. As I’ve discussed, the POV of the

film constantly shows us what Hero Boy sees, making this another moment where he can feel and see the Hobo ghost interact with him. And because these cuts indicate that Hero Boy noticed it was the Hobo playing the role of the puppet, his fear shouldn't be coming from the creepy look of the doll. Rather, Hero Boy is frightened by discovering that ghosts are real, baffling his prior belief, and he is taken aback by the ghost's ability to verbally and physically manipulate him.

These two encounters with the Hobo serve different purposes in Hero Boy's adventure, as one helps him while the other frightens him. But both support Hero Boy's growing belief in ghosts by showing that he can *see* and *feel* the Hobo interacting with him. So, at this point in the film, Hero Boy consciously opens to the possibility that uncanny ideas and beings do exist. These experiences with the Hobo, alongside the ticket, the hot chocolate, and several other unmentioned scenes in *The Polar Express*, work together to prepare Hero Boy for visual proof of Santa's existence. And his previous expression of shock and confusion—when facing his golden ticket and the hot chocolate table—is noticeably absent on Hero Boy's face when the train finally approaches the North Pole. At the first sighting of Santa's elves, instead of showing them to us through Hero Boy's POV, we first see him excitedly look out the window. This is followed by the frame, not switching to his view, but zooming out to show both the train in the background and the elves marching to the town square (0:49:18). It's almost as though we don't need to view these things from Hero Boy's perspective anymore because his vision has become linked with a realization that the North Pole is real—as though he no longer needs to evaluate what he is seeing. Appropriate to this new outlook, while Hero Boy was reluctant to board the Polar Express in the beginning of the film, he doesn't hesitate to get off once he has arrived at the North Pole for the second half of his journey to see Santa Claus.

While these experiences of sight are vital parts of Hero Boy's journey on the Polar Express, his mental ascent to faith often seems to be affected more by what—and whom—he listens to. Even though Hero Boy sees a supernatural reality, his ability to perceive the magic wouldn't be possible without the sounds and voices that push him and challenge him in the moments leading up to his final declaration of belief in the film's climax.

Once again recalling the first few scenes of *The Polar Express*, after Hero Boy abruptly stops his research on Santa, he rushes to pretend as though he is asleep while his parents check on him. At first, we see a full view of Hero Boy lying in bed while his parents stand by his bedroom door in the background. When they approach his bedside, the frame slowly zooms to focus solely on Hero Boy's upper body as he hears his dad say, "an end of the magic" after having talked about Hero Boy's fading belief in Santa (0:04:29). Upon immediately hearing these words, Hero Boy's eyes open widely, much like when he heard a fake sleigh bell in the opening scene of the film. Then when his parents leave, we hear an echo of Hero Boy's voice repeat that phrase: "end of the magic" (0:04:55). But unlike Tom Hanks's assured speech, voice acting for the father who doesn't believe in Santa, the inner voice for Hero Boy makes the phrase sound unsure and perplexed, as though he needs to mentally—and physically—decipher what he heard his father say in confidence. In addition to this voiceover, he keeps his eyes open to stay awake and ponder what his father meant by fading "magic." With eyes closed, Hero Boy holds the calm presence of a kid asleep at night, not preoccupied with trying to see things to believe in their existence. But when Hero Boy hears his dad's assured disbelief, that presence is replaced with the compulsion to see and think about what he believes.

Unable to figure out the truth, Hero Boy drifts back to sleep without coming to a solution. But Hero Boy's eyes then reopen when he wakes up to another sound of sleigh bells paired with

the loud movement of clutter in his room (0:05:20). This moment in the film, marked by when Hero Boy wakes up to noises accompanying the arrival of the Polar Express, was clearly designed to be loud and momentous. Yet, when Hero Boy runs downstairs, the rest of his household is quiet; his parents and sister did not wake up to the sounds. The film places a peculiar emphasis on how sounds disturb Hero Boy's conscious. The same happens when he is deciding to get on the train. While peering at the grand sight in front of his house, what causes Hero Boy to break focus from looking at the Polar Express is yet again, a voice, this time of Tom Hanks as the Conductor shouting, "ALL ABOARD!" (0:06:27). Hero Boy, startled, turns around at the sound and slowly walks to him, not saying anything but rather focusing intently on what he is seeing: a seemingly real person aboard a train that should not be real. The Conductor, however, quickly interrupts Hero Boy's thoughts—not allowing him to finish deciding if what he sees is real—by saying assertively, "Well? You comin'?" (0:07:50). After this conversation, Hero Boy boards the train and then just a few moments later, he moves to the passenger cart again per request of the Conductor (0:09:18). So, while it is important to recognize Hero Boy's desire to associate sight with reality, these opening moments reveal that the interference of sound is what pushes him to start the journey to the North Pole and, likewise, to his acceptance of faith.

Using sound and voice as Hero Boy's guiding conscience continues through the film regarding his relationship with the Hobo. As discussed earlier, the Hobo is a character who simultaneously confuses and supports Hero Boy in his pursuit of believing in Santa's existence. By his constant effort to disappear in front of Hero Boy, Hobo's character is a staple figure in the argument that the film champions the concept of "seeing is believing." However, taking a closer look at Hero Boy's first verbal encounter with the Hobo proposes an opposite reading. It's first important to notice that Hero Boy is not introduced to the Hobo through catching sight of him;

he instead hears faint music playing in the distance that causes him to approach the object of that sound and *then* he sees the Hobo on his instrument in front of the fire (0:23:41). The rest of their encounter in this moment revolves around the Hobo's act of speaking *at* Hero Boy, vocally dominating the scene. While Hero Boy listens, the Hobo speaks loudly about the fact that he rides the train for free, believing himself to be the "King of the North Pole." When Hero Boy questions him, he strikes back by humorously impersonating Santa's "hohoho." And then when Hero Boy starts to explain why he struggles to believe in Santa Claus, the Hobo interrupts him to insert his own long speech saying, "BUT... you don't want to be bamboozled. You don't wanna be led down the primrose path. You don't wanna be conned, or duped, have the wool pulled over your eyes, hoodwinked, you don't wanna be taken for a ride railroadin'... Seeing is believing, am I right?" (0:26:39). First, these words all assert that the Hobo knows Hero Boy's problem with the notion of "seeing is believing," each line being indicative of how people are "duped" by what they see or don't see. Ironically, that is exactly what the Hobo's speech does to Hero Boy—it bamboozles him into thinking he is dreaming, its volume prevents him from having his own thoughts, and it makes him question all he has seen and heard while on the train.

As the Hobo speaks, the shots intercut to show Hero Boy frightened and intently listening to his words (0:26:26). Clearly affected by what he's heard, Hero Boy questions the Hobo for clarification on his journey. When he asks, "But what about this train," the Hobo responds saying "what about it?" When he asks, "we aren't really going to the North Pole, aren't we," the Hobo says with a mocking tone, "aren't we?" Both responses fail to answer his questions, rather they come across to Hero Boy as sarcastic and sardonic, convincing him that nothing he is seeing is real. Hero Boy asks once more, "are you saying this is all just a dream?" To this, the Hobo forcefully taps Hero Boy with his drink and says, "You said it, kid! Not me." This last bit is what

causes Hero Boy to go into crisis on top of the train, under the impression that it was all in fact, a dream. But the Hobo was right, it *was* him that said all those things, not Hero Boy. So, in his heavy-handed, twisted speech, the Hobo seems to know that the best way to convince a confused believer is by making them try and decipher the truth about what they hear. And once the Hobo knows the effect of his words, the rest of his appearances revolve around forcing the “seeing is believing” idea onto Hero Boy.

Even though this moment temporarily derails Hero Boy by putting him in an overwhelming state of confusion, other sounds and voices continue to help him find the way to his own conscious decision to believe. After the series of chaotic events with the train on Glacier Gulch and the cracked ice, Hero Boy has a brief conversation with the Conductor about witnessing miraculous events. Reflecting on what just happened to them, the Conductor discusses how there was a time a few years ago when “some thing” saved him from falling off the train. Applying the description to what he’s experienced with the Hobo, Hero Boy says to the Conductor, “Well, what did he look like? Did you see him?” In this moment, the Conductor pauses to look at Hero Boy, likely noting his personal confusions on the existence of ghosts, and says in confidence, “No sir. But sometimes seeing is believing. And sometimes the most real things in the world are the things we can’t see” (0:41:42). This dialogue in the film can be compared directly to Hero Boy’s encounter with the Hobo on top of the train. In both instances, Tom Hanks’s character asks Hero Boy to decide what he believes in, a decision that no one can make for him. The Hobo taunts Hero Boy by looking intently at him saying, “Seeing is believing, am I right?” And the Conductor offers Hero Boy an unsolved solution to his question of existence by using the word “sometimes” to define what relationship sight has to belief. However, while the Hobo slows his speech on the part about “seeing is believing,” the Conductor acts as a foil to his character by

quickly bypassing that line himself and placing most of his vocal emphasis on the last line, the notion that “the most real things . . . are the things we can’t see.” What Hero Boy wants is the ability to believe the ghost was real by hearing that someone else has seen him too. But the Conductor doesn’t do this. He instead plants a new idea in Hero Boy’s head: that belief doesn’t require sight and that what’s most real often can’t be seen—like sound waves.

At this point in the film, when the train arrives at the North Pole, Hero Boy has yet to come to any conclusion about believing in the existence of Santa Claus and supernatural Christmas spirits. What he hears and sees have, up to now, worked together to confuse him and to push him in opposite directions, resulting in his failure to hear the sounds that Billy and Hero Girl rely on to lead them back to the Christmas Eve festivities. He’s seen elves and presents. He’s heard proof of elves monitoring real-world kids by hearing them call out an address close to his own and then watching a video of the naughty child (0:56:00). He’s seen Santa’s sleigh and reindeer magically flying in the air, all things that go back to the shot-reverse-shot style to show us what he’s viewing and how it makes him feel (1:07:33). From his expressions of awe and excitement, these scenes should point towards Hero Boy’s decision to believe because he is seeing all the phenomena that he used to doubt. Yet, everything changes when the question of sight and sound comes together as the elves bring out the row of sleigh bells. Put in Hero Boy’s perspective again, we expect to hear the bells’ sound when the elves shake them. That doesn’t happen. Instead, we hear only loud cheering and celebrating, and we see Hero Boy back in the frame, appearing confused and disappointed (1:08:19). He had thought the Hobo was real because he could see him and hear him speak. He had thought the train was real because he watched it go through the journey, he heard the whistles, and he talked with the other passengers. So, if those things exist and if he can see the bells, why can’t he hear them?

When Hero Boy is finally at the point where he can figure out once and for all if Santa Claus exists, his sight fails him—and it fails us. To welcome Santa’s entrance, the elves all start to sing “Santa Claus is Comin’ to Town” and when it’s time, we hear a loud door swing open and see the large shadow of Santa Claus appear as everyone erupts in cheers (1:09:06). Instead of showing us Santa’s image, the shot transitions right back to a medium shot of Hero Boy attempting to see Santa. Again, we go into his perspective and instead of seeing Santa’s face, Hero Boy’s vision is blocked by several elves stacked on top of each other (1:09:55). In realizing this issue that sight cannot solve his problem, Hero Boy is forced again to confront his earlier problem of not hearing the sleigh bells. By what can be assumed as fate, Hero Boy’s eyes are naturally drawn to a single bell that appears to be loose from the rest. In close-up from Hero Boy’s perspective, we follow the bell as it becomes detached, rises in the air, and falls to roll on the ground beneath everyone’s feet (1:10:46). While neither we nor Hero Boy could hear the bells ring when they were first brought out, in this moment all other sounds in the scene become drowned out by the sound of the bell hitting the ground and rolling towards Hero Boy—like a sound that was calling him to confront his reality. While picking up the bell, he attempts again to hear its ring and instead hears the word “doubt” echoing in his ear, like a spoken indicator of what his problem has been all along. As though he listened to what the bell told him and understands the problem, Hero Boy responds to it saying, “Okay. Okay,” and then he closes his eyes. With eyes closed, this time Hero Boy is the one talking to himself, repeating the words “I believe” until he rings the bell once more (1:11:36). Both we and Hero Boy hear the sleigh bell’s beautiful sound, and we are rewarded with the notion that beauty arrives with finding faith and individually making the decision to believe in something. While Hero Boy tried so hard to believe in Santa based upon all the other sights he saw leading up to this scene, he doesn’t see

Santa Claus until this moment. And the film's first sighting of Santa is not from Hero Boy's perspective, but it is instead shown through the reflection of the sleigh bell (1:12:20). As if Hero Boy has redefined his faith by joining Santa in the spirit of Christmas, we see both Hero Boy's reflection and Santa Claus's looking down on him with pride. And though he did see Santa Claus in the end, Hero Boy's faith manifested itself through the bell in the film's defining moment.

From this point on, Hero Boy returns to his 1985 self. He now visually hears and feels joy from the glorious sound of sleigh bells (1:15:40). When one of his friends asks him if it was "nothing but a dream," he confidently says "no" and goes back to enjoying the sight of Santa flying away on the sleigh (1:17:59). And in the end, the shot focuses on the bell sitting on the table on Christmas morning as the narrator recites the same classic ending: "At one time most of my friends could hear the bell. But as years passed, it fell silent for all of them. Even Sarah found one Christmas she could no longer hear its sweet sound. Though I've grown old, the bells still rings for me as it does for all who truly believe" (1:30:30).

Conclusion: Sound as Worship?

Tracing back to my question from earlier, what is *The Polar Express*'s stance on if we need to see something to believe in it? Ultimately, as I've discovered through writing this, I don't think there is one answer to the question. The film engages multiple concepts of belief that don't all work together in a comprehensive reading of faith and existence. I know what I believe when it comes to having faith. And while several people likely feel the same, others will feel differently. But the film's purpose is read separately from its viewers' stance on religious faith. Trusting his statement that it was not just a dream, we know that Hero Boy did in fact experience this entire journey of seeing sights that are unordinary, surreal, and magical. Sure, I'd believe in Santa Claus if that had all happened to me—no doubt. But since Hero Boy's sight of the bells

didn't directly equate to his faith (i.e., feeling the spirit of Christmas by hearing the bells ring), is sound that much more a representative of faith in *The Polar Express*? If still gifted with the sleigh bell on Christmas, could Hero Boy have become a believer without going on the whole journey to the North Pole? And in our world, if we listen for the voices of others and the sounds of spirits, would that be enough to lead us to believe?

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