LITERATURE AND BELIEF

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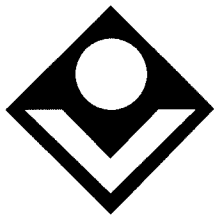

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Book Review

Thick and Dazzling Darkness: Religious Poetry in a Secular Age. **By Peter O'Leary. Columbia UP, 2017. 280 pp. $60.**

In addition to *Thick and Dazzling Darkness: Religious Poetry in a Secular Age*, Peter O'Leary is the author of a monograph on the poetry and poetic lineage of Robert Duncan. O'Leary's earlier study—*Gnostic Contagion: Robert Duncan and the Poetry of Illness* (2002)—situates Duncan vis-à-vis the modernist H. D. and the contemporary poet Nathaniel Mackey, claiming that a study of Duncan reveals a correspondence between the language of illness and "a religious perception of poetry and the cosmos" (20). In order to extend his meditation on concordances between religion, poetry, and the cosmos, *Thick and Dazzling Darkness* sees O'Leary reprising Duncan and Mackey, as well as several other contemporary poets, including Frank Samperi, Robinson Jeffers, Geoffrey Hill, Lissa Wolsak, Fanny Howe, Joseph Donahue, and Pam Rehm.

O'Leary's new book can be looked at as a sequel to *Gnostic Contagion*, which explores the role of gnostic or extrarational insight in the poetry of H. D., Duncan, and Mackey. As O'Leary expands the

stakes of his tent to consider a broader range of writers, he turns his focus from—but does not lose sight of—the diagnostic angle onto contemporary American poetics that he explored in *Gnostic Contagion*, in order to reflect on the role of religion, religious language, and a religious imaginary in the tradition of American experimentalism. As it turns out, O'Leary's book is as much a call for, as a study of, "religious poetry in a secular age."

While O'Leary uses a traditional definition of the word "secular" (deploying Peter Berger, Charles Taylor, and Talal Asad as a critical framework), his definition of the word "religious" feels far more idiosyncratic. O'Leary begins by specifying he does not aim to consider "spiritual" poetry, but more properly religious poems. He sees religious poetry as writing that emerges out of a tradition of "institutional, doctrinal adherence," and further points out that poetry and religion are comparable institutions in that they both share an integral sense of tradition (7). That being said, not all of the poets in his book identify explicitly with a religious tradition as an institutional entity, and so O'Leary is obliged to expand his definition. Thus, contemporary American poets either "activate religious meaning"—by which O'Leary means "the mysterious and revelatory properties" of language or "the feelings readers get of a religious meaning made and unmade" that behaves similar to institutionalized religious language and ritual—or poets use religious material in order to deliver more straightforward "religious expressions" (8). Fewer poets in O'Leary's study engage with religion in those latter, more conventional terms. Instead, most of the poets considered use epistemological structures and linguistic tactics analogous to those deployed in mystical, often medieval, Christianity. For O'Leary, such tactics center around the Dionysian concept of "anagogy," whereby the meanings of words are magnified along the order of a spiritual hierarchy. O'Leary compares the result to metaphor, thus aligning mystical and poetic meaning-making techniques (8). O'Leary's sense of religion is idiosyncratic insofar as it is mystical, extra-rational, unsayable, and fundamentally apocalyptic.

At the end of his book, O'Leary most powerfully articulates his own particular vision of the aureolic overlap between poetry, religious poems, and religion. He writes:

> Religious poetry filters the higher energies in. As readers, we seek these energies, drawing power from what this poetry releases into us. No matter what the age declares of itself, no matter how absent of spiritual truth and tendency you operate, there is beneath the loquacious level that your rationalism inhabits a deeper level to your nature where intuitions and occult convolutions gather and where, even deeper, a darkness emanates the material of creation. [Religious] poetry . . . narrates and demonstrates that dark energy, an unconsuming fire in which our imaginations come most intensely to life. (220)

This passage contains too much to parse in detail here, but notice (as an illustration of O'Leary's specific religious vision) the passage's emphasis on occultism, darkness, depth, transcendence, imagination, and psychology. Such a panorama stands in as a good portrait of O'Leary's specific engagement with religiosity and its possible application in poetry.

Thick and Dazzling Darkness develops loosely along parallel historical and cosmological chronologies, beginning with chapters on Samperi and Jeffers and culminating in a chapter on "Apocalypticism," where he considers the poetry of Pam Rehm and Joseph Donahue, the latter of whom O'Leary serves as publisher (O'Leary's press, Verge Books, published Donahue's *Dark Church* in 2015). In his chapter on Samperi, O'Leary examines his subject's "Catholic vision of the universe"—specifically, Samperi's "mystical theology of angelic despair" (25–26). O'Leary argues that Samperi has much to contribute to the canon of mystical, visionary poetry (à la Blake) by making "modern" a "Medieval Christian imagination" (27). O'Leary's chapter on Samperi is unique in that it is not filtered through a religious vision steeped in vitriol, spleen, jeremiad, apocalypse, and darkness, as is much of the rest of the book.

Indeed, O'Leary shows how the famous vitriol and difficulty of the poetry of Robinson Jeffers and Geoffrey Hill can be embraced as components of their respective religious poetic projects. Jeffers' "inhumanism aligns with catastrophic wisdoms of Gnosticism, which it

seems to modify for modernity" (57), while Hill's strenuous, uninhibited, errant, and self-rectifying poetry is symptomatic of his "effort to regard language as a kind of religious experience, not merely as its vehicle or its recorder" (85).

O'Leary devotes two chapters to Robert Duncan, the first focusing on Duncan's austere and uncompromising sense of poetry's inviolable, scriptural qualities. O'Leary describes Duncan's sacral approach to typography as "Quranic" and points to the poet's sense of the prophetic possibilities of the poem, wherein the "teleology of meaning is catastrophe" (111). O'Leary's second chapter on Duncan, which follows the chapters considering Lissa Wolsak and Fanny Howe, considers Duncan's structural deployment of the Celestial Hierarchy. As in his chapter on Samperi, O'Leary reflects on the presence of angels and angelology in order to illustrate Duncan's sense of underlying "poetic realities" or "metaphorical realities" that mirror traditional Christian metaphysical realities (160–61).

O'Leary understands Wolsak as a theological poet insofar as her poetry "is the sense by which unusurped spiritual realities are perceived" (119). Wolsak's poetry employs "difficulty" as a tool, which, like "religious language, . . . begins in intelligibility but then begins to, or seeks to, move beyond it" (116). Howe, on the other hand, channels an institutionalized theology, Catholicism, into her poetry in more immanent, socially configured ways. All the same, O'Leary claims that Howe's existential, "atheistic" Catholicism—reportedly central to any reading of her poetry—is overarched by a "viciously critical sense of justice" rooted in a metaphysical understanding of the universe, wherein "human misery is the precondition of justice and love" (136). Ultimately, O'Leary resolves Howe's idiosyncratic Catholicism into a "mysticism of doubt" (151).

In the final chapters of the book, O'Leary considers Nathaniel Mackey, Joseph Donahue, and Pam Rehm. After Duncan, Mackey employs a difficult esotericism as a way of engaging the "transrational phenomena that occupy the peripheries of our perceptions" (181). The result is a "negative epistemology" whose "secret knowledge . . . is one of ruinous, catastrophic, vexatious, interminable truth, rather than of transformative liberation" (186). According to O'Leary, Rehm and Donahue differently engage in "apocalypse" as a "genre" (192)—the former by "expressing the oppressing realities of the present" and its political economy (213) and the latter by developing an esoteric, "hierognostic" poetry that mediates between visionary realities and absolute reality (201–04).

Each chapter in O'Leary's book contains provocative and insightful critical interventions. I found O'Leary particularly compelling in his neuropharmaceutical reading of the poetry of Geoffrey Hill. O'Leary implicitly appropriates Hill as an "American" poet insofar as his later poetry is mediated through his encounters with the American psychiatric and pharmacological apparatus. O'Leary's biopolitical rendering of Hill's religious poetry is as deft as it is daring and contributes a radically new sense of Hill's important oeuvre. Additionally, I am energized by O'Leary's sense that difficult, experimental poetry—when routed through the lens of religious studies—can refract into and retain new possibilities of psychological significance. It recovers the reading and writing of linguistically difficult poetry beyond its usual application as a merely stylish idiom.

Ultimately, O'Leary's arguments are as much about secularism, and religious poetry, as about poetry writ large. Underlying O'Leary's reading of ten contemporary poets is the radical, oft-repeated claim that poetry and poetic language refer or correspond ultimately to metaphysical realities. Indeed, at the end of his book, O'Leary offers "apocalypticism" as a "Way Forward for Poetry," explaining that "apocalyptic poetry . . . is language charged with the power to reveal sacred reality, in history and beyond it" (191). According to O'Leary, each of the poets analyzed in this book use their work to articulate or interact with a "sacred reality." It is a substantial claim, and one with a long and substantial history.

O'Leary situates his book as a contemporary study of American religious poetry (with the exception of Hill) and traces the tradition back to the twin fountainheads of Whitman and Dickinson. Whitman and Dickinson, of course, owe much to Emerson, who understood religion and poetry as means to achieve metaphysical transcendence. For Emerson, the poet functioned as a mediator between an ideal, cosmic, or sacred realm, and its earthlier corollary. It

is no mistake that a discussion of contemporary religious American poetry should involve a discussion of the American Romantics; to that end, O'Leary's final chapter on Apocalypticism and poetry examines a literary journal, *apex of the M*, which "espoused an expressivist poetics and return to romanticism, in which 'the poet finds forms of spiritual synthesis in the world'" (194). As O'Leary observes, in addition to claiming the transcendental, idealist assumptions of romanticism, the editors of *apex of the M* foregrounded the "religious concern that set off the journal distinctly from the theoretical and material concerns that seemed to define Language poetry at the time" (194). Iconoclasm and originalism, of course, are venerable traditions in the American liberal context.

It is worth pointing out two consequences that follow from O'Leary's claim that within the religious poem dwells "the prospect of law, covenant, revelation, and genuine power" (2). First, as I have suggested, O'Leary's text should be read as much as a handbook as an academic monograph. Read this way, it offers a scholastic manifesto of sorts. As O'Leary states, *Thick and Dazzling Darkness* is as much a book about a "handful of modern and contemporary poets working in North America," as it is "about writing and reading religious poetry in a secular age" (2). Specifically, O'Leary's text is useful for re-visioning the "difficulty" of contemporary poetry through the lens of theology, which refracts the cryptic language sometimes employed by modern and postmodern poets and reveals its Esoteric, Gnostic, and Apocalyptic possibilities.

Second, O'Leary blurs the line between poetry and religion as ways to encounter nonhuman cosmic orders. For instance, his reading of Wolsak's theoretical "beyondsense," Mackey's negative poetics, Hill's regard of language as a "religious experience" in itself (85), Duncan's sense of "poetic reality" (160), and Rehm's political and economic engagement with Apocalypticism are several examples of how language appears to substitute religion and religious content as the vehicle for transcendence (and not necessarily deific transcendence, either). O'Leary's portrayal of poetry as a kind of religion is consistent with his reading of H.D., Duncan, and Mackey in *Gnostic Contagion*:

> When I refer to Duncan, H.D. or Mackey as religious poets, I do not mean that they have religious aspirations outside of the poem. They devote themselves to 'orders' of poetry, to the 'trouble of the unbound reference' (as Duncan calls it) with a religious fervor, because only in poetry do they find the revelation that gives order to creation and the cosmos. (25)

While O'Leary advances fairly strict theoretical definitions of what counts as religious at the outset of his book, in *Thick and Dazzling Darkness* religion and religiosity are often understood as psychosomatic experiences of transcendence modulated through experimental language. In the case of these ten poets, such language either directly borrows its rhetorical strategies from a mystical Christian tradition which already prioritizes an individual, as opposed to institutional, relationship with the divine, or it appears to mirror those historically anchored strategies. Wherever poetic language eclipses religion in *Thick and Dazzling Darkness*, O'Leary claims may apply more to postsecularism than religiosity in a secular age.

Despite its unusual engagement with these terms of debate, O'Leary's book is a methodologically diverse, playful, and attentive reading of ten contemporary poets. O'Leary's prose, which reflects the "occult convolutions" (220) he sees rippling through the history of American poetry, is alone worth the sale price. As a parting gift, take, for example, O'Leary's typically iconoclastic account of the relationship between the English language, the King James Bible, and the poetry of Geoffrey Hill:

> To repeat: All religious poetry addresses religious language, even as it arises out of speech. Ideology, faith, discernment, revelation: if turned to verse, these become adornments of religious language. English should be reckoned as one of the greatest proselytizing languages in human history. English was calcified, ensinewed, and muscularized in the Wycliffe sponsored New Testament, then a century and a half later in Tyndale's majestic one-man show, for which he was

burned. Even today, the most beautiful, most majestic writing in English, into which Tyndale's versions are almost wholly absorbed, is the Authorized Version, or the King James Bible, as we commonly call it. The muscle of our tongue is rooted in dewy, disobedient Genesis, shaped by covenant and law, flexed in prophetic utterance, then is pressed against the teeth of crucifixion to clap against the roof of apocalypse. (89)

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Contributors

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Jacqui Larsen has shown her work in New York, Illinois, Texas, Utah, California, and at the Millennium Arts Center in Washington, D.C. The recipient of numerous grants, awards, and fellowships, she uses found text, patterns, and images in both her collages and paintings. Her work can be seen online at www.jacquilarsen.com.