

Hank Lazer

Returns: Innovative Poetry and Questions of “Spirit”

The history of poetry in our century is only superficially the history of the struggle to make it new. More enduring is the struggle to regain the definition of poetry as spiritual ascesis.

—John Taggart, “The Spiritual Definition of Poetry”

Of course “spirit” is a topic that should produce squeamishness. In poetry, it is one of many areas that have been compromised by a contaminated, habit-ridden rhetoric. Like “personal expression” or an ego-based lyricism or linear personal narrative, “spirit” has become a too easily learned mainstream craft. In the case of “spirit,” the commodification via advertising and pop culture is all too apparent, whether under the rubric of “New Age” or the more blatantly commodified forms of “inner world” self-improvement programs and retreats. But in each of these areas, an avant-garde or innovative poetry might indeed be throwing out the baby with the bath water if these topics and concerns are altogether avoided simply because of the obviousness of a contaminated rhetoric.

Yes, there are other problems with “spiritual” (or inward) poetry in addition to a contaminated rhetoric. If we think of Rilke’s poetry as a prime example—and how can it *not* be that—there is a troubling persistence of a priestly role. In his poetry we find last vestiges of European royalty—a dying era of patronage and of castle-hopping. We read there a kind of ethereal metaphysics that wishes for a negation of history and historical circumstance, as if a timeless spiritual conversation were a replacement for dailiness, as if a poetry of “spirit” amounted to a particular “purification” of language and its concerns.

When we think of the major strands and activities of contemporary innovative poetry, particularly American poetry, we perhaps think first of investigations of the operations of language, of critiques of meaning and

new modes of meaning-making, of a poetry of exploded or multiple subjectivity, of collage principles of incorporating disparate elements into the poem, and of new forms of the poem. But innovative poetry of these past fifty years is also—and perhaps retrospectively will be seen as *principally*—giving us tremendously rich new work in the areas of “lyricism” and “spirit.” The evidence for a growing interest and accomplishment of new poetry of “spirit” is considerable. I think of earlier work by Robert Duncan and Ronald Johnson (or, outside the US, Paul Celan, or bpNichol [especially the seven volume *Martyrology*]), but more particularly of recent writings such as Fanny Howe’s *Selected Poems* (2000), Nathaniel Mackey’s *Song of the Andoumboulou* (in *Eroding Witness* [1985], *School of Udhra* [1993], and *Whatsaid Serif* [1998]), John Taggart’s work (especially *When the Saints* [1999] and the as yet unpublished *Crosses*), Patrick Pritchett’s *Reside* (1999), Paul Naylor’s *Book of Changes* (2000), my own *The New Spirit* (2000), Norman Fischer’s entire body of work, particularly *Precisely the Point Being Made* (1993) and *Success* (2000), Jerome Rothenberg’s body of work—especially *Seedings* (1996) and *the book, spiritual instrument* (ed., 1996), Allen Ginsberg’s *Death & Fame* (1999), Armand Schwerner’s *Selected Shorter Poems* (1999), Andrew Mossin’s most recent poetry – including *Shelley Drafts* (2000) and the *ARC* series (2000), Norman Finkelstein’s *Track* (1999), Susan Howe’s *The Nonconformist’s Memorial* (1993), Ivan Argüelles’ work beginning with “*That*” *Goddess* (1992), Andy di Michele’s *Black Market Pneuma* (1999), Jake Berry’s *Brambu Drezi* (*Book One* [1993] and *Book II* [1998]), Jack Foley’s *Exiles* (1996), Michael Basinski’s *Idyll* (1996), Jim Leftwich’s publications with *Juxta*, Gil Ott’s *The Whole Note* (1996), Philip Whalen’s *Overtime: Selected Poems* (1999), Robin Cooper-Stone’s first collection of poems, *Passenger*, C. D. Wright’s *Deepstep Come Shining* (1998), Ed Roberson’s *Voices Cast Out to Talk Us In* (1995), and Afaa Michael Weaver’s *The Ten Lights of God* (2000), to name just a few.

What I am attempting to outline in this essay is an ongoing, active process of writing an innovative spiritual poetry—a quest to write something other than a formulaic poetry of Emersonian correspondence. In “Nature,” Emerson offers a set of axioms which have, to a large degree, governed American conceptions of spiritual poetry—particularly those grounded in Nature as a storehouse (or factory) for symbols:

Nature is the vehicle of thought, and in a simple, double, and threefold degree.

1. Words are signs of natural facts.

2. Particular natural facts are symbols of particular spiritual facts.

3. Nature is the symbol of spirit.

I. Words are signs of natural facts. The use of natural history to give us aid in supernatural history; the use of the outer creation, to give us language for the beings and changes of inward creation.

(31)

The current endeavor, then, is to do something significantly different from Robert Bly's version of the deep image. As deep image poetry, from 1963 on, became a popular mode of epiphanic writing, that is where and when a habitual, formulaic rhetoric developed. (For the first effective critique of that "contaminated" rhetoric, see Robert Pinsky's *The Situation of Poetry* [1976], particularly the sections on "The Romantic Persistence" and "Conventions of Wonder.") Bly and company, as Pinsky saw twenty-five years ago, elaborate a too simple sense of one-to-one mapping—an image making of outer for inner, which finally becomes a repetitive poetry of dumb wonder. A formulaic rhetorical poetry masquerading as contemporary revelation.

One way to revitalize the life of contemporary spiritual poetry is, as Ed Foster has done, to reinterpret Emerson and the varieties of an Emersonian inheritance. In re-examining Emerson's own process of reconceiving the nature and example of Nature, Foster concludes:

Instead of reading nature like Swedenborg as a series of hieroglyphs, Emerson came to see it as a process: "The universe is fluid and volatile," he wrote in his essay "Circles"; "[p]ermanence is but a word of degrees." It was the particular function of the poet, Emerson believed, to disclose this perpetual process and make it manifest in words. The self had intuitive access to universal fact, and this was the source of great writing: "[t]he condition of true naming, on the poet's part," he wrote in "The Poet," "is his resigning himself to the divine aura which breathes through forms, and accompanying that." (16)

Foster's emphasis on natural *process* and on the poem and poem-making as embodying that spiritual/natural process, allows him to trace an unexpected Emersonian lineage, one which includes, among others, Gertrude Stein: "Another version of Emerson's poetics was devised by Gertrude Stein, whose essay "Poetry and Grammar" (1935), as Harriet Scott Chessman argued in *The Public Is Invited to Dance*, is 'a twentieth-century response to Emerson's "The Poet,"' '[shifting] the focus from the poet's relation to divine nature to the poet's relation to language itself, in which a form of divinity resides, not wholly beyond words, but within them'" (16).

Or, we may simply think of the writing of a new spiritual poetry as, in the words of critic Megan Simpson (in a talk January 28, 1999, University of Alabama), the writing of a "spiritual realism." I hear this term as resonating with Lyn Hejinian's comment in *My Life*: "So from age to age a new realism repeats its reaction against the reality that the previous age admired" (104). And, as Hejinian adds, "Realism, if it addresses the real, is inexhaustible" (101), and "To goggle at the blessed place that realism requires" (109).

Or, we may situate the current writing of "spirit" by re-visiting the controversy elicited by the publication of *apex of the M*, a journal first published in Buffalo in 1994, supported by various faculty of the Poetics program, and which gained considerable notoriety for its polemical initial editorial statement which, among other things, questioned, "Why, in a society in which communication between human beings is constantly discouraged and threatened, does a participatory valorization of this disintegration become the primary mode of many of the arts?" (5). Most of the reactions to the editorial position of *apex of the M* focus on the political elements of the editors' statement.

But the *apex of the M* editors were, in addition to their perhaps too early attention to the ossified aesthetics of disjunctive "resistance," equally concerned with calling attention to a turning away from "spirit" in poetry (at a time when, as the contents of the six issues of their magazine demonstrate, there were a number of poets writing a compellingly new poetry of "spirit"). In the reactions to the *apex* editorial, most of the replies focused on overt political claims and on the gnarly issues of generational replacement. One of the few respondents who addressed the issue of "spirit" was James Sherry, who, in criticizing the *apex* editors, relies on Wittgenstein: "The quotation which I have overused from

Wittgenstein helps my explanation. ‘If we speak of a thing, but there is no object that we can point to, there, we may say, is the spirit’” (Poetics@, 94). Sherry concludes his critique by noting that “the most egregious and annoying part of the M is how they have forgotten the lessons of the enlightenment exposing the weakness of spiritual allegiances and its institutions. But I guess we have to ‘pay to keep from going through all this twice’” (95).

My own assessment of the importance of the *apex of the M* editorial appears as the Conclusion to Volume 2: Readings of my *Opposing Poetries*. In that conclusion, I grant the validity of the claim that “certain formally ‘innovative’ gestures lose their force and become the means of a conformist, imitative practice lacking in the oppositional energies suggested by Charles Bernstein’s definition: ‘poetry is aversion of conformity’” (182). When writing that Conclusion in 1995, I also saw that the *M* editors—with their claims about “spirit”—had indeed pointed toward “one possible contrastive basis for such a poetic inheritance [which] may focus on the place of the sacred in poetry” (182). The *M* editors argue for an innovative poetry which *includes* the “sacred”:

We would also want to open in the pages of this journal the question as to whether there can be a purely secular form of alterity, of whether the relationship with the other can exist independently of an acknowledgement of the sacred. Of course in utilizing the word sacred, or the word spirit, we run the risk of being misunderstood. . . . It should go without saying that we invariably and without hesitation separate our use of the words sacred and spirit from conventional religious systems. (6)

My own conclusion (five years ago) was that

There are a great number of formally innovative poets for whom the issues of spirit and the lyrical fall *within* their practice, even while that spirituality and lyricism may be practiced in an ambivalent or self-questioning manner. Clearly, the work of poets such as Susan Howe, Rachel Blau DuPlessis, bpNichol, Nathaniel Mackey, Lyn Hejinian, and Charles Bernstein engage such issues, as does the work of earlier poets such as Robert Duncan, H. D., and George Oppen. (183)

I continue to think that the *apex of the M* editors were on to something important—though it is perhaps still unclear whether tension over claims of “spirit” constitutes a generational marker (contrasting L and M generations), or represents a conceptual site of tension *within* current avant-garde poetry/poetics. (Or, more likely, a mixture of both possibilities.) As a supplement to the first issue of *apex of the M*, M Press published Lew Daly’s *Swallowing the Scroll: Late in a Prophetic Tradition with the Poetry of Susan Howe and John Taggart* (1994), a book which extends and clarifies some of the claims made by the *M* editors—a group which, in addition to Daly, included Pam Rehm, Alan Gilbert, and Kristin Prevallet. Daly proclaims his interest in Howe and Taggart “as a call for reformation” (7) and as attention to a body of poetry that “among the young will come to pass as an irreconcilable but revitalizing rift, perhaps one among many, within the avant-garde” (8). Daly finds the writing of Howe and Taggart to be “wildly religious poetries, as profoundly anomalous as they are traditional, as irreverent as they are devotional, as resolutely at odds with current trends in the avant-garde as they are with those in the mainstream as well” (9). Daly describes their poetry as having a “a radical regard for spirit and prophecy” (10) as well as occupying “the precarious place of poetry in a radical Protestant tradition, or, more generally, in a prophetic tradition of the written word. In the early Protestantism of the kind to which these poems may be ascribed originated the very possibility of modern counterhistory” (10).

What remains to be considered, at present, is not merely an assessment as to whether or not the *M* editors, in their attention to an ossified poetics and their renewed emphasis on “spirit” as a key element in a poetry of alterity, were “right.” Their critique may in fact point to a “spiritual” legacy—in the poetry and poetics of Robert Duncan, H. D., Ronald Johnson, Jerome Rothenberg, Armand Schwerner, George Oppen, and others—that has been repressed or partially erased as well as to an undervalued (nearly invisible) “spirit” writing of the present which, particularly in recent years, may be coming to fruition.

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In *Poetry as Experience*, Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe links discussions of “spirit” to a certain *zeitgeist*, to a sense of culmination and re-commencement of fundamental modes of thinking. In talking about Hölderlin and Heidegger, Lacoue-Labarthe writes that

They give voice to what is at stake in our era (*dieser Zeit*). A world age—perhaps the world's old age—is approaching its end, for we are reaching a completion, closing the circle of what the philosophical West has called, since Grecian times and in multiple ways, "knowledge." That is, *techné*. (7)

Lacoue-Labarthe analyzes Heidegger's thinking as situating itself so that "such thought must re-inaugurate history, reopen the possibility of a world, and pave the way for the improbable, unforeseeable advent of a god" (7).

Like Lacoue-Labarthe, I find that my own thinking about "spirit," the task of thinking, and the nature of current existence inevitably leads back to a renewed reckoning with Heidegger's writing. But some of the key terms of Heidegger's thinking are ones that I have to consider, at best, skeptically, such as the return or advent of "a god." Perhaps the heroic and progressive possibilities for thinking itself must be questioned as well if we wish to free ourselves from the heroizing self-interest at the heart of western European metaphysics. The contemporary spirit-poetry that I am attending to in this essay is more modest and tentative in its claims (than a Heideggerian heralding of the return of a god) while still developing or re-turning to a dialog with the Other.

Nevertheless, Lacoue-Labarthe's own sharply worded sense of the late twentieth century does, for me, ring true:

The extermination gave rise, in its impossible possibility, in its immense and intolerable banality, to the post-Auschwitz era (in Adorno's sense). Celan said: "Death is a master who comes from Germany." It is the impossible possibility, the immense and intolerable banality of our time, of this time (*dieser Zeit*). It is always easy to mock "distress," but we are its contemporaries; we are at the endpoint of what *Nous*, *ratio* and *Logos*, still today (*heute*) the framework for what we are, cannot have failed to show: that murder is the first thing to count on, and elimination the surest means of identification. Today, everywhere, against this black but "enlightened" background, remaining reality is disappearing in the mire of a "globalized" world. Nothing, not even the purest, most wrenching love, can escape this era's shadow: a cancer of the subject, whether in the *ego* or in the

masses. To deny this on pretext of avoiding the pull of pathos is to behave like a sleepwalker. To transform it into pathos, so as to be able “still” to produce art (sentiment, etc.) is unacceptable. (8-9)

Within the stress and seeming finality of such a *zeitgeist*, what is poetry to do? Or, as Lacoue-Labarthe wonders, “What is a work of poetry that, forswearing the repetition of the disastrous, deadly, already-said, makes itself absolutely singular? What should we think of poetry (or what of thought is left in poetry) that must refuse, sometimes with great stubbornness, to signify?” (14).

That is, in fact, an intriguing and volatile nexus: a contemporary poetry that refuses simple acts of habitual signification, while at the same time that poetry seeks to keep open the possibility of taking part in an ongoing “spiritual” conversation.

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John Taggart’s writing constitutes a serious example of an independent lyricism and a stubbornly spiritual investigation—stubborn because John’s work has been central to “experimentalism,” and “stubborn” because he has taken his own direction, one drawing on the work of Oppen, Duncan, Zukofsky, Olson, Melville, and others, but in a way that calls into questions the seriousness of Language writing by foregrounding the major questions of poetry that such experimentalism, in its purity, may have forgotten. As Mark Scroggins argues, Taggart’s poetry

has avoided both the talky, conversational poetics of the poetry workshop and the hypertheoretical technicalization of the art advocated by the proponents of Language poetry. Instead, he has with uncompromising single-mindedness pursued a poetics of both musicality and vision, exploring through his work aspects of the spiritual—even religious—that have almost disappeared from contemporary verse. (337)

Taggart’s work was at the center of the *apex of the M* controversies, but due to the quirks of the publishing world, we have not had adequate access to the best of Taggart’s poetry of the past ten years. A major

collection of his poetry, *Crosses*, has languished for years in the “forthcoming” category of Sun & Moon Press. That major book is still not available. But recently Talisman House Publishers issued *When the Saints* (1999), a book-length memorial to sculptor Bradford Graves.

Taggart’s poem is a “space of provocation” (10), and poetry is where we register the differences and nuances of wish, desire, and need. Poetry provides what’s needed. Literally, “lines are words put in combinations/ a poem is a combination of lines/ to write a poem is to make a discovery” (11). But to move forward, “combinations must be broken” (11), and the poem, as a site of regeneration, is equally a site of breakdown: “to find the unknown/ find the one room of the chapel// make the roof to fall in” (13). The poem presents a possible way for “the question of making a progression through ashes/ to an unknown destination” (20). Taggart’s poem proposes a recurring set of terms—the fundamental keys and chords of his harmonic arrangement. As I hear it, several of the recurring terms are the words *problem*, *poem*, *question*, *memory*, and *song*. In “Chicago Breakdown,” a series of observations (that Taggart calls “journal notes written in the wake of a new long poem *When the Saints*”) given as a talk in Chicago in late 1999, Taggart offers a prose improvisation upon the poem’s key terms:

To have a problem, as a poet, is to know you don’t have a poem, to be without or before a poem. But a problem has value precisely as it involves a question. My question: memory, whether a song can be extracted from memory. And not just any song, a new song. (2)

And this is where and how Taggart’s poetry rebukes a possible superficiality in much “experimental” poetry. Though Taggart’s own forms are new forms, he insists—as in the lineage of an older, “romantic” or “metaphysical” or “spiritual” poetry (such as Duncan’s or Oppen’s)—on keeping on the track of what is essential.¹ In *When the Saints*, the poem returns to a fundamental consideration, a ground of fundamental petitioning: “the question is what do I need/ what do I need I need to make up my mind” (26).² But make up his mind about *what?* And how does one go about making up his mind, particularly in a poetry committed to questioning, to song, to memory, and to breakdown? And how is “what I need” linked to making up my mind? Do I need to make up my

mind about death? About the death of Bradford Graves? About beauty? About what there is after death? The poem as the place of such questing/questioning is a costly place:

You pays your money and you takes your choice. The poem, the *consequence* of those choices. This is the economy of poetry. A poem can be expensive, perhaps has to be expensive. The currency is attention, a progressive fineness of attention as it may be. Attention to what? To what you need: the next word which is always a word. The/a, a fineness of attention. ("Chicago Breakdown," 5)

If the poem's currency is attention—and here, I'm reminded of Paul Celan's underlining in Walter Benjamin's essay on Franz Kafka a quotation of Nicolas Malebranche: "attention is the natural prayer of the soul"³—we must wonder, attention *to what?* In Taggart's *When the Saints*, attention turns "to what you need." As the poem is in the process of being made, what is needed is always "the next word." In "Chicago Breakdown," Taggart fine tunes our notion of attention, from something generic to "a progressive fineness of attention as it may be." That is precisely the sense, I think, in which poetry constitutes a spiritual discipline. Poetry, when we pay up in an intensive experience of reading or of writing, constitutes a cultivation of fineness of attention—to the word, to the next word, to the key questions, and to the song-like qualities of such thinking. To learn and to nourish that fineness of attention is, in Keats's terminology, the soul-making quality of poetry.

Taggart's own cultivation of fineness of attention has produced a particularly haunting mode of lyricism, in a manner that is at once self-restrained, that has a solidity to it (as one would expect in the presence of "the necessary"), and that feels self-evident. In its slowly building, overlapping, self-modifying statements, there is an odd collision of lyricism and statement. The units of Taggart's composition—at the level of the phrase or the line—are not (as I hear them) in and of themselves particularly lyrical or obviously or flashily beautiful in their musicality. But the cumulative effect of sustained attention to a long poem, such as *When the Saints*, is a tremendously lyrical experience. It is the odd construction of this *macro-lyricism* that is the mark of Taggart's peculiar song. As one of Taggart's most important forebears, Robert Duncan,

states, "In declaring that there is a Poetry, a man in order that there be a poet seeks to open his mind and heart to be a dance floor where a new, an Other, life may come to dance in this world. A poem is news of an other life" (113). And such news is not particularly a mode of personal expression. As Duncan concludes, "a poem is a service of the Divine," and a poet "writes in the office of the Poet in order that there be a poem, and if he claim personal honor for the act he usurps the honor" (112).

In Taggart's poem, it is the music that leads us on,⁴ as he is "led on by music/ charged to obey// in the middle of my life" (57). It is a charge—at once, a cost, a compulsion, a rush, a command—to be sure that "obedience is to necessity// to what is needed" (57). In part, what is needed is "the next word" and "a new song" that would allow some way for Taggart to remember Bradford Graves and to be adequately attentive to his death, for grieving involves dissatisfaction and incomprehension, and "your soul/ is known by its dissatisfactions" (59). Part of "what is needed"—particularly in poetry today—is fineness of attention (and *sustained* attention) to what is needed.

In the fourth and final section of *When the Saints* the various melody lines begin to fuse, so that the work of poet and sculptor find some commonality: "the art is cutting/ cutting what has been already cut/ / cutting into and around/ the art is recutting the cut" (64). So that many modes of making—from the precise cutting of the gardener, to the cuts of musical production, to the poet's inscriptions, to the sculptor's cutting of slabs of stone, and the refining cuts that each makes—begin to assemble themselves together. The large slabs of stone, particularly in work such as Bradford Graves' large stone xylophone pictured on the cover of *When the Saints*, become akin to Taggart's own "rough cut from the language quarry/ rough cut slab of words" (65)—a metaphor not simply wished for or reached for, but utterly accurate to the mode of assembly that Taggart has worked in for many years. In either case, it is easy enough *not* to hear the particular music of the sculpted work or the written work—to be stone deaf to either or both. But the truth is "stone/ not without tone/ when struck deep tone and deep tones/ marvelously distinct and deep tones" (67). And the truth is that Taggart does not pander to his listeners/readers. In fact, we are not necessarily being addressed. When Taggart ends with the declaration, "taken and changed," "thank you this is a new song/ saying thank you" (72), we end in a Heideggerian space where "thinking" and "thanking" are kindred spirits.

We are still left wondering at “thanks” for what and to whom? Perhaps the procession of saints—from Coltrane to Rilke, from Sainte Colombe to Charlie Parker—who have made this “new song” possible, though part of the way of that path is “cutting/ the quotation/ free from the quotation” (65).

Taggart’s giving thanks also points toward the peculiar mode of memory achieved in *When the Saints*. What is needed is a new song that enables seeing, that allows the poet to sense and behold the person (Bradford Graves) who is no longer present. That sensing and beholding—for friends who are artists—takes place in a reinvigorated attention to the work. As Taggart writes in his Introduction for *To Construct a Sculpture* (a series of notes by Bradford Graves which accompany photos of his sculptures):

The memory doesn’t bring our friends back so much as it allows us to see them. Perhaps to see them with a sudden and revealed clarity. Perhaps to see them as, frankly, we never saw them when they were with us. And if we see, what we see is not a thing of memory, not the past but rather the present. . . . And, if we see, this is also not a matter of memory. It stands before us in a sudden and revealed clarity. Stands before us as our friends’ work and as itself. It is an unexpected gift, an unexpected clear gift. (6-7)

When the Saints offers thanks for the gift of a new song which enables a renewed vision.

In *When the Saints*, Taggart retells a classic Bird story:

after a concert
Charlie Parker was asked
how much he cared about the critics
the critics who know so much

about as much as birds
he said as birds care about ornithologists (51)

Underlying the joke, though, is a serious concern: for whom is the music made; and, analogously, for whom is the poem written? In Taggart's case—his poetry has existed at various border zones (at the edge of experimental poetry, but more lyrical in nature, more "spiritual" in nature; even within lyrical poetry, the units of Taggart's lyricism are longer and not standard) and his physical location (at Shippensburg State and in rural Pennsylvania) has been somewhat remote—that question, of poetry to and for whom, is an important one, and perhaps one of the (his?) soul's dissatisfactions. One answer, from Ed Foster, is that "poetry . . . is responsible to itself and in every other context answerable to none" (10) is somewhat extreme in its purity, but it is an answer that hints at the seriousness of address in Taggart's writing. Those addressed are the saints ("to the saint to the other saints" [72]), the key musicians, the makers of similar harmonies, readers and listeners at some future date, and the dead with whom one is (increasingly) in conversation. One other pure answer to the question of poetry to and for whom would be the Hebrew word *leeshma*—for its own sake. As Taggart concludes, "word is found in what comes after" (5), and the issues of specific address, of the poem and poet's participation in a socially mediated matrix of institutions, certifications, and circulations, are after-effects that should not impinge upon the moment when the poet is able to "do the do" (4).

When the Saints stands as evidence of Taggart's career-long pursuit of a new spiritual poetry. In the case of this new long poem, that activity, like Paul Naylor's *Book of Changes*, is linked to a personal and poignant loss. In "The Spiritual Definition of Poetry," Taggart argues that "the history of poetry in our century is only superficially the history of the struggle to make it new. More enduring is the struggle to regain the definition of poetry as spiritual ascesis" (23). That particular corrective emphasis (upon "spirit" over and above "innovation") marks Taggart's implicit and explicit critique of Language writing. But his prescription for how poets are to regain poetry as a spiritual discipline—

There are two ways to secure this definition [of poetry as spiritual ascesis] for poets who would write from the visionary imagination: (1) arduous study of and complete immersion in mythic and spiritual literature; (2) a like immersion in language. (23)

particularly in its second dictum, suggests why Taggart's work remains read and valued as part of (or proximate to) the enlarged context of Language writing. But crucially for Taggart, the poem itself—and I would suggest that his generalization applies as well to *When the Saints*—is not strictly speaking something that the poet alone makes or controls: "Form (content) is not imposed upon language but received from it. It chooses you" (24). Hence, Taggart's thankfulness at the end of *When the Saints*.

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The enigmatic non-presence of the divine—as described by Lacoue-Labarthe—has obvious "rhymes" with the concept of *sunyata*: "God shows or reveals himself in the same way as the sky's pure opening—the 'abyss,' as Celan would say; as the ceaseless ebb, on and right against the whole surface of the visible, the invisible from which the visible streams" (116-117). To approximate the divine—to be proximate to and with the invisible (that enabling and sustaining realm of the invisible in Rilke's poetry, for example)—remains one of poetry's most sacred possibilities. In Lacoue-Labarthe's phrasing—"that he is evident as the invisible is evident, withdrawn into the visible as its visibility" (117). Poetry marshals its peculiar forces—particularly the invisible force of breath (*ruach*)—as a key partner in making manifest that invisibility. That particular charge or obligation, that duty, is part of why poetry is so often (wrongly) critiqued as being too indirect and as unable to "say what it means." As Lacoue-Labarthe concludes, poetry's peculiar form of truth, the mode of "realism" appropriate to it, is linked inextricably to this affinity with the concealed revelation of the divine:

But the more he sends himself into "the sky's aspect," which is unknown to him, the more he "reveals" himself as invisible. Thus Heidegger can say: "The poet calls, in the sights of the sky, that which in its very self-disclosure causes the appearance of that which conceals itself, and indeed as that which conceals itself." (117)

Poetry is, and sacredly so, most direct in its indirection and in its habitual concealment, in its very refusal to "mean" directly. Knowingly, the poem is a hymn to the unknowable—poetry as an approximation and an intimation.

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A noteworthy and eccentric example of writing “spirit” anew is the multifaceted body of work produced by Jake Berry. A musician,⁵ visual artist, and poet, Berry’s location in Florence (Alabama) as well as his rare travels mark his work as part of a tradition of intensely individualistic exploration—part of a lineage that might run from William Blake to Frank Stanford. An active correspondent, and a poet whose work has received considerable circulation internationally (through the zine-world, international postal art shows, and small press / independent publication), Berry’s work bears kinship to that of southern visionary folk artists, religious visionaries, traditional blues/folk musicians (including Bob Dylan, with whom Berry has played). Perhaps the most sustained inheritance for Berry is a fusion of Christian traditions—from his Church of Christ upbringing (Berry’s father is a minister [as well as an engineer])—gnostic Jewish traditions, ancient Egyptian religion, and Voudoun, enriched by Berry’s readings in myth-based poets such as William Blake, Charles Olson, and Michael McClure.

Berry’s major ongoing work is *Brambu Drezi*⁶, an epic work of poetry and visual text (which also lends itself to performance).⁷ In *Brambu Drezi: Book II* (1998), Berry begins,

And darkness opened
 drifts in
 viscid air
 (boundless light
 conception’s shadow
 profusion from the exodus chamber
 the joy of appearing
 genus loci
UMGATHAMA
 crosses take root in the sun
 driving it from its sepulcher
 (govi)
 frequencies collide
 bone white mares
 torn screaming neck deep
 from zodiac tar
 All worlds are projections
 of a beautiful agony
 We have formed
 a compact
 with discord
 commensurate utopia ion deluge room of lambs
 brought before ravenous Damballah
 zero pressure Capricorn
 disintegrating
 the moon’s laser
 rapt in bloom fractured memory

This beginning to Book II of Berry's epic poem contains many of the essential elements of his poem. The opening "And" is, as Berry's epigraph announces, "a hinge." The text itself will be a site of colliding sources and perspectives as well as an intersection for heightened and conflicted emotions, with the poem itself being the recurring experience of "a beautiful agony." The poem pivots about key moments of glossolalia, including the annunciation of UMGATHAMA. Berry indicates that "glossolalia, speaking in tongues is the result I suppose of an experience of overwhelming awe. This would be the most fundamental religious experience" (56, interview with Jim Leftwich). Berry's own relationship to that central word UMGATHAMA is a complex, elusive one:

I have no concrete idea of its meaning. I am not sure one is intended or necessary. The word arrived as a result of hypnogogic vision. As I lay on my bed one evening, Charles Olson stood over me repeating the word "UMGATHAMA" with great force, but not anger. The urgency in his voice suggested he was bringing a message, but one from a poetic realm and therefore a word of power, an address of the holy, which is how it continues to arise throughout BRAMBU DREZI. I was surprised that Olson should be the messenger since I had read only small portions of his work, being particularly impressed by "In Cold Hell, In Thicket." (53)

The poem, from its beginning, will rely on words that stretch our sense of sense-making, though, as with UMGATHAMA, those key words point to irresolvable but multiple sources.⁸ Also, from the very beginning, the visual elements—from the layout of the phrases to the drawings—are an integral part of the poem. The right hand shadowy filament—a kind of emerging or devolving genetic strand—recurs throughout the text in a variety of ways.

The next three lines of the poem point to an important source:

loa racine raged across the highlands
green mantle shrouding cathode zombies
dolmen transubstantiator wichasha
wankan

The term “loa” is crucial to understanding Berry’s poetics, particularly in an epic poem that is so radically released from mastery, where the poet clearly exists in subordination to a greater reality and where the poem is released from the performance and will of one’s individual intentions. Maya Deren in *Divine Horsemen: The Living Gods of Haiti*, her foundational book on Voudoun, explains,

The loa, whose function is to direct the enormous primal mass of the material universe into patterns of intelligence and benevolence, are involved in a great and endless labor. It is their moral energy which animates this huge bulk of matter, and so, since that energy is constantly expended, it must be constantly replenished. And this is man’s duty: to feed the loa, to insure the constant flow of the psychic energy, to assure the moral movement of the universe. (209)

The loa are forces that the poet summons—forces that “ride” the poet and that possess him and, at times, the poem. Deren writes of the importance of the loa:

To be made aware, once more, that man is of divine origin and is the issue of and heir to an uncounted multitude of hearts and minds; that at the root of the universe the great imperturbable principles of cosmic good endure; and that even under his torn shirt, his hunger, the failures of his wit and the errors of his heart, his very blood harbors these monumental loa—is to experience the major blessing with which possession rewards men’s dedicated service. (248)

The poet as a gateway to a *multitude* of forces and beings is a foundational premise for *Brambu Drezi*, as is the reality (and peril) of possession, an experience that is often marked in Berry’s text by glossolalia and by the way that the text constantly remains outside the control of its author.

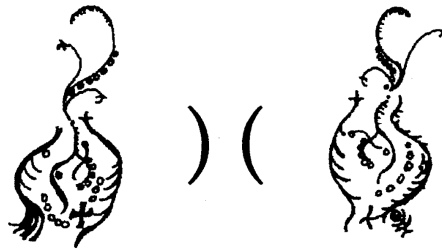
When I began my own reading of Deren’s *Divine Horsemen*, I was struck by a worldview utterly compatible with that of *Brambu Drezi*. When I asked Jake about my observation, he wrote back:

You're absolutely right to be reading Deren along with *Brambu II*. I read *Divine Horsemen* a year or two before starting BD2, so it was a fresh part of the psyche, near the surface, and she has continued to be there. The last lines of the book in fact are in part inspired by her film *Meshes of an Afternoon*. Voudoun seems to have all the right elements with little or none of the kind of moral strictures that the heavy orthodoxies have. And it remains beautifully balanced between magic and religion and makes magic of everything it touches. I hope always in *Brambu* that the "I" is not only another, but one of a multitude, so that the ego is a player but only one of many more or less equal players. Polytheism comes closer to daily human experience than monotheism, but even in voudoun the one, Bondeye, remains God, but the loa are the divine beings we have contact with. In Jewish mysticism we have all the various names of God, Elohim, Adonai, YHVH, etc, which became the Tree of Life in Kabbalah; Catholicism has its saints; Tibetan Buddhism a host of Bodhisattvas. The transcendental reality is there certainly enough and it must inform everything, since everything is its expression and vehicle, but there are many details and these take on bodies, sometimes human bodies. Possession is just a natural completion of the human drive toward the divine, and the divine toward human. I could babble on about this for hours. Best to let *Brambu* do the speaking since it is the experience and not just words about it.⁹

Deren describes the loa as the means of encounter of the human with the divine. The ceremonies, songs, and drum beats are "like lines thrown out, to become the cables of the bridge upon which man would cross that chasm [between the human and the divine]", a divide that Deren says that "no man can straddle" and that is "present, as physical fact, in the amnesia which makes even the sense of the loa inaccessible to the very 'horse' which bore him. *To understand that the self must leave if the loa is to enter, is to understand that one cannot be man and god at once*" (249). In *Brambu Drezi*, the recurring incidents of terror and dissolution, alternating with episodes of possession and vision, are completely consistent with Deren's analysis of the experience of possession:

Thus the possessed benefits least of all men from his possession. He may even suffer for it in material loss, in the sometimes painful, always exhausted physical aftermath. And to the degree that his consciousness persists into its first moments or becomes aware of the very end, he experiences overwhelming fear. . . . It is toward the achievement of this—toward the forcing open of the door to the source—that the entire structure of Voudoun is directed. The serviteur must be induced to surrender his ego, that the archetype become manifest. (249)

Thus the second page (and a quick look reveals that the *page* is a pertinent unit of composition) of *Brambu Drezi: Book II* indicates



mouth
black sibylline infusion

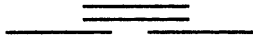
epistrophes
brujo/ hermit

Nova Cygni 1992

brambu langage
AHG PRIMINCIA SABAYI meniso SABAYI isosyn
(santhgroi scau awi-spuh sungvis nahgway
frlanmus) ISHNUI AMA (hawol alahmae
eelezay shadnre neevah unapwa)
UMGATHAMA

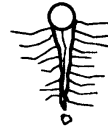
Berry's note glosses "langage" as "the sacred language used in Voudoun ceremonies, the "Brambu" as a qualifier here, meaning the sacred tongue (or part of it) of this particular body of work" (53).¹⁰

Berry's poem is full of references that mark Voudoun as an essential realm of terminology, experience, and ritual. As with the Olson dream-delivered term UMGATHAMA, dream-experience is one of the poem's recurring modes of possession:



mal(sanguinary)stain
 your ichthycloset
 remnemonish wave
 in pleurisy of evolute ragadin

jehovah's
 coal-black crows



begin the planter
 straighter than carbon
 horse shaper

"cochicery", he spoke
 thundranamus fray torn banter spiked
 jangling nimbostrativicta
 jangling
 raining ridiculous
 blow

In a note, Berry explains the source of the term "cochicery" (which, in the note, Berry spells "cochier"): "'cochier'—word spoken to me by Sun Ra, the jazz composer/performer, in a dream. It was to be my new name he said. I was unable to understand what he said at first and had to go back to sleep and back into the dream and ask him to repeat it. The word I have used is as close an approximation as I was able to bring back" (54).

As with page thirteen of *Brambu Drezi: Book II*, what we often get, as in Blake's illuminated manuscripts, is an active interplay of text and drawing:

maggies scatter & return
 cyclical as dervish
 "It means tornadoes," she said smiling
 "whole herds of them
 grazing rooftops and mammal soul.
 We begin with carnival."

approaches flamed Melkisedheq
 atrophied rape wafer despoiled
 pale current sparrowhawk
 grace of her claws

*Heavenly bodies
 I know the secrets of the ways of the lord,
 their paths and signs...*

specialist green with posture
 the four corners region encrypted now
 held as lien against the glacier's retreat
 slow movement through the barricades
 even spirit is detained by
 the heavy circumstances of blood

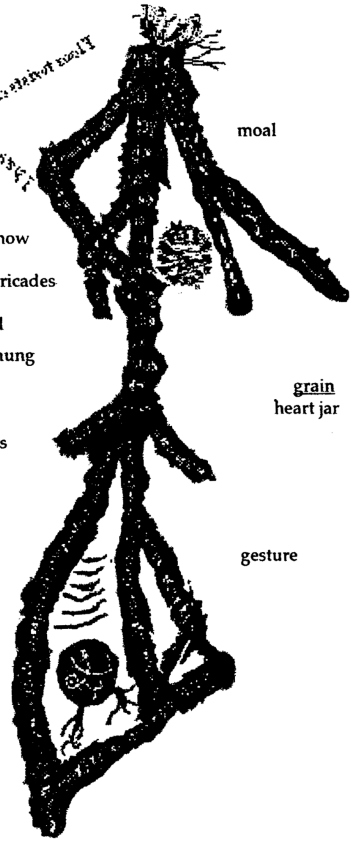
He came to a place where 12 men had been hung
 from 12 spiked rods
 over each of them a television flickered
 their images at various ages, through the
 perfunctory rites of passage, private indulgences
 and significant dreams

gown
 splendor
 abstantial
 river
 neuropsalm
 screamer

"I know the secrets of the ways of the lord,
 their paths and signs..."

oblivion be my redeemer
 oblivion my shelter
 oblivion the message of my blood
 oblivion is the name of the Lord
 oblivion my redeemer
 oblivion my stallion
 oblivion the message of my blood
 oblivion is the name of the Lord"

asleep cortex egg



moal

grain
 heart jar

gesture

In this passage, the central word "encrypted" points both toward what is entombed and what is coded. The drawing suggests a DNA-like strand of encryption—a kind of governing helix-like structure that bears a generative relationship to the surrounding text. The drawings at times look like the line drawings of Klee or Miró, though they also suggest science textbook illustrations. The page itself often becomes a crowded space—of words and illustrations—what Bataille would call the world of excess, of spiritual

detritus, of a flood of images and words, what Berry calls “soul trash” (17). Throughout *Brambu Drezi: Book II*, there are ever-shifting perspectives, the “holy” and the “tawdry” readily changing places, with a fallen or debased world and word readily at hand (“Word become venom” [24]) as in the recurring pop-perversion of the spirit world/word. So that while Berry’s poem is definitely a “spiritual” text, it is also “brutal as scripture” (25) and the product of a consciousness existing under great tension and pressure (“I’ve got a brainful of lightning/ ready to blow ” [25]). Thus the text itself occurs at the edge of an explosive, disintegrative intensification.

*

Clearly, some of the problems today in “writing ‘spirit’” rhyme with Jewish prohibitions against representations of the divine. Lacoue-Labarthe locates a similar strain in Celan’s writing, “the interdiction against representation; or, rather, they [Celan’s poems] are haunted solely by the unfigurable or unrepresentable” (41). He concludes that a Celan poem, which Lacoue-Labarthe identifies with “the interruption of language” (49), “must clear a way between silence and discourse, between mutism’s *saying nothing* and the *saying too much* of eloquence” (56). Lacoue-Labarthe conceptualizes Celan’s poetry as “the interruption of the ‘poetic.’ At least, as it is defined as a battle against idolatry. All ‘real’ poems, all that are effectively poems, seem to aim at nothing other than being the place where the ‘poetic’ collapses and becomes abysmal” (68).

While I agree—siding with Nathaniel Mackey’s writing (in *Discrepant Engagement*) on the importance of the stutter and the stammer, and with numerous examples in Susan Howe’s work—that there indeed is an interruptive quality to poetry, I react somewhat skeptically to what I perceive as a Euro-existential macho posturing on behalf of the terminal or the abysmal or the unsayable. Indeed, poetry is, oddly and sequentially, an active critique and rebuke of the “poetic.” And if this hypothesis is true, then the very formulations of the poem that are Celan’s or that belong to the first generation of Language poets are themselves rhetorics that move from being “real” poems to becoming “poetic,” by means of assimilation, familiarity, commodification, fashion, and historical determinations. Lacoue-Labarthe sees poetry as battling with “art” (or with the “poetic”): “what poetry wants to rid itself of is the

beautiful. The poem's threat is the beautiful, and all poems are always too beautiful, even Celan's" (69). But perhaps poems, such as today's writing of "spirit," may resist being "too beautiful" if the poem's beauty remains inextricable from difficulty or if the beauty is such that it is able to retain (over time) a strong quality of "otherness" and of the "unassimilable."

Lacoue-Labarthe explains, "This is just what justifies the idea that poetry is the interruption of art, that is, the interruption of mimesis. Poetic art consists of perceiving, not representing. Representing, at least according to some of the 'ancient rumors,' can only be said of the already-present" (67). Perhaps this formulation points to the situation of an innovative poetry on the track of "spirit." It would be a poetry that is, in its own new ways, indeed "realistic"—that is, true to the phenomenology of experiencing "spirit," in all the ambiguity and imprecision of that experience, in its peculiar "otherness" (here, decisively *not* an "otherness" that has anything much to do with the particularities and differences of personal/ethnic identity). It is a poetry that may nonetheless partake of the beautiful—"the singable residue" (23)—but one that risks the incarnation of a potentially reinvigorating mixture of uncertainty, desire (a desire to believe?), and a feeling of proximity.

Lacoue-Labarthe's *Poetry as Experience* moves toward a particularly critical triangulated relationship for man, language, and god:

Language is the other in man; it constitutes him as man *himself*. Man does not *have* language in the sense of possession or property[.] [H]e is not its master (on the contrary; language operates a strange dispossession, attracting man—within himself—outside of himself). This is the motif of "pre-scription" (*Vor-Schrift*). Language is the essence, the inhuman essence of man; it is his (in)humanity. (96)

By virtue of man's peculiarly intimate relationship to language—and particularly in language's ineluctable otherness—man is drawn into a relationship as well with the divine:

Thus language can be considered man's origin. Not as God is[.] . . . But as that by which man is necessarily related to the other, and thence to the wholly other, so that God is not language, but its supposition, or at least what irresistibly draws it. (96)

While drawing language (and man) toward it, the divine remains—as in basic Jewish edicts—unnameable and outside of language. In fact, the divine is precisely that which remains outside of presence: “It is precisely because the being reveals itself as nothingness, no thing, that the God (someone, *einer*) reveals himself as “not one” or “none” (*keiner*), and from there as “no one” (*Niemand*). A no one whom it is (still) possible to address (you, *du*)” (80). It is this address that poetry ventures. The history of poetry—of some strands of Poetry—can be viewed as successive modes of address and successive approximations. It is equally important to note that these successive deeds are not linear, not “progressive” (certainly not progressively wiser), and not steady in seeming importance, centrality, or pertinence to Poetry. In part, that is why I am writing this essay: to respond to an intense feeling that *now* is one of those times in which some significantly interesting modes of address (again) become possible and are occurring.

*

If the poem is a province for the “spiritual,” it is not then today imagined as a site for re-counting an anecdote. In fact, the particular phenomenological space of the poem is one that embodies conflicting measures of saying and not-saying. In spite of our tendency to heroize the difficulties of writing the poem, poetry *does* constitute a space charged by what cannot be said and by what can only be approximated. The poem is a place charged with contra-dictory orders and impulses regarding presentation and protection, clarification and occlusion. That is, a complex (and somewhat historically governed) ethics of representation. As Lacoue-Labarthe describes it:

But the poem’s “wanting-to-say” does not *want* not to say. A poem wants to say; indeed, it is nothing but pure wanting-to-say. But pure wanting-to-say nothing, nothingness, that against which and through which there is present, what is. (20)

Thus, today, there is an increasingly significant body of renewed writing of “spirit.” This poetry is no longer principally an anecdotal recounting of “spiritual” experiences and lyricized epiphanies, but a poetry ad-venturing

in language the complex, elusive location that we bear (and bear witness to) in our intimate and proximate relationship to alterity.

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Notes

1 As Mark Scroggins affirms, "[Lew] Daly is correct in seeing Taggart as one of the few poets of the postwar period who has been committed both to exploring a spiritual vision and to pursuing an innovative poetics" (343).

2 Taggart's sense of "the question" reminds me of Derrida's analysis in *Of Spirit: Heidegger and the Question*, where he remarks that "he [Heidegger] almost never stopped identifying what is highest and best in thought with the question, with the decision, the call or guarding of the question, this 'piety' of thought" (9). Derrida, in a footnote, quotes

Heidegger: "For questioning is the piety of thought" (117). Taggart's *When the Saints* tracks a similarly "pious" and essential thinking-as-questioning.

3 See Lacoue-Labarthe's *Poetry as Experience*, p. 64. See also John Felstiner's *Paul Celan: Poet, Survivor, Jew* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995), 163-164.

4 As a general observation about Taggart's poetry, Mark Scroggins suggests, "His [Taggart's] is a poetry that has questioned and sought to plumb the relationship of the human and the spiritual in ways that have analogues, not in twentieth-century poetry, but in the music of John Coltrane and Carlo Gesualdo, or the paintings of Edward Hopper, Mark Rothko, or Hans Memling" (337).

5 Jake Berry's recent CDs include *Shadow Resolve* (Front Porch Records, 1997, which includes "From a String of Pearls," "Keys to the Kingdom," and "Lightning Scars"), *Trouble in Your House* (by Bare Knuckles, with Wayne Sides; Front Porch Records, 1998; includes "Dark Side of Heaven" and "St. John of the Cross Blues"), and *Roses on the Threshold* (Front Porch Records, 2000; includes "After the Veil," "Lazarus Bound," and "After the Storm"). Berry's lyrics are of extremely high quality and address issues of vision and "spirit" that are quite pertinent to the poetry.

6 To date, two books have been published: *Brambu Drezi: Book One*, Port Charlotte, Florida: 1993 and *Brambu Drezi: Book II*, Berkeley: Pantograph Press, 1998.

7 There are videotapes available of two particularly noteworthy, multimedia performances of portions of Berry's *Brambu Drezi*. On November 14, 1997, Berry staged a one hour performance (including dancers, musicians, video installation, visual art) at the AB Theater at The University of Alabama. On December 4, 1998, for Joe Speer's weekly TV show (in Nashville), Berry recorded portions of *Brambu Drezi* for public cable TV broadcast.

8 See Jim Leftwich's excellent commentary on UMGATHAMA (essay and interview with Jake Berry; pp. 56-58; *Brambu Drezi: Book II*).

9 E-mail from Jake Berry to Hank Lazer, August 2, 1998.

¹⁰ Jake Berry's work can be seen and heard as participating in a tradition of art-work that goes by various labels such as self-taught, "outsider" art, or visionary folk art. For example, Berry's work—particularly in its interplay of script and visual imagery—bears some kinship to that of Howard Finster, JB Murry (and his mystical script), and the gourd-writings of Reverend Perkins. (See *Howard Finster, Man of Visions: The Life and Work of a Self-Taught Artist*, J. F. Turner, New York: Knopf, 1989; *Outsider Artists in Alabama*, Catalogue a Project of The Alabama State Council on the Arts, compiled by Miriam Rogers Fowler, 1991; and *Baking in the Sun: Visionary Images from the South*, University Art Museum: University of Southwestern Louisiana, 1987.) Berry's work can also be placed in the context of more traditional "textual" writings such as the work of Hannah Weiner or Antonin Artaud, or in the context of various book-makers represented in *A Book of the Book: Some Works & Projections About the Book & Writing* (edited by Jerome Rothenberg and Steven Clay, New York: Granary Books, 2000), particularly Aleksey Kruchonykh and Adolf Wölfli. For those interested in a more detailed study of Berry's compositions, The Sackner Archive of Visual and Concrete Poetry (and accessible at www.rediscov.com/sackner.htm, and located in Miami) has a substantial collection of his work, including the complete manuscripts for *Brambu Drezi: Book I* and *Brambu Drezi: Book II*.