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CIVIC POETICS
A CRIMINAL'S RELATIONS WITH THE DIVINE, AS MEDIATED BY THE POLIS,
A POLIS' RELATIONS WITH THE DIVINE AS MEDIATED BY ITS CRIMINALS

by

JASON HUNT BAUMUNK

Under the Direction of Dr. Louis Ruprecht

ABSTRACT

A criminal is thrown from a high cliff into the sea. He has been covered in feathers, live birds attached to him to slow his fall. Fishermen wait below, hopeful of being able to carry him safely away. The people are punishing the criminal with death, yet simultaneously rooting for his survival. This startling image from Strabo, with its delicious ironic tension, is the center-piece of "Civic Poetics." The thesis consists of a cycle of poems imagining life in a city where this bizarre ritual is performed, coupled with a number of essays written for several Religious Studies courses on related themes. The creative interplay of poetry and essay aims to illuminate the experience of my own journey from criminal outsider to re-integrated citizen. The lenses of my own experiences in 21st century Atlanta and poetic imaginative reconstruction of this ancient ritual reveal a startling picture: a criminal's relations with the divine, as mediated by his state, and a state's relations with the divine as mediated by its criminals.

INDEX WORDS: Bible, Civics, Criminal, Execution, Greece, Leucas, Mimesis, Pindar, Religious Studies, Ritual, Sacrifice, Sappho

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A CRIMINAL'S RELATIONS WITH THE DIVINE, AS MEDIATED BY THE POLIS, A POLIS' RELATIONS WITH THE DIVINE AS MEDIATED BY ITS CRIMINALS

by

Jason Baumunk

An Honors Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of

Bachelors of Religious Studies

In the College of Arts and Sciences

Georgia State University

2012

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Jason Hunt Baumunk
2012

For Troy Davis

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It was a custom among the Leucadians each year at the festival of Apollo that some criminal be thrown from the look-out for the sake of averting evil: all kinds of wings and birds were fastened to him in an effort to break his fall by their fluttering, and many people in small fishing-boats waited in a circle below and did what they could to rescue the man and take him to safety beyond the borders. (Strabo 23-25)

civic *adj:* of or relating to a citizen, a city, citizenship, or community affairs

poetics n: pl but sing or pl in constr 1 **a** : a treatise on poetry or aesthetics **b** : poetic theory or practice 2 : poetic

Introduction

The Babylonian king Hammurabi's notorious code of laws has, for the most part, been long-since abandoned by everyone. Rules concerning the amount to be paid for a wife, or ways to punish her for being looked at by another man don't seem to have much relevance in our culture today. Why is it, then, that the famous injunction of "an eye for an eye" persists into the 21st century? It is my contention, implicit in the following pages, that our continued practice of retributive execution of criminals has everything to do with ritual sacrifice. The "eyes" in the transaction become social: the eye that watches for our security, and the eye that witnesses our mis-deeds. The ancient practice of sacrifice meets an ancient need in secular contemporary culture. Indeed, the very formation of the idea of a "state" may have grown out of the need for some non-religious body to *carry out* the eye-for-an-eye transaction: a ritual killing outside of the temple or sanctuary.

"Civic Poetics" reflects my two areas of focus here at Georgia State University: Religious Studies and Creative Writing. This is, in essence, a work of academic imagination. I came across a Greek fragment from the ancient Roman geographer Strabo, and began thinking about it. As thought blossomed into obsession, I began to form narratives based around its remarkable imagery. These narratives have had a deep meaning for me. I have attempted to mold them into a cycle of poems imagining the actual experience of living with the precarious civic ambivalence that must have underlay this bizarre ritual. For me, the vertigo of that ambivalence resonated with my own experiences on the dizzying edge of *my* polis. I spent several years in the grips of addiction and homelessness, years that ended with a four-month stay in an over-crowded county jail, followed by several months of civic tenderness in a county drug court. The composing of these poems, the compiling of this thesis, and the completion of a degree that I began working toward in 1986 have been, for me, the seal of my own hopefully successful re-integration to that polis.

I would like to make it clear that I don't know or pretend to know what took place on the island of Leucas in ancient times. I'm attempting to share the blessing it has been for me to wonder at and imagine what *might have* happened.

The essays interspersed among the poems were originally written as "reading responses" to Dr. Louis Ruprecht in a "low-stakes" online writing forum connected with three classes I took from him. The classes were "Biblical Literature," "Religion and Sexuality," and "Religion, Spirituality, and Sport." These pieces were originally written to Lou in the second person. The consistent theme throughout was that of a new acolyte to academia *asking questions* as he endeavored to begin the large task of trying to understand.

In editing some of these pieces for inclusion here, I faced a choice: expand the intimate second-person dialogical element, so that I'm essentially allowing the

reader to eavesdrop on one side of a conversation; or else eliminate that element, making the "essays" more explanatory and accessible to an outside reader. I dearly hope that in choosing the latter I have not compromised the tenuous, uncertain tone of the original endeavor. This is a work of questions, not of answers. If I speak with any authority, I hope it is only that of sincere enquiry: of deep uncertainty, and a fledgling reach for truth. I dare to hope that some of this writing carries the authority, the imprimatur of the streets, which have so vitiated my world these past six years since I stopped living in them.

By way of introducing the themes inherent in "Civic Poetics," I'd like to quote two breath-taking pieces of scholarship that have echoed in my mind as I've researched and written "Civic Poetics." I would like nothing so much as that each piece that follows should resonate with, carry a whiff or sense, of one or the other of these quotes.

> We are discontinuous beings, individuals who perish in isolation in the midst of an incomprehensible adventure, but we yearn for our lost continuity. We find the state of affairs that binds us to our random and ephemeral individuality hard to bear. Along with our tormenting desire that this evanescent thing should last, there stands our obsession with a primal continuity linking us with everything that is...
>
> …In sacrifice…the victim dies and the spectators share in what his death reveals. This is what religious historians call the element of sacredness. This sacredness is the revelation of continuity through the death of a discontinuous being to those who watch it as a solemn rite. A violent death disrupts the creature's discontinuity; what remains, what the tense onlookers experience in the succeeding silence, is the continuity of all existence with which the victim is now one. Only a spectacular killing, carried out as the solemn and collective nature of religion dictates, has the power to reveal what normally escapes notice...(Bataille, 15 & 22)

> To betray Hera, Zeus chose one of her priestesses, the human being closest to her, since it was she who held the keys to the shrine. Her name was Io. In looks and dress it was Io's duty to re-create the image of the goddess she served. She was a copy endeavoring to imitate a statue. But Zeus chose the copy; he wanted the minimal difference which is enough to overturn order and generate the new, generate meaning. And wanted it *because* it was a difference, and her *because* she was a copy. (Calasso, 24)

A haunting glimpse of continuity, replicated in infinite variety. This is poetics. Startlingly, it may be civics as well.

The Welcomer

"The actual method of cure was sleeping in the sanctuary, incubation; the god is expected to give instructions in a dream or else to effect a direct cure. The whole process is placed in the context of a sacrificial ritual." (Burkert, 215)

He returns every spring to Ithaka,
the man who runs the Asklepion in Nikopolis.
He ambles around with a limp,
tells those he meets how he's enjoying his vacation.
Everyone knows, though, that he's waiting to see
if there's a survivor from Leucas.
His eyes, as he strolls through town,
never stray far from the island to the north, across the water.
Narrowed by sunlight,
nested in a maze of wrinkles,
the old eyes search. Wait.
Watch for the boat.

Sometimes, perhaps for several years running,
there's nothing for him to see.

When the boat does appear,
and a new exile arrives,
dumped in a heap from the small vessel by laughing fishermen
or perhaps leaping defiantly ashore of his own accord,
the old man makes his approach.
Extends his hand
…the hand of welcome to exile.
The old eyes search in those of the new arrival
much as they had searched out to sea.

Any new arrival is usually in pain:
battered, often broken, by their impact with the sea.
The old *asklepiad* gathers them up,
has them taken to his room for care.
He applies poultices, administers splints, brews tea,
and speaks of new dreams.
He tells of his duties as a priest of Asklepios.
Many who come to his temple believe they can
merely perform their sacrifice,
a cock or a piglet,
and obtain healing. As if buying a new garment.
Others look to *him*, the old man, for healing… as if *he* were the god who brings it.

Neither of these is the case, he tells his convalescent criminal.
In fact, he is more a custodian.

He keeps a clean sanctuary for sick men to come,
and for Asklepios to appear.
Above all, he encourages his patients to clean their minds, as he does his temple.
For, it is those who look past the ideas they arrived with,
who try to see what they've never known,
whom the god most surely visits in their sleep-
It's they who receive His favor easily.

Once the new man can walk,
they can be seen limping about town together, the old man
talking softly as the other's eyes dart about: frantic, wary
like those of any animal dropped into new surroundings.
The old man speaks not of what the young man did *to* Leucas,
nor of what Leucas did *to* him,
but of what he's done *for* Leucas.

"…whatever you were last week, my friend, you are now a tool, an instrument. You have cleansed Leucas: purified it for the coming year.
You've taken upon yourself the pollution of a city's impurities, and a god has seen fit to leave them washed away in the surf, while sparing your life."

Stopping, he turns to peer into the frightened lenses of the eyes: eyes that have been sacrificed, yet still see.

"A week ago, your life belonged to Leucas. Before that, it was yours. I ask you now to consider for whom it has continued. For what have you survived?
But, I know that you've no answer. Yet.
If you think it is yours again, then I fear for you, my friend."

If he sees in the new man's eyes that it's called for,
the old doctor will share his own story:
that he too, many years ago, was thrown from the cliffs of Leucas.

When the patient's health is restored, perhaps he will leave with the old Welcomer…
journey to the mainland, there to set about finding
the shape of his new life.

"We are exiles, my friend.
We can never return to where we're from, or to what we were.
We were formed at the intersection of a city's small anger and a god's mighty whim.
You'll find that if you're to live at all from here on, you must always ask yourself:
What is this new place? Who am I, and what do I really think of life, here?
How do I relate to this place, and what can I give to it?"

<u>His Master's Voice</u>
In Response to Genesis and the Akedah
(Abraham's near-sacrifice of Isaac)

I'm sure you know the story they like to tell about the village lamp-lighter; it ends with, "…I've never seen him, but I can see where he's been."

This class is the first time I have ever systematically approached "The Bible," with or without any kind of community. Hence, along with all the other, more academic issues that arise, there is, for me, the ever-present question of "what's up with this God? What does He have going on, and why should I care?"

In a year's worth of Religious Studies classes, I've gained a respect and appreciation for the work and synthesis which went into presenting me with the Genesis creation story (or stories), but sadly I haven't come across anything to sway my first impression of the protagonist as a petty, vindictive character. In Eden, for instance- the "free will" that we are supposedly granted in this tale, and that is the most common single reason offered up for all suffering since then, is clearly a ruse. Any second-grader in a movie theater, seeing an Act-Two injunction not to do something, understands that that thing will be done before the film ends; it seems unlikely that God couldn't see it coming. The game in Eden was obviously fixed from the get-go.

So far, as the exiled start walking east from the garden, the characterization I've gotten is of capriciousness: Either He's deceitful, or (worse) ignorant of the course of events and impotent to influence them. Yet, He is always eager to assert His might, His majesty.

The ensuing stories didn't do much to sway this impression. Genesis before Abraham (the parts where "man" can be a single character, before the narrative "telescopes" in on one family…) reads to me like a tale of innocence tormented. I see all the humans up through Babel acting with the same guileless, genuine striving that Weisel (in *Messengers of God*) attributes to Adam, while the devious pitfalls thrown in their paths come from above, rather than from wife or brother. This god appears horrified by, and simultaneously obsessed with, his creation, like a child shaking his ant farm to watch them scramble.

Kids with ant farms, of course, are also *frightened* of what's behind their glass. By Gen 6:8, when He destroys the Tower of Babel, the conflicted God is so *scared* of His ants, by the idea that they might defy Him, that He must create racism to disrupt the threat of their continued harmony. I find this much less reassuring or trust-inspiring than Heraclitus' fragment where god is a child playing with dice; this is a childish God playing with Mankind. At least in dice, one has a chance of a good outcome. Most of these characters appear to me to be heroically, or at least poetically, waging a losing battle: the battle to please a vindictive, capricious, all-powerful force: the One True God.

It's Abraham, specifically his demeanor in the *Akedah*, which gives me the most compelling argument for this God having some appealing power and mystery going for him. My notes while reading say,

> Abraham is such a scurvy little coward with regard to humans… by calling her his sister, for instance, he spinelessly casts his wife to the dogs because he's scared. Yet, in relation to God, he always *immediately* obeys: fearlessly, heroically, in the most trying of circumstances. This heroism is called 'fearing' God.
>
> All this is appealing because it makes one imagine how *Huge* must be his god's presence. It must just wipe away all else from his mind and heart but for obedience, like the recorder that erases and then re-inscribes a magnetic tape… God's command makes of Abraham a dog in relation to his master, and how enthralling must be his master's voice…

I understand that religious reasoning by nature occupies its own sphere. I'm not so shallow as to dismiss a religious tradition merely because it appears irrational, or to look within a "faith" for faith's opposite, certainty. Rather, I'm swayed by what it *does*, and I don't know that this is a particularly good criteria to use. I'm sure the Third Reich put on a hell of an enthralling show, watching those tanks parade by…

Nonetheless, the idea that God's voice *just took over* Abraham's world is, for me, a powerful argument, one that reaches beyond questions of justice or reason to a more visceral place. Here's the obvious analogy: when I started shooting heroin, I didn't particularly think it was a wise choice, or a sound investment in my future: I was intrigued by what was happening to the people I saw doing it. Once I *felt* the thing I had *seen* in them, I was conscripted quite wordlessly into the army of junkies, off on the odyssey of addiction. I mean this to be my clumsy segue to the selections we read from Aeurbach's "*Mimesis"*.

His Master's Voice tells Abraham to go to a far-off mountain and make a sacrifice of his only son, so off they go. The text says absolutely nothing about what transpires during three days of walking to Mt. Moriah. What must he have been thinking on this walk? Was he worrying or panicking over his untenable situation? Trying to find an angle, a way out of performing this terrible deed? What did they talk about during the journey? Why this huge ellipse?

I want to answer that it's because *when one is enthralled there is nothing to say*. People who have done a really good shot of dope are very poor narratives, socially. They just lie there.

The first layer of Mimetic separation is the *telling of the story*. It's Homer, not Odysseus who engages in the incredibly detailed story-telling Auerbach speaks of when he describes the description of the scar on Odysseus' leg. Homer leaves absolutely nothing unexpressed, explicating everything. The implication of this way

of representation is that a Greek experience of reality was incredibly *present*, in a way we might associate with Buddhism, with "mindfulness." The explicit pleasure of the Greek experience of life is expressed through the explicitly pleasurable reading which is the *Odyssey*. It's a pleasure that Auerbach labels shallow because, unlike Hebrew texts, one can enter The *Odyssey* on one's own: a kiddie-pool of mythic literature. Being so very *present* (hiding nothing, on the surface…) it is without the "depth" of history spoken of so eloquently (and obsessively) by Weisel in *Messengers Of God*. One doesn't need a community to read Homer, as one does with the TaNaKh. The Hebrew bible is a forbidding text. One needs help to "get into" it. Those reading it alone are cast out of its secrets, whereas there are no secrets at all in Homer: everything is out on display. How do these observations about text translate to the world-views, the Truths, of their authors?

I think that just as the three days constitute an ellipse within the Akedah, there's also an ellipse within our Auerbach conversation: that gap between Homer and the Rabbis, and I wonder if maybe what's missing there isn't Plato? Before Plato, when Homer wrote, the Greek mind interacted with *one world*. No caves, no shadows, no pure forms and pale reflections. For them, *The Odyssey*, the story itself, whether text or tune, was the only layer of separation from the facts of the tale, from Odysseus's scar itself. For Odysseus, clearly, there was *none*. I can't help but wonder how these layers of mimesis extend outward: from a man's sensory experience through his cognition about it, out into his telling of it, the hearing and re-telling of it, the forming of ideas about it, the values attached to those ideas, the reverence of those values and the things that others do to live by those values, including sacrifice. And addiction.

Ever since Plato (and from what I gather, it sounds as if the compilers of the Torah were well aware of this) we have history and mimesis: our experiences are but more or less pale reflections of what's really happening. We live in relation to things-in-themselves, a group in which we as individuals are emphatically <u>not</u> included. (Personally I think this is a significant notion to the study of religions, kind of why we do it.) This necessitates us coming together in communities to help us unlock many mysteries, mysteries of the type which Auerbach correctly finds all over in the depths of Torah, and completely lacking in the shallows of Homer.

The "narratives" of addiction and of sacrifice can both be found in the middle-ground of this same continuum: one needs to *make a connection, to know someone*, in order to score any dope. Having done a shot, one is disconnected from others- wholly engaged, and yet doing nothing: isolated in a personal "nod" which, for him alone, carries an inexpressible presence, a *here-ness* that transcends place. To anyone looking on, there's no mystery about it: this person is inebriated.

It takes a community to form a ritual, and a ritual to constitute a sacrifice. *Slaughter* is simple and explicable. *Sacrifice* is shot through with mystery. By what mechanism does this ritual killing, in its performance, unite a community? What is the singular *experience* of the one whose demise constitutes the ritual? I can imagine that Abraham, on Mt. Moriah, was absorbed in a revery analogous to that of

a powerful shot of dope. But what about Isaac's experience; what was that day like for *him*? Or, even more mysterious, what can we know of *the goat's* experience that day?

Escape

For years, here in this city, an angry man walked the downtown streets.
He was homeless, black, a veteran of Vietnam.
He was intelligent, well-read. Angry.

"Hey bum," said a security officer one day,
"You can't walk on this property."
"Well then," asked the man, "how shall I leave it?"

With your face shattered, came the reply,
with ribs and hands broken, bruised all over:
strapped down on a bloody stretcher, in custody.
The officer was eloquent, with an economy of language:
he said all this without uttering a syllable.

The angry man spent weeks in the jail infirmary, jaw wired shut.
By the time he could've spoken again, he'd grown used to not speaking.

Released back to the street, not speaking,
he watched, listened, paid attention.
Others were angry, too. People argued, yelled, laughed maliciously,
and cried.
Observing, he became compassionate.

No longer speaking, he gradually drifted away from words entirely.
Slipping the mooring of language, his thoughts
became more (is it abstract or concrete?) *animal*.
Walking downtown, seeing, hearing, thinking…
Eventually, he had forgotten his name.

Then, scandalously, waking and dream, those age-old dance partners,
finally rent the veil, the flimsy space between them, and moved as one
in him.

He was an antelope waiting in a soup-kitchen line,
a street tramp bounding effortlessly across the Veldt,
a prairie jackrabbit hiding from the predations of morning delivery trucks.

Eventually, not even other street people saw him around town any more.

Some time later he awoke one morning, hungry.
Nibbling on the nearest bush, he found that it was good. He ate.

Driven by hunger, unaccustomed to the horns on his head, he became entangled.

That's when, looking up, he saw the naked boy,
the man approaching with a knife.

Here's the compelling answer I found within the Akedah to the question of what YHWH has going for him- He did all this for Abraham. In the moment of contact with his God, Abraham was taken back or out or through or above or around or past into the ancient Greek moment. Why the incredible silence for those three days of walking? For the same reason Odysseus doesn't narrate his own story: he's there. Everything happens in the silence. For Abraham in those three days, the performance of God's command is *everything*. As with the representation of Odysseus scar, all is already explicit for him. This is what a good shot of dope does for an individual, and I wonder if sacrifice does for a community: everything. It leaves nothing to say.

There you have the junky's take on the Akedah.

Paean

Sing, Muse.
Release to me the song of your secret seeing, you whose eyes see beyond the limits of mortal vision...
Sing to me of festivals innumerable
a song of a noble land, and its continued well-being

Sing to us today of this sacred spot on which we stand-
a sacred place , where love's most famous lyricist met her end…
a spot to which many, god and mortal alike, have come to treat the wounds of Eros with a powerful medicine indeed!
Aphrodite sought release from the lure of Adonis by throwing herself from this very cliff…
None other than Zeus himself came to this very place to escape from his sister Hera's claims on his heart (a heart which you can be sure longed for the freedom to roam!)

Tell also, Muse, of a proud island home.
My home: Leucas. Beloved isle from which we all, here today, sprang forth
which we have come today to celebrate and protect.
with a festival
whose glory has been sung for hundreds of years by Leucadian poets before me.
For, we have been lyricists back through the stretch of time,
perhaps as far as the epic days of the one they call "the" poet.
For I (as you know, Muse!) have always been taught that it was dear Leucas,
not our neighbor Ithaca,
who truly provided the hero of Troy and his struggle of return
just as we provided triremes to dispel Persians at Salamis...

Oh, Leucas!
Secret home to the greatest hero!
Host to the hearts of Sappho, Aphrodite, Zeus!
Beloved by Apollo, as by poets uncounted,
what a jewel you are!
What would I not do to protect your sanctity?
Especially from one such as this criminal, today-
this lowest of men!
Anyone who knows can tell you he grew up preying on the good people of Leucas, even prior to the crime in question:
This spineless excuse for a man,
having heard (falsly!) that Acreon had a house full of ill-gotten gain,
broke into the man's home in search of wealth.

When the man's wife and daughter of only seven years could not show him to monetary spoils,
he made spoils of them.
Not meant for any mortal is the power to bring such horrors
upon innocent victims,
as did this villain, before finally killing them.

Thus, oh Muses, I call upon your master.
Bring forth Apollo, the bringer and remover of plagues,
the one to whom, as we always have in fair Leucas,
we consign such a scourge as this foul criminal, this vile murderer.
Sing with us, Muses, as we bring forth this foul sacrifice, and say to the fair god,
he is yours!
Do with him as you will!
Take this scourge: be sated great god,
In your purity
and leave us with the safety of your blessing.
Oh, god who loves this island which loves you for your favor.

Songs Of Experience: Reading Sappho In Translation(s)
(In response to Sappho's 94th fragment, Plato's "Symposium", and Williamson's "Sappho's Immortal Daughters")

"I loved you in the morning, our kisses deep and warm,
Your hair upon the pillow like a sleepy golden storm,
Yes many loved before us, I know that we are not new,
In city and in forest they smiled like me and you,
But let's not talk of love or chains and things we can't untie,
Your eyes' are soft with sorrow,
Hey, that's no way to say goodbye"

-Leonard Cohen, "Hey, That's No Way to Say Goodbye"

This essay concerns Sappho's Fragment. 94. More specifically, it concerns my experience of reading this poem, in Carson's translation and in Groden's especially. Mostly it's about questions stirred up in me as I read these two side-by-side.

The first thought I had reading this fragment was, "Oh, kinda like Medea": the poem opens with a woman's longing for Death. The course of Medea's narrative involves an *expression* of the anguish that has her yearning for *thanatos*. Few of us would approve the methods, but there's a therapeutic, *poetic* dimension to Medea's act of filicide. She summons her divine lineage to unleash chthonic powers of ageless process and effect a radical transformation of the circumstances of her grief. She responds to her terribly aching heart. Then she says, in effect, "Look!"

I was taken by the notion that maybe what happens in fragment 94 is a healthier response to a similar agony, that of Eros. It begins with the desire to die, with despair, pain. Then, the despondent lover (who we are told is "Sappho"; I don't think it's too much a stretch to conceive this one as autobiographical) hears her own pain reflected in the words of her departing beloved…

She begins with wanting to die. Then, she perceives the pain of her beloved and suddenly she wants to comfort, to assuage, to *heal* her beloved of the pain of love. I fancied she then heard herself say to her beloved the very things a caring universe would tell *her,* in her pain. She's no longer longing for death to end her grief, she's longing to bring succor to another who suffers it. She's lost herself in the well-being of another, and in so doing, found herself. I'm not sure, but I think this is a big part of what we mean by "love."

What is the medicine that Sappho prescribes for the sufferings of her beloved? Remarkably, it is the Story of Their Love, the invoking of *the very narrative which brought them to this pained point of separation*. It's this story that, in its role as salve for the beloved's anguish, makes up the remainder of the fragment.

Before I looked again into the mystery of this story, the love between these women so long ago, I had to stop and ask: why, sitting in a cushy chair on the 5th floor of the library, bathed in mid-afternoon sunshine with these two translations open on my lap, did I begin to sob?

That's a lie. I knew why I sobbed: I pretend to have asked merely so that I might answer. It was because it recalled my own experience of being exhorted, at a truly awful moment, not to despair: being called on, if you have any respect for me or what we've come through, *to remember us, to love what we've been.* These words were spoken to me, on more than one occasion, by the woman whom I now call my sister. I believe they express the sentiments of experience, of life itself as we come to places where our relations with it fall away. The End of the World entreats us: "Be happy. Here at the end, where everything falls away and nothing persists, be happy *now*, for what we've had, for what we were able to be."

My own responses aside, I found that in attempting to access the world revealed through the telling of a thousands-of-years old story of lovers, I was facing many of the questions we've brought up in this class (Religion and Sexuality). I was trying to parse meaning from a translated fragment by an ancient enigma. I recalled our asking why would Plato start a dialog about Eros *("*The Symposium*"*) by drawing our attention to the elaborate layers of obfuscation and confusion in which he'd swathed it? What, with this hall of cloudy mirrors, was he trying to say about Eros?

My notes from Astronomy class around this time contain the following parenthetical statement- "Pluto is sooo far & indistinct… eloquently so. We haven't known how to classify it, have learned that we didn't know it like we thought we did. It remains fragmentary and elusive, like Sappho. Why is it that distant broken things like this speak to our hearts of us? Why do we need them to illumine for us what's right before, (or behind, for that matter) our own eyes?"

So what *happened* between these two lovers, what is the story that Sappho is recalling for her departing lover?

As near as I was able to tell, it's an extremely racy story. This fragment seems the closest we've come to erotic *technae*. I hadn't yet encountered Williamson when I decided to write about this fragment. She, of course, has explained that "Garlands," "blossoms," "anointing," flowers and adornments generally constitute somewhat of an erotic lexicon in Sappho. These things, apparently, stand in for carnal pleasures. But, I didn't need her to tell me that. The piece holds an erotic allure even for the uninitiated reader.

It's tempting to chalk that allure up to, well, to Eros. And to… (is there a god of writing? There must be somewhere.) It's the magic of Love moving the heart, from across the centuries. I'm not at all sure that I don't believe exactly that. But, trying to read closely reveals some of the *technae* of this expression.

The telling of this story is first person, recounted by a participant in it. Look, however, at the perspective she uses: it's the perspective of adoration. Sappho recounts their love to her beloved by *describing her*, the same beloved. This is what the story has been for her, Sappho: *a revery of absorption* in the image of this other.

"…the beauty we shared, the times when you would wrap around yourself, beside me, (a profusion of garlands)…" (Groden)

"For many crowns of violets and roses]at my side you put on…" (Carson)

Within this fragment the character Sappho describes her role in the story, in love, thusly: she was just there. The most active gesture she takes credit for is *being present beside* the glory of her beloved's desire. I think it's a pretty safe assumption that she was a little more involved in her beloved's pleasure than that, don't you?

I fancy I can see in this detail the best and the worst of our erotic tendencies. On the one hand, Sappho here is selfless. She's absorbed into the greater narrative of passion and Eros in a way that I think sits nicely with St. Francis' ego-escaping channel-becoming. Eros is a doorway from ego to other(s), from the particular to the universal.

On the other hand, this (temporary) escape from identity carries with it the potential for the worst kind of scapegoating. If we go into a romance thinking "I cant believe I'm about to…" then we emerge with " I can't believe I just…" It seems a short step from here to disavowing all responsibility for one's actions. Blame it on Eros. Or the beloved. She was probably asking for it anyway, dressing like that…

This reflexive, defensive, "I didn't do it" seems so often to be our first reaction to our own erotics. It is a fundamental disservice to ourselves, to love, to the truth. It is the exact opposite of this fragment's exhortation to remember (and revere) the story. Our experiences with Eros, perhaps more evocatively and sharply than others, challenge us to face, to be worthy of, their history. If we take Eros as a model, perhaps our concern with history should be not so much "how true is it," but "how true am I to it?"

Carson-
"… many crowns of violets and roses]at my side you put on…"

Groden-
"you would wrap around yourself, beside me, [a profusion of garlands]…"

The distinction here is fine enough that I'm not at all confident I'm not making it up out of nothing. Groden's phrase seems like it could refer to *one garment,* repeatedly donned. Is this a tale of many episodes (Carson), or a single Occasion, doubtlessly composed of many encounters (Grodin)? Did this story leave behind a trail of dead and dying petals and blossoms in the wake of it's unfolding

narrative, or did it concern the donning of one single majestic floral cloak, put on over time, always enfolding, containing love itself? Is their love a story with infinite chapters, or is theirs the story of a single, infinite love? I've gone back and forth on which of these I feel tells the greater tale, which, indeed, Eros might want me to view it as. I just don't know.

I should address the most obvious protestation to all this- "You're going on and on about these trifling differences in translation, chasing them out as if they were sides in an actual conversation, with actual differences between them. But *it's the same poem*, and the differences you're so enamored of *where not there* in the original which was One." I've been hearing this objection in one ear throughout. I want to use as few words as I can to simply say, "of course." We are living in the 21st century, a world (or several) away from the writing of these texts. Again, Plato's deliberate obfuscation if relevant. We are piecing together meaning from the materials at hand, as people always do. Socially, *any* meaning we get comes to us through so many mediators that we're <u>always</u> wrestling with translations and levels of removal. That's as true of the evening news, or a toothpaste ad, as it is of fragment 94. What's new for me, in my outlook these days, is that I'm less inclined to sneer at the idea of an original, which was One than I used to be. As we've said in class, I can point out a thousand things that aren't true, which doesn't mean that *nothing* is true, or that I disbelieve in truth. For Jason, 2011 brings less relativism, less reflexive nihilism- the nihilism I sometimes still reach for was appropriate to the squat I inhabited five years ago. Not so much so these days. So my response to the above objection is- this it the text in the way(s) I can apprehend it. It was brought to me through the efforts of others (translators). If I play with the nuances of translation, it's in the interest of engagement with, even *devotion to* the original. You'll never convince me that this isn't apropos of our topic. Perhaps one's lovers act as so many *translators* of Eros…

We've now arrived at the most striking, startling of the differences between the two. It seems to me that one could derive two very different sets of conclusions about Eros, about desire and the experience of it, and about what it meant to Sappho from the two versions set out here of what happened in that bed thousands of years ago.

Groden:

upon the soft bed you would fulfill
your desire
for the lovely…
and no one…nor a holy…
…….that we were absent from…
nor a grove…
….sound….

Carson:

and on a soft bed
delicate
you would let loose your longing

and neither any[ ]nor any
holy place nor
was there from which we were absent

no grove[ ]no dance
]no sound
[

Where to begin? These two passages appeared to me to describe very different scenes from which the writer herself seems to draw two opposing sets of conclusions.

First, the obvious differences in the descriptions of the lovemaking- The soft bed in Carson is "delicate", a description entirely missing in Groden. The beloved's "longing" in Carson is "let loose," whereas in Groden "you would fulfill your desire." Said desire, in Groden, has an *object* ("the lovely"), which is completely absent in Carson.

Then, the denoument, or the results- Groden gives us four phrases and a single word, afloat in a wash of ellipses. She (Groden) doesn't really even hint at any clause with a subject and predicate. Carson, (ironically the one renowned for leaving holes in her translations) gives us six phrases, three of which could be seen to constitute a complete sentence. "Nor any holy place… … was there from which we were absent."

Here are the jarring conclusions to which these differences seem to point, which first made me want to read them side-by-side again, and then made me want to get into them.

On the one hand, it seems that desire, to be fulfilled must have an object toward which it's directed ("the lovely").

On the other hand, longing which is "let loose," without an object, receives no echo of fulfillment. This desire, though, is "delicate" in a way which fulfilled desire is not.

By extension, I wondered: if one posits an economy of eros, a scale with winners and losers, is desire *for things* a better deal, a more profitable enterprise? Clearly- one has something to show for this desire: fulfillment. Is it also crass, lacking a nuance and sublimity, which is to be found in the "delicate" realm of Longing Let Loose? Note that there's no "dance" with Desire Fullfilled.

What comes of the two? The realm of Desire Fullfilled is characterized by disconnection and ellipses. One, after fulfillment, is left with "no-one." The most complete image I can find is "a holy… that we were absent from." Poetically, this sounds like the land of separation and disconnection, a land bereft of meaning or companionship. Paradoxically, Desire Fullfilled has led to the place of longing.

Longing Let Loose, on the other hand… The very phrase summons a whoosh of yearning, an *expansion* of field (rather than contracting in upon an object "the lovely"). Desire, by definition, is for what we have not. That is, frankly, a lot, even for the wealthiest among us. I picture the co-mingled longing of two women on Lesbos let loose to diffuse itself outward until there is nothing left untouched by it. Anywhere. Hence, no holy place, grove, dance, or sound, from which these lovers are absent.

The fragment, in both translations, brings a shiver of eternity.

Desire Fulfilled involves the attainment of desire's object. However, desire is for what one has not. No sooner does one ponder Desire Fulfilled, than one is looking down a long hallway of repetition: desire. Fulfillment. Desire. Fulfillment. *Infinity*.

Longing Let Loose expands to the far reaches of the known and beyond. A desire unchecked by fulfillment (by object) goes to the very brink of existence. Neighbors with Pluto, whether distant rock or underworld god, Longing Let Loose keeps company with *Thanatos* beyond the edge of the known. *Infinity*.

Certainly, I was projecting into my readings of these translations my own slant on these issues. Surely the preceding is full of my own take on these things. I hope it's not *merely* my own slant, my own take. It seems to me that the story imbedded in the differences of translation wants to be given a chance to speak for itself just as does the fragment from which they came. Or, the poem from which *it* came. Or the poet from which *all of it* came. I hope it's not glib, flippant or disrespectful for me to take for myself so much meaning from such incidentals of later happenstance. I remind myself that the most outlandish act of translating, interpreting and mediating this story was that perpetrated by Sappho: the heroic act of respectfully rendering Experience, or perhaps raw longing and emotion, into language in the first place.

At some point, up there in the sun-dappled 5th floor of the library, I awoke from a nap, looked at the notes I had this far, and turned back to Carson's translation. "…nor any holy place was there from which we were absent." How marvelous, I thought. Continuity. And from out of the will to die. So I turned back to the start, and was startled. It didn't say "I wanted to die." It says, "I simply want to be dead." In the present tense. In this way, I think appropriately, I am brought

back around to a starting point. The emptiness of the story's ending calls forth the comfort of the story: its absence demands its presence. Thusly each story carries us into the next. Separation and continuity chase one another through eternity, telling one another a dizzying array of stories. We are the characters.

If the impression I got from Williamson is correct, and Sappho herself was cloistered in some upper-class finishing school, loving young ladies into mature brides-to-be, how acutely must she have experienced the revolving of this kind of cycle, over and over? The longing for continuity continues. It persists. We stand at points like this all the time: crossroads. So, I guess the story leaves us, at the end of its circle, at what I can only hazard the guess to call Ethics. Now, with this separation, with this longing, even having come to understand the story, or live it out, at yet another inexpressibly pained moment, *what shall I do with this*?

Fragment 94

. . . . . .
. . . and I honestly wish I were dead.
Weeping heavily, she left me,
and said, "Our anguish, Sappho,
is terribly deep-
I am really leaving you against my will."
And I answered her with this:
"Go, be happy-and
remember me-for you know
how I have cherished you,
and if you doubt it, let me call to mind for you
. . . . . the beauty we shared,
the times when you would wrap around
yourself,
beside me, [a profusion of garlands,]
if violets and roses, woven together…
and thick-plaited, sweet-smelling wreaths,
fashioned of blossoms,
you hung at your soft throat.
. . . and when you had anointed . . .
with rich and regal scents,
upon the soft bed you would fulfill your desire
for the lovely . . .
and no one . . . nor a holy . . .
. . . . . that we were absent from . . .
nor a grove . . .
. . . . sound . . . .

(Groden, 43)

I simply want to be dead.
Weeping she left me.

with many tears and said this:
Oh, how badly things have turned out for us.
Sappho, I swear, against my will I leave you.

And I answered her:
Rejoice, go and
remember me. For you know how we
cherished you.

But if not, I want
to remind you
]and beautiful times we had.

For many crowns of violets
and roses
]at my side you put on

and many woven garlands
made of flowers
around your soft throat.

And with sweet oil
costly
you anointed yourself

and on a soft bed
delicate
you would let loose your longing

and neither any[ ]nor any
holy place nor
was there from which we were absent

no grove[ ]no dance
]no sound
[

(Carson, 185-187)

Lost Impressions

I see them gathered below.

Their boats bob in the waves. Some wave up at me with streamers of white clothe.

It's hard to gather my thoughts with the panicked flapping of the birds, tied to my shoulders, my ankles and waist.

The birds have an appropriate fright: they want to get away, to escape their odd predicament. I don't seem to share this desire. I'd just like to remain for a moment.

Everything is happening so fast.
Somehow, I thought there would be
a moment or two
frozen floating
in which I would
breathe
wonder at the light on the waters below
savor my last taste of
the air of this world
perhaps
catch the eye of one of my handlers and share a moment's
startled intimacy…

But
now they trundle me toward the cliff edge prodding with long sticks. I've lost my balance. Fallen to the ground birds bouncing off my face. They hit me. I am standing again. Birds crying screaming fluttering crazily. Feathers in my mouth in my eyes my feet nearly fail again as they prod me towards the cliffs edge toward

Sea sky air
The Sun

Instruments

Everyone is more excited than usual, here at the festival.
I would know: I've been right here in the center of this festival
for the last thirty years since I was a little girl.
I taught the girls to play… the drummers, the kithara and lyre players…
for my whole life, I've instructed the girls of Leucas
in the sounds,
the rhythms I now hear.
This year's festival has a new tension in the air, here on the headland
an unfamiliar flavor to the frenzy, the excitement.
Things are different this year.
Our leaders feel we should be changing with the times.
As the old ways are becoming more flexible, the festival is in flux as well.

This year, for the first time,
my city will throw a woman to Apollo.
Me.

Eros, you are truly the torturer of humanity!
As a girl, I wanted nothing more than to be a part of this island,
and so I was. I wanted for nothing
until you, Eros, sent Pasiphae to me for instruction, my first year teaching music…
…since this beauty entered, and left, my life
there is emptiness everywhere,
nothing matters but the gentle touch of youth
or its absence.

They are leading me up the path to the headland.
We have passed along the route from town to the southern headlands,
to the temple and the cliff.
Behind me in procession is Kandake, playing the flute.
Parthenope, Philomena, and Daphne are singing, as they've been taught.
Megara, holding her Kithara, is the only one who will return my look.
A small-minded, jealous girl. Hey eyes are alight
with hatred. Vengeance. It's true I chose another over her.

After so much heartbreak, so many years spent teaching girls
only to watch them leave me,
I just could not take it any more.

When you came to my school, dear Akantha, I felt an inkling of
what was to pass.

I knew there was something special about you,
that Eros was going to tie my soul up with your beauty, then rip it out,
again
when you left.
I saw your perfect face, dear Akantha, and I refused to fall again.
I somehow knew I just couldn't do it.
I'm glad they discovered my crime.
Undiscovered, I might have set a new precedent: loving and poisoning
over and over.
Sweet Akantha! I *am* sorry your perfect face no longer graces the world.
But I am not sorry for refusing to watch you walk away from me!

Perhaps I never loved any of them,
these girls who will not meet my eye today…
I certainly felt painful longings and hopes for each.
I have become the subject of chattering gossip
of small-minded intrigues.
They say that it's a new, changing world, and such as I do not belong here.
I believe they are right.

I am a teacher of music.
I teach how to draw forth from instruments,
the songs of the gods, the stories told by Muses
and repeated by men.
To answer Emptiness with Beauty
is what I taught, and what I've tried to do.
If I have swayed from the rightness of this course,
it was *you*, Eros, who pushed me astray…

Curse you, Eros!!
May Apollo find it in him *not* to let me survive this fall,
that I may never again look into
the collected hatred in a city's eyes…
I cannot look. Rather, I desire to take from this world
the vision of Akantha's perfect face,
young and innocent of you, Eros,
as it shall ever remain.
Akantha…

Come Out To Show Them-
Ten Commandments in Two Takes

We've spoken this term of doubling, or the repetition of narrative elements in the books of the Bible. I want to say that persistent, repeated invoking of phrases and stories within the larger narrative serves to sew the whole together, to draw in , perhaps enmesh, the reader: it seems to me that the tactic of repetition mirrors the very heart of the questions which the reader brings to scripture, to religion, and to God.

You asked on the first day of class, why *this* set of answers to the dilemma of human suffering? Why invoke any justice at all, why not "shit happens," which is just as reasonable an explanation. Who needs a Theodicy? Perhaps, though, the heart's question of life is not so much "Why did this happen", as "Why does this keep happening?" It is persistence, repetition that gives the impact and resonance to what we get together in class and discuss as "the problem of suffering." When we ponder the repeated ascension of the second son, in a world that venerates the first, the implications for justice with regards to Esau, to Ishmael; when we contemplate Hagar adrift in the desert with only the name of God for consolation and Lilith wherever she ends up: or consider the dispossessing of the indigenous by the "chosen", it's the *repeating* of these Motifs which causes us to feel haunted by this narrative. Just as the phrase "wine dark sea" will attach to the everyday life when studying the Odyssey, I have woken in the night from dreams of someone answering "here I am", to an imperative call to action which will set some woman adrift, leave some son in obscurity, and probably cause immense suffering for some nebulous group of ancillary characters. Who I'm dreaming of, I couldn't tell you, but the tone, the feeling, is one of terrible urgency, an inexorable unfolding of horrible events. These stories strike a chord in us. It's repetition that brings resonance. This we call reverberation.

In comparing, side by side, the presentation of the Decalogue from Exodus and that from Deuteronomy, I was reminded of American composer Steve Reich, a big fish in the small pond of the "minimalism" genre. I am thinking here of his 1966 piece, "Come Out."

This piece is based around a recording of nineteen-year-old Daniel Hamm, one of the "Harlem Six." Accused of committing murder during the Harlem riots, Hamm and four others were innocent of the charge, which didn't prevent his being beaten by police. In "Come Out", he is recounting how he had to open up one of his bruises for officers, in order to convince them that he was hurt and in need of treatment. He says, "I had to, like, open the bruise up and let some of the bruise blood come out to show them." This statement repeats three times, after which Reich presents us with two tapes simultaneously (one in each channel) repeating the phrase "come out to show them." The two recordings begin simultaneously, in unison. As the piece evolves, however, they begin to phase out of synch with one another, forming a reverb effect, and eventually almost a row-row-row-your-boat kind of canon. Reich lets the chasm widen, then doubles it, giving us four and

eventually eight looping voices. Eventually (around the ninth minute), the evolution of the piece is such that the words are no longer intelligible: we are left with the sonic qualities of the boy's voice and the rhythm of the looping tape. The last four of the thirteen minutes of this piece have the quality of a speeding steam engine, a runaway beast built out of the repetitions of one, formerly intelligible, phrase.

We've spoken of decadence as a possible theodicy. Here I'm thinking of the decaying of theodicies.

With the two Decalogues open side by side, I was reminded of Reich's piece. As near as I can tell, for the first several injunctions, they are synched up word for word. Starting with "I am the Lord, your God", (an ideal statement for this initial unity) the two "voices" of the chapters tell exactly the same tale: I brought you out of Egypt and slavery. Keep no others before me: make no idols besides me. The two identical voices warn of their jealousy, and of the karmic consequences of violating these precepts. In unison, they warn the listener not to misuse their one name.

As the piece slowly evolves, even an attentive listener could be forgiven for missing the first phasing, the first small discrepancy; the left channel says "remember" the Sabbath, while the right says to "observe" it. The "song" continues harmoniously until the listener is jarred by the fact that one ear hears "resident aliens", while in the other the same voice says "alien residents." Then they go all out of synch, with Genesis invoking the six days of creation while Deuteronomy speaks at (relative) length of freedom for slaves. They shift back into phase, then, for the final injunctions: filial piety, and a basic code of criminal law. This piece ends with two competing tellings (one more contemporary to, and the other looking back on) of the theophany at Mt. Horeb, in which God did indeed "come out to show them" just what they were dealing with. Here, in the Genesis channel, is my favorite take-away line from the bible so far: Moses says, don't be afraid, he's just trying to terrify you.

Forgive me for a tenuous analogy here, but I find it striking. Doubling creates reverb, an evolving proliferation of narrative mimesis, in relation to which we struggle to situate ourselves, the reader. It's possible to loose ones grip on either story or self. At this point we are in a hall of mirrors, without a reflection. Such is the problem of suffering. It cries out, in a narrative no longer intelligible. The *pain* of suffering is not the problem. The problem is that it's not *reflected*. It's not acknowledged. In the contemporary milieu, suffering disappears into proliferation. If the dominant ideology says I'm not here, then it's my problem to wonder where (or what) I am.

The Lord tells Moses to give to Him all the first born of Israel, "whatever is first to open the womb" (Ex:13:2), by which He means firstborn sons. There is no provision made for a daughter born first. It's not even mentioned as undesirable. The space opened in the womb by this entity is filled with nothing. Her birth is an erasing, a non-event; the mother's labors, her pains and exertions, are written

straight out of being, as is the child born of them. She is born not existing. *How does such an entity address God*? How does suffering address itself to us?

Daniel Hamm describes squeezing his own injury, making it bleed in order to gain recognition of, acknowledgment of his suffering from the same (police) force that inflicted it.

Why is Moses not allowed into Israel? Deuteronomy says it's because he took credit for miraculous water. In Numbers, he's taking the heat for the misdeeds of the people (which I'm sure is viewed by some as foreshadowing –doubling- of Jesus). So he's exiled for his bad deeds. Or for his good deeds. Or (in light of theodicies we've discussed) because the devil did it, because it was written, because of his ancestor's misdeeds, because things were already falling apart. Because because because because. This is the chug-chugging of the narrative locomotive of theodicy.

The voice of suffering hasn't a chance against the gale force sound wave of doubling, evolving Theodicy. In agony, an individual reaches out her hand for contact. When we do this, the answer the heart craves is "I am the Lord, your God." What it gets is reverb. How many denominations are there now, formed around the following of the ethical path which starts out, "I am the Lord, your God?"

What's satisfying about "Come out", is that is gives a loop-amplified, doubling and redoubling-enhanced evolution to a small suffering voice, the very thing eclipsed by the juggernaut of multiply-doubled ideology, whether religious or secular. What's frustrating about it is the ending. After thirteen minutes, the piece does a fade-out, having accomplished what it came (out) to show us. Fair enough. But still. Is this a "sad stories do not have happy endings" scenario? Witness to suffering <u>is</u> an accomplishment in itself. But still. These things are frustrating.

When Come Out fades away, or when one finally shrugs and admits there's not going to be a resolution to a given problem within the bible, this capitulation is a blow to idealism, to hope, to belief. It's a blow to *evolution*, which depends on us. Just as the entire biblical narrative hinged upon Moses being convinced to come back to Egypt, to take up again the cause of his people, the course of history itself demands that not too many of us fold under discouragement; life itself within and without the individual will not accept our saying "Aw, screw it."

The narrative trajectory of my own experience lends its voice to echo the hackneyed truism that "the only way out is through." Now again, years after deciding it was just an adolescent phase, I come back to Nietsche's potential great spirit shouldering (again) it's load: becoming the camel plodding into the desert, towards it's date with lionhood, and perhaps with childish wonder.

All of these processes strike me as inexorable, possibly inevitable. The doubling of narrative, the miming of meaning, the eventual dispersal of truth through mutating ideological multi-representations, the muck that becomes Baudrillard's postmodern playground. They are history, evolution. This is why I'm

so intrigued lately by Tielhard de Chardin, and his "omega point." I don't know his work as well as I should, but some of his ideas, (in light of this doubling and it's implications) are very compelling.

That natural, Darwinian evolution, once having specialized to a dizzying degree, then mutates inward, folds back on itself, involutes in such a way that society and spirit are the grounds of it's growth. That along with this change the flow of history, the universe itself, takes on a conical shape, wherein any act of suffering draws one's neighbors into contact, into love, and inevitably these forces lift one another upward, towards a definite top-point. Hence, the opposite of creation turns out to be not destruction, but *completion*: the omega point.

This is blushingly idealistic. And I honestly don't know how to really, logically, tie it into the foregoing, or into my obsession with Leucas. In light of the fact that we still enact retributive rituals of judicial sacrifice, it's hard to make an argument for any such involution toward love… nonetheless, the idea is there, and I can't dismiss the notion that an idea implies a reality.

Regardless, if suffering exists in the face of runaway trains of mutated ideology and unworkable theodicies diluted through doubling, if these things can be metaphorically represented by a piece of music involving tape loops, what can one do from there? One can, I think, go backward or go forward.

If you walked into a room to find "come out" playing on a reel to reel tape deck, and you thought what the hell is that, you could reach out and reverse direction. If Come Out were played backwards, Daniel's voice would again become intelligible. I think many people similarly have sufficient impetus within them to battle their way (back) to an understanding of our texts, and find a personal connecting point with "I am the Lord, your God." I suspect, however that too many will at that point say, basically, "OK, great, I got mine."

To focus on Daniel Hamm, on his words solely, would be to deny oneself the dizzy pleasure of Reich's unsettling piece. Similarly, to fetishize meaning, purpose and resolution, to in other words consider a grasp on God as the point of the biblical, or historical narrative, is to turn one's back on the whole confusing whirlwind of the rest of the story. The doubling within the narrative opens up wobbly shimmering mirage-doorways in the linearity of the story, by which it takes on dimension. The vertigo of uncertainty makes the ride thrilling.

So, if one, (now a Nietzshean lion perhaps, shifting into childhood) has gotten back to the beginning of the tape, has made contact with the hand of the Lord, her God, what's the right move now? What shall the newborn child do? Why, reach out and turn ON the tape. Go forward. There may very well be no point, literally: no Tielhard tip of the cone, no resolution. But, there may be, and that is infinitely intriguing. We don't know, and that is infinitely engaging.

The Potter and The Wheel

It's late morning.
I'm lying in bed, recalling my night.
My brother was here with his youngest son…
…my brother who ceaselessly speaks of children,
tells me my life is barren without them.

I am the best potter in Leucas.
I've made pieces that have sold as far away as Delos.
People say my depictions of gods and heroes appear are nearly alive.

My brother and nephew spoke excitedly of today's festival,
Of the criminal this year, who had set out to rob a merchant's home,
then, finding very little money, had instead raped and killed the man's family.
"Do you recall," I asked my brother, "this happening before?
When we were children? I was perhaps seven, and you five years old…"
A failed farmer from the north of the island
had come to the city to find someone to steal from.
He entered a family's home, killed them, and started living there
as if it were *his* home… eating their food, wearing their clothes
until finally some friends of the slain family found him out…
"Do you recall?"

Annoyed, my brother said he didn't have room
in his mind for every little detail
from his childhood. He was too busy caring for the next generation's childhoods
to partake of such selfish foolishness.
There's only so much room in a man's mind, he said,
and it's wrong to waste it all on oneself. One should have children
and think of them.

We shared a last skin of wine and the two of them were off,
leaving me to my home, my work.
I entered the studio, hoping I could finish a depiction of Zeus,
watching the swimming Semele,
his form already turning to the snake that would take her after nightfall…

I don't know what's wrong with me lately.
I used to work in the morning, as if with the blessing of the fresh sun,
of Apollo and his Muses.
Lately I am up late, pondering questions for which there are no answers.
I approach my wheel, my clay
and am without inspiration. My hands flop uselessly on my lap,
and my heart sinks toward Hades below.

I came to bed in the middle of the night, after the candles went out, having
awakened in the dark before my unfinished Zeus,
the undefined Semele yet to materialize from the water in which she swims…

Now I sit in bed, the morning already giving way to afternoon, late for the festival.
Perhaps my brother is right.
Perhaps my lethargy, my doubt would vanish if I were to breed.
Perhaps the voice of my heart, calling out for the caress of a Muses's whisper,
is merely selfishness, and I need only give up, join in.
Have I created all I was meant to?

If my works did not sell so well, I could fill this house with the pots I've thrown.
Filled to the rafters with pieces into which I've put my work, my love, my self.
An awful, nauseating thought: this ghostly room full of me.
Fortunately, this dubious inheritance has been scattered from here to far Ionia.
Has the god's will to speak through my hands fled him,
as surely as my will to partake in his festival has fled from me?

I don't want to go.
I just can't stomach the thought of watching yet another
plummet to his screaming demise.
The forced gaiety,
the foolishness of the criminal in feathers, of the birds,
the music and celebration, the feasting…
…it all just makes me feel sick:
It's a *man* we're killing. His eyes will dart from person to person,
frightened, beseeching. His heart
will batter the walls of his chest, his hands will
flail about for some help, something to grasp,
just as mine would. Or yours.

The morning sun is now leaving my bedroom completely.
By Zeus, I'm so sorry. *I must go*…
I am Leucadian. I love my family, my home. I must be with my people.
Please, don't leave me alone out here!

I'm stumbling up, into my cloak, heading for the door,
and yet I pause again. Outside my window the bright sun burns.
How I wish I could be back in it's light,
could bring forth my art in the brightness of the pure morning!
Sudden discouragement has almost knocked me to my knees.

Oh, Apollo! Please don't forsake me.
If it pleases you, I shall go howl at this man's death today.
I shall bite back my conscience and scream with the rest…
Just please don't send me away from you!
Let me walk, and work, in your light while I can…

Beyond The Borders

(Reading Response to "Haunts of the Black Masseur" by Charles Sprawson)

> It was a custom among the Leucadians each year at the festival of Apollo that some criminal be thrown from the look-out for the sake of averting evil: all kinds of wings and birds were fastened to him in an effort to break his fall by their fluttering, and many people in small fishing-boats waited in a circle below and did what they could to rescue the man and take him to safety beyond the borders. (Strabo, 23-25)

I'm starting this essay with Strabo's quote, just as a reminder. After all, this fragment having become such an obsession with me, I'm used to channeling most things I think about through Leucas anyway.

We've been discussing romanticism. Specifically "Romantic Nationalism," a concept I can't say I have much grasp on after these couple weeks. But, reviewing my notes, it says that our class' goal has been a "feel for" the Romantics, and I think we've succeeded at that. Such a damn *feeling* bunch of kids they were after all…

I *feel*, as I set out tonight, that it's very much germane to Sprawson and his heroes for me to ask of Strabo's quote: "how much more 'beyond the borders' can one get than already to have been tossed over a cliff for transgression?" And further, "if you've managed, miraculously, to survive that tossing and to be hauled up into a vessel of your fellows' good-will, what more 'safety' could possibly await 'beyond the borders?'" In asking those questions, I begin to detect the outlines of what "romantic nationalism" may be.

After the class' discussion of Sprawson, I found myself confounded by the idea that romanticism and nationalism should intersect at all: didn't the romantic call lead to wilderness, to mysticism, to travel- into the individual's own desert, and *away from* the homeland? Didn't Goethe's romantic urges lead him to embrace the British, which doesn't seem a very nationalistic association?

In class we characterized these poetic youngsters as "transgressive for a living." Beyond the borders is the *point* of the whole Romantic endeavor, right? The borders of decorum: between, for instance, civility/primitivism, land/sea, clothed/naked, sober/"spirited", above all the infernal borders between individuals. As I understand it, the other side was always the Romantic destination. One of the most visceral, evocative things in Sprawson is the capacity of the outcast to excel in water: the deformed (Byron), or the Polio-sufferer (Annette Kellerman). It's as if something within them were making clear for everyone the Romantic condition: *I never belonged on this side anyway.*

I fancy that a true Romantic would hold "safety" in disdain, but always consider life itself to be happening over the borders. And, were some Romantic young criminal, still dizzy from his harrowing plunge, to arrive over the borders one

day, to be dropped off from a boat in a foreign harbor, to be heartily bid adieu by a cheerful fisherman and his son… as he took his first steps into this new life in a new land, resurrected, what would be, then, his infirmity, his Achilles heel, his secret softness, the weak-spot which he carried hidden and protected, both reviled and revered? My guess is it would be his *nationality*.

Have you read about the fugitive just arrested in Portugal? Caught after forty years on the lam, living abroad. How must his nationality have felt, as he lived out a dream no-doubt utterly romantic to those he left behind in the New Jersey State Penitentiary? Here was a man with a secret: his identity. I wonder if it's wrong to see an analog with some of Sprawson's Romantic characters: skinny effeminate boys at Eton two hundred years ago, thinking "if only these people knew: I'm really a wild savage in their midst…"

Why did Trelawny, the most adventurous of them all, after surviving Webb's whirlpool and Byron's Greek war, return to England to die? The Portugal fugitive, George Wright, was caught sometime after he'd re-established contacts with relatives back home. Apparently, while they were no longer in their nations, their nations were still in them. And, well, that <u>is</u> pretty romantic, isn't it?

It seems that no matter the break one might make from Nation in a Romantic charge after transgression, no matter the voluptuous delight of leaving, the thrill of nodding out in a foreign opium den (or an Atlanta squat), the place you came from is still in you. For the Leucadian criminal it's the hands of the place he came from which rush him towards his fate, his fall. Think again of the Olympic diver we talked about in class. Whether on a springboard or a high platform, he can be seen pacing back and forth a time or two before his plunge. From the edge, the boundary, he must walk *back to where he came from*, so he knows exactly how many steps to the edge. To dive well, he has to re-trace, again, the ground he's covered to reach the edge and to measure the steps it took. Otherwise, his final approach, the one that matters, might be catastrophic. He might fall, rather than diving. If his last step is taken from too far inside, not near the edge, he might fail to soar as he's meant to in the dive. If his last step is too near the edge, well you know…

I wonder what poetic significance might lay in the fact that it's only an "Inward" dive that requires no such retrospection?

In terms of our classes, the pacing back & forth prior to a plunge resonates for me with the mysterious generation of silence between crucifixion and gospel, with the ten years of silence between Weisel's camp experience and his beginning to write about it, with Sappho helplessly trapped between two minds… If I'm going to get this right, I've got to hold back and digest it before I leap. I fancy that I can feel the difference between a poem which was published as written, and one which has been re and re and re written, sculpted until… what? How does a painter know

which stroke was his last? How does a bereft apostle know when its time to start telling the story? I fancy that the mysterious ritual on Leucas may have lain in wait for me over these many years, until I had something to say, a voice to speak with…

I wish they hadn't spent all that money catching him, the fugitive- it would've been more romantic if he were still at large, and New Jersey needs the money. But then I would never have heard of George Wright. It would not have been the spectacle that it is for us now, however briefly. And this is another dimension to the whole conversation. There are *people watching* the diver. We are gathered to study the diver this term. The dive attracts something elemental in us. I imagine if I studied up, I'd discover that it's tragic. It's certainly cathartic…

When the student in class a few weeks ago mentioned how everyone goes to auto races hoping to see someone die, I wanted to scream. We watch NASCAR, and NHRA, and platform diving, and ski jumping and Evil Knieval to see someone NOT die. We're like (I think) the chorus, imploring the character not to take that fatal action… we *hope for* their safety.

This is why I'm always thinking of Troy Davis, and of Leucas in this class. What did the Leucadians buy with the spectacle they put on? The element of justice and retribution was part of it. So, too must've been the *sport*: the thrill of wondering will he make it, of cheering someone on. Clearly, by "averting evil", the criminal played an expiatory role in the community calender: did he take all their mis-deeds over the cliff with him, rendering them lighter, free to go forth unfettered for another year?

Is *Apollo* the crucial difference between Leucas and the lethal-injection chamber? I mean, they had a cathartic spectacle "for the sake of averting evil." Um, don't we too? I mean, wasn't Troy Davis' death entirely ritualistic but void of the benefit of the blessing? What do *we* buy with this spectacle of ritual bloodletting, of retributive homicide?

I guess this is a question of nationalism, too; what do Leucadians get from their festival? What do we get from our executions? What do we get for our Olympic victories? Is a death in the surf, an occasional execution of the innocent, a bronze metal or even an injured DNF (did not finish) cathartic for the citizens of the nation? Who, after all, doesn't know the "agony of defeat" guy? How do these things in their various ways speak to the aspirations and trepidations, the vibrant hopes and dark fears of a nation? Also, what do they give us, the individual, as we pull for the one who has gone beyond the borders?

As I walk out this morning to attend the State Fair with my girlfriend, just as if I were a real citizen of this place, as I perform my ablutions, touch base with whatever force ferried me to my resurrection, as I wave good-bye to my own well-

wishing fishermen and venture into another of these days I never expected to have, I know one of the things hidden in my heart: I'm one of the killers of Troy Davis. Formerly, in squats and shooting galleries, I was a party to lots of needles going into strong black arms… but somehow the act of falling into the surf of the Fulton County Jail and getting lifted out has re-set the clock on lots of my actions… these things are now fueling my new life… I'm trying to say this: the agency of the many shots I was involved in weighs on my heart less than my complicity in the one that killed Troy. I'm fine with being a junky. I'm ashamed of having killed Troy.

So, is this Romantic Nationalism?

The Heron

For the past fifteen years, I have trapped the birds for the festival.

During migrations, I walk my trap line along the cliffs,
the shore, the edge of the trees.
I get cormorants, pelicans, terns.
My father taught me this skill, as his father had taught him. It is my family's job,
the role I must play.

It happened almost two years ago.
I came atop the crest, at the high point of my line,
and I saw it.
I still wonder at how such a large beast ever fit itself into my trap.
It was a male heron.
Its legs protruded out, through the gaps in the trap-door that, triggered to fall, had apparently knocked the great bird prone.
Its thin, strong neck was curled back about its great torso.
My traps generally contain their quarry in a comfortable, if confining, chamber.
In this case the trap was more like a harness or net:
gathering up the angles and edges of the bird's strength, tying it to itself.
At my approach, the trap, full of enraged, feathered energy, began to bounce around.
The air filled with an awful screech.
Lugging the trap home, I set about building a larger cage than any I had.

Most of my captures become somewhat domesticated during their time with me.
As I enter the bird room, they awaken, step forward in their cages,
eager for the food they know I bring.
The heron remained a stranger in my house: never calmed down or settled in.
At my approach it thrashed wildly, recoiling into the opposite corner, never touching or acknowledging, until after I'd left, the fish I set down .
It did not adapt. It remained incapable of living, except freely.

* * *

The heron was the last bird that I attached, on the day of the festival.
Reaching into his big cage, on the bright windy cliff-top,
I felt I was trying to hold wind, to grasp fire.
Fighting mightily against my advances, the bird hurled itself repeatedly toward the blue of the sky, hindered
first by the cage's bars, and then by the leather bonds on its legs
as he strained towards clear sky.

I had never before seen him outside of a cage.

Having pulled him out, I paused, lingered a moment
before turning toward the prisoner.
He tugged skyward above me.
As the gathered crowd murmured and exclaimed,
As I felt the strength, the power, transmitted down the leather cords to my hands,
As I beheld his bright fury, the spectacle of his straining,
I indulged, for just one extra moment, my love for this animal.
I hope no-one saw my tears, as I knelt to attach the bonds.

* * *

Ceaselessly struggling skyward, he never looked at any of us
…never so much as glanced at the burden to which he'd been attached
as it was prodded toward the edge, was hurled forth,
and pulled him downward.
He descended among the cries and screams of lesser beings,
his eyes on the blue above,
as they all, together, plummeted.

I lost sight of him when the boats surrounded them,
the men reaching over to haul the whole mess out of the sea.
Then he emerged, giant wings still straining for the sky.
Someone's knife separated bird from man, and I saw him, my beloved,
begin to rise, to escape.
I heard the cries from below, the cheers all around me,
as the criminal was pronounced Alive.
But my eyes were on the great delicate beast with the giant wings
laboring upward,
the remnants of his bondage trailing behind as he disappeared into the sun.

Oracular Poetics-
The Words of the Voiceless
(Reading Response to Hosea)

This "essay" requires some introduction.

Our Biblical Literature class, taking me through my first look at the Hebrew Bible, had arrived at the prophets. We were discussing the nauseously recurring failure of Israel to live up to their covenant(s) with YHWH, their desire for a king, a human authority to mediate (and dilute) His singular rule. The delicate balance that had been struck was roughly this: if you insist on having a human ruler, you'd better also have a human check on that ruler- a human voice of accountability to the divine: prophecy. The role played by the prophets in the Kingships is not dissimilar to the role I began to believe that poetics should play in civics. This is not the fortune telling, future-predicting, second-sight kind of prophecy, but a voice of common sense demanding accountability in light of the big picture.

When we came to the writings of the prophet Hosea, I was confronted with a prophetic voice whose message was based in his own sufferings. When Hosea confronted Israel with its indiscretions, its failure to stay true to its covenant, its repeated running around with other deities and idols, he did so with the authority of one who knows. Hosea, in his own life, had married a reformed prostitute who failed at being reformed. His continued efforts to forgive and reform a recalcitrant lover who refused to be true, had earned him a broken heart, even as YHWH's heart had been broken by his beloved, chosen people.

All of which is very poetic and moving picture of political poetics if you don't happen to be a woman. In class we addressed some of the feminist takes on these chapters- why is it that women must always be cast as angels or whores? Why never just women? Why can't powerful forces ever seem to clearly look at, and behold the faces of those over whom they hold power? What was the *experience* of those whose tales haven't survived? What impressions did *they* have, now lost to the ages? These things were on my mind as I sat down to write…

Well, Hosea has taken us in some definite new directions. In class on Wednesday, I went from intrigued, to alarmed as the text seemed to take some disturbing turns. Downright scary and unpleasant turns. I hope to share a little of the horror with you here.

When God, (in Hosea 2:16-20) makes these promises to Israel, paints this picture of an uncloudy day in the future, of war and pain banished, all this mess behind us, the picture I see is of the drunken, remorseful father in a child's bed too late at night, speaking to the naked innocence within the child's heart, one that beats with his, the long-past-innocent drunkard's, blood… Steadfast love: speaking promises of security, devotion. Above all, *we'll be together*…

Indulge me in describing a document, a volume, a travel-tale in the shape of Canterbury Tales. This one, though, is on a bus with welded windows, bound for the women's asylum: for, say, Georgia Regional... The passengers who share their stories with one another are all court ordered into exile in the nuthouse: unfit for citizenship, less than criminal, mad or inconvenient or both.

I didn't ask for all that, says the first one to share her story. She'd been a regular bar girl, a honky-tonk gal, just hanging in bars and having fun like all the rest. She wasn't hurtin no-one, and wasn't asking for anything. Guys came and went, and that was fine with her, which was fine with them. Till this guy Jose came on the scene, talking how he loved her, needed her, would give her all this shit she never said she wanted… God, why couldn't he have fell for some other broad, and let her be? "You knew what I was when you started this mess", she used to say when he yelled or, worse, carried on crying if she went out at night, whenever she spoke to any other man, hell, whenever she *looked* at anyone but him. Then there were kids. Then there was a house, his church, his goddamn friends. She never asked for any of it. Ingrate, he called her. Unfit, the judge had said. Well, she reckoned both were right. This aint where she'd expected to end up, but hell at least they're doping us up, and most of all at least I don't have to hear his nagging, whining, and raging anymore…

Another had ended up wandering the streets after her husband had killed himself. They'd been high school sweethearts in the mountains, she told the other passengers . Her husband had inherited the old farm he'd grown up on. He'd heard of other people doing big business with growing grapes, running winerys. His father had warned him before dying that the land they owned was good for pecans, and that was all, but her husband had wanted in on the winery boom. The poor guy, lamented his widow, had visions of himself hosting the other land-owners, comparing vintages with them, being accepted into their cosmopolitan crowd. The farm refinanced, the pecan trees cut down, the last of his money squandered on planting grapes which never grew, they had fled to the city after foreclosure, and he'd ended his life in a homeless shelter, leaving her alone.

There was a prostitute who began to feign lunacy after her pimp got sent to prison. She described their life together on the street. Yeah, it's true it was pretty rough, but hell it was always rough for me. My man had taken me away from a bunch of Egyptians running a store. Sure, they fed me, but they also had their way with me whenever they wanted, and treated me like a dog, a slave. The things they called me! My man never lied to me. He said he was a pimp, that I'd have to work for him, that I'd have to make him look good in front of the other pimps and make sure everyone knew I was just his, and that was cool with me. Y'know why? Because with him I *knew* what love was. I wasn't just some bitch to him. My man had *chose* me, yknow? And I knew he loved me cause after awhile, he couldn't even stand to see me working. He kept thinking I was gonna leave with a trick, like they were trying to take me away, or like I'd go if they were. Oh, we had us some fights over that! But I tell you what- nobody ever cared for me enough to fight like that for

me. My man, he *love* me, and that's what makes my whole life matter. I'll get out this place, and he'll do his bit in prison, then we'll be together again because that's how we're meant to be.

Then there's the scary one. I guess *I* have to tell her story because she doesn't speak. She's young, in her teens. She stays curled up around her swollen belly, sucking on a strand of her own hair, looking out at the others and rocking back and forth. She hears and knows what the words mean, but she hasn't spoken any in some time. She's listened to the other stories, and she doesn't understand them. How could someone's home just disappear? Closed for what? What's a bar girl? Like a candy bar? Isn't a pimp something you get on your skin? And, most of all, how could love be so important, such a big deal? Why, love was all she knew. Her daddy had always spoken of his love for her, as far back as she could recall. He'd dressed her for school, and wrapped the scarf around her neck, telling her how much he loved her before she went out. These were her first memories. Then, in the fifth grade, he'd seen her playing with the kids from school, and then he told her they wanted to hurt her, so she shouldn't go back to school. Then, about that time, he started to teach her about grown-up love. Daddy said she got good at grown-up love, and she should never have to grown up love with anyone else, because no-one else was her daddy and no-one else loved her. Really, her whole life had just been Daddy and Love. About the time her stomach started hurting, Daddy didn't come home one day. Eventually some other people who she didn't really understand had come and taken her away…

Old Friends

"How is the meat, Alexis?"

"Ah, Praximos! So good to see you! Sit. Sit by my side, and *you* tell *me* how the meat is."

"And I shall. Seems we rarely see one another anymore."

"Indeed it does. It seems to me only last week we were still living together in our little district in town… playing in the roads, chasing one another around for whole afternoons."

"Haha. Last week it was not, old friend. It has, in fact, been some years since my own grandchildren outgrew the kind of play you recall."

"Oh,I know. Perhaps I'm becoming maudlin and sentimental in my dotage, but it sometimes seems to me that I left behind the greater part of myself in that old district, playing with you in the heat of mid-morning forever."

"I think I should disavow any understanding of such a sentiment..."

"You probably should. An yet you don't, old friend."

"It pleases my heart as always to see you here."

"And how *is* it?"

"My heart?"

"The meat, you old codger, the meat you're gnawing on!"

"Haha. As usual, Alexis, you have your mother's touch with the preparation of the sacrificial feast. You know, as a child I always wondered why Apollo left the better part of any cock or goat in your pot, and not ours. I figured he must've been better disposed to your family, or to you, than to me. It took me years to figure out that your mother was the superior cook…"

"Ha ha. Well, we had to be superior at something old friend, because the gods had seen fit to fill your house with most of the beauty to be found, leaving us all quite homely."

"You exaggerate as always."

"If you say so, Praximos."

"Yes, it does seem as if this festival is the one time for old friends to see one another anymore."

"Sigh. Indeed. I wish it were another, happier, occasion…"

"Have my ears failed me? What did I just hear? Are we not here upon the pinnacle, at Appollonioi, the sight of Leucas' brightest hours? Is this not the very scene of the most exultant moments of our young lives? It's perplexing, in light of the decades of joy I've witnessed you personally having here, to hear you call it an unhappy occasion."

"Of course you're correct old friend."

"But..?"

"…I just haven't the stomach for it like I used to, old friend. Why must there be so much killing for us to enjoy an afternoon together? Yes, the meat is good. Tender with a marvelous flavor. I just grow weary of this elaborate charade- we must take the beast to altar, must secure it's "permission", dripping the wine on its head so it "nods" its assent… we must make this great spectacle of blood flowing out, pretending we do all this for the god. I'm not a priest: I don't know what Apollo does or doesn't need from us, but I know that for sixty years I've watched us perform all these rites for *us*. For our own selves. I'm tired of the show, the fakery."

"Huh."

"To say nothing of what we're going to do to that poor man in a couple hours. His crime, whatever it was this time (I've stopped even asking) is no more the reason for what we're about to do than the bull's "agreement" was necessary for me to butcher it. These are games we play, as much as any you and I made up as children. Only no-one imbued our imaginary pastimes with the workings of the gods, or with the power to affect a whole island's well-being."

"Alexis, old friend, do you know the first thing I thought upon waking this morning?"

"Of course not."

"I thought, oh, by Zues do I have to? Must we go through with all this? Haven't I seen enough blood and death for one life? Of course I know how you feel."

"So you see, then what I mean!"

"I just said I do. And do you know what I said to my wife after having these thoughts?"

"What?"

"Nothing! I said, "how shall I help you to get ready, my dear?" These are things we *don't talk about,* Alexis! Not out of some personal fear, but because its no longer ours. Think of the joy we had here as boys, the thrill of looking down the cliff, watching the man fished out of the water, waiting with baited breath to see which flag would fly. The sheer joy I, no *we* felt when we were ten and we saw the first to survive since four years earlier… do you recall?"

"Yes, of course."

"Do you wish to deprive our grandchildren of this?"

"Well, no. I just…"

"You just want to change things, to feel better about yourself now that you feel *you* have outgrown the savagery of our ancestral custom. Is this a choice you care to make for others, too, Alexis? Do you wish to say to Patrocle's family over there that their meal wasn't actually pleasing to the god? Or to explain to your grandson Stavros that this man today will be dying For Nothing- it won't avert any evil, and whatever joy he takes from it will be an illusion?"

"Hold on, now. I never said…"

"But you did. You made reference to this bull we're eating, to the wine sprinkled on his head before he's killed. You said we're fools to rely on the false comfort of thinking this mere physical response indicates some approval, some agency on it's part, fools to think it's playing a role in it's own demise. Well, Alexis, perhaps Leucas needs to feel it plays some role in it's own fate. Perhaps our little charade, as you called it, so recently repugnant to you and I, is the feeble gesture by which we Leucadians convince ourselves that our own senseless striving and immanent demise were of our own doing, that we're not living a terrifying mystery in the hands of unknown forces…"

"Of course…"

"You and I, Alexis, grew up with the benefit of this comfort, whether false or not. It brought us to the point of seeing one another annually, and savoring the joy of our lifelong friendship, of indulging together the luxury of our current disillusion… Perhaps, old friend, when we force on a smile today, and ignore our nausea at the horrific proceedings, we are, finally, sacrificing a little of *ourselves…* Perhaps, finally, this is what is being asked of us."

"Huh. I guess that's a pretty good deal isn't it? "

"Well, I daresay this bull we're enjoying would gladly accept our burden instead of his. Or the man that, even now, they are preparing for his fall. A pretty good deal, indeed…"

"Well, Praximos, in light of what you've said, let me change my earlier answer- Wonderful! The meat is the best it's ever been! Sit down, and let's share some…"

Charis

The children are happy.
They jump and run about
chasing one another among the many fires where sacrifices made this morning
are now meals roasting, aromatic smoke rising to the sky.
The people smile and laugh, as befits the occasion:
our festival of Apollo.

The music has ceased for now,
the music that drove us each along the trails
as we gathered together from around the island
and came in procession up to the temple this morning.
But the music's energy, its kinetic insistent force
is still present, still here beneath the happy chatter
as I wind my slow way among the people of my polis, my island.

I am the oldest woman, for that matter the oldest person, on Leucas.
Thus, it will fall to me, soon,
when the sun reaches its peak, to introduce the paean,
and to officially pronounce expulsion to the criminal.

For several years now, I've been doing
what I've seen a succession of old women do for my whole life.
When the criminal has been brought before us, has
passed the long line of Leucadians as they swat at him,
pelt him with branches and sticks, as they yell,
"*Katharmata*-" "Be our off-scouring… scum… filth… rat…"
When they've stood him in his place,
between the temple and the cliff's edge,
and all are gathered round,
I will step forward and speak, will direct everyone's attention
to the singing of this year's new paean,
which includes as always a re-telling of Leucas' story,
the history of this sacred place, the many who've leapt
or been thrown from here.

Most will not listen too closely to the lyrics.
For the children, today is all about the fall of the criminal
the spectacle of a funny-looking bird-man's moment in the air.
Will he fly? Will he survive?
For most adults, in truth, this ceremony is mostly diversion.
We've no great theatrical or sporting competitions on Leucas,
but we do make our show of *agon*, and of catharsis…
During the paean, most everyone's eyes are on the criminal

whether he be defiantly staring back at them,
fighting his handlers attempting to escape,
or fallen to the ground wailing in terror.
I sometimes wonder what each of us is thinking of the sacrifice,
how much cargo is he taking on from the gathered individuals,
to carry with him off our island, off our minds?
Even so, regardless of any celebrant's state of mind,
each of them, over years, will absorb through the paean
the history, the legacy, of our festival and our polis.

When the song is over, men will attach the birds.

Then, finally he will stand before us,
festooned in his ridiculousness, a cacophony of frightened birds
aflutter above him, shedding feathers and excrement upon him:
    judged ugly, and made uglier: befeathered, shat upon
    found guilty and made more so: despised, reviled: refuse to be discarded.
Before the men with their poles and long sticks
begin, in a semi-circle, to prod the criminal towards the edge,
it will be my duty, as the eldest Leucadian,
to step up to him and speak for the island.

They've begun to run together in my old mind, these many
frightened, ugly men to whom I've bid farewell.
Some had to be bound by their handlers, held in place to listen to me.
They lashed out, spat upon us.
Others fell down, begged, tried to reach for my legs, to never let go.
And others stood, perhaps trembling some,
looking at me, or up at the sky where a god awaited them…
I do prefer it when it appears that the man *hears* what I must say.

When first I took on this duty, I spoke to them as I understood I was supposed to:
    May your fall, Katharmata, cleanse us. May you take with you our off-
    scrapings. May you please the god, and take our stains to the waters below.
    Bring us blessing and security against divine forces.

As I've begun to grow weary,
my own thrill at bloodshed long gone,
I have begun to say, attempting to meet the man's eyes,
what seems to me the more direct expression, appropriate to the setting:
"Thank you."

That is the end of the festival, for me.
It's years since I took an interest in the man's fall,
in the drama of his survival or demise.
When I've done my duty, I go to lay down, exhausted.

It's *this* time, before, that I value in the festival:
the community, the eating, the celebrating.
As I walk from fire to fire,
I understand less and less of the god that calls us here, annually.
I am happy merely to enjoy the company of my people.
Now, I see by the activity about that the music has started again.
They are bringing the criminal up from the jail.
As I hear the music from below, excitement spreads throughout the crowd.
It's time.

What We Get
(Reading Response to Plato's Phaedrus)

Nettle neuron Newfoundland niche nightshade nimbus nuts nuthatch oak-tree oat obelisk oboe ocarina octagon

Lysias reminds me of my first step-dad.

When he explained his job (attorney) to me, I exclaimed, "so you get paid to lie for people! That's great!" I was terribly excited about this. At seven, I was tuned into this truth: that we live in the world outlined in Lysias' speech. What matters is results, and who can pay for them. Sincerity and earnestness were the natives whose extermination made way for this empire, but they were small losses: as Lysias points out, these kinds of things only gum up the works.

Pain and pleasure; if one plays with Love, there will be both. But it's really quite unnecessary: a product which is not displeasing can be had, (and called "Pleasure") without the annoyance of that pain. How could anyone say it's not real pleasure, when there are orgasms involved? Lysia's speech conscripts rationality into the crime of selling economics over love: the weak spot is the self's desire to avoid pain. A cost/benefit analyses of love. Once we've made this gesture, why not do the same in *every* facet of social life? We've reached the cynical point where the obsession for safety has trumped the imperative to live while we're alive.

In opposition to this cynical reasoning, Socrates speaks of "… proof that convinces the wise if not the clever." (Reeve, 109) To labor in the service of sincerity, of earnestness and love… to place oneself in the tradition of devotion and holy madness rather than Calculation; there are no Virtue Friends with benefits.

arches Archimedes' screw armadillo armor arpeggio artificial horizon asses astrolabe atoll great auk backhand

Oh, boy. Last night I watched Wings of Desire with my girlfriend, Melanie. This morning I received the following text from her- "So, Marrissa does have cancer, and it's stage 4 of 5. And I can't stop thinking about all the things the dying man said, y'know?" Mel's friend Marrissa is 23, and her brain is full of tumors.

Melanie was really struck, last night, with the man who'd fallen from the motorcycle: how he was lying in his indignant bewilderment, the incredulous narrative of ending flying around in his mind… how the angel merely (what?) *steered* that same narrative towards a disconnected litany of images from the life he was about to leave… how this same narrative of image followed by image became the succor and comfort the dying man got… that's what we get.

triskelion trombone trowels trumpet truth table T square tuba tuning fork turn hawksbill turtle type ulva uniak unicorn

Do you recall the angel walking away from that, how agitated, how affected he was? What we get is often not enough, and that's part of erotism as well. "Damn, it shouldn't be this way," is an intimate of "I can't believe I'm about to…"

How to say this? For me, everything exploded when you said in class that the etymology of "Platonic forms" is "image." Man, that really changes everything…

That's what we get. Everything? Is what we get all there is? Do we *have* everything? If Form (substance) is Image, and we're already steeped in it, how come we still desire? How *can* we?

When it was released, I watched this movie half dozen times in quick succession. I was in love with Ganz's love of the earth, of life. It looked to me like Nietzsche's Life-affirming antidote to post-Platonic Forms of abstraction. And at the basest level, that propaganda works: it IS wonderful to take in a breath of the morning, laden with cold and rain, to step off the sidewalk, to feel the ache of approaching age in one's limbs, to savor, to be… it's marvelous.

franklin stove French horn frets frieze frog frustums fungi gables gadroon gall gambrel roof gantry gargoyle gas mask

In Astronomy class, the teacher introduced Newton's law of universal attraction. I experienced an immediate shiver of dread and recognition. So, you're telling me that what attracts the most, at the deepest level, is the biggest, the true-est, the Great… but also that this very attraction, the important one, is trumped, over-ridden, tied down by the many and varied small attractors which pull on one through the accident of proximity; the shit between me and what matters. That's not cheery news. We all know, though that that's exactly how it works.

This seems to me to have everything to do with the Egyptian king, spoken of in the Phaedrus, who invented writing: an agon of life vs. image. My notes say, "Congratulations. You've invented the Spectacle. –King", referring to Guy DeBord's revolutionary thesis that Capitol keeps us all under it's sway by feeding us little cannibalistic images of ourselves, which we purchase in *leiu* of lived experience, of Life… In the world I inhabit, I can hear the words of Victor Jara, composed as he waited for Pinochet's thugs to end his life in the stadium. I can re-produce his words and songs on my phonograph at will. I can call up Tahrir Square on the internet, and indulge the emotion, the rush, of a televised revolution.

The king speaks of how writing isn't remembering, only reminding. The implication is that it's less authentic; it's now image, just as today's Social Machine manufactures Image for us, which substitutes for a life unlived. All this voyeurism makes sense. Like Lysias' proposal, it's safer. It's safer to live by watching Life than to live it. It's safer to make love to a non-lover than it is to love.

Image usurps substance. It's criminal, and tragic. But then you tell us that the meaning of "substance" (Platonic forms) is "image", and everything cracks open…

I read my girl's text and suddenly stand athwart an abyss, staring out at…well, at eschaton in this 23 year-old's skull.

Of what are we getting glimpses? What is this payoff? Phaedrus' pretty face does a Proust to Socrates, waking up the Daimon who says "walking away from a hot young piece of ass? Blasphemy! Don't you dare!!" So, Eros functions to recall to us the Higher Things, eh?

All our erotic moments unite us with the recollection of the time we had wings? A glimpse above the clouds… I'd like to buy all this, really.

How am I to convince myself that it's not merely Thanatos up there, out there: the expressionless face of eternity, seeing nothing yet claiming everything in it's own namelessness?

That's what you get. All these thrilling shivers: the glances, the kisses, the whispers… all this excitement at the whimsical fingertips of Eros: is not a taste of Death the salt for the bland fare of Life? And if we *feel* these things, if we *experience* them, is that life, or the image of life? It's my tenuous understanding that Plato, in book ten of The Republic banishes poetry from the ideal city in an effort to avoid just such a crisis of representation… what is a city without poetry? Is it not entirely barren?

Oh, hell… there went, again, the fleeting notion that I could say something about it. Like Peter Falk said: this drawing sucks. Gosh, I hope one day I might make one that doesn't…

So: Life. Death. And what we get: images (of which words are a subset).

We are discussing the alleged inferiority of writing to lived experience- this *reminding* which is not actual recollection, the room full of students reaching for notebooks to tell them where they left off last time… In an authentic life, wouldn't the heart always know exactly where it left off, for the heart is always still there? It seems I'm being told that mythos and writing are the agents of sincerity's demise, the end of experience. And it sometimes, as above, looks to me just that way.

But. To be redundant, here; these things are what we get. I've never personally, authentically, stood beside that river, driven mad with the beauty of the day, intoxicated by open spaces and Pheadrus' fetching countenance. Have you?

I love that fuzzy, drunken inarticulate moment in the wee hours of the morning after the symposium when Aristophanes and Agathon are passing out, missing the culmination of a terribly important argument, one which our unreliable, drunken narrator has only just woken up enough to catch the end of. This shaky image which he passed on to another, later to someone else and one more, making its way to us on a broken chain of dubious authority… Would I have this image if Plato hadn't inscribed it, hadn't *birthed* it?

Our greatest blessings come to us through madness, provided it's the madness of a god. The audacious act of putting a pen on paper probably is madness, conscribing Life to the cage of Literature. But, like, what else do we have? Recalling Diotima's talk of pregnancy, and Dr. Ruprecht's talk of 1+1=3, I feel compelled to state that Writing is not suspect, writers are. Is the madness of your pen on paper coming from a god, or from a fabrication, from "you"? *What am I calling forth* is the question, no? I don't think I'm wrong to place these questions in the province of Eros.

I have experience with the 2nd function of Madness: escape. Escape which is fatal madness, ego madness, death: addiction. Also, with escape which is fertile madness, life. By this I mean the great blessing of the story, which turns out to be merely image, the delirious madness of image. What we get.

In jail, when I'd been off dope for a few weeks, and life was making an agonizing return to my psyche, like circulation returning to a "sleeping" limb, I picked up the dictionary. In a notebook, I made a list of words: the words with pictures, those represented in the dictionary by images. Their succession on the page was a felicitous composition of randomness. Un-intended themes danced among the words, imbedded in the happy circumstance of their accidental order.

It's this which saw me back into life, and which saw the motorcyclist back out of life: the story imbedded in the things we see.

capstan capybara caribou carpels flower cartridge for shotgun cashew castanets catboat C clef cell cello canser

UGLY

"An eye for and eye makes the whole world blind." –Ghandi

Now, of course, I remember my mother.
My mother on Leucas.
It seems only natural that it should be her whining voice to come to me now.
Here in exile.
A heartless old thing, she was: never a kind word or a touch of the hand.
No sweetness, certainly not for me.
Others got date pastries; I got my ears boxed.
"I gave you everything," she used to screech. "What do you give to me?
When will you bring anything to my door?"

I wasn't really so ugly, not before. *They* did this to me.
I may not have been beautiful, but I wasn't *ugly*…
not until they threw me off their island, and the impact put out my eye.

Yes, I stole from Leucas. It was supposed to be my home.
I told myself I was done with that shrill old cow:
I went off into Leucas to fare for myself, but Leucas did not recognize me as it's own:
a not-gorgeous, not-rich boy who had to take what he could get.
What did I get?
Some bread. Some cloth. The pair of sandals for which I was thrown off the cliff…

When I struck the water, it was face first.
When they dropped me off here,
I was a mess: purple, blue, and black,
my right eye dangling beneath it's socket.
Before, I'd been just average. It was what *they* did that made my truly ugly.

And that damned old man with all his worthless talk!
I wish he'd have let me die where they left me.
Better never to have tasted human kindness than to have suffered it
from an old lunatic, hurling his crazy ideas at me!
The old fool put a poultice on my missing eye, my battered face,
and tried to tell me I should look through my bad eye!
He said that after he went home, my wounds would be healed.
and if I learned to look through the missing eye, I'd discover how to live
in a new way, a way for a new world…

I hate that old man.
He made a fool of me.
It shames me to know that I ever listened to him,
that I tried to do as he said.
I stood like a chump, a fool, with one hand over my good eye
straining through this empty socket,
expecting to see something through the hole in my face.
There was nothing there.

What I saw after he left were the women of Ithaca.
I saw the shapes of their bodies under their garments,
saw their eyes light up at the things their friends said
at the voices of their children
at the sight of their husbands, their loves…

I saw those eyes cloud with horror and leap away from the sight of me.
I saw the soft skin I'd never touch, saw the love I'd never feel.
I sat there hoping and longing and
…and now I am dying of fever in a foreign street.
I am dying young. Ugly.
It's been a waste.
And now, *she* comes back to me.

I recall how she would grudgingly set my food before me and lay back
to bemoan her own fate… a filthy whore, who never washed,
then wondered why the men of Leucas didn't flock to her.

"Eros has found me beneath the tread of his sandal," she would wail,
"and tossed me aside to his rubbish heap."
"That," she'd go on, "is where your ugly father found me:
an ugly and unwanted woman. It was **his** brief pleasure alone,
not that of Aphrodite, or Eros,
certainly not **mine**, that visited this curse upon me:
an even uglier, and less wanted little boy.
When will you bring anything to my door
save the pain of your ugly face to remind me of my barren life?"

Well, as soon as I could, I stopped bringing her even that, and I never returned.
I hope the old crow died lonely and in pain, even as I am about to.

Cooks

It's very early on the morning of the festival of Apollo. Two men, young and old, are preparing a fire.

"I'm excited! Long have I anticipated the first festival at which I would get to perform sacred duties. My heart leaps at the thought that today I shall meet the god as one of his own."

"Well, I'm glad your heart is leaping in anticipation. As for me, my back aches in anticipation. There is much work before us today, you and I."

"Oh, elder, you're not so jaded as all that. You jest and play at aged indifference, but I'm sure your spirit is stirred by the day's festivities."

"Funny you should mention the stirring of spirit. You know that later today we'll be ladling forth stew made from the meat of today's sacrifices. Tell me this, boy: at that point, ladles in hand, will we be stirring spirit?"

"Um… I think not."

"A good answer. You mean to say we shall stir merely matter at that time. *Spirit* will have fled with the blood poured forth onto the sacrificial stones. It's *spirit* upon which Apollo shall feed, before we partake of the flesh, yes?"

"I believe that's right."

"Do you fancy women's work, son? I hope so. For that's what you have chosen. Today we cook for a dangerous husband, and for his fickle children. Today we serve to Apollo a dish we hope he will find favor in, and to our fellows, his subjects, we serve the material remains of what's given to the god…"

"Um."

"Tell me- who is the beneficiary of the day's festivities? Of the music, the procession, the sacrificial feast and the brief flight of the criminal? Who is it all *for*?"

"Well, for the god, right?"

"Perhaps. Are you sure it's not for us? To keep us alive longer, to buy another year's well-being for Leucas, to please the god so we can go on? Surely the benefit is for us?"

"Yes. I thought of that when you asked. I just… well, I said what I felt I was supposed to."

"Ah! Now we're getting somewhere. What you were supposed to say… as priests we're supposed to serve the god, not the people, right? What if the god should

happen by and hear me say this was all merely for us, not for him? Why, wouldn't I be as liable to be struck down as was poor Marsyas, who played flute a little too well? Does not the very thought that it's merely for us strike a certain fear into your heart, as a priest-to-be, perhaps make you want to step away from such blasphemy, out of the path of divine lightening?"

"Truthfully, it was out of such a fear that I answered as I did."

"Uh huh. And that fear, my boy is what I would have you take away from today, to learn to act upon. Make no mistake: the husband to whom you and I have betrothed ourselves is a terrible one indeed. You're too young to recall the last plague that visited us here in Leucas. Me, I lost two brothers and the woman I wanted to marry in that plague. It was in a frightful depth of fever in which I, too, nearly died that I learned I should serve Apollo. And why not? He had just *taken* the life I'd had previously…"

"A priest of Apollo is all I've ever wanted to be."

"Wonderful! I'm sure you'll far surpass the old oaf who presumes to be your instructor. I ask that, today, as we enact and partake of the festival, that you ask yourself just what it is that you've been wanting for your whole life… what is *done* by a priest of Apollo?"

"I wanted to be near to the god, to be a part of divine business, to be…how to say… near the center of life. I want to be where the power is."

"Oh. Well. In that case, my young friend, please accept my condolences."

"Um. Condolences?"

"It may be a bitter day for you; today you will see your lifelong ambition being realized, not by you but by the ugliest, lowest, person on the entire island."

Dear Troy Davis, 23 April, 2012

This is the second letter I have written to you, now. The first was as I sat across from the capitol building on the day of your death, waiting for the protesters to arrive. Today, seven months later, I'm about to finish this Leucas project, and leave college.

Seven months ago, sitting outside Central Presbyterian, across the street from the capitol on the day you died, I indulged in looking back. Many chapters of my own story intersect within a two-block radius of our Capitol building.

For some years, I prepped burgers in the Johnny Rockets at Underground, using my paychecks for pharmaceuticals, drinks and cocaine. I drank and partied in Underground, made a mess of myself on my 30th birthday, felt the exhilaration of partying with people I wasn't supposed to know, of crossing racial and social borders in search of a good time. I used to hand money to some panhandlers outside of the now vacant Coca-Cola museum. Years later, I would be sleeping beside those same individuals, in the shadow of that same church where I wrote to you.

When, somewhere along the line, I awoke one morning to find I had assaulted my best friend in a blackout, it was to that church's free outreach clinic that I brought my frightened self for counseling. Their volunteer therapist had tried to minimize the ill-effects of my downhill slide.

Six years ago, I lived in a halfway house a block and a half to the southwest of the Capitol. Again, sober, I was working in Underground. I used to pause, walking through the church's courtyard to work, try to gather my scattered wits about me and attempt to pray to the mysterious "higher power" that seemed to be keeping me clean…

From my window in Hope House, I used to look up at the statue atop the capitol building, at the torch held aloft in her right hand. As my junky fatalism began to thaw, with a burgeoning, well, hope, I looked to the lady atop the state-house, with her eternal light, and I felt myself daring, again, to think of things I'd had to be wasted to ponder. Truth. Wisdom and of clarity. Somehow, at that point, I didn't notice the sword in her left hand.

That sword, Troy, is what brought *you* into my history with the Capitol, with my state. At a rally two years ago in front of that same Capitol building, I heard someone at the microphone call loudly, shockingly, in wild unfamiliar syllables on their Holy Ghost to intercede for you. If there's a God, perhaps He was moved by that. I was. Perhaps He did intervene. I don't know. Perhaps the intervening time brought something to you. I hope so.

Over the last three or four years, you have been instrumental in my being sewn back in to life, into society, my city, my species, back in to the Body Politic, the body of Christ if that's what it is. My dismay at execution, my sorrow at your

setbacks, my joy at the small victories in your case… as I slowly thawed from narcosis, these events and the sudden ability to *feel* what *we* are doing, and to *give a shit,* have marked the awakening of the civic heart in my chest. You, by unfortunate virtue death row, of what you represent for us, of what we did to you, have afforded me a framework for re-integration, a redemptive, regenerative, process. I've been allowed back into the flow of mankind, of society. It's hard not to feel your death had something to do with my renewed life.

I stood at one of those rallies a couple years ago, and I listened as your sister described a visit with you. She told us that you had made what peace you had to, that you were fine with the outcome of your case, regardless. She told us that, in essence, we needed to worry about *ourselves*, to check the things *we* were doing. Well, Troy, I'm worried about us.

In my first letter, as the protesters arrived, I asked your forgiveness for leaving the scene: I felt the time for protest, for screaming and rage, had passed, that it was time to merely look on in horror at what we're capable of. I wrote that I was sorry for what we were about to do.

For the last year or more I've been wandering around with a head full of readings about sacrifice- why people do these things, what it brings. I read of the bizarre *pharmakos* ritual in ancient Athens, a sacrifice by which they hoped to cleanse their city, to buy some purity and success. One would step into the surf to be tossed about with, to roll around with the one onto which they'd place their own faults and shortcomings, prior making the sacrifice. If this, Troy, is what we've done, what we do with the execution ritual, then thank you from all of us. Regardless, whether it makes sense to say or not, thank you for Jason's life, for the place at which I stand today.

As I researched this thesis, I would sometimes read in a stairwell at GSU's General Classroom Building, on an upper floor. From this vista, one can see all the terrain I've spoken of in this letter: Johnny Rockets, Underground, the ghostly empty Coke Museum, the churches with their lawns full of homeless men and women. From this height, one is basically at the level of the mysterious statue atop the Capitol. Affected by the vertigo of ten floors of emptiness between the street and I, looking across at the sword-wielding visage of civic liberty, I would sway in uncertainty. I've done a lot of rah-rah cheerleading about what I've called re-integration. The closer I get to the center of the body, though, Troy. The more I wonder whether I'm capable of confronting the cancers within it.

Next week at this time I will no longer be in college. I will have returned to the menial workforce, will have no external compulsion to think about any of this. Will my life be better because we killed you? I truly do not know.

At some point, while staying in my halfway house and going to lots of twelve-step meetings, I attended a vigil at the Capitol for another man's execution. They read a statement from the condemned. He said, I never thought I was the kind of

person who would do what I've done. It all started with one drink, and it's ended for me here. I thought of my own blackouts, things I've been told I'd done, the counseling I sought out across the street. I searched in vain for the substance of why this man and I should not be in one another's places.

Troy, I leave college with lots of questions and few answers. I hope that wherever this is leading me, wherever it will end for me, I will act in a way that honors you, and remembers what we've done. I promise to try.

Yours,

Fishers Of Men

For Troy Davis

My son is talking so excitedly
about the Festival
that he keeps missing spots in the nets he's mending.
Feigning irritation, I keep telling him to pay attention.
But my mind is on the Festival too.

***

As a boy, I was cut by the beak of a panicking
pelican, its feet tied to the criminal's legs,
as I struggled to haul him into my father's boat.
How strong the bird was, giant wings battering my head,
deafening in their frightened frenzy,
and how weak the man.

Once, I recall thinking we would split the man in half,
my friend and I: each trying, laughing, to pull into our respective boats
the body between us.

So many men I've seen plummet from that look-out above us, perhaps
half to meet their deaths below.

Many times my father and I were the ones to reach him,
to earn the right to ferry the man out of Leucas.
We would return triumphant,
the blessing of a god our day's catch.

Most of these men were a chaos of howls and screams-
man and bird flapping falling howling crying out in the broken morning
down through the sea air, our air, towards us below.

I recall thinking, in the arrogance of my youth, that if it were *me* up there, I'd do better. I, who'd fished these shores my whole life, would be the criminal who knew the morning as his own, who relaxed in descent, who held out his arms in the way the cliffs dictated… who let the birds take me, triumphant, to some brighter elsewhere as my astonished village looked on.

Then, in my sixteenth year, I saw the criminal I'd imagined myself to be.
He did not struggle. Silently, he spread his arms and legs just as I'd pictured.
He would've soared majestically, king of the seabirds,
except that he fell as quickly as any of them.

In my enthusiasm, I had placed our boat very near shore. I looked up at
the single moment of his silent, sculpted hanging
and I was afraid
that he would land *on* our boat,
would shatter it and sink us all.

He landed a mere toss of the net from where I stood.
I saw his impact, his face striking the waves.
His head snapped back onto his spine,
and he sank for a moment
before the surfacing of the frantic birds
dragged him up, resurrected but for being dead.

Head now facing the other way, as a head never should,
his emergent eyes pointed toward
me as I stood, stricken, on my father's boat.

***

"Father, do you think it will be a large man this year?
I hope not. I think the smaller men do better
because the landing is lighter. Don't you think?"

"Look," I say. "You've missed another spot.

Lost Impressions

The music has stopped: the drums and flutes fallen silent. They stand before me
in a semi-circle, everyone suddenly quiet,
the men holding their long poles
to prod me over the edge.
I smell the sea in the breeze on my face.
They stare.
They're watching for me to fall down, to beg, to wail, plead and thrash about just as
I've seen men like me do for my whole life.
I expected to oblige them: I intended to beg, to panic, to tremble in mortal terror…

But, now, beyond them, in the empty middle distance before the clouds
there is… well,
there is
a man.

There IS,
like the earth the sea and the gods ARE,
a man who has done this already.
They will touch me. They will probably kill me. But soon I will be through with this.

If I survive, I will be whatever it is that I see up there.
If not, what I see up there will have been
me.
I suddenly realize what I was.

I was always taught that the sacrificed criminal would take away the worst of us,
take our shortcomings off the island. How could I have understood,
(how could any of them, the poor fools)
until I had stood here looking into their faces…
Dear, foolish island!
You think you can wash away the ugliness, retain the beauty.
But you have placed *all of yourselves* here, on me, to give to the gods.

Today I am the most valuable object in the entire world.

A woman begins keening loudly. The men are approaching with the poles.
The very earth and everything in it, like them, is approaching
attempting to hold the marvel that is me.
I am breathing anew. I am escaping. I am

Narrative/Normative

Trying to understand how power uses poetry
(or vice-versa)

> "Poetry is not a form of entertainment," wrote Brodsky, "and in a certain sense not even a form of art, but our anthropological, genetic goal, our linguistic, evolutionary beacon."
>
> People go out of their way to ignore this beacon today, but they do so at their own peril. "By failing to read or listen to poets," Brodsky wrote in "An Immodest Proposal," "a society dooms itself to inferior modes of articulation—of the politician, or the salesman, or the charlatan—in short, to its own."
>
> Maybe Brodsky had this right, and this is the highest purpose of poetry, or song: It keeps us from listening to fools.
>
> -Leopold Froehlich One-Track Mind, *Poetry* Oct. 2011

It was reading Pindar's odes that led me to the idea of "Civic Poetics." Looking at Pindar while thinking of Troy Davis, and of Leucas, I began to wonder: where's the boundary between authority, audacity, and hubris?

Whatever one's definitions of these terms, examples of them could be found in the poetic conceits of Pindar's Odes, and also in the judicial conceits of a (any?) Polis' struggle to deal with its criminals. Both roles, poet and polis, call for a presumption of omniscience, a posture of omnipotence, and an *audacious* self-confidence. To play at poetry or to play at power is *to play god*, in a way that by all reason should constitute sacrilege, yet both carry such a deeply implanted *authority* that they get away with it, often with the imprimatur of the very gods against whom they trespass. This gets to the heart of Civic Poetics: through what narratives, what myths, does a state claim the authority to arbitrate mortality, to pronounce and carry out the sentence of death?

Olympia One, and Pythian Three were "Victory Odes," written to be sung in praise of Hieron, the king of Syracuse, whose horses apparently won often. Olympia One is built around the myth of the hero Pelops, while the central myth in Pythian Three is that of Asclepius.

Pelops is the patron hero of Olympia, The trajectory of his myth takes place almost entirely along the thin line between mortal and immortal, "mortal" really meaning only that which is balanced on the tight-rope between *thanatos* and immortality… Pelops' story straddles this border.

He is the son of a man who dined with gods: Tantalus, king of Lydia. Lydia was the wealthiest of the Ionian nations, coveted and fought over by Greeks and Persians. Having somehow found favor with the immortals, Tantalus was allowed to dine with them at Olympia. Being, however, only-and-after-all human, he was prone to taking a little too much pride in his standing- as proof to other humans of where he'd eaten, he stole some ambrosia and nectar from the divine table and shared it

with them. Still, the gods permitted him the odd opportunity to make a return invitation: you had me over- now, come dine with me at my castle. In planning the menu for this engagement, Tantalus faced a timeless dilemma: *who knows how to please the gods*? What do they want? Tantalus decided the Olympians would be impressed with a dramatic display: he would slay his own son, and serve them a stew made from the fruit of his very loins. In retrospect, this was clearly a catastrophic mistake (Tantalus' very poetic punishment was a consumerist hell: standing in a pool of fresh water under a canopy of sweet fruit tress, yet eternally unable to reach either, to take a bite or a sip), but still; how crazy an idea was it, really? One imagines that Abraham might understand…

The story has it that the Olympians sat down and were presented with the abominable spectacle of little boy soup. The immortals were horrified, staring aghast amid what must have been the mother of all uncomfortable silences. All of them, that is, save for Demeter. She, distracted with grief over the loss of her own child, Persephone (who had been abducted by Hades), absent-mindedly took a bite. It was Pelops' left shoulder. The strained silence ended when an indignant Zeus, much to the dismay of the host, angrily ordered the gathered immortals to reconstitute the lad. Soon he stood before them re-assembled with a new ivory shoulder fashioned by a presumably contrite, if nauseated, Demeter.

He was resplendent. How could he not have been? Here was a boy, prince of the wealthiest of nations: the very picture of the highest, noblest of mortal forms, unspoiled by age or work. This most desirable of mortals had now been undone and re-worked by the hands of gods; doubly beautiful, he was. One can imagine that he was dazzling. Poseidon certainly thought so: he snatched the boy up and took him back to Olympus for instruction in the things of Aphrodite until Pelops had grown to maturity.

Returning to Lydia to claim his throne, Pelops looked around for a bride. Oenomaus, the king of Olympia in Greece had a beautiful daughter, who Pelops wanted. One of the questions we must ask here is, what does the man want who has everything? It appears to be a familiar answer. Beautiful women, fast horses: sports. Pelops, king of an immensely wealthy nation, wants the beautiful daughter of the man with the fastest horses. Oenomaus will not let his daughter, Hippodameia, go to anyone who cannot beat him in a chariot race. He knows he has the fastest horses around. He has the decapitated heads of her many previous suitors to prove it.

Sick of the advances of her amorous father, Hippodameia fell for Pelops and is said to have helped him to plan a subterfuge: they bribed Oenomaus' stable-boy to sabotage his master's chariot. At the same time, Pelops approached Poseidon. Reminding the god of the savory pleasures they had enjoyed together, he secured the loan of the god's winged horses for a chariot race.

When the race began, Oenomaus's sabotaged wheels flew off. He was torn apart by the horses in which he had taken such pride, while Pelops disappeared into the sky with his daughter, a hero.

This, roughly, is the myth of how Pelops became the patron hero of Olympia, of the games. He is a character exalted beyond the realm of mere mortals, on the edge of god-hood: an athletic superstar. As such he straddles the boundary between gods and men, between the separation of life and the continuity of eternity. I found that this border is of great import to Pindar: he's deeply invested in the mortal/immortal distinction.

It's tempting to consign that investment to self-interest: he's terribly taken with the near-absolute separation of mortals and immortals merely because (as he stresses constantly) he, the greatest poet in the land, is in a unique position to ferry his patrons across that particular border. Lyric poetry was the only game in town for anyone yearning to persist through the ages. Who can deny it? After twenty-five hundred years, we are still talking about the Victory Odes, and victors celebrated therein. Pindar make this point emphatically in Pythian Three, which references the myth of Asclepius.

Asclepius, as near as I can tell is both a hero and a god. He was the product of another union between a male god and a female mortal; Apollo was his father, Coronis his mother. Prior to becoming engaged to Ischys, a mortal, Coronis had coupled with Apollo. In this particular case, I have not seen their relations referred to as an abduction, or a rape, though it's not hard to imagine who the aggressor was. The god had impregnated her, yet the wife-to-be committed the crime of lying with her mortal betrothed while (as Pindar says) she still "…bore the god's pure seed within her (Nisetich, 170)." This act was witnessed by a Raven, who went straight-away to tell the god what he'd seen.

Apollo, apparently, did not fancy the idea of his pure seed occupying the same vessel as mere mortal seed. I'm not sure why, that being the case, he had chosen a mortal vessel to begin with: one might think that *sex with mortals* would be the greater profanity. Regardless, the impurity that Apollo took exception to was the sullying of the canal through which his child would have emerged. So enraged was he to learn of this dark offense that he turned the raven who told him of it from white to black, as they remain to this day.

Apollo's rage at this transgression apparently quite blinded him to the issue of the child's well being. Rather than letting it be born in contact with an impurity he disliked, Apollo sent his sister Artemis to kill his former lover, along with whatever was within her loins. This Artemis did, and it was only as the deceased was being set alight on her funeral pyre that Apollo wavered and suffered a moment's compassion for his innocent offspring.

Stepping into the fire, the god tore his embryonic son out of its burning mother. He took the infant to the centaur Chiron, who brought it to maturity, and taught it the art of human healing: Asklepius, both patron hero and god of medicine.

The student excelled at his studies, and became an accomplished healer. His renown became widespread and sick, wealthy patrons flocked to him. Asklepius developed a taste for being in demand, for commanding a price, and he developed a taste for wealth. It was inevitable that eventually he should be approached to, with his renowned powers, transverse the barrier between the living and the dead. This he was, and he accepted, effecting the resurrection of one Hippolytus, for which he was handsomely renumerated.

This action caused a stir on Olympus (not to mention in Hades, where a drastic drop in GDP was feared). Zeus felled the god of healing with a bolt of lightning from which he did not heal.

Thereafter, as near as I can tell, Asklepius became a fascinating thing: a dead god. He was gone; his death was completed. Apollo's grief and anger at Zeus nearly caused a rift in Olympus. Yet, the cult of Asklepius thrived. Sick people sought the ministrations of the deceased god through healing dreams visited upon them in special temples built for this purpose, temples which never closed, which operated constantly with no schedule or ritual calendar. Mortal, yet a god. Man, yet eternal and ethereal. Wielder of mysterious powers to heal. Most importantly, possessed of the ability to cross the border between living and dead, to decide who lives and who dies. These are qualities that resonate with the poet Pindar, and his odes are full of self-assurance as to how much of these powers he, Pindar, possesses.

When we discussed the Olympian Odes in class, Pindar's celebration of the victors, the image I got was of the statuary in the *altis* (ritual sanctuary) at Olympia. These were the statues of deities, heroes and past victors in the sacred space of the sanctuary. In order to reach the games, athletes walked past them, giving reverent homage to their predecessors en route to the competitions. A gallery of immortals. Later, most of the athletes having fallen by the wayside, it's almost as if Pindar, through his lyric, is taking the victors by the hand to lead them *back* the way they'd come, back beyond the border (to safety), back into the *altis*, this time (through their accomplishment and his lyricism) as the revered, rather than the reverent. This is a remarkable thing: a poet succeeding where a god, (albeit a mortal one) had failed: at bestowing immortality. Is this really within the purview of poetics?

I distinctly recall discussing these poems after class, outside the library, in the shadow of the state capitol. We grasped at the scope of what was happening in these poems, both their form and content. I remember saying I was fascinated with the <u>perspective</u> of Olympian One. *Where must one stand*, in order to look upon and judge mortals, heroes and gods alike? Is this merely an arrogant presumption of panoptic omniscience, or does poetics somehow actually hold such a privileged

vantage point? The sudden sound of helicopters shattering our conversation, I resolved to go home and look more closely at this perspective.

When, later at home, I sat down to read these odes a second time, I was looking for the perspective that had given me such a shivering intimation of unfathomable poetic power. What was this miraculous vista point of Pindar's? Where must one stand, upon what strangely-balanced pinnacle, to be able to address in the second person, as if face-to-face, mortals (Heiron), heroes (Pelops), and gods (… … … here, I lost my way.

I went looking for one specific perspective in these odes. I found one, but not the one I thought I'd find. For all the audacity of Pindar's perspective, *I couldn't find, when I went looking for it, a single occasion of Pindar saying "You…" to a god*. With the failure to find that, I discovered instead a definite… (I reach in vain for a non-christian term…) devoutness, a piousness to his take on things.

My first impression of these poems was visceral: a shiver of recollection. There was a time right after high school when all I did was smoke dope and write rhyming verse. Usually I just put pen to pad and followed to the mostly mediocre places it led. It first appeared to me as if here in Pindar I was seeing an otherwise very deliberate poet *taken by* such distracting flights of fancy… I know it's probably not so, but in a couple odes, it reads as if he set out to speak about the victor, but was *taken away* by the myth… perhaps I'm seeing too much in this, but whether he *does* become swayed by sudden (Olympian?) (Daimonic?) (Muse from Apollo?) influence, or merely wants to *appear* to be so swayed, doesn't this speak to a (reaching again…) *devotion* to, an *obeisance* to these forces? I feel the same shiver from the infinite I felt when reading of Socrates turned around by his *daimon*, sent back to Pheadrus to fix his transgression…

Pindar, as we observed in class, will not allow Pelops to cheat, for why would anyone need to cheat in a contest between a man (Oinomaos) and a god (Posiedon). The very idea reflects a lack of (reaching again…) *fealty* to the gods. Pindar himself (while denying that Demeter could ever have taken a bite of Pelops soup) says he "cannot call any of the blessed gods a savage: I stand apart. / Disaster has often claimed the slanderer…"(Nisetich, 83).

Pindar does indeed address Pelops directly, in the second person. However, he does so to explain, "Pelops, I will tell your story differently…"(Nisetich, 83). He, Pindar, unlike the less well-informed, less accomplished, less *pious* wielders of myth, will have no truck with the blasphemous stories making the rounds. In Olympian One, we get a telling wherein there *never was* any Pelops soup… Tantalos did indeed suffer eternal punishment, but it was for the crime of sharing nectar and ambrosia with mortals. This business of gods eating, or *even being anywhere near* a chopped-up little boy could never have happened in Pindar's world- the gods themselves are too powerful and aware to have allowed it. Likewise, in Pythian Three Pindar makes a point of saying that Apollo himself, from his place in Delphi, knew immediately of Coronis' defiling of his "pure seed." The very notion that an

immortal should require a mere bird to illuminate him would be preposterous for Pindar.

He seems in these passages to be aware of the charges of arrogance and hubris that our class would bring against him in 2011… aware, and properly respectful of it. Hubris? On the contrary, it seems to me that Pindar is deliberately stepping away from those who show insufficient piety in their pronouncements, making way for the probable thunderbolt. After all, those whose slander of the gods has brought disaster include Tantalos and Asklepios.

How did they slander? They *used in a human manner that which they'd been given by the gods*. Really, being after all human, they did what seems inevitable for them to have done. It seems to me that Pindar is deeply wary of doing this, even as he seems to stride, nay strut, with such pride in his own abilities, his unique perspectival vantage point… For example, when I went into the text looking to find examples of him addressing the divine, I found instead many instances of "you…" sayings directed by Pindar toward his own soul, as in "Do not yearn, oh my soul, for immortal life!"(Nisetich, 171) Here he is very mindfully reminding himself of the fates of Tantalos and Asklepios. In fact in the very next line (Pythian 3, line 62) he exhorts himself to "Use to the utmost the skill that is yours/ Yet…"(Nisetich, 171). He then goes on to explain that were he imbued with the ability that Asklpeius had, *he would make the same mistake* Asklepios did. I invite you to ponder the (reaching again for an idea a greek might recognize…) *humility* of this digression.

Here we have the wielder of this near-godlike perspective, the audacious voice of this magnificent authority with it's ability to ferry mortals across many sacred boundaries cautioning itself about the hazards of these very powers, urging temperance and restraint even in the act of using those powers "to the utmost."

What are the implications of these ideas in the analogy to a polis's wielding of legislative/judiciary powers? We hope for and rely on our leaders to use in *a higher way, a conscientious way*, the collective power we bestow upon them as individuals. Often we are disappointed by their shortcomings; power seems to have a way of sinking to its lowest stereotypes. Occasionally we exact punishment for these failures. Often we reward them. The cautionary restraint Pindar expresses regarding the power of the gods (and his own poetic powers) is the very language our founding documents are steeped in, our checks and balances based on, the very caution which some of us feel is thrown to the wind when we revel in the blood-sacrifice of the execution ritual…

I found, looking again at these Odes a different perspective: one of pious restraint. What I first took to be an audacious voice of an unfettered poetic panopticon may in fact be a poet of great skill voluntarily foreshortening his powers, aligning said powers in a restrained manner with a piously prudent sense of a greater order. This is a nice picture. It seems that poetics-in-relation-to-power might just function for a community as Socrates' *daimon* did for him personally: to

re-direct the communal mind back to the important things, to act as the voice of the holy in matters profane.

Then, however, as so often happens when contemplating anything Greek, I remember that I'm reading a tale written by winners. Or, in this case, *for* winners. Not the charioteer with the skills to bring home the victory, but the king with the money to repeatedly purchase a victory. Casting a more jaundiced eye upon these same odes, it's easy to discern a much less high-minded relation of power to poetics.

I said it was "humble" for Pindar to recognize that if he could resuscitate the dead like Asklepius, he too would make that fatal blunder. He would do it, however only to revive the youth of the aging Hieron, who's health (as of Pythian Three) was failing. Most assuredly, he could not render physical immortality but, safe in that assurance, he seems glad to mewl about how pleased he would be to do so for his wealthy patron, if only he could. Doubtlessly it was true: Pindar got paid well for his odes, and must've been sorry to see such a taproot of bounty pass away. He would not allow for the idea that gods had partaken of any abominable little-boy stew, but Pindar also was aware that Hieron, king of wealthy Syracuse claimed lineage from Tantalos, king of wealthy Lydia.

Even mortal concerns aside, there are plenty of less than high-minded reasons to exercise poetic "piety" and "devotion," particularly for the poet. It pays to stay on the good side of the powerful, and none were more powerful than the Olympians. Pindar may very well have been guilty of bringing great poetic talents to bear on the same spineless, self-interested sort of deal-making that is traded in by street-corner preachers: better git with the good side, or else!

So, far from finding the perspective I was expecting to, Pindar revealed to me *two* starkly contrasting pictures of Civic Poetics. One the one hand, poetry may be the eloquent voice of reasoned restraint: a conscientious narrative parallel to, and acting upon the socio/political narrative. On the other hand, however, there may be a sniveling, whining sycophant propagandist with one hand out for cash and another poised to render in flowery verse whatever dictum it's rulers decree. There appears to be infinite potential for swapping back-and-forth between these pictures, for dressing one up in the clothes of the other.

Tantalos and Asklepios appear, after the fact, foolish: they should have known better. On second glance, we see that they were merely being human, doing things as humans do them. They made mistakes that I probably would have, too. A third look, in light of what appears to be Pindar's self-examining caution, makes clear that there's a deeper level. Just because it "comes natural" to do something, doesn't mean we have to do that. Tantalos had the *ability* to refrain from sharing (bragging) about his good fortune. Asklepios *could have* refused that particular job. Just because we can produce an electric chair doesn't mean we have to use one.

Hindsight is 20/20, but foresight is very difficult. This doesn't mean it's impossible or unimportant. Foresight may require a kind of second-sight, an ability

to fashion a future that's informed by the heart, a civics that's grounded in the poetic. My small examination here seems to bear out Brodsky's statement: the alternative is to listen to fools.

Another thought. As we've discussed these boundary questions so much, always arriving ultimately at the imperative to *Look* (to strip away the surfaces of what we've heard, the perceptions we've inherited, ways we're used to seeing, and to ask what does this really mean to me…), I've begun to think of these boundaries as *crossroads*, and to wonder if perhaps *voudun* is not a good analog for ancient Greek religion. Even my history professor said something about how hard it is for us to conceive of the degree to which religion was woven into every aspect of Greek society. Sometimes one wonders, for instance, how this crazy-quilt pantheon of gods doing whatever strikes their fickle fancies could co-exist with what we think of as the founding of modern government, with the birth of *nomos*, of order. Perhaps it's instructive to recall that in Haiti, plenty of perfectly observant, devout Catholics live pious lives in a world peopled by *orisha* and spirits passing through, demanding food and drink, taking people over when the mood strikes…

Perhaps the boundaries we discuss are better conceived as between layers, rather than between side-by-side realms. It seems to me that the passing of *Iwa*, of *Orisha*, <u>overlays</u> the quotidian in Haiti. Also, that *nomos* in our society overlays the action of our everyday lives, in a way we associate with religion: as we spoke on outside the library after class, the helicopters suddenly overhead were actually on their way to supervise the dismantling of the Occupy encampment a couple blocks away. Perhaps they constituted an (if you'll forgive a poetic conceit) "nomosophany," or perhaps a small "tyranophany" making briefly visible an overlapping, perhaps interdependent, realm which exists parallel to our everyday: the realm of normative power.

Could the experience of living among Olympian deities have been something like this? What's it like to live in a world where you know that at any moment you might be carried off by a diety? How much, finally is poetics, is art, a parallel realm, like religion and power? And how much does it sew the two of them together, weaving us, as well into the tapestry?

Decisions, Decisions…

"Even the most courageous among us rarely has the courage for that which he really knows."
-Nietzsche, "Twilight of the Idols" (Kaufmann, 466)

It's not easy, this decision.
It's among the most troubling duties of priesthood.

Annually, I must hear from the jailers about the candidates they have for me.
First, I listen to their stories, their crimes.
Then, I go to the jail where I see the men.
I must familiarize myself both with their deeds, and with their faces.

I must consider many things.
Which of them are most likely to harm the people of our island?
Which are fair of countenance, and which are abominations,
disgraces, impurities upon our beautiful landscape?

I must balance, sometimes precariously, these concerns:
-which candidate is most likely to please, to satiate the deity?
-which is my city best off without, rid of?
Above all, I ask: in the ugliness of which face, the awfulness of which crime,
do I see myself, my city…
Which of these men most embodies those parts of Leucas that we wish to lose,
those elements of our island, of *us*, which we need to be rid of,
want to see die,
(but want, even more deeply, to see survive and sneak off somewhere).
Which of them is, or can become, the impurity whose removal cleanses us all,
while sating a divine hunger?

This seems a solemn duty, and indeed it is that.
It's a decision that demands careful deliberation, a practiced concern
for the community and the god.
As the elder priest on the island, I am entrusted and encumbered with a great,
serious, responsibility.

And yet.
What would my city think of the vacillations I go through?
How much I sometimes lean toward one candidate or another
for purely personal impulses…
the wish, for instance, to see a certain fine, taught body
suspended momentarily over the waves,
merely because it would be a pleasing sight…
How much have some of my decisions been based merely on my own attraction or
repulsion towards a given candidate?

In fact, I have found myself compelled at times toward sending the *least* dangerous,
and even the *most* beautiful
over the cliff,
have found myself crazily attracted, physically, to the most hideous of criminal faces,
longing to feel the caress of hands that have committed monstrosities…

I was startled and frightened, years ago, to discover this tension, this ambivalence
in my decision-making.
I recall setting out to systematically develop the skill of finding a sane medium
between crazy impulses.
After many years of serving the deity in all his own fickle ways, however,
I have come to realize that this dizzying uncertainty is part of my decision,
part of our act: it's built into our festival. It's part of justice.

Even as a child, I understood that this ceremony was more than mortal:
it was in the wake of the criminal's "flight,"
as we waited, hushed, to see which flag was flown below,
that I first realized the connection between us and the gods.
For, in the silence after he hit the water,
in the heightened, agitated air of the moment's uncertainty,
I realized that we were one.
As one body we had placed our dirt upon this man, as one we had forced him over.
It was not some of us, but Us, We who had thrilled to a shared vertigo as he was
prodded over, arms flailing back toward land, toward Leucas, toward *us*.

As *one* we feel in our chests, and are suspended between
-the chaos of the birds attempting to scatter,
-the gravity of the sea, of Hades pulling him down,
-the opening of the void before our eyes
through which our sacrifice plummets.

When I entered the priesthood I was told that through this void,
the god whom we serve reaches out, joins in,
partakes with us
of the same vertigo, the same tension.
Our horror, I learned, was his sustenance.

In light of the nature of the ceremony, of the appalling power,
the divinity at its center,
I realized several years ago, that it was fruitless
to worry so over my ambivalences, my irrational urges.
Perhaps I'm drawn to chose a given man
because I find his face so compellingly horrible,
or his body so compellingly attractive.

But even so…
Even so will my city veer between thrilling engagement
and nauseous repulsion at our action on festival day.
Even so will the chosen criminal dangle in air,
caught between the bird's wide-open freedom
and death's sure, confining grip.
And even, (how much more so!), must the god view US,
his flawed, but sometimes attractive mortal subjects
with a horrified fascination,
like a young boy who has swatted at an ant-hill?

As a younger man, I dreaded the gravity, the burden of this decision.
Lately, as I dodder toward my own cliff's edge, I find
myself looking forward to the vertigo,
the odd opportunity to play with a man's destiny,
to watch as a god
makes of my whim the law of the land.

It's a beautiful morning as I leave my home, walking toward the jail.
I find myself in a state of anticipation, of excitement,
in a way most unusual for one of my age.
I suspect this may be a good year.

The Welcomer 2

Only when her kinsmen had placed the girl
on a wooden mound and the grim glare of flame
ran cracking around her
                did Apollo relent:
"I cannot kill my own child, trapped
in the doom of its ruined mother,"
he said, and strode into the blaze.
The fire hid nothing from him:
                in one step
he found the corpse, tore the infant from it,
and carried it to Chiron in Thessaly
to be taught the art of medicine.
(Nisetich, 170)

I wonder how much longer I'll be able to come.
My damaged hip continues its slow decay.
I cannot expect many more springs here on Ithaca.
I catch myself indulging the thought, "what shall they do
when I'm gone, with no-one to meet them," and I laugh.
I know it is I who am treated, helped by my visits here.
Each time I walk this coast, these beaches, I remember.

I remember:
I did not awaken until I had already been dropped here,
on this very beach.
Sand. In my mouth. That's what woke me up,
the gritty grains
under my lips, on my tongue.
O awakening, momentarily, all I knew was that texture.
This interlude was quickly shattered by
pain and sunlight.
Sunlight all over me and pain throughout.
I lay for some time, gasping at the blue above.
Finally I tried to move,
and found that from the waist down I could not.
For many years I struggled to understand what happened next-
I looked down,
saw the angle at which my leg was pointed, and
without thinking
reached out, grasped my own thigh and knee,
and forced the hip back into alignment so it might heal properly.
Then, pain swept me back out of consciousness.

Over the next weeks, as I stumbled through Ithaca
begging and healing,
I noticed the son of a merchant here.
This boy's posture was askew, his every step a tortured parody of walking.
Looking at him, I found that I knew
the combination of herbs and meats
that would straighten and strengthen his bones.
This I information I passed to the father when I next saw him.

Once the boy was healing, the father took an interest in me,
the beggar on the street with healing powers.
He took me to his home one day,
and it was there that I got a look at myself in his mirror.
They were gone.
The man looking back at me did not have the marks, the blotches all over his face,
the marks that had brought me such enmity and derision,
had led me toward so many fights, so much hatred
(at least, that is, until my own hatred
led me to more hatred and conflict…)
the marks that had made me feared and reviled in Leucas
even before I resolved to live against them, to take from them anything I could…
The marks were gone.
They did not exist in this place.

The grateful merchant sent me on the long journey to Kos.
There, the brethren of Hippocrates molded me,
taught me how to live as this new man,
a man unmarked and unmarred by old hate…
Throughout a long apprenticeship,
as I daily discovered more about Asklepios who I serve, and
his terrible father Apollo who has selected me for this life,
I was prepared to take the Oath…
I recall my body aquiver with all the newness of a hatchling as I intoned,

> "…whatsoever houses I enter I will enter to help the sick, and I will abstain from all intentional wrong-doing, and harm…"
> (Jones, 301)

After a lifetime at odds with all of the earth,
determined to exact my vengeance in any way I could
for the polluted state into which I'd been born,
living up to the oath gave me the way to stop,
to pause, to breathe still… in such moments,
my master Asklepios never fails to find me.

For ten years I did not return to Ionia.
My training took me from the western islands of my youth,
over and past the mainland,
to the far-away east of Kos, and then back again.
These were difficult years
not because I missed the land of my youth, but because it still had me.
I had gotten more healthy in every way.
Yet never lost the corrupting fear, the seething hatred for Leucas,
which had pushed me off of itself and into a new world.
A divided man cannot heal properly, and will certainly make for a poor healer.
Knowing this, my teachers sent me to the *asklepion* at Nikopolis, where I'm
capable enough to help others, and near enough to be helped.
Near enough to allow my continued sojourns here…
looking across the water,
to where it happened, where they still do it to others.

Yes, it's my own continued healing that takes place here
on the same beach where it began.
I'm searching, when I'm here, for what has happened to me.
I look toward Leucas, and if I can, into the eyes of the ones they send away.
I look for that force in the void, that appalling strength which reached out as I fell…
The hand that saved Asklepios from his mother's burning womb
took me also from the flames of my city's abhorrence.
Apollo received me as their cast-off, gave me a new face,
and brought me straight to his son Asklepios,
who I remain delighted to serve. Sometimes,
in the scared eyes of a new arrival on this beach,
I catch, again, a glimpse
of that terrible black wing bearing hope swathed in bleakness.

For now, once more I stand on this beach and look back at Leucas.
I don't see Home.
I'm no longer angry.
I do not wish to return.
I continue to be healed just by seeing her there:
the instrument by which the god found me.

Some Things Left To Figure Out

Looking Again At The Hebrew Bible As I Prepare To Leave College

"She has left us with some things to figure out."

This was the theme of the eulogy at a funeral I attended last month with my girlfriend, Melanie. A long-time friend of hers had died of brain cancer at the age of twenty-five.

I had been reading 1st Samuel, trying to get a handle on the kingships of Saul and David, to get a sense of their implications for the role of poetics in civics, the dance of poetry and power. How can one adequately explain, or understand, the dichotomy between these two kings? It seems Saul can do no right, and David can do no wrong.

In my first reading of the bible a couple years ago, I'd focused mostly on David. The man was a juggernaut- he committed innumerable atrocities en route to achieving an unprecedented power, one that he promptly abused. Yet the "Davidic kingdom" appears to command enormous authority: a pinnacle still yearned for nostalgically by thousands. How is this possible? At the time, I came up with what seemed a whimsical stab at an answer:

> David's very presence on the throne was the result of his songs, no? I mean, I don't know the scholarship, but I understand he tended sheep, and wrote and sung psalms. Reading those psalms, they're nothing if not full of gut-wrenching devotion sincerity, and passion. Didn't David end up on the throne as a direct result of God's hearing those songs? If I squint, I can almost see it adding up logically, or at least Dueteronomically, the logic of these times. The psalms I read in jail were all alike in tone: *I love you, and I know you'll destroy everyone who gets in my way, and you fill my heart and smash the teeth and break the legs of my enemies, and I'll never not give you lots of props for that*. On the surface of my first reading, it looks like both parties kept the bargain, in a Deuteronomic ("if/then") kind of way.
>
> One idea that's striking, maybe even explanatory (what would you call a justification for the suffering associated with a king? Regodicy?): maybe God, hearing this song, *Fell In Love* with David. Perhaps this apparent softening of His heart was just that: the nauseous vertigo of God falling for someone. Falling so as to want to deliver his enemies gift-wrapped like chocolates, so as to make and honor the most outlandish promises, so as (especially) to forgive the most egregious transgressions. I'd be surprised if I were the first to think this- maybe that's why everyone places his kingdom on such a pedestal, as such a golden age: because it was the time when God *fell for* one man, when one magnetic individual, *a poet*, thrust his maker

> into the same vortex of doubt, lawless abandon, and confusion that is human erotics…

In contrast to David, Saul appears to me almost like Willy Lowman: a sympathetic figure striving to persevere with honor and/or dignity in the face of enormous odds against him. Saul was in a fixed game, trying to play by the rules.

Saul was chosen by God to fill an office that he, God, felt should not exist: the first king of Israel. "Listen to the voice of the people," God told Samuel the Judge, "…for they have not rejected you, but they have rejected me from being king over them." (1 Sam 8:7) With wounded pride, and a chip on his giant shoulder, God then chose the first king of Israel: Saul. How well-disposed could He possibly have been towards anyone who represented this painful betrayal?

Saul was not an ambitious man, was not power-mad. In chapter 10, he seems to be veritably kidnapped into service in a way reminiscent of Jimmy Stewart in Hitchcock's Man Who Knew Too Much. Samuel, at God's behest, suddenly anoints the unsuspecting Saul with oil, tells him that he'll soon be embarking on a great adventure. After Samuel walked away from Saul, *God himself* "gave him another heart; and all these signs were fulfilled that day." (1 Sam 10:9) The fulfilling of those signs must have been quite a trial for Saul: that day he saw people come up to him and instigate conversations that he'd heard Samuel prophesy, word for word. He himself fell down in prophetic frenzies, driven quite wild by the sudden word of Gd. When they came to appoint him to his harrowing new position, Saul was nowhere to be found. The poor guy, doubtlessly overwhelmed, was hiding: "…when they sought him he could not be found. So they inquired again of the Lord, 'Did the man come here?' and the Lord said, 'See, *he has hidden himself among the baggage*'" (1st Sam 10:22).

> Saul tried.
> He didn't want the job.
> But he got it.
> So he summoned the requisite ambition
> for the job,
> and was struck down for this pride.

As it happened, the man delivering the eulogy for Melanie's friend was speaking of "figuring out" whether or not to offer oneself up to Christ for personal lorded-and-saved status: individual salvation or individual perdition? It seemed to me that she had joined a long line of predecessors who'd left us to figure out much more than that: why them, but not others? Why was her short, harmless life punished while others (me, for instance) did rotten things and were rewarded with

longevity and happiness? What does this god want? What does He approve of? How can one live a human life in a way that meets Life's standards? How can we please the Universe?

Over the Next twenty chapters of 1st Samuel, we are treated to a cathartic spectacle as Saul continues trying to perform the duties of his office while being consistently stymied and found lacking in the eyes of a god who is actively thwarting him.

What I'm trying to address is the role of poetics, the elusive imbuing of language with magic, in Saul's failings, in David's successes, and by extension in our own lives, both civic and individual.

As near as I can tell, Saul's two most grievous transgressions both involve ritual sacrifice. He did not neglect to perform them, but performed them at the wrong time or in the wrong way. First, Saul, after having waited a little longer than he'd been instructed to for Samuel's return, had made an "executive" decision (which doesn't seem too far-fetched for the *king* to do…) and gone ahead with performing the burnt offering. Upon Samuel's return we learn that (for some unknown reason) this was breaking God's commandment, and now his kingdom was no-longer assured. My bible's notes, in describing the first transgression, say, "The nature of Saul's sin is not clear. Perhaps he tried to usurp Samuel's role of religious leadership"(note 1 SAM 13-14). So Saul was the first to transgress the separation of church and state- before anyone knew there even *was* such a separation…

Saul's first sin is a case of ritual sacrifice at the wrong time, one in which he may have trespassed an established ritual authority (Samuel). He killed when he shouldn't have. In the other instance, Saul doesn't kill when he is supposed to, thus trespassing God himself, while trying, uncertainly, to demarcate what exactly was the authority of a king: what *are* the boundaries of proper kingship?

In this second case, God had commanded Saul to "attack Amalak, and utterly destroy all that they have; do not spare them, but kill both man and woman, child and infant, ox and sheep, camel and donkey"(1 Sam 15:3). Saul however, had taken the king captive, and let his men have some of the best of the livestock from the conquered nation, ostensibly to be saved for future ritual sacrifices to God. The exchange between Saul and Samuel here is fascinating-

> 'Why then did you not obey the voice of the Lord? Why did you swoop down on the spoils, and do what was evil in the sight of the Lord?' Saul said to Samuel, 'I have obeyed the voice of the Lord, I have gone on the mission on which the Lord sent me, I have brought Agag the king of Amalek and I have utterly destroyed the Amalekites. But from the spoil the people took sheep and cattle, the best of the things

> devoted to destruction, to sacrifice to the lord your God in Gilgal.'(15:19-21)

I must comment briefly upon Saul's reflexive blaming of his soldiers. He's about to take full responsibility for his failures. First, though, like Adam in the garden, pointing the finger of blame at Eve (who is pointing at the snake), and like most any of us as children confronted with a theft from the cookie jar, he cant help but scramble for a scapegoat: the people… *they* took the sheep! This is part of what's so confounding in the saga of the first two kingships. Saul isn't perfect. But the mistakes he makes, the culpability which is his, are all well within the bounds of what I can understand, can even empathize with. This is why it's so vexing to see God kick him out on his ass in favor of David, whom God seems to love so desperately as to encourage and enable even the worst of his human impulses.

Then, and this is remarkable to me, Samuel, the prophetic voice of authority, the voice which speaks to a king of a god's judgment, an earthly human voice entirely freighted with the weight of divinity, speaks. And speaks *in verse*.

> And Samuel said,
>
> "Has the Lord as great delight in
> burnt offerings and sacrifices,
> as in obedience to the voice of the
> Lord?
> Surely, to obey is better than sacrifice,
> and to heed than the fat of rams.
> For rebellion is no less a sin than
> divination,
> and stubbornness is like iniquity
> and idolatry.
> Because you have rejected the word of
> the Lord,
> he has also rejected you from being king." (15:22-23)

What is happening here? Why is *poetry* the hallmark of a terrible judgment? Why does poetry serve as trappings of divine imprimatur, and for how long has this been the case? I don't know the answers to these questions. I'm attempting to illustrate my own experience of asking them. I get the impression that through translations out of Hebrew, through Greek and Latin, then into my bible these verses have survived in most cases because they were the fragments left intact from earlier tellings. Perhaps my 1st Samuel contains bits of prose composed over the centuries by editing monks in Jerusalem, Rome, Alexandria… I don't know enough scholarship to speculate. When, however, my eyes fall on a spoken judgment, set aside from the text in verse, my imagination is haunted by an image of some wizened bard, perhaps with a zither or lyre in hand, singing to a semi-circular gathering of men around

some ancient Levantine campfire. His song is a story from their shared ancestral narrative, a story they already know, much as we know the words of a song we've heard our whole lives…

We are cautioned, in Religious Studies courses these days, against the over-valuing of origins. We are rightly warned that one can, through fetishistic reverence for the age or primacy of a text, be dissuaded from asking crucial questions about the context, relevance or truth of that text. I've come to believe that the greatest usefulness in this training to bracket the reverence for origin is the heightened awareness it brings to the volatility of origins, and of the wielding of this volatile substance to form narratives of power. In many cases, there is an inherent relevance to those elements of a culture believed to be the oldest: the relevance of power and influence that old ideas gather as they age, and the ways this influence is used. We need, in other words, not to fetishize origins so that we might see the widespread (use and) abuse of the concept of origin.

Our president, in his inaugural address, exhorted us to stay true to "our founding documents." It is the job of the highest court in our land, the final authority in our culture, to interpret individual and collective problems today through the lens of our "founding documents." If the earliest books of the bible contain fragments of verse, and *if* these fragments are among the oldest of the passages therein, and *when* these specific passages address issues of proper governance specifically, then I don't believe I'm wrong to get a creepy sense of déjà-vu about the use of poetics to justify and perhaps prop up civics, particularly errant civics…

In both of Saul's sins, I'm struck by the compelling fact that Saul was attempting to play a new role. He was entrusted with the execution of a brand new office: he was the first king. Apparently there was no such thing as a "learning curve" in this story. It appears to me, in fact, that Saul was acting very much in the way we today would hope to have our leaders act. In his own words, "I have sinned; for I have transgressed the commandment of the Lord… *because I feared the people and obeyed their voice*"(15:24). Isn't this what we *want* our democratically elected leaders to do? Yet in Saul's situation, it was an egregious sin.

This confession of sinful good governance came as Saul begged forgiveness, in the very next paragraph after he was upbraided in the ancient lines of Samuel's verse. What he receives is not forgiveness, but a terrible, cold-hearted pronouncement.

"The Lord has torn the kingdom of Israel from you this very day, and has given it to a neighbor of yours, who is better than you." (15:28)

Does not everyone fear in their heart that they will one day hear these words from their God or their government: I hereby forsake you; you are just not good enough.

As if to illustrate this fatal judgment upon Saul's character, his very essence, Samuel then calls forth the captured king of the Amalekites. There before Saul, he ritually slays the prisoner. Significantly, *while performing execution* the judge again speaks in verse-

> And Agag came to him haltingly. Agag said, 'Surely this is the bitterness of death.' But Samuel said,
>
> "As your sword has made women
> childless,
> so your mother will be childless
> among women.'
>
> And Samuel hewed Agag in pieces before the Lord in Gilgal(15:32-33).

God now announces that he's washing his hands of Saul, that's he's stripped the kingdom from him. He does not, however, show Saul the mercy of actually relieving him of his duties. All at the same time, God (who is turning out to be unfaithful as well as jealous) falls for someone else, someone He will make king. God afflicts Saul with madness, while leaving him to try to manage the crushing responsibility of first-ever King of Israel.

I am only going up to the edge of the story of David, rather than into it. As noted above, his kingdom was one of unfettered indulgence in all the human failings that god had warned (1st Sam 8: 11-18) would come with a human king. In one figure, David encapsulates poetics and civics- he commits atrocities and writes breathtaking verses that soothe and honor God. For now I want to follow David only up to a point shortly after he is chosen by God.

> Then Samuel took the horn of oil, and anointed him in the presence of his brothers; and the spirit of the Lord came mightily upon David from that day forward… Now the spirit of the Lord departed from Saul, and an evil spirit from the Lord tormented him. (16: 13-14)

Saul, being king and being in grave distress, afflicted with demons straight from the God he's trying to serve, asks for someone to play him some nice music. They bring him the shepherd boy David, who is said to be quite a singer…

> And whenever the evil spirit from God came upon Saul, David took the lyre and played it with his hand and Saul would be relieved and feel better and the evil spirit would depart from him(16:23).

What is the role of poetics in this picture? It appears to be the form in which one's sentence is read to one, the language in which authority speaks. I'm not sure that poetry here is not an authority in itself. Also, it's the sound of devotion: David (here still a younger man) is serving, loyally, both God and his king. For Saul, poetics is the sign of everything he's not: it's the herald of righteousness, while he's always somehow wrong, the form of an accepted devotion, while his offerings are all sinful. Yet, it is what soothes the pain of these very shortcomings. It represents the source and the substance of his malaise and also its treatment. Poetry, in short, is the magic sign of divinity in life, a quantity utterly lacking in his obtuse, well-meaning, all-too human efforts at living and ruling.

Unaware of the demons placed in him by God, Saul continues to try to rule. As his calamities increase, he turns for comfort to the very one who is the instrument of his downfall. I wonder if the young David, plucking his lyre, and looking over at the prone, miserable king, wondered the same thing that I am compelled to when reading his tale- *what did this guy do wrong*?

This question, sadly, brings me back to the funeral parlor. I never knew the departed, but it was impossible for me not to wonder at the appalling randomness of this young woman's death. As the first eulogy drew to a close, I fancy I may not have been the only one in the crowded chapel who was pondering this. At that point, the opening riff of Guns-n-Roses', "Sweet Child Of Mine" began.

Looking up at the stained glass window in the chapel, I thought that perhaps this was the perfect hymn for the occasion. The rows of pews contained hymnals with song after song after song of human attempts to express devotion to the divine, to please God. Could *this* be the divine response? Here, today, through the poetic mechanism of Axl Rose, was God pronouncing his paternal love for the departed, for the painfully bereaved?

Forgive me, but…

Could this Guns-n-Roses song describe what happened when God looked upon young David in the fields? Did God then behold eyes that reminded Him of a time when everything was as fresh as a bright blue sky, eyes that took Him away to a special place, eyes into which He'd hate to look and see an ounce of pain, eyes into which if He stared too long He'd probably break down and cry?

> 'There remains the youngest, but he is keeping the sheep…' Now he was ruddy *and had beautiful eyes, and was handsome*. The Lord said, 'rise and anoint him, for this is the one…' …and the spirit of the Lord came mightily upon David from that day forward(16: 11-13).

It seems to me that the twisted marriage of poetics and power is everywhere in the relationship between God and David- it's a relationship which will be consummated in blood throughout the Levant, which will yield some of the most enduring verse in many languages (psalms), one which, even now as we leave David comforting Saul in his distress, I fancy has already gotten away from its creator. For, to return to my fanciful story of two years ago, perhaps it was not so much that David broke God's heart as that the songs got away from them both. I keep wondering: did God purposely put the poetry in David, or did it well up in response to God's adoration? Which of them created it? I decided it doesn't matter.

The poetry has made their relationship, to some extent, public: open and available to all. But it has also cemented their relationship away in a fortress of poetic splendor: this is a one-of-a-kind love affair, in which only these two could partake. This strikes me as ominous considering that it's often held forth as a model to be emulated- a model of God's adoration of man, and a model of pious kingship, of right-minded civics.

It seems to me that we want to hear God saying "sweet child of mine." We want to believe this is the universe's feelings toward us, each and all. It brings comfort. We can all listen to GnR or read the Psalms. What nags underneath the comfort brought by these poetic interventions, though, is Saul. David is "the one." Saul was not. We may seek, and get, a comfort of sorts from the poems that came of God's relations with "the one." The psalms may bolster us up to feel blessed and adored through any mis-adventure we may get into, but how can we explain away the suspicion that we may be like Saul, ceaselessly striving to perform our lots in life, yet always falling short of the mark, never pleasing the forces which hold our fate in their hands?

Can you or I, too, be a sweet child of God's? Looking at Saul's story, it appears there's nothing we might do to affect the answer to that question. Cross our fingers?

As the song faded away, the minister stepped up to the pulpit. He proposed to offer up a Psalm of comfort in a difficult time. He opened to the 91st Psalm and read these words of David, which sent my mind hurtling again toward the ancient Leucadian cliffside:

> Surely he shall deliver thee from the
> snare of the fowler,
> and from the noisome pestilence.
> *He shall cover thee with his feathers,*
> and under his wings shalt thou trust:
> his truth shall be thy shield and
> buckler (KJV, Psalms 94: 3-4).

Surely some shall be delivered. Surely some shall be fished from the Leucadian surf, gasping and alive. Surely some shall have lawyers whose poetry strikes the right tone to a Pardon & Parole board. Certainly others will sink, drained, to the sea-floor, will drop silently from the vibrant surface of the body politic, ushered into the last exile by a cold syringe in an arm held down by restraints. Surely the forces responsible for these outcomes also exercise some great, terrifying dominion over the fears, the joys, the hope and the dread in every citizen.

Civic Poetics-
We stand.
On cliffs. On the job. In jail cells,
warehouses and restaurants. On criminal streetcorners.
In churches. On campus.
We stand facing a vast power, in which our fates are bound-up.
    We hope to be accepted.
Small, we stand before the universe,
    infinity looking on,
    and search for the song that will please it.
We must try, somehow, to touch its heart, to make the grade,
    to find and say the words
    that will meet the approval of the appalling vastness.
Now, take a breath. Open your mouth…

This is my thesis. I hope you like it.

Your New City

In the streets of your new city today,
the people are all doing things.
Birds trade gossip about the coming of morning.
Nikopolis is larger, and much busier than where you're from.
Bustling activity surrounds you.
The sun is at your back.
You are enveloped in its light, its warmth.

Its been eight weeks since your fall,
two weeks since the old man brought you with him
to the mainland.
Your bruises are gone, the pain only intermittent in your neck
and back.

Under the old man's watchful eyes you have been eating different foods
and *more* food
than ever before.
A new strength resides in your limbs,
a vitality that's difficult to recognize as your own.

The old man has said, and he would know, that your body
has been changed in your dreams,
these strange new dreams you've had on this new land.
Each morning since your fall, you have awakened
almost breathless-
You'd just been dreaming the most remarkable adventures, though
you remember nothing of them. However,
there remains
a sensation: an almost palpable feeling of engagement,
of some vitally important activity taking place.

Under the sway of this odd new feeling,
you have stepped out into the mornings of this city
to watch as its people hurry about, doing things.

The old man has told you that his job is finished.
From Leucas' jail through a free-fall into exile
in the arms of a god,
and now into a healed body,
and over to the broad mainland: you've come far.
And there is no further that *he* can take you.

The sunlight surrounds your body.
It seems as if your every muscle is aquiver with its influence.
You have become as a leaf on a morning tree,
aglow with a different green
while bathed in fresh light.

Stopping, you turn towards the source,
eyes closed against the brilliance.
There behind your lids,
in the shifting patterns of glowing red,
an opening momentarily appears.

You wait for something to reach out for you.

Something unseen, yet familiar, that
you'd glimpsed while plummeting to the sea
a fold, a wave in the world, in life's own substance…
It had washed over you in mid-air, just before you hit.

You had forgotten this moment, until
one morning, back on Ithaca,
the old man stopped you, while walking,
pointed to the sky, told you to look into the blue depths and
tell him what you saw.

Now, today, you stand in the middle of Nikopolis' new street
among its busy citizens
closed eyes turned to its sun,
your hands out to receive…

What you were was discarded by the hate of a city
and is gone.
The man you are is a new acquaintance: still unknown.
What you will be is somewhere in the red glow before you.
The people are all doing things.
What shall *you* do?

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