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Joel Bettridge

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Avant-Garde Pieties

Aesthetics, Race, and the Renewal of Innovative Poetics

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4 Case Studies

On Peter O'Leary's *Phosphorescence of Thought*, Kenneth Goldsmith's *The Weather*, and Claudia Rankine's *Don't Let Me Be Lonely: An American Lyric*

My argument that the avant-garde has become a tradition—one that resembles a sacred tradition in its ability to rejuvenate itself by drawing the values of its founding scriptures into the present—has so far privileged the values most explicitly under debate within the avant-garde, which I hope helps identify pressing fault lines and sketches out how we came to find ourselves where we do, historically, politically, aesthetically. I trust this focus has also helped provide a clear theoretical framework for my narrative. However, much of the conversation the avant-garde has with itself about its central values occurs not as direct debate but by means of individual poems. A poet working within the avant-garde tradition offers a reading of a particular value, such as the use of source material, when he or she employs it to produce a poem; this *use* of a particular value gives it its local meaning and is that which allows poets to talk to one another across generations and draw on each other's work as a resource and as a point of departure. Thus, I want to turn to three case studies, both to show how my argument plays out in concrete terms as well as to demonstrate the way in which this broader avant-garde conversation happens most often. And to emphasize the multiformity of the avant-garde while doing the above, I will consider three poems within the avant-garde tradition by poets who, in many respects, seem antithetical: Peter O'Leary's *Phosphorescence of Thought*, a long, unapologetically mystical poem; Kenneth Goldsmith's *The Weather*, which is a transcription of a year's worth of weather reports from the radio station 1010 WINS in New York City; and Claudia Rankine's *Don't Let Me Be Lonely: An American Lyric*, a sequence of prose poems woven from the memorabilia of personal trauma, media saturation, and post-9/11 political rhetoric.

I've chosen these three poems for a number of other reasons. Practically, I want to provide some continuance with what I have already written, so I will build upon the readings of O'Leary's and Goldsmith's undertaken in the previous section and then complicate that picture with Rankine's poem, which connects us more explicitly to the political concerns having

to do with justice discussed in Chapters 1–3. Importantly, from a historical perspective, these three poets also occupy the same literary generation (born in 1968, 1961, and 1963, respectively), the generation that falls after Language writing, so they are in many respects the generation faced most peculiarly with the challenge of continuing the avant-garde tradition in the conscious and explicit recognition of its historical paradoxes. These particular poems were also published long enough ago that we have some critical distance from them, although they were all published in the new millennium and thus find each poet producing mature work explicitly aimed at negotiating new space within the landscape of American poetry. (And it should go without saying that I think each book is, arguably, one of the best produced by each poet.) At the same time, considering the formal and intellectual logic and structure of these three poems at length provides a fuller sense of the range of recent and current avant-garde practice and helps us see how each defines, uses, prioritizes, and rejuvenates the various avant-garde values central to its project.

*

Although it has received little scholarly and public attention, O'Leary's project is just as confrontational in its stances toward other poetic practices as anything produced by the famously combative generations that precede it; in fact, in its cosmic scope, the apocalyptic poetics that O'Leary names as the true avant-garde for our time recalls more profoundly, and without irony, the revolutionary fervor of the moderns. In "Apocalypticism: A Way Forward," a 2010 essay on Pam Rehm and Joseph Donahue, O'Leary dismisses what he takes to be the two dominant and institutionalized poetic modes at the time, those emerging from the creative writing workshops of the past few decades, and Language writing and its younger imitators. He then makes an appeal for the legacy of "visionary poetry" and the apocalypticism found there, the poem as "sacred expression" that "unbind[s] love from material desire, freeing it to embrace the unknown and the unspeakable" (84). He concludes:

An apocalyptic poetry remains difficult to write in a poetry world filled with allergies to the spirit. But we need such poetry, difficult as it may be to write, difficult as it may be to understand. It is a complete, necessary, and coded protest against structures of worldly domination. And it can make for a truly great, truly radical poetry. (99)

Inside this poetics, which applies equally well to his own poetry, and in keeping with his inheritance of modernism through Robert Duncan and Ronald Johnson (a commitment to the eye, ear, and mind of language), O'Leary tends to stress the process of composition, poetics (as with the

above cited essay), the musical, material quality of language, and the use of source materials to generate and focus his intellectual perception. To write *Phosphorescence of Thought*, O'Leary used the number of lines in the 1855 edition of "Song of Myself" to determine the length of his own poem (although the final version ended up ten lines shorter) and it self-consciously takes up high modernist density of reference and diversity of genre, from catalogs and hymns, to myths, to field notes, and direct citations, from Ovid's *Metamorphosis* and Euripides's *Bacchae*, to philosophers, theologians, poets, and scientists such as Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, William James, Walt Whitman, Saint Symeon, Emily Dickinson, William Blake, Gerald M. Edelman, and Gregory Bateson. These names constitute a kind of roll call of saints reminiscent of the list we saw Duncan compose earlier, and O'Leary weaves these sources together into a formally and philosophically complex study of consciousness and mystical experience, environmental degradation, and modernity.

Of particular importance, Pierre Teilhard de Chardin provides O'Leary with his title, and much of his poem's visionary, flying butresses; in the book's afterword, he writes:

The great Jesuit mystic and paleontologist Pierre Teilhard de Chardin saw the mind as an incandescence, the culmination of psychical temperature that had been rising in the cellular world for more than 500 million years. He imagined a "majestic assembly of telluric layers" culminating in an outer layer on which the spark of consciousness, lit from the first moment of awareness, is the point of an ignition that quickly catches, roaring into a growing blaze "till finally the whole planet is covered with incandescence." He called this planetary thinking layer the *noosphere* (the sphere of the mind) and believed it to be visible from space. "And even today," he wrote in 1940, "to a Martian capable of analyzing sidereal radiations psychically no less than physically, the first characteristic of our planet would be, not the blue of the seas or the green of the forests, but the phosphorescence of thought."

Teilhard believed that the "Personal" and the "Universal," that is to say the creaturely and the divine, are growing in the same direction to "culminate simultaneously in each other" in a moment of complete illumination.

(67–68)

O'Leary then qualifies this mystical framework with two coinages in order to contend with the "tragic ... way we've handled the gift of consciousness," polluting our rivers and contributing to the vanishing of other species (68). The first is "*lutrescent* (also *lutrescence* and *lutrid*), which combines light with putrescent to suggest light gone rotten.... If there is a phosphorescence of thought, then there must be a

way to account for decaying, rotten thought." The second coinage is "autochthonous";

This word slots into the center of *autochthonous*, which means "native born" but also "of the earth itself," the Greek word *nomos*, which means law. So: of the earth's own native law. Essentially, this is an adjective for evolution but evolution as if it were a theology.

(69)

The literary ambition of the poem is remarkable, but it is important to highlight too how the poem turns to these biological and theological concerns within an always tense musical expression. Characteristically, O'Leary weaves scientific and theological vocabulary into otherwise spare images, clips syllables, and seeks out alliteration or the repetition of vowel and consonant sounds in words near to one another. The poem itself opens with the image

The wren / the mind / allows / to sing / alights / —and flits— / on
branches bare / of anything other than the sun's ceaseless iodine / the
woods at dusk flood with / like sutras meditators seep their thoughts
in / neurochemicals recall from galaxy's / antique axiometry.

Notice the sound made by the "n" of "wren" carried into "mind" then "sing," "and," "branches," "anything," "than," "sun," and "iodine," while "w," "s," "l," and "t" sounds also occur frequently. Within this sound chamber we bump up against the somewhat obscure word "axiometry," which is a play off of "axiology"—the study of the value of things. What the "galaxy's / antique axiometry" pushes forward here is a formulation of how the galaxy measures value; namely, what is of worth is ancient light—stars. By the poem's logic, the sun is the most valuable thing in our solar system as its light gives the solar system its shape and gives us life. We are, after all, as the cliché reminds us, made of stardust, and so we are creatures of the light, which our "neurochemicals" recall for us. Against the scale of stars, the branches the wren alights on are sharply humble, what the attentive eye sees when walking through a forest: these branches are drenched only in the sun's red light at dusk, like the thoughts of "meditators" excreting "sutras" (1). As the ancient light of the stars that fills and forms the galaxy also saturates the quiet forest, readers find themselves in a poem with both microscopic and telescopic vision, as they do with *Leaves of Grass*. The combined effect of this music and sense of scale is that the individual lines and stanzas of *Phosphorescence of Thought* sound like linguistically playful short lyrics while the larger poem has the referential scope and focus of an epic.

As this brief description indicates, O'Leary composes his poem in a mystical vein most recently made prominent by Robert Duncan. In *On*

Mount Vision: Forms of the Sacred in Contemporary American Poetry, Norman Finkelstein undertakes a study of poets—such as Ronald Johnson, Jack Spicer, Susan Howe, Michael Palmer, Nathaniel Mackey, and Armand Schwerner—who he thinks may be fruitfully read alongside Duncan. Finkelstein writes that he is concerned with poems that

are engaged in cultural work that is derived from or in dialogue with what may be broadly understood as practices of faith and spiritual experience. Sometimes they address (or revise) specific religious doctrines or beliefs, but more often they participate in what Duncan calls “the symposium of the whole.”

What Duncan means here is of the utmost importance for understanding how this cosmically, divinely focused poetry remains inscribed within avant-garde practice, which is more often characterized by its commitment to a secular worldview and skepticism toward vocabularies of faith and belief. Finkelstein goes on to cite two passages from *The H.D. Book*:

“our ideal of vital being,” Duncan declares, “rises not in our identification in a hierarchy of higher forms but in our identification with the universe.” Such being the case, “religion and art may both be fictional and the intensity of their truth and reality the intensity needed to make what is not actual real. The crux for the poet is to make real what is only real in a heightened sense.”

(*The H.D. Book* 91, 123)

As Duncan indicates, the “fictional” nature of religion and art, these two related spheres of human activity, means that they paradoxically transform and intensify reality.

(5)

As the introduction continues, Finkelstein is careful to disassociate this stance from the likes of Matthew Arnold’s poetry as religion and Eliot’s subjection of poetry to religion, and instead locates it with Emerson, Dickinson, and Whitman, with whom he can argue that this form of attention to the sacred, and to its *fiction*, is a way to account for human experience, which is always materially inscribed in the physical world and in language. Transcendence of this condition is not the goal of this poetry; rather, it is Orphic and theosophical and aimed at the redemption of “human potential when the social order has become overbearing, too full of what Santner calls ‘undeadness’” (26). Which is not to say that these poets do not believe in the divine, but that what the divine is and how human life and the physical world participate in and come to grips with it is of vital importance. Finkelstein cites O’Leary’s own critical study, *Gnostic Contagion*, on what it means to write religious

poetry of this kind, which does not mean poets like Duncan, H.D., or Nathaniel Mackey

have religious aspirations outside of the poem. They devote themselves to the “orders” of poetry, to the “trouble of the unbound reference” (as Duncan calls it) with a religious fervor, because only in poetry do they find the revelation that gives order to creation and the cosmos.

(*Gnostic Contagion* 25)

Elsewhere, O’Leary reformulates a sentence of Ronald Johnson’s to explain that to “talk Cosmos is to share the prospect of language as conductor and lightning of the soul” (“Talking Cosmos” 236). In both Duncan’s and Johnson’s terms, an insistence on a mystical, religious, or divinely oriented vocabulary is a way to insist upon a wider range of human experience and material reality than the more dominant materialist philosophies and political ideologies, such as Marxism, have historically allowed. It is to imagine the linguistic and physical world shot through with mystery, ecstatic emotional and intellectual states, uncertainty, and human love for the world and other people. It is also, without dogma attached, to remain committed to the sacred mission of poetry as a way to locate us in our bodies and in the world, giving order to creation by means of linguistic perception; it is a way to insist on the redemptive authority of poetry where redemption is not from sin, but from an absence of the world we hope to, and sometimes do, live in, one marked by a perception of the self as participating in the universe. Or, as the religious mind might put it, it is to see oneself in light of the eternal where one abandons the lyric, independent subject in favor of joining with “the symposium of the whole” (Finkelstein 5). And where the poem precedes the world, where words give rise to our understanding, our lives, our culture, and what we variously call spirit, mind, soul, or consciousness, as they do in this poetic mode, there is the avant-garde being made new again in the present poem and reading.

Perhaps the key passage of *Phosphorescence of Thought* comes near the poem’s midpoint. This section takes up Whitman’s listing impulse in “Song of Myself” and the chanting of Ginsberg’s “Howl” to speak the whole of creation. In a talk for the Festival of Faith and Writing at Calvin College in April 2012, O’Leary discusses the list poem as a way to create order, which includes both the visible and the invisible, and since “the unseen exists outside our visual powers, it naturally finds habitation in language itself, ‘the medium of total imagination’” (“Listing Creation”). It opens:

Make holy
all you works of God with praise and exultation

you angels of God and you heavens, you magnifiers of all the
 single quantum's
 original energy
 you hydrogen and helium, you universe of frenzied particles
 billowing out
 you primordial billion years depthless night shuddered toward
 transfiguration
 through
 you praise, you magnification
 you unbearable creative moment
 you consuming sacrificial force;
 make holy
 you galactic internal dynamics, you spew of stars, you luminous
 intensities
 you waters coursing over heaven and you dynamos generating their
 power
 you slow-burning yellow star
 you socket of life.

(27)

The section goes on for a number of pages to list a vast range of natural objects and events, from the "rapid hapless scattering of electricity" to the "stellar vistas of cells" (29, 31). This section of the poem is itself a reworking of the "Benedicite," which is a medieval Latin hymn in praise of creation. The English translation used for the Anglican liturgy in *The Book of Common Prayer*, which O'Leary used as one of his sources, opens as follows:

O ALL ye Works of the Lord, bless ye the Lord : praise him, and
 magnify him for
 ever.
 O ye Angels of the Lord, bless ye the Lord : praise him, and
 magnify him for
 ever.
 O ye Heavens, bless ye the Lord : praise him, and magnify him for
 ever.
 O ye Waters that be above the firmament, bless ye the Lord : praise
 him, and
 magnify him for ever.

(8)

This hymn continues for another twenty-eight lines. But O'Leary's 132 lines permit him to undertake a scientific and mystical annotation of the Benedicite.

The formal logic of the Benedicite depends on at least three organizational principles: the entire poem is a detailing of the first line—"all ye

Works of the Lord" who are commanded to praise "him for ever," works that are specifically listed by the lines that follow (8). That list then follows a hierarchical movement from heaven above, down through the stars, the sun and moon, and weather, then down again to the earth, the mountains, seas, and whales, and down at last to people, and the subclasses of "Priests," "Servants," the "Righteous" and "holy and humble Men of heart"; lastly, the repetition of "bless ye the Lord : praise him, and magnify him for ever" at the end of each line draws them together by means of what they do (9–10). As "works of the Lord" they become recognizable as objects and as part of the universe by praising their creator. It is important to add that all the objects commanded to praise the Lord are part of the material world as the poem understands it, and are mostly categories, like "Showers and Dew" or "Fowls of the air"; many geographical and biological particulars are thus subsumed into this system by type (8–9). The exceptions to this rule—like "Sun and Moon," or the "earth," and "Ananias, Azarias, and Mishael" in the final line, which are the Latin names for Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego who were thrown into a furnace when they refused to worship Nebuchadnezzar, but who then emerged unharmed due to their singular worship of God, thus allowing the hymn to end with examples of three holy men who do just what it commands others to do—tend to occupy liminal places between the human and the divine, and have no ready categories in which to fall (*Phosphorescence of Thought* 27–28, 32).

O'Leary's annotation-hymn remains faithful the logic of Benedicite—it moves from cosmic or stellar origins to biological, earthly life—even as it profoundly wrestles with the constitution of its vision. To begin, he undercuts the clear hierarchical order of creation by filling the original hymn's categories out in more detail. Where the Benedicite has "ye Beasts and Cattle" O'Leary has, "you lumbering beasts of the land / you cattle sweet as grass / and you handsome cougar slain in the neighborhood / and you little housecat sphinxes perplexing the sun" (*The Book of Common Prayer* 9; *Phosphorescence of Thought* 30). Moreover, the poem overflows with scientific vocabulary, from the "hydrogen and helium" of the opening to the "strands of DNA" at the end, from the multiple reference to evolution, such as "you quadripedal hand freed from the task of walking," the molecular and microscopic world—"neurons" and "packets of bright particles sped down to the brooding earth"—and the biological diversity of the planet, as in the lines, "you polyps, you worms, you insects, you clams, you sponges, / you spiders, you leeches, you backbones" (27–32). And often this scientific vocabulary is married to the more celestial: "you stellar vistas of cells" or "you praisers and exalters, you oxygen saturating earth's system," the effect of which is that the splendor of God is expressed in scientific wonder (31, 28). And there are also objects that are more abstract, hardly objects at all, such as "you unbearable creative moment / you consuming sacrificial force" (27). And

there is room for, even pleasure found in, the otherwise grotesque: “you eaters of your own dead”; “you sad sewage foaming”; “you anuses extruding that vitalizing hash” (29). Equally important to this vision of objects, as has been made obvious by these cited lines, is that the Benedicite’s “O ye” are now “you,” which effectively continues the former’s religious habit of imagining objects of creation as having consciousness, if only metaphorically (directly addressing them with a command to act makes the fact of their coming into being through the words of God explicit). But in O’Leary’s imagining, the decidedly metaphorical address of the hymn is much less apparent because in his poem the “you” is the formal device that is repeated and all the objects addressed as “you” are acting: making “holy” or flying, or singing, or “surging, metabolizing, expiring” (29). Thus what the object is and what it is doing is that which is most greatly emphasized. And these objects in motion fill up every line; only later, or periodically, does their need to praise become explicit in the poem (where it was in every line of the Benedicite). It is their physicality, action, and amount that stand out. Consequently, the decidedly ordered, physical, but not starkly organic, universe of the Benedicite becomes in O’Leary’s vision a throbbing organism of heterogeneous still-enmeshed parts—chaotic, thriving, sometimes invisible, sometimes rotten, sometimes sublime, sometimes lowly, although always living.

And this organic majesty of creation in the poem, its emphasis on Life, finds its starkest expression in the manner in which the human body, sex, and language enter the poem. In the Benedicite, the human is less a physical body than a moral and spiritual agent, we get the human as “Children of Men,” “Israel,” “Priests of the Lord,” “Servants of the Lord,” “Spirits and Souls of the Righteous,” and “holy and humble Men of heart” (*The Book of Common Prayer* 9–10). In this portion of *Phosphorescence of Thought* the human is, “huff[ing]” “fungal spores into” its “sinuses,” having “involuntary erections,” defecating, polluting rivers, and building “turbines” (27–29); the human is at once an “intoxicated central nervous system,” parent, “daughters” and “sons,” and self-aware: “you initial leap from action to reflection, from pathway to memory / you self-thought, you slot of distinction, you crashed acid and / phosphorescent flare” (29–31); and the human is always screwing:

you phallic thumb of love / and you thruster holding me tight / you pressure in the uterine clutch, you glare of the rich palpation, you / proposition of sperm / you orchid boat and you winged serpent / you sweet sleepiness / you relaxed body / you nations of the world.

(31)

And all without shame or original sin. And human measurement and naming is everywhere on display, in “light years” or the “Des Plaines” river (27, 29). Hence, the human “mind imagining this” gives the poem

its shape, and yet that human thought appears as just another aspect of the poem’s organic, physically lived life (30). The lines referring to sexual coupling and feces are easily linked to the animals too (the urges and physical processes are, after all, often addressed as individual agents in themselves), so that the biological acts that make the human present in the poem also plops it right down in the muck with all the other organisms. The fullness of this joining and the vast diversity of life are thus always emphasized, held in common for our witnessing, a fact we see in a line like “you oxygen-devouring eukaryotic cells.” Eukaryotic cells are complex, containing a nucleus and organelles (subcellular structures that perform special functions), and they are the cells out of which multicellular plants and animals are composed, and the cells that contain the DNA of those organisms; they can grow, change shape, and they devour other cells to get energy. By drawing our attention down into the “eukaryotic cell,” O’Leary pulls into focus the surge and pulse of evolution that drives biological life, the many forms that life takes in this inhabited earth, what they all share physically as living creatures, and how they all live out their days, eating, excreting, reproducing, polluting, and dying. In this sense, the “eukaryotic” cell is one of the founding metaphors and literal material concerns of O’Leary’s poem (28).

This locating of the human body consciousness in the vast diversity of life regenerating and expanding itself echoes, quite deliberately, Whitman’s poetry of infinite particulars: the italicized line “phallic thumb of love” comes from “Spontaneous Me,” the line “thruster holding me tight” comes from “Song of Myself.” (“Orchid boat” is Kenneth Rexroth’s metaphor for the vagina in *The Love Poems of Marichiko*.) So much so that the poem’s Whitmanesque insistence on growth and variety ends up granting language, that most characteristic human attribute, an independent agency. The first line that specifically addresses language as a subject comes toward the end: “you language coming in and you priests serving God.” Here, intriguingly, is the notion that language enters creation and takes up residence beside people, in this instance “priests” (*Phosphorescence of Thought* 31). The line comes in the place where people are first mentioned in the Benedicite, and is here framed by direct uses of the categories it uses for people, “nations” (where the Benedicite has “Israel” and “Children of Men”), as well as “Spirits” and “Souls” (*Phosphorescence of Thought* 31; *The Book of Common Prayer* 9–10). Language is thus not used by people to praise so much as it is, like people, commanded to praise. At the very least, language has a holy status and role, like a priest, but is not a mere tool. It is an object like all else in the poem. A few lines later we get a series of ways to “make this song holy” in the way directed by the poem, one of which is “by catastrophically sanctifying the metaphors.” But phrased this way, language has the same relationship to metaphors as all else that lives in creation; it too, like all the flowers, birds, stars, and whales must *sanctify* them.

To sanctify something is to set it aside for a religious purpose, and, of course, a metaphor is a figure of speech in which the description of one thing is transferred to another. And this sanctifying of metaphors is to be done “catastrophically”—toward a final, violent end, or shift. I take this line to suggest that learning to understand one thing in light of another should be understood as a holy act, and this holy act points us *ever* in the direction of a final violent fulfillment of those things, and our own, and the world’s, purpose. In “catastrophically” we also hear apocalypse, or final revelation (recalling O’Leary’s poetics named at the outset of this reading), which in this case metaphorical language permits us to envision (31). Gasping this understanding while reading the *Phosphorescence of Thought* thus makes the poem holy too, apocalyptically so. This poem, like language, like sex, is imbued with sacred potential, but realizes it only when the poem is read in light of its violent potential to realize its place in the mess of creation as a created thing.

Crucially though, the “by” of this line is just one of nineteen. The first two come in line nineteen; two more come in lines twenty-nine and thirty (my favorite is: “by binding packets of bright particles sped down to the brooding earth / with data of the life mass”) (28). In an email to me O’Leary wrote: “For what it’s worth, my favorite line in this section is ‘you tenderly dusted, glimmering mineral energy wound.’ What kind of bullshit is that?! Actually, it’s an epithet for the soul. The soul is the glimmering mineral energy wound”; three more in lines 92, 93, and 94; the last 12 come at the end of the poem in a rush in lines 115 through 116 (“JB on POL”). The “by”s are the second half of the formal device that O’Leary used to replace the Benedicite’s repetition of “bless ye the Lord : praise him, and magnify him for ever”; the “by”s themselves are set up by the command to the works of creation to “make holy” (without a specific noun attached) and in other places to “make this song holy,” or “make holy this song”—hence, the “by”s weaved through the poem describe how that sanctification is to take place (28). The final seven are:

by haplessly magnifying the glassy melancholic interiors
 by warding us with charms
 by stitching us alphabetic talismans from strands of DNA
 by forming tissue from moon spores and rubber
 by leading us on
 by thinking
 by praising and exalting the Lord forever.

(32)

And as each *by* pushes back against the poem’s larger scientific, material listing of organic life, slowly building up and returning readers to the holy potential of all created objects, it becomes evidence that all of creation is commanded by the poem to do all of these things, so it is not

just language that must engage in these acts of sanctification, but all the infinite particulars, people included, that stand beside it in a long list of physical, spirit-filled, organic subjects. And “catastrophically sanctifying the metaphors” is just one of nineteen ways to create holiness (31). This use of metaphors is central to how O’Leary adapts the Benedicite as a source because it gives the matter of creation the injunction to create the sacred. The Benedicite does so as well, for, as O’Leary puts it in a talk on *Phosphorescence of Thought* given at Calvin College, “To bless something is to make it holy”; but his choice to make holiness the explicit desire of the poem, rather than orthodox worship by means of doctrine (although worship as a humble act of recognition is there too) allows holiness as an entity, or idea, to emerge with distinguishable aspects (“Listing Creation”). This fact is made more apparent when the command “make holy” stands by itself in the poem, which it does three times—that is, unattached to an object the act of praise simply creates holiness itself. Praising likewise, while always directed at God takes the form of “thinking,” or “forming tissue from moon spores and rubber” and other not obviously religious endeavors (*Phosphorescence of Thought* 32). The moments where creation is ordered to make “this song holy” have a similar effect in that the words used to praise are made holy by the world they participate in. We end up, as O’Leary himself suggests in his Calvin talk, alongside Ginsberg’s footnote to “Howl.” In that same talk, O’Leary also says that

The holy, in Rudolf Otto’s memorable description, is an “overplus of meaning” that evokes what he calls “creature-feeling,” “the emotion of a creature, submerged and overwhelmed by its own nothingness in contrast to that which is supreme above all creatures.”

(Listing Creation)

In *Phosphorescence of Thought*, this creaturely emotion, this sense of being overwhelmed by and submerged in that which escapes understanding is created by the compulsive urges and acts of consciousness: the self-aware, individual and collective acts of living, where living is at once mystical, scientific, sexual, linguistic, cosmic, intellectual, human, animal and vegetable, magical, grotesque, and poetic.

At no point, however, does O’Leary’s use of the Benedicite leave it behind. He keeps its opening and closing lines virtually unchanged, and still in their primary positions, and in this way he signals the presence of the original and includes its aura in the fabric of his own poem. Moreover, he transfers a number of objects—such as “winters” and “summers”—intact from Benedicite into the *Phosphorescence of Thought* (28). There is also a series of lines in which O’Leary uses the original term as an opportunity to take off on a musical, poetic riff, albeit in a manner that does not leave the original behind: “Lightning,” for instance, becomes

“you rapid hapless scattering of electricity” (29). This section of *Phosphorescence of Thought* does not hide its primary source and chooses instead to call attention to it even while using it as a catalyst. O’Leary’s poem is joined to the Benedicite as if by an umbilical cord; the DNA is in there, but his poem grows on its own, taking up its own life in ways the parent cannot imagine. His stance toward its source is thus somewhat of a paradox; he is the orthodox reformer: his poem is a reading of the Benedicite, an attempt to draw it into the present, to make it fit for our lives even as he fits our lives to it—he means to make it understood by transforming it. Another way to say it would be to observe that all that is in the Benedicite—its devotion, its humility, its vision of creation, its orthodoxy, and its hierarchy—is also in *Phosphorescence of Thought*, so in this sense O’Leary is a transcriber of the medieval hymn. But not all that is in the *Phosphorescence of Thought*—its sex, its scientific wonder, its organic fascination—is in the Benedicite, at least overtly, even if you could say O’Leary reads it in there by means of his frenetic interpretation. Taken in this light, O’Leary’s poem also looks a good deal like a dialogue with the Benedicite; it talks back to it so as to see what it replies in turn, how its words travel in our own world. A reader gets the notion that O’Leary’s list is potentially endless, that its ending is arbitrary, and that fact seems to be part of the poem’s concern. All that is not known and all that is are recognized at present and as overwhelmingly determining of the cosmos of we have it, and will continue to.

And, crucially, as we have seen, this dialogue is enacted through and also with the central avant-garde values on display throughout the poem: a material, musical concern for language directed at heightened emotional and cognitive states—something akin to rapture; poetics as theological argument, and a use of a process-centered composition and source materials to expand avant-garde bibliography and its purposes. To recall what Finklestein wrote of Duncan, O’Leary’s poem is an attempt to “paradoxically transform and intensify reality” (5). Or to cite O’Leary’s own terms, we can say that his apocalypticism attempts to rejuvenate the avant-garde by infusing it with spirit—he too talks cosmos. He does so by using his avant-garde values to read the sacred as manifest in the poem and thus also materially present in the world. Mystical experience, source texts, linguistically embodied consciousness, and the physical world all give the poem its life force and inscribe readers within it. Thus, the avant-garde is here itself redemptive—it is a protest against environmental and spiritual degradation that propel each other, and it “unbind[s] love from material desire” so that it might be redirected outward, beyond our selves—when it is itself redeemed. When O’Leary reemphasizes the line of visionary radical poetry diminished in recent years, he makes Duncan’s modernism new again and makes his poem a habitable, readable encounter with “the unknown and the unspeakable” order of the universe (“Apocalypticism” 84). Some poets might want

to call that order Justice; O’Leary uses the sign of God, but he uses the words *poem* and *love* and *soul* and *creation* and *blessing* too, and we ought not to diminish the distinctions, for in them we begin to find the stakes of the avant-garde’s multiformity.

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Although the artistic influence and public account of Conceptual writing changed dramatically after the watershed year of 2015, I do not think any study of recent avant-garde writing can ignore the central role it played in American poetry for over a decade at the start of the twentieth-first century. Looking back at that recent history means both seeing its institutional power and character as well as what was artistically valuable and productive about it, for a wide range of poets. To begin, we might observe that while O’Leary names a small group of poets he includes within his cluster of millennialist poets, they do not appear as a self-conscious movement of poets in the same way that those writers involved with Conceptual writing have often done so. This is not to say, though, that Conceptual writing was ever a unified project. While a number of the poets involved with it do function as a coterie in a way reminiscent of past avant-gardes, the kinds of writing often included within the larger framework of Conceptual writing vary greatly, from Goldsmith’s (2003) *Day*, which is a retyping of the September 1, 2000, issue of *The New York Times* from left margin to right, to Christian Bök’s (2001) Oulipo-inspired *Eunoia* that restricts each chapter to a single vowel, to Tan Lin’s *7 Controlled Vocabularies and Obituary 2004. The Joy of Cooking* (2010) that mixes genre and art forms, to Rob Fitterman’s *Metropolis* series and its poetic framing of the language of consumer culture, to Vanessa Place’s *Tragodia*, a three-volume work consisting of *Tragodia 1: Statement of Facts* (2010), *Tragodia 2: Statement of The Case* (2011), and *Tragodia 3: Argument* (2011). In these books, Place, who works as an appellate attorney, reproduces portions of her appellate briefs representing sex offenders and does so with no critical gloss and little editing. To this brief list, we might point to the fact that the first two anthologies of Conceptual writing, *Against Expression: An Anthology of Conceptual Writing* (2011) and *“I’ll Drown My Book”: Conceptual Writing by Women* (2012) contain works by younger contemporary writers and writers from earlier generations and, occasionally, from various aesthetic allegiances, all of which help establish a lineage for, and widening in scope of, Conceptual writing, which indicates the degree to which Conceptual writing theorized itself as it went.¹ That a number of the poets included in the second anthology later disavowed Conceptual writing (or perhaps more actually moved on from it) speaks in part to how much the ground changed after 2015, while also helping us to see the degree to which the term was in many respects an exciting, heterogeneous, and