

God-Wrestling as Postmodern Rhetoric in the Work of Three Contemporary American Poets

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In 2002, the list of nationally advertised literary conferences included at least three that focused on creative writing and religion. While the existence of these conferences does suggest that some relaxation of the tension between religious belief and mainstream contemporary literature has occurred, many writers of faith (that is, writers who maintain belief in a sustaining divine entity) remain reluctant to express their faith explicitly in their work, perhaps because such expression seems inconsistent with the dominant characteristics of the modern aesthetic: humor, playfulness, concern for surfaces, and opposition to traditional forms and ideas. However, the choice against open expression of belief is not necessarily a matter of recent fashion, postmodern or otherwise. Such reticence may be a matter of privacy: we recall the words of Emily Dickinson, who referred to people who “talk of hallowed things, aloud—and embarrass [her] Dog” (Johnson 415). The reluctance to publicize one’s religious beliefs may also reflect the state of a writer’s faith in which doubt is a condition. Indeed, doubt is a reasonable reaction to a post-Holocaust world under the pall of enormously powerful weapons, whose population inhabits an increasingly depleted and even devastated environment.

It could be said that these conditions result from human actions, are not the workings of God, and therefore should not determine faith or the lack of it. But this is not a satisfactory answer for those who see all human behavior as being in some way under divine sway or at least as occurring with God's knowledge. It is exactly the faith that God does know and care what humans do that may require a person to ask, "If God is a force for good and assuming that God is aware of human actions and is sovereign, why are humans enabled to wreak damage to each other and to the earth?" Why has our culture become characterized by anomie, distrust of authority, and superficiality? An orthodox Christian view might posit that God is good, that any evil in the world, including the disjunctions humans are now experiencing, results from Satanic influence (however that term is understood) and that Christ died precisely to free believers of the outcomes of that influence. However, there is another view that finds value, even holiness, in the very act of questioning, and this wrangling is implicit in poems by April Bernard, Mark Jarman, and Chase Twichell discussed in this essay. Far from being subject to literary fashion at the expense of substance, and whether these poets see their work in this light, the poems represent serious efforts to resolve conflicts between the impulse toward belief in a benevolent, powerful deity and the evidence the world presents that God, if God exists, is far from benevolent and does not hold sway among people.

This struggle toward a resolution that permits the individual to survive spiritually has been described by Arthur Waskow, social activist, author, and motivating force behind the Jewish renewal movement, as "God-wrestling." One might immediately recognize this wrestling in the story of the patriarch Jacob, who struggled with an angel throughout the night preceding his reunion with his brother Esau, whose inheritance he had stolen through trickery. However, Waskow suggests that Jacob's wrestling match is paradigmatic, in that throughout the Old Testament, or Tanach, characters find themselves in situations that impel them toward the question "Why does it need to be this way?" (6). Waskow further asserts that it is only by facing God and demanding an answer to this question, by "speaking the truth to power," as he puts it

(17), that biblical characters (if only through the inner change they experience as a result of their encounters with the Divine) are freed from their particular situations. Thus Cain, because he refused to challenge God directly when his offering of first fruits was unenthusiastically received, turned from God and murdered his brother Abel. Conversely, Jacob, who wrestled with God's messenger in a night-long battle that left him with a permanent limp perhaps symbolic of the inner damage wrought by his unrighteous actions toward his brother, was able to reunite with Esau successfully. Waskow suggests that modern man, too, must "be ready to challenge God, to answer God, to wrestle God. That is adulthood" (17). Viewed against this backdrop of confrontation with God, Bernard, Jarman, and Twichell are engaged in crucial tasks. "Why must we have reached the situation in which we find ourselves?" they seem to ask. "Why must our world have reached the state in which we find it?"

Certainly contemporary poets are not the only ones so to address God. For instance, seventeenth-century English poet John Donne initiates direct, even intimate conversation with the Divine. What may be at issue, then, is not whether the poet "speak[s] . . . truth to power" but exactly what is spoken. A brief review of one of Donne's Holy Sonnets provides some notion of premodern human-Divine dialogue:

Thou hast made me, and shall Thy work decay?
Repair me now, for now mine end doth haste,
I run to death, and death meets me as fast.
And all my pleasures are like yesterday,
I dare not move my dim eyes any way,
Despair behind, and death before doth cast
Such terror, and my feeble flesh doth waste
By sin in it, which it towards hell doth weigh;
Only thou art above, and when towards thee
By thy leave I can look, I rise again;
But our old subtle foe so tempteth me,
That not one hour myself I can sustain;
Thy grace may wing me to prevent his art,
And thou like adamant draw mine iron heart. (179)

Here is a wholly personal conversation explicitly and exclusively concerned with the speaker's spiritual life. It expresses orthodox belief in God as Creator, Sustainer, and Savior, upon whose grace the speaker is completely dependent, and without whom he is utterly vulnerable. The speaker, confronting mortality, is terrified to consider the punishment he expects to receive for his sinfulness, yet he freely admits himself to be powerless against the "old subtle foe," Satan, for as much as an hour without God's help. The poet urges God to help him avoid the sojourn in hell he feels is his due. This is a sonnet of supplication, and one might say that "speaking truth to power" here means admitting one's own helplessness and petitioning for aid. In the world of this poem, the terms are clear: the source of help, and Donne's faith in that source, are certain. Donne's concern is not with whether God can help him, but that such aid come soon. One also sees that God is magisterial; Donne rises from sin merely by looking up toward God, but he cannot effect even this gaze unless God wills it. God, on the other hand, is "like adamant," unbreakable, unyielding to the power of evil and perhaps (for the poet can never be sure while on earth that he has achieved salvation) to the poet's pleas as well.

Turning abruptly from Donne's sonnet to the first poem of April Bernard's *Psalms* (1993) suggests that the world has undergone a change so radical as to have become a different planet from the one Donne inhabited. Though the title *Psalms* is a direct allusion to texts central to the Judeo-Christian tradition as liturgical writings and reflections of the human-Divine relationship, the book's first poem, "Psalm of the City-Dweller Gone Home," communicates altogether different assumptions from those found either in the psalms ascribed to David or in Donne's sonnet:

There must be as many windows as possible, while the long
white ghost
floats from a hanger looped to the shade

Rumblings in the stars, a clanging that preceded this slate
vault of cloud, Arcturus palsied, and tonight the moon
will be blotted

somewhere west of here

I've been looking for faces in the snow, the spit of ice
from ghost grass, the spangles of ice from the moon

The things that come out of my mouth

No longer trusting to memory, the man with rags to bind
his feet
springs lightly as a deer across a shaggy meadow

The landscape will not yield to winter's plow: The ones I
lusted after,
not knowing where lust would take me, or how

Mechanical rumblings of stars that shift in the bed of black;
and in their cold inadequate light we are urged to be afraid

They illumine the streets, lamps holding new gases under glass,
indicate hideous bright new tones, creep up the meadow

Mice, wretched with winter, creep lightly as deer about the
attic

If I wandered with bloody feet on this bitter night and
asked for God,
I would be afraid to find him

That sheet waved perpendicular by ice and wind, though
there is no wind
across the bitter skin of the moon

Colder now and tired, looking for God, as for my bitterest
enemy. (3-4)

The truth that this poem speaks is a harsh one; the fear the speaker expresses concerns not what awaits her after death, but instead the conditions of the world in which she still lives. "The long white ghost," which toward the end of the poem is identified as God, is envisioned as floating from a hanger, much as a garment that can be put on or taken off at will might hang. This is not an affirmation of God's power but of God's subjection to human will, even, in its figurative nature, an affirmation of God's subjection to human imagination. The stars rumble and clang, echoing the machinery which covers the earth, yet their light is inadequate and "we are urged to be afraid." Far from being comforted by looking upward, the speaker looks for faces in the snow, perhaps the imagined faces of angels formed when humans lie down and sweep their own limbs across it. The new gases the lamps hold, which "indicate hideous bright new tones," recall the gas used in warfare as well as that used to kill concentration camp inmates during World War II. Even the mice are "wretched with winter," and the sole human inhabitant of this world, other than the poem's speaker, is a man whose bloody feet bound in rags suggest the bloodied feet of the crucified Christ. Small wonder that the speaker would be afraid to find God on this "bitter night." The allusion to liturgical poetry seems particularly ironic after a survey of the cityscape from which God is strikingly absent and in which the ambiguous nature of modern technology is all too obvious. Furthermore, though the speaker's empathy for the shoeless man is a positive note in the poem, it is also ironic that only a person outside the scene, and neither his fellow city-dwellers nor the apparently volitionless figure of God, recognizes his situation. The poem not only wrestles with God but it also indicts God, and the poet's truth is spoken very clearly. Yet even in this bleak place, and even though God, if such a Being exists as something more substantial than a wind-blown sheet, is an enemy (because what friend would leave one here), the speaker, "calmer now and tired," is nevertheless "looking for God." All things having been said, the poet is voicing a supplication much more subdued and complex than Donne's, but a supplication nevertheless.

If the view Bernard commands moves her to despair, Mark Jarman's similar vantage, as revealed in his collection *Unholy Sonnets* (2000), compels him to defiance. Interspersed with poems which directly address theological concerns—like Unholy Sonnet Six, "Outside My Door I Keep An Angel Chained" (26), in which the speaker's account of the angel vividly recalls the angel Jacob wrestled through the night but contained now by Jarman as if to head off further trouble—are poems that comprise snapshots or brief videos of a world gone awry. This point is underlined by the ironic allusion to Donne's more ordered world that the very term "unholy sonnet" makes. In Jarman's universe, God does not respond to the final prayers of flight accident victims (or, as one may be more likely to think after September 11, 2001, victims of air terrorism) any more than he responded to those praying that the devastation of Kristallnacht would not occur, even as the means to achieve it were being prepared. Like Bernard's, Jarman's humans usually suffer the workings of their own impulses and inventions, and God is either silent or absent. As Jarman points out in Unholy Sonnet Nine, "Someone Is Always Praying As the Plane," the prayers the accident victims uttered "fell like bombs"—another human creation—"out of their names, out of the living sky / . . . struck the blank face of earth, the ocean's face, / The rockhard, rippled face of facelessness" (29), and God must be obdurate indeed, if people can be left uncomforted as they horribly die. The earth to which they fall cannot under the circumstances be pronounced good, as it first appeared in God's eyes. In this sonnet, the "rockhard" earth is the ultimate blunt instrument, and Jarman is unsparing in the truth he speaks, if not *to* power, then *of* it (though the act of writing the poem can be seen as a kind of direct address). "Praying as it happens, / Praying before it happens that it won't," victims of accident, like the victims of Kristallnacht, are neither answered, rescued, nor comforted in Jarman's poem, which seems to equate the Divine with the faceless earth the people fall to along with their vain supplications.

Another principle central to the Judeo-Christian belief system is introduced in Genesis very soon after God surveys the newly made earth and finds it to be good: humans are made in the image of God. Though

it is difficult, if not impossible, to know in what sense this is the case, one can understand that humans in some way represent or serve as reflections of the Divine. Having adamantly challenged in Unholy Sonnet Nine the belief that God knows when people fall, much less when a single sparrow falls, Jarman reexamines in Unholy Sonnet Eleven, “This Boy Listening Eagerly to His Friend,” the notion of the sacred inhering in the human form, as that form is manifested in the techno-barbaric realm from which he will not let us look away:

This boy listening eagerly to his friend
 Who wears a steel-studded leather wristband
 And catechizes him in petty theft
 (The kind that leaves a shop clerk dead for pennies)—
 This boy, if you could grab him by the wrist
 And contradict his thug worship with visions,
 as real as TV, of his life in prison,
 Might transfer his attention unto you.
 But what about his friend? Too late for him?
 Before he enters the quick stop and reveals
 The weapons he will use to beat or kill
 The man or woman breathing behind the counter,
 He pulls a nylon stocking over his head.
 Look for the sacred face inside that face. (31)

It seems Jarman dares one to see anything of God in the stocking-distorted features of this boy who worships crime, whose most genuine vision of the world is obtained from television, who kills recreationally, whose life and self are apparently devoid of anything holy. Or if one is able to find “the sacred face inside that face,” one might wish one had not discovered its features. Jarman can be understood here to assert either that the human image is no longer a reflection of the divine image or that the human image reveals the most terrible aspects of the divine. However, there is another way to understand this poem, one which expands on Waskow’s notion of the importance of God-wrestling. If humans do not confront God, they turn on each other, as seen in Unholy Sonnet Eleven as well as in the story of Cain and

Abel. A world empty of the Divine leaves the boys in Jarman's sonnet without a god to address, much less the strength to dare such a challenge. In this situation, the boys must necessarily turn on other people. Thus, the sonnet both questions the theological principle of God's eminence and affirms Waskow's suggestion that the act of God-wrestling is essential to humans' survival as individuals, and perhaps, as a species. As stark as is the world of this particular poem, Jarman does not deny God altogether but says, for example, in *Unholy Sonnet Thirty-Six*, "He Will Not Let Us Blame Him Easily," that God "will not let us blame Him easily" even for natural disasters that kill dozens, if not hundreds, of people; the aftermath, God says, "is love" (64). The irony, even the bitterness, of Jarman's voice is present, but it speaks from a world within which God acts and beyond which God does hold sway, however difficult it might be to perceive God's presence in that world.

The same cannot be said for the world of Chase Twichell's poem "The Devil I Don't Know," from her book *The Ghost of Eden* (1995), which identifies the Divine with the packaged meat in the grocery store (the devil the speaker does know), as elsewhere in the book God is associated with the threatened natural environment:

It seems to be the purpose of mourning

to change the mourner, to tip over,
in the end, the urn that holds the grief.

When a loved person dies,
elegy formalizes that work.

But what if it's the holy thing itself,
the thing beseeched with prayer,
that's the deceased? What good is elegy then?

I was pushing my cart through the sharp
fluorescence of the supermarket,

lost in this question. People pawed

through the shrink-wrapped meats
which look like body parts to me
since I stopped eating them,

things that should have been buried,

and I thought, to what should I pray?
I'd always prayed to the ineffable
in its body the earth,

to the sacred violence of storms,
huge tracts of seaweeds rocked in the dark,

the icy crystals of the stars above the snow,
the mystery untamable and pure.

So what should I pray to now
in the hour of my abandonment?

Should I stand in my shining cart and shout
that the age of darkness is upon us?

Or turn inward to the old disciplines
and wander like a disembodied soul
through the wreckage, honoring my vows,

faithful to the end? A pilgrim
grown bright and clean as a flame,

eating only the gifts of the plants
and trees, what fattens among leaves

or swells in the soil underfoot.
Pure offerings. That means

no to fellow creatures bloated with steroids,

no to the heavy metals that shine
in the mackerel like tarnished silver,

no to the black-veined shrimp
in their see-through shells.

No to the embalming liquids
injected with needles,

no to the little chops packaged in rows
like a litter of stillborn puppies,

no to the chickens' sputum-colored
globules of fat, no to the devil I know.

The circular blade started up in the deli,

pink sheets of ham drooping into the plastic
glove of the man behind the counter.

What am I, an empty vessel waiting
for some new holy thing to come pour itself
into me? Where is the new divine?

I want to feed myself
into the machines of grief

and come out changed, transformed,
a new soul with a new consciousness.

I want a new inscrutable to worship,

to turn to in times of uncertainty and fear.

But there's only
 the soft hiss of the lobster tank,

 the one surviving lobster, just sold,
 waving its pegged claws from the scale.
 A small swordfish gleams behind the glass.
 Dear higher power, dear corpse of the world,

 gutted, garnished, laid out on ice. (22-24)

If one overlooks for a moment the very real anguish expressed in this poem, one might observe that Twichell's perception of God as a corpse, "gutted, garnished, laid out on ice," is grounded in a questionable equation. Twichell has always "prayed to the ineffable / in its body the earth." But if God is transcendent, God cannot be so narrowly identified with the earth, its produce, and its creatures. The earth could perish altogether, along with everything on it, and transcendent God would endure, though that is not a comforting thought and strengthens rather than counters the sense that humans have been left to their own devices on a planet populated by latchkey children and opportunistic door-to-door peddlers equipped with the most up-to-date locksmith's tools. In fact, what is at issue here is not the existence of the Divine but Twichell's conception of it. What she seeks is not a new god but a new way of understanding or conceiving of that god's power. Nevertheless, the vocabulary of her poem is traditionally religious and allusive. Furthermore, to the extent that Bernard and Jarman are also challenging God largely on the basis of what humans have perpetuated, Twichell belongs with them.

"The Devil I Don't Know" opens with a clear indication of the speaker's emotional state. She is in mourning but not yet in despair, supposing as she does that mourning should be transformative and that the poem, which she describes as an elegy, should provide the means for this process to occur. She then posits the poem's central question: if the object of prayer is dead, what good is the attempt the elegy represents to achieve the transformed state? Implicit in this ques-

tion is the assumption that a poem is a kind of prayer, and this alone identifies the speaker as a “writer of faith” who through her work considers a frightening truth: if God is dead, her own artistic and religious efforts are futile. And from all appearances, the god she knows is dead. She can no longer believe in (or petition) the deity once manifest for her in the “untamable and pure” mystery of nature, when she sees that nature as shrink-wrapped body parts, the “little chops packaged in rows / like a litter of stillborn puppies,” and their prospective consumers as creatures who paw, predatory, through the meat case. When Twichell poses her rhetorical question, “So what should I pray to now / in the hour of my abandonment,” it echoes Christ’s question from the cross, “My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?” (Matt. 27:46). When Twichell asks whether she should “stand in [her] shining cart and shout / that the age of darkness is upon us,” rolling before the reader are the wooden carts that carried to their executions those once regarded as heretics. And when she asks whether she should wander through “wreckage, honoring [her] vows, / faithful to the end,” one hears the speaker of Psalm 116 proclaiming “I will pay my vows to the Lord” (vs. 14). In the last figure of this sequence she envisions herself as “eating only the gifts of the plants / and trees, what fattens among leaves / or swells in the soil underfoot,” identifying herself as a vegetarian but also identifying herself with the first creatures in Eden, who ate only what the earth itself yielded. It is this primordial image of herself “grown bright and clean as flame” that enables Twichell to reject the devil she knows, that is, a conception of the Divine that must somehow accommodate row after row of contaminated meat and fish, just as the god of Jarman’s poems must accommodate child-thugs or as the god who overlooks the city Bernard depicts must tolerate clanging stars and lamps, which “indicate hideous bright new tones.”

At this point in the poem Twichell answers the question she poses earlier, despairing of the elegy’s transformative efficacy when “the holy thing itself” is as dead as the packages of meat in front of her: “to what should [she] pray?” She wants to “feed herself / into the machines of grief,” which sound discomfitingly similar to the circular blade slicing deli ham, and “come out changed, transformed / a new

soul with a new consciousness. / [She wants] a new inscrutable to worship, / to turn to in times of uncertainty and fear.” She does not recognize such a figure in this poem and arguably not in her book. Nevertheless, she has not given up the search for an “inscrutable” to whom she can pray. Like Bernard in “Psalm of the City-Dweller Gone Home,” she cannot let go of the possibility that such a Being exists. Thus even the most pessimistic of these three poets, whose god, as she has conceived of god, is dead, recognizes that “the holy thing itself” may exist in another form, and this recognition comprises tacit acknowledgment that it is her conception of the Divine, and not necessarily the Divine itself, that is defunct. Given the similar visions of Bernard and Jarman, one might argue that it is not just isolated private visions but culture’s conception of God that is moribund. But this does not mean that God does not exist, whatever the current zeitgeist. Like Twichell, humans may be engaged in a process of reenvisioning, conceptualizing anew or on the basis of different assumptions. Rather than stifling this activity, it is possible that postmodernism’s bias against tradition, even though all may not share that bias, has facilitated the re-examination and transformation of tradition by allowing doubts to be voiced.

I am reminded here of a young man who was my student in a freshman studies course I taught years ago. During one discussion, the class had somehow worked itself around to the question of God’s gender, a matter on its face totally unrelated to the proper concerns of a freshman-level reading and writing class but in fact appropriate to the context of the particular discussion. The student suggested that whatever God is, God is big enough to allow us to envision the Divine in whatever way we need to. I was struck by his observation at the time, and it seems more remarkable, rather than less so, as time goes on. Of course: if Twichell is pressed to envision God in a way different from how she is accustomed to doing, by all means she should proceed, and the poem discussed here shows her in the process of doing exactly that.

Waskow suggests in the first chapter of *God-Wrestling* that “God demands everything and risks everything” (17). What can this mean? What has *God* risked? Humans must make sense of what they see around them, or at least find a way to live with it, most often without any sure

sign that God is even aware of their situations. Possibly God risks exactly the encounter Twichell narrates in “The Devil I Don’t Know,” that of being pronounced dead. Yet in the poems of all three poets, God demands belief in the face of massive contrary evidence. For that reason, the circumstances within which these poets find themselves are reminiscent of those which prompted Job to call out in despair, though their concerns are more collective than private, and thus, if anything, a mark not of apostasy but of spiritual progress. Then again, there is a fundamental difference between the Job narrative and these three poems. Job received an answer, less notable for its specific content than for the reassurance of the ordering force it represented. Bernard, Jarman, and Twichell leave readers with a silence that might be read as a belief that there will be no answer, that it has not yet come, or that neither they nor readers can hear it. However understood, their silence leaves one facing the whirlwind (Job 38:1). If, as the psalmist says, the earth is given to man (Ps. 115: 16), humans must see what they have done. Perhaps then they will recognize response.

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