

## “PRAYER IS THE LITTLE IMPLEMENT”:

Poetic Speech and the Gestures of Prayer in Christian Traditions

by Mark Burrows (July 2012; posted with permission)

We know so little about our lives. We strive to find some order in the midst of the swirling events that carry us forward from day to day, calling upon words to try to make some sense of things. Even when we succeed, we know that the unknown—and, perhaps unknowable—is of a magnitude we only dimly imagine. Yet these wide margins of unknowing are filled with experience. In their plenitude they invite us to dwell in this world with curiosity, a sense of wonder, luring us into speech to give shape and form to our lives. Wittgenstein reminds us of this when he suggests that “[n]ot how the world is, is the mystical, but that it is.” That the world is and that we belong in it: these are the unexplainable puzzles framing our efforts to bring order to our existence—and, often enough, to face the chaos that seems capable of overwhelming us. “Do not let the flood sweep over me,” cries the psalmist, “or the deep swallow me up, or the pit close its mouth over me” (Ps. 69. 14). Prayer, whatever else it is, remains one of the primary gestures we make in the face of this intractable mystery. One might say the same of poetry, if for quite different reasons. Both are forms of art we make at the juncture of “sense” and silence. By the act of prayer and through the life of poetry, we find ways to give ourselves to life with all its puzzlements and its clarities, its allurements and its dreads. Perhaps these two are finally not altogether different from one another for this very reason. What binds them is not the matter of form or the question of style, but something far more fundamental and primal: viz., the very existence of language both employ in our unending search for some “sense” in the midst of it all, and even more significantly, the quality of silence that each induces. The German poet Durs Grünbein describes poetry as an imaginative searching, a kind of thinking “that only occurs in certain otherwise quite hard-to-reach places”: For the first time, it will make certain places visible, individual branches of the anything-but-straightforward psychic cave system that runs through the bodies of all humans and can only be discovered by a resourceful imagination audaciously pushing forward into still unsecured galleries.<sup>1</sup> The same could be said of prayer. Like poetry, it is a gesture of communion that we make in the face of our essential aloneness, a means of practicing “a resourceful imagination” so that we might penetrate the darkness that is the ground of our creative life—and its peril. Like prayer, poetry presses <sup>2</sup> forward by means of words shaped at the margins of silence. Both steer toward an essentially unlanguageable reality, penetrating the “still unsecured galleries” that constitute our inner life. Both are intimately human and for that reason not necessarily religious, though it is difficult to imagine a living religion bereft of either.

If prayer is a “voice from the depths of the heart,” as Karl Rahner once observed, it seems that the same could be said of poetry.<sup>2</sup> The work of finding our way into this particular “deep” calls for something other than analysis or declaration. Each derives its life from particular gestures of imagination. Jeanette Winterson’s description of poetry could apply with equal force to prayer when she suggests it is “not a version of the facts” but “an entirely different way of seeing”: both are creative expressions that we make as we turn ourselves toward the tedious and the intense in our lives.<sup>3</sup> Both arise from an essential solitude, one that reminds us of our unknowable origins and unmanageable transitions. Both call us to risk language, to shape words out of solitude, in our search for a “sense” of life. Both are gestures that turn us toward the surfaces and depths of our existence. The French philosopher Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe underscores the continuities between the two by suggesting that “poetry in its essence is prayer, and conversely. . . every prayer is a poem.”<sup>4</sup> But what would it mean to go on to claim with him that “the sole archives of the divine are poems, and an address to the god, more than any other kind, requires a conversion in language or an entirely different attitude within it”?<sup>5</sup>

This is a claim worth exploring, as I intend to do in what follows. Augustine and Dickinson: Two Voices on Prayer To frame this discussion let us begin with two testimonials regarding prayer, claims which, taken together, establish something of a thematic “arc” for our consideration of the “continuities and discontinuities” between poetry and prayer. The first is not a poem, at least not formally. It is a claim nestled in one of the great repositories of prayers from Late Antiquity, Augustine’s Confessions, that “prose-poem addressed to God,” as Henry Chadwick calls it, a “work of rare sophistication and intricacy” which—like a poem—is resonant with “harmonics of deeper meaning.”<sup>6</sup> The second is a poetic gem from the 19th century American recluse from New England, Emily Dickinson. First, then, to Augustine. In a probing exploration of prayer, the freshly consecrated bishop wonders with a philosopher’s curiosity precisely where God dwells within him. He names this cavern of awareness *memoria*, a word that <sup>3</sup> literally means “memory” but suggests much more in its Neoplatonic meaning. In this context, *memoria* meant something closer to what we call “mind,” a vast repository of images, feelings, ideas, and experiences capacious enough to include the unconscious. Addressing his query to God, Augustine wonders: “You were not already in my *memoria* before I learnt of you. Where then did I find you, so that I could learn of you, if not in the fact that you transcend me?” He goes on to describe the experience of those who pray: “You reply [to us] clearly, but not all hear you clearly. . . .Your best servant is the one who does not attend so much to hearing what he himself wants as to willing what he has heard from you.”<sup>7</sup> Hearing and willing constitute the circuit

of prayer for Augustine, shaping his description of what it is that people do when they pray: "In seeking [God] they find him, and in finding they will praise him. Lord, I would seek you, calling upon you—and calling upon you is an act of believing in you. You have been preached to us. My faith, Lord, calls upon you. It is your gift to me."<sup>8</sup> These two additional circuits—seeking and finding, and calling and praising—shape the "act" of praying as Augustine understood it, and prayer finally is what grounds the act of believing in God. *Lex orandi, lex credendi*.

How does the matter stand with that most startling voice among modern poets, Emily Dickinson? One might expect her to inhabit an altogether different world than that of Augustine, a rhetorician of Late Antiquity, and in many matters this is surely the case. But on the question of prayer, the two journey on a common path before coming to a decisive parting of ways. One of her poems addresses the experience of prayer directly: Prayer is the little implement Through which Men reach Where Presence – is denied them – They fling their Speech By means of it – in God's Ear – If then He hear – This sums the Apparatus Comprised in Prayer –<sup>9</sup> Augustine and Dickinson agree in seeing prayer as a "calling upon" or "reaching" for God across some "space" of interior distance. Both envision the origin of prayer as a gesture reaching for the one who is not present. As such, both would have agreed with Simone Weil's insistence that prayer "consists of attention," and in fact "it is the orientation of all the attention of which the soul is capable toward God."<sup>10</sup> But here they distinguish themselves. What separates the two—and we might see this as marking the watershed of modernity—comes down to the small but defining conjunction in Dickinson's poem: "If then [God] hear. . .". Up to this point, the poet seems to join Augustine in seeing the proper framework for prayer as "call and response." But Augustine wonders whether we hear God's speaking, while Dickinson wonders about the unsettled question of whether God hears.

We will return to the question of this watershed at the end of this inquiry, asking what this shift of confidence suggests for our approach to both prayer and poetry—and, at that point, find ourselves better able to assess Lacoue-Labarthe's bold claim that "poetry in its essence is prayer, and conversely, every prayer is a poem." The "Internal Language" of Poetry In a magnificent little gem of a poem entitled "Lyrik," or "Poetry," the German poet Hilde Domin suggests what a poem is, or rather how a poem behaves. It reads like this: Poetry Lyrik the not-word das *Nichtwort* stretched out *ausgespannt* between *zwischen* word and word. *Wort und Wort*.<sup>11</sup> This poem offers an insight into the continuities shaping both poetry and prayer. Of course, it is obvious enough to concede that not all prayers are poems, just as not all poems are prayers. But is there something inherently poetic in human experience that also animates the impulse to pray? In other words, might we identify the "habits" of poetry, if I might speak in this way, as having certain affinities to prayer? And might this proximity be the case even when the two have no formal relationship with each other—as, for example, in secular poems bereft of any theological referent, or in prayers that strike us as prosaic in diction and form? Domin's claim about the "not-word" of poetry offers help here by reminding us that poetry has to do with what is not said or written, with a sense that lies beyond language. So, too, with prayer: its poetic character shapes how prayer gestures, and is not strictly bound by the form it assumes. For prayers are also marked by what Domin calls, referring to poetry, a "*Spannungsverhältnis*," a "tensive relation" that brings together an "agitation [*Erregung*] on the one hand and a ratio on the other."<sup>12</sup>

Poetry is like this, but what of prayer? A "tensive relation" of this sort seems as apt a description of prayer as one might find—or, to recall George Herbert's poem "Prayer 1," it is an "engine against th' Almighty" and "reversed thunder" (an "agitation") and also, as he concedes at the close, "something understood" (or ratio). Domin deepens this point when she suggests that "the poem lives in the quivering opposition of [these] contradictions."<sup>13</sup> The same could be said of prayer. The tension inherent in this "opposition" has to do with how a poem's "sense" exceeds what words mean, pointing rather to how they mean—much as the "meaning" of music, if we can even speak of this, has to do with how it resonates within us long after our hearing of it ends.<sup>14</sup> Poetry has a music that plays not simply in the sounds of its words but in the resonance of its voice within us, and the way it indwells us as "presence" long after the words fall away. The Jewish poet Haim Nahman Bialik refers to this as "the domain of poetry," a "habitation" within us that he describes as "an internal language, that of solitude and the soul, in which what is essential is 'how?' as in music."<sup>15</sup> Both prayer and poetry gesture by means of this inner language beyond their use of words, finding their voice in the borderland of solitude. Both "speak" by means of the "not-word // stretched out / between // word and word," and in this are utterly different from what Bialik calls the "the domain of logic," an "external language" as he understands it that depends upon "abstraction and generalization, in which the essential is 'what?' as in mathematics."<sup>16</sup>

Yet these two domains—that of poetry and that of logic—share an essential attribute, following Bialik's argument: both are barriers of sorts, neither able to reveal for us "the essence of things." Both reflect strategies of protection against the chaos that surrounds us, both using words as a form of concealment, to follow the poet, serving as shields that "construct a barrier to prevent the void's darkness from welling up and overflowing its bounds."<sup>17</sup> The psalms remain Bialik's steady guide in this, reminding us of how we are caught in the tension of our search for "sense" in the midst of the ineradicable "nonsense" facing us. For while it may be that "day to day pours forth speech, / and night to night reveals knowledge," we also know in our experience that "there is no speech, nor are there words; their voice is not

heard" (Ps. 19, 2 – 3). What this implies for prayer, as for poetry, steers us to the depths of the question before us. And already here we begin to see that the interior language of poetry faces this void differently than the "external language" of argument and declaration. Bialik illustrates this by means of a vivid contrast. The latter, those "masters of logic," are like one . . . who crosses a river walking on hard ice frozen into a solid block. Such a [person] may and can divert his attention completely from the frozen depths flowing beneath his feet. But their opposites, the masters of poetry, are forced to flee all that is fixed and inert in language, all that is opposed to their goal of the vital and mobile in language. . . . And to what may those writers be compared? To one who crosses a river when it is breaking up, by stepping across the floating, moving blocks of ice. He dare not set his foot on any one block for longer than a moment, longer than it takes him to leap from one block to the next, and so on. Between the breaches the void looms, the foot slips, danger is close. . . 18

Those who pray know that they inhabit the domain of poetry, vigilant as it is to "the vital and mobile" and opposed to "all that is fixed and inert in language." Prayer may not always take the form of poems, but when it renounces the "internal language" of poetry, prayer loses something essential to its nature: even if it were to keep the form of its "body," such a renunciation would signal the loss of its soul. Prayer in Monasticism and the Premodern Liturgy What, then, can be said of poetry and prayer, and their continuities and discontinuities, considered across the horizon of Christian traditions? Does prayer emerge and develop as an instinctive "gesture" of poetic speech? Does it contribute something distinctive to poetic language? Surely one can speak of a *poetica* of prayer and a *devotio* of poetry in relation to pre-modern Christian cultures. But can the same be said when we cross the watershed of modernity? Is poetry a veiled form of prayer or a fraudulent imposter in a society like ours—postmodern, post-liberal, and often enough post-religious? To begin this inquiry we must recall that there is no such thing as peculiarly "Christian" experience, at least in the first generation. As a "new" religious movement, the earliest followers of "the way" belonged to other communities, their pieties shaped by existing religious practices. They were like the "scribe" Jesus describes in one of his sayings, the one "been trained for the kingdom of heaven, who is like the master of a household, bringing out of his treasure what is new and what is old" (Mt. 13, 52). In other words, these early believers borrowed patterns of prayer and ways of praying familiar to them from their "old" lives: what we have come to call the *lex orandi*—the "law" or "rule" of praying—came from Jewish as well as Gentile sources and patterns. 7

The prayer Jesus gave his followers, "the Lord's prayer," became a guide for this development, reflecting the synagogue tradition of Jewish prayer. In the setting and form Matthew and Luke gave this prayer, it represents a poetic model easy to memorize and repeat because of its brevity and simplicity. In Matthew's account, in fact, Jesus prefaces this "guide" with sharp words about not "heap[ing] up empty phrases as the Gentiles do, for they think that they will be heard because of their many words" (Mt. 6, 7 – 8)—a warning against the prolixity of prose. The phrases of this "poem-prayer" gesture by means of metaphor, not concept. They remind us, as the philosopher Emmanuel Levinas suggests, that "[i]n the poetic imagination, the unheard can be heard, called out to and expressed."<sup>19</sup> The Lord's Prayer opens with just such a "calling out": "Our father. . . ." As a poem, it engages an imagination that "hears" the unheard, that posits "presence" against the pressures of absence: ". . . who art in heaven." In the practice by which it has rooted itself in the church's memory, this prayer lives by means of this petition: "Thy kingdom come, thy will be done. . . ." And its very expression gestures toward the intentionality of experience: ". . . on earth as it is in heaven."

The earliest Christians prayed this prayer, including it formally in the earliest known liturgies and encouraging its use informally as an act of personal devotion.<sup>20</sup> But they also took Jesus at his word, at least in the expansive sense of a saying meant to teach his followers to pray "like this." We know that when these believers gathered to celebrate "the resurrection of the Lord" on the "eighth day," they carried with them not only this prayer—"the new"—but other forms from the traditions familiar to them on the "seventh day," as it were—"the old." Augustine offered a classic defense of this practice of Christian "thievery," interpreting such a practice as reenacting the Israelites' despoiling of Pharaoh's "gold and silver" as they fled from slavery in Egypt.<sup>21</sup> To his mind, "the Egyptians unwittingly [loaned] them things they were not themselves making good use of,"<sup>22</sup> an exposition of the apostle Paul's suggestion that "the letter kills, but the spirit gives life" (see 2 Cor. 3, 6). Among the treasures they took were the scriptures, of course, and above all the Psalms, set within a form of prayer reminiscent of synagogue worship. As these early Christians made such texts and practices their own, the shape of a distinctive Christian "poetic" of prayer began to emerge, a tradition that more than any other defined how these believers gave communal shape to what they understood as God's "new covenant." The Psalms, of course, were one of the most prominent features of this early Christian "looting." By the second century Christians in the Roman world <sup>8</sup> had a workable Latin translation of the psalms—the so-called "Old Latin" version.

This eventually became the central scriptural foundation for prayer among the early desert mothers and fathers, as it was to become in later monastic communities eastern and western. In these traditions, the psalms came to anchor the "liturgy of the hours"; according to Benedict, monks were to pay attention to "sing[ing] praise wisely," quoting Ps. 46, 8 in the Old Latin version; indeed, this text provoked him to remind his brothers that they were "to stand to sing the psalms in

such a way that our minds are in harmony with our voices”<sup>23</sup>—an example that accords with Paul Valéry’s insistence that poetry represents a mingling of “sound” and “sense.” The poetry of the psalms thus comes to dominate the monastic office. But the psalms were never prayed alone. Benedict makes use of the expression “*psalmi cum antiphonas*,” or “psalms with refrain,” to describe the practice of framing the psalms with short poems—the so-called “antiphons,” which “sound against” the psalms. These movable poems located the psalms in the church’s increasingly elaborate “calendar” of sacred time.<sup>24</sup> Indeed, the basic shape of monastic prayer constitutes what one of the most important interpreters of medieval monasticism, Jean Leclercq, calls “the poem of the liturgy,” a tradition shaped by the “acoustic” experience of poetry and informed by texts that lived by being sung.<sup>25</sup> The apparently endless repetition of chanted poems found their life through being passed back and forth in the ongoing cycle of singing and listening, of being voiced and heard within the monastic *horarium*. This “liturgy of the hours” was poetry ceremonially enacted in the community; its use constitutes what we might think of as “verbal ritual.”

Benedict was also emphatic about the role of silence in shaping monastic prayer, and here, too, we glimpse a poetic sensibility of the Rule. In the Cistercian reforms of the 12th century, in fact, silence became the defining norm of the monks’ life, so that what one heard and spoke—or rather sang—would have been constituted largely by prayed scripture. In this sense, of course, monastic prayer took shape as a cycle of song, maintaining a circular rhythm of sung poetry. And, lest this perhaps obvious point be missed, the ongoing “practice” of the Psalter as the central poetry of the liturgy was an oral practice leading to the “interiorizing” of scriptural poetry. A vivid illustration of this is found in one of the “sayings” of the desert fathers. In this story, a young aspirant at Scetis proudly boasts to an old “abba” that he had copied both testaments of the Bible with his own hand, whereupon the old monk, unimpressed by such a feat, remarked: “So you have filled the cupboards with paper!”<sup>26</sup> I mention this story because it reminds us that 9 scripture, and above all the psalms in this tradition, were experienced as poems that came to live in the silent “cells” of memory. Poems one comes to know “by heart” are like this. The monastic liturgy could be understood as an extended expression of “sung” poetry. Jean Leclercq goes so far as to say that monks experienced the liturgy of the hours as “one large poem.” Describing the shape of this prayer, Leclercq suggests that “the value of their words lies more in what they mean than in what they actually say: their evocative power is greater than their precision; each of them is like a note which awakens harmonics. All the delicacy of liturgical poetry comes from the free and harmonious use it makes of the sacred words.”<sup>27</sup>

Prayer depends on such a poetic appetite, as it were; it is a form of speech expressing the monks’ desire for the divine presence—amid the otherwise grinding routine of chant, and thus in the face of an often felt absence. Monastic liturgy was and is poetic in just this sense. This tendency to exalt the “poem” of the liturgy as the essential shape of the church’s prayer becomes a defining characteristic of medieval Christianity, in both its eastern and western forms. Within the broader expressions of Christian life during the so-called “monastic centuries,” this form of prayer held a privileged place of honor. Indeed, it established the framework for what came to be known as “cathedral prayer,” which is to say the liturgy used in non-monastic or “secular” churches. This preference had a tenacious hold on Christianity through the period of the western Reformation and beyond, at least among the “magisterial” reformers, or the churches of the Lutheran, Reformed, and Anglican traditions. For them, the prayer of the church remained essentially “formal,” against an emerging variety of “new” traditions that emphasized spontaneous prayer. John Donne among others opposed such innovations, defending the older tradition of the prayer book. In a sermon on “Prayer,”<sup>28</sup> he insists that prayer might be spontaneous, but that its proper and effective form is to be found in the church’s formal liturgy—largely because of the stability that the liturgy offered, with its musical setting, poetic cadences, and theological stability.

Of course, Donne did not despise what he thought of as “private prayer,” referring to those spontaneous utterances we make in times of anguish or joy. These were not, to his mind, without importance, since they constituted what he calls “payments of [our] debt [to God], in such peeces, and in such summes, as God, no doubt, accepts at our hands.”<sup>29</sup> But he went on to privilege the formal prayer of the church’s liturgy: “For the debt of prayer,” he argues, “God will not be paid, with money of our owne coyning, (with sudden, extemporal, inconsiderate prayer) but with currant money, that beares the Kings Image, and inscription; The Church of God, by his Ordinance, hath set his stampe, upon a Liturgie and Service, for his house...[T]he solemne dayes of payment, are the Sabbaths of the Lord, and the place of this payment, is the house of the Lord.”<sup>30</sup> He goes on to undermine prayer offered outside the great “poem” of the church’s liturgy—and by this he meant The Book of Common Prayer—as unreliable and ineffective. As Donne suggests, it would be better not to “tak[e] up every tatter’d fellow, every sudden ragge or fragment of speech, that rises from our tongue, or our affections,” since such scrappy utterances are but a poor substitute for “muster[ing] up those words, which the Church hath levied for that service, in the Confessions, and Absolutions, and Collects, and Litanies of the Church.”<sup>31</sup> But what of those “darts of a devout soule,” as Donne calls the spontaneous, the private prayers we utter, “which, though they have not particular deliberations, and be not formall prayers, yet they are the indicia, pregnant evidences and blessed fruits of a religious custome”?<sup>32</sup> Could such “tattered” prayer, such “rags of speech,” be considered “poetic,” even if a far distance from anything resembling the formal shape of liturgical poetry? For such utterances may well be eloquent in expressing what Domin has called the “not-word” of poetry. Here, we might vary Wallace Stevens’s query when he asks, “Is there a



poem that never reaches words,"<sup>33</sup> to wonder about prayers that never reach words, that are borne in the inarticulate depths of the heart.

Such utterances or intentions of our "interior language" are not, strictly speaking, poems. But they are surely prayers, and they are in some sense unavoidably "poetic." Bialik reminds us of this, suggesting that 'there are yet to the Lord' languages without words: songs, tears, and laughter. And the speaking creature has been found worthy of them all. These languages begin where words leave off, and their purpose is not to close but to open. They rise from the void. They are the rising up of the void. Therefore, at times they overflow and sweep us off in the irresistible multitude of their waves; therefore, at times they cost a man his wits, or even his life.<sup>34</sup> Here we find ourselves in the company of the apostle Paul, and his notion of "sighs too deep for words" (Rom. 8. 16). The poetic of these "languages without words" opens us to a knowing that is post-verbal, an expression that gives expression to the soul's "agitation." One encounters this sense of the poetic not only in the organized language of the liturgy, or what we might call the II "explicit" poem of such communal prayer, but also—and importantly—in the silences that shape such liturgy, in the yearnings we bring to its set prayers, and, yes, to the "gaps" that interrupt the "concealments" of this language. For the "sense" we discern amid these vacancies—in the voice of the "not-word" of which Domin speaks—points toward depths and heights of our experience that exceed words. Such sighs mark the places in the heart where longing comes to do its work—in the formal prayers that shape the liturgy as well as in the silent margins where an "interior language" (Bialik) speaks within us. Such yearning also finds its way into language in otherwise apparently "secular" poems, those distinguished as Paul Celan once put it for the ways they "are making toward something. . .standing open, occupiable, perhaps toward an addressable Thou, toward an addressable reality." And here, once again, one hears a witness echoing Dickinson's "if."<sup>35</sup>

The deep impulse of this "sigh" as a mark of anguish or longing moves beyond Donne's conviction about the primacy of formal prayer and the priority of the prayer book above all else. Celan's point also bears cautious witness to this "if," and his poems stand as expressions that carry the agony of this "sigh" into speech—on the far side of a silence evoked in the face of the Shoah and its horrors. Celan, too, gestures toward the impulse of poetic imagination, that tensive blend of "agitation" and "ratio" as Hilde Domin suggests, a peculiarly modern—and, in this case, Jewish—impatience with Augustine's confidence that God "replies" to us clearly. If prayer is a wager on this reply, Celan's poetry is as well. "The Swimming Word Belongs to the Dusk" What will the prayers be like that are felt and uttered within the horizon of this late-modern uncertainty? Something closer to what Donne scorned as a "tatter'd fellow, every sudden ragge or fragment of speech, that rises from our tongue, or our affections" than to formal liturgies with their balance and order. Such fragments—and Donne's image is a good one—will rarely become poems marked by the sturdy diction and formal shape of Cranmer's prayers which Donne so cherished—and rightfully so. But they do belong to the "domain of poetry," in another key, as found in those ragged-edged psalms, that mingle desolation with praise, vengeance with mercy, celebration and lament—in other words, fraught with the "contradictions" that shape themselves within the heart's divided chambers. Whatever their form, they carry us because of the way they voice the deep language of the heart and the cadences of human longing. Of course, we experience this in widely varying forms and shaped precisely by 12 apparently contradictory impulses: as a gesture arising from a great abundance within us, and as a reaching from the chasms of emptiness or despair. We find this voiced in one of Sappho's vivid fragments when she describes "the sweetapple [that] reddens on a high branch: . . .high on the highest branch and the appletickers forgot—no, not forgot: were unable to reach."<sup>36</sup>

Our longing holds in our minds what we experience, even when it is absent from us or beyond our reach. In this, we come to know ourselves as creatures whose "self forms at the edges of desire,"<sup>37</sup> as the poet Anne Carson once put it. This yearning guides us like a red thread that traces a way through the labyrinth of our lives, in plenty and in want, reminding us of Plato's ingenious suggestion in *The Symposium* that Eros was the offspring of Poros ("resource" or "abundance") and Penia ("poverty").<sup>38</sup> Celan approaches this theme from a quite different angle in one of his masterful poems, pointing to the shifts that mark the watershed of modernity: Knock the Klopfe die light-wedges away: Lichtkeile weg: the swimming word das schwimmende Wort belongs to dusk. hat der Dämmer.<sup>39</sup> Ours is a cultural moment of this "dusk," following Celan's vivid metaphor. Even where these "light-wedges" linger among us, the poet insists, we must "knock" them away. What we are left with is language that serves us as a "swimming word" in this gathering dark. All of this brings us back to the question of prayer and poetry, now set within the dusk of late-modernity. For as surely as poems are not prayers, except when they are, and prayers are not poems, except when they are, the question of "continuities and discontinuities" has to do with diverging modes of prayer and certain dynamic moods of the poetic. Along the path we have traced in this journey, we begin to see how "attention," a posture as fundamental to prayer as it is to poetry, has little to do with what we think—whether about God, ourselves, or our world—and much more to do, to think again with Bialik, with the "internal language of solitude and the soul in which what is essential is 'how?' as in music." It is the posture of what Meister Eckhart called "Gelassenheit," that opening of our lives to the "there-ness" of what is.<sup>13</sup> Those who strive to pray at the edge of this "dusk" may well choose quite different paths. Some are content in assuming that getting the words of prayer "right" is enough. They are those who cherish the poetic resonance of the

church's formal prayer, preferring with Donne the stability of the prayer book and thus carrying on a long tradition shaped by ancient monastic practices. They presume, against the pressure of Frank Lloyd Wright's familiar dictum regarding modern architecture, that "form is function," and are content for this very reason with the church's "liturgy and services." They find themselves moved by the poetic beauty of her prayers. And, with Augustine, they cannot be shaken from their resolve that the God who "calls" accomplishes his purposes.

Others are less certain about such matters. They sense that the words of prayer voiced in the church's formal liturgy offer no guarantee of "finding" God, who seems to them more like an absentee landlord than one who is overbearing with demands. They may love the poetic cadences of her prayers, the assuring lyricism of her song, but deep within them stirs the blunt question posed by that fierce Welshman R. S. Thomas as the opening of one of his poems: "How do you know?"<sup>40</sup> In the company of such voices, they too try to keep an eye on what is "vital and mobile" in language, to recall Bialik, recognizing that an unfathomable depth looms beneath—and between—their words, those "blocks of ice" in the river offering at best an only momentary foothold. Yet as they make their way across these ice floes, they trust the poetic to guide them, knowing that in this case "form follows function"—and not only that which is explicitly "religious," since even the so-called "secular" poets like Celan voice the longings that keep them afloat. "Very Much Alive and Not At All Alone" I know of no better way to exemplify this late-modern vigilance, this search through the "still unsecured galleries" of the soul (Grünbein), than to close with one of Chris Wiman's poems, "Small Prayer in a Hard Wind," from his most recent collection *Every Riven Thing*. It is a poem, like many, that lives through its allusions, concluding with an echo to Donne's familiar "Holy Sonnet XIV," "Batter my heart, three-person'd God. . .". It is a poem about prayer and a prayer in its own right, a "calling out" to God in the face of the "non-sense" of this gathering dusk of late-modernity. I read it as Wiman's attempt to make art—and, in this case, to make prayer—in the face of Emily Dickinson's "if," a poem that wonders how we use language to address God in a time of apparent abandonment amid the gathering "dusk" of late modernity. And it is a poem that gestures with the desire for communion—in this case, a longing evoked through the image of a "long-abandoned half-standing house." 14

Wiman anticipates such a poem in an autobiographical essay entitled "Love Bade Me Welcome," a familiar line with which George Herbert opens his poem "Love, III." "The language I have now to call on God," Wiman confesses, "is not only language, and the wall on which I make my taps and scratches is no longer a cell but this whole prodigal and all too perishable world in which I find myself, very much alive, and not at all alone."<sup>41</sup> Here, then, the poem "Small Prayer in a Hard Wind": As through a long-abandoned half-standing house only someone lost could find, which, with its paneless windows and sagging crossbeams, its hundred crevices in which a hundred creatures hoard and nest, seems both ghost of the life that happened there and living spirit of this wasted place, wind seeks and sings every wound in the wood that is open enough to receive it, shatter me God into my thousand sounds . . .<sup>42</sup> I suppose that Wiman did not intend this as a poem about the "dusk" of modernity, at least not explicitly. But I cannot help but hear in his "small prayer" echoes of a prodigal's voice calling *de profundis*: one hears in this poem the cry that rips through the Hebrew psalms of lament, yet one senses here as in those psalms more than an expression of pained resignation. Like them, Wiman's prayer recognizes how abandonment might gesture toward a remembered presence—the "living spirit of this wasted place"—and how suffering releases a song of its own for those whose "wounds" are "open enough to receive" the coming wind and let it sing. In a peculiar sense, I read it as a poem that bears witness to an unexpected Pentecost of sorts, one that echoes Hopkins' testimonial to the "reaving peace" that does not "come to coo" but "comes to brood and sit." Of course, Wiman's prayer is not about peace. Or is it? It closes with the poet admonishing God to "shatter" him "into [his] thousand sounds," to break him loose from silence into language—another pentecostal image. But couldn't this longing for voice be the pathway of peace, at least among those who know that "the swimming word belongs to dusk"? We who lift our prayers knowing that they are but "a little implement" by which we "reach / Where Presence – is denied [us]" need poetic fragments like Wiman's, alongside the immaculate cadences of more formal liturgies chastened as these often are by a larger measure of theological certitude. We who find 15 ourselves "in rivers north of the future," as Paul Celan put it in one of his poems,<sup>43</sup> yearn for prayers that stake their hope on the wager that God will hear our pleas, but also know that if this God were to come it might well be in the form of a fierce lover—who might well "shatter [us] into [our] thousand sounds." And we need poems that dare to "make certain places visible," as Grünbein puts it, revealing not some distant metaphysical certainties but rather those "individual branches of the anything-but-straightforward psychic cave system that runs through [our] bodies." In the gathering dusk of late modernity, we who live in the face of the poet's "if" long for ways of addressing "the god," as Lacoue-Labarthe suggests, knowing that this "require[s] a conversion in language or an entirely different attitude within it." Beyond questions of form in the case of poetry, or content in the case of prayers, we yearn for language "open enough to receive" these winds of spirit—surely in the silences of the prodigal heart, but also in poems that call upon God with "language [that] is not only language," that speak with the "internal language, that of solitude and the soul," that alone can lead us from loneliness toward the sacrament of desire.

- 1 Durs Grünbein, "The Poem and Its Secret," translated by Andrew Shields, *Poetry* 199: 4 (January, 2007): 316.
- 2 Karl Rahner, *On Prayer* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1967), 52.
- 3 Jeanette Winterson, *Art Objects: Essays on Ecstasy and Effrontery* (New York: Vintage Books, 1997), 28.
- 4 *Poetry as Experience*, translated by Andrea Tarnowski (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999), 79. A voluminous bibliography exists on the question of poetry as prayer. A short series bearing this title appeared a decade ago, comprised of three volumes: John Delli Carpini, *Poetry as Prayer: Emily Dickinson* (Boston: Pauline Books and Media, 2002); Basil Pennington, *Poetry as Prayer: The Psalms* (Boston: Pauline Books and Media, 2001); and, Murray Bodo, *Poetry as Prayer: Denise Levertov* (Boston: Pauline Books and Media, 2001). Other relevant studies of a general nature include: Henri Bremond, *Prayer and Poetry. A Contribution to Poetical Theory*, translated by Algar Thovold (London: Burns, Oates, and Washbourne, Ltd., 1927); Helen C. White, *Prayer and Poetry* (Latrobe, PA: Archabbey Press, 1960); William T. Noon, *Poetry and Prayer* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1967). A wide array of studies explore poetry in the traditions of Jewish prayer, including: Avi Baumol, *The Poetry of Prayer* (Jerusalem: Gefen, 2009); David Jacobson, *Creator, Are You Listening? Israeli Poets on God and Prayer* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2007); and, James Kugel, editor, *Prayers That Cite Scripture* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Center for Jewish Studies, 2006). The same is true of the poetry of the Hebrew Psalms in English translation and usage; see, for example, Zirkah Zim, *English Metrical Psalms: Poetry as Praise and Prayer, 1535 – 1601* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1987) and John Witvliet, *The Biblical Psalms in Christian Worship. A Brief Introduction and Guide to Resources* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2007). Among a host of monographs devoted to particular poets on this topic, one bears special mention: Frank X. McAloon, *The Language of Poetry as a Form of Prayer: The Theo-Poetic Aesthetics of Gerard Manley Hopkins* (Lewiston, NY: Edwin Mellen Press, 2008).
- 5 Lacoue-Labarthe, *Poetry as Experience*, 79.
- 6 See his Introduction in *Saint Augustine, Confessions*, translated with an Introduction and Notes by Henry Chadwick (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), ix.
- 7 Augustine, *Confessions* X. xxvi (37), here in Chadwick's translation, op. cit.
- 8 *Ibid.*, I. 1 (1), again in Chadwick's translation.
- 9 *The Poems of Emily Dickinson*, edited by R. W. Franklin (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1999), 279 (no. 623).
- 10 Simone Weil, "Reflections on the Right Use of School Studies with a View to the Love of God," in *Waiting for God*, translated by Emma Crauford with an Introduction by Leslie A. Fiedler (New York: Harper and Row, 1951), 105.
- 11 Hilde Domin, "Lyrik," in *Hier* (1964), reprinted in *Sämtliche Werke*, edited by Nikola Herweg and Melanie Reinhold with an Afterword by Ruth Klüger (Frankfurt am Main: S. Fischer Verlag, 2009), 113 (my translation). For a provocative and penetrating discussion of Domin's poetic work, see Vera-Sabine Winkler, *Leise Bekenntnisse. Die Bedeutung der Poesie für die Sprache der Liturgie am Beispiel von Hilde Domin* (Ostfildern: Matthias-Grünewald-Verlag, 2009); Winkler explores this particular poem at pp. 13 – 40.
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- 12 Hilde Domin, *Das Gedicht als Augenblick von Freiheit. Frankfurter Poetik-Vorlesungen 1987/1988* (Frankfurt am Main: Fischer Verlag, 2005), 69.
- 13 *Ibid.*
- 14 This sense lives, like music, once we have finished reading a poem, its "geschehendes Sein," or "becoming being," as the philosopher Josef Pieper once put it. See Josef Pieper, "Thoughts About Music," in *Only the Lover Sings: Art and Contemplation*, translated by Lothar Krauth (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1988), 42f.
- 15 Haim Nahman Bialik, "Revelment and Concealment in Language," in *Revelment and Concealment. Five Essays*, with an Afterword by Zali Gurevitch (Jerusalem: Ibis Editions, 2000), 14.
- 16 *Ibid.*
- 17 Bialik, 17.
- 18 Bialik, 24 – 26.

- 19 Emmanuel Levinas, "On Religious Language and the Fear of God," in *Beyond the Verse. Talmudic Readings and Lectures*, translated by Gary D. Mole (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1994), 86.
- 20 See the *Didache* 8, which advises that this prayer be said three times each day.
- 21 See his *De doctrina Christiana* II. 40 [60]; translated as *Teaching Christianity*, translated by Edmund Hill, OP (Hyde Park, NY: New City Press, 1996), 160.
- 22 *Ibid.*
- 23 See *The Rule of St. Benedict*, ch. 19.
- 24 For an astute discussion of this point, see "The Liturgical Code in the Rule of Benedict," in *The Rule of Benedict in Latin and English with Notes*, edited by Timothy Fry et al. (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 1981), 402f.
- 25 See Jean Leclercq, "The Poem of the Liturgy," in *The Love of Learning and the Desire for God. A Study of Monastic Culture*, translated by Catharine Misrahi (New York: Fordham University Press, 1982), 236 – 54.
- 26 In the "Anonymous Apophthegmata," as cited by Douglas Burton-Christie, *The Word in the Desert. Scripture and the Quest for Holiness in Early Christian Monasticism* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), 115.
- 27 Leclercq, *Love of Learning*, 241.
- 28 John Donne, *Poetry and Prose, with Izaak Walton's Life, with an Introduction and Notes* by H. W. Garrod (Oxford: At the Clarendon Press, 1946), 89 – 93.
- 29 *Ibid.*, 90.
- 30 *Ibid.*, 89.
- 31 *Ibid.*, 90.
- 32 *Ibid.*
- 33 Wallace Stevens, "Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction," ix, from *Transport to Summer* (1947), reprinted in *Wallace Stevens, Collected Poetry and Prose* (New York: The Library of America, 1997), 343.
- 34 Bialik, 28.
- 35 Celan suggests that such poems "are the efforts of someone who, shelterless in this till now undreamt-of sense and thus most uncannily in the open, goes with his very being to language, stricken by and seeking reality." See his "Speech on the Occasion of Receiving the Literature Prize of the Free Hanseatic City of Bremen," in *Selected Poems and Prose of Paul Celan*, translated by John Felstiner (New York: W. W. Norton, 2001), 396.
- 18
- 36 Sappho, *If Not, Winter. Fragments of Sappho*, translated by Anne Carson (New York: Vintage Books, 2002), 214 – 15.
- 37 Anne Carson, *Eros the Bittersweet* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1986), 39.
- 38 See the final "Speech of Diotima," in *The Symposium 203Bff.*
- 39 Paul Celan, from *Lichtzwang* (1970); in *Selected Poems and Prose of Paul Celan*, translated by John Felstiner (New York and London: W. W. Norton, 2001), 316 – 7; the translation is my own, in conversation with Felstiner's.
- 40 R. S. Thomas, "Amen," in *Collected Poems, 1945 – 1990* (London: Phoenix Press, 2001), 160.
- 41 Christian Wiman, "Love Bade Me Welcome," in *Ambition and Survival: Becoming a Poet* (Port Townsend, WA: Copper Canyon Press, 2007), 245.
- 42 Christian Wiman, "Small Prayer in a Hard Wind," in *Every Riven Thing. Poems* (New York: Knopf, 2010), 72.
- 43 Celan, *Selected Poems*, 216.