Poetic Exercises:

An Exploration of the Influence of *The Spiritual Exercises of St Ignatius* on the Writing of Poetry

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I certify that all material in this thesis which is not my own work has been identified and that no material has previously been submitted and approved for the award of a degree by this or any other University.

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Abstract

This thesis investigates the question ‘How might *The Spiritual Exercises of St Ignatius* influence the writing of poetry?’ The creative practice section consists of a collection of poetry written during and after I made *The Spiritual Exercises*.

In Chapter One, drawing on the writing of Roland Barthes, I characterise *The Spiritual Exercises* as a series of ‘texts’ rather than a single book. I discuss how the term ‘influence’ might be understood before illustrating the influence of *The Spiritual Exercises* on the poetry of Robert Southwell and Gerard Manley Hopkins. I explore how making The Exercises might lead to poetic retellings of biblical stories with reference to Samuel Tongues’ concept of poetic paragesis. I then discuss the relationship between poetry and prayer extending Antonio Spadaro’s idea of the threshold between poetry and prayer. Chapters Two and Three offer studies of the work of Denise Levertov and Ted Hughes. I argue that *The Spiritual Exercises* led to shifts in the work of Levertov and Hughes. Levertov did not retell biblical stories in her post-Ignatian poetry, but utilised them as starting points for reflection on her own faith. By contrast I suggest that meditation influenced Hughes to engage with the Bible at a deeper level and to retell stories in surprising ways. The poetry of both poets illustrates the ways in which the threshold between poetry and prayer can be crossed. A final bridging chapter reflects on my creative practice, highlighting similarities and differences between my own experience of writing poetry influenced by *The Spiritual Exercises* and the work of Levertov and Hughes.

I conclude that *The Spiritual Exercises,* as a process of meditation, influences the writing of poetry. Ignatian meditation leads to shifts in theme and tone of poetry and can support the creation of imagery. *The Spiritual Exercises* lead to imaginative retellings of biblical stories and enables poetry to cross the threshold between poetry and prayer in both directions.

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Introduction

In February 2012 I read Wang Wei's 'The Deer Fence' for the first time:

> On the empty mountain, no one is seen
> But the sound of voices is heard
> Returning: light enters the deep forest
> Again: it shines on the green moss.[1]

I was struck by the depth of this brief poem and in particular by the subtle allusion to Buddhist meditation and the path of enlightenment. Subsequent reading of work by other Buddhist poets, classical and contemporary, confirmed the influence of meditation on them.[2] I wondered whether a similar influence might be found in the poetry of poets who meditated using methods from the Christian tradition. As I had taken part in Ignatian Quiet Days my interest in this topic began to focus on the influence of *The Spiritual Exercises of St Ignatius* on poetry. Ignatius' use of the imagination, especially his 'composition of place' and 'application of the senses' resonated with my experience as a poet. The poetry collection, *In the Steps of Saints,* and a critical reflection on the work of Denise Levertov and Ted Hughes, *Poetic Exercises*, are the result of my research into the influence of *The Spiritual Exercises* on poetry.

This research seeks to answer four questions. My central question is 'How might *The Spiritual Exercises of St Ignatius* influence the writing of poetry?' Ignatius' book *The Spiritual Exercises* is a handbook which gives instructions for meditation.. Therefore, although I consider the possible textual influence of Ignatius' book on poetry, my main line of enquiry will seek to discover how practising the meditation it outlines affects a poet's subsequent poetry.

My following question concerns the interaction of literature and theology, which is an increasingly significant debate within both literary criticism

[1] Quoted by Charles Egan in 'Recent-Style Shi Poetry: Quatrains (Jeju)' (207)
[2] See for example the work of the seventeenth century poet Matsuo Bashō and contemporary poets Chase Twitchell and Maitreyabandhu.

and theology.[3] As *The Spiritual Exercises* are centred around meditation on biblical passages I ask 'How does Ignatian meditation impact on the retelling of biblical stories in poetry?' Although a number of poets have drawn on the Bible[4] I am interested in seeing whether or not meditation takes poetic retellings of biblical stories in different directions, potentially leading to new interpretations of the original stories.

While scholars have explored the similarities and differences between poetry and prayer[5] I seek instead to discover whether poems written after Ignatian meditation confirm that the relationship between poetry and prayer can be best described by drawing attention to the similarities and differences between them, or whether these poems call for a fresh understanding of the interrelationship of poetry and prayer.

Finally I enquire 'How might appreciating a poet's engagement with *The Spiritual Exercises* contribute towards a reading of his or her work?' By asking this question I consider how far Ignatian readings of a poet's work confirm, disconfirm or complicate previous approaches. I also look at how this reading could extend existing criticism, possibly filling in gaps in understanding.

I employ a range of methods of research. A primary research method is research by practice. This involved writing a collection of poems influenced by *The Spiritual Exercises.* In order to do this I made[6] *The Spiritual Exercises* with the guidance of a spiritual director for a period of a year, from February 2015-February 2016. As I made *The Spiritual Exercises* I began to write a collection of poems, *In the Steps of Saints*. The first poems were drafted in the preparatory month, and so were written before I began the exercises themselves. Subsequent poems were composed in the first, second, third and fourth week of *The Spiritual Exercises.* I continued to write poems having completed *The Exercises*. From September 2017 to October 2018 I made *The*

[3] For an overview of this debate in the twentieth and early twenty-first century see David Jasper 'The Study of Literature and Theology.'
[4] Examples include the work of John Milton, William Blake, Alfred, Lord Tennyson, Emily Dickinson, Walt Whitman and Wilfred Owen among others.
[5] See essays in *Poetry and Prayer: The Power of the Word II* eds. Bugliani Knox, Francesca and John Took.
[6] It is common practice to refer to carrying out *The Spiritual Exercises* as 'making *The Spiritual Exercises'.*

Exercises again, but this time without the guidance of a spiritual director. Consequently I was heavily dependent on the text of *The Spiritual Exercises* as my guide. The text I followed was Thomas Corbishley's translation and the Bible I read was the King James Authorised Version[7] in order to approximate Ted Hughes' experience of *The Spiritual Exercises*. I wrote more poems during this period and from November 2018 until July 2020..

In conjunction with research by practice I began to reflect on the work of two poets: Denise Levertov and Ted Hughes.[8] I chose to focus on Levertov's poetry because she made *The Spiritual Exercises* between September 1993 and April 1994 with the support of a spiritual director. Levertov kept a journal as she meditated. Reading this Ignatian Journal, and other journals that she kept at the time, alongside drafts of poems and the final collection published in her lifetime, *Sands of the Well* (1996), shed light on how *The Spiritual Exercises* influenced her work. Hughes, by contrast, did not make *The Spiritual Exercises* in a formal sense but recommended them as exercises for training the imagination. I argue that Hughes' poetry, from the mid-1960s onwards, was influenced by his personal meditation. Hughes' poetry demonstrates, in a way that Levertov's work does not, how *The Spiritual Exercises* can have a varied and creative impact on the work of a poet over a period of several decades. Therefore my choice of Hughes' poetry adds a different perspective to the debate about the influence of *The Spiritual Exercises* on poetry.

My reflection on the work of Levertov and Hughes is supported by archival research, the analysis of existing criticism and my own close reading of selected poems. In the case of Levertov the archival research consisted of a comparison of materials in her journals, especially her Ignatian Journal, and drafts of her poems from *Sands of the Well*. In several cases this enabled connections to be made between Levertov's meditation and specific poems. My approach to Hughes is speculative. I draw on Hughes' published and archival

[7] David Troupes in his PHD thesis *Ted Hughes and Christianity: Constant Revelation of the Sacrificed God* confirms that this was the version of the Bible that Hughes usually read (8).
[8] David Lonsdale in 'Poetry and Prayer: A Survey of Some Twentieth Century Studies' also mentions these poets in his discussion of the relationship between *The Spiritual Exercises* and poetry.

material about *The Spiritual Exercises* in order to suggest how they have influenced his poetry.

Early on in my research I realised that answering the central question 'How might *The Spiritual Exercises of St Ignatius* influence the writing of poetry?' is not straightforward. Therefore I have devoted a large part of my preliminary chapter to examining the issues around this main question in some detail. I begin by exploring the nature of *The Spiritual Exercises,* referring to David Lonsdale's *Eyes to See, Ears to Hear: An Introduction to Ignatian Spirituality*, John W. O'Malley's *The First Jesuits* and Roland Barthes' *Sade, Fourier, Loyola.* A major difficulty lies in appreciating how the word 'influence' should be understood when it is applied to the relationship between *The Spiritual Exercises* and poetry. In the field of literary criticism there are many theories of influence, which seek to explore how one or more written texts shape and inspire another text.[9] However, despite being published in a book, *The Spiritual Exercises* is primarily a process of meditation. I contend that the whole process of meditation is a more significant influence on poetry than St Ignatius' book alone, although the possibility of textual influence of the book should not be excluded altogether.

I look at three studies that provide useful insights about how Ignatian meditation might influence poetry. These are Annemarie R. Paulin-Campbell's[10] research, Helen Ethimiadis-Keith and Graham Lindegger's small scale pilot study, 'The Subjective Experience of Using Ignatian Meditation by Male and Female South African University Students: An Exploratory Study' and T.M. Luhrmann and Rachel Morgain's paper 'Prayer as Inner Sense Cultivation: An Attentional Learning Theory of Spiritual Experience'. I also examine T.S. Eliot's theory of influence. Eliot was familiar with *The Spiritual Exercises.*[11] Drawing on these studies and Eliot's theory, I propose that *The Spiritual Exercises* may

[9] See *Influx: Essays on Literary Influence* ed. Ronald Primeau for a range of essays on this subject.
[10] Paulin-Campbell's work is recorded in her doctoral thesis, 'The Impact of the Imaginal and Dialogical (Relational) Processes in the Spiritual Exercises, on Image of Self and Image of God in Women Making the Nineteenth Annotation Retreat'.
[11] Eliot read and closely studied *The Spiritual Exercises* following his 1926 Clark Lectures on Metaphysical Poetry of the Seventeenth Century. See Ronald Schuchard *Eliot's Dark Angel: Intersections of Life and Art* for a full discussion of Eliot and *The Spiritual Exercises.*

influence poetry by shifting the poet's perspective, leading him or her to write poetry that is different in subject or tone from earlier work. The term 'tone' has a complex history within literary criticism, developing from the original linguistic meaning of the sound of the voice. The tone of a written text may refer to the mood or general atmosphere of the text or to the personal attitude of the author or speaker within the text. [12] I understand tone to refer to the attitude and engagement of the poet or speaker. Secondly, poems offer new and surprising views of biblical stories. Thirdly, it is possible that phrases, images and feelings from Ignatius' book, or wider Ignatian 'texts', could be incorporated in poetry. Lastly, The *Exercises* could be one tool among others that support a poet in the development of imagery through writing poems that spring from a heightened spiritual awareness. As I discuss these possibilities I provide illustrations from the work of two Jesuit poets, Robert Southwell and Gerard Manley Hopkins.

My preliminary chapter then explores two of the subsequent questions. I submit that Samuel Tongue's work on poetic retellings of biblical stories in *Between Biblical Criticism and Poetic Rewriting: Interpretive Struggles over Genesis 32:22-32* and '"What Is Language but a Sound we Christen?" Poetic Retellings as an Improper Surprise for Biblical Reception History', provides a useful framework for a discussion of the impact of *The Spiritual Exercises* on the retelling of biblical stories in poetry. Tongue coins the expression 'poetic paragesis' to describe the process of interpretation that takes place in the space between Bible story and poem. Both the poet and the reader are involved in this act of interpretation. I extend Tongue's theory by suggesting that meditation is a lens between the biblical text and the poem which brings particular aspects of a Bible story into sharper focus or highlights different ways of reading it. Passing though this Ignatian lens adds a further layer of interpretation.

While Tongue discusses the space between Bible and poem Antonio Spadaro is concerned with the space between poetry and prayer, Spadaro's concept of poetry at the threshold of prayer provides a fruitful way of looking at the fluid relationship between poetry and prayer. In 'Poetry at the Threshold of Prayer' Spadaro puts forward the idea that some poems stand at the threshold

[12] See David Marno's article 'Tone' in the Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics.

of prayer by naming God but not addressing him. Other poems address God and so have crossed the threshold to become prayer. I build on this idea to propose that a poet may have thoughts during the course of meditation and subsequently write a poem. Provided that the poem does not address God, it has crossed the threshold in the opposite direction, moving from prayer to poetry.

In chapter two I examine the influence of *The Spiritual Exercises* on the poetry of Denise Levertov. Three critics, Edward Zlotkowski in 'Presence and Transparency: A Reading of Levertov's Sands of the Well', Dorothy Nielsen in 'The Dark Wing of Mourning: Grief, Elegy and Time in the Poetry of Denise Levertov' and Paul A. Lacey in 'Denise Levertov: Testimonies of the Lived Life', highlight changes in tone and emphasis or technique between *Sands of the Well* and Levertov's earlier work. Zlotkowski notices that there are few poems of social critique in *Sands of the Well.* The poems in this collection are less Christocentric than Levertov's previous religious work. Zlotkowski also believes that in *Sands of the Well* Levertov was arriving at a new awareness of herself as a poet. Nielsen in 'The Dark Wing of Mourning: Grief Elegy and Time in the Poetry of Denise Levertov' writes about the theme of grief in Levertov's work. Nielsen identifies a change of tone in *Sands of the Well.* Grief is tamed so that it co-exists with celebration. Levertov views grief as an aspect of being and a daily companion. Lacey specifically mentions changes in Levertov's writing that he believes were due to the influence of *The Spiritual Exercises.* I extend Zlotkowski's and Nielsen's criticism by making use of archive material and my own close reading of Levertov's poetry to argue that the shifts they identify in Levertov's poems are influenced by her making of *The Spiritual Exercises.* In addition I propose that Levertov's poetry reflects her changing awareness of God as she made *The Exercises.* Although I agree with Lacey that Levertov used colloquy[13] in some poems written after she made *The Exercises*, I dispute his wider claim that Levertov employed systematic techniques that she had acquired during her meditation to enrich her poetry.

[13] A colloquy is a prayer in which a person talks to God in a conversational manner, as though to a friend.

Chapter three discusses the influence of *The Spiritual Exercises* on the poetry of Ted Hughes. Despite the fact that Hughes' enthusiasm for *The Spiritual Exercises* is attested in both published and unpublished sources there has been little critical discussion of the relationship between *The Spiritual Exercises* and Hughes' work. I refer to existing criticism: Susan Bassnett's *Ted Hughes;* Terry Gifford and Neil Roberts' *Ted Hughes: A Critical Study*; Susanna Lindström's *Nature, Environment and Poetry: Ecocriticism and the poetics of Seamus Heaney and Ted Hughes*; Joanny Moulin's 'Ted Hughes's Anti-Mythic Method'; Yvonne Reddick's *Ted Hughes Environmentalist and Ecopoet;* Keith Sagar's *The Art of Ted Hughes*; Leonard Scigaj's *The Poetry of Ted Hughes: Form and Imagination*; Ann Skea's *Ted Hughes: The Poetic Quest* and 'Ted Hughes' Vacanas: The Difficulties of a Bridegroom'; Carrie Smith's "*Poetry in the Making": Ted Hughes and the Art of Writing* and David Troupes's 'Hughes and Religion', *Ted Hughes and Christianity: Constant Revelation of the Sacrificed God,* and 'Knowing the Bible Right Down to the Bone: Ted Hughes and Christianity'.

I go beyond this criticism by arguing that Hughes' work from *Crow* onwards was influenced by his practise of Ignatian meditation. I link shifts in Hughes' work to his interest in *The Spiritual Exercises.* In particular I look at Hughes' reinterpretation of biblical material and the persistent use of Christian symbolism and images. I examine Hughes' portrayal of the Goddess, and his increasing concern with human damage to the environment coupled with the idea that the Goddess indwells creation.

I conclude that Ignatian meditation has a significant influence on poets. Engaging with *The Exercises* leads to shifts in a poet's work. Levertov's poetry echoed a withdrawal from political activism and she became more concerned with personal grief than with politics. Levertov was more accepting of the world as it is. Her post-Ignatian poems were less Christological than her earlier work and she developed a greater awareness of a personal God and developed her views of her vocation as a poet. In *Crow* Hughes has a deeper engagement with the Bible than in his previous collections. His later work reflects his growing concern for the environment stemming from his reading of Rachel Carson and Lynn White. Certain readings of Ignatius lead to a similar impetus towards

concern for the environment. In *River* the Goddess indwells nature, paralleling Ignatius' emphasis on the presence of God in creation. The text of *The Spiritual Exercises* plays a minor role in the work of Levertov and Hughes. Levertov incorporates phrases from her Ignatian Journal, rather than phrases from Ignatius' book, in her poems demonstrating the importance of Ignatian 'texts' identified by Barthes.

Hughes retells Bible stories in novel ways in *Crow.* His *Gaudete* epilogue poems and *River* include references to the Bible and Christian imagery and symbolism. His work enables paragesis which would be continued by the reader as new interpretations of the Bible are suggested. Levertov and Hughes each write poems which cross the threshold between poetry and prayer. Their poems become prayer when they address God or the Goddess. Some of Levertov's and Hughes' poetry, closely connected with meditation, crosses the threshold in the opposite direction moving from prayer to poetry. Poetic encounter with *The Spiritual Exercises* illustrates the fluidity of boundaries between poetry and prayer.

Appreciating the engagement of Levertov and Hughes with *The Spiritual Exercises* enables fresh readings of their work. It both extends and challenges existing criticism and explains aspects of their work that appears puzzling, for example the lack of imaginative retelling of Bible stories in *Sands of the Well* and the persistence of biblical references and Christian images and symbolism in the work of Hughes.

My thesis makes a further contribution to the study of the relationship between Ignatian spirituality and poetry. Although there has been a large body of literature that examines the influence of meditation on the work of Jesuit poets such as Southwell and Hopkins there has been little attention paid to more recent poets. My thesis addresses this gap by extending criticism of the work of Levertov and Hughes, two poets influenced by *The Spiritual Exercises of St Ignatius.* As the first researcher to be granted access to the entire Levertov Ignatian Journal I am able to suggest original interpretations of Levetov's work. My research contributes to the ongoing debate about the relationship between literature and theology. Carrying out my research convinces me that bringing

theological questions to bear on works of literature remains a valid exercise in a post-Christian culture. There is a continuing interest in spirituality,[14] including *The Spiritual Exercises.* Art Forms, among them poetry, which move beyond conceptual thinking, continue to explore areas that were once addressed by religion. Furthermore, as research by practice, my thesis contributes a collection of poetry *In the Steps of Saints* directly influenced by Ignatian meditation.

[14] See John Drane *The Mcdonaldization of the Church* and David Tacey *The Spirituality Revolution* who both document the increasing interest in spirituality in the West.

Chapter 1 The Spiritual Exercises of St Ignatius: A Preliminary Exploration

The Spiritual Exercises of St Ignatius were compiled by Ignatius of Loyola in the sixteenth century. O'Malley writes about the origins of *The Spiritual Exercises* in *The First Jesuits.* Ignatius was a soldier, and in 1521, when the French invaded Spain, he was badly wounded defending Pamplona (24). During his convalescence at Loyola Ignatius began to read *The Golden Legend* by Jacob da Voragine and Ludolph of Saxony's *Life of Jesus Christ.* As Ignatius read he began to think about his future, whether he should continue with his life as a soldier, or model his life on the examples of the saints and Jesus. According to O'Malley, Ignatius noticed that when he thought about the first option he felt agitated, but when he thought about the second choice he felt serene (24).

Once Ignatius was stronger he set off on a pilgrimage to Jerusalem, stopping off at Manresa. Although he had intended to stay there for a few days, Ignatius remained for almost a year. During his visit to Manresa Ignatius continued to meditate on the life of Christ and began to read *The Imitation of Christ.* As he did so Ignatius undertook a severe regime of prayer, fasting, and self-flagellation. Despite his devotions Ignatius felt an increasing sense of agitation and spiritual dryness. It was only when he began to attend to his inner inspiration that Ignatius noticed that he began to return to feelings of calm. While at Manresa Ignatius also received enlightenment through visions which he believed came from God (25).

O'Malley says that Ignatius began to look for ways to use his experiences to help others. He started to make notes which formed the basis of *The Spiritual Exercises* (25). The text of *The Spiritual Exercises* was largely written in 1522 but was revised over a period of twenty years, taking into account Ignatius' ongoing personal experience and his practise of giving *The Spiritual Exercises* to others. The book was finally printed, with papal approval, in 1548.

The Spiritual Exercises of St Ignatius begins with a series of twenty annotations giving guidance to spiritual directors about how people should be

supported through the retreat process. These annotations include the stipulation that the director must not attempt to influence the exercitant towards any course of action, but should remain ‘as a balance at equilibrium’ in order to allow ‘the Creator to deal directly with the creature, and the creature directly with his Creator’ (*§*15). The annotations also emphasise the flexibility with which the director should give *The Exercises*, recognising that although the main body of *The Spiritual Exercises* is divided into ‘Weeks’, not every Week will take seven days to complete. Some people will progress through the Weeks quicker than others (*§*4). Ignatius acknowledges that some people will not benefit from undertaking the whole of *The Spiritual Exercises*, but only a part. He highlights the First Week as being especially helpful for people in this situation (*§*18). Other people will have commitments which will make it impossible to undertake *The Exercises* in a period of seclusion. Instead they will need to make them, for a longer period, whilst ‘engaged in public affairs or necessary business’ (*§*19).

Following the annotations, Ignatius introduces the purpose of *The Spiritual Exercises*, which is to enable the individual to conquer self. This means that when decisions about vocation are made, they will be free from any ‘inordinate attachment’ (*§*21). Directors are then urged to believe that all statements made by exercitants are made in good faith, and to be kind in correcting any misunderstandings (*§*22). Ignatius outlines 'The First Principle and Foundation’ which states that humankind are created to ‘praise, reverence, and serve’ God in order to attain salvation (*§*23). The meditations and contemplations in the Weeks that follow are designed to achieve that end.

The purpose of the First Week is to focus the exercitant’s attention on the reality of sin through examination of conscience and a series of imaginative exercises. The exercises follow a structure which includes a preparatory prayer, two preludes and a series of points. Exercises always conclude with a colloquy and the Lord’s Prayer. In the First Exercise Ignatius writes about the subject of the preparatory prayer:

> In the preparatory prayer I will beg God our Lord for the grace that all my intentions, actions, and operations may be directed purely to the praise and service of His Divine Majesty (*§*46).

This prayer emphasises the exercitant's exploration of the calling to serve God which is central to *The Spiritual Exercises*. Ignatius says of the First Prelude, 'This is a mental representation of the place' (*§*47).[1] He explains that this involves seeing in the imagination the place where the subject of meditation is situated (*§*47). However, as the subject of this Exercise is sin which is not a subject located in a specific place, Ignatius offers a further clarification:

> The representation will be to see in imagination my soul as a prisoner in this corruptible body, and to consider my whole being as an exile here on earth, cast out to live among brute beasts (*§*47).

Ignatius states the nature of the Second Prelude, 'I will ask God our Lord for what I want and desire' (*§*48). Since the precise content of this petition will vary according to the Exercise Ignatius explains, 'Here it will be to ask for shame and confusion' (*§*48). Ignatius then sets out the three points of the First Exercise. The first point 'will consist in using the memory to recall the first sin which was that of the angels' (*§*50). The second point recalls 'the sin of Adam and Eve' (*§*51) and the third point the third sin, 'that of one who went to hell because of one mortal sin' (*§*52). The First Exercise then concludes with a colloquy and the Lord's Prayer. In the colloquy the exercitant is required to address Christ and ask how he, the creator, became a man and died for our sins (*§*53). Ignatius says that the colloquy should be made 'by speaking exactly as one friend speaks to another, or as a servant speaks to a master' (*§*54).

As Ignatius makes clear in his annotations, the spiritual director has considerable freedom in guiding the exercitant through *The Exercises.* When she gave me written instructions for the First Exercise, my director, Shirley Taylor, concentrated on the Second Prelude:

> I begin in allowing a simple sense of God's compassionate presence to permeate me. Resting in this presence, I take time to consider my own 'sin' story. I allow a sense of shame and confusion to permeate my recollections, so that through my senses I have a profound knowledge of what it is for me to be caught in un-freedom.[2]

[1] The mental representation of the place described by Ignatius is often referred to by the alternative term 'composition of place'.
[2] After each meeting my director emailed a sheet of written instructions for making *The Exercises* over the following fortnight.

After praying I was asked to read different Bible passages and to make notes about my feelings and responses in a journal. My experience of the First Exercise did not involve all of the stages proposed by Ignatius and included others that he does not mention.

As the First Week progresses Ignatius introduces another feature of his Exercises: repetitions. The Third Exercise repeats the first two exercises (*§*62) and the Fourth Exercise is a repetition of the third (*§*64). The Fifth Exercise, a Meditation on Hell, is the final one of the First Week. After the preparatory prayer and two preludes Ignatius gives instructions for the 'application of senses' where the exercitant is asked to use the five senses to make the imagined scene real. In the Meditation on Hell the five points utilise each of the five senses in turn. Here the exercitant is asked to see the fires, hear the wailing, smell the smoke, taste the bitterness of tears and feel the flames (*§*66-70). The Fifth Exercise then concludes with a colloquy and the Lord's Prayer (*§*71).

My director sent me the text of a Meditation on Hell and this was my first experience of applying my senses in prayer. Initially I found it hard to enter into the meditation as Ignatius' view of hell reflects those current in the sixteenth century. However, later on I discovered the power of the application of senses in making a scene real. As I repeated the Fifth Exercise I had a hallucination that I was falling into a pit filled with rotting bodies. This experience was distressing and challenging to process.

Between the First and Second Weeks there is the contemplation on The Kingdom of Christ (*§*91-97). The Second Week follows the life of Christ from the Nativity to Palm Sunday and begins with a contemplation on The Incarnation (*§*102-109). The first point of the Second Contemplation, on The Nativity, requires the exercitant to become part of the nativity scene:

> This will consist in seeing the persons, namely, our Lady, St. Joseph, the maid and the Child Jesus after His birth. I will make myself a poor little unworthy slave, and as though present, look upon them, contemplate them, and serve them in their needs with all possible homage and reverence (*§*114).

Having to become part of the scene imagined is a further method that Ignatius uses to make the Bible come alive for exercitants and to encourage them to make decisions about their vocation. The Second Week includes meditations on The Two Standards (*§*136-148), Three Classes of Men (*§*149-155) and Three Kinds of Humility (*§*165-167). The Second Week is the longest section of *The Spiritual Exercises* and concludes with guidelines for making a choice of a way of life. The exercitant is expected to use these guidelines to make a decision about his or her vocation (*§*178-188).

Although I was familiar with the idea of visualisation through attending Ignatian Quiet Days, I discovered that entering into scenes from the gospels as I meditated on them gave me a new perspective on familiar stories. My director explained:

> In prayer bring imagination to bear and place yourself fully into the Gospel, you may be an onlooker, you may become a participant, you may act and speak as one of those present. Include each of the following aspects: Setting, persons, speech, silence, encounter, gesture, smells, feel, facial expression, response etc. Above all focus on Jesus, watch him, study his walk, the look in his eyes, the words recorded in the Gospel, other words that you imagine him to use.

After meditating I felt that I had been present with Jesus during his ministry and speaking directly to him, as Ignatius suggests in his description of the colloquy, became a natural part of prayer.

The Third Week concerns the Passion, beginning with The Last Supper and ending with the burial of Christ (*§*191-208). The First Contemplation, on the journey from Bethany to Jerusalem and the Last Supper, has six points. The second and third points illustrate another meditational feature: paying close attention to what people in an imagined scene say and do:

> Second Point: This is to listen to their conversation, and likewise seek to draw fruit from it.
>
> Third Point: This is to see what they are doing, and to seek to draw some fruit from it (*§*194).

From the Second Day onwards Ignatius does not give detailed instructions for the individual contemplations. He merely states the scenes from the Passion that each one should cover (*§*208).

My director followed Ignatius in not giving detailed instructions for each of the contemplations. She proposed gospel passages as a focus for different meditations. Additionally she suggested that I could find that looking at images or listening to music while I meditated helped to create an appropriate mood. I followed her suggestion by listening to Taizé chants.

The Fourth Week consists of contemplation of the resurrection appearances and the Ascension (*§*219-226). Among the resurrection appearances the exercitant is invited to meditate on the non-biblical appearance of Christ to his mother. Again, apart from a brief outline of the First Contemplation, which is the appearance to Mary, Ignatius only lists the subject of each of the contemplations. The Fourth Week concludes with the Contemplation to Attain Love of God (*§*230-237).

When I began the Fourth Week I was sent personalised instructions by my director. During my time making the *Exercises* I had become increasingly uncertain about the direction of my future career. My director, in the spirit of Ignatius, asked me to imagine a scene that is not described in the gospels, where the women are waiting to visit the tomb of Jesus on the morning of the resurrection:

> Stay with the women in the house where Thaddeus is. Take time to be with them in this place, remain among them, hear them speak, aware of their loss and their devotion to Jesus. Bring to prayer your sense of loss, your sense of desolation and the longing for clarity on the way forward in your own journey. Allow your prayer to be less busy, more a waiting on the prompting of the women in their devotion.

I subsequently followed some of the contemplations listed by Ignatius, but this first contemplation, devised by my director, proved to be most significant for me as it changed the direction of my working life. The experience of being with the women as one of them, yet then being left behind when they went to visit the tomb revealed to me the sense of loss that I was feeling not being involved in Christian ministry. In my meditation I ran out of the house to

catch up with the women. Subsequently I took the decision to return to ministry. This example highlights the importance of the flexibility that Ignatius allows for when he wrote his book. *The Spiritual Exercises* is intended to be a guide to spiritual directors who are accompanying people on a journey of vocational discovery rather than a programme to be followed rigorously.

Lonsdale in *Eyes to See, Ears to Hear: An Introduction to Ignatian Spirituality,* notes that although Ignatius intended that *The Spiritual Exercises* should be given on an individual basis, this practice eventually lapsed. For a long time *The Exercises* were given to groups in the form of preached retreats (17-18). However, Hans-Peter Kolvenbach writing in 'The Ministry of Spiritual Exercises in Europe Today', credits the work of Father Pedro Arrupe from 1965 onwards with the revival of the individually guided retreat (19). From the latter part of the twentieth century interest in Ignatian spirituality and *The Spiritual Exercises* grew so much that by the time Sven Fredrik Heiding wrote his thesis, 'Giving Ignatian Exercises at Ecclesial Frontiers', Ignatian spirituality had become very popular. He reports that a wide range of people, Catholics and non-Catholics, were both making *The Spiritual Exercises* and acting as spiritual directors for others (14).

So far I have considered *The Spiritual Exercises* as though it were simply a single written text. Barthes argues in *Sade, Fourier, Loyola* that *The Spiritual Exercises* is not one, but four 'texts' (41). The first text is the handbook written by Ignatius and addressed to the retreat director (41). The second, 'semantic text', is given by the director to the exercitant (41-42). In giving this text the director may adapt *The Spiritual Exercises* by lengthening, shortening, softening or hardening the original. The material of the original can also be given in a different order. I have given a flavour of one 'semantic text' in my summary of *The Spiritual Exercises.* Thirdly, there is the unwritten text that the exercitant gives to God. This is the 'allegorical text', consisting of prayers, colloquia and meditations (42). Finally, in the fourth, 'anagoric text', God responds to the exercitant (42). Although Barthes does not say so explicitly, much of the second, third and fourth texts are unwritten. The director may provide written instructions, Bible passages and extracts from *The Spiritual Exercises,* but much of the exchange between director and exercitant is oral and

not recorded in writing. Similarly, although the exercitant may keep a written journal, much of the third and fourth texts exist only in the mind of the exercitant. Spadaro[3] says that *The Spiritual Exercises* have more elements than Barthes suggests. Nonetheless, Barthes' analysis does underline the importance of realising that *The Spiritual Exercises* refers to more than Ignatius' book.

Barthes' approach to *The Spritual Exercises* highlights the fact that a complex process of meditation springs from Ignatius' book. Encompassed within the total experience of *The Exercises* is a web of relationships including, but not limited to, relationships between: the Bible and Ignatius' book; Ignatius' book and the retreat director; the retreat director and the exercitant; the exercitant, Ignatius' book and the Bible; and the exercitant and God. It was Ignatius' intention when he wrote his book that the exercises and contemplations within it should enable each exercitant to make a vocational choice. This choice would be transformative for the people concerned. Therefore, when asking how *The Spiritual Exercises* might influence poetry, it is vital to think about how all of these 'texts', written or unwritten, interact with each other and what may happen in the experience of a poet who employs *The Spiritual Exercises* as a method of meditation.

Consequently I consider two studies that explore the effects of *The Spiritual Exercises* upon exercitants and a third study that investigates the effects of kataphatic prayer which employs the imagination to represent God or scenes from the Bible. Coincidentally both of the studies featuring *The Spiritual Exercises* were carried out in South Africa.

In the first study Paulin-Campbell[4] considered the effects of making *The Spiritual Exercises* on the images of God and self of nineteen South African women. Her research shows that through undertaking *The Spiritual Exercises* women frequently adopted new images of God and self (103,108). Paulin-Cambell believes that these changes are brought about primarily through

[3] See Antonio Spardaro 'Non tantum lecturi sed facturi: Reading Poetry as Spiritual Transformation' (178)

[4] Paulin-Campbell's work is recorded in her doctoral thesis, 'The Impact of the Imaginal and Dialogical (Relational) Processes in the Spiritual Exercises, on Image of Self and Image of God in Women Making the Nineteenth Annotation Retreat'.

imaginative prayer and secondly through the relationship with the spiritual director (103, 129, 141). She also says that the changes are sustained, leading to healing or deepening intimacy with God (109), and continue after *The Spiritual Exercises* have been completed (112). In a later chapter Paulin-Cambell describes the changes in more detail. For a number of women God changed from being a remote, punitive figure to a God who loves unconditionally and desires their good (121-122). For a few women the image of God shifted from masculine to feminine (124). Alongside changes in the image of God the women viewed themselves differently. The women described having greater self-acceptance and self-confidence (125) and becoming more autonomous and empowered (127).

In a second, small scale pilot study, Efthimiadis-Keith and Lindegger investigated the effects of Ignatian meditation on three men and four women who were theological students. Writing in 'The Subjective Experience of Using Ignatian Meditation by Male and Female South African University Students: An Exploratory Study', Efthimiadis-Keith and Lindegger say that their aims were to find out whether Ignatian meditation would facilitate personal and social transformation, and if so, which aspects of the meditation process were responsible for the changes. They were also interested in discovering whether the experiences of women and men differed (1457). Their research shows that participants' experience of the biblical text, using Ignatian meditation, was very different from their common experience of reading the Bible with the help of commentaries. Ignatian meditation enabled them to see other, often surprising, aspects of the text, and helped them to put themselves in other people's shoes (1465). In contrast to the experience of women, men could find this imaginative approach to the Bible 'quite threatening and scary because you do not know where it will take you.' (1466)

As Efthimiadis-Keith and Lindegger predicted, Ignatian meditation changed the personal perspectives of the participants. Women reported that they were challenged to think of themselves, as women, in new ways. This altered view of themselves opened up the possibility of acting differently (1466). Men realised that they brought gender stereotypes to their Bible reading. These were challenged as they meditated, giving them greater insight into the reality of

women's lives (1466). These insights made men feel embarrassed about the way men can treat women and began to change the ways in which they related to women (1468). The women's insights led them to desire to change, not only themselves, but also the society in which they lived (1468).

Efthimiadis-Keith and Lindegger report that the participants believed that imaginative contemplation, where they entered deeply into the experience of biblical characters, rather than merely reading the biblical text, was responsible for their changed attitudes (1467). The researchers envisage that a longer period of meditation would lead to greater and deeper personal transformation. This transformation could then have the potential to transform a patriarchal church and society as a whole (1468-1469).

As I have previously noted Paulin-Cambell and Efthimiadis-Keith and Lindegger carried out their work in South Africa. There is, therefore, the possibility that their results are specific to their cultural context. Efthimiadis-Keith and Lindegger, in particular, write of the potential of *The Spiritual Exercises* to transform not just individuals but a patriarchal church and society. This comment refers to the situation that the researchers and participants experienced in South Africa. However, Americans Katherine Dyckman, Mary Garvin and Elizabeth Liebert also speak about the liberating possibilities of the *Spiritual Exercises* for women struggling against oppressive church structures in *The Spiritual Exercises Reclaimed: Uncovering Liberating Possibilities for Women* (4). I therefore judge that the findings of the two South African studies are applicable beyond their immediate cultural setting.

As well as considering these studies, which focus explicitly on the effect of *The Spiritual Exercises*, I am also taking into account work done by Luhrmann and Morgain into the effects of imaginative prayer more generally. Luhrmann and Morgain report their findings in 'Prayer as Inner Sense Cultivation: An Attentional Learning Theory of Spiritual Experience'. Luhrmann and Morgain explain that their interest in the effects of prayer began with reading an article by Richard Noll. Noll contended that mental imagery cultivation is central to shamanism and many religious cultures. Noll believed that mental imagery induction, that is the ability to form pictures in the mind,

was a skill that was deliberately taught in shamanism and other religious traditions (359). Luhrmann and Morgain set out to investigate this learning process further and claim that one of most significant ways in which this happens is through mental imagery cultivation in prayer (360). This means that a person creates images in the mind as an element of prayer. According to Luhrmann and Morgain, there are two forms of Christian spiritual discipline. The first, the apophatic tradition, asks Christians to get rid of thought and mental imagery when they are praying. This is the opposite of the second form, kataphatic prayer, where Christians deliberately form mental images during prayer. Luhrmann and Morgain cite *The Spiritual Exercises of St Ignatius* as a prominent example of kataphatic prayer (362). Luhrmann and Morgain say kataphatic prayer is essentially mental imagery practice (362). Therefore if a person undertakes kataphatic prayer they are improving their ability to create mental images:

> This in effect is mental imagery practice—or, more precisely, it is inner sense practice. The person praying is seeing in the mind's eye, hearing with the mind's ear, smelling with the mind's nose—imagining an interaction with the mind's inner senses (362).

Luhrmann and Morgain's Spiritual Disciplines Project set out to test the hypotheses that kataphatic prayer makes mental imagery more vivid; that it leads to unusual sensory experiences; and that it makes what people imagine more real to them (363). Their research involved 104 people drawn from American evangelical charismatic churches who were randomly assigned to spend a month carrying out Bible study based on recorded lectures or a month carrying out kataphatic prayer based on recorded instructions that encouraged them to enter into Bible passages imaginatively using all their senses. In order to find out how the experience of Bible study or kataphatic prayer had changed people's experience and perception the participants completed questionnaires and interviews about their religious experience before and after taking part in the Bible study or prayer (363-365).

The Spiritual Disciplines Project showed that people who had experienced kataphatic prayer reported receiving more frequent guidance from God through intense feelings and vivid physical sensations. These people were

more likely to state that God guided them through clear and meaningful images. Kataphatic prayer increased the rate of unusual sensory experience and was associated with more frequent claims of intense spiritual experiences (371, 373, 379):

> Prayer changes the mind. These results suggest that attention to what the mind imagines during prayer makes the world of the mind more vivid. People experience mental images as sharper. They have clear, meaningful images and thoughts that stand out and grab them. They report significant unusual sensory experiences. They say that they have more intense emotions that they associate with God, the object of their prayer. Their very awareness feels different. And they say that God becomes more real to them, even when they believe in him already (380-381).

Drawing on the work of Paulin-Cambell, Efthimiadis-Keith and Lindegger and Luhrmann and Morgain I make some suggestions about the ways in which *The Spiritual Exercises* influence the writing of poetry. These suggestions are illustrated in this chapter with reference to the work of two Jesuit poets, Robert Southwell and Gerard Manley Hopkins.

A common thread in the two South African studies was that the participants experienced shifts in perspective. This might be reflected in poetry by changes of perspective, tone or subject matter. Although Hopkins claimed to have destroyed his early poems, W.H. Gardner writing in the introduction of *Poems of Gerard Manley Hopkins* says that a number survived as drafts in Hopkins' diaries (xv). A comparison of these early poems with those Hopkins wrote after he became a Jesuit reveals a change of tone between the early poems and those written as a Jesuit. One example of an early nature poem is 'Winter with the Gulf Stream'[5] :

> The boughs, the boughs are bare enough
> But earth has never felt the snow.
> Frost-furred our ivies are and rough
>
> With bills of rime the brambles shew.
> The hoarse leaves crawl on hissing ground
> Because the sighing wind is low. (23)

[5] Quotations from Hopkins' poems are taken from W.H. Gardner *Poems of Gerard Manley Hopkins*

Although the rhythm of the first line prefigures the poetry of the more mature Hopkins and ‘Frost-furred’ captures something of his later use of alliteration, the lines as a whole lack energy and fail to draw the reader fully into the scene . This is in contrast to later work which shows energy and employs imagery and alliteration which immediately engages the reader’s attention. In ‘Inversnaid’ Hopkins begins:

> This darksome burn, horseback brown,
> His rollock highroad roaring down,
> In coop and in comb the fleece of his foam
> Flutes and low to the lake falls home. (94)

Here Hopkins’ language and rhythm gives a vivid visual impression of the appearance of the burn and conveys the speed of the movement of the water. The speaker’s description is lively and the reader can place him or herself alongside Hopkins’ burn.

Hopkins’ early poems include some that have a religious theme. ‘Heaven-Haven’ is written in the voice of a nun at the time she takes up the religious life:

> And I have asked to be
> Where no storms come,
> Where the green swell is in the havens dumb,
> And out of the swing of the sea. (40)

Here the nun expresses the hope that her new life will be peaceful and untroubled. This expectation can be contrasted with ‘The Wreck of the Deutschland’ where Hopkins wrestles with the reality of vocation as the drowning nuns experienced it:

> Loathed for a love men knew in them,
> Banned by the land of their birth,
> Rhine refused them, Thames would ruin them;
> Surf, snow, river and earth
> Gnashed: but thou art above, thou Orion of light;
> Thy unchancelling poising palms were weighing the worth,
> Thou martyr-master: in thy sight
> Storm flakes were scroll-leaved flowers, lily showers—sweet heaven was astrew in them.
>
> Five! the finding and sake
> And cipher of suffering Christ. (62)

The cumulative effect of the past participles ‘Loathed’, ‘Banned’, ‘refused’ and ‘Gnashed’ is to convey the harshness of the nuns’ experience and the intensity of their suffering. Hopkins, who has discerned his own vocation through making *The Spiritual Exercises* and becoming a Jesuit, now knows from a more mature perspective that calling can involve rejection and martyrdom as the Christian follows the example of Christ’s suffering.

Efthimiadis-Keith and Lindegger discovered that the theological students viewed the Bible differently, sometimes seeing surprising aspects of the text. As a result of meditation poets write poems that retell biblical stories in novel and unexpected ways. One example of the retelling of biblical stories is Southwell’s ‘The virgin Mary to Christ on the Crosse’.[6] Here Southwell writes about the crucifixion from the viewpoint of Mary. This leads to a different perspective on the crucifixion as Mary calls upon the angels who sang at Christ’s birth, asking them why they are not singing songs of public mourning at his death:

> You Angels all that present were,
> To shew his birth with harmony,
> Why are you not now ready here,
> To make a mourning symphony?
>
> The cause, I know, you waile alone,
> And shed your teares in secresie,
> Least I should moved be to mone
> By force of heavy company. (71)

Although a poem detailing Mary’s grief is predictable, the element of calling upon the angels, and Mary’s subsequent explanation for their absence, is unexpected and surprising.

Luhrmann and Morgain emphasise the way that kataphatic prayer trains the imagination leading to vivid imagery and intense sensory and spiritual experiences. Although poets routinely include imagery and sensory details in their poetry, Luhrmann and Morgain hint that the images evoked by kataphatic prayer are more deeply personal than those arrived at through other forms of

[6] Quotations from Southwell’s poems are taken from James H. McDonald and Nancy Pollard Brown *The Poems of Robert Southwell S.J.*

prayer. It is possible that the application of techniques drawn from Ignatian meditation could support poets in forming images. Although I will discuss this suggestion later in relation to my own work, .some scholars have suggested that Ignatian meditation played a part in forming images in Southwell's poetry. Writing about composition of place in Southwell's poetry in *The Poetry of Meditation,* Louis L. Martz refers to it as 'the image-forming faculty' (28). This is reminiscent of the language used by Luhrmann and Morgain when they talk about 'mental imagery cultivation' in relation to kataphatic prayer. Martz discusses 'New Prince, new pompe', and says that the first eight lines are composition of place (40). Undoubtedly Southwell describes the manger scene vividly in these lines:

> Behold a silly tender Babe,
> In freesing Winter night,
> In homely manger trembling lies,
> Alas! A pitteous sight.
>
> The Innes are full; no man will yeeld
> This little Pilgrime bed;
> But forc'd He is with silly beasts
> In Crib to shrowd his head. (16)

Here Southwell contrasts the cold of 'freesing Winter' and 'trembling' with the comfort conveyed by the 'homely manger' which gives the impression that the speaker is viewing the scene.

In 'The Influence of the "Spiritual Exercises of St Ignatius" on the Nativity Poems of Robert Southwell' John Roberts sees evidence of Southwell explicitly employing the imaginative techniques recommended by Ignatius in these lines, especially with reference to the composition of place whereby the exercitant visualises the scene where a gospel story takes place (454). In his discussion of 'New heaven, new warre' Roberts refers to the lines 'This little Arke no cover hath' and 'And Angels sing his lullabie' as examples of composition of place. Roberts then says that the speaker places himself in the scene, evidenced by the instructions to angels to provide for the Christ child, 'Come Raphaell, this Babe must eate / Provide our little Tobie meate.' (454). Entering into gospel stories is part of the methodology of meditation in *The Spiritual Exercises* (453). Although Roberts does not mention it as an example,

Southwell's poem 'The Visitation' opens with an imaginative description of Mary's journey to see Elizabeth:

> With Pilgrim foote, up tyring hils she trod,
> And heavenly stile with handmaids toile acquaints,
> Her youth to age, her health to sicke she lends,
> Her heart to God, to neighbour hand she bends. (5)

Here the reader can imagine the countryside through which Mary travelled and then possibly accompany Mary on the journey. The choice of words, 'tyring'; 'trod'; 'toile' gives an impression of the steepness of the hills and the effort that the journey took. This effect is amplified by the hard 't' sound in 'stile' and 'toile' which conveys a sense of trudging and the repetition of 'ends' in the rhyming couplet.

More recently, Gary Kuchar in *The Poetry of Religious Sorrow in Early Modern England,* sees 'A vale of tears' as a creative response to the instructions for the composition of place of The First Exercise (38). Certainly lines 37-40 clearly describe the valley:

> The strugling floud betweene the marble grones,
> Then roring beates upon the craggie sides,
> A little off amidst the pibble stones,
> With bubbling streames and purling noise it glides. (42)

Southwell draws a striking contrast between the 'roring beates' of the flood, the rocky crags and the smallness of the 'pibble stones'. The poet also appeals to the sense of hearing with the onomatopoeia of 'bubbling' and the rich sound of 'purling'. Kuchar's suggestion that this poem is Southwell's response to Ignatius' instructions to imagine 'my whole composite self as if exiled in this valley among brute beasts,' is feasible.

There may also be an example of heightened sensual and spiritual awareness in Southwell's 'The burning Babe':

> As I in hoarie Winters night
> Stoode shivering in the snow
> Surpris'd I was with sodaine heate
> Which made my hart to glow;
>
> And lifting up a fearefull eye,

To view what fire was neare,
A pretty Babe all burning bright
Did in the ayre appeare; (15)

There is a contrast between the cold described in the first two lines with the words ‘hoarie’, ‘Winters’, ‘shivering’, ‘snow’ and the heat expressed by ‘glow’, ‘fire’, ‘burning bright’. The sibilance of ‘Stoode shivering’, ‘snow’, ‘Surpris’d’ and ‘sodaine’ create the effect of someone shaking with cold.

While it is essential to focus primarily on how the effects of meditation influence a poet’s work, it is also important not to lose sight of the reality that *The Spiritual Exercises* is a text. Indeed, as Barthes has argued, *The Spiritual Exercises* is comprised of a number of ‘texts’. Even though exercitants who make *The Exercises* under the guidance of a spiritual director are unlikely to read the whole of Ignatius’ text, they are sometimes given passages from the book by the director. Exercitants who make *The Exercises* individually without input from a director will rely on Ignatius’ book as a guide through the process. There can be other written texts that are produced as part of making *The Exercises,* for example exercitants’ journals.

Turning to a consideration of possible textual influence, Cheney, in ‘Influence’, states that three critics, T.S. Eliot, Walter Jackson Bate and Harold Bloom were seminal in developing theories of literary influence in the twentieth century (703). Each of these critics addressed the issue of originality. Bate in ‘The Second Temple’ asks ‘What is there left to do?’ (100). The title of Bloom’s book *The Anxiety of Influence: A Theory of Poetry* encapsulates the problem of a writer acknowledging dependence on a predecessor. However Eliot, in ‘Tradition and the Individual Talent’, takes a positive view of literary influence. Eliot proposes that poets write from within a tradition and that the influence of other poets is an essential element of poetic maturity and originality (16).

Eliot’s theory appears to offer the most promising framework within which to discuss the possible literary influence of *The Spiritual Exercises* on poetry. Eliot explains how he believes influence works by means of the analogy of a chemical reaction: ‘The poet’s mind is in fact a receptacle for seizing and storing up numberless feelings, phrases, images, which remain there until all the

particles which can unite to form a new compound are present together' (19). Eliot believes that the poet is a medium 'in which impressions and experiences combine in peculiar and unexpected ways' (20).

I find T.S. Eliot's theory interesting for two reasons. Firstly, as a poet, Eliot's theory relates particularly to the writing of poetry. Secondly Eliot's theory is especially useful as it demonstrates how experience of *The Spiritual Exercises* as a process of meditation springing from St Ignatius' book and the actual text from the book could influence the writing of poetry. Eliot mentions feelings, images, impressions and experiences which could refer equally to the practice of meditation and the reading of a text. The word 'phrases' is more specific to the reading of a text and could indicate that poets could remember and utilise phrases from Ignatius' book or their own journals in their work.

Following Eliot it is possible that feelings, phrases, images, impressions or experiences drawn from making *The Spiritual Exercises* would influence the writing of poetry. Phrases from Ignatius' book are not found in the poetry of either Southwell or Hopkins. However, taking 'text' in its broadest sense, as suggested by Barthes, examples can be drawn from Hopkins. Hopkins kept journals and also made notes for a commentary on *The Spiritual Exercises* that he intended to write. There are some indications that the language of Hopkins' poems was influenced by his thoughts about *The Spiritual Exercises.* Joseph Pizza in 'Hopkins' Counter Stress' sees a similarity in language between Hopkins' notes on Principle and Foundation, from *The Exercises,* and 'The Wreck of the Deutschland' as both speak of 'the finger of God' (57). In his notes[7] on Ignatius' The Contemplation for Obtaining Love, Hopkins writes, 'All things therefore are charged with love, are charged with God and if we know how to touch them give off sparks and take fire, yield drops and flow, ring and tell of him.' (195). The language here is very similar to that in 'God's Grandeur' which begins:

> The world is charged with the grandeur of God.
> It will flame out, like shining from shook foil; (70)

[7] These can be found in *The Sermons and Devotional Writings of Gerard Manley Hopkins,* edited by Christopher Devlin.

Similarly, stones ‘ring’ in ‘As kingfishers catch fire, dragonflies draw flame’:

> Stones ring; like each tucked string tells, each hung bell’s
> Bow swung finds tongue to fling out broad its name; (95)

Furthermore, Paul Mariani in *Gerard Manley Hopkins: A Life* refers to a phrase from Hopkins’ journal for 17 September 1868, the second day of his first retreat, which speaks of ‘Chestnuts as bright as coals’. This imagery occurs in ‘Pied Beauty’ as ‘firecoal chestnuts’ (74). Images and phrases, written while Hopkins was thinking about *The Spiritual Exercises,* later found their way into his poems.

Eliot suggests that poets store up impressions and experiences that later influence their work. John Pick in *Gerard Manley Hopkins: Priest and Poet,* in his discussion of ‘The Wreck of the Deutschland’, the first poem that Hopkins wrote after becoming a Jesuit, suggests that he is guided by the structure of *The Spiritual Exercises*. The subject of ‘The Wreck of the Deutschland’ is the death by drowning of five Franciscan nuns. Some stanzas are written in the first person, while others narrate the story of the shipwreck and drowning of the nuns. Pick suggests that the ‘I’ who speaks is Hopkins, and that he retells his first experience of undertaking *The Spiritual Exercises* (40). Hopkins appears to allude to *The Spiritual Exercises* in several stanzas. In the first stanza he writes, ‘God! giver of breath and bread;’ (55) which could be a reference to the Principle and Foundation where God creates humankind and provides for them. Later Hopkins mentions ‘the hurtle of hell’ (56) which reflects the meditation on hell. There is a clear reference to the nativity; ‘Manger, maiden’s knee’ (57). It appears that Hopkins is using his experience of the First Week, plus the beginning of the Second Week, in order to set the scene for his account of the drowning of the nuns.

The experience of Ignatian meditation may also influence the themes of a poet’s work. The predominant theme of *The Spiritual Exercises* is the importance of making a choice to serve God. In ‘The Wreck of the Deutschland’ Hopkins writes about the call to serve God:

> Thou mastering me
> God! giver of breath and bread;
> World’s strand, sway of the sea;

Lord of living and dead;
Thou hast bound bones and veins in me, fastened me flesh,
And after it almost unmade, what with dread,
Thy doing: and dost thou touch me afresh?
Over again I feel thy finger and find thee. (55)

This call is followed by the decision to serve 'I did say yes' (56). Later on Hopkins acknowledges the similarity between his decision and those of the drowning nuns 'Sister, a sister calling / A master, her master and mine! – ' (61). Then Hopkins contrasts the consequences of the nuns' decision to serve God with the different outcome of his own choice:

Away in the loveable west,
On a pastoral forehead of Wales,
I was under a roof here, I was at rest,
And they the prey of the gales; (63)

A second theme that runs through *The Spiritual Exercises* is the relationship between God and creation. In 'First Principle and Foundation' Ignatius says that humankind were created to reverence and serve God. This should lead to indifference to all created things (*§*23). The idea of indifference to created things has led some people to believe that Ignatius feels that creation is unimportant but Ignatius continues to say that people should not seek one material state in life above another. Therefore, rather than thinking that Ignatius was unconcerned about creation, it is better to interpret his words as meaning that people should not become attached to material things or place anything above the obligation to serve God. Later on in the 'Contemplation to Attain Love of God' Ignatius says that God dwells in creation which suggests that creation had a significant place in his thought (*§*235).

A number of Hopkins' poems focus on the natural world, including 'The Sea and the Skylark', 'The Windhover:', 'Pied Beauty', 'Hurrahing in Harvest' and 'As kingfishers catch fire, dragonflies draw flame.' Hopkins praises God for creation 'Glory be to God for dappled things –' but goes beyond simply seeing God as creator. Like Ignatius, Hopkins expresses the idea that God indwells creation. 'God's Grandeur' begins 'The world is charged with the grandeur of God' (70). In 'Hurrahing in Harvest' Hopkins sees Christ indwelling creation 'I walk, I lift up, I lift up heart, eyes, / Down all that glory in the heavens to glean

our Saviour' (74) Philip Ballinger in *The Poem as Sacrament* discusses Hopkins' Christocentric view of creation. Ballinger forms the opinion that Hopkins' theology was indebted to Duns Scotus but nonetheless was guided by *The Spiritual Exercises* (72).

The Spiritual Exercises centre around meditation on the Bible, Consequently, my second question asks 'How does Ignatian meditation impact on the retelling of biblical stories in poetry?' Jasper in 'The Study of Literature as Theology' says that perspectives of feminism and other cultures have produced rereadings of biblical texts and a revision of the literary canon (27). Here Jasper touches on a very interesting field of enquiry. Although he says that further discussion of biblical interpretation is beyond the scope of his article Jasper indicates that biblical interpretation is influenced by the perspective of the interpreter and that there is no such thing as an authoritative view of the Bible. Instead it is legitimate to interpret the Bible from a variety of different perspectives.

Tongue also disputes the idea of an authoritative view of the Bible in his investigation of the issues surrounding biblical interpretation in relation to poetic retellings of biblical stories. In *Between Biblical Criticism and Poetic Rewriting: Interpretive Struggles over Genesis 32:22-32* he outlines the tension between philosophy, biblical criticism and poetry. Tongue says that philosophy and biblical criticism have denigrated poets as being 'unconcerned with truth' (122). By contrast biblical criticism has been perceived as showing 'how things really were and are.' (123). The assumption behind this approach is that meaning is to be found within the biblical text and the interpreter's task is to draw out this meaning, in other words to carry out exegesis. Tongue's own thesis is that poetic retellings of biblical stories are 'poetic paragesis'. Here meaning is to be found not within texts, as in exegesis, but in the spaces in between the text and the reader. Poetry discovers and reinvents meaning in the encounter between the writer and the Bible (135). Tongue says:

> Such a poem then offers itself as a paragetical text, a text that may be read alongside, within and outwith the biblical, crossing the boundaries between biblical content, critical exegesis and imaginative reception. The

> poem adds more text, foregrounding and dispelling the myth of a final interpretation (135).

Tongue's theory implies that poets reinterpret the biblical text and then give it new meaning through the language that they use. Readers will in their turn interpret the poem. The reader's interpretation of the poem then reflects a fresh understanding onto the biblical text, adding to and interacting with the different ways it has been interpreted in the past. Thus poetic retellings of biblical texts do more than just retell a story in a different form. Through the process of poetic paragesis the biblical text continues to be dynamic and its interpretation is always 'shifting, equivocal, noisy' (160).

In '"What Is Language but a Sound we Christen?" Poetic Retellings as an Improper Surprise for Biblical Reception History' Tongue questions further the nature of poetic retellings of biblical stories. Tongue judges that poetic retellings contribute to the making and remaking of the idea of the biblical and refuse secondary status. Rather, the way that poets interact with biblical texts highlights the fact that historical-critical exegesis is also supplemental writing (261). One example Tongue discusses to illustrate his ideas is Kei Miller's poem 'Psalm 151'. This poem is particularly relevant to my research because Miller recounts how a biblical text can be reinterpreted when it is received through the lens of preaching. Tongue quotes from Miller's poem:

> Never you rebel against Jehovah –
> remember his stoutness
> and his plentyland(iness)
> and his odd love for vengeance.
> Remember Lucifer. Remember
> the scriptures are true:
> if you draw knife onto God,
> Then He will draw knife onto you. (265)

Tongue explains that this poem had its origins in the mishearing of the Authorised Version of James 4.8 'Draw nigh to God, and he will draw nigh to you', which was quoted in a sermon (265). Miller's young cousin went to church and after the sermon concluded that 'God was … the biggest badman about' (265). She had heard the preacher's quotation in the context of her experience of the reporting of violent crime in Jamaica (265). This mishearing of the Bible

leads to a radically different picture of God from the one in the original Bible verse.

Tongue's work draws attention to the complex nature of biblical interpretation. Poetic retellings of biblical material inhabit the space between the Bible, the poem and the reader bringing a possible multiplicity of new meanings to the texts recounted. In his discussion of Miller's work, Tongue touches on the process of hearing a biblical text through preaching and then writing a poem. This adds a further level to the interpretation of the Bible as the biblical text, the preacher, the hearer, the poet and the reader of the poem are all interacting. Personally, I will not read James 4.8 in the future without 'hearing' Miller's poem. This leads me to ask what happens when a biblical text is 'heard' through the medium of Ignatian meditation. In the background of this 'hearing' is the experience that Ignatius brought to his reading of the gospels. The second possible layer is the work of a spiritual director who selects Ignatian and biblical material for meditation and possibly through conversation with the exercitant adds particular nuances to the biblical text. Then the exercitant meditates and maybe has a strong visual impression of a gospel scene or actually becomes a participant in a gospel story. At some stage the exercitant writes a poem which is eventually read by a further person who interprets both the poem and the gospel passage underlying it. At all these levels there are likely to be a variety of interpretations of the Bible which lead to new and surprising perceptions of gospel stories.

Alongside their focus on the Bible, *The Spiritual Exercises* are a form of kataphatic prayer. My third research question asks 'How does the influence of Ignatian meditation on poetry contribute towards understanding the relationship between poetry and prayer?' Prayer is difficult to define. Interestingly in *The New SCM Dictionary of Christian Spirituality* Elizabeth A Dreyer begins her article on prayer with the sentence 'Poetic expression most aptly captures the mystery of prayer' (504). Dreyer continues by saying that prayer is a response to God's gestures toward humanity (504). She writes that the nature of prayer can best be captured through metaphor (504). Prayer arises out of and flourishes in community. It is founded in wonder and is humble and generous (505).

Even if poetic expression captures the mystery of prayer it is hard to describe the relationship between poetry and prayer. In her introduction to *Poetry and Prayer: The Power of the Word II* Franscesca Bugliani Knox indicates the close but complex relationship between the two (1). In the first chapter of the same book, 'Poetry and Prayer: A Survey of Some Twentieth-Century Studies', Lonsdale points out obvious connections between poetry and prayer: some prayers have the form of poems, and some poems are prayers (17). Lonsdale then reviews the approaches of some twentieth century scholars: Henri Bremond, William T. Noon, Karl Rahner and Enda McDonagh. Each scholar sought to describe the similarities and differences between poetry and prayer.

However seeing the relationship between poetry and prayer as a matter of similarity and difference does not adequately explain what is happening when poetry is influenced by *The Spiritual Exercises.* In this case the writing of poetry evolves from prayer rather than being a separate activity that takes place in parallel with it. What is needed is an exploration of the relationship between poetry and prayer that, rather than comparing them, looks at the fluidity between them.

One promising approach is that of Spadaro in 'Poetry at the Threshold of Prayer'. Spadaro begins with a definition of prayer given in the *Catechism of the Catholic Church,* that it is the habit of being in the presence of God and raising one's heart and mind to God. Prayer represents a vital and living relationship with God (57). Therefore, Spadaro says, it is important not to simplify the relationship between poetry and prayer. One difference between them is that poetry is always expressed in words but prayer is not necessarily spoken and can remain in the silent depths of the heart (57). In order to explain how God is addressed in prayer Spadaro refers to Ignatius' instructions for colloquies in which a person talks to God as though engaged in a normal conversation (57). According to Spadaro prayer always involves invoking God or the Other explicitly (57). Spadaro says that poetry can express a tension in our relationship with God and the need to have a dialogue with him, yet despite this often remains on the threshold of prayer as it does not address God

directly. However Spadaro feels that this threshold is an ideal meeting point between poetry and prayer (58).

Spadaro explores the threshold between poetry and prayer by quoting from a poem by the American poet Emily Dickinson:

> God grows above –
> so those who pray
> Horizons – must ascend –
> And so I stepped upon the North
> To see this Curious Friend –

This poem 'reaches the threshold of prayer but stops just short of it' (58) as God the 'Curious Friend' is spoken of but not addressed. However in another poem Dickinson addresses Jesus:

> At least – to pray – is left – is left –
> Oh Jesus – in the Air –
> I know not which thy chamber is –
> I'm knocking – everywhere –

Spadaro states that this second poem demonstrates that the threshold between poetry and prayer can be crossed so that poetry becomes prayer. Dickinson speaks to Jesus rather than merely speaking about him (59). But once this threshold is crossed Spadaro believes that the relationship between poet and reader is potentially broken. God has entered the relationship and, unless the reader can accept God, he or she cannot be truly involved in the poem. Having made the point that a third person has been introduced into the relationship between poet and reader, Spadaro says that the poem that has become a prayer provides the linguistic framework for the reader to develop a relationship with God. Therefore the poem now becomes the canvas on which the reader's private prayer can take shape (60). Spadaro asks whether a poem which becomes a prayer is similar to a love poem which also introduces a third person into the relationship between poet and reader. He concludes that it is not. The reader always remains an observer of a relationship in a love poem[8] but when a

[8] Spadaro's point is valid unless the reader is the one being addressed in the love poem. It might be argued that any poem addressing a 'you' is addressing the reader as well as the apostrophised subject.

poem becomes a prayer the reader is invited to become an active participant in the relationship (60). By making these observations Spadaro has touched on a role that poetry can play in a post-Christian culture. Although the majority of people are not religious believers, nonetheless poetry can invite them to consider the existence of a spiritual reality and to engage with that reality.

Next Spadaro seeks to answer the question of whether or not non-believers can write poems that become prayers. He replies that paradoxically a non-believer can write a poem that becomes a prayer. Spadaro supports his answer with the example of Paul Celan, who although not a religious believer, recognised that poetry wants to reach an Other (61). Spadaro draws further support from the poetry of Pär Lagerkvist which addresses an absent and non-existent God (61). Although Lagerkvist's poetry denies the existence of God it none the less addresses him, thus agreeing with Spadaro's view of the hallmark of prayer as an address to God.

Spadaro has built up a strong case for the idea that poetry can either remain on the threshold of prayer or cross the threshold and so become prayer. The suggestion that there is a threshold, or liminal[9] space, between poetry and prayer can be fruitfully investigated further. It is possible that one effect of the influence of *The Spiritual Exercises* on poetry is that poems written when a poet has made *The Exercises* may cross the threshold and become prayers. In 'Sinnes heavie loade' Southwell addresses Christ. 'O Lord my sinne doth over-charge thy brest' (17). Hopkins questions God in 'Thou art indeed just, Lord, if I contend':

> Thou art indeed just, Lord, if I contend
> With thee; but, sir, so what I plead is just.
> Why do sinners' ways prosper? and why must
> Disappointment all I endeavour end? (113)

However Spadaro does not consider travel across the threshold between poetry and prayer that moves in the reverse direction. Maybe it is possible for prayer to become poetry. By this I mean it might be possible to write a poem that springs immediately from an experience of prayer. However,

[9] The concept of liminality was developed by Arnold van Gennep in his book *The Rites of Passage.*

as the poem does not directly address God it is not prayer in the strictest sense. But a poem which has crossed the threshold from prayer to poetry would have a much more intimate relationship with prayer than a poem that was written about the experience of prayer sometime after prayer was concluded. I investigate this direction of travel further in subsequent chapters.

In the next three chapters I seek to answer my research questions by considering the work of poets who have encountered *The Spiritual Exercises of St Ignatius.* Chapter two examines the poetry of Denise Levertov and chapter three that of Ted Hughes. Both Levertov and Hughes meditated albeit in different ways. I discuss ways in which the work of each poet may have been influenced by *The Spiritual Exercises,* look at their retellings of biblical stories and explore the relationship between their poetry and prayer. I also consider how an Ignatian reading adds to our understanding of their work. My final chapter is a reflection on my collection *In the Steps of Saints .* This reflection highlights the similarities and differences between the influence of *The Spiritual Exercises of St Ignatius* on my work and on that of Levertov and Hughes.

Chapter 2 This Little Meditation Space: The Spiritual Exercises and the Poetry of Denise Levertov

Levertov was born in 1923 in Ilford, Essex, the third daughter of Rev. Paul Levertoff, a Russian Jew who converted to Christianity, and his Welsh wife Beatrice.[1] Levertov's first collection, *The Double Image*, was published in 1946. In 1949 she moved to America, becoming an American citizen in 1955. Christopher MacGowan writing in *Twentieth-Century American Poetry* classifies her as an American poet on the grounds that all her subsequent books were published in America (3). Levertov was influenced by a number of poets. According to MacGowan these writers include William Carlos Williams and the Black Mountain poets (113). Levertov was establishing her reputation as a poet during the 1960s. This decade saw the rise of protests against the Vietnam War. A number of poets were active in the anti-war movement and MacGowan says that Levertov was one of the most active politically (25) and her activism is reflected in her poetry. Other poems picked up Levertov's concern about the environment. Levertov did not become a Catholic until later on in life but she was always deeply spiritual and her spirituality is a thread that runs consistently throughout her work.[2] Although little known in England, Levertov was nominated as American Poet Laureate shortly before her death in 1997.

Levertov made *The Spiritual Exercises* between September 1993 and April 1994. In order to appreciate Levertov's motivation for undertaking *The Exercises* I refer to archive material kept in Stanford University library. By summer 1993, as she approached 70, Levertov mentions in her *Teal Green Notebook* (11th May 1993, 30th June 1993, 1st July 1993) that she was increasingly fatigued and had received news that she might have a lymphoma. She also records a meeting with her priest, Father Craig Boley, in which she discussed how she lacked the inclination to play an active part in the life of the church (26th June 1993). In reply Father Boley encouraged Levertov to continue to pursue her vocation as a poet and promised to find her a guide so

[1] See Dana Greene *Denise Levertov: A Poet's Life* (5-8).
[2] According to Sarah Law in '"The Pulse in the Wound": Embodiment and Grace in Denise Levertov's Religious Poetry', Levertov was always drawn to the transcendent (221). Joyce Lorraine Beck in 'Denise Levertov's Poetics and Oblique Prayers' notes that the religious, meditative element in her poetry can be traced to her Christian upbringing.

that she could start *The Spiritual Exercises of St Ignatius* and 'discern what is the voice of God.' It is clear that as she began *The Spiritual Exercises* Levertov was already aware of changes in her life due to ageing and declining health. She embarked on *The Spiritual Exercises* in order to discern her vocation in changed circumstances. The poems in Levertov's collection, *Sands of the Well,* span the period during which she made *The Spiritual Exercises* and are crucial in grasping how Levertov's poetry is influenced by her experience of Ignatian meditation.

Several critics have remarked on changes in the poetry of *Sands of the Well* when compared with her earlier collections. Zlotkowski in 'Presence and Transparency: A Reading of Levertov's Sands of the Well' notes that there are few poems of social critique in *Sands of the Well* (138). Zlotkowski then turns his attention to religious poems and says that those in *Sands of the Well* are less Christocentric than Levertov's previous religious work (139). Additionally Zlotkowski believes that in *Sands of the Well* Levertov was arriving at a new awareness of herself as a poet as she becomes absorbed 'in what is: mountain, moon, lake; yellow tulip; bark of cedar' and places language and poetry in a larger spiritual setting (145-146).

Secondly, Dorothy Nielsen's 'The Dark Wing of Mourning: Grief Elegy and Time in the Poetry of Denise Levertov', surveys Levertov's approach to grief. As she writes about the ways in which grief is portrayed in Levertov's work Nielsen identifies a change of tone in the later collections, notably *Sands of the Well.* Nielsen notices, for example, that in 'In the Woods' from *Sands of the Well* grief is tamed, allowing it to 'coexist peacefully with celebration' (135). Nielsen says that Levertov's later poetry 'includes faithful attention to grief as an aspect of being' and displays 'a gentler sense of grief as a daily companion' (133).

Neither Zlotkowski nor Nielsen mention *The Spiritual Exercises* when they discuss changes in Levertov's poetry. Here, I extend Zlotkowski's and Nielsen's criticism by making use of archive material to argue that the shifts they identify are influenced by Levertov's making *The Spiritual Exercises.* Contrastingly, a third critic, Paul A. Lacey in 'Denise Levertov: Testimonies of the Lived Life', draws attention to the fact that Levertov undertook *The Spiritual*

Exercises and sees 'affinities of content' and some analogues between Levertov's poetic practice and the meditative practices taught by St. Ignatius (243).

As Zlotkowski says, there are far fewer poems of social critique in *Sands of the Well* than in previous collections. Zlotkowski demonstrates his point by drawing a comparison between the number of poems in the section 'It Should Be Visible' from S*ands of the Well* which contains four poems, and the equivalent thematic section, 'Witnessing from Afar', in *Evening Train* which contains sixteen. He then highlights the range of material in 'Witnessing from Afar'; it includes poems on human destruction of the environment, homophobia, domestic violence, TV news, nuclear annihilation, the effects of technology on children and pre-eminently the Gulf War (136). Although Zlotkowski briefly compares Levertov's poems about the Gulf War with those about the Vietnam War and draws attention to her belief that environmental disaster is inevitable (136) he does not discuss poems in detail. Even when he later turns to the poems of social critique in S*ands of the Well* he merely notes a change in tone from Levertov's earlier protest poems but does not enter into in depth comparison of poems from S*ands of the Well* and her previous work (138).

I supplement Zlotkowski's insight by drawing on archive material in order to evaluate the influence of *The Spiritual Exercises* on Levertov's poetry. Levertov's Ignatian Journal is in three notebooks: *First Ignatian Notebook Day 1 - Day 30*; *Second Ignatian Notebook Day 30 - Day 70* and the *Third Ignatian Notebook Day 72 – Day 101*. In addition there are a number of notebooks and diaries, as well as manuscripts of drafts of poems, that show the evolution of the poems from S*ands of the Well*.

In her Ignatian Journal Levertov categorises the political and environmental issues that concerned her as 'the sins of the world'. When she attempts to meditate on the nativity at the beginning of Week 2 Levertov states that she has a problem with thinking about the sins of the world:

> I think 2 things that have come up frequently are a difficulty with looking again at the world's sin and guilt, (not only my own), because of my history of having done so already as a person of political consciousness & the

> sense that at 70 I don't have the psychic energy to keep on doing so (Day 53).

Here Levertov says that she has already focussed on social issues as a political activist and implies that she has nothing further to reflect on. Additionally as an older person, Levertov cannot be actively involved in protest and feels that she does not have the emotional energy to expend on thinking about political issues.

A comparison of the four poems in the section 'It Should Be Visible' reveals part of the process in which Levertov came to accept that withdrawal from a more active involvement was necessary. 'Protesting at the Nuclear Test Site' was written before Levertov began *The Spiritual Exercises.* 'The News and a Green Moon. July 1994' and 'In the Woods' were written after she had completed them.[3] The poem 'It Should Be Visible' appears on a reading list in the *Blue Notebook* dated 26th January 1995 and its similarities to 'The News and a Green Moon. July 1994' suggest that it dates from 1994.

'Protesting at the Nuclear Test Site' records Levertov's active involvement in political protest. The harshness of the language that she uses in this poem links in with her earlier poetry. She writes:

> Now, as my mind knew but imagination strained to acknowledge,
> deep, deep and narrow the holes were bored
> into the land's innards, and there, in savage routine,
> Hiroshima blasts exploded, exploded, rape
> repeated month after month for years.[4] (936)

Words like 'innards', 'savage', 'blasts' and 'rape' can be compared with the diction in 'The Certainty' from *Evening Train:*

> But one ancient certainty
> remains: war
> means blood spilling from living bodies,
> means severed limbs, blindness, terror,

[3] 'Protesting at the Nuclear Test Site' is included in the *Post-Evening Train Reading Folder* list of poems published or accepted for publication by mid-August 1993.A draft of 'In the Woods' is dated January 26 1995.
[4] All page references to Levertov's poems are taken from *The Collected Poems of Denise Levertov.*

means grief, agony, orphans, starvation,
prolonged misery, prolonged resentment and hatred and guilt,
means all of these multiplied, multiplied,
means death, death, death and death. (887)

In both poems the language is graphic. In 'The Certainty' Levertov pictures 'blood spilling', 'severed limbs' and 'blindness, terror.' Levertov stresses the unremitting violence of war in both poems and uses repetition: 'deep, deep', 'death, death, death and death' to emphasise the strength of her reaction against it.

Furthermore, the graphic language of 'Protesting at the Nuclear Test Site' can be compared with earlier work about the Vietnam War and 'El Salvador: Requiem and Invocation', a libretto written about the murders of Archbishop Romero, three nuns and a lay sister in El Salvador. In 'Advent 1966' Levertov uses irony, comparing the 'burning babe' of Southwell's poem with the killing of children in the Vietnam War:

Because in Vietnam the vision of a Burning Babe
is multiplied, multiplied,
the flesh on fire
not Christ's, as Southwell saw it, prefiguring
the Passion upon the Eve of Christmas,

but wholly human and repeated, repeated,
infant after infant, their names forgotten,
their sex unknown in the ashes,
set alight, flaming but not vanishing,
not vanishing as his vision but lingering,

cinders upon the earth or living on
moaning and stinking in hospitals three abed; (342-343)

Levertov writes with the urgency of the activist, the shocking language, active verbs, and imagery of her poem: 'flesh on fire', 'flaming but not vanishing', 'cinders upon the earth', and the repetition of 'repeated' and 'vanishing' creating a vivid impression of the unrelenting horrors of war. Once more in 'El Salvador: Requiem and Invocation', Levertov employs graphic language to express the dreadfulness of what has happened to Romero, the nuns and lay sister but also to the El Salvadorian people in general:

Chorus (Words of Terror and Violence)

Blood Rape Kill Mutilate Death-squad Massacre
Torture Acid Order National Guard Thirst Pain
Crying Screaming Bloated Naked Helicopter
Slaughter Shoot Machine-gunned Beaten Vomit
Slash Burning Slit Bullhorns Sprayed Blinded
Bullets Machete Wounds Smash (789)

The list of brutalities, without punctuation, has the effect of heightening the violence of the situation described. In the libretto Levertov chronicles the history of El Salvador. Levertov begins with the peace enjoyed by the indigenous people, then she describes the violence of conquest followed by violence under an oppressive regime. Ultimately Levertov focuses on the violence meted out to Romero and others who spoke out against oppression:

Narrator

A magnum slug,
his heart torn open,
a single shot,
a hired killer,
a distance of 20 meters.

Half Chorus

His killers
were ironic;
but in martyrdom
is a seed of power!

Narrator

The sisters, travelling
On their road of mercy,
were ambushed,
raped,
killed,
flung in a pit.

Half Chorus (Bitterly ironic)

Raped, killed, flung in a pit –
the usual way.
The soldiers
had practice.
But in martyrdom
is a seed of power! (806-807)

Although not actively involved in El Salvador, Levertov is far from a detached observer of the events that she writes about. Her striking phrase 'his heart torn open', and repeated use of active verbs, 'raped, killed, flung' show the strength of her emotional involvement.

By contrast with the passion she shows in her earlier work and in 'Protesting at the Nuclear Test Site', Levertov writes in a reportorial way in 'The News and a Green Moon. July 1994':

> Two thirds of what's left of Rwanda's people after the massacres
> milling about in foodless, waterless camps.
> Or not milling about, because they're dying.
>
> Young men's bodies, hands tied behind them, litter the streets
> of Port au Prince. (As rivers and lakes
>
> in Africa have been littered recently, and not long ago in Salvador –
> a familiar item of News.) The crowded boats (again) set out,
> sink or are turned back. (937)

Levertov's subject is the aftermath of the Rwandan massacres yet she does not express her feelings in graphic diction or repetition. Recurring references to the moon throughout the poem 'The green moon, almost full' (line 1), 'The green moon' (line 12), 'bounced on the moon' (line 16), 'as the moon finds mirrors' (line 42), 'the moon gives off this night' (line 48) add to the feeling that the speaker is a detached and omniscient observer in the same way that the moon is distant from the earth. Levertov has not ceased to be concerned with suffering, but her sense of distance carries resonance with the shock of having to observe brutality. This is a stark contrast to Levertov's earlier poem 'News Report, September 1991' from *Evening Train* which also utilises the news report as a format:

> "*When we*
> *went through there wasn't anybody left.'* (890)
>
> "*What you*
> *saw was a bunch of*
> *buried trenches*
> *with people's*
> *arms and things*
> *sticking out."* (890)

"*I know*
burying people
like that sounds
pretty nasty, said
Colonel Maggart,
But …" (890)

In this poem the use of direct speech highlights the horror and immediacy of what has happened. The short opening lines of each stanza emphasise the involvement of the speaker in the situation. As in earlier poems protesting about the Vietnam War, the speaker is more than an impassive observer.

'It Should Be Visible' from *Sands of the Well* continues with the more detached tone. Again, this poem views the earth from space:

If from Space not only sapphire continents,
swirling oceans, were visible, but the wars –
like bonfires, wildfires, forest conflagrations,
flame and smoky smoulder – the Earth would seem
a bitter pomander ball bristling with poison cloves. (938)

Levertov discusses what the view of earth from space would be like, were it possible to see wars and their effects. Her choice of vocabulary - 'sapphire', 'swirling' highlights the natural beauty of the world, then contrasts this beauty with the effect of human activity: 'wars'; 'wildfires, forest conflagations'; 'bitter pomander ball'; 'poison cloves'. Once more she writes as an observer, rather than as a person who is involved in protest against war. The idea that Levertov's speaker is a spectator of what is happening in the world, rather than a participant in social protest, can be illuminated by considering her practice of Ignatian meditation.

In his Meditation on the Incarnation Ignatius instructs exercitants to view the people of the world 'some at war; some weeping' (*§*106) and to see 'what the persons on the face of the earth do, for example, wound, kill and go down to hell' (*§*108) from the perspective of the three persons of the Trinity looking down on the earth from heaven. These instructions have parallels with 'It Should Be Visible':

And each war fuelled with weapons: it should be visible
that great sums of money have been exchanged,

great profits made, workers gainfully employed
to construct destruction, national economies distorted
so that these fires, these wars, may burn
and consume the joy of this one planet (938)

Here, the speaker looks down on the earth from space, like the persons of the Trinity, and visualises the human activity that is taking place as she watches. Despite talking about human destruction of the earth and contrasting this with the natural world's desire for life: 'myriad forms of 'life that wants to live'' (938), Levertov does not write with the urgency of protest, but with detachment.

Although Levertov does not include many poems of social critique in 'It Should Be Visible' other poems illustrate that she does not cease to be concerned with the related area of human suffering. Levertov's ongoing concern with suffering is elucidated in 'A Yellow Tulip'.[5] Zlotkowski describes how in 'A Yellow Tulip' Levertov displays an acceptance of the world as it is (144) which contrasts with poems from earlier volumes where her language displays passionate involvement in protest. While Zlotkowski does not do so, it is useful to compare 'A Yellow Tulip' with two similar poems, 'Like Noah's Rainbow' and 'Psalm Fragments' alongside extracts from Levertov's Ignatian Journal and other notebooks to highlight the influence of *The Spiritual Exercises* on them.

According to her Ignatian Journal, Levertov is troubled by the fact that she has blessings while God allows the suffering of many innocent people (Day 4). This discomfort is amplified when she meditates on the story of the tenants in the vineyard (Mark 12.1-12). She wonders why it was that the owner had gone away leaving the vineyard to others. Levertov believes the answer to the problem of God's non-intervention to prevent the suffering that happens as a result of human action lies in free will. She writes that God would not renege on free will (Day 4). On Day 16 she meditates on passages from the book of Job and thinks that, 'One must trust that such suffering plays a part in the cosmic design & that God's justice somehow 'makes it up to' the sufferers - outside of our ideas & experience of time and space, logic and symmetry.' This insight, arrived at while making *The Spiritual Exercises*, lies at the root of Levertov's acceptance of the world as it is. Reading her Ignatian Journal reveals that

[5] The draft of 'A Yellow Tulip' is written on the back of a book review dated March 1995

Levertov believes that it is not presently possible for people to understand the mystery of suffering. Instead the believer has to have faith that God's justice will deal with suffering in some way that is not currently accessible to human logic, as part of his overall plan for the world.

Levertov notes the contrast between her own comfortable situation and the apocalyptic horrors going on in the world: the destruction of landscapes and species; the savagery of continual wars; nationalism and institutionalised injustice and misery (Day 59). Despite the more detached tone of her later poetry, Levertov had not ceased to be concerned about wider social issues. However, her experience of meditation was changing her perspective on them. During her meditation Levertov describes two separate spheres: the personal welling up of gratitude, and the suffering that she sees in the world at large. Levertov has always been aware of the dissonance between the two spheres, but now that she is undertaking *The Spiritual Exercises* Levertov is searching for some understanding of how they co-exist in the scheme of things, even though at present they seem to be totally incompatible universes. Levertov believes that it should not be possible to oscillate between the two spheres but acknowledges the paradox that in fact she does oscillate between them (Day 59).

'A Yellow Tulip', 'Like Noah's Rainbow' and 'Psalm Fragments' can be understood against the background of Levertov's reflection on the dissonance between personal blessings and world suffering that she identifies while making *The Spiritual Exercises*. The yellow tulip symbolises the blessings that Levertov has received and her faith in the goodness of God. Its presence seems to jar with existence of suffering. She writes:

> *The yellow tulip in the room's warmth*
> *opens.*
> Can I say it, and not seem to taunt
> all who live in torment? Believe it, yet
> remain aware of the world's anguish? (972)

In these lines Levertov describes the paradox she notes in her Ignatian Journal. The italics focus the reader's attention on the tulip as it opens. The space around 'opens' invites the observer to see this action as a gesture of blessing,

inviting him or her to participate in a moment of grace. In the draft of 'A Yellow Tulip' the connexion between the language of the Ignatian Journal and the language of the poem is even more striking. Levertov writes in her Ignatian Journal on Day 59 'God's presence can consist of recalling the ways God works in my life. Blessings / Gratitude…my friends … all my pleasures, i.e. my ability to enjoy art & music & books & nature.' In the draft of the poem Levertov uses the word 'blessing' which links 'A Yellow Tulip' with her line of thought as she meditated:

> never a day, even in trouble
> but some extraordinary blessing
> comes to me as if a caravan were constantly
> arriving out of desert dust (Box 16 Folder 12)

The word 'blessing' is omitted from the final published version of the poem. The published poem does, however, replicate other ideas that occur in the Ignatian Journal:

> But it's so: a caravan arrives constantly
> out of desert dust, laden
> with gift beyond gift, beyond reason …
> That's one, at nightfall of a day which brought
> a dozen treasures, exotic surprises, landscapes,
> music, words, acts of friendship, all of them wrapped
> in mysterious silk, each unique. (972)

Here by mentioning landscapes, music, words and friendship Levertov refers directly to the blessings that she has written about in the Ignatian Journal. Through making *The Spiritual Exercises* Levertov has moved beyond the search for a theodicy that would ease the tension between blessings and suffering. She has reached the position that she accepts that things are as they are.

'Like Noah's Rainbow' is also connected with Levertov's emerging beliefs about suffering. Its date of writing can be ascertained from an entry in Levertov's *Blue Notebook* for 12 June 1994. Levertov begins the entry in a state of depression. She writes about problems she sees in the Catholic Church and the world. She is losing her faith in God's mercy, and thinks that maybe, as the Old Testament suggests, God's patience is not infinite after all. Levertov

refers to her depression in ‘Like Noah’s Rainbow’: ‘I return greyhearted / to the sunny shore,’ (934). In the *Blue Notebook* Levertov describes how, in an attempt to tackle her depression, she returned to *The Spiritual Exercises*. She meditates on the experience of the apostles on the day between the crucifixion and the resurrection. She remarks, ‘How like an eclipse that day must have seemed to the apostles (including the women).’ Here Levertov likens the dark place she is in to the plight of the apostles before they experienced the resurrection. After Levertov has referred to her reflections on *The Spiritual Exercises* she continues, ‘Yet I must remind myself that in the midst of this a sight of the heron on the day before yesterday acted once more as a Noah’s rainbow for me.’ She sees the heron as a sign of hope:

> Surely these sightings,
> familiar but always
> strange with unearned joy,
> are a sign of covenant (934)

It might be said that the heron also acts as a symbol of resurrection, unseen by the apostles, but glimpsed by the poet. As a result of reengagement with *The Spiritual Exercises* Levertov is able to return to the position of acceptance and faith that she originally gained through them.

‘Psalm Fragments’ also seems to be linked with the events of 12 June 1994. It first appears in draft in the *Red Notebook* on 12 November 1994. Further drafts appear in the *Red Notebook* on 22 November as well as in a folder of drafts of poems from *Sands of the Well* (Box 16 Folder 39). This poem moves back and forward between disbelief and faith. Levertov speaks of clinging to a God who seems tyrannical and heartless in allowing ‘the endless outrage we call history.’ In a draft from the folder Levertov writes a stanza that does not appear in the published poem:

> Lord, I am not
> cast into grandeur of dark night
> merely adrift
> in what resembles
> the drained light
> of eclipse of midday. (Box 16 Folder 39)

The word ‘eclipse’ recalls the entry in Levertov’s Blue Notebook for 12 June 1994 where she refers to the eclipse that the apostles experienced between the crucifixion and resurrection. In the draft of ‘Psalm Fragments’ written in the *Red Notebook* on 22 November Levertov contrasts the protection that she experiences with the plight of others:

> Slung in the hammock
> your care has woven …
> I hear thunder
> a mounting wind
> cries of hunger

Here it appears that Levertov is about to turn to the note with which she began the poem, of railing against God for the suffering of the world. However, in the published version the references to thunder, wind and hunger are missing. Instead, Levertov continues to write about God’s protective care and the poem ends with an affirmation of faith, ‘Lord, You provide.’ (970) In returning to *The Spiritual Exercises,* Levertov continues to work through feelings of doubt caused by suffering, to a position of trust in God, who in a logically inexplicable way would ultimately ‘provide’.

In Zlotkowski’s review of poems in *Sands of the Well* he notices that Levertov’s later religious poems are less Christocentric than her previous work (139). As he writes about the religious poetry Zlotkowski describes Levertov’s ‘intense, imaginative appropriation of Christian scripture’ and the central importance of her reading of the life of Christ (137) in earlier collections. Although Zlotkowski mentions the collections *Oblique Prayers, Breathing the Water* and *A Door in the Hive* the only poem he cites from these books is ‘On a Theme from Julian's Chapter XX’. Even then Zlotkowski does not comment on this poem. I believe that ‘On a Theme from Julian's Chapter XX’ is an example of a poem which centres on Christ. Levertov begins with a description of the crucifixion:

> Six hours outstretched in the sun, yes,
> hot wood, the nails, blood trickling
> into the eyes, yes–
> but the thieves on their neighbor crosses
> survived till after the soldiers

had come to fracture their legs, or longer,
Why single out this agony? What's
a mere six hours? (769)

In her opening lines Levertov paints a powerful picture of Christ on the cross. The reader sees Jesus 'outstretched in the sun', feels the heat of the sun beating on wood and notices the blood trickling into his eyes. But Levertov asks whether Christ's suffering was really remarkable when compared with that of others. Levertov then moves to Julian's grasp of the significance of the crucifixion and comes to a new truth:

The oneing, she saw, *the oneing*
with the Godhead opened Him utterly
to the pain of all minds, all bodies
–sands of the sea, of the desert–
from the first beginning
to the last day. (769)

The reality that Julian saw, and which Levertov focusses on in 'On a Theme from Julian's Chapter XX', is that in Christ's crucifixion God was taking on himself all the suffering of every human being for all time.

'Salvator Mundi: Via Crucis' from *Evening Train* is a further example of a poem in which Levertov reflects on the crucifixion. In this poem Levertov examines the tensions between the humanity and divinity of Christ as he faced crucifixion:

The burden of humanness (I begin to see) extracted from Him
that He taste also the humiliation of dread,
cold sweat of wanting to let the whole thing go,
like any mortal hero out of his depth,
like anyone who has taken a step too far
and wants herself back. (908)

Not torture of body,
not the hideous betrayals humans commit
nor the faithless weakness of friends, and surely
not the anticipation of death (not then, in agony's grip)
was Incarnation's heaviest weight,
but this sickened desire to renege,
to step back from what He, who was God,
had promised Himself, and had entered
time and flesh to enact. (908)

This poem employs imaginative detail, ‘cold sweat of wanting to let the whole thing go’, ‘torture of body’ and ‘this sickened desire to renege’ to explore the reality and significance of Christ’s suffering. By including such detail Levertov gives the impression that she has entered into the depth of Christ’s suffering. By referring to ‘On a Theme from Julian's Chapter XX’ and ‘Salvator Mundi: Via Crucis’ Zlotkowski has clearly made his point that Levertov includes Christocentric poems in the collections leading up to *Sands of the Well.* Zlotkowski is correct when he says there are no comparable poems in *Sands of the Well* (139-140) which explore Christ’s experience in such imaginative detail but he does not offer an explanation.

I propose that the reason for the absence of Christocentric poems from *Sands of the Well* can, again, be determined by referring to Levertov’s Ignatian Journal. Throughout the Ignatian Journal, Levertov writes about her inability, at that time, to gain a sense of the personal presence of Jesus. She prays that she may come to feel Jesus as a living person (Day 37) but believes that entering a colloquy with the crucified Christ, as Ignatius instructs, would feel ‘phony’ (Day 40). Later, she writes, ‘So much Jesus talk sounds self-deceptive to me, or unrelated to the impression the historical Jesus sometimes makes on me’ (Day 50). Levertov wants to resolve this disparity and thinks that it may be achieved through a close reading of St Luke's Gospel. However, despite focussing her attention on Luke, Levertov’s sense of Jesus remains distant (Day 74). Levertov is aware that she has now stopped writing what Zlotkowski refers to as Christocentric poems. Reflecting on her difficulties when it comes to having a relationship with Jesus she notes:

> Only in poems (<u>The Stand Off</u>, <u>On a Theme by T. Merton</u>, the Crucifixion and Harrowing of Hell poems, for example) can I <u>in those acts of imagination</u>, of creative vision, do I come closer perhaps to what I should be feeling (Day 40).[6]

Despite this insight, and the fact that the meditational techniques of *The Spiritual Exercises* encourage the use of imagination to come close to Christ, Levertov is reluctant to return to her former method of writing poems about Christ. Indeed, Levertov views the fact that she has written this type of poetry in

[6] The syntax and underlining are Levertov’s.

the past as a block to entering fully into meditation. She writes about her experience of trying to contemplate the birth of Jesus, ‘Had I not already written that Xmas poem 6 or so years ago I might have been able to go further with this contemplation’ (Day 51).

A possible explanation of Levertov's reluctance to use her imagination to write Christocentric poetry based on her meditation lies in her belief that to try to enter imaginatively into the experience of Jesus and, ‘feel what he felt, see with his eyes, think what he thought’, would be impertinent (Day 55). The feasibility of this explanation is backed up when Levertov continues, ‘was I attempting just that 'impertinence', in my conjectures in the 2 crucifixion poems...?’ As a devout Catholic Levertov wishes to treat Jesus with the utmost respect and feels that trying to enter into his experiences in an imaginative way would be disrespectful.

However, later on Levertov appears to be revising her opinion of the possibility of writing poetry based on visualisation of scripture. When meditating on the passion she realises that in order to feel it, one must be able to cast out foreknowledge of the resurrection, ‘Maybe the only way to do that is to imagine oneself into the consciousness of one of the apostles, or the women & other disciples, or most of all Mary His mother or John his best friend.’ Levertov then writes about the experience of Mary as she watched Jesus die, ‘this public dying in the heat, the dust, the noise of the mocking crowd’ (Day 93). At the end of her reflections she prays:

> Lord, when I wrote the crucifixion poems I was able to feel so much more than I seem able to master now - why is that? Are you trying to make me understand that only <u>in work</u> can I really grasp anything?’ (Day 93)

Here Levertov seems to be on the verge of acknowledging that writing poetry based on visualisation is once again possible, and that doing so is the only way that she will be able to enter into the type of experience that *The Spiritual Exercises* are designed to nurture. Yet even so Levertov does not return to writing Christocentric poems either in *Sands of the Well* or in her last poems collected after her death in *This Great Unknowing*. Poems like ‘‘Poetics of Faith’ and ‘On Belief in the Physical Resurrection of Jesus’ which appear to be about Christ are not really Christocentric. They deal instead with Levertov’s

conception of the nature of faith, which she debated as she undertook *The Spiritual Exercises*.

'Poetics of Faith' does not occur in any lists or anywhere in Levertov's personal notebooks or engagement books but Donna Hollenberg in *A Poet's Revolution: The Life of Denise Levertov* says that it was written after she completed *The Spiritual Exercises* (419). The origins of the poem might be traced to an entry in the Ignatian Journal. Levertov meditates on Luke 17.5-6, which she says is a subtle 'poetic paradox'. Levertov writes, 'It's hard to articulate what I perceive: but it's about the leap … an unpremeditated faith, the walking on water which Peter does but then tumbles & loses it' (Day 73). The language of this extract is very close to the poem:

> and impetuous Peter, empowered,
> jumps from the boat and rushes
> on wave-tip to meet Him–
> a few steps, anyway–
> (till it occurs to him,
> 'I can't this is preposterous'
> and Jesus has to grab him,
> tumble his weight
> back over the gunwale). (964)

'Poetics of Faith' articulates Levertov's struggle with faith, as revealed in her Ignatian Journal. Throughout her time making *The Spiritual Exercises* Levertov felt a tension between what she referred to as an analytic faith, and a faith that was more responsive to God. As she meditated Levertov approached scripture in a structured and analytic way. It appears that Levertov had a set place for meditation, 'this little meditation space' (Day 3) or 'oratory' (Day 80). There she would light a candle and read through the assigned Bible passages and make notes on her thoughts. From the notes in her Ignatian Journal it seems that Levertov would often read different translations of the Bible and record differences in wording between them. On Day 56, for example, she notes a difference between the translation she was reading and the Revised Standard Version, 'he hastens to preach 'in the synagogues of Judea' (RSV Galilee).' She also used a commentary to aid understanding, 'The commentary makes an interesting observation - the sight of a man carrying his cross on the way to his own execution is a familiar one in the Roman world' (Day 72). Rather than using

an imaginative approach to scripture, Levertov was trying to understand the background to Bible passages and the meaning of the words that she read and employing the tools of critical scholarship to do so.

In the light of Levertov's remarks in a final interview given to Nicholas O'Connell[7] the fact that she never returns to an imaginative approach to scripture in her poetry after she has made *The Spiritual Exercises* is surprising. She tells O'Connell:

> I was really amazed at how close the exercises of St. Ignatius of Loyola were to a poet or novelist imagining a scene. You focus your attention on some particular aspect of the life of Christ. You try to compose that scene in your imagination, place yourself there. If it's the Via Dolorosa, you have to ask yourself, are you one of the disciples? Are you a passerby? Are you a spectator that likes to watch from the side, the way people used to watch hangings? You establish who you are and where you stand and then you look at what you see (346).

Levertov's poetry written prior to making *The Spiritual Exercises* contains lines which can be equated with Ignatius' composition of place and application of senses. 'St Thomas Didymus' clearly shows this. Here Levertov enters imaginatively into the experience of Thomas at the healing of a boy with an evil spirit (Mark 9.14-29). Levertov sets the scene by using the senses of sight and hearing:

> In the hot street at noon I saw him
> a small man
> gray but vivid, standing forth
> beyond the crowd's buzzing
> holding in desperate grip his shaking
> teethgnashing son, (844)

Levertov also places herself within the scene she is describing and becomes St. Thomas. Later she uses the sense of touch:

> But when my hand
> led by His hand's firm clasp
> entered the unhealed wound,
> my fingers encountering

[7] See Nicholas O'Connell in *At the Field's End: interviews with 22 Pacific Northwest Writers*

rib-bone and pulsing heat, (846)

Levertov's description of the setting, her use of the senses and the way in which she becomes a character in the gospel story is clearly in line with the methods of meditation recommended in *The Spiritual Exercises.*

The paradox that Levertov does not return to writing poetry incorporating imaginative reflection on the gospels is further compounded in passages where Levertov writes about the conflict between analysis and the imagination. As early as Day 2 she asks, 'Perhaps I should spend more time in silence & not, as it were, make a noise with my pen, my words, my articulations of thought?' She then continues to write lengthy analyses of Bible passages or her own feelings on most days. It appears that Levertov is afraid to respond to her experiences of *The Spiritual Exercises* by using her imagination. She prays, 'O Lord, help me to better respond to the Spirit without losing a desire for intellectual rigor'. (Day 21) Levertov discussed her concerns about using her imagination with her director for she notes that it is, 'hard to achieve that balance of the analytic and the responsive that Fr. Kapfer advised' (Day 27).

Levertov's struggle with an imaginative approach to scripture is crystallised when she writes in the Ignatian Journal about the journeys of the shepherds and wise men to see the infant Jesus. The shepherds, Levertov believes, have an immediate, intuitive call, whereas the wise men have a longer journey. Their journey is prolonged because they lacked intuition and looked for information in the wrong place (Day 53). Here Levertov implies that the intuitive, imaginative approach is superior to the logical and analytical. Levertov, however, persists in taking the analytical approach to scripture in her meditation and poetry.

In 'Poetics of Faith', Levertov tries to articulate her feelings about faith. As Hollenberg notes about the opening lines of the poem, 'she first dismisses logic and then parable as a means to knowledge of the divine' (419). Instead Levertov indicates that 'miracle' or an intuitive response to faith brings a person closer to God. Levertov faces the same dilemma as Peter. He takes a leap of faith by walking on water, then realises this is not logical, and so falls as he goes back on his intuitive reaction to Christ. However, there is one surprising,

imaginative image in ‘Poetics of Faith’ which extends the original gospel story. Years later, on the verge of sleep, Peter feels his feet walking on the waves. The Ignatian Journal reveals Levertov’s own longing to be responsive to God, as Peter was as he fell asleep.

A draft of ‘On Belief in the Physical Resurrection of Jesus’, another poem dealing with Levertov’s perception of faith, appears in the *Blue Notebook* on 10th December 1994. Throughout her Ignatian Journal Levertov seeks to understand the historical reality behind the Gospel stories as evidenced by her comparison of different translations and her use of commentaries. On Day 20 Levertov writes about the idea of bodily resurrection and admits that she is baffled by it. Levertov’s search for historical veracity is echoed in ‘On Belief in the Physical Resurrection of Jesus’ as she says that, unlike some people who are happy with symbolic interpretations, she cannot accept the reality of miracle, including resurrection, unless it is grounded in history. She needs ‘its roots / in bone and blood’ (968). At the end of the poem Levertov employs sensory imagery when she speaks of feeling the pulse in the wound and then talks about tasting bread and the warmth of Jesus’ hands as he broke the bread with the disciples at Emmaus (968). This could be an allusion to the Eucharist which Levertov says changed her life and anchored her (Day 20). However, Levertov found the story of Emmaus significant as it mirrored her own faith journey. She writes in her Ignatian Journal that she is, ‘back on the road to Emmaus (is one ever anywhere else – for long, anyway)’ (Day 100). In writing this Levertov draws a comparison between herself and the disciples on the road. The disciples had so many unresolved questions that they failed to recognise Christ.

Having discussed Zlotkowski’s observations that Levertov writes fewer poems of social critique and Christological poems, I will now turn to his point that that Levertov has moved on in her self-awareness as a writer in *Sands of the Well*. Naming ‘Looking, Walking, Being’, Zlotkowski reviews how Levertov’s understanding of herself as a poet develops. A draft of this poem appears in a second *Blue Notebook* on 7 December 1994. Zlotkowski says that Levertov had always believed that she had a destiny to be a poet (145). This belief is attested in the Ignatian Journal. As Levertov begins *The Spiritual Exercises* she confirms

her belief that writing poetry is a vocation (Day 4). Later, when reflecting on the call of Isaiah, Levertov states that writing poetry is a call and a gift although she does not think of herself as a prophet (Day 28). Levertov sees poetry as a blessing and a way that God works in her life (Day 59). Zlotkowski claims that in 'Looking, Walking, Being', Levertov now sees language, and by extension, writing poetry as breathing (146):

> I look and look.
> Looking's a way of being; one becomes,
> sometimes, a pair of eyes walking.
> Walking wherever looking takes one…
>
> And language? Rhythms
> of echo and interruption?
> That's
> a way of breathing,
> breathing to sustain
> looking,
> walking and looking,
> through the world,
> in it. (954)

Zlotkowski says that Levertov implies that through writing poetry she participates in the mystery of being (146). If Zlotkowski's understanding is correct, Leverotov had expanded her idea of vocation to include the belief that as a poet she became part of the mystery of being.

I suggest that Levertov's heightened awareness of the significance of her vocation could have come through undertaking *The Spiritual Exercises.* Levertov made *The Exercises* in order to re-evaluate her vocation in the light of the changes that the process of ageing brought. As Paulin-Cambell discovered in her research, exercitants changed their image of God and self. This change led to new beliefs about vocation (19). For Levertov this may have resulted in the understanding that her vocation as a poet took her deep within the mystery of being, God himself.

Even if Zlotkowski is incorrect in his reading of 'Looking, Walking, Being', as the purpose of *The Spiritual Exercises* is the discernment of vocation it is to be expected that Levertov would emerge from the experience with new insights into her calling as a poet. As Levertov reflects on writing poetry she

believes that her poetry comes from God and that he was prompting her as she wrote. She also gains insight into how God reaches others through her poems. On 23 March 1994 she writes in the Ignatian Journal:

> I had this realisation of creaturehood, that the poems I make are vessels, empty vessels (however beautiful they may seem) into which the responsive readers … pour their gifts of spirit, which is of God. (Day 92)

Levertov sees that God is involved both in the act of writing a poem and also through the ways in which readers interpret the work.

Levertov's realisation is reflected in 'Writer and Reader'. This poem was added to the reverse of the reading list dated 25th October 1993. It also appears in a reading list in the *Blue Notebook* dated 26th January 1995. Although it is not possible to come up with a precise date of composition it is likely that 'Writer and Reader' was written sometime between the end of October 1993 and January 1995 which would make a link with the journal entry for Day 92 feasible. In the poem Levertov writes about her sense of wonder at being called to be a poet, 'then I feel awe at being / chosen for the task' (958). Then she talks about reading a poem by someone else and, inspired by God, finding layers of deep meaning in it. This is like a mystical experience, 'then I'm caught up beyond / that isolate awe' (959). Even though Levertov speaks of herself as both writer and reader, the content of the poem does mirror her thoughts on Day 92 when she talks about writing a poem and then another person, inspired by God, pouring their own thoughts into it.

Although Zlotkowski writes about several changes that he sees in *Sands of the Well,* he does not include Levertov's changed relationship with God among them. I feel it is important to consider how Levertov's growing awareness of the presence of a personal God impacts her poetry, because she explores her relationship with God and her maturing spirituality explicitly during her engagement with *The Exercises*. As Levertov's Ignatian Journal entries reveal a growing awareness of the presence of a personal God, I go beyond Zlotkowski's article to consider how this important development impacts her poetry. Levertov explores her relationship with God, and her maturing spirituality, during the course of the time she is engaged in *The Exercises*.

Levertov's early Ignatian Journal entries can be contrasted with her later ones. On Day 1 she says that she does not feel God's presence. Again on Day 19 she says that although she is aware of God's blessings, she does not experience God. However as Levertov goes through *The Spiritual Exercises* this changes and she becomes aware of the presence of God and has an experience of him. Levertov says that when she prays she does feel the presence of God the Father and God the Holy Spirit (Day 37). On Day 43 Levertov spends time reviewing all of the entries in her Ignatian Journal and notes that she does experience God in her life. Two days later she writes, 'God - creator, listener, that - which Is - Aware, fountain of goodness - I feel as a reality' (Day 45). Levertov's awareness of God's presence is bound up with the events of her daily life, as putting herself in the presence of God during meditation consists of recalling the ways God works in her life (Day 59). By Day 74 she feels that her faith in God, and the impulse to address him, has increased. It would appear that Levertov experiences a growing awareness of the presence and reality of God as she progresses through *The Spiritual Exercises.* By the end Levertov says that she has gained 'a greater degree of faith & trust' (Day 97).

This growth in faith and trust is reflected in Levertov's poetry. Three of the poems which can be dated to the time after she had completed the *Exercises* speak about an experience of God. Two poems, 'The Prayer Plant' and 'Altars' appear as drafts in the Red Notebook dated 26th May 1994. 'The Prayer Plant' describes the plant's longing for darkness and compares its folded leaves with a believer kneeling down to praise God:

> The way a shy believer,
> at last in solitude, at last,
> with what relief
> kneels down to praise you. (970)

In the Ignatian Journal, Levertov says that she had feelings towards God of gratitude, joy and amazement (Day 45) which are reflected in the believer's relief at being able to praise God. 'Altars' speaks about discovering God's presence in acts of kindness which reflects Levertov's growing awareness, while undertaking *The Spiritual Exercises,* that God's presence could be found in everyday life, including kindness and friendship:

Thy presence is made known
by untraced interventions
like those legendary baskets filled
with bread and wine, discovered
at the door by someone at wit's end
returning home empty-handed
after a day of looking for work. (974)

Levertov says in the Red Notebook that she started to write 'The Beginning of Wisdom' on 24th August 1994. The entry for that day also includes some notes for a workshop that Levertov was planning and says that she had an idea to 'develop close observation – imaginative seeing – Ignatian style.' Levertov was clearly conscious of *The Spiritual Exercises* as she began writing 'The Beginning of Wisdom'. In opening and closing lines of the poem she addresses God directly, as in a colloquy, 'You have brought me so far' (962). Levertov was able to develop this type of prayer as part of *The Spiritual Exercises*. She also questions God in lines 10-14:

Are you holding
the universe? You hold
onto my smallness. How do you grasp it
how does it not
slip away? (963)

This poem effectively uses an act of imaginative prayer from *The Spiritual Exercises* to personalise her theological questions. Levertov's colloquy affirms her faith and trust in God. The world is a speck of dust in the universe and she is a speck of dust moving across the world yet God holds onto the universe and holds onto her smallness.

I turn to Nielsen who traces the theme of grief throughout Levertov's collections and foregrounds a further change in her perspectives. Whereas in Levertov's earlier work lamentation is used as a form of protest against violent oppression, war and environmental destruction (128-130) in *Sands of the Well* grief often relates to 'purely individual concerns' (135). This sensitivity to personal grief is reflected in Levertov's Ignatian Journal. Levertov notes that as her physical energy declined, she became less sensitive to world suffering, but '<u>more</u> sensitive to the needs and sorrows of individual friends.' (Day 3). This

observation from the Ignatian Journal underscores the point made by Nielsen that Levertov's sense of grief was shifting from the political to the personal.

Nielsen focusses particular attention on Levertov's environmental poetry, contrasting earlier poems with those found in *Sands of the Well.* It appears that by the time Levertov wrote the later poems she had come to a sense of acceptance of grief and of the world as it is (134). In *Sands of the Well* environmental destruction is placed side by side with an affirmation of life (135) and Levertov celebrates the beauty of nature for its own sake. This contrasts with Levertov's previous ecological poetry where she gave a stark picture of environmental destruction and included details about the beauty of nature in order to heighten the sense of grief at its destruction.

Although Nielsen quotes from 'Silent Spring' and 'Two Threnodies and a Psalm' from Levertov's earlier collections, and 'In the Woods' from *Sands of the Well* to illustrate her points she does not undertake a close reading of them side by side. Looking at the three poems in some detail extends the comparison between them. 'Silent Spring' picks up the title of Rachel Carson's book and like the book focuses on the threat to wildlife posed by the use of chemicals. The poem begins by lulling the reader into a false sense of security. On the surface everything is fine with the environment:

> O, the great sky!
>
> Green and steep
> the solid waves of the land,
> breasts, shoulders, haunches,
> serene. (697)

The diction 'great'; 'steep'; 'solid' gives an impression of permanence. The land is seen as a powerful, indestructible body. The repetition of the long 'e' sound: 'Green'; 'steep'; 'serene' gives the sense that the earth will last forever. However, despite initial appearances the natural world is vulnerable as insect and plant life has already been destroyed:

> But listen …
>
> no crisp susurration of crickets.
> One lone frog. One lone
> faraway whippoorwill. Absence.

No hum, no whirr. (698)

The destruction has already happened and, in a note of irony, the instruction to listen draws attention to the absence of sound. ‘Susurration’ mimics the sound of the absent crickets and the short syllables underscore their fragility. Levertov paints a picture of the beauty of nature in these lines and in doing so makes its disappearance even more poignant.

‘Two Threnodies and a Psalm’ opens with the lines:

It is not approaching.
It has arrived.
We are not circumventing it.

It is happening.
It is happening now.
We are not preventing it.
We are within it. (815)

Levertov stresses the point that environmental destruction is not something that will happen in the future: it is a reality now. She makes use of repetition of ‘happening’ to underline both the urgency of the situation and the fact that the natural world is being damaged in the present. Levertov underlines these points by repeating ‘happening’ in alternate lines of the third stanza. She also attempts to distance the environmental damage from the world of the speaker: ‘The sound of its happening / is splitting other ears’ (815). However, it soon becomes clear that humans are very much affected by the destruction of the environment:

The body being savaged
is alive.
It is our own. (815)

The contrast between the longer first line and the two short lines creates a sense of shock. Levertov then employs extended metaphor: environmental destruction is an ‘eagle-vulture’ and a ‘heart-worm’ which are damaging the ‘liver’ and ‘heart’ of the earth (815). Faced with this threat people fail to act and do not see that their fate is inextricably linked with that of the world:

We don’t beat off the devouring beak,
the talons. We don’t dig out what burrows
into our core. *It is not*
our heart, we think (but do not say).
It is the world’s, poor world, but I

am other. (816)

The use of italics for direct speech gives these lines a visual distinction from the rest of the poem and thereby adds to the reader's perception of the separation between people and the natural world. However, towards the end of the poem Levertov repeats the possessive 'our' to stress the actual dependence of human well-being on the well-being of plants and animals and 'one' to highlight the unity between them:

Our flesh and theirs
one with the flesh of fruit and tree.

Our blood
one with the blood of whale and sparrow. (817)

The poem concludes with a plea to the Spirit to stir people into action:

Lift us to seize the present,
wrench it,
out of its downspin. (817)

Although the environment is being destroyed it is not too late to do something about it. Therefore the whole poem is a call to the reader to take notice and do something to prevent irreparable damage to the natural world before it is too late.

The present reality of environmental destruction is at the forefront in both 'Silent Spring' and 'Two Threnodies and a Psalm'. By contrast in 'In the Woods' the focus is on the beauty of the natural world in spite of the threat facing it:

Everything is threatened, but meanwhile
everything presents itself:
the trees, that day and night
steadily stand there, amassing
lifetimes and moss, the bushes
eager with buds sharp as green
pencil points. (939)

It is noticeable that the threat is only mentioned once in the first line. The image 'bushes / eager with buds sharp as green / pencil points' gives an impression of

the vibrancy and beauty of nature and extending the description of the bushes over three lines conveys to the reader that nature will continue exist in the future. The longevity of the natural world appears to be confirmed in the image of the lake 'always ready to change its skin' (939). It is only as the poem comes to a conclusion that there is a hint that all is not well and some species have already become extinct:

> Everything answers the rollcall,
> and even, as is the custom,
> speaks for those that are gone. (939)

Even though the environment is under threat Levertov focuses on the present beauty of nature. Unlike in her earlier work the threat of destruction is largely in the future. In 'In the Woods' Levertov holds environmental destruction and the beauty of nature in tension. The threat is unable to negate the beauty. This is a similar paradox to the one highlighted earlier when I discussed Levertov's awareness of the contrast between her personal blessings and the world's sufferings. The beauty of nature and environmental destruction seem to be antithetical yet both are true.

As NieIsen notes, by the time Levertov wrote the poems in *Sands of the Well* she writes about grief in a calm and distinctively open way (133). Protest has given way to acceptance and Levertov has changed her focus from the political to the personal. These changes coincide with the period when Levertov made *The Spiritual Exercises.* It seems plausible that these changes were influenced by her practice of meditation, especially in the light of Levertov's comments about her changed perspectives on suffering in her Ignatian Journal. As Jean Evans says in 'Experience and Convergence in Spiritual Direction' the process of discernment outlined by Ignatius encourages the exercitant to reflect on experience in an open way and to be 'indifferent' or objective when making decisions (271-272).

Neither Zlotkowski or Nielsen show awareness that Levertov made *The Spiritual Exercises* but Lacey writes about the influence of *The Spiritual Exercises* on her poetry. In 'Denise Levertov: Testimonies of the Lived Life' Lacey observes that Levertov had always meditated and used this as a basis for her creative work. Levertov consistently saw similarities between her own

writing and religious experience. However Lacey adds that *The Spiritual Exercises* gave Levertov a 'systematic technique' that first of all enriched her spiritual life but also enabled her to push her limits as a poet (245-246).

Focusing on 'The Conversion of Brother Lawrence' Lacey sees it as a 'colloquy rooted in the representation of place' between Levertov and Brother Lawrence (251). Lacey remarks that Levertov questions Brother Lawrence directly in a similar manner to the way to which Ignatius advises the exercitant to talk to God, Jesus or Mary (251):

> What leafless tree plunging
> into what pent sky was it
> convinced you Spring, bound to return
> in all its unlikelihood, was a word
> of God, a Divine message? (964)
>
> Was it elm, ash, poplar, a fruit tree, your rooted
> Twig-winged angel of annunciation? (965)

Then, according to Lacey, Levertov projects herself into Brother Lawrence's life, in the manner of an Ignatian meditation. Levertov does this in order to fulfil her desire to find a way out of her darkness, and to trust Brother Lawrence's joy (252, 255):

> Joyful, absorbed'
> you 'practised the presence of God' as a musician
> practises hour after hour his art:
> 'A stone before the carver,'
> you 'entered into yourself.' (966)

Lacey's suggestion that 'The Conversion of Brother Lawrence' is a colloquy is plausible. Levertov employed elements of colloquy in other poems written after she had completed *The Spiritual Exercises.* In 'Moments of Joy' from *This Great Unknowing: Last Poems,* for example, Levertov writes about times when she glimpses God's presence and concludes in a conversational way, 'That's how it is, Lord, sometimes / You seek, and I find' (1011). However Lacey's broader claim that Levertov used systematic techniques that she had acquired during her meditation to enrich her poetry can be disputed. Levertov shows insight of Brother Lawrence and his situation, and enters into a dialogue with him, but she does not use other Ignatian imaginative techniques widely elsewhere in *Sands*

of the Well. The absence of composition of place, application of senses and placing herself in the scene in *Sands of the Well* contrasts markedly with poems from Levertov's earlier collections. In 'Caedmon' for example, Levertov speaks in Caedmon's voice (766-767). In 'The Servant-Girl at Emmaus' Levertov imagines the servant-girl's thoughts as she serves a meal to Christ and the disciples (767-768). In 'St Thomas Didymus' Levertov uses different senses and becomes Thomas (844-847). If Levertov had used systematic techniques acquired from *The Spiritual Exercises* in her later poetry it is likely that she would have written more poems like these earlier ones in which she used composition of place or entered imaginatively into the experience of characters. 'Conversion of Brother Lawrence' is the one example of post-Ignatian poetry where Levertov empathises at length with a character's experience and uses something comparable to composition of place to describe his setting.

The influence of *The Spiritual Exercises* on the poetry of Levertov can be seen largely through the subtle changes of tone and perspective displayed in the poems of *Sands of the Well.* Her poems of social critique show less personal engagement than her previous work. When Levertov writes about environmental damage she shows more awareness of the present beauty of nature than she did in earlier work. These shifts are partly due to the fact that Levertov was in declining health and unable to be as physically active as she once was. However Ignatian meditation enables Levertov to come to terms with her changed situation and to reach new perspectives on the issue of suffering which are manifested in her poetry.

Making *The Spiritual Exercises* also led Levertov to develop her self-awareness as a poet. As she writes, Levertov becomes part of the mystery of being. Instead of only seeing the writing of poetry as a vocation which entails God calling the poet and inspiring her to write, Levertov now realises that God also inspires the reader as she reads and interprets poetry.

Over the period that she made *The Spiritual Exercises* Levertov developed a growing awareness of God which ties in with Paulin-Campbell's discovery that the women in her study had changed their images of God after

making *The Spiritual Exercises*. Levertov expresses her increasingly personal relationship with God in poetry.

Overall Leverov's work is influenced by the total process of meditation rather than by the text of *The Spiritual Exercises*. However, some of her poems contain ideas and language that mirror the ideas and language of the Ignatian Journal, the 'allegorical text', that she wrote while meditating. The inclusion of phrases from her reflections on *The Exercises* is reminiscent of Hopkins.

Surprisingly, given her earlier retelling of biblical stories in her poetry, Levertov does not write poems that take an imaginative approach to the Bible after she completed *The Spiritual Exercises*. Her poems that include material from the Bible express Levertov's struggle to take an imaginative, rather than an analytical, approach to scripture once she had become a Catholic. Her approach was dominated by a search for truth rather than allowing her imagination to reinterpret the Bible. Levertov uses gospel stories predominantly as hooks on which to hang her reflections on her own approach to faith. This places limits on the space between the poem and the biblical text and, apart from the conclusion of 'Poetics of Faith' where the reader can begin to grasp new possibilities in the story, there is not much room for what Tongue describes as the process of poetic paragesis.

Levertov addresses God directly in some of the poems from *Sands of the Well* and so affirms Spadaro's suggestion that some poems can cross the threshold between poetry and prayer and become prayers. This is strikingly the case with the poem ''Psalm Fragments'. Several of Levertov's poems echo language found in her Ignatian Journal illustrating the idea that prayer can cross the threshold between prayer and poetry.

Reading Levertov's poetry, taking into account her experience of *The Spiritual Exercises,* enables new layers of understanding of her work. While Zlotkowski and Nielsen describe shifts and changes of tone when poems from *Sands of the Well* are compared with earlier work they are unable to explain why the changes they observe have taken place. Reading the poems in the light of Levertov's making of *The Spiritual Exercises* takes their work further, enabling the reader to understand why Levertov's perspective changed.

Levertov's Ignatian Journal uncovers the thought process behind a number of the poems. While comparing different drafts of poems with published work can aid readers and critics in their interpretation of poetry, the existence of the Ignatian Journal, and the access it gives to Levertov's thoughts as she meditated, adds another source to understand her later poetry.

Exploring Levertov's work does not enable me to address all of my research questions thoroughly. In particular the lack of re-telling of biblical stories in Levertov's poems means that I leave my second research question about the impact of Ignatian meditation on the retelling of biblical stories on poetry largely unanswered. Likewise it has not been possible to have a detailed discussion about the relationship between poetry and prayer, especially about whether or not poems can cross the threshold from prayer to poetry. I will explore these questions subsequently in my discussion of Hughes, and in my reflection on my own work.

Chapter 3 Gymnastics for the Imagination: The Spiritual Exercises and the Poetry of Ted Hughes

In this chapter I discuss the influence of *The Spiritual Exercises of St Ignatius* on the poetry of Ted Hughes. Unlike Levertov, Hughes did not make *The Spiritual Exercises* with the aid of a spiritual director. Hughes owned a 1963 edition of *The Spiritual Exercises*[1] and so it is most likely that he read the book then practised the meditational techniques recommended by them as an aid to stimulate his imagination. Hughes had already seen the value of meditation as a method to facilitate imagination in writing.[2] Levertov made *The Spiritual Exercises* as a way to discern her vocation. She came to *The Exercises* as a practising Catholic and, in contrast to her earlier work, this made her hesitant to use her imagination to retell Bible stories in her later poems. Hughes did not identify with a religious faith but nevertheless his poetry draws extensively on the Bible.[3] Given their different motivations and starting points, Levertov and Hughes are influenced by *The Spiritual Exercises* in different ways. I argue in this chapter that shifts in Hughes' poetry from *Crow* onwards, especially his deeper engagement with the Bible, can be traced back to his encounter with *The Spiritual Exercises*.

Two people who knew Hughes write about his familiarity with *The Spiritual Exercises.* Daniel Weissbort in 'Ted Hughes and Translation' says that Hughes was interested in mental disciplines such as memory training and writes:

> Hughes continued to train his mind and remained interested in various mental disciplines, for instance The Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius Loyola, founder of the Jesuits.[4]

Weissbort implies that Hughes' interest in *The Spiritual Exercises* was not a passing one but continued over a period of time. Ann Skea writing in, 'Re: Ted Hughes and the Spiritual Exercises of St Ignatius' says that Hughes

[1] Hughes copy of *The Spiritual Exercises of St Ignatius* is listed in the library catalogue of Emory University as the 1963 Burns & Oates edition, translated by Thomas Corbishley. Rose Library (MARBL) Locked Stacks (BX2179 .L7 E5 1963 Hughes)
[2] See Hughes 'Notes on the Chronological Order of Sylvia Plath's Poems' (191).
[3] See David Troupes 'Knowing the Bible Right Down to the Bone; Ted Hughes and Christianity',
[4] As this article is online I am unable to cite a page reference.

practised *The Spiritual Exercises* and possibly saw them as a way of tapping into subconscious energies to gain inspiration.

There are a number of references to *The Spiritual Exercises* in Hughes' writing. It is useful to look at these references in chronological order. First of all, in a talk delivered by Hughes as part of the BBC series *Religion in its Contemporary Context,* which was broadcast in January 1967[5] and included in the book *Poetry in The Making*, Hughes contrasts the critical exegesis of the gospels with an imaginative approach:

> You can imagine who is likely to be getting the most out of reading the gospels, for instance: the one who discusses every sentence word by word and argues the contradictions and questions every obscurity and challenges every absurdity, or the one who imagines, if only for a few seconds, but with the shock of full reality, just what it must have been like to be standing near when the woman touched Christ's garment and he turned round (118-119).

Hughes draws a contrast between an intellectual approach to a text and the emotional one. Through the words 'shock' and 'touched' Hughes indicates that an imaginative, fully engaged reading of the gospels does more than aid the reader to think more deeply about the stories. Using the imagination enables the reader to become an active participant in the gospel scenes. Although Hughes does not cite *The Spiritual Exercises* in his talk, the imaginative approach he describes sounds very much like the entering into scenes in the life of Christ recommended by Ignatius.

The next reference occurs in the epilogue of *Gaudete. Gaudete* tells the story of Rev. Nicholas Lumb who is carried away into the other world by spirits. During his absence the spirits place a changeling, who looks exactly like Lumb, in charge of the parish. However, the changeling is not human, and misunderstands his role as a parish priest. He organises the women of the parish into a coven so that he may father a Messiah. The changeling is eventually killed by the men of the parish and the original Lumb reappears in the West of Ireland. Here he composes hymns and psalms to an unnamed female deity (9). Some children, who have met Lumb and have his notebook, visit their parish priest:

[5] See *Poetry in the Making* (11) and *Genome Radio Times 1923-2009*

> In a straggly sparse village on the West Coast of Ireland, on a morning in May – a morning of gust and dazzle – three small girls came to the priest where he sat in his study gazing at an open page of St Ignatius (173).

The word 'gazing' implies that the priest is meditating rather than simply reading the text of *The Spiritual Exercises*. As the priest later on 'deciphers' Lumb's notebook (175), Hughes could be suggesting that meditation was a necessary precursor to understanding spiritual realities, and in particular to having a relationship with the Goddess of Lumb's hymns and psalms.

Hughes names *The Spiritual Exercises* in 'A Word about Writing in Schools' which dates from 1989. Here Hughes refers to *The Exercises* as a method of training the imagination:

> The most celebrated handbook of instructions on the training and strengthening of imagination is St Ignatius Loyola's book of Spiritual Exercises. These exercises are, basically, gymnastics for the imagination. They are based on the understanding that the more powerfully real the imaginative grasp, the more accurate and lively and as-if-real will be the perceptions, feelings and experiences that flow from it (25).

Hughes points to the capacity of the imagination to give a person a real experience of the story and makes links between *The Spiritual Exercises* and the development of the imagination. Although imaginative development is vital for all writers it had additional significance for Hughes. In his 1976 essay 'Myth and Education' Hughes writes about the existence of two worlds, an outer world which can be perceived by the senses (143) and an inner world which is 'indescribable, impenetrable, and invisible' (144). Hughes explains that as people live in both worlds they need some faculty which will help them make sense of both. He believes that this faculty is the imagination (150). In his work Hughes sought to use his imaginative capacity to reconcile inner and outer worlds. Ignatian meditation was one method, alongside mnemonic techniques,[6] that Hughes could use to make his imagination more responsive and able to carry out this task. Perhaps Hughes was thinking about composition of place and application of the senses as ways in which

[6] See Ann Skea 'Poetry and Magic' (40).

he could train his imagination in order to develop his writing to make it 'more accurate and lively'.

Hughes repeats the metaphor of gymnastics in a manuscript *Memory Book Vol. 2,* possibly written between 1980 and 1990. Hughes writes, 'The Spiritual Exercises of St Ignatius Loyola are basically a gymnasium for imaginative actualization.' This phrase 'imaginative actualization' implies that Ignatian meditation enables something that is imagined to become real or 'actual' for the person meditating. Then, as the scene becomes real in the mind of the exercitant, it becomes vivid and memorable. Later on in the *Memory Book* Hughes uses the word 'gymnasium' again to describe another outcome of meditation:

> The Spiritual Exercises of St Ignatius Loyola are a gymnasium for precisely this faculty. The ability to achieve the most imaginative actualization possible; In those particular exercises the purpose is to adapt to virtual participation in Christ's life & death, even a reliving of his life and death: subjective re-enactment of it all & all it entailed & a hallucinatory experience of being present as an observer.

Here Hughes says that undertaking *The Spiritual Exercises* can enable the exercitant to have a perception of being present during the events of Christ's life and death. The person who meditates thereby gains first-hand experience of stories recounted in the gospels. This experience might give the exercitant a depth of understanding of the significance of those incidents which cannot be accessed by other methods. It is possible that Hughes employed Ignatian meditation in order to gain a new understanding of biblical material. Hughes believed that Christianity obscured the underlying truth that the Bible was meant to convey.[7] The experience of meditation might have led him to feel that he was able to access a reality within the Bible that centuries of Christian religion had concealed.

In *Shakespeare and the Goddess of Complete Being,* published in 1992, Hughes includes *The Spiritual Exercises* in a list of ideas and methods

[7] See Hughes' letter to Moelwyn Merchant (577).

that Shakespeare would have been aware of as he wrote his poetry and plays:

> The idea of as-if-actual visualization as the first practical essential for effective meditation (as in St Ignatius Loyola's *Spiritual Disciplines*, as well as in Cabbala).
>
> The idea of meditation as a conjuring, by ritual magic, of hallucinatory figures – with whom conversations can be held, and who communicate intuitive, imaginative vision and clairvoyance (33).

We see that Hughes thought that the imaginative visualisation found in *The Spiritual Exercises* is an essential element of meditation. Meditation then allows a person to conjure up figures with whom they can talk. This conversation leads to the ability to grasp spiritual reality. As Hughes refers to *The Spiritual Exercises* in the context of his belief that Shakespeare engaged with the myth of the Great Goddess, it is possible that Hughes used the imaginative methodology of Ignatius to conjure up the figure of the Goddess and communicate with her as part of his writing process. Earlier in his introduction to *Shakespeare and the Goddess of Complete Being,* Hughes writes about the role of Mary, as the beneficiary of innate Goddess worship (10-11). If Mary is, as Hughes believed, a form of the Goddess, it is a short step to see Ignatius' recommendation that exercitants should address colloquies to Mary (*§*63) as an invitation to invoke the Goddess through meditation.

The references I have highlighted support the impression given by Weissbort that Hughes drew on *The Spiritual Exercises* for a sustained period of time from around 1966 to at least 1992. The first date of 1966 coincides with Hughes' visit to Doonreagan on the West Coast of Ireland. According to Thomas West in *Ted Hughes,* Hughes did not write much poetry from 1963 until he went to Ireland (59). Although Hughes was not in Ireland for long he looked back on it as a time when he had a personal breakthrough and a productive period in his writing. *The Letters of Ted Hughes* includes a retrospective letter to Hughes' son Nicholas:

> What it meant—as turned out to be true—was that going to Ireland broke me out of that arid sterile alienation from myself that my life at

> C.G. had trapped me into, and with a single stride plunged me right into the productive, fruitful thick of my best chances. And in Ireland I did make a big breakthrough—in my writing and in everything to do with myself (702).

Hughes may be alluding to his time of breakthrough when he sets the *Gaudete* epilogue on the West Coast of Ireland. By using this setting Hughes links *The Spiritual Exercises* to Ireland. There is a parallel to be drawn between Hughes' time in Ireland and the time that he spent with Sylvia Plath at the artistic community at Yaddo in 1959. Plath had been suffering a period of writers block before going to Yaddo. According to Hughes in 'Notes on the Chronological Order of Sylvia Plath's Poems' they devised 'exercises of meditation and invocation' which revitalised Plath's work (191).

Hughes' comments give indications about how *The Spiritual Exercises* could influence his poetry. Compared with earlier work we might expect to see the following features in his poems from 1966 onwards. Firstly, an engagement with biblical material that shows that Hughes' understanding of it is moving in new and surprising directions. Secondly, an invocation of the Goddess that reflects Hughes' desire to reassert her importance.

I now attempt close readings of a range of Hughes' work beginning with a selection of poems from *Crow: From the life and Songs of the Crow.* Hughes began to write *Crow* during his time in Ireland. I then look at the prose epilogue of *Gaudete* and comment on some of the epilogue poems. Finally I consider some poems from the 1980s taken from *River*. The poems chosen for close reading are a selection of those that Hughes wrote between 1966 and 1992. This period coincides with the time span that he mentions *The Spiritual Exercises* in his prose writing. I will also compare this sample with earlier work.

Crow draws on Hughes' developing interest in mythology. In utilising and adapting myths in his poetry Hughes was following the practice of a number of twentieth century poets including W.B. Yeats, T.S. Eliot and Ezra Pound.[8] In 'Myths, Metres, Rhythms', Hughes says that mythologies are 'picture languages that we invent to embody and make accessible … the

[8] See J. Nohrnberg's article on Myth in *The Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics.*

deeper shared understandings which keep us intact as a group' (310). Hughes compares these shared understandings to a bank account upon which every member of the group can draw. As the wealth in this account is spiritual or psychological, the more it is used the greater it becomes. Myths are tokens with which members gain access to the account, and touching just one token is sufficient to release all the riches in the entire account (310). It is, therefore, clear that Hughes saw myths and legends as being immensely powerful because they encapsulate shared human understanding drawn from the inner world. This was one reason why he was so keen to use them in his writing and to find different ways, including meditation, to release their meaning.

Smith in her PhD thesis "*Poetry in the Making": Ted Hughes and the Art of Writing* notices that the writing of *Crow* coincides with Hughes' interest in shamanism (158). Hughes in 'Regenerations' describes shamanism as 'a personal, poetic, profound engagement with the miraculous forces of the universe' (58). He does not see shamanism as a distinct religion but as 'a technique for moving in a state of ecstasy among the various spiritual realms' (56). Whilst the shaman could be chosen in different ways, Hughes writes that the most common way was by the spirits themselves through the medium of a dream (57). Later on Hughes compares the shamanistic experience with the romantic poetic temperament and sees it as underpinning fairy tales, myths and epics:

> And the initiation dreams, the general schema of the shamanic flight, the figures and adventures they encounter, are not a shaman monopoly: they are, in fact, the basic experience of the poetic temperament we call 'romantic'. In a shamanizing society, *Venus and Adonis*, some of Keats's longer poems, *The Wanderings of Oisin*, *Ash Wednesday*, would all qualify their authors for the magic drum; while the actual flight lies perceptibly behind many of the best fairy tales, behind myths such as those of Orpheus and Herakles, and behind the epics of Gilgamesh and Odysseus (58).

Hughes says that poets such as Shakespeare, Keats, Yeats and T.S. Eliot share common ground with a shaman as all of them have had a similar experience of another spiritual reality. Terry Gifford and Neil Roberts in *Ted*

Hughes: A Critical Study draw parallels between shamanism and Hughes' own poetry:

> It is clearly impossible for a modern English poet to *be* a shaman, but equally clearly Hughes's preoccupations with the unconscious, with death, with the animal world and mythology show an affinity with the shaman's function. What a poet such as Hughes ultimately shares with the shaman is a concern for psychic equilibrium (20-21).

Gifford and Roberts identify similarities between the function of the shaman and the role of Hughes as a poet. Although it would be incorrect to describe Hughes as a shaman, he was clearly interested in the shaman's ability to unite the inner and outer worlds. Smith argues that the rapid method of composition that Hughes employed when he wrote *Crow* is in keeping with his ideas about shamanistic practice (149). Hughes' notion that Ignatian meditation could lead to 'a hallucinatory experience' is also compatible with the ecstatic facets of shamanism.

Moulin writing in 'Ted Hughes's Anti-Mythic Method' assumes that Hughes intends to 'wage systematic attacks against the Old and the New Testament' in *Crow* (89). However Troupes in 'Hughes and Religion' presents an alternative viewpoint which sees Hughes not as anti-Christian but as a poet who engages productively with Christian themes (181). Troupes' interpretation goes some way towards explaining why ideas about Creation, Fall and Crucifixion feature so prominently in Hughes' work and in *Crow* in particular. My approach, which envisages that Hughes meditated on biblical passages, takes Troupes' argument further by suggesting that Hughes invested a significant amount of time in attempting to draw out what he saw as the real meaning of the biblical stories. It is plausible, given Hughes' recommendation of *The Spiritual Exercises* as a tool to develop the imagination, to suggest that he employed the visualisation techniques of Ignatian meditation to enable him to accomplish some of this work. Hughes was not just simply adopting Christian language but was working with it and reinterpreting it. Hughes had an argument with orthodox Christianity but nonetheless saw biblical symbols as immensely powerful.

In a number of the *Crow* poems Hughes inverts Judeo-Christian mythology and some of these are of particular interest when undertaking an Ignatian reading of his work. In 'Lineage' Hughes uses language which reflects the Authorised Version of the Bible:

> In the beginning was Scream
> Who begat Blood
> […]
> Who begat Mary
> Who begat God
> Who begat Nothing (2)

Gifford and Roberts in their analysis of 'Lineage' say that it utilises 'the Old Testament style of genealogy' (128). However considering the focus on meditation on the life of Christ in *The Spiritual Exercises* there are two New Testament passages that could underlie this poem.[9] The first of these is the prologue of John's gospel, 'In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God' (John 1:1). The second is the genealogy of Christ in Matthew:

> The book of the generation of Jesus Christ, the son of David, the son of Abraham. Abraham begat Isaac; and Isaac begat Jacob; and Jacob begat Judas and his brethren; … and Jacob begat Joseph the husband of Mary, of whom was born Jesus, who is called Christ (Matthew 1:1-2, 16).

Hughes replaces 'the Word' (or Logos) of John's Gospel with 'Scream'. Here the Judeo-Christian God, represented by the Logos, is replaced by a scream. The word 'scream' indicates the state of chaos and suffering that Hughes thought was brought about by orthodox belief in the Christian God. Matthew's genealogy leads up to the birth of Christ. This is alluded to by Hughes in the lines 'Who begat Mary / Who begat God' but this is not the climax of the poem. Hughes correctly says that God 'begat Nothing' as Christ was childless but then in an ironic parody of Matthew's genealogy Hughes continues to write. Hughes' genealogy leads to the appearance of Crow who is not the Christ but a creature who is driven by his own instincts for survival:

[9] Susanna Lindström in *Nature, Environment and Poetry: Ecocriticism and the poetics of Seamus Heaney and Ted Hughes* sees the link between *'Lineage'* and John 1:1 but does not mention Matthew's genealogy (31).

Who begat Crow

Screaming for Blood
Grubs, crusts
Anything

Trembling featherless elbows in the nest's filth (2)

Here the word 'Screaming' looks back to the beginning of the poem and hints that the struggle for survival, rather than the design of a benevolent God, underpins creation. The naturalistic tone of the last line contrasts with the surrealism of the rest of the poem. The poem's lack of punctuation, even at the end, suggests a world that is out of control and anarchic.

'Apple Tragedy' is one of several poems that is based on the story of the Fall in Genesis. Ignatius asks exercitants to meditate on this story at the start of the First Week (*§*51). In the first Genesis creation story God rests on the seventh day after creation is complete. Hughes takes this idea as the first line of 'Apple Tragedy'. However, in Hughes' poem it is the serpent who rests and not God. Hughes then adapts the story of the Fall. God, rather than the serpent, is the cause of the Fall. He makes the apple into cider and offers it to the serpent, Adam and Eve. God is portrayed as an interloper and mischief maker rather than the creator who continually cares for creation:

So on the seventh day
The serpent rested.
God came up to him.
'I've invented a new game,' he said.

The serpent stared in surprise
At this interloper.
But God said: 'You see this apple?
I squeeze it and look – Cider.' (72)

Hughes continues his adaptation. Genesis links the Fall with the beginnings of enmity between the serpent, humankind and the origin of sexual desire:

> And the LORD God said unto the serpent, Because thou hast done this … I will put enmity between thee and the woman, and between thy seed and her seed; it shall bruise thy head, and thou shalt bruise his heel. Unto the woman he said … thy desire *shall be* to thy husband, and he shall rule over thee (Genesis 3: 14-16).

According to Hughes, Eve seduces the serpent, rather than being tricked by him. Eve then stamps on the serpent and later Adam smashes a chair on its head. Hughes concludes the poem with a twist. He quotes from the account of the baptism of Christ in the synoptic gospels, 'And lo a voice from heaven, saying, This is my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased' (Matthew 3:17 // Mark 1:11, Luke 3:22). However despite the conflation of the Genesis story with the story of Christ the result is not redemption. Hughes writes, 'And God says: 'I am well pleased' / And everything goes to hell.' (72)

Hughes expands the idea that the Christian religion, as it is usually understood, is unable to offer redemption in 'Crow Blacker than Ever'. At the start of the poem God is depicted as being disgusted with man and turns towards heaven. Man is disgusted with God and turns towards Eve. This picture of God who turns the other way when faced with problems in the world deliberately contradicts the traditional Christian idea of God. In *The Spiritual Exercises* at the start of Week 2 God sees what humankind is doing in the world and decides to redeem humanity by becoming incarnate (*§*107-108). In 'Crow Blacker than Ever' it is Crow who sees what is happening and decides to try to sort out the situation by forcing an incarnation on God. Hughes' words allude to the crucifixion:

> But Crow Crow
>
> Crow nailed them together,
>
> Nailing Heaven and earth together –
>
> So man cried, but with God's voice.
> And God bled, but with man's blood. (62)

In the couplet Hughes subtly suggests an orthodox Christian understanding of the incarnation and crucifixion. But the following lines appear to overturn this idea:

> Then Heaven and earth creaked at the joint
> Which became gangrenous and stank –
> A horror beyond redemption.
>
> The agony did not diminish.

Man could not be man nor God God. (62)

Troupes in *Ted Hughes and Christianity* interprets the line 'Man could not be man nor God God' as further evidence that 'Crow Blacker than Ever' 'embraces the central Christian belief that Christ unites God and humanity' (106). Despite agreeing with much of Troupes' interpretation of this poem, I suggest that this line reflects Hughes' view that an orthodox reading of Christian religion, especially that of Protestantism, caused problems by distancing humanity from the divine. Hughes was attempting to highlight the consequences of this distancing and make a plea for a radical re-reading of Christianity, one that truly unites God with humanity.

Although Hughes alludes to Christian themes from his earliest published work[10] it is worth comparing poems from *Crow* with earlier poems from *Wodwo* where Hughes refers explicitly to biblical texts. Troupes, in *Ted Hughes and Christianity,* remarks on a fundamental shift in Hughes' treatment of the Bible. In his earlier poetry, culminating in *Wodwo,* Hughes 'enacts a rejection of religion'. The later collections, beginning with *Crow*, are a 'restaging of the Christian drama of salvation' (4).

In the first part of 'Gog', from *Wodwo,* Hughes turns to the book of Revelation. Gog is woken up by God's claim to be 'Alpha and Omega':

I woke to a shout: 'I am Alpha and Omega.'
Rocks and a few trees trembled
[…]

The dog's god is a scrap dropped from the table.
The mouse's saviour is a ripe wheat grain.
[…]

I am massive on earth. My feetbones beat on the earth
Over the sounds of motherly weeping … (150)

There are ideas in 'Gog' that are developed further in Hughes' later writing. For example in 'Gog' Hughes describes a God who claims to be all powerful,

[10] See Troupes' discussion of allusions to the crucifixion in 'The Hawk in the Rain' in *Ted Hughes and Christianity* (78-84)

yet there is a hint in the poem that this power is not recognised by creation. This anticipates the powerless God of *Crow.* Secondly the animals of 'Gog' are absorbed by the search for food and see this, rather than God, as the means of their survival which echoes Crow's preoccupation with eating. Gog hears 'the sounds of motherly weeping' which is possibly a reference to the Goddess who would be a key protagonist in *Gaudete*. However in 'Gog', unlike later poems, the biblical text is a starting point and there is no ongoing engagement with it throughout the poem. The deeper exploration of biblical texts in *Crow* and the central role of the Goddess in *Gaudete* may be the result of Ignatian meditation in which the person meditating spends a significant amount of time imaginatively immersed in biblical stories.

'Theology', like some poems from *Crow,* is a rewriting of the story of the Fall in Genesis:

> No, the serpent did not
> Seduce Eve to the apple.
> […]
>
> Adam ate the apple.
> Eve ate Adam.
> The serpent ate Eve.
> This is the dark intestine.
>
> The serpent, meanwhile,
> Sleeps his meal off in Paradise –
> Smiling to hear
> God's querulous calling. (149)

There are similarities between 'Theology' and *Crow.* The line 'God's querulous calling' in particular prefigures the ineffective God of *Crow.* However Hughes' retelling of the Genesis myth of creation in 'Theology' contains none of the humour, irony and subtle interplay found in the later *Crow* poems. Smith's work on the manuscripts of *Crow* shows that the poems were written rapidly with fewer drafts than his earlier collections (167). Yet despite this Hughes' poems in *Crow* display a depth of engagement with the Bible. This depth intimates that Hughes spent time engaging with biblical material before he began to write.

Hughes' poem 'Crow Alights' talks about creation, but is not a rewriting of the Genesis creation myth. In his meditation on The Incarnation, Ignatius directs exercitants to 'see the great extent of the surface of the earth' (*§*103). Crow sees the surface of the earth in 'Crow Alights':

> Crow saw the herded mountains, steaming in the morning.
> And he saw the sea
> […]
>
> And he shivered with the horror of Creation.
>
> In the hallucination of the horror
> He saw this shoe, with no sole, rain-sodden,
> Lying on a moor.
> And there was this garbage can, bottom rusted away,
> A playing place for the wind, in a waste of puddles. (10)

Here Hughes refers to 'the horror of Creation.' In his earlier collections Hughes has an unromanticised vision of the natural world, often describing the cruelty of nature. The hawk in 'The Hawk in the Rain', for example, is shown plunging to its death:

> Coming the wrong way, suffers the air, hurled upside down,
> Fall from his eye, the ponderous shires crash on him,
> The horizon traps him; the round angelic eye
> Smashed, mix his heart's blood with the mire of the land. (11)

Elsewhere Hughes acknowledges the continual battle for survival in nature. In 'To Paint a Water Lily' from *Lupercal* 'There are battle-shouts / And death-cries everywhere hereabouts' (29). However Hughes does not refer to the cruelty of nature when he speaks of the horror of Creation in 'Crow Alights'. Instead he highlights the spoiling of the natural world by humankind: the rotting shoe discarded in the countryside and the abandoned, rusted garbage can. Despite the occurrence of a number of poems about nature in his first two collections, Hughes does not consider how humans affect the environment apart from a brief mention in 'Fourth of July' from *Lupercal:*

> The hot shallows and seas we bring our blood from
> Slowly dwindled; cooled
> To sewage estuary, to trout-stocked tarn.
> Even the Amazon's taxed and patrolled (20)

Here, Hughes touches on a concern for the environment which would feature more prominently in later collections.

Crow marks a change in tone as Hughes begins to engage seriously with environmental issues in his poetry. Yvonne Reddick in *Ted Hughes Environmentalist and Ecopoet* charts the development of Hughes' interest in environmental issues. She sees the 1960s as pivotal for Hughes. This decade saw a growth in awareness of the impact of human activity on climate, species extinction, the dangers of artificial chemicals and the ecological impact of warfare (149). Reddick states that Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring* was an important catalyst for Hughes' environmental awareness (151).

Lindström, however, stresses the influence of Lynn White's article 'The Historical Roots of our Ecologic Crisis' published in 1967 while Hughes was writing *Crow* (22). White's thesis is that the Judeo-Christian creation story established a dualism between humanity and nature. The Christian religion, with its dogma that humans can exploit the natural world (1205), is responsible for the ecological crisis. White's approach is similar to Hughes' stance that Christianity causes humankind's problems. Yet White and Hughes ultimately part company when suggesting a solution. White believes that the early Franciscans offer a fruitful alternative view of the relationship of humankind and creation (1207) but Hughes in his review of Max Nicholson's *The Environmental Revolution* holds that people need to rediscover the Goddess who has been replaced by the male God of Christianity, especially in its Protestant form (129, 132-133).

Encountering *The Spiritual Exercises* in the mid-1960s, when the environmental movement was gaining momentum, may have added impetus to Hughes' environmental poetics. In the 'Contemplation to Attain Love of God' Ignatius states that God lives in all creation, naming the elements, plants and animals before humans (*§*235), which could imply that that the environment should be cared for as an embodiment of God.[11] This has

[11] For contemporary Jesuit ecological readings see James Profit 'The Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius and Ecology' and Kevin O'Brien *The Ignatian Adventure: Experiencing the Spiritual Exercises of St Ignatius in Daily Life* (69)

parallels with Hughes' view of the Goddess who is discovered in nature. The meditation on The Incarnation focuses on the negative aspects of human activity in the world.

Following *Crow* Hughes wrote *Gaudete* which draws on the myth of the Great Goddess. Susan Bassnett in *Ted Hughes* states that the Goddess is a recurring presence in Hughes' work and points to Robert Graves' book *The White Goddess* as the source of some of Hughes' ideas (65). Bassnett says that Graves believed that the oldest form of religion was the worship of the moon Goddess in her three forms: a young beautiful woman, a mature maternal woman and a hag whose task was to lay out the dead (66). These three aspects of the Goddess, identified by Graves, are echoed by Hughes in *Shakespeare and the Goddess of Complete Being* when he speaks of the Goddess as 'the Mother, the Sacred Bride, and the Queen of the Underworld' (7). Gifford and Roberts explain Hughes' beliefs about the accessibility of the Goddess:

> The Goddess is not separate from the world of things, and she is present also in the human unconscious, accessible to disciplined techniques of imagination, states of meditation, ecstasy, extremes of anguish or bliss (19).

Hughes saw Ignatian meditation as a method to train the imagination and as a way to invoke hallucinatory figures, a position compatible with Gifford and Roberts' view that Hughes deployed disciplined techniques of imagination to summon the Goddess and access her power as he wrote.

Hughes introduces the Goddess in the prologue to Gaudete, when Lumb encounters a woman who, unbeknown to him, is the Goddess. She appears to be dying:

> He declares he can do nothing
> He protests there is nothing he can do
> For this beautiful woman who seems to be alive and dead.
> He is not a doctor. He can only pray. (15)

Hughes uses Lumb's expression of powerlessness to communicate the inadequacy of the Protestant religion, which relies on human knowledge and science, and denies its spiritual roots. Protestant prayers are empty and meaningless when faced with disaster and spiritual crisis. In order to save

the Goddess, Lumb must be taken away to the spirit world. When he re-emerges in Ireland Lumb will have been rescued by the Goddess and will be able to compose genuine hymns and psalms. Hughes turns the Christian myth of salvation through a male Messiah on its head.

Hughes refers to *The Spiritual Exercises* in the epilogue of *Gaudete* which concludes with Lumb's poems. The Catholic Priest has been meditating using *The Spiritual Exercises* before he hears the girls' story and receives Lumb's notebook from them. He then speaks to the girls about Creation before copying the notebook:

> And as he spoke the priest was suddenly carried away by his words. His thoughts flew up into a great fiery space, and who knows what spark had jumped on to him from the flushed faces of the three girls? He seemed to be flying into an endless, blazing sunrise, and he described the first coming of Creation …
>
> He opened the notebook and began to decipher the words. He found a pen and clean paper and began to copy out the verses (175).

Sagar, writing about the epilogue in *The Art of Ted Hughes*, contrasts *The Spiritual Exercises* with the revelation received by the Catholic Priest. Sagar equates Ignatian spirituality with an asceticism that is the opposite of the priest's life-affirming vision of Creation. He comments, 'This is a far cry from the *Spiritual Exercises* of St Ignatius: 'We must make ourselves indifferent to all created things.' ' (211).[12] Sagar draws a parallel between the priest's spirituality and that of Gerard Manley Hopkins. He sees both as being close to pantheism and comments that Hopkins expressed this spirituality 'even in his commentary on the *Spiritual Exercises*' (212). It is ironic that in making this comparison, Sagar does not see a link between Ignatian meditation and a spirituality that focuses on creation. Carls Rainer, writing in 'Finding God in all Things: panentheistic features in the *Spiritual Exercises* of St. Ignatius', supports the view that Ignatian spirituality includes the idea that God is immanent in the world (750) and saw a close connection between creation and redemption (752). Ignatius' theology was not dualistic and saw God as communicating and expressing love through creation (760). Sagar concludes his analysis of the prose epilogue by remarking that the

[12] Sagar repeats this interpretation in *Ted Hughes and Nature: 'Terror and Exultation'* (155)

priest puts Ignatius aside before copying out Lumb's poems (212). Again Sagar hints at an antipathy between Ignatian spirituality and the poems, rather than considering that the priest is open towards Lumb's poems, and is able to decipher them, precisely because he has made *The Spiritual Exercises*.

Unlike Sagar, who sees an antagonism between Ignatian spirituality and one that affirms creation, I propose that both Hughes' priest and Hopkins have drawn their affirmation of creation from Ignatius. There are several features of Hughes' description of the priest which suggest that he is receiving a revelation through meditating. Firstly, the priest 'was suddenly carried away by his words' which suggest that he was having a deep spiritual experience. Secondly, Hughes describes the priest flying into 'a great fiery space' or 'endless blazing sunrise'. The priest talks about the first coming of Creation as though he were actually present in the scene, a characteristic that Hughes ascribes to Ignatian meditation.

Sagar discusses the epilogue poems and summarises Hughes' achievement:

> But though the poems often start with what look like startling but disconnected images, by the end they have been shaped by the controlling religious feeling into a unity which makes it appropriate to think of them as hymns (224).

Sagar also speaks about the atonement achieved by these poems but concludes by contrasting them with 'the arid spirituality of St Ignatius' (225). Sagar does not contemplate the possibility that Hughes may have arrived at his imagery, and the poems achieved atonement, through the medium of Ignatian meditation.

By contrast Gifford and Roberts write of the epilogue poems:

> They are the closest Hughes has come to being literally a devotional poet. They uniformly have a solemn preoccupied intensity, like the words of a man possessed, and most of them are addressed to the goddess who, in the 'spirit world', was eventually reborn through Lumb (192).

By speaking of the intensity of the epilogue poems and saying that they are 'like the words of a man possessed', Gifford and Roberts may be approaching the truth about their method of composition. Hughes has written about the power of *The Spiritual Exercises* to conjure up hallucinatory figures thereby giving the person meditating an intense spiritual experience. As Gifford and Roberts indicate there are a number of examples of direct address to the Goddess in the epilogue poems. The poem 'What will you make of half a man' (176) takes the form of a question to the Goddess. In 'Who are you?' (177) the speaker questions the Goddess about her nature, as expressed in the cruelty of the natural world. In addition to poems which question the Goddess, Hughes includes some in which his speaker talks to the Goddess about her presence and relationship to creation and the worshipper:

> I hear your congregations at their rapture
>
> Cries from birds, long ago perfect
> And from the awkward gullets of beasts
> That will not chill into syntax. (176)
>
> Hearing your moan echo, I chill. I shiver. …
>
> I know
> The flowers also look for you, and die looking. …
>
> Each of us is nothing
> But the fleeting warm pressure
>
> Of your footfall (194-195)

These poems have a prayer-like quality and intimacy that indicate a deep relationship with the Goddess. Other epilogue poems, although not addressing the Goddess, speak of a similar tender yet powerful relationship. In 'I watched a wise beetle' Hughes speaks about the Goddess who beckons her devotee (179). Elsewhere Hughes describes the coming of the 'fullness' of the Goddess which is experienced as a shocking force like electricity (180).

It would be tempting to claim that these epilogue poems, with their intimate address to the Goddess, take the form of Ignatian colloquies.

However Skea in 'Ted Hughes' Vacanas: The Difficulties of a Bridegroom' contends that Hughes' model was A.K. Ramanujan's book, *Speaking of Siva* (81).[13] Eighteen of the poems from the epilogue are taken from Hughes' *Vacana Notebook* that he worked on following his reading of Ramanujan (83). Yet Skea states that by the time he wrote the vacanas included in the epilogue[14] Hughes was no longer following Ramanujan closely. Instead the poems were completely Hughes' own (85).

Despite the fact that their form is derived from vacanas, some of the language of the epilogue poems has biblical roots, possibly indicating the influence of *The Spiritual Exercises*. One example is 'I said goodbye to earth':

> I said goodbye to earth
> I stepped into the wind
> Which entered the tunnel of fire
> […]
> I arrived at light
> […]
> I saw the snowflake crucified
> Upon the nails of nothing
>
> I heard the atoms praying
> To enter his kingdom
> To be broken like bread
> On a dark sill, and to bleed. (186)

The first line and the phrases 'stepped into the wind', 'tunnel of fire' and 'arrived at light' gives this poem a mystical feeling. This may indicate a time of meditation that then led to a vivid spiritual experience. The mention of crucifixion and nails at the end of the second stanza recall gospel accounts of the crucifixion of Christ. The atoms' prayer to 'enter his kingdom' and to 'be broken like bread ... and to bleed' is evocative of the Last Supper:

> And as they were eating, Jesus took bread, and blessed it, and brake it, … And he took the cup, and gave thanks, and gave it to them, saying, Drink ye all of it; for this is my blood … I will not drink henceforth of this fruit of the vine, until that day when I drink it … in my Father's kingdom (Matthew 26: 26-29 // Mark 14: 22-25, Luke 22:17-20).

[13] Vacanas are Hindu devotional poems to the god Siva written in the Kannada language.
[14] For details of these poems see Ann Skea 'Ted Hughes' Vacanas: Chart'.

There are further examples of biblical language in the epilogue poems. Leonard Scigaj in *The Poetry of Ted Hughes: Form and Imagination* discusses 'The night wind, muscled with rain'. He notes that the speaker recoils from a visionary moment and then remarks that 'A voice quaking lit heaven / the stone tower flies' may allude to God's destruction of the Tower of Babel in Genesis 11 (197-198). The poem 'The glass blade is not without' concludes with the lines:

> Let your home
> Be my home. Your people
> My people. (190)

There are parallels with a verse from Ruth:

> And Ruth said, […] where thou lodgest, I will lodge: thy people shall be my people, and thy God my God (Ruth 1: 16).

Ruth turns from her own religion, which involved goddess worship, to the worship of the Judeo-Christian God, but Lumb moves in the opposite direction from being an Anglican priest to becoming a devotee of the Goddess.

Hughes wrote about the Goddess in his earlier work. He explains to Ekbert Faas in an interview included in *Ted Hughes: The Unaccommodated Universe* that he thinks of his Jaguar poems as 'invocations of the Goddess' (199). Therefore any of Hughes' poems about nature potentially portray the Goddess. However, 'Song' from *The Hawk in the Rain* is specifically about the Goddess:

> O lady, when the tipped cup of the moon blessed you
> You became soft fire with a cloud's grace;
> The difficult stars swam for eyes in your face;
> You stood, and your shadow was my place:
> You turned, your shadow turned to ice
> O my lady. (19)

Hughes draws his imagery from the natural world, as he does in his vacanas but, compared with the epilogue poems, 'Song' lacks the intensity of personal experience and the feeling of grappling with a mysterious being

who is sometimes benevolent and at other times malevolent. By contrast the following epilogue poem does convey the mystery of the Goddess:

A primrose petal's edge
Cuts the vision like laser.

And the eye of a hare
Strips the interrogator naked
Of all but some skin of terror –
A starry frost.

Who is this?
She reveals herself, and is veiled. (185)

There is a sense in these lines that the devotee is stripped bare in the presence of the Goddess and is gripped by a chilling fear. The Goddess herself has laser vision and is seen, yet without revealing herself fully. The imagery of the epilogue poems creates the impression of a devotee who has been in the presence of his Goddess, possibly via the medium of meditation.

I turn now to look at one of Hughes' later collections, *River.* Hughes wrote about *The Spiritual Exercises* during the 1980s, emphasising their role in developing the imagination. Skea in *Ted Hughes: The Poetic Quest* discusses the figure of the Goddess in Hughes' collection *River* and draws attention to an image in 'The River' where the Goddess is depicted with her sacrificed son lying across her lap. Skea picks up the correspondence between this image and a pieta (210):

Fallen from heaven, lies across
The lap of his mother, broken by world …

Scattered in a million pieces and buried
Its dry tombs will split, at a sign in the sky,

At a rending of veils.
It will rise, in a time after times,

After swallowing death and the pit
It will return stainless

For the delivery of this world. (36)

The tombs splitting and the rending of veils recalls the death of Christ in Matthew's Gospel:

> Behold, the veil of the temple was rent in twain from the top to the bottom; and the earth did quake, and the rocks rent; and the graves were opened (Matthew 27: 51-52).

Hughes continues in this vein, talking of resurrection and evoking 1 Corinthians 15: 54 where death is said to be swallowed up in victory. By talking of the river's return as 'stainless / For the delivery of the world' Hughes echoes the belief that Christ was sinless in order to save the world. Reddick remarks on the apparent inconsistency between Hughes' belief that Christianity supported the destruction of the environment with his deployment of Christian symbolism in *River* (214). This inconsistency can be explained if Hughes' imagery results from an underlying imaginative meditation on biblical material.

Hughes includes poems in *River* which describe pollution in some detail. These build on Hughes' earlier concern with the environment in *Crow* which may have been partly prompted by *The Spiritual Exercises.* The poem '1984 on 'The Tarka Trail'' is set on a river that is heavily polluted:

> The river is suddenly green – dense bottle green.
>
> Hard in the sun, dark as spinach.
> Drought pools bleach their craters.
> The river's floor is a fleece –
> Tresses of some vile stuff
> […]
>
> Charlie found a stranded mussel. He brought it
> Up the fishing ladder.
> […}
>
> Then the stench hit us. He yelled
> And flailed it from his fingers as if it had burnt him
> Into a blaze of willow-herb (13-14)

Hughes makes the pollution of the river a central focus of the poem. The revulsion shown by the finding of the mussel is dramatised. An apparently insignificant moment is shown to be of major importance. The significance of the discovery of the pollution is highlighted by imagery which appeals to

different senses. The reader can visualise the colour of the river ‘dense bottle green’, feel the pollution ‘a fleece - / Tresses of some vile stuff’ and smell it: ‘a stink of diesel’ ‘the stench hit us’. The application of the senses is one of the features of *The Spiritual Exercises.*

In the final section of the poem the river is personified as a woman. Her destruction is blamed on human activity through the actions of the South West Water Authority and the Express Dairy Cheese Factory:

> Drowned in the radioactive Irish Sea.
> Blood donor
> To the South West Water Authority.
> Her womb’s been requisitioned
>
> For the cloacal flux, the accountancy curse
> of the Express Dairy Cheese Factory –
> […]
>
> Now she truly can be called: Sewer.
> (More truly: The Washer at the Ford.
> As in the old story.
> The death-rags that she washes and washes are ours.) (16)

By describing the river as a woman Hughes might be suggesting that the Goddess indwells the river, which has been destroyed by the dominant world view: the world as a commodity to be exploited by humankind. A parallel can be drawn between Hughes’ possible depiction of the relationship between the Goddess and the river, and Ignatius’ statement that God dwells in all created things, including the element of water (*§*235).

Hughes further conveys a sense that rivers, and nature as a whole, are indwelt by a living, spiritual being through his images. Scigaj in *Ted Hughes* comments:

> Brilliant sequences of images occur in *River* to convey a vitalistic energy that leaves one with a sense of astonishment and awe at the power and beauty of nature. […] Hughes’s language bathes the reader in a vitalistic energy that seems omnipresent and emotionally cleansing (136).

The capacity of Hughes’ imagery to express this energy can be illustrated by two examples from *River*. ‘The West Dart’ opens with the couplets:

It spills from the Milky Way, spiked with light,
It fuses the flash-gripped earth –

The spicy torrent, that seems to be water
Which is spirit and blood. (12)

The impression of the Dart spilling from the stars suggests that the river has a heavenly origin. The metaphor, 'Which is spirit and blood' indicates that the speaker perceives the river to be both a living creature and a spiritual entity. In 'The Kingfisher' Hughes' depiction of the river scene and the kingfisher are striking:

Oafish oaks, kneeling, bend over
Dragging with their reflections
For the sunken stones. The Kingfisher
Erupts through the mirror, beak full of ingots,

And is away – cutting the one straight line
Of the raggle-taggle tumbledown river
With a diamond –

Leaves a rainbow splinter sticking in your eye. (61)

The personification of the oaks gives a feeling that they are more than trees: they are animate beings. Hughes' images of the kingfisher erupting 'through the mirror, beak full of ingots' and 'cutting one straight line' communicate both the speed and the brilliance of the bird. These images enable readers to visualise the landscape Hughes describes. The effect of the language is enhanced by the way Hughes draws his readers into the scene. Through the phrase, 'a rainbow splinter sticking in your eye' and the later lines 'And look! He's / - gone again', the speaker calls on readers to enter into the scene they are imagining and become a part of it.

From close readings of Hughes' work it is possible to see how *The Spiritual Exercises* may have influenced his writing. He saw *The Spiritual Exercises* as a method of training the imagination. Imagination was important to Hughes because it enabled him to make sense of both inner and outer worlds. Hughes perceives his visit to Ireland in 1966 as a time of breakthrough when he was able to write very productively. In *Gaudete* Hughes links *The Spiritual Exercises* to Ireland and it is possible that the

changes in his writing that took place in *Crow* and continued in *Gaudete* and *River* was influenced by his meditation.

My first proposal is that *The Spiritual Exercises* might lead to shifts of perspective in poetry. There are two major changes in Hughes' poetry from *Crow* onwards. Firstly, in *Crow* Hughes engages in a deeper exploration of biblical texts than he does in earlier work. Given that the poems in *Crow* were written rapidly with fewer changes, the depth of engagement with the Bible found in them possibly hints at time spent in mediation before the poems began to be formed on the page. Biblical imagery and symbolism is paradoxically present in Lumb's hymns and psalms to an unknown goddess in the *Gaudete* epilogue. Similar imagery and symbolism is deeply embedded in the poems in *River* despite the fact that Hughes believed that the Christian world view was responsible for environmental damage. The presence of this imagery and symbolism is more explicable if Hughes were utilising Ignatian meditation in order to recover the Goddess whose underlying presence in the Bible had been concealed by centuries of Christian interpretation.

Secondly, although Hughes had always written about nature, *Crow* marks the beginning of a serious engagement with environmental issues which reaches its height in *River*. Although Hughes' primary influences were his readings of Carson and White, certain readings of Ignatius, especially of his 'Contemplation to Attain Love of God', can also lead to a greater care and respect for the natural world, especially non-human creation. Looking at damage to the natural environment from an Ignatian perspective could lead to increased revulsion as the viewer sees not only damage to the environment, but an attack against God dwelling within his creation. This is Hughes' perspective, especially in *River,* where the indwelling Goddess is affected by human actions.

My second research question probes the impact of Ignatian meditation on the retelling of biblical stories in poetry. Through the practise of meditation, Hughes reworked biblical material. Hughes 'hears' Bible stories through the medium of meditation but in his case his rewriting is not the

result of a literal mishearing. Rather what may be happening as Hughes uses the imaginative techniques of *The Spiritual Exercises* to meditate on biblical passages is that he receives a sudden mental image or idea that causes him to feel that he has an insight into the underlying meaning of the text. Tongue considers that the process of retelling and reinterpreting biblical stories through poetry is multi-layered. Interpretation of biblical stories takes place in the spaces between the text and the poet, then between the poem and the reader. For Hughes, meditation may act as a lens between the Bible and the poem. This leads Hughes to produce innovative retellings and reinterpretations of the biblical stories that he works with. The space between Hughes' poetry and the biblical text leaves room for the reader to return to the biblical stories with questions and to continue the work of interpretation.

The third question I seek to answer is 'How does the influence of Ignatian meditation on poetry contribute towards understanding the relationship between poetry and prayer?' Hughes' epilogue poems from *Gaudete* are addressed to the Goddess and could be viewed as prayers. His work provides support for the idea that making *The Spiritual Exercises* enables poetry to cross the threshold of prayer. If I am correct in my theory that Hughes meditated in order to gain spiritual insight and energy in order to write poetry, his work strengthens the supposition that Ignatian meditation enables travel in the opposite direction. Prayer crosses the threshold to become poetry. This is especially the case with *Crow,* which was written rapidly, and the poems from that collection are more likely to have evolved directly from Hughes' experience of meditation.

Fourthly I enquire how appreciating a poet's engagement with *The Spiritual Exercises* might contribute towards a reading of his or her work. An Ignatian reading of Hughes' poetry enables the reader to gain new insights into his work. Although some critics have focused on Hughes' interest in shamanism and occult practices, foregrounding the influence of *The Spiritual Exercises* draws attention to the ways in which Hughes drew on Christian spirituality as well as critiquing its orthodox theology. Hughes was a profoundly spiritual poet even if he was not religious in an orthodox sense. I suggest his spirituality was nurtured through his meditation on the Bible

using Ignatian techniques. Troupes has described Hughes' interest in the Bible from his earliest work; an Ignatian reading of Hughes' work helps to explain why his engagement with the Bible deepened from *Crow* onwards. This reading makes the inclusion of Christian imagery and symbolism in *Gaudete* and *River* less puzzling..

Levertov and Hughes began their engagement with *The Spiritual Exercises* from different starting points. Nonetheless in the case of both Levertov and Hughes there were discernible changes in their writing which coincided with their encounter with *The Exercises*. The post-Ignatian poetry of Hughes is more fruitful ground for exploring poetic paragesis than that of Levertov. Hughes' poetry may have sprung more directly from his meditation, opening the possibility that his work moved from prayer to poetry.

Conclusion

My research has sought to explore the influence of *The Spiritual Exercises of St Ignatius* on the writing of poetry. It might be asked why it is important, in a post-Christian culture, to undertake such research that goes beyond literary criticism to ask theological questions. However, although Western culture is post-Christian and traditional Christian beliefs and observation have declined the appeal of spirituality remains strong. As Heiding discovered, interest in *The Spiritual Exercises* was burgeoning in the late twentieth century. Since then the development of the internet has made Ignatian spirituality accessible to a much wider audience.[1]

Moreover, in a post-Christian culture literature, including poetry, is likely to become an increasingly significant means of investigating the questions of truth and identity that religion traditionally addressed. Whereas in the past sacred texts embodied the myths and ritual that carried meaning for society, today secular literature can have that function. As William Franke, in *Secular Scriptures: Modern Theological Poetics in the Wake of Dante* states:

> Literature can be thought of quite broadly as a secularized form of religious revelation. This is especially so if we take "religion" to be concerned with underlying myths and rites and other forms of cultural invention and relation that constitute communities, often unconsciously (207).

Turning specifically to the relationship between poetry and religion there has been a debate about whether or not poetry and religion are compatible. In his article 'Is Religious Poetry Possible?' Morris Dickstein equates religion with strict doctrinal and ethical systems which seek to prescribe how people should think and live and contrasts this with the imaginative and intuitive approaches of poets (136). I argue that religion and poetry both undertake an imaginative and intuitive exploration of existence and share the language of image and metaphor. Ewan Fernie writes in his introduction to *The Poet's Quest for God: 21st Century Poems of Faith, Doubt and Wonder:*

[1] My search for 'Ignatian Spirituality' in Google produced 531,000 results.

> Poetry goes deeper than conceptual thinking, which loses hold of the truth by translating it too quickly into what we think we already know. It is the vehicle of religious discovery (21).

Fernie indicates that poetry is a highly suitable medium for the expression of faith and spirituality. Indeed, in a context where traditional religious beliefs are increasingly questioned and discarded, poetry can be one means of taking faith in different directions and enabling people to reconnect with it. Therefore placing the capacity of poetry to engage with faith in an imaginative way alongside an increasing interest in spirituality, the influence of *The Spiritual Exercises* on poetry seems to be a fruitful field for research.

My research aimed to answer four questions, the central one being 'How might *The Spiritual Exercises of St Ignatius* influence the writing of poetry?' My exploration of the work of Levertov and Hughes indicated that the whole process of meditation, rather than the text of *The Spiritual Exercises* alone*,* influenced their poetry. In particular shifts in their poetry may be linked to their practice of Ignatian meditation. Through making *The Spiritual Exercises* Levertov was able to come to terms with her own situation and the world as it was. Therefore she writes fewer, less personally engaged, poems of social critique and her environmental poetry places greater emphasis on the present beauty of nature as it coexists with environmental destruction. Levertov's later poetry displays further development of her awareness of how God speaks through her work and a deepening of her relationship with him. Some poems reflect ideas and language found in Levertov's Ignatian journal. Hughes' poetry from *Crow* onwards engages in deeper exploration of biblical texts. Additionally there is a more serious engagement with environmental issues in Hughes' work alongside his interest in the Goddess figure as she indwells creation.

Turning to the question of how Ignatian meditation impacts on the retelling of biblical stories in poetry, I discovered that although poets can retell Bible stories after making *The Exercises* they do not automatically do so. Surprisingly, Levertov retold Bible stories in an imaginative way in her earlier poetry but does not do this in *Sands of the Well.* Instead gospel stories become hooks on which Levertov hangs her reflections about her

approach to faith. By contrast Hughes' retelling of Bible stories is innovative. Meditation may have given Hughes images that led him to reinterpret the text. This in turn encourages the reader to bring fresh questions to the biblical text and continue the process of interpretation. Tongue's idea of poetic paragesis is a useful way of interpreting the resulting layers of understanding.

Awareness of the influence of Ignatian meditation on poetry furthers understanding of the relationship between poetry and prayer. In the case of both Levertov and Hughes Spadaro's thesis that poetry can cross the threshold between poetry and prayer held true as both poets write work that can be read as prayers. It may also be the case that Levertov's and Hughes' poetry illustrates the idea that prayer can also cross the threshold between prayer and poetry by becoming poetry. A few of Levertov's poems echoed language found in her Ignatian Journal which indicates their roots in prayer. If my suggestion that Hughes meditated in order to write poetry is correct, then it is fair to say that some of his work grew directly from the practise of kataphatic prayer.

Appreciating a poet's engagement with *The Spiritual Exercises* contributes towards a reading of his or her work. Firstly, this appreciation of a poet's interaction with *The Spiritual Exercises* can help readers and critics to understand why certain developments took place. Levertov's Journal reveals her reasons for being more accepting of the world as it is and why she no longer wrote poetry that took an imaginative approach to the Bible. Reading Hughes' poetry from an Ignatian perspective can deepen critical understanding of his treatment of the Bible. An Ignatian reading of Hughes also helps to explain the persistence of Christian imagery and symbolism in his work. Therefore taking account of a poet's engagement with *The Spiritual Exercises* both builds on and challenges aspects of current criticism.

A primary research method was research-by-practice through writing a collection of poetry. One problem with practice-based research is subjectivity. I had vivid experiences when meditating which led me to write in a particular way. The danger is that I have subsequently read my experience

into the writing of the two poets that I discuss. Whilst this can lead to greater insights into their poems, there is also the possibility that my interpretation of the work of other poets has been distorted by my own experience.

Practice-based methodology inevitably places limits on the scope of the critical thesis. It was not possible, in a thesis of under 40,000 words, to address critical questions in more depth, thereby expanding criticism of Levertov and Hughes' further. It might have been useful to have considered Levertov's posthumous collection *This Great Unknowing* by undertaking further archive research. Research and discussion of *This Great Unknowing* could have further confirmed or challenged my suggestion that Levertov's poetry changed in emphasis and tone after she made *The Exercises*. Likewise to have explored more of Hughes' later work and to have looked at manuscripts of *Crow, Gaudete* and *River* might have added to or changed the direction of my argument. Troupes in *Ted Hughes and Christianity,* highlights the usefulness of studying drafts of poems in order to discover the thought processes underlying them. He discovered, for example, that a draft of 'She rides the earth' identifies the Goddess as Mary (129). It is possible that examination of drafts of Hughes' poems would have added more weight to my argument or challenged it.

My research indicates that the topic of the influence of *The Spiritual Exercises of St Ignatius* on poetry could repay further exploration. Future research might include the investigation of more twentieth and twenty-first century poets. Prominent among the possibilities is Elizabeth Bishop. *The Spiritual Exercises* were clearly significant to Bishop who writes to Robert Lowell on 23 November 1955, 'What is that spiritual exercise of the Jesuits – when they try to think in detail how things must have happened? Well, "The Prodigal" is an attempt at doing that.' Cheryl Walker in *God and Elizabeth Bishop: Meditations on Religion and Poetry* says that Bishop read *The Spiritual Exercises* in the early 1930s and utilised it as a poetic resource many times (19). Laurel Snow Corelle in *A Poet's High Argument: Elizabeth Bishop and Christianity* refers in a footnote to the fact that Bishop made careful notes on *The Spiritual Exercises* (116). Clearly, although some work has been done on the influence of *The Spiritual Exercises* on Bishop's work,

this is an area that could be expanded by using a combination of archival research and close reading of her poetry. Carrying out further research might reveal how Bishop employed *The Spiritual Exercises* as a resource and whether she followed similar or different approaches to those of Levertov and Hughes. Researching Bishop's poetry would establish whether or not there is a link between the notes that she made on the text and her subsequent poetry.

A second poet whose work is worth consideration is Michael Symmons Roberts who acknowledges the influence of *The Spiritual Exercises* on some of his poetry.[2] An investigation of Symmons Roberts' poetry would be a valuable subject for original research as he is a twenty first century poet who has not been the focus of much criticism. An Ignatian reading of his poems could play a part in opening up critical discussion of his work. Tongue writes of the work of Miller and Symmons Roberts in 'What is Language but a Sound We Christen?' 'Biblical motifs and cadences run through their work.' (263) It could be worthwhile to explore how far Ignatian meditation influences the presence of biblical motifs in Symmons Roberts' poetry. In *Between Biblical Criticism and Poetic Rewriting* Tongue discusses Symmons Roberts' poem 'Choreography' which is a retelling of the story of Jacob wrestling with the angel in Genesis 32 (242-244). Tongue does not consider the possible influence of *The Spiritual Exercises* on the generation of the language and images in 'Choreography' or the role that meditation might have played in Symmons Roberts' paragesis. Further exploration of Roberts' poetry might strengthen my argument that Ignatian meditation contributes to poetic reinterpretation of biblical material adding surprising insights to the interpretation of the text.

Poets have a range of resources to draw on when writing poems. As one of these resources Ignatian meditation, through its imaginative techniques, enables poets to write sometimes surprising retellings of biblical stories. Most significantly making *The Spiritual Exercises* leads poets introduce new themes and to shift focus in their work. Meditation highlights

[2] Symmons Roberts confirmed the influence of *The Spiritual Exercises* on his work in an email dated 30 September 2014.

the fluidity of the boundary between poetry and prayer. In a post-Christian world poetry influenced by *The Spiritual Exercises of St Ignatius* enables poets and their readers to connect with faith and spirituality through engagement with prayer and scripture in creative and innovative ways.

In the Steps of Saints: A Personal Reflection

In 'A Tune Beyond Us' Maitreyabandhu writes about the relationship between meditation and poetry. He says that the mental qualities arising from meditation are essential for writing poetry and that his poems often come to him in meditation (76). In my critical thesis I explored the influence of *The Spiritual Exercises of St Ignatius* on the poetry of Denise Levertov and Ted Hughes. At the same time I meditated and wrote the poetry collection, *In the Steps of Saints.* This brief self-reflexive commentary offers some thoughts on the relationship between my thesis and my own writing-as-practice. I draw out parallels and points of divergence between my experience of writing poetry influenced by Ignatian meditation and that of Levertov and Hughes.

In common with Levertov and Hughes, the major influence of *The Spiritual Exercises* on my writing was through the practice of meditation springing from Ignatius' book. Before beginning my research I thought that the most important effect of meditation on my writing would be through the employment of techniques, such as composition of place and application of senses, to create striking imagery. Although applying Ignatian techniques did help me to develop imagery, I was surprised to discover that my poetry underwent significant shifts reflecting changes in my life and outlook brought about by making *The Exercises.* Firstly, I began to become involved in politics and to take an interest in contemporary social issues. This change is reflected in the second section of my collection, *Wake-up Call*. A number of poems in *Wake-up Call* focus on the environment. My work was shaped by some contemporary readings of the 'Contemplation to Attain Love of God'. According to these readings St Ignatius implies that creation is an embodiment of God. This understanding should result in greater care and concern for the natural world.[1] The view that creation is an embodiment of God became increasingly important for me as I learned more about the human impact on the environment. A key example which illustrates how my poetry was influenced by this reading of *The Exercises* is 'Noah and the

[1] See my discussion in Chapter 3

Dove'. I utilised Ignatian techniques, especially application of the senses, to create images. As I meditated on the story of Noah my senses were heightened, especially the senses of touch and taste. My increased awareness of touch and taste led me to increase my use of these senses in the poem. Noah 'feels her feathers soft on his cheek, / the drumming of her heart.' Later Noah 'recalls the piquant flesh of olives.' In addition to the inclusion of Ignatian techniques in my writing process, 'Noah and the Dove' echoes contemporary ecological readings of Ignatius. The language of the third stanza, 'his lockdown ended', recollects the COVID- 19 pandemic. The poem hints that, following the positive effects of lockdown on the environment, people could take the opportunity to be more respectful and caring of the natural world. 'Noah tiptoes, his footsteps / gentle on new-born earth.'

As a consequence of making *The Exercises* I decided to return to the Methodist ministry and moved to Cornwall. This was a significant change in my life which had an impact on my poetry. A number of poems, gathered together in the third section, *In the Steps of Saints* portray the history, myths and legends, people and landscape of Cornwall. One of the poems in this section has particular links to the process of meditation. 'Nanstallon' was inspired by the work of a local artist and brother of one of my church members. Using composition of place, the poem pictures the artist working on a painting. The viewer looking at the completed work fails, initially, to relate the scene to the village she knows. Then there is a moment of realisation 'Ah yes – there's the road,'. As I made *The Spiritual Exercises* I had similar moments of revelation as I meditated. Sometimes, for example, I suddenly viewed familiar gospel stories from a different perspective.

The final section, *The Absence of Birds,* gathers together poems on minor themes which occupied my attention while making *The Exercises* and afterwards. The opening poems in the section are concerned with spirituality and the practise of meditation. These are followed by poems about the difficulties of writing poetry, liminal spaces, and the eclipse of faith including the way that faith itself can silence dissenting voices. Finally there are two poems about death and bereavement. As I began *The Exercises* I kept a

journal to record my experiences. In an entry dated 25th January 2015 I wrote about a prayer walk that I undertook while I meditated on Psalm 104.12, 'The birds of the sky nest by the waters; they sing among the branches.' I note some significant moments in the walk, 'as I walked past the hedge I heard the leaves rustle; I had disturbed a bird … I saw a red kite and a magpies' undulating flight.' These images are incorporated in the first stanza of 'The Absence of Birds':

> The leaves rustle
> releasing a surprised sparrow,
> thrushes answer one another,
> the red kite static above my head,
> I trace the magpie's undulating flight,
> tune in to the distant rookery.

Later in 2015, when reading Levertov's notebooks, I was fascinated to notice that phrases and experiences from her notebooks were included in her poetry. Levertov's experience of reflecting on her meditation, then writing poems, resonates with my own practice.

The practice of meditation, predominantly through opening up new themes, was the major influence on my poetry. Yet unlike Levertov and Hughes, I was also influenced by the text of *The Spiritual Exercises.* Poems prompted by the book are found at the beginning of the section *Gloria.* 'Seven Questions' takes up Eliot's suggestion in 'Tradition and the Individual Talent' that poets might take phrases from a text which would be included in a poem (19). 'Seven Questions' began with a list of random words and phrases from *The Spiritual Exercises.* I then wrote questions which included these words and phrases:

> VI
>
> Do fish turn into stones or bread
> if they are subjected to indignities?
>
> VII
>
> Is the midday sun
> asking for kindness?

Furthermore, a number of the poems in *In the Steps of Saints* are haibun or prose poems. Reading the prose of *The Spiritual Exercises* may have unconsciously influenced my choice of form. One reason for the influence of the text on my work might be that I spent more time reading *The Spiritual Exercises,* especially when I was making *The Exercises* for a second time. Additionally, my primary reason for making *The Spiritual Exercises* was to write poems, which may have affected the extent to which my work was influenced by the book.

While writing this thesis I considered the way in which Ignatian meditation might have an effect on the retelling of biblical stories. I referred to Tongue's understanding of poetic retellings of Bible stories as paragesis.[2] Tongue thinks that in poetic retellings there is interpretive space between the poems and the gospel stories. I wanted to discover how viewing the Bible through the lens of meditation might impact on the ways in which its stories are retold in poetry. *Gloria* includes poems that retell gospel stories. Before meditating I believed that Ignatian meditation would be similar to the process of visualisation that I, in common with other writers, often employ as part of the creative process. In my experience this visualisation is similar to watching a film. I have been an external observer of the scene that I have written about. However, meditating on a gospel story was a revelation. Rather than being an observer I became present in the story. Hughes may be describing this sense of being present when he says in 'A Word about Writing in Schools' that the exercitant experiences 'as-if-real' perceptions, feelings and experiences (25). My impression of being present in the story led to visual and auditory hallucinations. Hughes also mentions hallucinatory experiences in relation to *The Spiritual Exercises* in his *Memory Book* and *Shakespeare and the Goddess of Complete Being* (33). As I meditated on the crucifixion I became the centurion who saw Jesus die and said 'Surely he was the Son of God!' (Matthew 27.54). This experience of becoming the centurion was written as 'Septimus':

> Where can doomed men hide
> from the fury of the gods?

[2] See my discussion in Chapter 1

We know now that his dreadful cries
have roused his father from sleep.
He comes to earth to avenge him.

Hiding our faces we fall to our knees:
we are the ones who killed Jupiter's son.

Meditating, then writing 'Septimus', changed my interpretation of the gospel story of the crucifixion. The god spoken of by the centurion is not the Judaeo-Christian God, as most readers of the New Testament might assume, but the Roman deity Jupiter. When I read 'Septimus' at a workshop my audience remarked on the way in which the poem adds a surprising twist to a familiar story. Readers may also find their understanding of the New Testament changed as a result of reading my poems, continuing poetic paragesis and stimulating interest in gospel stories.

In the first chapter I referred to Spadaro's concept of the threshold of prayer. As he discusses the relationship between poetry and prayer Spadaro suggests that poems can cross this threshold and become prayer (64). I proposed that poems written as a result of Ignatian meditation might move in the opposite direction from that described by Spadaro, and cross the threshold from prayer to become poetry. None of the poems in my collection are addressed to God and so they are not prayers, according to Spadaro's definition of prayer (57). However, I began to draft some poems as I meditated, and so they have therefore crossed the threshold from prayer to poetry. 'The Feast of St Barabbas' originated during a meditation on Jesus being condemned to death, following *The Spiritual Exercises* as a guide, 'Barabbas the brigand was preferred to Him' (§293). As I focussed on these words I thought they could lead to the conclusion that Barabbas was pivotal to the Christian story of salvation. Had Barabbas not been released Jesus may not have been crucified. Next, I began to ponder what happened to Barabbas after release. While Christian tradition is silent, I imagined that he eventually became a hermit. I visualised a village in a remote location that honoured Barabbas as a saint:

> The hermit, St Barabbas, in brown tunic, billowing white hair and beard, hands raised in prayer. His fallen shackles wrap around his ankles. Grape hyacinths, alyssum, rock roses, butterfly orchids decorate the base.

The poem is partly written in the first person as I utilised composition of place. I placed myself in the scene as a tourist who had travelled to the village to witness the festival of St Barabbas. 'The Feast of St Barabbas' is one example of a poem which has crossed the threshold from prayer to poetry.

In the first chapter of my thesis I suggested that practising Ignatian meditation might support poets in developing their imagery. As poets draw on a range of resources and techniques to create images it is difficult to support this suggestion unless a poet mentions the influence of *The Spiritual Exercises* in forming images. However, after meditating I became more alert to the importance of the senses and the deployment of other Ignatian techniques as I formed images. In his meditation on hell Ignatius instructs exercitants to use their senses (*§*66-70). As I wrote 'St Ignatius Meditates on Hell' I paid attention to the senses and handled a bank note before writing 'Feel the pitted surface of a bank note'. My greater awareness of the senses led to the images in the final stanza of 'An Absence of Theme'. The 'conversation of birdsong' pays attention to hearing and 'chrysalis buds' to sight. In 'In the Steps of Saints' the imagery of '*Helman Tor'* draws on composition of place and I placed myself in the scenes that I describe in 'Voices of the Dispossessed'.

Making *The Spiritual Exercises of St Ignatius* was a life-changing experience. It has transformed my perspectives, interpretation of the Bible and way of life. As a poet, the practice of meditation opened up new themes, revitalised imagery and enabled me to share biblical stories with readers, potentially unlocking different ways of seeing gospel scenes. I began this reflective commentary, and my critical thesis, by referring to the work of Buddhist poets which began my interest in the ways in which Ignatian meditation might influence poetry. My experience, as a poet and exercitant, has confirmed the value of meditation as an element of the creative process and as a tool for exploring faith and spirituality in a post-Christian world.

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IN THE STEPS OF SAINTS

PhD Poetry Collection

Contents

IN THE STEPS OF SAINTS

THE ABSENCE OF BIRDS

GLORIA

Things that lead to consolation
(After Sei Shōnagon)

The appearance of sunshine after days of rain. A small beetle scuttling under a rock. The smile of a stranger passed on a journey. When, after many hours spent trying to write a poem, an idea appears on the page and blossoms. Bats curving over rooftops at dusk.

Arriving home after a long absence. Opening each door in turn and seeing familiar things. Boiling a kettle, relaxing in a much loved chair with a mug of tea. Sleep in one's own bed.

To turn the pages of a well-worn book. Smelling the must of an old manuscript. The scent of a snuffed out candle. The shudder of a butterfly's wing. Silence in the hours after midnight.

Browsing the pages of a photo album. Remembering walking along the cliffs, picking up a curlew's skull and placing it on a glass shelf. Seeing the faces of family and friends. Imagining the sensation of being hugged.

Gathering mushrooms at dawn. A dew glimmering hedgerow. The sound of the mistle thrush chipping at a snail's shell. Delight on a child's face. A cool drink on a warm day. The smell of freshly laundered sheets. A waft of mown grass.

To walk in a well-loved place. Spotting a clutch of cowslips at the field's edge. When one catches a glimpse of glow worms. A grass snake, with darting tongue, slithering along a path before it slips into a lake, ripples through the water.

Arising
From: The Spiritual Exercises of St Ignatius §229Trans. Elder Mullan

As soon as I am awake
I turn in my bed, lift the curtain,
I place before my eyes
frost shimmering on the lawn,
the things which stir up joy.

I make use of the advantage of light
sun slipping through trees,
and sky which shall offer itself
a sacrifice of first brightening
as in the time of spring.

The sight of green herbs and flowers
basil, catnip, oregano, daffodil, cowslip,
the agreeableness of a sunny place,
I cocoon myself in longed-for warmth,
the welcome heat of the sun or fire.

Seven Questions

I
What must happen before the moon's
thoughts remake themselves?

II

Why are trees clothed
in snow-white skins?

III

Who thought that stars
are soaked in crystal blood?

IV

How many birds can sing
before the house is full of grief?

V

If the sky falls down
will the pavements be lined with clouds?

VI

Do fish turn into stones or bread
if they are subjected to indignities?

VII

Is the midday sun
asking for kindness?

Manresa

What was it in those books
that first turned your mind
from courtly chivalry to prayer,
making you speculate
how your life would evolve
if you followed the pattern
of those Saints whose lives you read?

*

One moment in your thirty first year,
your limp less urgent now,
you see in your pleasant thoughts
a Spirit, a Divine messenger.
Then one night Mary appears to you
rocking her child. Why is it that
the thought of her entraps you?

*

What was it about that sultry
summer day that convinced you?
Was it a word from your companion
or his solemn expression
as you walked side by side
in the garden deep in conversation?
Then for hours you pace the red tower,
and after a long refusal you disrobe your heart.

St Ignatius Meditates on Hell

St Ignatius asks me to imagine hell.
I close my eyes and try to visualise
great fires, bodies in flames,
I try to hear the wailings, howling, cries,
to smell the sulphur, the putrid stench,
to taste tears bitter on my tongue,
to feel fire scorching my fingertips.

But the only warmth I feel
is spring sunshine spilling
through my window,
and the cries of playing children
meddle with my thoughts.

Then I say to St Ignatius
meditate on my world if you can.
Imagine people rushing,
hear the non-stop drone of the city,
smell the reek of exhausts. Taste a take-away.
Feel the pitted surface of a banknote
as it passes through your hands.

So St Ignatius closes his eyes,
the creases on his forehead taut.
As I stand there watching a tear forms,
falls from the corner of his eye.

The Door

There is no door.

How then to make an entrance?
Perhaps a dramatic appearance;
enter angel stage left,
maybe flying in
through the open window,
or else strolling,
nonchalant
from the garden,
surprising her as she sits
at peace on the portico.

But there is a door.

A single entrance,
the threshold and boundary
between two spheres,
where space is shrunk,
time and eternity
collapse into one,
the passage between
earth and heaven
flung wide open
by her words.

Gloria

Bethlehem's sky was busy with stars
when we first saw him –
an old man leaning on a staff,
an improbable visitor making his way
warily across the fields.

Next minute the sky was on fire –
arrows of light; gold, silver,
scarlet. Nathaniel yelled *Run!*
For no one has ever seen
the glory of the Lord and lived.

The only one not quaking
was the old man. He stood there
unflustered, telling us not to panic,
to go to town to find a new born
baby. It sounded a strange story to me.

Suddenly there was the sound
of singing. We looked up at the sky;
saw no-one, only the sound grew
louder, louder. Then silence,
Bethlehem's sky was busy with stars.

Haibun for Anna

My friends ask politely how I am taking to this new way of life. I know by the way they glance sideways at one another that they think my grief has made me mad. As a widow I am not unusual amongst them. Take Miriam for example; married a mere thirteen months before the Lord took her Jacob. But she remarried within the year and has a teeming household of children.

The years pass. They visit less and less and finally stop coming altogether. It can't be easy having a prophet as a friend, especially one like me. Forever walking to and fro in the Temple, eating measly scraps, and proclaiming the Lord's word to the few who will listen and to the many that won't.

The priests tolerate me. The Sadducees look at me as though I was some piece of dirt that they had the misfortune to tread on. The poor seem to like me though. They treat me well, often sharing their frugal food, smiling and saying kind words.

Like that couple with their first child, a baby boy, come to offer a sacrifice to God. I knew there was something special about the child the moment I saw him nestling in Simeon's arms.

A pair of turtle doves
prayers coil upwards
God lies in an old man's arms

The Stone

He turns it over in his hands, a stone the size of a flatbread. He talks, his words gentle, soothing, remind me of home. My mother kneads the dough, pats it, carries it to the oven.

As the stone rotates I fancy I see steam rising from it. My nostrils fill with the smell of fresh baked bread.

My companion tears the stone in half and begins to eat.

Miracle

There’s a skill to catching fish,
knowing how the species live,
the different nets to trap each one,
understanding currents’ flow.

It’s a hard life too and dangerous,
watching tides then battling waves,
sailing away from home at nightfall,
returning exhausted or exultant at dawn.

One time we fished all night,
caught nothing until the carpenter,
inexperienced in the ways of fish,
landed us a lifetime’s haul.

Last Week

The first couple of days:
colt, cloaks, crowd,
road, branches, trees,
city, temple, tables,
money, seats, doves,
fig tree, leaves, fruit.

A few topics of conversation:
oxen, calves, teeth,
angels, phylacteries,
mint, dill, cumin,
snakes, vipers, sages,
sun, moon, stars,
trumpet,
accounts, taxes, bankers,
the devil.

Relaxing with friends:
jar, ointment,
thirty pieces of silver,
body, bread, bowl,
loaf, cup, blood, vine.

Last Friday:
sword, clubs, kiss,
courtyard, guards,
council, testimony,
witnesses, verdict,
cock, dream, water,
soldiers, robe,
crown of thorn, reed,
cross, bandits, sponge,
curtain, rocks, saints,
centurion, linen cloth,
tomb, stone.

Passover

The Jews are celebrating Passover, not my favourite feast.
I must remain alert and be astute. May my hands stay clean.

The priests bring a man before me. When I question him
he stands there mute. I pray my hands stay clean.

My wife sends a message. *Keep yourself well clear*
of this Jewish dispute, *so your hands stay clean*.

I give them a choice, Barabbas or this Jesus man.
Then I'll commute his sentence; my hands stay clean.

The priests choose Barabbas, and coerce the crowd
to follow suit, his blood's on theirs, so mine stay clean.

I, Pontius Pilate, sign the warrant, hand him over with regret.
I'd have chosen a different route. In truth my hands stay clean.

The Feast of St Barabbas

'Barabbas the brigand was preferred to Him.' The Spiritual Exercises of St Ignatius §293

All day jolting on the coach. Then, with the sky as a golden backdrop, we begin to crawl upwards. The diesel exhaust leaves a trail of cloud. We inch our way forward, tucking into the side of the road to allow a downward car to pass. Below there is a precipitous drop. I shudder and avert my eyes from the tumbling river.

Our coach reaches the summit and begins its meandering descent to a narrow valley. We follow the road as it twists through a pine forest, passes a huddle of farm buildings gripping the hillside. The lower slopes are terraced with vines. At the point where the road levels the coach rumbles into a small town.

We unfurl our legs, disembark and stand shivering by the roadside while the driver unloads the luggage. Tourists straggle into the hotel in twos, threes and fours, cases clattering on the cobbles.

In the room cold tiles shock my feet. I pull down sheet and blankets, climb into bed. My body eases into sleep.

Crescent moon …
little owl's shriek
kills the silence

In the town shutters fly open. Fresh baked bread and earthy coffee. A cat ambles through the town square, strolls into a café, and rubs itself around table legs.

The town square clock strikes; streets bustle with shoppers, tourists. A breeze tousles the corners of bunting, bees linger over balconies bursting with flowers. I watch children relishing the day's freedom. They dart between buildings, balance on low boundary walls.

At noon
the bitter aftertaste
of wine

A press of people in every available space along the street. At the front a woman in a wheelchair, and the elderly on seats. Behind them everyone else jostles for position. Tourists elevate their phones, a father hoists his daughter onto his shoulders and her fingers ruffle his curls.

The boom of a band playing. Women in red, orange, garlands of flowers in their hair. Priests, acolytes in white robes. At last the statue, carried on the shoulders of four men. The hermit, St Barabbas, in brown tunic, billowing white hair and beard, hands raised in prayer. His fallen shackles wrap around his ankles. Grape hyacinths, alyssum, rock roses, butterfly orchids decorate the base.

Sudden shower –
rainbow arc touches the heavens
stoops to kiss the earth

I sit at the back of the Church of St Barabbas the Hermit. A few dispersed worshippers listen to the priest as he chants the psalm and intones the evening prayers.

Outside street cleaners clear the day's debris. An old man shuffles along dragging a reluctant grey-haired dog on a leash. Tourists loiter before seeking out cafés. The aroma of herbs, spices. The sour taste of olives.

Sunset –
ashen moon
swallow freckled sky

Septimus

I've seen other men
asserting their innocence,
determined to escape death,
yet he, guilty as night,
as we all thought then,
stayed impassive,
as if taunting
his accusers with silence.

Our frustration
gushed out in jeers,
mockery, blows,
even then he stood dumb,
not raising an arm
to defend himself,
against our fists,
so we left off our assault
defeated by his apathy.

We nailed him up,
cast lots for his clothing,
I won sandals too large for me,
planned to sell them later.
We readied ourselves
for the tedious waiting,
but then he shrieked a name.
Someone, Felix, I think
ran for the vinegar,
another harrowing cry.

Silence, absolute stillness,
then the earth shakes,
rocks split,
chasms open,
the dead spill out
of their graves.

Where can doomed men hide
from the fury of the gods?
We know now that his dreadful cries
have roused his father from sleep.
He comes to earth to avenge him.

Hiding our faces we fall to our knees:
we are the ones who killed Jupiter's son.

Too soon to sort grief from reality

As I saw Joseph's men carry his body to the tomb, I knew they carried an empty shroud. He stood beside me, watching. I felt his arm wrapped round my shoulder, in his familiar way. Heard him whisper *Our separation will not last long*.

Told Salome this. *Too soon to sort grief from reality,* she said.

The whisper was wind through olive branches. His presence, a shadow cast by the dying sun.

Fishing

A man wades into the river,
casts his line with precision,
he waits, watches while the water
swirls around his waist.

The rod bends.
He pulls the line in,
coaxes the trout towards the net,
then cradles it in his arms.

The heron creeps from the bank,
claws extending with each step.
He waits, watches the river
for shapes moving beneath the surface.

His neck bends,
his beak makes a rapid jab,
the minnow is raised,
shaken, swallowed down.

in my father's house

the hallway
cupboard door
hangs on one hinge

in the kitchen
the doormat hides
an absent tile

the lounge picture rail
fails to circle the walls
by half an inch

in the bathroom
a corner of windowsill
waits for paint

the wall behind
the bedroom radiator
is missing its paper

but it's not these small acts
of incompleteness
that I grieve for

WAKE-UP CALL

The Road to Bethlehem

Half-past three
and the hillside road
is awake with taxis
carrying shift-workers
south to Bethlehem.
There the log jam
of bodies awaits them.
They are ushered
forward between
narrow barricades,
like cattle at market
filtered for slaughter.

As the crowd shambles
slowly onward
the street vendors
sell sweet tea,
sour coffee,
fruit, nuts, dates,
extracting coins
from shoving hands.

One man weary of waiting
for the queue's
stammering progress
risks the fence top,
he wavers above the heads
of slouching walkers
like a high wire artist.

At last each body
is processed,
one by one,
through the turnstile
of checkpoint 300,
then they rush forward
towards buses as though
hungry for the crumbs
of migrant labour.

Rachel's Children

My son was playing football in the park
as he had done dozens of times.

My daughter was eating sweets with her friends
as she had done dozens of times.

My son had just gone out for pizza
as he had done dozens of times.

My daughter was looking out for her father
as she had done dozens of times.

My children were going to school
as they did every day.

My children were at the table eating
as they did every day.

My children were at the Madrassa
where they went every week.

My children were at Cheder
where they went every week.

When the sniper's bullet struck
as the enemy's bomb dropped.

Clearing out

The last few days before moving house. To ease the monotony of sorting through papers, I turn on the TV. A politician speaks about ‘strong, proven leadership.’ She promises ‘a country that works not for the privileged few but that works for every one of us.’ A vision of a future where there can be no going back. I zap her with the remote and step through my patio door into the garden.

Bare feet leave their tracks
scarlet hollyhocks bow down
unexpected rain

Wake-Up Call

A little bit of bread and no cheese
calls the yellow hammer,
darting between the crevices
on the quarry face.

I hear the bird's cry,
but fail to see it,
until my mother points
as it flits to a gorse bush,
yellow breast merging with flowers
in the late evening sun.

Today the yellow hammers have flown,
the quarry lies abandoned;
my neighbour rings,
wakes me with rumours of asbestos landfill,
a new use for yesterday's scar.

April Snow

Sky. An intense blue, cloud free, when I wake him. I announce there's a carpet of snow. He scrambles from the bed, parts the curtains and peers out. Later walking, feet sinking through white down, our tracks join those of fox and pheasant. We circle the rim of the wood, enjoy the yellow of a primrose cluster and the emerging spikes of bluebells.

frail sunlight –
the musk scent
of a frost-tipped rose

Terminus

The next station is Artic Ocean,
(orbiting satellites observe the earth,
see the big picture, send data
plotting melting ice, expanding seas.)
Mind the gap between the ice floes.

The next station is Monteverde
(Cloud Forest, where the golden toad
once burrowed in tree roots,
before emerging to spawn one last time.)
Other species are ready to depart.

The next station is Great Barrier Reef,
(where poisoned from within,
stressed coral expels brown algae,
becoming a pale skeleton.)
Stand clear of the UV rays.

The next station is Namib Desert,
(here slow growing baobab trees
desperate for rain stretch out their roots
to dried up water holes.)
All change.

A Catalogue of Endangered Species

1.

The Amur Leopard weaves around tree trunks,
spots a solitary moose, crouches,
sizes up its prey, races,
then leaps for the kill.

The poacher watches,
traps the leopard in his site,
poised with his gun,
prepares to shoot.

2.

Dark in colour, the Bornean Orangutan,
camouflaged, its outline merges with trees,
as it eats stripping plants,
reviving them again by dispersing their seeds.

Loggers clear the forest,
the farmer sows his fields,
raises his gun,
pulls back the trigger.

3.

As it cruises round coral reefs
the Hawksbill Turtle with patterned shell,
prises sponges from crevices
with its pointed beak.

The fishermen sail
through tropical seas,
they drag their nets,
throw their harpoons.

4.

The Javan Rhino, armour plated
with dusky grey skin
and single ten inch horn,
grazes the grasslands.

Tsunamis, volcano, rising seas
engulf a shrinking habitat,
cattle encroach on its territory,
spread their diseases.

5.

Recently discovered
a unique predator,
the Malayan Tiger
prowls the Malay wetlands.

A threat to livestock:
angry villagers
load their guns,
take aim and shoot.

6.

The shy antelope-like Saola
with slender horns,
white marked face,
hides in the depths of the forest.

The man sets his snare,
the ‘Asian Unicorn’ approaches
heedless of danger,
the trap entangles its prey.

7.

A small porpoise
with dark-ringed eyes,
the timid Vaquita
swims away.

The fishing net lurks
in shallow gulf waters,
the porpoise thrashes,
then slowly drowns.

8.

A bipedal almost
hairless mammal,
hunts, fishes, shoots,
clears forests everywhere.

The earth warms,
harvests shrivel in fields,
ice sheets melt,
swelling seas consume the land.

This World is Dying

This world is dying –
all the old-growth trees
gathered in a circle weep,
a drum beat in the background
a kind of keening,
mourning clear-cuts,
burnt forests.

The sixth extinction –
all amphibians,
all mammals,
among a host of nonhuman others
function as a cry,
a call to action
for what has been lost,
trees they lived in,
animals whose eyes they met,
dead comrades known as kin.

Grief is a kinship bond
with the wild,
with other species,
shaped by remembrance
of the disappeared,
the intimately known,
the more abstract dead.

This world is dying –
these beloved others
become vulnerable bodies.
The fruits of technology,
science, past and future
complicit in their loss.

Road blockades,
property destruction,
tree-sits,
animal releases,
injury, arrest,
prison sentences:
ritual practices,
self-sacrificial actions.

This world is dying –
animals killed,
turned into machines,
wild landscapes caged,
treated like a wound
in perpetual mourning.

A dead-end street
a lumber yard,
chainsaws,
bulldozers:
the dark green of woods
only bare dirt,
a wild landscape
transformed, alien.

Wild places paved over,
the stumps of former trees,
old-growth redwood groves
small battles of local losses,
extinction comes easily,
the silencing of species.

This world is dying –
endangered species
hang from treetops,
delicate ecosystems laid waste,
on the evening of Summer Solstice
a pantheon of fallen warriors.

Make these visible –
the deaths of trees,
stumps of trees,
fat and raw
images of absence.

Human asteroid,
the earthquake of us
with teeth and claws
to match our dreams –
this world is dying.

Source: Pike, Sarah M. 'Mourning Nature: The Work of Grief in Radical Environmentalism' *JSRNC* 10.4 (2016) 419-441

What do trees talk about?

In the quiet of a woodland walk,
there's a hive of conversation
as tree gossips to tree
along networks of burrowing fungi,
hidden beneath our feet.

What do trees talk about?
They speak in muted voices
of where to find nutrients,
warn of emerging diseases.
Make haste, they say,
marshal your defences.

But today mostly
their conversation turns
to death. Not from natural
causes, but from warm winds
blowing in cool places,
the unchecked raging of the sun.

Stylite

A hundred feet in the air
the stylite sits,
her hair a mop of tangles,
clothes a jigsaw of colours
roughly sewn together.
She fails to stem the holes
worn from long days
of sitting or standing
in only one position.

Her supporters rally
round the base,
a disparate band
of young and old.
They shout encouragement,
winch up supplies,
small bites of food,
sips of drink,
whatever they can muster.

Some people huddle
in expectation of wise words,
or hope for a statement
to justify aberrant ways.
A few merely hang around
to see how long she can maintain
this hazardous occupation.
Others who are gathered there,
try to coax her to surrender.

But all of them,
friends, enemies,
sceptical or curious,
know that while she sits tight,
her platform firmly tethered
to a sturdy branch of oak,
no politician or contractor
will ever hear the traffic thunder
through this ancient wood.

Noah and the Dove

Noah’s bud-shaped hands unfurl,
pitch the dove skywards,
then at midday he again
stretches out through the skylight,
draws the bird towards him,
feels her feathers soft on his cheek,
the drumming of her heart.

The second time,
flying back at sunset,
the dove presents a gift
of olive leaf. Noah nurses
it in his palm, marvels
at the miracle of green,
recalls the piquant flesh of olives.

On the seventh day
Noah sets the dove free,
watches, waits, his stomach
fluttering at her failure to return.
Then his lockdown ended,
Noah tiptoes, his footsteps
gentle on new-born earth.

Obliterated

A scattering of boats moored in its shelter –
~~Kayoo-may~~ Spring Cove
white sands, green sea, a crescent of trees,
masts jangle at ~~Wéyé Wéyé~~ Careening Bay,
make footprints in the sands of ~~Koreé~~
Chowder Bay.

Under the arch of the harbour bridge –
~~Quibéreé~~ Lavender Bay,
land claimed from the sea, moulded ship-shape
the rocks of ~~Ar-ra-re-agon~~ Snapper Island,
take a ferry to the sandstone knoll ~~Wa-rea-mah~~
Cockatoo Island.

In the shadow of the opera house –
~~Woccanmagully~~ Farm Cove,
its natural outline obliterated, blown apart
jagged ~~Ba-rab-ba-ra~~ Sow and Pigs Reef,
pack a picnic then head to ~~Kogerah~~
Rushcutters Bay.

Voices of the Dispossessed

I
An Inca beaker with dance scene

The cup nestles in my hand –
Ch'unchus dancers in single file
parading behind plumed musicians,
a flag-bearer with particoloured banner,
I recall joyful harvest celebrations.

II
A llama of pure gold used in human sacrifices

Lifting the tiny figure
I place it by the bones of my mother,
pray to Mama Quilla
defender of women,
whose pallid face weeps.

III
A knife with a mosaic handle used in blood rituals

I sharpen the blade then squat low,
a crouched figure of a man,
an eagle warrior dressed in feather cloak
I clasp my knife close,
sunlight frolics with the iridescent pearl.

IV
A serpent mosaic worn as a pectoral on ceremonial occasions

Watching the tree tops I shade my eyes,
the snake moves seamlessly between earth and sky,
joins the living with the dead,
she slips out of her skin
renewing my life.

V
A caribou-skin parka worn by a girl in Greenland

My sanctuary from winter's ice,
two skins encircle my body,
fur ruff traps breath and snowfall,
I bless the spirits
of caribou and wolverine.

VI
Snow goggles found near the Bering Sea

A rough caribou antler,
I smooth the outer layer,
cut lines diamond-shaped,
with small slits for eyes
I tread across spring snow.

VII
A birdstone used as a weight in a throwing stick

My companions muffle their conversation,
I toss the shaft over my shoulder
with a flick of my forefinger,
watch it glide through the snow,
my winning throw in Snowsnakes.

VIII
A pipe in the shape of an otter smoked in purification rituals

Rotating the wood
my knife gouges out the bowl,
flows round the curves of the otter's head,
my handiwork establishes peace,
relieves another of guilt.

Shipwrecks

Amphorae, like bleached skulls,
encrust the sea bed. Fish meander
in and out, glide across
weed swathed surfaces.

***

Opaque porcelain vase, white bowl,
a ship weighed down by rocks,
nine sturdy wooden bulkheads,
scuttled by relentless typhoon.

***

Wooden rosary beads,
barber's chest, razors, copper syringe.
Two fiddles, three-hole pipes,
their melodies perpetually silenced.

***

Silver coins spotted with verdigris,
a ship's anchor. A coiled cannon muzzle,
one pewter spoon. One blackened belt buckle.
Lying on the sea floor, a fragment of tibia.

***

A jacket still on its hanger,
the tarnished mirror's opal shades,
growing garden of sponges, corals.
A shark torpedoes beside the hull.

***

Schools of wrasse, pollock and pouting
stream past steel plates,
machinery camouflaged
by anemones, starfish, weed.

***

A scatter of plastic bottles
dipping up and down in the waves,
the flattened ghost of a dinghy,
a brightly coloured dress, floating.

Teapot

Worcester Factory, Circa 1768-78

A glazed butterfly, with dainty tracery wings, flies past
while father plays the flute, mother fans herself,
children with kites wait to hurl them to the wind,
a saffron crocus with gold enamelled stamens.

Picture another family:
mother raises the teapot,
tilts it downwards, an amber waterfall
of memories flows from its spout,
news of engagements, marriages, births,
the sorrow of condolences for shared loss
delight or shade their reminiscences
as the teapot's passed on down generations.

See a third family with backs bent by baskets,
hands disfigured by coarse callouses,
whose skin would make them unsuitable
for invitations to gather round the table to sip tea.

Loss

My loss comes wrapped up in phrases:
... no more funding
… have to let you go.

Yours has no such delicate packaging:
the click and boom of gunshots
that violate the rushing street,
the angry blade that rips through flesh.

I add the experience to my CV,
gain advantage from it,
move on, give thanks.

You are left with unspent years,
photographs of absent brothers,
a restless fury that invigorates,
refuses to give in.

Liberation

Edward Colston,
feet shackled to a podium
overlooks The Centre
in a pensive pose,
does he have a thought
for the men, women, children,
who with feet shackled,
bodies branded *RAC*,
he once trafficked
from their African homelands
through his home port of Bristol?

Now Colston is about to be set free.
We scale the column,
chain him with ropes, the crowd heaves,
the statue capitulates, we dance
victory over Colston's corpse,
parade him through the streets,
his torso branded red
as his heart bleeds out.
He stands motionless for a moment,
gazes from the harbour wall,
lurches askew into history.

A Brief History of the Human Heart

Aristotle

A fiery, parched organ,
birthplace of intelligence,
movement, emotion,
the heart's three chambers
cooled by liver, kidneys,
brain, stomach, lungs.

Galen

Hearthstone
unrivalled in complexity,
a hard organ resistant to injury,
its expansion and contractions
demonstrate intelligence.

Avicenna

Human heart –
the controller,
source of nourishment,
understanding, power,
the breath of life.

Ibn al-Nafis

Two-chambered organ,
observe how blood flows
from the right cavity,
enters the lungs,
returns to the left chamber
where it shapes the spirit.

Leonardo da Vinci

A dense muscle
nourished by artery and vein,
yet how does it move
combining opposing motions,
contraction and dilation as one?

Andreas de Laguna

The spring of anger,
fear, terror, sadness,
shame, joy, delight.

William Harvey

The circle's centre
or the body's sun,
the heart labours,
its exertion expelling blood,
then full once more it relaxes,
lies at rest.

Rene Descartes

A furnace, rather than a pump,
the heart heats blood,
ejects it again to be cooled
as it circulates the body,
causing arteries and veins
to collapse. There's
nothing spiritual in this,
only philosophy.

John Hunter

Ferocious anger
disorders the heart,
sends blood racing
through the body:
angina pectoris.

Peter Mere Latham

Listen to the murmurings
of the heart regurgitating
blood: *mitral stenosis*,
or maybe your patient
has *rheumatic carditis*
in which case treat
with blood-letting,
opium and mercury.

Willem Einthoven

Record the heart's rhythms
with magnets, wires, light,
string. Draw its curve,
trace shadows, track
ventricular hypertrophy,
atrial fibrillation,
the heart's flutter.

Nina Starr Braunwald

Polyurethane, Teflon, cloth,
patience, persistence.
Overcoming bias
mends broken hearts.

Bernadine Healy

Did you say *Human Heart?*
A woman has a heart
that discomforts arms,
neck, jaw, stomach and back.
A man's disease in disguise?
The cure lies in seeing her pain.

Eyam

In the beginning the occasional traveller carried rumours,
then death arrived disguised as bales of cloth –
new smocks for farm workers and jackets for miners,
longed-for dresses for women and children.

The first, George Viccars, who unwrapped the plague,
spread it out to dry, then Edward Cooper,
Peter Hawksworth, Thomas Thorpe, Sarah Sydall …
a community of silent sleepers hoping for Resurrection.

Smell the sweet scent of death in the air – or is it fear?
A virus of confusion spread by satellite and cable,
then hear the commands: self-isolate, lock down,
take your vacuum cleaners, turn them into ventilators.

Lessons from History

The Great Plague, London 1665

Death hounds the streets,
the rich migrate to country homes
in Richmond, Hampstead Heath,
the Royals sail down the Thames
to Hampton, where they set up Court.

The poor, meanwhile, remain
in red-crossed homes,
shut in by Royal decree,
leaving only to lie in hasty rows,
buried east to west, head to toe.

Later false tales circulate,
grow, then become the truth:
the dead were thrown like rubbish
to fill the streets, afterwards
toppled, naked, into pits.

Cholera Epidemic, London 1854

The poor crammed in Soho's swarming streets,
jammed between cowsheds, slaughter houses,
grease-boiling dens. In Broad Street a single pump
spews sickness among residents and passers-by.

At Middlesex Hospital Nightingale works long shifts:
undressing, bathing, applying stupes.
She does all she can, sees the poorest suffer worst,
illness races through heaving homes.

At that time false theories form,
are verified by specialists, upheld as true:
sickness drifts in the air the people breathe,
wherever there are noxious smells cholera grows.

COVID- 19 Pandemic, London 2020

A single pedestrian walks in Trafalgar Square,
no tourists jostle for selfies round Nelson's Column,
scattered travellers wait in the nearby Tube.

Ethnic minorities, in larger family groups,
low paid key workers fall ill in numbers,
grave rows dug to receive the Muslim dead.

As ever false stories spread around:
drink lemon juice, avoid ice cream,
a telephone mast will make you sick.

Tales to Tell your Grandchildren

One day you will have tales to tell your grandchildren
about everything you did in those strange times
when shops ran out of paracetamol, pasta, bread flour,
how, if you left home you might be stopped by the police,
then one Sunday evening you watched the Queen
on TV assuring everyone that eventually all will be well.

But in those days absolutely nothing was going well.
You will try to explain to your teenage granddaughter
there were no parties, pubs were closed, even the *Queen's Head* down our street was shut, in those most sombre times.
All the disturbance and revelry you heard was the police
singing 'Happy Birthday' as they arrested people for stealing flour.

But even as they stockpiled that stolen flour
many people began to cough and feel very unwell
with high fevers. This affected everyone including police.
And as all playgrounds and schools were closed children
didn't go out, but stayed at home memorising times
tables and writing lists of British kings and queens.

And it was said on the news that the Queen,
shut in Windsor Castle, grew bored and wished she had flour
left to bake enough bread for all of her people. *The Times*
carried headlines about neighbourliness, saying how well
people were coping with all the restrictions. Your grandson
says that when he grows up he may be a doctor or join the police.

But while you will talk about the numbers of police
out arresting people, and the fact that the Queen
had to move from London to Windsor, your grandchildren
will never believe tales of clean air or abundance of flowers
growing wild in parks and along uncut verges as well,
in those most environmentally friendly of times.

For eventually, as predicted, those curious times
passed, business resumed and once more the police
went back to setting speed traps and all was well.
The staff at Buckingham Palace welcomed the Queen's
return, the shops sold paracetamol, pasta, bread flour,
and every school reopened for all of their children.

Which was just as well, for as your grandchildren
are sure to tell you, neither the police nor the Queen,
had the time to make bread from wild flowers.

Crossing the Tamar

Leave Plymouth behind you,
a city of adventurers,
of pilgrims travelling to a new world,
stern battleships and humming docks.

Ride out across the bridge,
a parabola of wrought iron tubes,
trusses, chains and girders, hung
like a crescent moon over the water.

Arrive in coral-shaded Saltash,
step into a land populated by saints,
the ghosts of miners and preachers,
a countryside expectant with myth.

From *Miners and Preachers*

Bal Maidens

Gunhild daughter of Bon

My daily toil: wash black ore
cleansing it from waste,
gather reeds for the bone ash store.

My wage, one penny,
leaves the amber ring,
the silver broach
set with pearls,
beyond my reach.

Jane Wasley

A regular wage –
ten and six a month,
plus a four penny
midsummer bonus,
for supervising others
at their work.

Ann Nettle

I'm a peeker at four pence a day
on Pool Adit copper floor.
I watch stones tossed in the streke,
pick good ore from bad.

My nineteen days this month
keeps us from the poor relief.

Jenny Stone

A fine figure wearing gook,
and white apron, but
I dream of new frills, skirts,
stockings, rainbow beads.

My hand as clear as any agent's,
I write in Roger's book:
each maiden an extra shilling,
to spend at Redruth fair.

Martha Buckingham

I walk three miles, Sir,
my feet wet when I arrive,
no change of shoes,
it's hard enough to get one pair.

No time for crowst, Sir,
when the agent turns away
I bite into a pasty,
do my work one handed.

I read fine, Sir,
and spell as well –
the Methodists teach me,
as we study Catechism.

Alice Ann Stevens

Eliza Jane spinning
round, her dress
caught in the gears.

The coroner asked
if she'd been warned:
I told him *Yes*.

Gracey Briney

I work beside the men
hauling ore kibbles
from shaft to landing stage.

In my Par Stack hat,
hob-nailed boots,
I'm the equal of any man.
I'll drink to that.

Stella Oates

With our boys at war,
I succeed the bal maidens,
my eyes as sharp as theirs,
my fingers as quick.

But with a scarcity of skills,
there'll be no one to follow me.

The Mine Captain

Monday through to Saturday
I work at Dolcoath mine,
assigning tasks,
checking cost books,
hiring and firing,
praying there will be work
to keep the miners on in June.

I write in the day and night book,
how much water must be pumped
from shafts, of disputes between
bal maiden and agent,
the progress each one makes.

Then on Sunday
I climb the Tuckingmill
Wesleyan's pulpit steps,
announce my text:
The labourer is worthy of his hire.

The Ballad of Will Thomas

Someone must clear the adit of stone,
so the miners can work their way through.
Who will go to dig those rocks for me?
Will Thomas, my man, that will be you.

So Thomas went down with a shovel,
we all thought he had climbed up the shaft,
his wife came along, she was shaking,
we believed Will was safe, so we laughed.

At midnight she came round still weeping,
Where's Will? He's not home yet, she cried.
We went down the mine, me and Charlie,
found Will, crushed by a rock, on his side.

We went for help, but thought it hopeless,
for the rocks had fallen on Will's head,
we carried him up though the mine shaft,
laid his body on grass, imagined him dead.

Then Will made a moan as he lay there,
his rescue a miracle, we're sure.
Will Thomas completely recovered,
and today he works the lodes once more.

Gwennap Pit

Blessed are the eyes which see the things that ye see
....hear the things that ye hear.
An unnatural space, shaped by collapsed mine works,
adopted by chance as a preaching place,
sheltered from the wind, and as good a chapel
as any meeting room designed to transmit
the travelling preacher's voice.

Wesley's words reverberate around the hollow,
Blessed are the eyes which see the things that ye see
....hear the things that ye hear.
His eyes fall on the congregation spread about:
drawn by curiosity to hear him speak again,
a respite from daily labour,
garnering copper from the ground.

While Wesley homes in on holiness, sanctification,
perfect love, the people dream of worldly things:
his methods cultivate discipline,
yield skills to leave the seams behind.
Will they reap a richer life?
Blessed are the eyes which see the things that ye see
....hear the things that ye hear.

Wesley Cottage, Trewint
Let us make a little chamber, I pray thee, on the wall; 2 Kings 4.10

Digory Isbell's practised hands dress stones,
place them side by side as he builds walls,
constructing here, by his cottage in Trewint,
his own Cornish 'Prophet's Chamber'.

He will later furnish the upstairs room
with a simple wooden bed, table, stool
and candle, where any man of God,
on route from Bristol or London, can find rest.

Downstairs he will set out a desk,
hand-carved chairs in rows, where those
hungry for the word of God can come,
hear it expounded, leave satisfied.

Surely, it was God who prompted him
to open the fragile pages of his Bible
at the place where the prophet Elisha stays
as the guest of a Shunammite woman.

And surely it was the hand of God
which guided those two men, who pray
without a book, to come to a place with no inn,
to knock at the home of a stonemason.

South Crofty

Buildings with boarded windows,
slate-stripped roofs,
all that remain of this mine
silenced at last by falling prices,
shrinking subsidies.

The investors came, then went,
beaten back by court disputes,
local housing plans.

Could lodes of high-grade copper
newly discovered in rocks,
lithium salts in underground pools,
set the wheels at South Crofty whirring?

Mine Ruins
(after Ted Hughes)

One morning
The shift failed to sign on
(China, Peru
And Indonesia undercut them
Skills stolen from the bold men of Cornwall).

Machinery rusts, as the roof slates fall away.
Tall stacks became brittle skeletons.

And the herring gulls and kittiwakes
Flung by waves and wind and the beating rain
Storm tossed seabirds
Looking for sanctuary

Took over all that they could
And what they could not overrun
They scattered

They prised loose and toppled down cliff faces.

Then drifted away westwards naturally
Like the earliest
Wandering Celts.

Truro Cathedral

Bishop Benson and John Loughborough Pearson
work in harmony to design a splendid Cathedral:
three slender spires command the skyline.

Victorian craftsmen practise Medieval skills –
nave and choir turned on their axes,
a vision of space, yet curtailed by buildings.

God's glorified not only in stone
but through peals of bells calling people to prayer,
the choir's rich tones rising to a crescendo of praise.

***

But today, in early April, the door is shut:
no tourists meander, or workers hurry,
their loud footsteps echoing through the aisles.

No congregation gathers to sing God's praise,
with the city in lockdown it seems as though
this proud Cathedral's purpose is ended.

Yet the choir sings on SoundCloud,
the Dean, livestreamed, preaches to more
than he ever would see at Evensong.

If Benson and Pearson were to return now
would they think all they worked for ceases to exist,
or that their legacy's ensured, their influence increases?

Cormelian

He lashes me with his words,
he lashes me with his fists,
he lashes me with his feet.

I lug his granite boulders
wrap my apron round them,
their heaviness oppresses me
but there is nowhere to escape.

He lashes me with his words,
he lashes me with his fists,
he lashes me with his feet.

I wear the clothes he tells me,
keep the children quiet,
his behaviour depresses me
but there is nowhere to escape.

He lashes me with his words,
he lashes me with his fists,
he lashes me with his feet.

He sleeps so I take my chance.
I pick up lighter greenstone,
quickly hide it in my apron
but then my husband wakes.

He lashes me with his words,
he lashes me with his fists,
he lashes me with his feet.

He sleeps so I take my chance.
I pack a bag, call a cab,
quickly gather up the children
but then my husband wakes.

He lashes me with his words,
he lashes me with his fists,
he lashes me with his feet.

St Piran's Day

The choughs have returned.
If you take the cliff path
you might see them
jabbing the earth,
each bill a bloodied dagger.

Miraculous,
they landed here,
like the saint
who walked from the waves
dragging his millstone behind him.

St Petroc's Well

Midnight
waver of candles.
The echoes of chanting voices
chase through the cloisters,
until each man steps
solemn to rest at the day's end.

The shy light of dawn,
while frost holds the earth
in its stranglehold –
the sound of psalms
filters heavenward like smoke.

Midday Mass,
the Eucharistic host
elevated as the sun
reaches the hill's pinnacle,
gilding the priory with light.

In the pastel dusk of winter,
men in grey robes
move in silent vesper procession,
heads bowed,
the chafe of feet over flagstones.

This rhythm of Hours,
steadfast in repetition,
and as necessary
as daily trips to the well.

In the Steps of Saints

Padstow

Leave behind
the stink of fish and chips,
the sparkling lairs of shops,
set off from St Petrock's Church,
weave your way up steps,
go through the fringes of the town,
then amble along footpaths,
salute their thistle sentries,
clamber over granite stiles.

Little Petherick

From Little Petherick
view the steel scythes
of flaying giants
harvesting the wind.
Onwards towards St Breock,
through jewels of daisies,
buttercups,
celandine.

Withiel

At Withiel
see mottled stone walls,
grey slate of Coddles Mill,
cross the Old Coach Road.
Rejoice, like Hardy,
in the solitude.

Lanivet

Startled by the swish of traffic,
notice how a sword of tarmac
divides a village,
rips out its heart.

Helman Tor

Imagine the cones
of a hut circle,
conjure in your mind,
women, children, men,
gathered round a fire at nightfall,
or up at dawn sowing fields,
rough dogs muzzling at their heels.

Golant

Rest your aching feet,
watch the fishing boats
as they dip up and down.
Spot the keen-eyed cormorant,
catch the brilliant dart
of the diving kingfisher.

Fowey

Scallop Shell house;
picture pilgrims praying here
before the dangers of the sea.
End at St Fimbarrus Church,
linger a while,
take stock before
the stink of fish and chips,
the sparkling lairs of shops,
encircle you once more.

Nanstallon
(In memory of Oliver Cumine)

You tramp up the hill
as the village retreats
behind your right shoulder.
Cows browse the field
below the path
where you rest your easel,
hoist the canvass,
begin to spread the oils.

I try to place myself in your scene,
familiar, yet unfamiliar,
viewed from a different angle.
Where can I stand
so that I make sense
of the hillside, fields,
trees, rooftops?

Ah yes – there's the road,
Goldbank Farm,
St Stephen's Church,
Pleasant View Cottages,
and crouching above the hollow
Nanstallon Chapel.

The Carpenter

He learnt his trade early
seeing his father plane wood,
watching the delicate curls cover the floor,
observing how wood is shaped, bent,
joined to form a myriad objects.

Now he is a skilled craftsman,
he can make you anything
you wish for:
a chest for your trinkets maybe,
a cupboard, table, chair.
A new back door,
or a statue for your garden.

He can make you a box
to your precise measurements,
line it with satin,
make sure you fit it
snug.

Aubade in Autumn

Today we will say our goodbyes –
the autumn sun our witness,

but time crawls
like the slow procession

that moves down the lane
and pauses by the farm,

where each morning
you led whinnying horses

across the flag stone yard,
and harnessed them for work.

Then it travels on through the valley,
passing fields that once ricocheted

with the sound of your singing,
as you ploughed your patient furrows.

Charm Against Rain

Conjure up beach.
Feel the abrasion of sand beneath your feet,
hear the far off sea sighing against the shore,
watch gulls, wings sculling into the wind.

Conjure up wood.
Kick up stones as you walk its pathways,
see the wren hop on low branches mid-song,
follow the shuddering wings of the small tortoiseshell.

Conjure up moorland.
Picture yellow horizons of gorse,
sheep cropping grass, ponies ambling at the roadside,
observe the wildfowl sailing the distant lake.

Conjure up hill.
Brace your legs as you climb its slope,
butt your head into the wind as you near the summit,
resist rain, relish the sun beating on your back.

Distant Coasts

The fulmars bank, then glide upward
the puffins stretch their wings, lift off,
over islands, rock arches, sea stacks,
wings undulating the birds soar,
they ride thermals to the cliff top,
over black basalt sands seaward,
chiselled granite dropping shear to the waves,
plummet, dive streamlined through the water.

The slopes are a panoply of flowers,
plants that huddle close to the ground;
Queen Anne’s lace, bell heather, kidney vetch,
caraway, rock ptarmigan's leaf, angelica,
hairy bird’s-foot-trefoil, yellow bartsia, hare’s foot clover,
moss campion, ladysmock, starwort mouse-ear,
flourishing in the mild ocean air,
sheltering from the chill east wind.

The Ballad of Selina Wadge

Selina, with your head bowed low
what are you trying to hide?
And why this sombre procession
with the Chaplain by your side?

Judge Denman did condemn me:
he passed the sentence of death,
so I walk out now to the gallows
where I'll take my final breath.

Selina, where is Harry,
why is he not with you?
He stays still in Launceston,
and all that I tell you is true.

Selina, where is Harry,
what has become of him?
In truth he died at Alternun
where he lies in his small coffin.

Selina, why are you walking
with Johnny alone at your side?
My lover took Harry and threw him
down a well on the moor where he died.

Selina, no one believes you,
a new story each time you are asked.
It is true it was me who killed Harry,
I drowned him in a well Friday past.

So Selina was hung in Bodmin
on a sunny summer's day,
but whether what happened was justice
is a difficult matter to say.

From *Lanhydrock*

Devouring History

Around the outskirts of rooms
creatures scurry away from feet,
stumble into traps set
to record their presence.

On the bookshelf in the entrance hall
booklice embedded
in the pages of *Temple Shakespeare*
consume their next meal.

Silverfish leave a frost-like trail
across the covers of *Kelly's Directory,*
bound volumes of letters, legal guides
on the shelves of the estate office.

In Tommy's bedroom,
case bearing clothes moth larvae,
hide secure in their multi-coloured shells,
a network of pink, red, blue, green.

White-shouldered house moths
mottle-backed scamper among toys,
seek a sheltered nursery
for the next generation.

In the lumber room
pale-backed clothes moth larvae
carry their tilted silk bags,
weave among furniture legs.

Woolly bears slip through cracks,
rummage through drawers,
leave their hairy cast skins
in Her Ladyship's bedroom.

A varied carpet beetle scuttles,
along drawing room window-sill,
egg-laden she drops down
into soft piles of silk carpet.

In the gallery a foreign invader,
Australian carpet beetle,
white-haired, rotund body
finds a welcome sanctuary.

Vacuuming Shakespeare

Illuminate, magnify *Hamlet,*
dust gold-leaf edges,
turn in the hand, sweep the spine,
vacuum covers clockwise centre to edge,
check inside for booklice frass.

Illuminate, magnify *Timon of Athens,*
dust gold-leaf edges,
turn in the hand, sweep the spine,
vacuum covers clockwise centre to edge,
check inside for booklice frass.
Then find on the half title
inscribed in an upright hand:
‘A.G. Agar-Robartes
from Mother, April 1905.’

Timon of Athens,
Alexander Agar-Robartes,
wealthy, popular,
much loved youngest son,
generous friend,
brave soldier,
rejected,
wounded,
plots his revenge,
tries to forget,
borders on madness,
suffers a breakdown,
found dead near his cave,
found dying on a London street.

After Hours

As the last visitors trail up the drive,
volunteers slip out of Edwardian guise
and return to the twenty first century.
Then with rooms checked, blinds down,
lights turned off, external doors locked,
the final cars leave the church circle.

In the entrance Oskar,
stretched on hind legs,
drops down on four paws,
shakes himself.
His carved ringlets
dissolve into curls,
he glimpses the ghost of a cat,
bounds upstairs in pursuit,
the hallway echoes
with the rattle of his claws.

Florence, Ivy, Ruby
blink their eyes,
unloosen limbs,
spring down from chairs,
sit cross-legged on nursery floor,
heads bowed, hair touching –
they share secrets as girls do.

The door inches open,
a flicker of light
moves stealthily
down the passageway.

Pietà
A sword shall pierce through thy own soul also. (Luke 2.35)

The fruit has followed them from Eden.
It hangs in succulent clusters on the bough,
as Cain goes about tilling soil, sowing seed,
and Abel takes care of his flocks.
Temptation lies waiting, patient at the door.

Does Abel, watching his mother nurse the child,
look over and catch sight of death?
And does Eve, even as she suckles, see
another woman who would hold her son,
cradle him, crucified, in her arms?

THE ABSENCE OF BIRDS

How is Silence Possible?

I asked a Solitary,
How is silence possible?

I hear the zip of traffic,
catch the rumble of conversation,
thrum of a street musician,
or clatter of a skateboard,
the drone of a plane overhead.

I hear the burr of the grasshopper,
notice the whine of a fly,
a distant cock crowing,
constant babble of birdsong,
the rasp of a horse eating grass.

I hear my feet skittling pebbles,
listen to the ocean thrashing the shore,
the water lightly washing the sand,
fading to the sound of gulls keening.

Silence is interrupted
by the hum of the computer,
the beat of a clock ticking,
then the scamper of my pen across paper.

The Solitary replied,
Go out onto the street,
walk in a summer meadow,
spend time strolling along a beach,
rest content in your room at night.

The Cathedral

I see you too have lit a candle.
You stand beside me watching
the flickering of its feeble flame
as if willing it to live,
each breeze's punch
sends it reeling backwards,
before it rises again.

At such moments memories
rekindle themselves:
that quiet moment at dusk,
just enough time to wind down,
sip a drink, recollect the day's events,
that poignant tune, the piebald light,
or the haunting smell and smoke
of a dying candle.

See, it grows sturdier now.
What prayers, thoughts,
or even dreams
are invested in that candle?
What disparate journeys
have brought us to this Cathedral,
where our separate lives
momentarily run in parallel?

Against Coach Tours

Not for me
the up at dawn starts,
the interminable miles
in air conditioned coaches,
the exuberant camaraderie –
We're all friends now,
the false conviviality
with a pack of random strangers.

Not for me
the endless evenings
spent in mediocre cheap hotels,
the too abundant tourist fodder,
the over organised excursions –
All keep up, follow my umbrella,
the compulsory photo shoots
at must-see hyped attractions.

Give me solitude:
the perfect destination,
a quiet lake, peaceful hills,
a place to restore, to recreate –
No-one goes there, it's too remote.

Encounter

Leaving our car
we walk reading names on grave stones,
imagining personalities, unity of minds
in the stillness of the Meeting House.

The guide's voice fractures the silence.
Have you come far?
What would you like to see?
How much do you already know?

The benches keep their peace though,
as do the books in the library,
the costumes in the gallery,
and the centuries of quiet dead.

The Absence of Birds

The leaves rustle
releasing a surprised sparrow,
thrushes answer one another,
the red kite static above my head,
I trace the magpie's undulating flight,
tune in to the distant rookery.

Then silence.

I think about the absence
of birds, until a pigeon clatters
from the branches and a robin sings.
The birds were always present
but those thoughts
oh my thoughts…

Poem Written in the Sunshine

Now I'm sitting outside the café in the sun. I'm eating an ice cream and marvelling at all the time I've already frittered away today searching online for ideas for poems I might write, or poets I might imitate.

an ant hesitates
threads a path
among sugar grains

I walk through a garden. The magnolia cups its silken hands as though waiting for them to be filled with blessings. There are people taking photos, families sitting on the grass, as I near the car park I weave around tourists speaking a language I half recognise. Possibly it's Polish or maybe though it's Swedish.
I remember that day in Höganäs, the bus driver spoke to me in English but smiled when I got off and said my one word *Tak.* Down by the sea a boy jumped off the jetty, he was streamlined like a fish but reminded me of Basho's leaping frog.

beyond the blackbird's song
the gentle murmurings
of a waterfall

As I open the car door the heat floods over me, I touch the steering wheel with caution. The sun has made it a band of fire. I think it is too hot to go shopping so instead I get out and sit a while longer in the sunshine. As the afternoon comes to an end I drive to the supermarket where I meet Liz. She has spent the day in her garden and her car is now crammed to the roof with branches and weeds.

a lattice of branches
the spiralling arc
of starlings in flight

An Absence of Theme

All morning I sit reading poems
I wish I had written but cannot.
It is not only a lack of technique,
it is more an absence of theme.

For in one poem I admire,
the poet enters the cancer ward,
relays the disbelief of blood counts,
the numbness of hair loss.

While in another a poet recalls the shock
of adolescent love,
contrasts its ungainly agony
with the harmony of lying entangled in sheets
behind the door of a Georgian house.

A third poet visits a revolution,
hears the jabber of bullets,
the shriek of sirens,
repeats the reticence of grief.

But I am constrained by
the conversation of birdsong
overheard in a spring lane;
holly trees shaped
like the flame of a candle;
beeches, their chrysalis buds
bursting unseen into life,
and a speckle of primrose
at the wood’s edge.

How to Become a Global Poet

Refuse to leave your room,
ignore the adverts for city breaks,
the invitations to explore distant places.
Instead make a cappuccino,
type a few words into *Google* –
see you have a whole world at your fingertips.

No need to worry and rush
to be on time to make connections,
certainly don't bother about time zones,
or resetting your watch to local time.
Don't be anxious how you will cope
jet-lagged with a few hours' sleep.

Just explore the world at leisure,
take in views of mountain ranges,
scuba dive near coral reefs,
camp out in a desert,
and sail past Artic icebergs.

Encounter a Yanomami hunter
stalking peccaries in the forest glade,
a Tibetan monk as he chants his prayers,
a yachtswoman navigating Atlantic waves,
an American tycoon closing his latest deal.

Now you have seen the world,
discovered its wildest spaces,
return to your homepage,
open *Word* and your screen
becomes a hustling market place,
a buttress of storm-chiselled cliffs.

Spoons

She hangs on the cusp of a dream

with spoons levitating in her thoughts

which is what she supposes

spoons were made to do

She watches them dancing in air

tiny ballerinas pirouetting

on invisible toes

then flying beckoned

to her outstretched hand

Soon she will be crossing a boundary
to that space where she can talk
with the living and the dead side by side.

She will find herself in a country
where it is possible to travel from
Bodmin to Hartlepool in an instant.

She will meander along corridors
into rooms of a house that is strange,
yet seems like a well-loved home.

The rooms expanding as her feet touch
them. They fill with light, she will twirl,
hands clapping in time with a soundless beat.

But for now she hovers on the threshold

of a dream her mind gently levitating

as though it were a spoon

Seventeen

Take care with these last fragments of childhood –
treat them gently. Spread them out before you
like a party dress, to be worn only once,
or savour them like some exotic dish.

Do not rush through your days –
handle each minute with care, as though
you take down a delicate ornament from its shelf,
or turn the pages of a precious manuscript.

Honour these hours as an exquisite hoard –
respect them, although you rebel against them
as you reach out to touch the fringes of adulthood.
These moments are fleeting, take delight in them.

Wedding Day

I put on the dress made of layers of silk,
cover my face with a borrowed veil,
take up the bouquet of red and white,
then close my door for the final time.

Cover my face with a borrowed veil,
conceal my doubts so no one can see,
then close my door for the final time,
hope for the best as I travel to church.

Conceal my doubts so no one can see –
reassure the man standing at my side,
hope for the best as I travel to church,
smile at the priest as she speaks to me.

Reassure the man standing at my side –
promise I love him; I distrust myself.
Smile at the priest as she speaks to me,
sign my name in the place I'm shown.

Promise I love him? I distrust myself.
I know I love another so I go to him.
Sign my name in the place I'm shown:
marriage can be ended so easily.

I know I love another so I go to him:
I put on the dress, made of layers of silk –
marriage can be ended so easily,
take up the bouquet of red and white.

Flying to Mercury

When I was a child
I dreamt of travelling
to the moon and back,
but now I'm in countdown,
ready to fly to Mercury.

My hand light on the throttle,
foot poised on the brake,
I wave to the earth,
race past the moon,
on towards Venus.

Venus, a searing mass:
red-brown rock,
convulsing volcanoes,
hell blown hurricanes.
It slows me down,
threatens to suck me in,
but, hand hard on the throttle,
I heave the space craft past.

Mercury in view,
I thrust the engines.
Like the gentle quiver
of a bird's wing,
they slow me down.
I land as the sun sets twice,
marvel at the crusty rocks,
dense iron core, blazing heat,
the freezing fingers of a glacier.

With a mouse-click I return to earth,
take off my headphones, shift ended.
I walk through the grounds of control centre
brindled in evening light,
cross city streets, steer myself home.

Easter in Paris

Inside the burnt out carcass,
the cinders of faith,
of nationhood,
lie in a smouldering mass.

But listen … do you hear it?
High up above the sacristy,
bursting out of layered boxes,
a buzzing resurrection.

The Spirits of the Roof Space

Two African spirits
three inches high,
solemnly stood guard
at the rim of my loft hatch.

*

He carried a stick
slung over his shoulder,
she clutched a cross,
to ward off evil.

*

A quaint curiosity,
I lifted them down.
Heedlessly discarded
I thought no more of them.

*

Roaring clouds of locusts
stripped the lawn of grass,
trees leafless carcasses,
but only in my garden.

*

An electrical storm
set the sky alight with bursts
of red, blue, green, purple.
My internet was down for days.

*

The whole building trembled,
saucepans rattled in the kitchen,
coat hangers jangled in my wardrobe,
ghosts of ancestors roamed through the house.

*

A sandstorm erupted,
grit, dust everywhere,
the sun blacked out.
I was wasted by fear.

*

It rained over my house
forty days and forty nights.
I watched tables, chairs, books and cats
float through the door.

*

Wild fires raged all night,
my house bombarded,
flames shooting
as high as the Alps.

*

A river appeared spewing alligators,
crocodiles, snakes, fish and frogs,
people came from miles away:
their videos went viral.

*

Far too rashly
we think no more
of fantasies, of spirits,
of passing gods.

Heretic
(2 Timothy 4.14-15)

Alexander the metalworker did me a great deal of harm.
Of course I attacked him, charlatan,
unsettling Ephesus, talking in his false apostle's
voice, denouncing me for being twice-married,
accusing me of spreading made-up fables.

The Lord will repay him
and him too. May he erupt in blisters,
be set ablaze in hell's fiercest flames,
I curse him and his offensive ways!

for what he has done.
What did I do?
Exposed the falseness of his claims
to be someone of note,
magnifying his malicious teaching
by assuming our saintly founder's name,

be on your guard against him.
Be on your guard against him
with his foul manners and corrosive lies.

Memento Mori

Papa counted out three guineas;
the photographer arranged us in line –
William, Lizzie, Alfred, John
paraded in Sunday best
while I wore a new dress,
white cotton, silk ribbons
bought for the occasion – two shillings.

The photographer said to stand dead still.
No one blinked or twitched.
So for the sum of three guineas,
plus two shillings,
not forgetting the Hansom cab fare –
thruppence three farthings,
we had our family portrait.

Papa, how much
would the doctor have cost you?

Grief …

is the Christmas card
that I keep
by my bedside

a collection of stories
that I meant one day
to tell you

the email I sent you
that remains
without an answer

a score of conversations
that are left
with no ending

the message on my phone
that I'll never
now delete

a couplet from a song
that you used
always to be singing

the 'you' who wanders
through poems that
will stay unwritten …