

ALLUSIONS TO A CHRISTIAN GOD IN ENGLISH ROMANTIC  
POETRY: A RELIGIOUS EXPLORATION

by

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A THESIS

Presented to the Department of English  
and the Robert D. Clark Honors College  
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of  
Bachelor of Arts

May 2024

## **An Abstract of the Thesis of**

Grace Winjum for the degree of Bachelor of Arts  
in the Department of English to be taken May 2024

Title: Allusions to a Christian God in English Romantic Poetry:  
A Religious Exploration

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Inspired by personal experience, growth, and exposure to the works of a number of Romantic poets, this project aims to provide analytical questions about religious foundations for the works of English Romantic poets while attempting to find answers through a creative lens. Considering both the secular and religious elements of the poetry of William Blake, Percy Shelley, William Wordsworth, and Samuel Taylor Coleridge, I analyze the use of Christian allusions and attempts at moralizing through these allusions.

Approaching primary texts (*The Prelude* by Wordsworth, *Songs of Innocence and Experience* by Blake, “Hymn to Intellectual Beauty” by Shelley, and *The Lyrical Ballads* by Coleridge and Wordsworth), I identify key characterizations of and mentions of religious connotations.

Taking into account the critical interpretations of the writers’ own spiritual beliefs, I examine the use of these allusions in establishing a clear theological message through the poets’ work. After thoroughly interrogating the intentions and potential interpretations of these messages, I turn to my own reflections on the piece.

There exists a vast amount of research regarding religious allusions within Romanticism, including research focusing on Wordsworth, Blake, Shelley, and Coleridge. The personal religious beliefs of each author have been explored so that they work in conjunction with one

another in their shared movement. A clear comparison can be made in the comparison between William Wordsworth, who may work to exemplify the work of a religious poet without necessarily externalizing these ideas, and Percy Shelley, who provides a clear alternative as a known atheist utilizing biblical references within his works.<sup>1 2</sup>

This consideration has sparked the conception of Romanticism as an inherently religious or, conversely, a secularizing movement. Along this train of thought, the argument may be made that the dichotomy of presenting Christianity against secularism is misguided and overlooks the broader implications of these two concepts, even within one literary movement.<sup>3</sup> This opposition to the juxtaposition of Romanticism as a strictly religious or secular movement invites a closer interrogation of the religious allusions present within Romantic works.

The work of William Wordsworth, as a Christian, inspired discussion about the spiritual questions and musings, and lack thereof, within his poetry. The lack of explicit discussions of his religion in Wordsworth's work has caused questions surrounding the extent to which his personal beliefs influenced his writing, with explorations into why religious ideas may be markedly present as well as where they are decidedly absent.<sup>4 5</sup> His well-known religious beliefs have inspired a closer investigation into the impact of his thought on not only his poems, but also on Romanticism as a whole.

From a different perspective, many scholars have worked to examine Percy Shelley as an atheist. Despite his personal beliefs, Shelley utilized biblical allusions in his poetry.<sup>6</sup> This

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1 Gill, Stephen. *William Wordsworth--the Prelude*. Cambridge [England] ; Cambridge University Press, 1991. Print.

2 O'Neill, Michael. *Shelley*. London ; Longman, 1993. Print.

3 Buckley, Devin J, and Thomas Pfau. *Romanticism as Religion: Beyond the Secularization Narrative in Readings of British Romantic Poetry*. Ann Arbor: ProQuest LLC, 2021. Print.

4 Borkowska, Eliza. *The Presence of God in the Works of William Wordsworth*. London: Routledge, 2021. Print.

5 Borkowska, Eliza. *The Absent God in the Works of William Wordsworth*. Vol. 35. London: Routledge, Taylor & Francis, 2021. Print.

6 Shelley, Bryan. *Shelley and Scripture : The Interpreting Angel*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1994. Print.

complicated the reception of his work during his lifetime and has started conversations regarding the impact of one's beliefs upon the work they create.<sup>7</sup> The difference in the approach regarding Shelley as a writer as opposed to that of Wordsworth highlights the complicated interplay between poet and poetry, as well as Romanticism as Christian and secular.

My thesis focuses on the complex relationships between Romantic poets' personal beliefs and the ways in which these beliefs found representation in their work. Using my own findings and the interpretations of others, I present my own collection of work exploring religious topics and ideas touched on by existing Romantic poetry. This collection is a combination of methodology as both a creative production and consideration of past scholarship.

Taking into account the critical interpretations of the writers' own spiritual beliefs, I examine the use of these allusions in establishing a clear theological message through the poets' work. After thoroughly interrogating the intentions and potential interpretations of these messages, I turn to my own reflections on the piece.

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<sup>7</sup> O'Neill, Michael. Shelley. London ; Longman, 1993. Print.

## **Acknowledgements**

Thank you to my parents and my friends, who have always been there for me.

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## Introduction

I have loved the works of English Romantic poets from the first time I read them. Themes of nature, solitude, imagination, and an appreciation of the sublime all captured my attention early on. I was particularly inspired by the works of poets Percy Shelley, William Wordsworth, William Blake, and Samuel Taylor Coleridge. It seemed to me as though their explorations into these concepts flowed naturally from their views of the world, and I found that my love of nature was perfectly encapsulated by their works.

Having lived in the twenty-first century rather than the end of the eighteenth century, my positionality came from a vastly different place. Why, then, were there so many ideas that appealed to my interests? This question spurred a greater investigation into the period in which these writers lived, and how the differences in their lives could have led to the production of work that touched me so significantly.

Drawing on the conflicting ideologies of the Romantic poets, I decided to embark upon my own form of poetic exploration. The goal was to find where religious conversation could exist within a twenty-first century series of poetic musings. Having been raised within the Christian faith and having not faced the poetry of English Romantics until adulthood, I endeavor to discover where my own religious experiences could fit within the context of the conversation about secularism and Christianity from this period of time. I attempt to find a place for my modern-day experiences within the context of controversy and complicated dialogue surrounding the Christian faith centuries before my own life began. These poems focus on themes brought forth by the poets Shelley, Blake, Coleridge, and Wordsworth. They explore innocence, identity, love, and reconciliation between personal experiences of faith and the expectations of the church.

# 1: Works of English Romantic Poets

## 1.1 William Blake's Certain Faith

At a time when religion was greatly politicized, William Blake served as a Romantic poet effectively encompassing Christian ideals without confronting them.<sup>8</sup> His poetic works, particularly his *Songs of Innocence* and *Songs of Experience*, published five years apart in 1789 and 1794, respectively, focus on central tenets of the Christian faith without opposing God.<sup>9</sup> Though drawing inspiration from his faith, Blake did not shy away from critique of the Christian church.

As the titles indicate, Blake focused these major projects on the two contrary states of the human soul by “doubling” many of his poems. In two of his most famous doubled poems, “The Lamb” and “The Tyger,” Blake explored the maker of a figure of innocence (the lamb) who could also create a creature as fierce as experience can provide (the tiger).<sup>10</sup> In a departure from the righteous ideal of a Judeo-Christian benevolent God, the decision to create such an animal points to the fallible nature of Blake's God, who instead shares humanity's capacity for both good and evil.<sup>11</sup>

There is no question of the religious elements within Blake's work, as his imaginative endeavors in these projects were in harmony with the Christian faith.<sup>12</sup> Though exemplifying the Romantic Period's exploration of nature and the individual mind, Blake found a way to tie individualism and the power of nature into his Christian ideology, examining how his God could

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8 Borkowska, Eliza. The Presence of God in the Works of William Wordsworth. 4.

9 Gill, Stephen. William Wordsworth--the Prelude.

10 Blake, William, and Bruce Rogers. *Songs of Innocence and Experience*. New Rochelle: Peter Pauper Press, 1935. Print.

11 Lindquist, Hannah R. (2019) "A Question of Identity: God and the Human Crisis in William Blake's The Marriage of Heaven and Hell and Songs of Innocence and Experience," *The Corinthian*: Vol. 19 , Article 5, Pg. 3.

12 Borkowska, Eliza. The Presence of God in the Works of William Wordsworth. 2.



be “meek” and “mild” in His gift of a savior as well as “dare seize the fire” of a violent tiger. <sup>13</sup>

These exploratory ideas came in the form of direct addresses, both to the subjects of various poems, the reader, and, at times it seems, to God. Blake’s clear invocation of a Christian God as a figure within his poetry was not shared amongst all other Romantic poets, even amongst those considered religious poets themselves. <sup>14</sup>

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13 Blake, William, and Bruce Rogers. *Songs of Innocence and Experience*.

14 Borkowska, Eliza. *The Presence of God in the Works of William Wordsworth*. 4.

## 1.2 William Wordsworth as a Religious Poet in *The Prelude*

There are few poets whose religious beliefs have been as integral to their editorial reception as William Wordsworth. Over the course of his writing tenure, Wordsworth was able to create a large body of work, almost half a thousand of which contain themes of religious faith.<sup>15</sup> Despite this large number of religious references, Wordsworth's work markedly lacks direct addresses to a Christian God, unlike many other Romantic poets of the same age.<sup>16</sup> It is in part due to his many allusions to this God that some believe there is no question of Wordsworth's religious perspective as a poet, while others note his lack of insight on the matter.<sup>17</sup> <sup>18</sup> To examine the themes of religiosity within Wordsworth's work, the idea that Christianity must be pitted against secularism can be disregarded to instead attend to a different kind of God that exists within the framework of Romantic thought.<sup>19</sup>

In Wordsworth's autobiographical poem *The Prelude*, he examined themes that have evoked religious ideals, but departed from strictly Christian faith practices. As he explored his own lifetime through the thirteen book collection, Wordsworth established his identity as a poet within this framework, connecting his ideological ideas with the ways in which he saw the world as a poet. He wrote of his internal reflections and "Of genius, power, / Creation, and divinity

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15 Borkowska, Eliza. *The Presence of God in the Works of William Wordsworth*. 3.

16 Borkowska, Eliza. *The Presence of God in the Works of William Wordsworth*. 4.

17 A strong claim that "Wordsworth is clearly a profoundly religious poet" (Gill 39) encompasses one strain of thought, emphasizing Wordsworth not as a religious man, but as a religious poet who presents Christian perspectives only as they influence his work.

18 Other scholars claim that, distinct from a religious identity, Wordsworth's "interests are all with the human, the social, or the political; a religious insight is conspicuously lacking" (Jacobus 62).

19 In Devin Buckley's *Romanticism as Religion: Beyond the Secularization Narrative in Readings of British Romantic Poetry*, he describes a new form of "Romantic religion" that emerges from the works of these four poets. Moving forward, I will attend to this conceptualization of religious thought that transcends a traditional Christian approach in favor of this idea of the Romantics and their attention to God within nature and beyond institutional bounds of established religion.

itself,” as he had spoken of “What has passed within [himself]” (III, 170-174). He assumed the role of creator of poetry while discussing the role of God as Creator at the same time.

Using a collection of historical stories and myths, Wordsworth compared the forms of devotion across multiple theological systems:

Harmonious tribute paid  
To patient courage, and unblemished truth,  
To firm devotion, zeal unquenchable,  
And Christian meekness hallowing faithful loves.  
Sometimes, more sternly moved, I would relate,  
How vanquished Mithridates northward passed,  
And, hidden in the cloud of years, became  
Odin, the Father of a race by whom  
Perished the Roman Empire.

(I, 182-190)

By embracing the faults of Christianity’s “meekness” and introducing the Norse figure Odin, Wordsworth painted a picture of a Creator that extended beyond a single definition. Continuing along this line of thought, Wordsworth explored the sites of worship by speaking of:

Some famed temple where of yore  
The Druids worshipped, or the antique walls  
Of that large Abbey where within the Vale  
Of Nightshade, to St. Mary’s honor built,  
Stands yet a mouldering pile with fractured arch,  
Belfry, and images, and living trees;  
A holy scene!

(II, 101-107)

This combined image of varied faith practices connected Wordsworth’s understanding of the Christian faith with those outside of it, demonstrating a consideration of a greater power beyond

one set of belief systems. His additional mention of the “living trees” as a part of the “holy scene” introduced the importance of nature within his demonstrated conception of a holy spirit.

Wordsworth reflected on this idea throughout his thirteen books in *The Prelude*, following the central idea of “Nature’s self, which is the breath of God, / Or His pure Word by miracle revealed” (V, 221-222). This conception of nature as a gift of, or proof of, a God, remained a central theme throughout the books. As a Romantic poet, the recognition of nature and its aestheticism permeated much of Wordsworth’s work. His allusions to a greater being often coincided with the power of nature, working effectively as one. The idea of the afterlife, of a Creator, and other religious ideals were founded, in his work, in the beauty of the natural world:

Earth, nowhere unembellished by some trace  
Of that first Paradise whence man was driven;  
And sky, whose beauty and bounty are expressed  
By the proud name she bears – the name of Heaven.

(III, 108-111)

The recognition of the earth and sky as conceptions of paradise and of heaven blurred the separation between the world gifted by a God figure and the world around Wordsworth. This lack of distinction allowed Wordsworth to draw divine inspiration from the sublime elements of the world around him. It was through this idea that Wordsworth’s references to religion in his independent work led easily into the combined efforts of *The Lyrical Ballads* written with the pantheist Samuel Taylor Coleridge.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> Jacobus, Mary. *Tradition and Experiment in Wordsworth’s Lyrical Ballads* (1798).

### 1.3 Coleridge's Pantheistic Influence and The Lyrical Ballads

While debates remain ongoing regarding the influence of religion upon William Wordsworth, there is little question of the intense religious focus of Samuel Taylor Coleridge. In a profoundly Romantic approach, Coleridge's poetic works attended to the mind of God as it could relate to the minds of men.<sup>21</sup> Though his constant struggle over theology permeated much of his work, Coleridge's religion continued to resist definition. As a pantheist (a term rife with controversy due to its rejection of traditional religion while acting as a distinct belief system at the same time) Coleridge believed that the presence of "God" was contained within all that is in the universe, indistinguishable from the world.<sup>22</sup> This ideology was an extremely influential aspect of his work completed independently and alongside other Romantic poets, like William Wordsworth.

Working together over a period of years, Wordsworth and Coleridge wrote *The Lyrical Ballads*, a collection of some of their most significant works including Coleridge's "Rime of the Ancient Mariner" and Wordsworth's "Tintern Abbey," both of which touch on religious beliefs and have been greatly examined by scholars of the literary canon.<sup>23</sup>

In concordance with their deep appreciation of nature, Coleridge and Wordsworth attended to another significant aspect of religious thought: death. Several of the poems included within *The Lyrical Ballads* attend to this death, not just in expectations for the afterlife which is so often contemplated in faith-based spaces, but how the living must reconcile the loss of loved ones.

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21 Jacobus, Mary. *Tradition and Experiment in Wordsworth's Lyrical Ballads (1798)*. Clarendon Press, 1979. 63.

22 Mander, William. "Pantheism." *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, Stanford University, 17 Aug. 2023, plato.stanford.edu/entries/pantheism/.

23 McEahern, Patricia A., Thomas F. Beckwith, and William Wordsworth. *A Complete Concordance to the Lyrical Ballads of Samuel Taylor Coleridge and William Wordsworth : 1798 and 1800 Editions*.

In Wordsworth's "We Are Seven," the speaker meets a young girl protesting that there are seven children in her family despite the death of two. Not understanding, the speaker attempts to clarify the number in light of these losses, but the young girl refuses to change her explanation, even when questioned:

'How many are you then,' said I,  
'If they two are in Heaven?'  
The little Maiden did reply,  
'O Master! We are seven.'

(61-64)

The lines dividing the living and the dead become blurred in this poem, as the young girl includes the presence of her siblings into her familial tale, even when they are "in Heaven" and not on Earth. The question thus becomes not what Heaven may be, but how the family lives on in the wake of death. As a child speaking, the girl goes on to include her siblings in games, explaining that once their sister was lost:

'Together round her grave we played,  
My brother John and I.

'And when the ground was white with snow,  
'And I could run and slide,  
'My brother John was forced to go,  
'And he lies by her side.'

(55-60)

The casual explanation of the loss of John's life is not accompanied by a dramatically sorrowful tone, but a continuation of a youthful understanding of his presence. Rather than view his death as tragic, the girl understands it as a way for her brother to accompany her sister as the family stays together. In this way, Wordsworth's explanation of death through the eyes of a child

reveals the innocence that can live on in the face of tragedy, reminiscent of Blake's emphasis on innocence.

Exploring the emotion around premature death of a child, Wordsworth included "The Thorn" as another example. Though continuing to attend to beautiful descriptions of the natural features of the scene set, Wordsworth delved into the darker emotional connotations of an infant's death. He wrote of:

This heap of earth o'ergrown with moss,  
Which close beside the thorn you see,  
So fresh in all its beauteous dyes,  
Is like an infant's grave in size  
As like as like can be:  
But never, never any where,  
An infant's grave was half so fair.

(49-55)

As he explored the natural world's appearance, Wordsworth contended with the darker themes present in the scene. The emotional weight of his words became greater due to the juxtaposition between Romantic explorations of aestheticism and the grief associated with such a loss of young life. Wordsworth walked a fine line between these two contrasting views of the world by connecting the beauty of nature with the destruction of death. This form of connection took on an unexpected approach, however, as Wordsworth's words turned not to the afterlife, but to the physical world left behind in line with the pantheistic and Romantic emphasis on the natural world.

#### 1.4 Shelley's "Atheism" Expressed in a "Hymn to Intellectual Beauty"

Though widely acknowledged, Percy Shelley's atheism took on a form distinct from what twenty-first century readers, or even readers of his age, often consider atheism. Shelley may have rejected the idea of a Christian God, but he still maintained the presence of a divine spirit that was made distinct through his proclamation of himself as an atheist.<sup>24</sup>

One such demonstration of this spirit took on the form of the intellectual beauty central to his "Hymn to Intellectual Beauty" that remained separate from but influenced by the idea of a Christian God. In a definition similar to the "God" of pantheistic believers, Shelley wrote about, and to, the subject of his poem as a force holding a light that "Gives grace and truth to life's unquiet dream."<sup>25</sup> This concept of light shines throughout the poem, as the themes of light and darkness serve to exemplify the inconstancy of man's world.

Inconstancy takes on an action of its own, as beautifully demonstrated through Shelley's descriptions of "moonbeams that behind some piny mountain shower."<sup>26</sup> It is in the abstraction of light, muddled behind the darkness of night but ever-present, that Shelley demonstrates the dramatic comparison of light within darkness and, contrastingly, darkness that creeps in to suffocate light "Like darkness to a dying flame."<sup>27</sup> The dichotomy of this illumination helps develop the contrasts with which the speaker must contend. He searches for the answer to the presence of such juxtaposition and lands not on God, but on intellectual beauty.

Reveling in the "inconstant" presence of beauty, Shelley repeats this word and idea as a way to present the mysteries of life. The speaker ponders the questions shrouded from human

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24 Shelley, Bryan. "Young Bysshe and the Bible." OUP Academic, Oxford University Press, 7 Apr. 1994, doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780198122845.003.0002.

25 Shelley, Percy Bysshe. "Hymn to Intellectual Beauty by Percy Bysshe..." Poetry Foundation, Poetry Foundation, 36.

26 Shelley, Percy Bysshe, 5.

27 Shelley, Percy Bysshe, 45.



view that many would call upon religion to answer, and instead turns to his idea of intellectual beauty. It is to this presence, the pursuit of this art, that the speaker proclaims “I vow’d that I would dedicate my powers.”<sup>28</sup> In this moment, though not proclaiming a set faith, the speaker finds his own form of God.

This spiritual concept remains separate from the experience just of man or just of the world around him. It serves, instead, as a way of finding the answers that man in the physical world is unable to find on his own. Intellectual beauty can serve as the foundation for a religion found by the poets (or just by Shelley): a belief system persistent in idea, if not in practice, today.

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<sup>28</sup> Shelley, Percy Bysshe, 61.

## **2: Religion in a Lifetime**

Having explored the themes of personal religious ideology within the works of English Romantic poets, I turn now to my own conception of this poetic thinking. In attempts to rationalize connections between the lived experiences of coming of age within the Christian church and a disconnect from this establishment, I impart on my own form of poetic thinking inspired by Shelley, Blake, Coleridge, and Wordsworth. This leads into a set of poems that explore innocence, identity, love, and reconciliation between personal experiences of faith and the expectations of the church.

### **2.1 Born to Experience**

The first four poems focus on the early stages of life within the church community. Starting with an introduction into the world of the church, I begin with a description of the limitations within the confines of organized religion. This idea moves into a baptismal scene, where the infant questions the ceremony that she did not request. The next step is the confirmation into the church, an important moment within the Catholic and Lutheran churches in which young members of the church become adults in the eyes of the institution, claiming the faith and their part in it after an extended education. This section concludes with a departure from the institution, as it turns into a personal, rather than institutionalized, exploration of faith.

## *2.1a The Church and its Walls*

The world, it hums in held and hushing breath  
Of pews ruled by no-nonsense grandmothers  
Clinging to each note ringing forth—the Word  
Of God, leaving the mouth of the servant.

Before the quieted crowd, he stands tall  
And certain, holiness fully assured  
By those many pairs of unblinking eyes  
Fixed upon the heaviness of white robes.

Weight on his shoulders, mixed cotton and stares  
Lifts ever so slightly, his palms to the sky.  
Hosanna, he calls, a chorus now formed  
Of age and innocence, acting as one.

It lifts to the ceiling, falls to the floor  
In filling the hall, it can't reach the door.  
Their melody sounds, the congregation  
Of one voice, one mind, one God, now, forever.

Age-worn wooded ceilings hold unsilenced

Professions of guilt and love and losses  
Too terrible and great to leave behind  
Or outside the still air of fellowship.

Where wind whips branch and leaf, there are no walls  
To contain their words. There are no muting  
Mufflers of carpets, drapes, traps of fabric.  
Outside, the sky goes on, and up, and where?

Birth in walled rooms, so babes are held inside  
Taught to walk and talk and learn to worship  
Away from the sun and stars and wind and  
Sea. I don't ask to see the sky, or why

All I see are walls.

*2.1b The Question of Baptism*

The world, it hums in held and hushing breath  
Of solemnity broken (awoken?)  
By the only voice rising from the pulpit  
To my ears, round and keen to know sound.

Words young and ancient, both new and rehearsed  
Form a call and response. That strange man speaks  
To the two who hold the white crumpled dress  
Folded under my legs bent, now rounded flesh.

I hear my father's name, but he speaks not,  
And son (though I am the only daughter),  
And Holy Spirit, too. Sound drowns my world  
In water cold and falling and everywhere.

I wail to stop. All there is to do: cry.  
All there is to seek: the warmth of mother  
A name not tainted, and much more dry.  
She coos and pats and I almost forget.

Blinking eyes bring water from my lashes  
Down the cheeks that have reddened less in time.

Salt and fresh water I didn't request

Leave tracks, lines on skin that tell me nothing,

Least of all why.

## *2.1c A Confirmation*

The world, it hums in held and hushing breath  
As I stand before the small crowd watching,  
Waiting for my mouth to move with purpose.  
Practiced words appear, the script in my mind.

My speech rings out above the gentle whir  
Of ceiling fans too old to spin in tandem.  
I've seen their age as mine has come today,  
Their volume found just as my voice has been.

They cry for oil, I cry a silent plea  
With the eyes I open wide to find  
A sea of head nods up and down with my  
Every word, whatever each may mean.

I acknowledge the gifts God gave me in  
My baptism, once all those years ago  
When the world was my voice within these walls.  
A promise made is not a promise kept.

I renounce, I believe, and I confess

All that I could not fifteen years ago  
With the taste, the red of my bitten tongue  
Blood of Christ, shed for me. I swallow it.

Lips close and tighten, my smile forced and wide  
To ignore the lump bulging in my throat,  
A threat to spill across brown-speckled ground  
My recant, a color ugly like bile.

But I see my words, they hang in the air  
Unstirred in a space untouched by the breeze  
The fans fabricate but can't recreate  
That may make meaning of ceremonies.

Here, they are all words. Mine empty with them.



*2.1d To Attend to God*

The world, it hums in held and hushing breath  
Holding notes shared in every melody  
In and exhaled, exalted and observed.  
Playing in twists of air, a traveler

All of its own design, it whispers low,  
Below bells ringing, amongst gossip tales.  
Waiting to be heard, the world, it remains  
Present in the spaces long left alone.

I cross a crowded street, and still I hear  
The smile creeping into its story told.  
I wake to the birds outside my window  
And still I feel the warmth of absent sun.

I leave my father's house to see the world  
And remember the promise I once made  
In the room of dust and death and red wine  
Now easily kept here, on my own path

Where I can hear the hum of the earth.

## 2.2 Self in Community

These four poems mark a new chapter, exploring the role of the individual on a faith journey that attends to and, in time, rejects pieces of the teachings of the church. Inspired by the Romantic idea of individualism and independent thinking, these poems depart from the community based formulation of Christianity and instead embark on a personalized experience.

The first poem centers on a disillusionment from the community based practices within the Christian faith. It draws on the power of individual prayer as a force of equal strength. The next flows from this idea of individualism, questioning the guidance of Christianity and instead turning to a set of values and practices that are formulated as life progresses, rather than based on the guidance of others. Departing from a strictly individualized practice, the third poem contextualizes these religious experiences within the context of the natural world, which may be overlooked or overpowered when observed in communal settings. In a final rejection of the established church, the fourth poem in this section focuses on the preachings of Hell and its dangers. Based on Blake's ideas regarding sin and its consequences, this poem draws home the point that the consequences and determination of sin may not follow what the teachings of the Christian church have established.

## *2.2a Loss of Illusion*

Once, I was told there is strength in numbers.  
I listened. Crushed between the overstuffed bags  
And crumpled overcoats, there was nowhere  
Else to go, for then I would be alone.

Psalms, their lyrics, the choral strength of all  
Mouths opened to mime rehearsed rhythmic chants,  
Were not mine. Soprano faded, and I  
Swayed silent, just one member of many.

We rose, we fell, we sat, we ate, we drank  
As one, trained followers as Simon says.  
Palms touched, heads fell, prayers whispered in unity.  
Solemn beauty filled my childhood chapel.

Peace be with you, and also with you. With  
Blessings gentle and kind, what more could I,  
Child of God's gifts, find wanting? Everything,  
Given and received, stories made my own.

A quiet room, a thought of single mind,

Could contain multitudes with just one voice

Raised to the heavens, or held in the head

Bowed, and not too proud to rest wearily

On two hands, just ten fingers, joined and strong.

## *2.2b State of Self*

Once, I was told, commanded, to treat each  
neighbor as I would like to be treated.

I listened. Commandments came more, I learned,  
And these rules rang true in home and in life.

Clay unmolded holds new shapes. In this shape  
I could wait, listen, learn to treat others  
As I should, though others' hands were shaping  
The same mold. How would I like to be treated?

An answer as unknown to the potter  
As to the lump lying still on the wheel.  
To spin and hold, pressing hard then gently  
Is to make new a form from the same mound,

To follow new rules.

## *2.2c Human of Nature*

Once, I was told of a nature wild, free,  
Stayed in spite of us. I listened. Man-made  
Gray darkness, concrete walkways, the trap  
Of the city spreads wide without stopping.

World of my mind, you keep the birds aloft,  
Banish grazers behind fenced green grass lawns,  
Send the fish downstream to swim from oil spills  
Seeping into soil, coating asphalt tracks.

World of my mind, you condemn the free, yet  
Call to God, save His creation from us,  
His damning creatures of sin. You forget  
From where we came, on the earth shared by all.

Maker of beauty and maker of sin  
Leaves smudges, thumbprints, and points to the way  
Autumn colors fade for Spring to bloom bright,  
Feathers catch the sun and scales shine with wet,

And we learn to step aside.

## *2.2d Evil Lives*

Once, I was told evil acts bring Hellfire.

I listened. Sins enumerated, then

Evil sprung forth, then all to do was wait

For the heat of condemnation to burn.

The world grew no hotter, my feet were not

Ablaze with each misstep, and so I asked

“Where is the Hell on Earth come for evil?”

But no one looked to check, and chills still came.

Rain fell and forests swayed and fire stayed

Contained and kept from the place of sin, no

Punishing force to face, no need to change.

Without answer, I learned that still the sins

I feared brought no more heat than August sun.

### 2.3 Right to Love

In a slight departure from the form of religion through Romantic conceptions of aestheticism, independent thinking, and aestheticism, the next two poems center on the experience of love within the framework of Christianity. Toying with the idea of sin (as previously explored primarily in William Blake's considered work), these poems draw the connection between the celebration of and condemnation of love. This connection begs for the consideration of how any form of love can be considered sinful. While Blake may have seen sin as a form of energy emerging from the state of being human, this idea does not necessarily include loving another, even if it is an integral aspect of humanity.<sup>29</sup>

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29 In William Blake's *Songs of Innocence and Experience*, he explored the depths of sinful activity and the corruption of innocence. This idea creates a world in which innocence in humanity cannot exist without the evil of experience as a counter. Humanity, thus, was founded on the dichotomy between the two through the very nature of life. This balance can go so far as to influence the ways in which we conceptualize love and other aspects of human existence. Where there is good, there must also be evil, which may be the natural state of things. Considering love as a part of human existence, we can see how the "energy" of life exists within the recognition of sin. The poems in the section beyond demonstrate the dichotomy that Blake inspired for the specific instance of acts of love and how they are perceived through a Christian lens.



### *2.3a Love as Right*

Oh, love, to see your bright light is a dream.

To feel the warm blanket of two arms close

Slung around shoulders and tightly squeezing

Is to ascend to the heavens above.

To know your certain presence is a gift

Presented before a willing claimant

Eager to tear off the wrapping paper

And toss it aside, forgotten and gone.

To feel your tug on upper lip corners

Is to show the pearl white shine, like seashells

On a cresting wave crashing with full force,

Of a smile, undefeated and growing.

To curse your true name is to hate your loss

With the sting of life lived wrong, achingly

Yearning for your return, though words protest

That the need for you, oh love, has all gone.

*2.3b In the Darkness, You've Gone*

Oh, love, how can you be wrong, when all who  
Need are needing you? How can they go on  
In the absence of your light, when darkness  
Falls, creeps into your place without request?

I want to go where you are, that bright spot  
Unyielding to shadows that long to take  
A life, a "sin," and drag it down beyond  
The touch of sun, the sound of song: all good.

In your absence, those shadows lack combat.  
Against the will of the heart, they retreat.

## **2.4 Reconciliation**

Having worked through the conflicting emotions surrounding individual rather than community-based faith practices, this section concludes my poetic thinking. Through these last four poems, I draw on the Romantic embrace of a new way of independent experience through human eyes rather than the eyes of the church. I recreate the idea of the individual human spirit that exists outside of the church before delving into the ways that a Christian faith can influence the poetic thinking of myself as well as how it may impact Blake, Wordsworth, Coleridge, and Shelley. This then leads into the presence of nature and the aestheticism of the natural world. Attending to the weight of the natural world upon poetic thinking, the third poem explores the pantheistic ideology represented primarily in Coleridge's work. Finally, in drawing from the observation in the first four poems regarding church walls as barriers, I explore what happens when these walls fall down, allowing the energy of nature to permeate the site of faith practices.

## *2.4a Self Sans Faith*

Heavy falling footsteps tread down the space  
Left in between each pew. Floorboards creaking.  
Shoes pressing into the carpet faded,  
I walk to the sanctuary alone.

No candles lit, no piano played here  
When lamps are dimmed and prayers are forgotten,  
The room is just a room. Reverence lost,  
I raise my voice and speak unquiet words.

Old cross looming large over the pulpit,  
“Are you not just wood?” Your place exalted  
Before the four pew rows when you could  
Simply splinter, not so grandiose then.

Feeling nothing but the warmth from windows,  
I look to the lawn beyond the confines  
Of walls bearing down, power untested  
And see life and loss between blades of grass.

Absent here, where world mystified loses meaning.

## *2.4b The Religious Poet*

Heavy words filled the pages young fingers  
Flipped and read, all parts of the book they learned  
In silence, in the company of of voice,  
At home and at church and with family.

School brought new ways to read the words beheld,  
Sounded out in trial runs, clumsily  
Tripped over until they were right,  
Though unfamiliar, and sounded aloud.

Voices raised, joined, to repeat their meaning  
That meant something different to each mouth.  
Through years, translations, even conversions,  
The words on the page stayed, a book unchanged.

They read it, once, those poets of lovely  
Sounding symphonies, creations their own.  
Creators, these men, they read but then changed  
To remake what was done and write anew.

## *2.4c Song of the Nature Spirit*

Heavy clouds fall down to the Earth in tears,  
Unable to take the weight. The weeping  
Sky starts a dance upon pavement graying  
As wet circles spread, each splat a new step.

Gusts blow droplets to either side, left, right  
And down. As they land, their notes ring aloud,  
A silence filled with sound. Alone they make  
Almost no mark, but storms build from just one.

The rain continues its dance to music  
It makes as it falls. Players all, river parts  
Will stream over rocks to smooth the rushing  
Melody like the wind flowing through trees.

Birds swoop and sing their part, a harmony  
Of their own invention. They ride the gusts  
And flutter through pine, needles fall with rain  
To floor cloaked in both, a dark brown and green.  
So color, sound, and movement carry tunes  
And bring a familiar life in the woods.

## *2.4d When Walls Fall*

Heavy falling minor chords reach the ears  
Sat in pairs to receive discordant sound.  
The piano tuned once years ago now  
Sings the song of notes missed and melody flat.

Stale air stirs, absent of spirit and might,  
By the wizened fingers plucking at keys  
Seeped of color. A cough into closed hand  
And a hurried sniff join in the chorus.

I breathe in, I taste the unsettled dust  
Floating in clouds against the covered sky  
Draped in birch beams. Close-windowed room of prayer,  
Your walls drown out the sounding wind in vain.

I can see the branches breaking beyond  
Unstained glass against the dark gray outside,  
Unseen forces buffeting to and fro  
With a might pressing each breath to the wall.

The strangest vision appears before me.

A gust finds its way through the cracked door hinge,  
Through windows that shut almost completely  
Until upwards wind lifts its wooden edge.

Forced wide open, the window's paint peels off  
So it becomes just a hole in the wall.  
Where glass once filled its vacant space, absence  
Creates unity, and spirit enters.

To you, newly opened room of prayer,  
I pose a question. From where I see gaps  
Growing across drywall painted over,  
Another presence rushes in. So why,

I ask, why build your borders tall and thick?  
Where elders can join and the youth can run,  
Removed from the glow of the sun, why keep  
To yourself, why keep that spirit at bay?

The window can be the start, just a wall  
Transparent and removed. Invite them in,  
Those winds, and the whispered words on the breeze  
That carry a holiness wholly fresh.



I beg your walls to fall, so all can feel

The rush eternal, the spirit of wind.

### 3. Concluding Connections

Though modern day religious expression differs significantly from the time of Blake, Wordsworth, Coleridge, and Shelley, their poetic thinking still paved the way for exploration of my own experiences. These poets wrote of the presence of God, a Creator, and of all the natural splendors that make up the beauty in the world. Through their descriptions, they had, in some ways, created their own world in which these concepts of the world existed outside of the Christian church and in the literary realm.

It was in hopes of participation in this realm that I endeavored to perform my own form of poetic thinking. I explored themes identified in their poetics such as individualism, sin, nature, and beauty with the hopes of capturing the ways these themes remain prevalent in twenty-first century conceptions of the world. This endeavor left me with a focus, much more intensified than I would have predicted, on the sense of nature as Creator and Creation. The form of pantheistic thinking that identified all parts of the world as portions of the “God” separate from the Christian figure inspired the conclusions of these poems. I ended my poetic thinking with a ponderance on what faith can look like if these lines become blurred. Shifting away from a Christian God and finding a new figure in the beauty of nature, I tried to answer the question: what would happen if the walls, the divisions, between these two beliefs were to fall away? I am left without a concrete answer. I am left, instead, with the feeling of wholeness allowed by the merging of these two conceptions of a spiritual presence.

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