

Remembering as a Revelation Discourse: Sacred Memory Narratives in Silko's *Almanac of the Dead*

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Introduction

Analysing Leslie Marmon Silko's *Almanac of the Dead* (1991), I argue that this text locates the sacred in memory narratives, which I define as the creative recording of cultural and personal pasts and relating them to the present. Such recording of experiences opens new possibilities of self-knowledge for both the writer and the reader. In recording one's memory, the self can be discovered and recreated. The memory narrative as an imaginative text reorganizes one's relationship to oneself and to the other. Because of its organization of the data of experience, the memory narrative acquires a revelatory quality. It is the act of revealing that is the centre of Paul Ricoeur's analysis of nonreligious and religious fictions alike. Revelation for Ricoeur is understood in performative, not propositional terms; it is an event of a new meaning between text and interpreter. It becomes so especially in sacred texts, rather than being a body of received doctrines under the control of a particular magisterium, the teaching authority of the church. Thus, Ricoeur stresses the "areligious sense of revelation" of both figurative and sacred texts.¹ I apply the performative discursive functions of the sacred text as Ricoeur has deduced them to memory narratives in *Almanac of the Dead* (henceforth *AOD*), to show how memory narratives in Silko's novel perform as a sacred text, thus interpolating the sacred into the secular.

In *AOD*, there are many forms of memory narratives. Most characters keep notebooks in which they record their comments on daily events. The central notebook in the novel is the almanac, a book which the

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¹ See Mark Wallace, *Figuring the Sacred: Religion, Narrative, and the Sacred*, trans. David Pellauer (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1995), pp. 8-9.

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Native American community claims as a record of its heritage. In this sense, the almanac is itself a notebook and a collective memory narrative through which a whole community has recorded its hopes and fears, features of identity, confessions, and reactions to others' attitudes towards it. Yoeme is the custodian of the almanac, but in addition to the almanac; Yoeme keeps a set of notebooks, which accompanied the almanac in its journey through time and space and helped members of the community to understand it. Yoeme turns to Lecha and Zeta, her two granddaughters, for completing the mission of preserving and disseminating the almanac and its marginal notebooks. Lecha, who is trusted with transcribing the notebooks, keeps her own notebook; so do many characters in the novel including Angelita, Clinton, Trigg, and a policeman.

Previous scholarship on *Almanac of the Dead* addressed the notebooks and the spiritual aspects of Silko's novel without connecting them. Daria Donnelly has written about the use of notebooks in Silko's novel and has argued that the new notebooks of the novel's characters, as well as the surviving almanac and its marginalia, make clear the importance of marginal stories and Silko's interest in the processes by which they "gain value and thus the strength to overthrow the hegemonic narrative and dominant power."² Likewise, Virginia Bell discusses the notebooks as a method of "counter-chronicling" by which an alternative historiography resists the tendency to write Eurocentric history and by which alternative mapping of nation-state challenges the Euro-American nationalist narrative based on borders imagined as natural and eternal.³ Donnelly argues that the main achievement of the notebooks in Silko's novel is political because through storytelling, notebooks challenge the dominant history written by the Western colonizers. She ascribes Silko's belief in the power of these stories to her Laguna's spiritual heritage, "regardless of whether they are cherished or find audience."⁴ In her book on contemporary allegory and postmodern faith, Petrolle focuses more on the spiritual dimension of Silko's novel. She describes *AOD* "as allegory that in addition to operating

² Daria Donnelly, 'Old and New Notebooks: Almanac of the Dead as Revolutionary Entertainment', in *Leslie Marmon Silko: A Collection of Critical Essays*, eds Louise Barnett and James Thorson (Albuquerque, NM: University of New Mexico Press, 1999), p. 251.

³ Virginia Bell, 'Counter-Chronicling and Alternative Mapping in *Memoria del Fuego* and *Almanac of the Dead*', *MELUS*, vol. 25, nos 3-4 (2000), pp. 5-30.

⁴ Donnelly, 'Old and New Notebooks', p. 251.

as ritual activity, as well as “national allegory,” also operates as religious expression, possessed of theological, cosmological, and salvational claims.”⁵ Petrolle writes that Silko’s novel enters in what William Covino calls the “arresting” and “generative” magic of word and story. Petrolle’s analysis demonstrates that Silko’s use of allegory and postmodern aesthetics does not lead necessary to “vacuums of meaning.”⁶ Her analysis of the spiritual theme in Silko’s *Almanac* approaches it as an example of animist pantheism within the Amerindian tradition. Silko’s belief in the capacity of story-power to create and change reality is an example of the poststructuralist view of the importance of language in making reality. Petrolle, however, does not show how this story-power hinges on sacredness intrinsic to narrative as a discourse of revelation capable of telling the present as well as the future. In addition, Donnelly, Petrolle, and Bell do not address these stories in their relationship to the role memory is playing in the life of characters and community, a theme that cannot be ignored in *Almanac of the Dead*.

I address the almanac, its notebooks, and the individual notebooks which have been added to it as one body of memory narratives, where the collective memory collides with the individual one. Yoeme introduces the almanac to her granddaughters as a collective memory of the Native American community at first. But then, she calls for repairing it and keeping it, telling them that she has been adding her own experience. As the novel progresses, we see that Lecha and Seese are also incorporating their experiences within the body of the almanac, borrowing its fragmentary, poetic, and authorless form for their own writing.

Narrative Discourses of Revelation

With this coalescence of the collective and individual experience narratives, sacredness takes on new meanings, different from but comparable to those in traditional sacred texts. Most importantly, a divine source for these stories is not the significant aspect in their sacredness. In his oft-cited essay on narratives as sacred texts, Stephen Crites sees that sacred stories are fundamental narrative forms, which may include within them different genres. They are sacred not because gods are commonly

⁵ Jean Petrolle, *Religion Without Belief: Contemporary Allegory and the Search for Postmodern Faith* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2008), p. 143.

⁶ Petrolle, *Religion without Belief*, pp. 142, 147.

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celebrated with them, but because “men’s sense of self and world is created through them.”⁷ Sacredness in the almanac, its notebooks, and its editors’ additions does not only originate in their capacity to create a sense of the world, by being a record of a communal experience, but also because of their revelatory capacity which is endemic to their rhetorical structure. To illustrate the rhetorical aspect of the sacredness of memory narratives, I am turning to Ricoeur’s essay on revelation in sacred texts.

In his “Toward a Hermeneutic of the Idea of Revelation,” Paul Ricoeur analyses the question of revelation, understood as God revealing himself through a sacred text, the Old Testament. He focuses on a concept of revelation embedded in language because he sees that revelation belongs to the discourse of faith or to the confession of faith.⁸ He sees revelation as an amalgamation of three levels of language. The first level is the confession of faith where the *lex credendi*, is not separated from the *lex orandi*. This Latin expression means that the law of prayer is the law of belief; so when the church celebrates the sacraments, it also confesses the faith received from the Apostles; the second level is the level of ecclesial dogma where a historic community interprets for itself and for others the understanding of faith specific to its tradition; and the third level is the body of doctrines imposed by the magisterium, the office of authoritative teaching exercised by pope and bishops,⁹ as the rule of orthodoxy.¹⁰

Ricoeur considers this amalgamation a form of contamination. He asserts that the doctrine of a confessing community loses the sense of the historical character of its interpretation when it places itself under the tutelage of the fixed assertions of the magisterium. Ricoeur endeavors to bring the sacred text back to its originary level. By originary level, Ricoeur refers to revelation as verbal communication that has not been instrumentalised by institutions. It is this level of the sacred text as

⁷ Stephen Crites, ‘The Narrative Quality of Experience’, in *Memory, Identity, Community: The Idea of Narrative in the Human Science*, eds Lewis P. Hinchman and Sandra Hinchman (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1997), p. 31.

⁸ Paul Ricoeur and Lewis Mudge, *Essays on Biblical Interpretation* (Philadelphia, PA: Fortress Press, 1980), pp. 73-74.

⁹ Anthony J. Figueiredo, *The Magisterium-Theology Relationship: Contemporary Theological Conceptions in the Light of Universal Church Teaching Since 1835 and the Pronouncements of the Bishops of the United States* (Rome: Pontificia Università Gregoriana, 2001), p. 7.

¹⁰ Ricoeur and Mudge, *Essays on Biblical Interpretation*, p. 74.

fundamental discourse, not theological one that Ricoeur analyses rhetorically.¹¹ Ricoeur concludes further that a hermeneutic of revelation must give priority to those modalities of discourse that are most originary within the language of a community of faith; consequently, those expressions by means of which the members of that community first interpret their experience for themselves and for others.¹² The rhetorical analysis of the sacred text, according to Ricoeur, results in classifying its constitutive discourses into prophetic, apocalyptic, prescriptive, Hymnic, and wisdom discourses. Applying these discursive functions to memory narratives in *AOD* illustrates how they perform as a sacred text. It is important, however, to see how memory narratives exemplify the notion of the originary level, liberating a sacred text for a community from the authority of the magisterium.

Revelation Discourse in Almanac's Memory Narratives

In the Almanac's memory narratives, the tutelage of the magisterium is replaced with a much more flexible form of preservation. The originary level of revelation is not subject to fixed assertions of a particular teaching authority; it is open to changes and alterations, just as it might be open to different interpretations. In fact, ordinary community members are in custody of the community's faith and its stories. While rituals of confessing faith take place in a dedicated space, such as church rituals on special holy days, we see that the confession of Native American's faith, represented in a collective memory narrative travels through time and space carried by community members and even outsiders, some of whom have spiritual talents, such as Lecha, or develop spirituality, such as Seese, a stranger to the community, just by contact with the sacred text.

The sacred text under preservation is being repaired and edited by both insiders and outsiders, revising the concept of tutelage over confessions of faith and revelation narratives. The narrative voices in the almanac and its marginalia, the new additions which represent Yoeme, Lecha, and Seese's edits, include first person point of view as in the Snake's Message, third person point of view as in Lecha's vision of the

¹¹ See Werner Jeanrond, 'Hermeneutics and Revelation', in *Memory, Narrativity, Self, and the Challenge to Think God: The Reception within Theology of the Recent Work of Paul Ricoeur*, eds Maureen Junker-Kenny and Peter Kenny (Münster: Lit Verlag, 2004), p. 51.

¹² Ricoeur and Mudge, *Essays on Biblical Interpretation*, p. 74.

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kidnapped boys, and second person point of view as in Seese's vision-dream about her murdered son. The pluralism of narrative voices and points of view put the idea of inspiration and prophecy at stake. All these narrative voices facilitate a revelatory function in the corresponding narrative, with no ultimate authority of speech. In all these examples, the narrative voice reveals the invisible, the unseen, or the unknown future. Lecha's notebook reveals the unseen, so does Seese's transcription of her dream about her son kidnapped and killed by her boyfriend's lover. The plurality of narrative voices in the almanac and the notebooks, new and old, and the absence of a clear persona of a prophet throughout the almanac problematize the presence of the divine source of inspiration behind the prophetic voice. However, to Ricoeur, the problematic of inspiration is in no way the primary issue of consideration, even in religious discourse.¹³

Drawing on Gerhard Van Rad's *The Theology of the Old Testament*, Ricoeur sees that confession of God in narrative religious discourse takes place through narration, relegating inspiration to a secondary degree of importance. Narrative includes prophecy in its province to the extent that prophecy is narrative in its fashion.¹⁴ In this sense, narrative can be prophetic regardless of the sacredness of the source; inspiration by God ceases to be a condition of sacredness according to this view. Many members of the community, and even outsiders, are implicated in the prophetic, predictive, and revelatory aspect of memory narratives.

Lecha is not only a catalyst of spiritual knowledge through her work as a keeper and decipher of the notebooks; she also acts a conduit of spiritual power and knowledge by being a psychic to whom police resorts in order to locate missing dead people. She "is a special contact for the souls that still do not rest because their remains are lost; somewhere fragments of bone burnt to ash, or long strands of hair, move in the ocean wind as it shifts the sand across the dunes."¹⁵ Lecha visualises the memory narratives of missing victims. In these visual, revelatory memory narratives, Lecha not only witnesses animation of natural elements, but also endows them with a particular interpretation that reveals to her what happened to the victims. The relationship between natural phenomena and revelatory discourse is established further when Zeta remembers how

¹³ Ricoeur and Mudge, *Essays on Biblical Interpretation*, p. 79.

¹⁴ Ricoeur and Mudge, *Essays on Biblical Interpretation*, pp. 78-79.

¹⁵ Leslie Marmon Silko, *Almanac of the Dead* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1991), p. 138.

Yoeme and the old ones used to watch “the night skies relentlessly, translating sudden bursts and trails of light into lengthy messages concerning the future and the past.”¹⁶

Although content to help and earn fame and money for leading police and investigators to missing people, Lecha was not satisfied with names such as psychic and intermediary which were given to her to describe her gift. Her witnessing the traumatic experiences of the killers’ missing victims was a source of constant physical pain for her in the form of chronic headaches. Lecha was deciphering the images about these people by observing that what Western culture saw as inanimate was not necessarily so. In one instance when she led the police to discover the location of the dead boys’ bodies near the ocean, she focused her attention on what was happening inside her head. Her gift, or curse, was her ability to see the images that went through the criminal mind pushing the murderer to torture, kill, and mutate the victims. Moreover, Lecha saw visions of the places where remains of victims were hidden. The places took symbolic shapes of animate nature that Lecha was able to decipher. In one of the cases, she was able to locate the remains of dead, mutilated boys. The narrator presents a picture of what Lecha sees through the criminal mind:

The eyes are gone. The sand fills the sockets. Now the boy has eyes the color of sand... He imagines the boys are trees that he must go tend from time to time. He uncovers them tenderly. To see who they are developing...

The waves glittered and flashed like fragments of a broken mirror. From the air the beach sand made a narrow white stripe down the back of giant mind, and the ocean waves glittered and flashed-eyes of mirror as the sun dips closer to the mouth of the beast that swallows it. She had the full answer now. She had suspected the concept of intermediary and messenger was too simple. Lecha knew exactly how grave her condition was... Now that she knew how the power worked, Lecha was not sure anymore it could be called a gift.¹⁷

Lecha’s ability to interpret the visions she receives about the victims may have been influenced by her work on transcribing the old notebooks. The old notebooks “bless” their keepers with mystical power. The narrator tells us that the

power Lecha had seemed to be an intermediary, the way the snakes were messengers from the spirit beings in the other worlds below. She was just

¹⁶ Silko, *Almanac of the Dead*, p. 178.

¹⁷ Silko, *Almanac of the Dead*, pp. 141-142.

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getting accustomed to this fact and her link with the dead when she had been called to San Diego.¹⁸

In her interview with Laura Coltelli, Silko connects Lecha's power to her work and contact with the old notebook, saying that:

Zeta seems to have translated the old notebook fragment she received, into action. Lecha has to grow into her role as keeper and transcriber of the notebooks, and so does Zeta. In a way, Lecha and Zeta are already under the spell of the old almanac even before they settle down to transcribe the almanac because of Yoeme's influence over them. Like Yoeme, both women depend on experiences in their personal lives to transcribe and decode the old notebooks.¹⁹

The spell of the old almanac is both physical and mystical. When the four children, three young girls and a young boy, were asked to save the old manuscripts by fleeing to the North, they were also told that "the pages held many forces within them, countless physical and spiritual properties to guide the people and make them strong." Yoeme tells Lecha and Zeta that it was the almanac that "saved [the children]" from the dangers of the trip.²⁰ Eventually, the almanac saved who helped it survive its journey through time and space.

The central notebooks are a source of revelation and power not only for Native Americans, but to whoever deals with them. Their performative power exceeds members of the community who believe in them to those outside of them. Seese, a drug addict and smuggler like Lecha and Zeta, but also alcoholic, and former prostitute, was employed by Lecha to help her prepare a digital copy of the notebooks and received a vision about her lost son. Seese had resorted to Lecha to help her find her son, but because of her emotional instability Lecha refrained from telling her that her son was dead because she pitted her desolate condition. Lecha employed Seese, not only to prepare a digital copy of the transcribed notebooks, but also to work on Lecha's notebooks. Lecha's insisted that "Seese type up each and every letter or word fragment however illegible or strained."²¹ The narrator tells us that, "she had been working on a strange passage in Lecha's transcription of the notebooks, which had an almost

¹⁸ Silko, *Almanac of the Dead*, p. 139.

¹⁹ See Laura Coltelli, 'Almanac of the Dead: An Interview with Leslie Marmon Silko', *Native American Literatures Forum*, vols 4-5 (1992-1993), pp. 73-74.

²⁰ Silko, *Almanac of the Dead*, p. 252.

²¹ Silko, *Almanac of the Dead*, p. 174.

narcotic effect on her.²² Seese woke up from a dream and wrote down her own memory narrative. Seese writes her passage in the form of a poem, whose theme is a boy-sacrifice and which concludes with “He only struggled a little.”²³ The narrator tells us that:

Seese blamed the old notebook for the dream. She had awakened from the dream in tears, and hours later the effect of the dream had not subsided. Seese had sat at the keyboard and let the tears stream down her face. Instead of Lecha’s transcription, Seese had typed a description of the dream:

In the photographs you are smiling
taller than I have ever seen you
older than you were when I lost you.
The colors of the lawn and house behind are indistinct
milked to faded greens and browns.
I know I will never hold you again.²⁴

Although Seese’s realization comes through a vision dream, it provides her with information that only Lecha could have given her. It is Seese’s contact with the old notebooks and her work as a reader and decoder of the memory narratives of the community and particular individuals, such as Lecha, that helped her fulfill her quest in the novel, finding her son or knowing what happened to him. Lecha and Seese’s contribution to the memory narratives illustrates how the community has negotiated the notion of the magisterium and practically deflated it. On the narrative level, the constitutive discourses of these narratives exemplify the narrative modes that Ricoeur has analyzed as features of revelation and sacred texts.

The major contribution to the growing body of the almanac written in a poetic mode by Lecha and Seese, verges on poetic writing, reinforcing both the creativeness of the memory narratives and their revelatory potential. Ricoeur ascribes a revelatory function to poetic discourse. He approaches poetic discourse as it exercises a referential function that differs from the descriptive referential function of ordinary language and above all scientific language. Poetic discourse suspends the descriptive function.²⁵ Poetic language restores to us that participation-in or belonging-to an order of things that precedes our capacity to oppose ourselves to things taken as objects opposed to a subject. Poetic language facilitates what Ricoeur calls re-describing reality. This conjunction of fiction and re-description, of

²² Silko, *Almanac of the Dead*, p. 592.

²³ Silko, *Almanac of the Dead*, p. 594.

²⁴ Silko, *Almanac of the Dead*, p. 595.

²⁵ Ricoeur and Mudge, *Essays on Biblical Interpretation*, p. 99.

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mythos and mimesis, constitutes the referential function relevant to the poetic dimension of language. In this sense, poetic language conceals a dimension of revelation where revelation is to be understood in a nonreligious, non-theistic, and non-biblical sense of the word.²⁶ Poetic discourse is revelatory because it incarnates a concept of truth that escapes the definition by adequation as well as the criteria of falsification and verification. Here truth no longer means verification, but manifestation, letting what shows itself be. What shows itself is in each instance a proposed world, “a world I may inhabit and wherein I can project my own most possibilities” according to Ricoeur.²⁷

Apocalyptic and prophetic discourses are entangled in the memory narratives as they grow out an extension of the body of the almanac. Prophecy, according to Ricoeur, remains bound to the literary genre of the oracle, establishing an almost invincible association between the idea of prophecy and that of an unveiling of the future. This association imposes the idea that the content of revelation should be assimilated to a design in the sense of a plan that would give a goal to the unfolding of history.²⁸ Ricoeur even identifies revelation with the idea of a premonition of the end of history.

The old almanac tells Native Americans that they will be victims of the violence of foreign forces. Glossing the Spirit Snake’s message, the narrator confirms that it predicts the genocide of Native Americans. Following the apocalyptic message, a story will offer salvation. The narrator describes the message, saying:

Those were the words of the giant serpent. The days that were to come had been foretold. The people scattered. Killers came from all directions. And more killers followed, to kill them. One story will arrive at your town. It will come from far away, from the southwest or southeast-people won’t agree. The story may arrive with a stranger or perhaps with the parrot trader. But when you hear this story, you will know it is the signal for you and the others to prepare.²⁹

Also, Lecha relies on her decoding skills to facilitate the revelatory potential of the almanac. Answering Zeta’s question about the next step to follow their work on transcribing the almanac, Lecha replies: “once the

²⁶ Ricoeur and Mudge, *Essays on Biblical Interpretation*, p. 105.

²⁷ Ricoeur and Mudge, *Essays on Biblical Interpretation*, p. 102.

²⁸ Ricoeur and Mudge, *Essays on Biblical Interpretation*, p. 77.

²⁹ Silko, *Almanac of the Dead*, p. 135.

notebooks are transcribed, I will figure out how to use the old almanac. Then we will see the months and the years to come-everything.”³⁰

Another dimension of discourse that Ricoeur finds constitutive of the idea of revelation is the prescriptive dimension, which orients the history of practical actions and “engenders the dynamic of our institutions.”³¹ One of the main features of the prescriptive dimension in the old notebooks is their influence on the organization of culture and society through their direct interference in the agricultural system of the Native American community, engendering its socio-cultural relations within and with members outside of it. The almanac prescribes best dates for agricultural activities and helps people foresee future events. Zeta and Lecha believe in this capacity of the almanac as they Zeta tells Lecha, “[t]hose old almanacs don’t just tell you when to plant or harvest, they tell you about the days yet to come-drought or flood, plague, civil war or invasion.”³² Out of this organisation of socio-cultural relations springs another mode of revelatory discourse in the almanac, namely, the mode of wisdom. Wisdom fulfills one of religion’s fundamental functions which is to bind together ethos and cosmos, the sphere of human action and the sphere of the world.³³

Conclusion

Remembering the past, characters of Silko’s *Almanac of the Dead* integrate their experiences with those of the community. This integration grows throughout the novel to bloom into fragmentary memory narratives providing a melting conjunction for the sacred and the secular, as well as the individual and the collective. Memory narratives in Silko’s novel represent what Wuthnow terms spirituality of seeking, which pays no attention to the contrast between “sacred and profane, or to the use of spatial metaphors, but concentrates on that mixture of spiritual and rational, ethical and soteriological, individual and collective activities whereby the person in modern societies seeks meaning in life and tries to be of service

³⁰ Silko, *Almanac of the Dead*, p. 137.

³¹ Ricoeur and Mudge, *Essays on Biblical Interpretation*, p. 198.

³² Silko, *Almanac of the Dead*, p. 137.

³³ Ricoeur and Mudge, *Essays on Biblical Interpretation*, p. 85.

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to others.”³⁴ With a spirituality of seeking, the search for the sacred is a journey through time, place, and different experiences, triggering what characterizes Americans’ quest for spirituality in the late 1980s and 1990s, a quest that requires knowledge of inner self.³⁵ Lecha’s quest of locating missing victims, Seese’s quest of finding her son, and Yoeme’s quest of restoring lost sections of the almanac symbolize this act of seeking. Their discursive experiences collapse within the body of the old almanac.

As keepers of the almanac, whether American Indians or not, they develop prophetic abilities and display creativity in their poetic additions to the central old notebook. This continuum of memory narratives provides sacredness, not only because it becomes an organic extension of the discursive expression of the spiritual heritage of a particular community, but also because of the multiple discourses that it is comprised of. The rhetorical analysis of these memory narratives yields prophetic, apocalyptic, prescriptive, and poetic discourses, modes that Paul Ricoeur has identified as constitutive of revelation. Moreover, memory narratives become a source of salvation, especially for those involved in weaving and keeping them. As Seese engages in preserving and disseminating the notebooks, she manages to write her own memory narrative, locating her murdered, lost son. Memory itself becomes revelatory of the future and of the invisible.

³⁴ Robert Wuthnow, *After Heaven: Spirituality in America Since the 1950s* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), p. 5.

³⁵ See Wuthnow, *After Heaven*, pp. 142, 167.