

II. The Question of God in the Struggle for Racial Justice

In March 1943, having narrowly escaped Europe three years earlier, Abraham Joshua Heschel published “The Meaning of This War,” his first essay in an American publication. The essay shows, quite remarkably, his full command of literary English. It also shows, as biographer Edward Kaplan remarks, that Heschel “had found his militant voice.”⁴⁴ “Emblazoned over the gates of the world in which we live,” the essay begins, “is the escutcheon of the demons. The mark of Cain in the face of man has come to overshadow the likeness of God. There have never been so much guilt and distress, agony and terror. At no time has the earth been so soaked with blood.”⁴⁵ Heschel’s extraordinary life’s witness, his whole body of work, traverses precisely this anthropological and theological knife’s edge: *The mark of Cain in the face of man has come to overshadow the likeness of God*. Where is God? Or better, Who is God? in relation to the rapacious misuse and idolatrous distortion of human freedom? Or simply, Is God?

In preparing to write this article, I have been newly haunted by Heschel’s writings, his witness, his face set against the crematoria of Auschwitz. At the risk of drawing a direct line between the horrors of Nazism and four centuries of white supremacy in America—one could make the case, *pace* Heschel, that there *was* a time when the earth has been so soaked with blood, right under our noses, in the antebellum South—have we not also been horrified in recent years by “the mark of Cain” in the face of our fellow human beings? Derek Chauvin, his knee on the neck of George Floyd; three officers atop Eric Garner, face down on the pavement, a forearm pressed against his throat; the contorted faces of torch-bearing whites in Charlottesville, shouting, “We

⁴⁴ Edward K. Kaplan, *Abraham Joshua Heschel: Mind, Heart, Soul* (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society, 2019), 133. Unless otherwise noted, all citations from Heschel’s works in the following are taken from Kaplan, and retain the noninclusive language of the original. Recipient of the National Jewish Book Award, Kaplan is far more than a “biographer,” lucidly interpreting Heschel’s literary and theological legacy in the context of broad movements in Jewish life and thought and catastrophic political events of the twentieth century.

⁴⁵ Kaplan, *Abraham Joshua Heschel*, 133.

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will not be replaced!" and state trooper Brian Encinia, wrestling Sandra Bland from the driver's seat while threatening to light her up. Such images, burned into our consciousness by cell-phone video, body- and dashcam footage, seem to have awakened the once-reticent, now "militant" voices of many white Americans, as if eager to separate themselves from the mark of Cain on full display in Minneapolis, Staten Island, Charlottesville, and Waller County, Texas.

It needs to be said that for many African Americans and other people of color in the United States, the murders of Ahmaud Arbery, George Floyd, Elijah McClain, and Breonna Taylor, among an obscene litany of others, is hardly "news" at all, except perhaps to fan some dying spark in the souls of their white neighbors. Yet I think it is also true that for many Blacks and for white allies committed to the work of racial justice, the Floyd video broke something of the spine in the camel's back that has kept the work of justice moving forward, if wearily, in the direction of hope. To gaze into Derek Chauvin's face for eight minutes and forty-six seconds as George Floyd desperately gasps for breath, cries out for his mother, and finally grows silent is to wonder indeed whether our society has not become the playground of demons and bullies, our likeness to God forever eclipsed. If Heschel's own witness is to be emulated, an argument I will make here, the crucial thing for the person of faith is not to turn away from the confrontation with ourselves, our society, or indeed, our God, in "the abyss, where one might be annihilated."⁴⁶

Heschel's model, of course, for the sacredness of human life was the Hebrew Bible, not biology, nor psychology, nor secular humanism, frameworks more or less detached from reference to the divine.⁴⁷ As Kaplan's work brilliantly details, Heschel witnesses to a far-reaching "sacred humanism," a "revolution" in theological insight and method that responded to the catastrophe of the Shoah with a faithfulness in God and in human beings that is breathtaking. In other words, the "militant" Heschel who cried out against human depravity is the same Heschel who insisted on the enduring image of God in humanity. The bridge between these two poles in Heschel's phenomenology of faith is prayer, "piety," the prophetic experience, the community who dares to place itself under the eyes of God, and thus dares *to feel*, in the marrow of the bones, the weight of responsibility for the world we are creating. The person or community with a feel for God "is not

⁴⁶ Kaplan, *Abraham Joshua Heschel*, 105, citing Henry Corbin, from his preface to excerpts from Heschel's *The Prophets* in a French journal in 1939. Corbin had enlisted Heschel and other essayists from Christian and Islamic perspectives to counter moral relativism and nihilism from the vantage point of the Abrahamic religions.

⁴⁷ Kaplan, *Abraham Joshua Heschel*, 120.

aiming to penetrate into the sacred,” says Heschel. Rather, she is striving to be “penetrated and actuated by the sacred, eager to yield to its force.”⁴⁸ For Heschel, “history forms a vehicle for God’s actions in the world. *The Jewish question is a question of God to us.*”⁴⁹

Heschel’s Enduring Witness to the Question of God

In this article, with Heschel’s life and writings as the framework, I would like to explore my experience of teaching “Black Literature and Faith,” an undergraduate freshman seminar I have taught for the last decade. What Heschel calls the “ineffable,” what he describes as “the fullness of [our] powerlessness” when we abandon ourselves in prayer, is the kind of music one hears resounding in the classics of African American literature—a prophetic sensibility that leaps from the pages of Frederick Douglass, Harriet Jacobs, W. E. B. Du Bois, Ida B. Wells, Howard Thurman, and many others. The class is framed as “Black Literature *and Faith*” because I am convinced that any serious antiracism curriculum or efforts to nurture the yearning for social justice in our students will lack a crucial animating force if it remains silent on the question of God or the dynamics of faith in the believing community. My evidence for this claim comes from the substance of Black literature itself, as noted previously, and no less, from the transcendent pull this material exerts on me and my students as we engage it together in the classroom.

To put my indebtedness to Heschel as lodestar for a spiritual and theocentric dimension of teaching for racial justice in historical context, it is important to remember that Heschel’s education as a young Jewish prodigy took place at the University of Berlin in the 1930s.⁵⁰ Think about that for a moment. As the son of a prominent Polish Hasidic rabbi, not only did Heschel have to contend with a German culture dangerously hostile to “his kind,” he also found himself navigating an intellectual milieu where the idea of “God,” as he wrote many years later, was granted “the status of being a logical possibility” by his professors, but for them “to assume that He had existence would have been a crime against epistemology.”⁵¹ In his bold rebuttal of a paper on “Science and Religion” by Albert Einstein, just after his escape from Europe, Heschel warned his Jewish readers—many of whom had embraced

⁴⁸ Kaplan, *Abraham Joshua Heschel*, 126, from Heschel’s 1942 essay, “An Analysis of Piety.”

⁴⁹ Kaplan, *Abraham Joshua Heschel*, 85, from Heschel’s 1937 biography of Jewish statesman Don Isaac Abravanel (1437–1509).

⁵⁰ See Kaplan, *Abraham Joshua Heschel*, chap. 2–5.

⁵¹ Kaplan, *Abraham Joshua Heschel*, 195, from Heschel’s 1954 treatise on prayer, *Man’s Quest for God*.

the secular epistemologies taken for granted even in many Jewish seminaries—that the supposedly morally neutral methods of science “cannot be prevented from creating poisonous gas or dive-bombers; and rationalism is powerless once ‘the magnificent blond beast’ . . . takes arms in order to subjugate inferior races.”⁵²

We are back to Derek Chauvin and a white supremacist culture that could logically and without qualms accommodate itself to those horrifying eight minutes and forty-six seconds. What characterizes the “magnificent blond beast” in the classics of African American literature is not just blood-chilling cruelty and indifference to the humanity of Black people; it is the naked pride, hubris, and self-referential idolatry of white Christian culture.⁵³ In short, one of the first lessons my students must contend with is the bald hypocrisy of white Christians, drunk with the impunity of state- and often ecclesially sanctioned power.⁵⁴ What emerges in writers like Douglass and so many others, by contrast, is not an abstract idea or theological conception of God that unmasks white hypocrisy and galvanizes resistance in the oppressed; rather, it is a *feel for God*, a sense for transcendence and grace breaking through the hellscape of anti-Black racism that galvanizes resistance and stirs something like hope—if not hope for this side of death, then a cry for freedom on the other.⁵⁵ My aim in exploring Black literature through the

⁵² Kaplan, *Abraham Joshua Heschel*, 120, from Heschel’s 1940 essay, “God’s Religion or Religion of the Good?”

⁵³ I know of few more devastating critiques of the gap “between the Christianity of this land, and the Christianity of Christ” than one finds in the appendix that concludes Douglass’ *Narrative*. “Indeed, I can see no reason, but the most deceitful one, for calling the religion of this land Christianity. I look upon it as the climax of all misnomers, the boldest of all frauds, and the grossest of all libels.” Frederick Douglass, “Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, An American Slave,” in *The Classic Slave Narratives*, ed. Henry Louis Gates (New York: Signet, 2012), 299–403, at 397–98.

⁵⁴ As I write these lines, images of a mob storming the American capitol cross my screen, some carrying the Confederate flag, others bearing flags emblazoned with the names of “Trump” and “Jesus.” The events of January 6, 2021, writes one journalist, are “evidence that Donald Trump has bent elements of American Christianity to his will, and that many Christians have obligingly [remade their faith](#) in his image. Defiant masses literally broke down the walls of government, some believing they were marching under Jesus’ banner to implement God’s will to keep Trump in the White House.” See Emma Green, “A Christian Insurrection,” *The Atlantic*, January 8, 2021. “What we saw today is a clear declaration that many white people would rather live in a white dictatorship than in a multiracial democracy.” See Bryan N. Massingale, “The Racist Attack on Our Nation’s Capitol,” *America*, January 6, 2021.

⁵⁵ To be sure, the “feel for God,” as we will see in the following, is shaped by certain narratives and images of God in the Bible, especially the Exodus story and the manner of life, teachings, death, and Resurrection of Jesus.

lens of faith is not to confirm a predetermined conceptual account of God; rather, it is to learn from and wonder with human beings who undergo a life-and-death feeling for God's presence and God's absence, God's fidelity and God's promises, in the crucible of the struggle itself.

To be clear, Heschel did not blame science, nor secularization, nor religion as such, for the moral catastrophes of the twentieth century. His target, as Kaplan notes, was "the failures of institutional religion: the trivialization of belief in God and a diminished moral courage."⁵⁶ Heschel was convinced that to relegate religious insight to the margins of public life—or worse, to subjugate the prophetic inheritance of Judaism and Christianity to the power of the state and its symbols of civil religion—is to cut moral reasoning off at the neck. (Thus, the dying words of Eric Garner, George Floyd, and Elijah McClain: "*I can't breathe.*") "True, God is hiding His face in our time," Heschel wrote in 1954, "but He is hiding because we are evading Him."⁵⁷ By contrast, the consciousness that we are living "under His eyes," that we human beings *are* the *imago Dei* in the world, imposes on the individual and community of authentic religious faith an ethical mandate of concern for the most vulnerable. God's pathos is at once judgment and vocation for the person with a feeling for God, for the community that subjects itself to the "mood of reverence"⁵⁸ that encompasses all things. "Let Fascism not serve as an alibi for our conscience. We have failed to fight for right, for justice, for goodness; as a result we fight against wrong, against injustice, against evil."⁵⁹ Heschel concluded his 1943 essay on the war by reminding his Jewish readers that they were "either slaves of evil or ministers of the sacred."⁶⁰

⁵⁶ Kaplan, *Abraham Joshua Heschel*, 89. "It is customary to blame secular science and anti-religious philosophy for the eclipse of religion in modern society. It would be more honest to blame religion for its own defeats. Religion declined, not because it was refuted, but because it became irrelevant, dull, oppressive, insipid." Abraham Joshua Heschel, *God in Search of Man: A Philosophy of Judaism* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1955), 3.

⁵⁷ Abraham Joshua Heschel, *Man's Quest for God: Studies in Prayer and Symbolism* (New York: Scribner's, 1954), xiv.

⁵⁸ In his 1950 book *Man Is Not Alone*, Heschel develops what Kaplan calls his "blueprint for a theological revolution," a bold "paradigm shift," partly a response to neo-Kantian or Cartesian epistemological frameworks, characterized by "the re-centering of human thinking from the self to God as Subject" (173). With students, I often use chapter 5, "Knowledge as Appreciation," and chapter 9, "In the Presence of God," to introduce a notion of faith rooted not in conceptual notions of the divine but in wonder and the ineffable dimensions of human experience.

⁵⁹ Kaplan, *Abraham Joshua Heschel*, 133, from "The Meaning of This War."

⁶⁰ Kaplan, *Abraham Joshua Heschel*, 133.

In sum, the question of whether we can speak credibly of an *experiential knowledge* of God's love, God's mercy, God's fidelity, God's justice becomes central in Jewish literature of oppression after Auschwitz. Many concluded, *no*, we cannot. The same theological questioning pulses from the depths of African American literature across four hundred blood-stained years, from the Middle Passage to the present. To explore Black literature through the lens of faith is to inhabit the irreducible tension between the mark of Cain, which asks, "Am I my brother's keeper?", and the *imago Dei* that constitutes human freedom. The theodicy question we put to God is inseparable from the anthropodicy question God puts to Cain; "What have you done? Your brother's blood cries out to me from the ground!" (Gen 4:1–16).

In what follows, I limit myself to a handful of passages from a broad sweep of material covered in four units that structure the course "Black Literature and Faith."⁶¹ More or less mirroring a method of *lectio divina* and contemplative listening that I seek to create in the classroom, the discussion is framed around themes that converge on what I will finally call a *covenantal spirituality* of wonder, resistance, and hope, a sensibility that shares much with Heschel's account of the human journey in partnership with, and under the eyes of, God.

Seeds of Wonder: The Feeling for God

In the opening pages of his *Narrative of the Life of an American Slave*, Frederick Douglass details the faintest memories of his mother coming to hold him in the middle of the night when he was a very small child. Separated from Douglass when he was an infant and sold to a plantation twelve miles away, his mother risked the penalty of a severe whipping for "not being in the field at sunrise." Still, by foot, and under the cover of darkness, she came.

I do not recollect of ever seeing my mother by the light of day. She was with me in the night. She would lie down with me, and get me to sleep, but long before I waked she was gone. Very little communication ever took place between us. Death soon ended what little we could have while she lived, and with it, her hardships and suffering.⁶²

⁶¹ The major figures treated in the course are (I) Frederick Douglass and Harriet Jacobs; (II) W. E. B. Du Bois and Ida B. Wells; (III) Howard Thurman; and (IV) Maya Angelou and Jacqueline Woodson, supplemented throughout by select works from Black writers, poets, and artists such as Langston Hughes, Billie Holiday, James Baldwin, Nina Simone, Marvin Gaye, Bobby McFerrin, and Toni Morrison.

⁶² Douglass, "Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, An American Slave," 316. This and limited material from the "Seeds of Wonder" section and the section titled "Seeds of

Just seven years old when his mother grew gravely ill, Douglass was forbidden to visit her, and “received the tidings of her death with much the same emotions I should have probably felt at the death of a stranger.” Nevertheless, the memory of those nocturnal visits remained burned into his consciousness, his mother’s love, it seems, imprinted on his very flesh.

When I teach “Black Literature and Faith,” we begin on the first day of class by reading aloud together these first few pages of the text, slowly, taking turns around the circle. I encourage students to take their time, to feel their way through the text, so that we might hear something of its music together. Gathering student responses to the text, I try to surface themes that will accompany us for the remainder of the semester. The dim memory of his mother’s embrace, the boy’s yearning to know the date of his birthday, the identity of his father: from between the lines we begin to surface beautiful questions of identity (*Who am I?*) and belonging (*To whom do I belong?*), themes that potentially resonate across the centuries in a new community of co-learners, to the degree we allow Douglass’ voice to reverberate in us.

In hints and gestures, I hope to plant the seeds of the realization, initially more felt than spoken, that there is a music in Douglass’ writing that can resonate in the heart even in the twenty-first century. When I introduce the spirituals on the second or third day of class, students often will notice the longing for the mother expressed in so many of the sorrow songs—*Sometimes I feel like a motherless child / a long way from home*—a yearning not too difficult to recognize, not least for freshmen in college. To borrow from German theologian Johann Baptist Metz, Douglass’ rational faculty, the towering intellect that so awed his contemporaries, including Lincoln, is foremost an *anamnesis*, a reason that remembers.⁶³ Flesh memory moves in two directions, from giver to receiver and back again, crossing bounds of time and eternity. In the case of his mother—her name, he wants us to know, is Harriet Bailey, a woman otherwise “disappeared” from the history books—the flame of her dignity and courage burns in Douglass’ writing, and stirs the empathic heart in a new generation of readers.

If Metz sums up the mystery of such remembrance with phrases like “dangerous memory,” if Catholic theology calls it a sense of “real presence,” like

Hope” were initially developed in Christopher Pramuk, “Proximity, Disruption, and Grace: Notes for a Pedagogy of Racial Justice and Reconciliation,” in *You Say You Want a Revolution? 1968–2018 in Theological Perspective*, eds. Susie Paulik Babka, Elena Procaro-Foley, and Sandra Yocum (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2019), 135–57.

⁶³ See Johann Baptist Metz, *A Passion for God: The Mystical-Political Dimension of Christianity*, trans. J. Matthew Ashley (New York: Paulist, 1998), 142–43.

the Eucharist, a kind of epiphanic calling forth, Heschel similarly locates Jewish identity in contact with the revelatory texture of millennia past. “Jewish faith is recollection of that which occurred to our ancestors.”⁶⁴ Revelation, in other words, is ongoing. The question for people of faith, a question implicitly stirred in white Christians and Catholics by reading Douglass, Holocaust literature, or any literature of oppression, becomes this: *Whose dead* do we permit to haunt our theological imaginations? *Which cloud of witnesses* do we allow to inform and shape our liturgical-anamnestic consciousness? Whose unreconciled dreams for life and love, dignity and freedom, are caught up most fervently in the pathos of God?⁶⁵ As one of Heschel’s earliest reviewers put it, “Jews must remember that Judaism is a God-centered religion of crisis.”⁶⁶

When sacred remembrance is placed in the steadied hands of a masterful writer, it moves the reader almost forcibly out of the head and into the deeper regions of the heart. By “deeper” I mean less subject to rationalization, theological subjugation, or other strategies of ideological control. Nowhere is Douglass’ mastery of the written word steadier or more searing for me than in his account of the brutality of existence for enslaved women, as in the first time he was forced to watch his own Aunt Hester, “a woman of noble form and of graceful proportions,” fall under the lash of Mr. Plummer, a “cruel man, hardened by a long life of slaveholding.” “I was so terrified and horror-stricken at the sight, that I hid myself in a closet, and dared not venture out till long after the bloody transaction was over. I expected it would be my turn next. It was all new to me.” And though he was but “quite a child” at the time, Douglass continues, “I never shall forget it whilst I remember anything. ... It was the bloodstained gate, the entrance to the hell of slavery, through which I was about to pass. It was a most terrible spectacle.”⁶⁷

Arriving just five pages into the *Narrative*, when such a scene is read aloud in class, one can almost feel a collective shudder. What before might have been an abstract idea of the horrors of slavery—“Oh yes, we learned all about it in high school”—begins to transform into a wholesale reorientation

⁶⁴ Kaplan, *Abraham Joshua Heschel*, 139.

⁶⁵ See Christopher Pramuk, “Black Suffering/White Revelation,” *Theological Studies* 67 (2006): 345–77. Such questions link Metz’s European political theology, shadowed by the memory of Auschwitz, with North American Black liberation theology, haunted by the history and enduring effects of slavery. Both trajectories interrogate Western theology’s historical amnesia with respect to what Metz calls the “unreconciled dead.”

⁶⁶ Kaplan, *Abraham Joshua Heschel*, 167, citing a 1949 essay by Will Herberg, “the first prominent Jewish intellectual to recognize Heschel’s significance.”

⁶⁷ Douglass, “Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, An American Slave,” 318–19.

of American “history” from the entrails out, suggesting, in the words of David Tracy, that “something else might be the case.”⁶⁸ When asked to describe the emotional tenor of the author’s prose, students often observe that Douglass’ voice, relative to the brutality being described, is sober, measured, restrained. The effect of such restraint is to render those passages of more explicit emotionality and spiritual self-disclosure all the more arresting.

Two or three sessions in, we arrive at what may be the most famous passage from the *Narrative*, a scene that fellow abolitionist William Lloyd Garrison singles out in his preface as “the most thrilling one of them all,” in a text that contains “many passages of great eloquence and power.”⁶⁹ It comes just after Douglass has described the cruelty of Mr. Covey, his master for one year beginning in January 1833, including the repeated rape of a slave named Caroline, whom Mr. Covey had bought, “as he said, for *a breeder*”—all the while thinking himself “a sincere worshiper of the most high God.”⁷⁰ One Sunday morning, Douglass stands “in beast-like stupor” on the banks of the Chesapeake Bay, “whose broad bosom was ever white with sails from every quarter of the habitable globe.” He was fifteen. The passage merits quoting at length.

Those beautiful vessels, robed in purest white, so delightful to the eye of freemen, were to me so many shrouded ghosts, to terrify and torment me with thoughts of my wretched condition. I have often, in the deep stillness of a summer’s Sabbath, stood all alone upon the lofty banks of that noble bay, and traced, with saddened heart and tearful eye, the countless number of sails moving off to the mighty ocean. The sight of these always affected me powerfully. My thoughts would compel utterance; and there, with no audience but the Almighty, I would pour out my soul’s complaint, in my rude way, with an apostrophe to the moving multitude of ships:

“You are loosed from your moorings, and are free; I am fast in my chains, and am a slave! You move merrily before the gentle gale, and I sadly before the bloody whip! You are freedom’s swift-winged angels, that fly round the world; I am confined in bands of iron! O that I were free! O, that I were on one of your gallant decks, and under your protecting wing! Alas! betwixt me and you, the turbid waters roll. Go on, go on. O that I could also go! Could I but swim! If I could fly! O, why was I born a man, of whom to make a brute! The glad ship is gone; she hides in the dim distance. I am left in the hottest hell of unending slavery. O God, save me! God, deliver me! Let me be free! Is there any God? Why am I a slave? I will run away. I will not stand it. Get

⁶⁸ David Tracy, on the impact of “the classic,” in *The Analogical Imagination: Christian Theology and the Culture of Pluralism* (New York: Crossroad, 1981), 102; citing Dorothy Van Ghent.

⁶⁹ Douglass, “Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, An American Slave,” 306.

⁷⁰ Douglass, “Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, An American Slave,” 358–59.

caught, or get clear, I'll try it. I had as well die with ague as the fever. I have only one life to lose. I had as well be killed running as die standing. Only think of it; one hundred miles straight north, and I am free! Try it? Yes! God helping me, I will. It cannot be that I shall live and die a slave. I will take to the water. This very bay shall yet bear me into freedom."⁷¹

If it is true that the slaves had a "Bible *within* the Bible,"⁷² a canon *within* the canon—biblical narratives that gave consolation and hope and which countered those texts employed by slaveholders to sanction trading them as chattel—then surely the Exodus story topped that list. Through the power of literary empathy, the reader here follows Douglass' own Exodus narrative, from his passage through the "blood-stained gate" of slavery into his yearning for freedom as an adolescent, manifest in those "beautiful vessels, robed in purest white." In Heschel's terms, Douglass *feels* what the Hebrew people felt in their bondage, and, like the prophets, gives voice to the pathos of God—God who shares in the torment of human suffering, and whose Spirit galvanizes our inner yearning for dignity, freedom, and liberation. Revelation is ongoing. God's voice, "Let my people go!" does not cease after the prophets.⁷³

In April 1943, German soldiers had begun to liquidate the Warsaw ghetto, where Heschel's mother and sister Gittel were trapped among seven hundred thousand Jews in the district where he grew up. In Cincinnati, the home of Hebrew Union College where he had secured a position that saved his life, the young Heschel "was on the verge of collapse. He couldn't sleep; he could hardly speak"; he spent his days "just walking in the Burnett woods across from the college."⁷⁴ A telegram would inform him that his mother had died of a heart attack when German soldiers stormed their apartment;

⁷¹ Douglass, "Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, An American Slave," 359–61. The praying person is "heroic," says Heschel, for "intentionally or not, he puts his life in danger. He surrenders himself to the One to whom his being and essence belong; he makes a decision, he accuses God, gives notice, confesses himself, makes a vow, ... and seals a covenant" (Kaplan, *Abraham Joshua Heschel*, 106, from a 1939 essay). And again: "In no other act does man experience so often the disparity between the desire for expression and the means of expression as in prayer....What the word can no longer yield, man achieves through the fullness of powerlessness" (Kaplan, *Abraham Joshua Heschel*, 199, from *Man's Quest for God*). In all such passages, Heschel stresses "the inseparability of ethics and inwardness" (199). Prayer, thought, and action become one.

⁷² Rev. Alonzo Johnson, in "The Ring Shout and the Birth of African American Religion," from the documentary *Eyes on the Prize: America's Civil Rights Years* (PBS: Blackside, 1987).

⁷³ Kaplan, *Abraham Joshua Heschel*, 138.

⁷⁴ Kaplan, *Abraham Joshua Heschel*, 134.

his sister had been deported to Treblinka, where she was murdered. Remarkably, it was under these paralyzing signs of the “escutcheon of demons” that Heschel introduced his foundational notion of “wonder and awe,” of “radical amazement” in the soul that “initiates a transformation of religious thinking.”⁷⁵

“Wonder is not a state of esthetic enjoyment,” he would write six years later. “Endless wonder is endless tension, a situation in which we are shocked at the inadequacy of our awe, at the weakness of our shock, as well as the state of being asked the ultimate question.”⁷⁶ For Heschel, the present generation was “no different than in biblical times, when the God of pathos had hid the Divine Face and withdrew compassion from the people.” It is “our fate to live in exile, but He has said to those who suffer: ‘I am with them in their oppression.’”⁷⁷ Above all, it was poetry and prayer that Heschel turned to for consolation. Kaplan remarks of Heschel’s first published poems, written as a student in Berlin, “The poet must speak for a silent God.”⁷⁸ Douglass’ *Narrative* reverberates no less with prophetic urgency and spiritual insight. “While penetrating the consciousness of the pious man,” says Heschel, “we may conceive the reality behind it.” Between history and the act of faith stand “immense mountains of absurdity.”⁷⁹

In a seminal essay of 1944 entitled “Faith,” Heschel makes clear his conception of revelation as, in Kaplan’s words, a “universally shared sense of the holy, an a priori structure of consciousness.” It was, to be sure, a controversial idea for many of his Jewish contemporaries.

Each of us has at least once in his life experienced the momentous reality of God. ... Faith does not spring out of nothing. It comes with the discovery of the holy dimension of our existence. Suddenly we become aware that our lips touch the veil that hangs before the Holy of Holies. Our face is lit up for

⁷⁵ Kaplan, *Abraham Joshua Heschel*, 135.

⁷⁶ Abraham Joshua Heschel, *Man Is Not Alone: A Philosophy of Religion* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Young, 1951), 68–69.

⁷⁷ Kaplan, *Abraham Joshua Heschel*, 89.

⁷⁸ Edward K. Kaplan, introduction, in Abraham Joshua Heschel, *The Ineffable Name of God: Man*, poems translated from the Yiddish by Morton M. Leifman (New York: Continuum, 2004), 15. Against critics who rejected Heschel’s “stubborn piety,” claiming that it “did not give meaning to the suffering and death of innocent people,” Heschel “maintained that compassion for God’s suffering (his theology of God in exile) could incite responsible citizens to act and thus avoid another Holocaust” (151). Heschel, for his part, was often stung by his Jewish critics. “They called me a mystic, not a realist. I had no influence on the Jewish leaders” (Kaplan, *Abraham Joshua Heschel*, 132).

⁷⁹ *Abraham Joshua Heschel: Essential Writings*, selected with an introduction by Susannah Heschel (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2011), 173.

a time with the light behind the veil. Faith opens our hearts for the entrance of the Holy. It is almost as though God were thinking for us.⁸⁰

It is this notion of “faith” as a sensibility born in the depths of human experience, “a force in man, lying deeper than the stratum of reason,”⁸¹ and which frequently defies empirical-rational cause for fear and despair, that I find so breathtaking in African American literature, as in Douglass’ soliloquy at the banks of the Chesapeake Bay. “It is the spiritual power of the praying man that makes manifest what is dormant in the text.”⁸²

As a student and teacher of such literature, it is clear to me that the power of Douglass’ witness, a literary record I would not hesitate to call *sacramental*, cannot be contained by its historical genesis in the nineteenth century. One of my students, a young woman who had shared with the class her struggles with family trauma and mental illness, wrote a “Letter to Myself” for her final paper. In a poignant nod to Douglass, she concluded, “You are no longer merely looking at the ships. You can set sail and be free just like them.” To be sure, God’s voice continues to speak in who our students are, in what they have endured, and in who they yearn to become.

Seeds of Resistance: The Feeling for Freedom

Alongside Douglass’ *Narrative* in the first weeks of the class, I introduce a series of short autobiographical narratives written by Black Catholics in the latter part of the twentieth century. No more than a page or two each, these oral histories of ordinary Catholics provide students a powerful glimpse into the recent record of racism in the Catholic Church, and an often proud, joyful, and inspiring witness to the faithfulness of Black Catholics who fought their whole lives against it.⁸³ One of these is Mrs. Joyce Coleman, a parishioner of Saint Agnes Catholic Church in Cincinnati. Again, I cite the passage at length because it never fails to move students, year after year, and provides a touchstone for reflection throughout the course. She writes:

My parents had me baptized Catholic as an infant in Selma, Alabama. My father was tragically killed in 1944, leaving my mother with my infant

⁸⁰ Kaplan, *Abraham Joshua Heschel*, 139.

⁸¹ Kaplan, *Abraham Joshua Heschel*, 139.

⁸² Kaplan, *Abraham Joshua Heschel*, 199, citing Heschel’s 1954 treatise on prayer, *Man’s Quest for God*.

⁸³ Office of African American Catholic Ministries, Archdiocese of Cincinnati, *Tracing Your Catholic Roots: 1990–2009*, <https://resources.catholicaoc.org/offices/african-american-pastoral-ministries>.

brother and myself. From the time that I was a small child, I was taught that I am loved with an everlasting love. As a matter of fact, I was brainwashed with love in Catholic schools. The Sisters of St. Joseph taught me that nobody is better than I am. God sees all of us and loves all of us. There is no need to ever be ashamed of who you are, because God does not make mistakes.

Jim Crow had no conscious effect on me in Selma, although he lived all over the place. He would spread his wings and he was mean. There were Colored water fountains, bathrooms, entrances, and schools. Consequently, my mother taught me to take care of everything I needed before leaving home. I was conditioned to avoid humiliating circumstances and to this day, I seldom use public facilities. I built defenses to protect myself. ... In the South, I knew my place, so to speak. The facilities and “whatnot” were separate, but it wasn’t until I got to Indiana [to attend Catholic high school] that I realized that I lived in a separate society. I was in for the shock of my life. There were only 4 or 5 black children in my freshman class and Father Muldane, the parish priest, treated us like we were dumb ... ignorant. I was crushed!

Coming up, my family didn’t have the finances for extra activities, so I read. Reading was my escape. I loved Shakespeare and Edgar Allen Poe so much that I could quote the verses and soliloquies. I can still hear Father Muldane telling me, “Negroes don’t understand Shakespeare.” I couldn’t believe him! Well, I did understand Shakespeare, Poe, Dickinson and anybody else. I thought, “Do I have to put up with this?” Father Muldane was “Jim Crow” to me. He told me that I was ignorant and called me a nigger. It didn’t mean anything to him that I had graduated first in my class in Selma. Consequently, I put in 150 percent effort to excel in school ... I got on his last nerve. He wouldn’t call on me, and when I earned good grades he accused me of cheating. He gave me a “D” in English. I stayed after class to speak with him. When I told him, “God don’t like ugly and He’s gonna get you,” he gave me a detention. ...

See, the education that I received in elementary school was more than book learning. I knew that I was a child of God and it was difficult for Father Muldane or anybody else to break my spirit. ... Yes, there have been times in my life when I wanted to give up, just quit. [But] through it all, I have learned to trust in Jesus. ... My life has purpose, and I know that the Lord will get me through.⁸⁴

Joyce Coleman, as I said, makes a strong impression on students. Unpacking the text, we arrive at this question: Whence comes the inner strength and spirit that empowered a teenaged Joyce to look square in the eyes of a man like Father Muldane and tell him that “God don’t like ugly”?

⁸⁴ Office of African American Catholic Ministries, Archdiocese of Cincinnati, *Tracing Your Catholic Roots: 1990–2009*, 100–01.

It came in part, as the text intimates, from her mother's care and hard-bought wisdom; it came from her tutelage under the Sisters of St. Joseph, teachers in the faith who taught her "more than book learning," who "brainwashed her with love," who formed her in the conviction that she was a child of God. From Shakespeare and Poe she could "escape" into a world protected from the Jim Crow south; from her mother and the Sisters of St. Joseph she was graced with a sense of her own dignity that would "inoculate" her, as it were, from the poison of racism she would later encounter in the north, not least from priests and nuns.⁸⁵ Same Catholic Church, two very different realities. How does one "put up with" the inner contradictions that dwell side by side in one's own faith community, much less find the spirit and strength to do so as a child?

Just prior to the scene in Douglass' *Narrative* at the Chesapeake Bay, he confesses that Mr. Covey had "succeeded in breaking me. I was broken in body, soul, and spirit." Shortly after the scene at the Chesapeake, where he had finally determined, "This very bay shall yet bear me into freedom," Douglass relates a violent altercation with Mr. Covey that would be "the turning-point in my career as a slave." The battle lasted hours, and by its end, Mr. Covey had gotten "entirely the worst end of the bargain; for he had drawn no blood from me, but I had from him." The confrontation, Douglass says, "rekindled the few expiring embers of freedom ... and I now resolved that, however long I might remain a slave in form, the day had passed forever when I could be a slave in fact. I did not hesitate to let it be known of me, that the white man who expected to succeed in whipping, must also succeed in killing me."⁸⁶ It seems the experience at the Chesapeake—a revelatory moment of pathos and prayer, as Heschel might say, attuning the boy's spirit to the very pathos of God—had brought the young Douglass to a critical realization of self-regard, and thus a fierce commitment to resist the evils of enslavement. There was no turning back. While the circumstances of Joyce Coleman's confrontation with Father Muldane were far less dramatic, arguably the stakes for her were no less existential. Will I surrender my dignity for the sake of survival and die a thousand small deaths in the process? Or will I stand firm and speak my truth, speak *God's truth*, to those who would push me down?

⁸⁵ On the history of anti-Black racism within Catholic women's religious orders and the courageous resistance of Black religious women against it, see Shannen Dee Williams, *Subversive Habits: The Untold Story of Black Catholic Nuns in the United States* (pub. forthcoming), and articles by Dr. Williams in *America* magazine.

⁸⁶ Douglass, "Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, An American Slave," 365–66.

If the reader is wont to celebrate Douglass' triumph over Mr. Covey, the pleasure of it is short lived. Some pages later, Douglass relates in excruciating detail the story of a fellow slave named Demby who escaped the whip of his overseer, a Mr. Gore, whose "savage barbarity was equaled only by the consummate coolness with which he committed the grossest and most savage deeds upon the slaves under his charge." Demby had plunged himself into a creek, standing to "the depth of his shoulders, refusing to come out."

Mr. Gore told him that he would give him three calls, and that, if he did not come out at the third call, he would shoot him. The first call was given. Demby made no response, but stood his ground. The second and third calls were given with the same result. Mr. Gore then, without consultation or deliberation with any one, not even giving Demby an additional call, raised his musket to his face, taking deadly aim at his standing victim, and in an instant poor Demby was no more. His mangled body sank out of sight, and blood and brains marked the water where he had stood.⁸⁷

Again, the collective shudder as we read the scene aloud, silence, and then shared wonder: Whence comes the courage in a poor slave named Demby to refuse to comply at the critical moment of death with the command of a demonic overseer? Dare we say, with Heschel, that "Each of us has at least once in his life experienced the momentous reality of God"; that perhaps Demby had come to know the "holy dimension" of his own existence; that in his act of refusal, it was "almost as though God were thinking" for him? And what of the other slaves watching the horrific scene unfold? Might they have beheld, if just for an instant, Demby's face lit up "with the light behind the veil," and in that light, a flash of their own sacred dignity? It bears repeating: between history and the act of faith stand "immense mountains of absurdity."⁸⁸

In the years 1940 to 1943, from the relative safety of Cincinnati, Heschel became increasingly alarmed by the "moral bankruptcy" of established Jewish organizations that were reticent to raise the public alarm about what was happening in Europe. "The facts," as Kaplan details, "were readily available." By mid-August 1942, reliable sources were reporting that up to ten thousand Jewish refugees "had been brutally deported in trains to internment

⁸⁷ Douglass, "Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, An American Slave," 330–31.

⁸⁸ I recognize the risk of projecting theological meaning on to such a dehumanizing scene, and do so tentatively. For a theological interpretation of women's Holocaust literature (and a sensitive navigation of its risks), see Melissa Raphael, *The Female Face of God in Auschwitz: A Jewish Feminist Theology of the Holocaust* (New York: Routledge, 2003); and Christopher Pramuk, "Making Sanctuary for the Divine: Exploring Melissa Raphael's Holocaust Theology," *Studies in Christian-Jewish Relations* 12:1 (2017): 1–16.

camps in unoccupied southern France” and were being sent eastward to an “unknown destination” to their deaths. From Heschel’s theocentric perspective, faith in the living God yields a moral imperative to defend all human life as images of the Divine. Twenty years later, a gray-bearded Heschel would march arm in arm with Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. and thousands of ordinary Americans singing freedom songs and united in their commitment to build a more just society. Of marching with King, Heschel famously said, “I felt my legs were praying.”

In a recent article marking the forty-eighth anniversary of Heschel’s death, Cornel West sums up the “radical” legacies of Heschel and King—and echoes what I have called a *spirituality of resistance* in Douglass, Joyce Coleman, Ida B. Wells, Billie Holiday, Langston Hughes, and so many others—when he asks: “What and how do we remember, who do we revere, and why do we resist? What are the bounds of our sensitivity and empathy? In which narratives of the past and present do we situate, locate, and insert ourselves?”⁸⁹ If it feels to us and our students today that God is “in exile,” as Heschel lamented, “imprisoned even ‘in the temples,’” then what will you and I do to set free the spirit of God from imprisonment, to bring the living God home from exile?⁹⁰

Seeds of Hope: The Feeling for Another Possible Future

Some years ago, I taught a class called “The Black Catholic Experience,” a class inspired, in part, by the memory of Sr. Thea Bowman. My students and I attended Mass together at two different Black Catholic churches in inner-city neighborhoods of Cincinnati, both less than five miles from the Xavier University campus. Some days later, a student wrote in his journal: “I have seen a different side of my faith that I did not know anything about. I have learned about the embarrassment that blacks felt when the Jim Crow laws were in effect. I have heard the music that made me *feel* some of the same oppression that African Americans in my own Church were feeling.” A female student wrote, “I’ve learned that you cannot understand a culture by simply reading about it in a textbook—you need to fully immerse yourself, both cognitively and physically, to be a part of it.” Did we alter the structures of racism and segregation in Cincinnati? We did not.

⁸⁹ Cornel West, “The Radical Heschel,” *Jewish Currents*, December 23, 2020, <https://jewish-currents.org/the-radical-heschel/>.

⁹⁰ Kaplan, *Abraham Joshua Heschel*, 89. Today, we can and must extend these questions to the suffering Earth and its nonhuman creatures, finding new narratives and reclaiming ancient and indigenous ones that reorient the human imagination in relation to the whole of creation.

But I would never underestimate the impact of those visits on my students' imaginations, their vision of what is possible. As one wrote, "No matter where you come from or what you look like, you are welcome here. We are part of each other's story."

If proximity is a precursor to grace, as I have argued elsewhere, then one of the most enduring gifts we can give our students is to accompany them out of the classroom and into unfamiliar communities outside of their comfort zone.⁹¹ Much in the way of Pope Francis, Sr. Thea emphasized personal encounter as the key to cultivating just and healing relationships across the color line, and so freeing the captive imagination. It is not enough for white folks like me to love Black culture and not to love, befriend, and defend actual Black and brown people. It is not enough to intellectualize the struggle, to project one's "wokeness" into the world via social media, to sing spirituals in class, or even to attend another's church service, and consider oneself sanctified. Yet surely Sr. Thea would also agree that introducing the spirituals in class is not a bad place to start. Some of the best moments I have been blessed to be part of in the classroom have come decidedly *not* in the wake of a brilliant lecture but on those days that I bring an electric piano into the room, ask students to "circle it up," and then invite, encourage, and cajole them into singing with me. The grace of proximity can come in many forms, not least in the power of weaving music, poetry, and all manner of the arts into the theology classroom.⁹²

Some eleven or so pages into the *Narrative*, Douglass describes hearing his fellow slaves singing as they made their way between the fields and the farmhouse after nightfall, making "the dense old woods, for miles around, reverberate with their wild songs, revealing at once the highest joy and the deepest sadness." "Every tone," he writes, "was a testimony against slavery, and a prayer to God for deliverance from chains. The hearing of those wild notes always depressed my spirit, and filled me with ineffable sadness. I have frequently found myself in tears while hearing them."⁹³ Note his use of the term "ineffable." "We sense more than we can say," says Heschel. Like the psalms and much of the narrative-poetic landscape of the Bible, the spirituals mediate an encounter that "precedes conceptualization, on a level that is responsive, *immediate*, *preconceptual*, and *presymbolic*."⁹⁴ The

⁹¹ See Pramuk, "Proximity, Disruption, and Grace."

⁹² See Christopher Pramuk, *The Artist Alive: Explorations in Music, Art, and Theology* (Winona, MN: Anselm Academic, 2019).

⁹³ Douglass, "Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, An American Slave," 323–24.

⁹⁴ Abraham Joshua Heschel, *God in Search of Man* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Cudahy, 1955), 115.

same revelatory insight that gave birth to the spirituals can find a home in those today who, surrendering self-consciousness, let go and sing them. The “I” recedes into a dawning sense of “we,” if only for the duration of a song.

If Douglass emphasizes the lament and implicit rage of the spirituals, W. E. B. Du Bois emphasizes their potent embodiment of a “hope against hope,” their vision of another possible future. It is telling that Du Bois structures the whole of his 1903 collection, *The Souls of Black Folk*, with the sorrow songs, placing the music and text of one spiritual at the head of each chapter. Though “neglected,” “half despised,” and “persistently misunderstood,” the spirituals, says Du Bois, remain “the greatest gift of the Negro people”⁹⁵ to the nation.

Through all the sorrow of the Sorrow Songs there breathes a hope—a faith in the ultimate justice of things. The minor cadences of despair change often to triumph and calm confidence. Sometimes it is faith in life, sometimes a faith in death, sometimes assurance of boundless justice in some fair world beyond. But whichever it is, the meaning is always clear: that sometime, somewhere, men will judge men by their souls and not by their skins. Is such a hope justified? Do the Sorrow Songs sing true?⁹⁶

One could ask the same questions of biblical, prophetic faith. Is the hope announced by the prophets *justified*? Do the psalmist’s reassurances of God’s presence in the valley of the shadow of death, or the Gospels of Jesus with their promise of resurrection hope, *sing true*? For people loyal to the God of pathos, insists Heschel, “This is the task, in the darkest night to be certain of the dawn, certain of the power to turn a curse into a blessing, agony into a song.”⁹⁷ It is no wonder—and a marvelous wonder!—that the music of the Black church comprised the soundtrack and unifying force for the civil rights movement.

In December 1939, refugees who had managed to escape the Warsaw ghetto were reporting cruelties of “unbelievable proportions”; a Paris dispatch

⁹⁵ W. E. B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk* (New York: Dover, 1994; orig. McClurg, 1903), 156.

⁹⁶ Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk*, 162.

⁹⁷ Kaplan, *Abraham Joshua Heschel*, 102. “‘There are three ways in which a man expresses his deep sorrow: the man on the lowest level cries; the man on the second level is silent; the man on the highest level knows how to turn his sorrow into song.’ True prayer is song” (Kaplan, *Abraham Joshua Heschel*, 161, from Heschel’s *Man’s Quest for God*). An elderly Black man from Charleston, South Carolina, puts it this way: “I think *singing* is the *key* that opens the heavenly door.” See “The Ring Shout and the Birth of African American Religion,” from *Eyes on the Prize: America’s Civil Rights Years* (PBS: Blackside, 1987).

of January 1940 announced that more than twenty-five hundred Jews had committed suicide; about seventeen thousand Jews and Poles had been executed by order of the German courts; and in the same few months, Heschel learned that his sister Esther had been killed in a bombing raid. “How could a bystander remain sane?” Kaplan wonders. “How could Heschel continue his religious teaching? Could he justify his faith that God cares about humankind?”⁹⁸ Of course, nobody can answer such questions for another person. They can only be answered by way of experience, and each of us may answer differently over the course of a lifetime. But it is no less true that our exposure to the movements of spirit and hope in another person, another community, can awaken in the soul an unexpected wonder and a desire to drink from the same waters of meaning and consolation, joyfulness and hope. Through proximity to the faith of others, “The ineffable has shuddered itself into our soul.”⁹⁹

Perhaps what this means for theology, whether in books or in the classroom, is that the tenor, rhythm, and voice of our manner of teaching—not just *what* is communicated, but *how*—matter as much as content. As any battle-worn teacher wrestling over a lesson plan or syllabus knows, it is the shape of the whole experience that renders the content more or less effectively. Perhaps the ideal climate for theological inquiry, not always attainable, to be sure, is to be no longer merely “looking at the ships” with our students, but to “set sail” *with* them, and to be free.

“Hope,” writes biblical scholar Walter Brueggemann, “must be told, in image, in figure, in poem, in vision. It must be told sideways, told as one who dwells with the others in the abyss.”¹⁰⁰

From Dominion to Accompaniment: A Covenantal Spirituality

“Here my cry, O God the Reader, vouchsafe that this my book fall not still-born into the world-wilderness.”¹⁰¹ In the afterword that concludes *The Souls of Black Folk*, the reader is astonished to discover that Du Bois has been directing his arguments not only to his human readers, but to God, the “divine reader of human hearts.” Thus, the whole of *The Souls of Black*

⁹⁸ Kaplan, *Abraham Joshua Heschel*, 103.

⁹⁹ Kaplan, *Abraham Joshua Heschel*, 176. Again, the “faith” of others can and often does extend well beyond formal religious affiliation. See, for example, Hebbah H. Farag, “The Role of Spirit in the #BlackLivesMatter Movement: A Conversation with Activist and Artist Patrisse Cullors,” *Religion Dispatches*, June 24, 2015, www.religiondispatches.org.

¹⁰⁰ Walter Brueggemann, *Disruptive Grace: Reflections on God, Scripture and the Church*, ed. Carolyn J. Sharp (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2011), 153.

¹⁰¹ Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk*, 165.

Folk is revealed on its final page to be a kind of sustained prayer and examination of consciousness from the praying heart of its author. I would say the same of Frederick Douglass' work, certainly Heschel's, and, I dare say, my own. (The theologian, to adapt Evagrius, is the one whose prayer is true, and who seeks deeply, with others, into the mysteries of God.) I recall the first time I taught "Black Literature and Faith" being more than a little anxious before the first meeting. I knew the material would surface painful realities for students of every background, but I wondered especially about the receptivity of students of color (two-thirds of those enrolled) to me, a white professor whom they had never met. I paused outside the classroom, said a silent prayer, and plunged in. The truth is, I have never stopped praying.

Much as Du Bois suggests that we pass our days in a kind of collective cultural "sleep," Jewish philosopher Walter Benjamin writes of the disruptive power of historical and cultural "fragments," the reassembling of the "ruins" of a defeated past, to illumine the mind and awaken complacent hearts from their slumber.¹⁰² Imbibing from Benjamin and seeking to reclaim the "mystical-political" sensibilities of Jewish faith, Metz locates the power of Christianity's central story—the memory of Jesus' death and Resurrection—in its capacity to break the spell of the ruling consciousness. "The shortest definition of religion," writes Metz, is "interruption."¹⁰³ The very same capacity to awaken and interrupt, I have argued here, pulses within the narratives, essays, poems, and sorrow songs that rise from Black experience in America, past and present.

Over and over again, I have observed the disruptive and illuminating power of this material on students of diverse racial and ethnic backgrounds, an African American literary tradition reflecting a profound sensitivity for what Heschel calls the "tangent of the beyond at the whirling wheel of experience."¹⁰⁴ As Rowan Williams observes of poetry, evoking Hopkins, poetry (and here we may add great literature) succeeds when it is "charged" with a kind of presence, with "the radiance, the luminosity, the density, of real things." It says "that the world is full; the world is not empty," and in doing

¹⁰² Walter Benjamin, "Theses on the Philosophy of History," in *Illuminations* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1968), 253–64.

¹⁰³ Metz, *A Passion for God*; Johann Baptist Metz, *Faith in History and Society: Toward a Practical Fundamental Theology*, trans. and ed. J. Matthew Ashley (New York: Crossroad, 2007), 158. It is significant that Metz, in describing the Ignatian mysticism of his teacher Karl Rahner, employs the phrase "pathos for God," the passion "for a God who is near, but yet in his most intimate nearness still hidden and thus easy to overlook" (*A Passion for God*, 98–99).

¹⁰⁴ Heschel, *Man Is Not Alone*, 35.

so, it “passes the radiance on to another level.”¹⁰⁵ The poet and NYU scholar Fred Moten offers a strikingly similar observation about reading James Baldwin and how Baldwin trains the reader in a kind of empathy—looking *with*, not just looking *at*—that our world desperately needs today.

Baldwin’s apocalyptic vision at the end of *Down at the Cross* is something that can only be staved off by another vision which we, his readers, have to carry out on his behalf. ... [Because] I think that it is necessary for us, just as it was for Baldwin, to actually try to figure out ... what it would mean to *look with* the ones that you are also *looking at*, to *be with* the ones that your ... detached analysis is trained upon; [and especially if you are a public figure] to have empathy for the ones ... whose lives you are charged to pay some kind of detached, analytic attention to, in the interest of “helping” them; to recognize that those who you are charged to help, those over whom you have some stewardship, also are the ones who are *with you*, who belong to you and with you; [and] that the world that you are charged, in some sense, to have dominion *over* is the world that, in fact, you live *in* and are a *part of*. That capacity to be in and with the world and not simply to exercise dominion over the world is so much a part of what has been lacking in our political culture for many, many years and continues to be lacking today.¹⁰⁶

If we take ourselves as teachers and scholars to have something like the public role that Moten here describes, then his account offers both a direction for *what* we are teaching (offering students the opportunity to look through the heart of another) and a direction for *how* we teach, which is to say, our stewardship of the classroom demands that we look *with* them, that we accompany our students in the experience of encounter, disruption, and illumination.¹⁰⁷ Perhaps to be “brainwashed with love” in the context of higher education is to come to know oneself as not only being seen and evaluated from the outside, but that one is also being seen, as it were, from the inside; that there are respected adult mentors in my life who I can see desiring

¹⁰⁵ John F. Deane, “A Conversation with Rowan Williams,” *Image* (80), <https://imagejournal.org/article/conversation-rowan-williams/>.

¹⁰⁶ “Fred Moten on James Baldwin’s ‘Letter from a Region of My Mind,’” <https://vimeo.com/261362341>. Here Moten refers to the final lines of Baldwin’s 1963 collection, *The Fire Next Time*: “If we do not now dare everything, the fulfillment of that prophecy, re-created from the Bible in song by a slave, is upon us: *God gave Noah the rainbow sign, No more water, the fire next time!*”

¹⁰⁷ I am indebted to my colleague Jason Taylor at Regis University for helping me think through and formulate these insights on teaching. Taylor further links Moten’s commentary with the four recently promulgated Universal Apostolic Priorities advanced by the Jesuits, especially the third, “Accompanying Youth in the Creation of a Hope-Filled Future.” See <https://www.jesuits.global/uap/introduction/>.

to see me, and in their seeing and affirming me, helping me come to know myself by my “real name.”¹⁰⁸

It remains only to be said that this capacity “to be in and with the world and not simply to exercise dominion over the world” is arguably the central idea of Judaism with respect to God and the heart of Heschel’s thought, which is the *covenant*. “It obligates God, and it obligates man.”¹⁰⁹ Covenant is less an idea or construct than it is a memory and experience of “*God in Search of Man*,” as Heschel titles one of his masterworks. Less a noun than a verb, the biblical witness to covenant evokes a God-centered sensibility, a whole-bodied manner of being in relationship in which “the essence of being human” is “being a need of God”¹¹⁰; to borrow from Metz, it is a “mysticism of open eyes” and a “suffering unto God”¹¹¹ at the heart of the biblical tradition. If Moten is correct, and if my experience bears out in that of others, then what I may now be justified in calling a covenantal spirituality can also be modeled, and so come to life, in our classrooms. It is a bold claim, I admit, but herein lay the audacity of what Heschel means by faith. “Religion, the end of isolation, begins with a consciousness that something is asked of us.”¹¹² God desires, God commands, God needs our participation in the

¹⁰⁸ Pope Francis speaks of the search for truth and common flourishing as inclusive of the desire to “name people with their real name, as the Lord names them, before categorizing them,” the latter being the danger of surrendering to the “culture of the adjective.” See Pramuk, “Proximity, Disruption, and Grace,” 148–50.

¹⁰⁹ Kaplan, *Abraham Joshua Heschel*, 176, citing philosopher Shmuel Hugo Bergman’s 1951 review of *Man Is Not Alone*.

¹¹⁰ Kaplan, *Abraham Joshua Heschel*, 173, from *Man Is Not Alone*.

¹¹¹ See Metz, *A Passion for God*, 163, on a “mysticism of open eyes,” a “God-mysticism with an increased readiness for perceiving”; see 54–71, on “suffering unto God,” or biblical Israel’s incapacity “to distance itself from the contradictions, the terrors, and the chasms in its life,” its “incessant turning of its questions” back to God; and thus, their yes to God, or what Metz also calls poverty of spirit, “does not express shallow or infantile regression.”

¹¹² Heschel, *Man Is Not Alone*, 68–69. Although Heschel did not himself use the term “spirituality,” a term that gained wide provenance in later years, Kaplan employs it to describe the heart of Heschel’s concerns. In the 1940s Heschel described his goal as a “systematology,” a phenomenology of prophetic insight, or, even more intriguingly, “Prophecy after the Cessation of Prophecy,” as he titled a 1944 essay. Meanwhile a number of early reviewers critiqued Heschel’s “poetico-mystical approach” as difficult to follow. Much later, at the height of his literary maturity, Heschel coined the term “depth theology,” which seems to me right on the mark. “Theology is like sculpture, depth theology like music. Theology is in the books; depth theology is in the hearts. The former is doctrine, the latter an event. Theologies divide us; depth theology unites us.” See Abraham Joshua Heschel, *The Insecurity of Freedom: Essays on Human Existence* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1966), 115–26.

transformation of the world. Theology at its most exciting and most authentic, I believe, is a response to that covenantal call.

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