Exegesis:

Finding the Śāṭān in the Sacred: An Exploration of Resignification and Generative Sacredness in *The Dying of the Light*

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Abstract

The Dying of the Light is the story of *Paradise Lost* (2005), reframed. It tells of Lucifer escaping heaven, an abusive institution and family structure, then living with their trauma, and freeing humanity (or so they think). The text explores themes of ecofeminism, postcolonial and institutional power, and familial abuse.

The Exegesis, 'Finding the Śāṭān in the Sacred', reflects on the process of writing the creative thesis and examines how specific sacred practices can be used as generative tools for poetry writing.

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Attestation of Authorship

I hereby declare that this submission is my own work and that, to the best of my knowledge and belief, it contains no material previously published or written by another person (except where explicitly defined in the acknowledgements), nor material to which a substantial extent has been submitted for the award of any other degree or diploma of a university or other institution of higher learning.

Candidate's signature: ____

C. Willett

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Ethics

Ethics and Intellectual Property Rights

1) All intellectual property, including copyright, is retained by the candidate, Christopher Willett. For the removal of doubt, publication by the candidate of this or any derivative work does not change the intellectual property rights of the candidate in relation to the thesis or exegesis;
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Dedication

This work, like everything I do, is dedicated to Hilary, my muse.
Thank you for your support, your guidance, your presence.

And a blessing to those who challenge systems of power:

In the face of adversity and hopelessness,
May your courage and integrity lead you;
When met with patronisation,
May your story and community bring you strength;
When your voice is among those who do not value it,
May you sing, clear and strong.

Exegesis: Finding the Śāṭān in the Sacred:

An Exploration of Resignification
and Generative Sacredness in *The Dying of the Light*

Christopher Willett

Chapter One: Introduction

1.1 Introduction

The poetry collection, *The Dying of the Light*, intends to do two things. First, it intends to reframe the plot of *Paradise Lost* (2005) from a perspective sympathetic to Lucifer to one that challenges modernist ways of thinking about good and evil. Second, it intends to be proof of the generative nature of sacred texts and practices. These intentions are in response to my research questions:

1) How to write and compile a poetry collection that reframes the rebellious as righteous; and
2) How to write poetry in response to a sacred text, using traditional religious practices.

This Exegesis, 'Finding the Śāṭān in the Sacred', will explore each of these questions in their own chapters.

1.2 Title

The title, *The Dying of the Light*, was taken from the poem 'Do not go gentle into that good night' by Dylan Thomas. Thomas' poem is about the death of a father; however, for me, it raises three provocations that became the basis of *The Dying of the Light*:

1) The light to which Thomas refers reminds me of the etymology of the name Lucifer: Morning Star, Light-Bringer. To 'rage against the dying' of Lucifer provokes a fascinating thought: should one feel sympathy for the pain Lucifer undergoes in *Paradise Lost?*
2) The death of a father draws me in to explore the death of the metaphor of God as father, and the patriarchal and masculine language that often surrounds (and blurs) God; and
3) Thomas' poem acts as a plea to the privileged—for whom it is perhaps easy to 'go gently'—to undertake strong, passionate social justice instead. This idea is the basis for the epilogic poem 'Onward: A Benediction'

1.3 The Śāṭān

Toward the end of the creative thesis I refer to Milton's character, Lucifer, as the śāṭān. The reason for romanising 'śāṭān' with accents is twofold: to comply with the International Organisation for Standardisation, and to emphasise the original Hebrew meaning. The reason for the article ('the') is also to distinguish the fallen angel, Lucifer, from the role that Lucifer plays in the original sense of the word śāṭān: the accuser, or the adversary. In so doing, I freed up the role to be applied to humans, as it is in the Hebrew Bible, and particularly, to be assumed by the reader. The reason for so doing was to strip the title of its nastiness, retell the story of Lucifer through a new hermeneutic (way of interpreting), and reframe rebellion as a worthwhile and just pursuit. This desire to reframe Lucifer stems from my belief that those with religiopolitical power have historically besmirched the name of rebellion as evil, using the śāṭān as a cautionary figure of opposition, to encourage those with less power to continue the cycle of repression themselves. Ultimately, *The Dying of the Light* refers to 'the śāṭān' in an attempt to create space for otherness.

1.4 Structure

The Dying of the Light follows a five-act structure, bookended by an introductory poem and a blessing. Each act is set in a new location: hell, prelapsarian Eden, heaven, postlapsarian Eden, and a space outside Eden (lapsarian here refers to the fall of humanity, which occurs at the climax of Act Three).

Originally I had set out to follow the twelve-book structure of *Paradise Lost* perfectly. I wrote five poems per book and organised them into chapters, focussing each on a theme of the twelve-step recovery programme. While this was a useful way of adhering to the plot of *Paradise Lost*, I found it obstructive to the flow of the narrative when reading the poetry back. I also found the focus on recovery programme themes somewhat distracting to the focus on spiritual practices. In my second draft, I removed the twelve chapter title pages, and had one large section. However, I found this overwhelming as a reader. During this draft, I also moved some of the poetry for consistency; since there were no longer book/chapter divisions, work from 'Chapter Four' could now be moved to 'Chapter Two' (or from Act Three to Act One) for a more consistent and coherent narrative.

In the third draft I restructured again, including some section title pages to allow for natural stopping points for the reader. I used online flowchart software to categorise each poem by central character, location, and theme. I found that the poems were, for the most part, already formed into a classic five-act dramatic arc, so I undertook some small changes to support the structure, moving some poems and editing others to suit their place in the narrative better. Given the five distinct locations, a five-act structure seemed a natural choice. Furthermore, a five-act structure allows for a better tandem narrative, introducing Lucifer's arc in Act One, and humanity's arc in Act Two; this gives space for both narratives and avoids the conflation thereof.

The first and last poems of each act were edited to be more transitionary turning points, and I placed more emphasis on framing the central dramatic questions: 1) Will Lucifer's trauma heal? And 2) Will God repeat their abusive behaviour with humanity?

Like *Paradise Lost*, *The Dying of the Light* begins in Act One in medias res with Lucifer's fall from heaven. Act Two begins when Lucifer escapes hell to find humanity, and the perspective shifts from Lucifer to the humans. Act Three begins when an angel joins the humans to describe the process of creation and heaven, and in so doing initiates a flashback to the war in heaven. The war ends with Lucifer's fall, bringing the reader back to the present moment when Lucifer is stalking the garden, the angel having left. The climax of Act Three is the five-poem sequence beginning with 'Suspension' (the fall of Lucifer) and concluding with 'Taste the Fruit' (the fall of humanity). Act Four is a sombre comparison of prelapsarian Eden and postlapsarian Eden. Act Five follows an angel showing Adam the future, and the humans leaving Eden.

In addition to occurring where it is traditionally placed in Freytag's dramatic pyramid, the climax is also the centre of a chiasm. In a chiasm, ideas or phrases are mirrored around a central argument. Chiastic structuring like this is found in epic poetry and various religious texts, including the Bible; longer chiasms typically contain something of great significance in their centre. By using a chiasm, the poetry collection asserts itself as important, through imitation of the Bible. The critical events of the poetry collection are the two falls and Lucifer's wrestling between them, marked in the following table as 'Ka' through 'Ke'.

The chiasm of *The Dying of the Light* is as follows:

Poem Title	Content
A – ‘At the Beginning of a Journey’	Normalcy
B – ‘Like Any Other Day’	Lucifer creates Pandemonium
C – ‘Why I Listen to Folk Punk’	‘Fight dirty’ refrain
D – ‘On a Ziggurat’	The killing of George Floyd
E – ‘Broken’	Addressed to the reader, regarding trauma
F – ‘Trapped, Observed’	Compares institutions to prisons
G – ‘A Rare Scene’	Nature responding to Lucifer’s fall
H – ‘Wild Shelter’	Describes prelapsarian Eden
I – ‘Canticle I: The Oasis’	Humans engage in positive sexual activity
J – ‘Creation Hymn’	Creation praises God (pre-fall)
Ka – ‘The Fall, Part One: Suspension’	Lucifer falls from heaven
Kb – ‘The Fall, Part Two: Firmly Held’	Lucifer wrestles with the decision to cause humanity to fall
Kc – ‘The Fall, Part Three: Filthy Hands and Muddy Feet’	Lucifer walks through Eden
Kd – ‘The Fall, Part Four: Resentment’	Observing God’s treatment of humanity re-traumatises Lucifer. Lucifer decides to betray humanity
Ke – ‘The Fall, Part Five: Taste the Fruit’	Humanity falls from grace
J' – ‘Optimism’	Creation continues to praise God (post-fall)
I' – ‘Canticle II: A Grove’	Humans engage in toxic sexual activity
H' – ‘Like That Other Day’	Describes postlapsarian Eden
G' – ‘On a Bench, Observing a Bridge’	Nature responding to humanity’s fall
F' – ‘Institutions’	Compares institutions to weeds
E' – ‘Reflection’	Addressed to the reader, regarding trauma
D' – ‘Future I: Cain and Abel’	The killing of George Floyd
C' – ‘End’	‘Fight dirty’ refrain
B' – ‘Unlike Any Other Day’	Christ creates the Church
A' – ‘Felix Culpa’	New normalcy

1.5 Context

This work was produced in 2020, and elements of the year have naturally found their way into my poetry. These include the killing of George Floyd and the resurgence of the Black Lives Matter movement, and the Covid-19 pandemic.

As a Christian feminist, I have taken the liberty of editing the quotes I use from *Paradise Lost* to be gender-neutral when concerning God, death, or angels.

Chapter Two: Retelling the Story

2.1 Introduction

The Dying of the Light aims to question some of the Judeo-Christian assumptions about God and Lucifer. These include assumptions about God's gender, authority, and goodness, and Lucifer's intentions and evilness. These provocations begin as early in the poetry collection as 'Why I Listen to Folk-Punk', with the imagery of an abusive father in the 'chorus' reversing the archetypes of a good God and an assailing śāṭān:

> 'Fight dirty, fight dirty,' that is what he said
> After seven pints of beer and thirty cigarettes.
> And he planted in us evil, and that evil, it has grown,
> We are children, one and all, of vengeful fathers.

2.2 Reframing God

'God' in *The Dying of the Light* refers predominately to the Christian person, 'God the Father'. Poems such as 'Liberation I: Wrath' ask the reader to reassess the gendering of God in this context, and acknowledge that maleness, authority, and violence are all intermingled in that image of God. The reader encounters God the most in Act Three, which correlates with Books 3 and 5–8 of *Paradise Lost* (2005).

The first third of Act Three depicts God creating the world and the world responding, the middle third portrays God preparing for war, and the rest of the act narrates the war itself. In this act, God is in the first instance presented as a creative and genderless creator. However, as the act progresses, God begins to be viewed through a human lens, and God's gendering becomes apparent. God is also seen to be violent in 'The Great Plot' and 'Baptised First in Blood.'

Although there are hints of this transformation of God throughout the start of Act Three, there is a sudden shift of mood present in 'The Great Plot' when read in context. This is intentional: the juxtaposition of the creative and destructive God is a merism, another language feature of biblical literature in which a combination of two contrasting parts of the whole refer to the whole. In this instance, God is expressed as being the entirety of the spectrum of creativeness and destructiveness. That is to say, God is not only both creative and destructive, but also exists in the grey space between the two. This is an attempt to re-complexify God and challenge modernity, as my first research question outlines.

2.3 Reframing the Śāṭān

I am hardly the first to consider Lucifer the hero of *Paradise Lost*—Steadman (1975) explores the arguments for and against—or wonder if there were something righteous about rebelling against the Church:

> "The reason Milton wrote in fetters when he wrote of Angels & God,
> and at liberty when of Devils & Hell, is because he was a true Poet,
> and of the Devil's party without knowing it." (Blake, 1906)

However, *The Dying of the Light* does propose that Lucifer is traumatised, and reimagines what that familial trauma may have felt like for the character (e.g. 'Tough Love'). It acknowledges that hurt people hurt people, and asks where the line is: can Lucifer be blamed for causing the fall of humanity when God preordained it and set Lucifer on the path to do so? Just as *The Dying of the Light* reframes God into shades of grey, so too it liberates Lucifer from being as black-and-white evil as Lucifer is commonly portrayed.

2.4 Reframing the Church

The Church is a complicated machine and historically has both helped and hindered. My Church experiences are predominately with the Roman Catholic and Anglican Churches of Aotearoa, and my comments stem from my personal experiences.

I sought for *The Dying of the Light* to challenge the injustice of the Church, especially given that one of the responsibilities of the Church is 'to seek to transform unjust structures' (Anglican Church in Aotearoa, New Zealand and Polynesia, 2016, 3d). In Christianity, the Church is the body of Christ (1 Corinthians 12:12–14). In my experience, this proclamation has been used as a 'get-out-of-jail-free card' to justify behaviour. In poems such as 'Institutions' and 'Surrender,' I distinguish the Church from Christ and even Christ's vision for the Church from humanity's image of the Church.

Chapter Three: Sacred Texts and Practices as Generative

3.1 Introduction

I chose Milton's *Paradise Lost* (2005) as a touchstone text because the theology that Milton espoused in the 17th century is still prevalent in conservative theological conversation today. When I criticise Milton's *ideas* in this exegesis, I do so because I have heard them upheld by contemporary Christians to justify their harmful behaviour. I do not intend to condemn Milton himself, who was of his time and wrote beautiful poetry.

More than merely referring to Milton's text and drawing my plot thereon, I treated *Paradise Lost* as a post-canonical Christian sacred text and engaged with it using both Christian and non-Christian sacred practices. By using these practices, I sought to address my second research question.

In this chapter, I will outline the practices with which I engaged in order to glean the meaning from *Paradise Lost* better, and comment on their generative nature in terms of poesis. Seeking the generative effect of sacred practices is served by two assumptions: 1) That writing prompts have helped me to hone my craft previously; and 2) That tension breeds creativity, and that operating within a framework allows creativity to flourish (Himmelman, 2017).

This research occurs among an existing contemporary humanist trend to treat the works of Jane Austin, Virginia Woolf, and J.K. Rowling—among others—as secular sacred texts (Not Sorry Productions, 2019; Paulsell, 2019; Zoltan & ter Kuile, 2016).

The spiritual practices I used are predominately Christian ones for two reasons: 1) I am familiar with these traditions as a Christian; and 2) I do not wish to colonise, appropriate, and bastardise religious practices of other cultures. I will briefly discuss appropriation and bastardisation further in the section on Kasfh.

In each of the following section titles I will state one practice I used, the tradition from which it originates, and an example of a poem I wrote using that practice. I will then explain the process I used in the body of that section and briefly comment on its usefulness for poetic generation.

3.2 <u>Lectio Divina (Christian): 'Liberation I: The Sceptre'</u>

Lectio Divina is a much-loved practice in modern contemplative-Christian circles. By the time I began the creative thesis, I was already familiar with multiple ways of practising Lectio. Lectio is somewhat exegetical in practice, and involves hearing a passage of text read and responding slowly and deliberately. Lectio has developed over the centuries so that there are a few variations: I chose a five-step form of Lectio that is quite analytical in order to draw more basically on visual and allegorical elements, because I figured it would lend itself to a more poetic expression of meditation. One poem in which I used Lectio is 'Liberation I: Wrath'. I used the following extract from *Paradise Lost*:

Then thou thy regal sceptre shalt lay by,
For regal sceptre then no more shall need,
God shall be all in all... (3.339–341)

Step 1: Identify what is happening on a literal level in the text.

My response: 'God is talking with Christ in the throne room. Christ offers themself to take humanity's place and die for it. God then outlines what will happen: Christ will die and destroy death and return as a sceptred monarch. Following the Last Judgement, Christ will no longer need a sceptre because all humanity will be Christ-like and will therefore not need ruling over.'

Step 2: Identify an allegorical meaning.

My response: 'This is an allegory for how the communion of saints on earth—that is to say, all humanity—should behave today. The All-in-All nature of Christlikeness is begun today in an inaugurated eschatology (the view that Christ's human existence brought heaven—partially—to our reality). That God is already in all of us as individuals, enhancing our true, varied selves, implies by Milton's logic that we do not need strict religious ruling. (Not Milton's intention, though.) This passage is an allegory for the suggestion that we are like God in our *diversity*.'

Step 3: Explore how this relates to Lucifer's character.

My response: 'The communion of hell is strong in its diversity also. I wonder if the seeds of hate grow stronger than those of love in this paradigm. When Christ's sceptre is laid down, will Lucifer be welcomed to a new family? What does it mean for Lucifer to be part of an authoritarian family, ruled by a violent and phallic tool like a rod or sceptre, used for beating?'

Step 4: Identify an action that this passage inspires you to undertake.

My response: 'For Lucifer, and all of us, to lay down our sceptres and humble ourselves. To relinquish our powers over other people. To acknowledge the All-in-All in one another instead of dominating one another. To destroy our sceptres.'

Step 5: Reflection, Creation.

My response: 'Throughout this meditation, I was struck by the under-realised eschatology and emphasis on the Judgement Day, and the unkind, violent and masculine understanding of

divine leadership illustrated in this passage. I would like to explore in a poem what happens when one conflates triumph and masculinity, and attaches either or both to the divine. Did Christ learn this leadership style from God?'

Ultimately, this method of sitting with a sacred text allows a deeper connection to allegorical, reflective and applicatory poetic ideas by scaffolding the user through a systematic way of thinking about a text.

3.3 Ignatian Contemplation (Christian): 'A Rare Scene'

As far as sacred practices go, Ignatian Contemplation or Sacred Imagination is quite simple: one imagines oneself into the sacred text as a notable character or as a bystander, and, by sensorially experiencing the narrative, gains new insights about the text or God. Midway through this thesis, I discovered that I have aphantasia, a condition meaning I cannot voluntarily visualise mental images. This explained why I often struggled with Ignatian Contemplation (among other practices, such as counting sheep, which I always assumed was metaphorical). Nonetheless, I meditated on what it would feel like to be present while Lucifer experienced loneliness for the first time:

So on this windy sea of land, the fiend
Walked up and down alone bent on their prey,
Alone, for other creature in this place
Living or lifeless to be found was none… (3.440–443)

I imagined myself both as Lucifer feeling profoundly alone—even more so for feelings of loneliness not being a shared lived experience—and the surrounding landscape crying out in sympathy. I imagined the giant Lucifer (1.194, 10.528) feeling small and helpless, and their physical form reflecting this.

Given my aphantasia, it is difficult for me to comment on the general use of visual imagination in poetry writing, though I presume it is widely used to write poetry. I nonetheless found it useful to engage with this practice as an intentional way of empathising with a persona and writing poetry from their perspective.

3.4 Icon Meditation (Christian): 'Hospitality'

Reading icons is a particularly Eastern and Russian Orthodox practice and involves sitting with an image and pondering what it can teach us about God. For this thesis, I used a range of icons, including Blake's and Doré's illustrations of *Paradise Lost* and traditional Christian icons. For the poem 'Hospitality,' I meditated on Rublev's The Trinity as an image of Raphael dining and speaking with Adam and Eve in *Paradise Lost* Books 5–7.

I explored the background elements—the house, the tree, the mountain—as symbols that represent each of the foreground characters as explored in the text: the domestic Eve, the immovable Adam, the living Christ (since the central figure is Christ in most interpretations, I

conflated Raphael and Christ in the poem). Aware of the gender assumptions with which I was playing, and seeking ways to undermine them, I wondered how these background elements would communicate with one another, and that became the creative basis for 'Hospitality.'

I often use images to inform or inspire poetry. However, I noticed a difference between writing a poem about a painting and writing a poem in response to a sacred image that is respected and venerated by the Orthodox Churches: the work felt more substantial and more deliberate for knowing a little about the history of iconography and its significance.

3.5 Florilegium (Christian): 'Liberation III: Lest We Celebrate'

Florilegium is the practice of flos-legere, or flower gathering. To practise this, one keeps a journal of impactful phrases that are plucked from sacred texts like flowers. When laid together on the same page, these 'flowers' inform a new and more significant meaning about the (often emotional) space the person collecting them is occupying. The poem 'Lest We Celebrate' began when three flowers from *Paradise Lost* Book 2 stood out to me:

My sentence is for open war… (2.51)
Through all the coasts of dark destruction seek / Deliverance for us all… (2.464–465)
…opal towers and battlements adorned / Of living sapphire… (2.1049–1050)

Together, they constructed an image of an equestrian statue being destroyed—one not particularly reminiscent of any scene in the text, but an image that indeed responds to the celebration of a holy war and a triumphant God in *Paradise Lost*.

I found these flowers exceptionally beautiful, but I found it challenging to use them naturally. There are countless writing prompts that provide or limit words; I would consider this practice (for a poet) a helpful alternative.

3.6 Benediction (Christian): 'Onward: A Benediction'

The practice of blessing others is by no means solely a Christian sacred practice, but for me it is so ingrained in liturgical worship that Christianity does not seem whole without it. According to Calhoun (2015), blessing desires to 'instil courage, confidence and hope through expressing the delight God has in others.' In the blessing in the dedication of this thesis and in the poem 'Onward: A Benediction', I write to encourage protest and growth. Benedictions tend to use an anaphoric 'May'; given their repetitive structure, they are not unlike existing writing prompts that demand a list of 'things you wish for someone'.

3.7 Pardes (Jewish): 'The Great Plot'

Pardes feels to me a little like the Jewish Lectio Divina, but even richer. It is a practice of exegeting text by following a four-part process (YashaNet, n.d.). 'Pardes' translates as 'orchard', but is also an acronym for the first Hebrew letter of each step of the approach:

1. פְּשָׁט (**P**’ shat) 2. רֶמֶז (**R**emez) 3. דְּרַשׁ (**D**’rash) 4. סוֹד (**S**ud)

In Pardes, one can walk through the text and, as in an orchard, reach up and there will always be fruit to pluck (Zoltan & ter Kuile, 2016). For my experience with *Paradise Lost* and Pardes, ‘I find the fruit in my hand soured at its plucking’ (‘The Great Plot’, line 13). As with Lectio, I will outline the process of practising Pardes by using my praxis as an example.

...all the plain
Covered with thick embattled squadrons bright,
Chariots, and flaming arms, and fiery steeds,
Reflecting blaze on blaze, first met their view:
War they perceived, war in procinct; and found
Already known what they for news had thought
To have reported… (6.15–21)

Step 1: P’shat (‘simple’)—the literal meaning of the text

This passage takes place just before the war in heaven. Abdiel is an angel who defected to the rebellion but argued with Lucifer and returned to God. In this passage, Abdiel is flying back to God with the news of the rebellion to find heaven already prepared to fight, “procinct” meaning complete readiness (for war).

Step 2: Remez (“hint”)—an implied or deeper meaning of the text

This passage implies God’s omnipresence and supports predestination. It also rewards Abdiel for their repentance. Significantly, this passage presupposes the ignorance of the rebellion and lack of understanding of the extent of God’s power.

Step 3: D’rash (“concept” or “seek” —an application of the p’shat and remez, or word study

By revealing heaven through following Abdiel, Milton is actively telling the reader to follow their example and repent before it is too late, and the reader faces God’s wrath. What struck me in this passage was the fire-language: ‘flaming…fiery…blaze’, and it reminded me of another scene with a similar intensity: the hell presented in Book 1. By using similar language, Milton references the suffering that the rebellion will face, but intensifies it by weaponising it; in hell, Lucifer is passively in a state of punishment, but in heaven, the fiery weapons are used actively by God and the angels for a much more dramatic and intense scene. The ultimate message of this passage is an illustration of God’s wrath and an offer of repentance.

Step 4: Sud (“hidden”)—a mystic meaning of the text

It is important to note that, while a sud may always exist, it may not always be discovered in a Pardes practice. A sud can be described as a divine secret; it is possible to catch a glimpse thereof. What came to me may not be a sud. Still, it is an additional development that can now be found in my poetry: I further explored the idea of predestination and concluded that the rebellion was created to rebel and be smitten, and Abdiel was created to rebel and repent. The sud, if it is one, is less of a divine secret and more of a divine revelation of a human secret, that humanity struggles with radical inclusion and restoration without repentance.

Pardes, like Lectio, offers a systematic approach to reading and the creation of an exegetical response that provides content for poetry. This opens some opportunities for a writer engaging with a sacred text, particularly in the d'rash stage, to make links and juxtapose parts of the text based on word use and imagery.

3.8 Kashf (Sufi): 'Disclosure'

Kashf translates as 'unveiling'. It asks the reader to approach the text with their heart instead of their head and allow the text to speak directly, rather than have a reader seek an interpretation. Kashf was a challenge for me because I was deeply nervous about appropriating Muslim practices. I decided I was not willing to use kashf with *Paradise Lost*. Since scenes of *Paradise Lost* are present in all the Abrahamic Scriptures, I approached kashf with an English translation of the Qur'ān (Saheeh International, 2011), turning to the account in the Garden of Eden, 7.12. Aware of obligatory practices around handling even an English translation, I attempted to ablute myself by employing the practice of Wuḍūʾ (a cleansing ritual).

The process I used involved reading the passage over and over slowly and allowing more meaning to flow out with each reading. I could have used this technique with *Paradise Lost* (and it is not dissimilar to some variants of Lectio Divina). Still, because my research involved using existing sacred practices, I chose to attempt to use this practice while giving due respect to both the Qur'ān and Islamic and Sufi tradition.

Regarding this practice's usefulness for poetic generation, I found it challenging to engage with it without 'walking on eggshells' in fear of bastardisation. This is perhaps the only practice with which I engaged that I felt uncomfortable using, and a part of me profoundly regrets using it because I understand how sacred the connection between Muslims and scripture is.

3.9 Prayer Beads with Mantra (Buddhist): 'Wild Shelter'

On the other hand, I do not feel as though the Buddhist practices I used have been bastardised by me any more than they were already. However, I have undertaken a lot more personal research into Buddhism than Islam throughout my spiritual journey, and I have found Buddhism a lot more open to the intersection of different religio-cultural ideas. In saying that, neither prayer beads nor mantras are exclusively used by Buddhism. I tagged this particular use of prayer beads as Buddhist as I was using a mala in a Buddhist style, despite using a repeating Christian prayer in a Franciscan monastery.

This particular experience of meditating using prayer beads connected God to nature in quite a strong, ecofeminist way. The poem 'Wild Shelter' attempts to capture some of the drifting thoughts that breached through the mantra.

3.10 Tonglen (Buddhist): 'Liberation II: For a Moment'

Pema Chödrön (2016) introduces Tonglen better than I ever could:

"Tonglen reverses the usual logic of avoiding suffering and seeking pleasure. In the process, we become liberated from very ancient patterns of selfishness. We begin to feel love for both ourselves and others; we begin to take care of ourselves and others. Tonglen awakens our compassion and introduces us to a far bigger view of reality…We begin the practice by taking on the suffering of a person whom we know who be hurting and wish to help…This is the core of the practice: breathing in others' pain so they can be well and have more space to relax and open—breathing out, sending them relaxation or whatever we feel would bring them relief and happiness."

More concrete than Christian forms of prayer (though not too dissimilar to benediction), Tonglen is a breath meditation that acknowledges suffering. This year, I have had more than a few friends and relatives burned and betrayed by certain Christian institutions. 'Liberation II: For a Moment' is a poetic retelling of my experience using Tonglen while contemplating Lucifer's suffering in the institution of heaven, and the experiences of those I know who suffered by the hand of the Church.

I used this practice to locate a character's suffering in *Paradise Lost*, and it offers the generation of call-and-response poetry using in-breath/out-breath imagery or a suffering/release dichotomy.

3.11 Yìjīng (Taoist): 'At the Beginning of a Journey'

I first discovered yìjīng (or i-ching) in the last two books of Philip Pullman's *His Dark Materials* trilogy (Pullman, 1998, 2001). Given this form of sacred divination was used in a series that Pullman based on *Paradise Lost*, it was irresistible.

One way that yìjīng is practised is by asking a question and throwing three coins six times. Since my household seldom uses physical currency, I used various polyhedral dice and sorted them, discerning between even and odd rolls. Essentially, yìjīng uses characters made from the stacking of six full or broken horizontal lines (hexagrams). The order in which the lines are combined gives the hexagram new meaning and an answer to the practitioner's question.

The hexagram is a juxtaposition and interrelation of two trigrams, both with natural significance. On viewing a hexagram, one notices three characters—the hexagram and both trigrams. Due to the significance of the number three and the nature themes of each trigram, in 'At the Beginning of a Journey' I felt drawn to use kigo (Japanese seasonal words) and a dash (in place of a kireji (cutting word)) for a traditional-feeling haiku structure, reshaped somewhat. This cross-Asian approach to poetry writing was also inspired by the tendency of both haiku and yìjīng to use juxtaposed fragments to create meaning.

I asked the yìjīng what to expect for 2020 and what Lucifer was feeling in Book 1 of *Paradise Lost*. I was answered with Hexagram #41: Decrease (it seems there is no hexagram for 'pandemic'). I took the answer seriously and interpreted it as Lucifer's decrease from heaven to hell, and my decrease from fulltime high school teaching to studying (which, although fulltime, I have found far less intense!) The poem loosely describes my new living arrangements (a move

from our comfortable rental to a tertiary accommodation unit) as I began to engage with a text in a new way. This was the first practice I used and the first poem I wrote for this thesis.

3.12 Mandala (Hindu): 'Trapped, Observed'

My use of mandala was somewhat abstracted from *Paradise Lost*. I created a mandala on paper while meditating on large sections of the text .Then I read the mandala to try to glean meaning about the text from this new (visual) text. I drew a few mandalas around the time of writing 'Trapped, Observed', and the one I selected for the poem felt more suffocating than the others. I connected it to Lucifer's imprisonment, not in hell, but in the institution of heaven. As with icon meditation (Section 3.4), a mandala is a visual representation of ideas that can be made literary.

3.13 Tarot (Occult): 'Like Any Other Day'

In previous sections, I have mentioned that I find visual prompts helpful for poetic generation. It should come as no surprise therefore that I found tarot a particularly useful practice. Oftentimes the cards would be helpful: 'The Tower' appeared when doing a reading on *Paradise Lost* Book 1 and the establishment of Pandemonium, which is how 'Like Any Other Day' begins. The polyvalent stories that combinations of cards produced, in addition to their traditional readings created tandem narratives with *Paradise Lost* that created interestingly themed poems. 'Like Any Other Day' was structured in columns to heighten the multiplicity of meaning, which was my experience of tarot.

3.14 Synthesis

Of all the practices I used to write poetry throughout the creative thesis, I found the exegetical practices (Lectio Divina and Pardes), the visual practices (Icon Meditation, Mandala, and Tarot), and Florilegium the most generative in terms of writing poetry in response to them.

The exegetical practices afforded deeper logical engagement with the text and offered more complex ideas to develop. The visual practices afforded poetry with a focus on visual imagery, which I do not write particularly naturally, balancing out the idea-heavy poetry. Florilegium offered more engagement with the text of *Paradise Lost* in terms of appreciating the words of Milton at a microlevel.

I know that using sacred practices respectfully does provide an extra layer of significance to the poetry that I produce. If nothing else, the poems in *The Dying of the Light* have a flavour informed by the spiritual practices I used that my previous poems do not have.

Chapter Four: Conclusion

4.1 Conclusion

When setting out to write the creative work, I wanted to retell the story of *Paradise Lost* (2005) in a modern context, as many have done with epic poetry in the past (Blake, 1906; Jackson, 2000; Pullman, 1996). My intention was to produce poetry by experimenting with using sacred practices as a means of connecting to the text. Some use of language (for example, the use of "O!" as an interjection or vocative, and the capitalisation of each new line) deliberately links *The Dying of the Light* to *Paradise Lost*.

As the year progressed, the poetry (as can be expected) transformed; my personal experiences injected themselves in my writing. What I anticipated was that the 'real-life' poems would sit alongside the *Paradise Lost*-inspired poems and would provide an interesting juxtaposition for the reader. However, what I found was that I read my experiences in the text of *Paradise Lost*. I believe that this is one factor that contributes to considering a text sacred: the ability to find a variety of expressions and experiences in it. My year involved some disagreement with family members, and interaction with a corrupt religious institution, so I find these in *Paradise Lost* when approaching it as sacred; a sacred text meets the needs of the reader.

The practices themselves were rewarding in many ways, significantly in poetic generation and in my personal spiritual growth.

It is my hope that readers of *The Dying of the Light* will indeed be challenged to reassess their images of Lucifer, and to seek to locate the radicality and challenge of śāṭān in the sacred.

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