

THE MYSTICAL AESTHETIC: HOWARD THURMAN
AND THE ART OF MEANING

By

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To my mother Mary Hawkins Steele, whose indomitable spirit reaches across eternity

and

To my father, James E. Steele, Sr. who first taught me to think

and

To a love that never fails

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Introduction

This dissertation is a critical study of what is framed as the mystical aesthetic in the life and rhetorical contributions of Howard Washington Thurman, mystic, scholar of religion, poet, and pastor. I use the phrase mystical aesthetic to describe a poetic display oriented toward religious experience. Thurman's life, essays, prayers, sermons, and poems catalogue and characterize his experiences with Christian mysticism as artistic provocation. The mystical aesthetic describes mystical experience, but it is also an invitation to encounter the vitality of the religious. Thurman believed that art, as evidenced in nature or constructed by persons and communities could provoke religious experience and ethical reflection. This dissertation analyzes the mystical aesthetic, a trope that describes the art of religious experience and meaning, and argues its prominence in Thurman's work.

Born in 1899, Thurman was reared in the small black community of Daytona Beach, Florida. From Daytona, Thurman became a citizen of the world. He held teaching posts at Morehouse College and Spelman, Howard, and Boston Universities. He served twice as a full time pastor in Oberlin, OH, immediately after graduating from Rochester Theological Seminary, and then later in San Francisco after having taught and served as Dean of Rankin Chapel at Howard. His teaching, pastoring, serving as Dean of two university chapels, and his travels abroad display a life that blazed a trail through the twentieth century.

This dissertation makes four claims. My first claim is that Thurman's mystical aesthetic transcends the institutional church. Thurman's grandmother, Lady Nancy (Nancy Ambrose), as she was affectionately referred to by the townspeople of Daytona,

was Thurman's personal connection to the invisible institution. Lady Nancy taught Thurman the biblical hermeneutic of those stolen religious gatherings of slaves. She taught him how the slaves transcended the brutal experience of slavery by integrating themselves and allowing their religious understandings to intervene in that world. Their religious understanding produced its own art, songs known as spirituals, a hymnbook from which all the world sings. Thurman reads the mystical aesthetic tradition rooted in slave tradition, a tradition transcending institutional religion.

My second claim is that his mystical aesthetic has religious significance and meaning. This claim is connected to John Dewey and George Santayana who share pragmatic ideals concerning religion. They are pragmatic in the sense that those ideals are rooted in experience and results. Dewey disunites institutional religion from meaning related to the religious. For Dewey the religious is an estimation of outcomes, results, and effects caused by any event for which these are the dividends. And Santayana suggests that the highest good that religion produces is poetry, a poetry that intervenes in life. For Santayana, theology detours from its purposes when it does not recognize its primary contribution to religion is its poetry. Thurman transcends the institutional church, but the mystical aesthetic has profound religious significance and meaning upon the study and practice of religion.

Thirdly, the mystical aesthetic is schematized by four aesthetic strategies that render religious meaning. The mystical aesthetic characterizes religious experience through schemes of meaning, namely, the ecstatic, a mediating strategy between the artist and God; the mimetic, a strategy that favors the imitation of universal religious themes such as the experience of wonderment, loss, quest, etc.; the heuristic, a strategy oriented

toward developing a sense of moral consciousness; and the iconic, a strategy oriented toward symbolic representation of ideas and concepts. These aesthetic strategies function to differentiate the varied ways the rendering of mystical narratives or religious experiences function.

Lastly, the mystical aesthetic has public significance. For instance, Thurman provides a clue to its public function when he describes a mystical experience he had in the Himalayas. The mystical vision that occurs at Khyber Pass at sunrise brought clarity to his vision for an interfaith, intercultural, interracial religious fellowship resulting in the Fellowship Church for All Peoples co-founded in 1944 by Thurman and Dr. Alfred Fisk. This church becomes a democratic ideal whose gatherings provide new interpretation, not only for ritual and practice in the church, but also for relationality and dialogue in public institutional life. Thurman's mystical aesthetic participates within the depths of human experiencing. It invites the poetic re-construction of disillusionment to desire and redemption of the religious.

Each chapter contributes to the overall thesis. Chapter One, situates the mystical aesthetic as a tradition inherited from the invisible institution. This chapter shows that the mystical aesthetic transcends the institutional church. It also shows black theology's departure from Thurman, and its resulting demands for social and political liberation. However it gives little attention to the possibilities for the various modes of experiencing those freedoms. Finally Chapter One gives attention to the mystical aesthetic through the work of Mircea Eliade, John Dewey and George Santayana to suggest the possibilities for the religious. Born out of religious understanding, the mystical aesthetic is finding and making the religious more, a way of redeeming life for human flourishing.

Chapter Two, characterizes the mystical aesthetic and provides a schematic for reading artistic renderings of the religious. Each strategy reveals constitutive elements circulating in Thurman's mystical aesthetic. The chapter seeks to show how there are aesthetic influences in religion and how religion influences works of art. I build the case upon research by David Chidester who names aesthetic strategies and their intent: ecstatic, mimetic, heuristic, and iconic. These are at play in Thurman and undergird the argument that it is not mysticism alone which influences his work. Thurman's intention is to create the possibility for mystical experience through art or through artistic display, as a particular rendering of an idea or concept or through the poetic. I then turn to religious philosophers, Victor Anderson and Nancy Frankenberry, who argue for the public significance of the mystical aesthetic. The meaning of the mystical is broadened by an ever widening matrix of aesthetic relationships. These relationships move beyond parochial symbols and identify public concerns, institutions, and possibilities for transformation.

Chapters Three and Four are display chapters. Chapter Three, looks specifically at Thurman's book on the spirituals. It shows the spirituals entering critical public space as an American art form in the late 1800's. The spirituals were also called "sorrow songs," "jubilees," and "work songs." Their melodies were haunting and often metaphorically described as complicated as birdsong. While musicologists were preoccupied with the musicality of the spirituals during that early period, there were a number of intellectuals who sought to understand the religious and social meaning embedded in the music. Their interpretations ranged from protest to compensatory characterizations. But, it was Thurman who uniquely suggested the mystical aesthetic as

a product of religious understanding by way of aesthetic forms. The mystical aesthetic was a poetic construction by which the enslaved made a miserable existence worth living.

Chapter Four, shows the mystical aesthetic in Thurman's preaching. It gives a structural and rhetorical summary of five of Thurman's sermons from his book *Temptations of Jesus* using a methodology found in John McClure's *Four Codes of Preaching*. This chapter examines the intentionality within Thurman's preaching. It engages his use of scripture, language, worldview, and culture. I argue for the mystical aesthetic as the formative structure of Thurman's preaching. His intention was to bring listeners into an *experience* of preaching through the mystical aesthetic.

This dissertation differs from most literature on Howard Thurman. Luther Smith reads Thurman as the prophetic-mystic. Smith's work is vital for showing black theology's departure from Thurman's mysticism and the results of that departure, namely the emphasis on power and liberation, while minimizing the concepts of relationality and experience. Mozella Mitchell's work is important for showing the relationship Thurman's scholarship had to literature. Her work pre-empted my turn to aesthetics. Walter Fluker emphasizes community as the ethical ideal in Thurman. And, Alton Pollard emphasizes the phenomenology of the mystic-activist. For Pollard, religious consciousness shapes the mystic into an activist from the inner experience of religion. Recent scholarship from Patrick Clayborn places emphasis on the spirituality of Thurman's preaching.

This dissertation and its subsequent claims focus on a methodology for reading Thurman. It emphasizes his mysticism, but insists that Thurman was not merely reporting on these experiences, but sought to bring audiences into the *experience* of

religion through aesthetic structures. Thurman's emphasis on the study of mysticism is well documented. He wrote and lectured on *Mysticism and the Experience of Love*, *Mysticism and Social Action*, the *Mystic as Artist* (an unpublished essay) to name a few. However, his emphasis on aesthetics, his taste for the poetic is a prominent feature I find throughout his work. Thurman was a scholar of religion who studied and taught courses on theology and the philosophy of religion, although, he never relinquished his research interests in religious experience and its relationship to the arts.

To make the argument that the mystical aesthetic runs through the entirety of Thurman's publications is a noteworthy claim, one in which I could not possibly attempt to prove in a dissertation given the extensive bibliography he produced. Thurman published over twenty books, each at different junctures of his professional career. He published his first work in 1944, a collection of poems, entitled *The Greatest of These*, the same year he co-founded the Church for the Fellowship of All Peoples in San Francisco. The approximately nine years he served as Minister in Residence at what was lovingly known as the Fellowship Church he published three additional books: *The Negro Spiritual Speaks of Life and Death* (later published as *Deep River* in 1955), *Jesus and the Disinherited* (1949), and *Deep is the Hunger* (written during his tenure there, but published in 1973). Entering Boston University as the Dean of Marsh Chapel and Professor of Spiritual Resources and Disciplines he published *Meditations of the Heart* (1953). The twelve years he served at Boston he published eight additional books: *The Creative Encounter* (1954), *Apostles of Sensitiveness* (1956), *The Growing Edge* (1956), *Footprints of a Dream: The Story of the Church for the Fellowship of All Peoples* (1959), *The Inward Journey* (1961), *Mysticism and the Experience of Love* (1961), *Disciplines of*

the Spirit (1963), and after he traveled around the world twice and resigned from the Marsh Chapel he published *The Luminous Darkness* (1965). From 1969 until his death in 1981 he published six additional books: *The Centering Moment* (1969), *The Search for Common Ground* (1971), *The Mood of Christmas* (1973), *Mysticism and Social Action* (1978), *The Temptations of Jesus* (1978), and *With Head and Heart* (1979). During this period he republishes two of his previously published books, and serves as editor to *Track to the Waters Edge* (1973). These are just the published manuscripts. Morehouse inherited more than 58,000 pieces of unpublished material authored and co-authored or edited by Thurman that were originally a part of the Howard Thurman Educational Trust. And the Howard Gottlieb Research Library at Boston University houses over 2,000 archival boxes of his writings, student papers, tapes, correspondence, and manuscripts grouped by subject. Even though the corpus of his writings is extensive, the mystical aesthetic figures prominently in at least four of his works given considerable attention in this dissertation. They are the autobiography, *With Head and Heart*; his first book, *The Greatest of These*; his book on the spirituals, *Deep River and the Negro Spiritual Speaks of Life and Death*; and his first collection of sermons, *Temptations of Jesus*.

It is not just Thurman's mysticism, but the mystical aesthetic, which constitutes Thurman's writings. My hope is that this dissertation contributes to the scholarship on Thurman and shows how the mystical aesthetic invites the reconstruction of new worlds and deepens possibilities for human experiencing. To quote Thurman:

It is a very searching insight of religion at its best that its insights and its experience do not rest finally upon any kind of external or experiential validation. The analogy of the good life is relevant. The important thing about the good life is not that it is useful, that it is expedient, that it is practical or the like. These are important, but the supreme thing about the good life is that it is *Good*—Good in and of itself. Thus religion insists that its experience and the ethic it inspires are

their own sure integrity. That is why the prophet insists, 'Although the fig tree shall not blossom, neither shall fruit be in the vines; the labour of the olive shall fail, and the fields yield no meat; the sheep shall be cut off from the fold, and there shall be no herd in the stalls: Yet I will rejoice in the Lord, I will joy in the God of my salvation.'¹

In Thurman's mystical aesthetic lay the conviction that goodness, as an ethical and aesthetic valuation, is embedded in religious experiencing and a determination of this experience is qualified by the experience itself.

¹ Howard Thurman, *Meditations of the Heart* (New York: Harper and Brothers Publishers, 1953), 108.

Chapter I

Constructing the Mystical Aesthetic: Howard Thurman and the Religious More

1.1 Introduction

Thurman's simple definition of mysticism is: "conscious and direct exposure to God."¹ While Thurman speaks of mysticism as "exposure," "encounter, confrontation, or sense of Presence,"² he also argues that regardless of the term used "the individual is seen as being exposed to direct knowledge of ultimate meaning."³ Dorothee Soelle makes the observation in *The Silent Cry: Mysticism and Resistance* that:

"According to a famous scholastic definition, mysticism is *cognition Dei experientialis* (the knowledge of God through and from experience). What is meant here, is the knowledge of God that, instead of being obtained from instruction, tradition, books, and doctrines, comes from one's own life.

She goes on to say that:

In terms of this medieval definition, two possible ways of understanding God may be distinguished. There is the ordered way, dogmatically legitimated and hierarchically directed, and the extraordinary one, resting on experiment and experience, which is incapable of being fully institutionalized. That definition represents a concession to the preecclesiastical and the extraecclesiastical reality of religious experience."⁴

¹ Howard Thurman, *The Creative Encounter: An Interpretation of Religion and the Social Witness* (Richmond, Indiana: Friends United Press, 1972), 20.

² *Ibid.*, 24.

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ Dorothee Soelle, *The Silent Cry: Mysticism and Resistance*, trans. Barbara and Martin Rumscheidt (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2001), 45.

The scholastic definition Soelle appropriates offers an important distinction for this dissertation. Embedded within the very notion of mysticism, according to Soelle is the notion of resistance to dogmatism and doctrine, and openness to *experiment* and *experience*. The ideological structure of mysticism resists what has been codified, creedalized, institutionalized, “dogmatically legitimated” and welcomes what has been observed, experienced, evidenced through personal encounter. Soelle’s insight is the organizational structure around which Thurman organizes the church he co-founds in 1944, the Fellowship Church. He writes: “I had to find out for myself whether or not it is true that experiences of spiritual unity and fellowship are more compelling than the fears and dogmas and prejudices that separate men.”⁵

Though Soelle understands mysticism favors a preecclesiastical context and extraecclesiastical reality, there really is no escaping the contextuality of religious experience. Thurman is a black Christian mystic no doubt. He is shaped by what Wayne Proudfoot calls formative experiences: “complex patterns of concepts, commitments and expectations,” “that define in advance what experiences are possible.”⁶ In other words, mystical experience is mediated through particular religious symbols, narrative texts, and ritual and cultural understandings. People enter into an experience with a set of beliefs, attitudes, and interpretations that are constitutive of those faith claims. The beliefs held prior to the experience are just as important as the experience itself. As for Thurman, he is as much a product of the Baptist church and the segregated south as he is a product of the mystical traditions he studied.

⁵ Howard Thurman, *Footprints of a Dream: The Story of the Church for the Fellowship of All People* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1959), 21.

⁶ Wayne Proudfoot, *Religious Experience* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985), 121.

This chapter introduces Thurman's understanding of mysticism as it transcends the black church (1.2). It also explores his intellectual autobiography (1.3) and the problem of his spiritual hybridity (1.4). It maps the preemptive departure that black liberation theology makes from Thurman's beliefs (1.5); and then situates Thurman's understanding of the religious as a pragmatic move toward underscoring the value, role, and possibilities of religion as a condition for aesthetic play (1.6). Each move together provides a basis for understanding Thurman's mystical orientation toward life, hereafter referred to as the mystical aesthetic.

1.2 Transcending the Institutional Church

Professor Alton Pollard reminds readers of Howard Thurman of the historical context of the early twentieth century into which Thurman was born.⁷ Pollard discusses various religious movements that creatively sought to respond to the increasing alienation and “non-existent American egalitarianism.”⁸ Movements such as “Holiness and Pentecostalism, Garveyism and Pan-Africanism, Black Moors and Black Muslims, Communism and Socialism, Father Divine and Daddy Grace” were led by people in search of “new patterns of community.”⁹ These movements were “products of modernity still largely submerged in an ocean of tradition.”¹⁰ Given the historical backdrop of the early twentieth century, Thurman had an undeniably significant impact on the prophetic

⁷ See Alton B. Pollard, III, *Mysticism and Social Change: The Social Witness of Howard Thurman* (New York: Peter Lang, 1992), 44.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Ibid.

consciousness of American social life. Pollard goes on to say that “Recognizing the powerful transformative potentials of the time, Howard Thurman sought to champion the essential genius of democracy, not out of principled commitment to democratic values as such, but basically because of their compatibility with his own passionate vision for an inclusive community.”¹¹ This dominant urge for human community was cultivated by a number of factors including: familial and institutional influences, professional experiences, and global travel with particular emphasis on a watershed event he experienced while in India, which I will describe in greater detail later. For much of his life, the idea of community, creating it and sustaining it, consumed Thurman’s thought. Ultimately Thurman’s religious sensibilities reached a crescendo as his thought transcended institutional life and embraced a deepened sense of community.

Invisible Institution Influence on Thurman

Situating Thurman’s religious formation in the bosom of his maternal grandmother, Nancy Ambrose, is common and necessary.¹² Because his mother, Alice Thurman, worked long hours away from home, and his father Saul Solomon Thurman died when Thurman was seven, Thurman and his sisters, Henrietta and Madaline, were left during the day with his grandmother.¹³ Thurman and his sisters moved again when his mother remarried, but returned to Daytona, after his mother’s second husband died.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² The connection is made between Thurman and his grandmother in the scholarship of many. See Ibid. Mozella G. Mitchell, *Spiritual Dynamics of Howard Thurman's Theology* (Bristol, Ind: Wyndham Hall Pr, 1985). Albert J. Raboteau, "In Search of Common Ground: Howard Thurman and Religious Community," in *Meaning and Modernity* (Berkeley ; Los Angeles ; London: Univ of California Pr, 2002), 149.

¹³ Howard Thurman, *With Head and Heart: The Autobiography of Howard Thurman*, First ed. (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1979).

The relationship that Thurman had with his grandmother is noteworthy and had at least two lasting results. First, it constructed a familial bridge between the “invisible institution”¹⁴ of his grandmother’s youth and the black denominationalism¹⁵ of Thurman’s. Historian Albert Raboteau substantiates this idea: “[I]ndependent black churches with slave members did exist in the south before emancipation...But the religious experience of the slaves was by no means fully contained in the visible structures of the institutional church...”¹⁶ The slave testimony Raboteau bases his argument on reveals that it was within the “secrecy of the quarters or the seclusion of the brush arbors (“hush harbors”) the slave made Christianity truly their own.”¹⁷

It is well noted that Lady Nancy, as she was affectionately called by the community, would gather her grandchildren and tell them stories about her life as a slave. It was the slave preacher who came from the nearby plantation once or twice a year to preach a sermon that reminded his congregation that they were not slaves. They were God’s children. Suspicious of the plantation owners’ use of Pauline scripture, Lady Nancy’s Bible reading (or rather Thurman’s narration of the Bible for her) consisted of her special requests: the gospels and the Psalms, particularly Psalm 39. Furthermore, Thurman’s relationship to his grandmother also locates a *taken-for-granted* black

¹⁴ Invisible institution is here defined as wooded areas or “hush harbors” where slaves would gather for uninhibited worship. See also slave testimony from Peter Randolph in Peter Randolph, “Plantation Churches: Visible and Invisible,” in *Afro-American Religious History: A Documentary Witness*, ed. Milton C. Sernett (Durham: Duke University Press, 1985, orig. 1893), 67.

¹⁵ Black denominationalism is here defined as historic and independent black churches as well as predominantly white denominations in which blacks have participated since the end of the eighteenth century. See C. Eric Lincoln and Lawrence H. Mamiya, *The Black Church in the African American Experience* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1990).

¹⁶ Albert J. Raboteau, *Slave Religion: The “Invisible Institution” In the Antebellum South*, Updated Edition ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 212.

¹⁷ Ibid.

denominational orthodoxy of its resistance to “Christian” catechesis and conversion through, at least, the second decade of the nineteenth century.¹⁸ To this point Gayraud S.

Wilmore writes:

The slaves had small concern for doctrinal fidelity, but not because there was no theological or moral content in the religions they practiced in Africa, or in the adaptations they were obliged to make to Christianity....The absence of theological interest among the slaves was due, most of all, to the practical and experimental nature of their religion in which the existence of a Supreme Being, the reality of the spirit world, and the revelatory significance of symbols and myths were all taken for granted and required no explicit theological formulation in the Western sense. Indeed what they already believed about nature, human beings, and God was more firmly corroborated by their *experience* (emphasis mine) than by any catechesis that had to conform to the institution of slavery.¹⁹

Wilmore’s notion that Christian meaning was “firmly corroborated” by a “practical and experimental” function of religion underscores the uneasy relationship black folks had with Christianity because of its problematic attachment to the institution of slavery. Despite the growing numbers of black people converted to Christianity during the First and Second Great Awakenings, Raboteau argues that the emphasis was on *conversion* rather than *instruction*.²⁰ His point builds a suggestive bridge. Catechesis, adoption of doctrinal beliefs, and various other missionary efforts by groups such as the American Home Missionary Society in the late nineteenth century were significant in shaping the *institutional* black church.²¹ However, for Ambrose, “[I]t was Jesus for

¹⁸ Elizabeth Yates, *Portrait of a Practical Dreamer* (New York: The John Day Company, 1964), 34.

¹⁹ Gayraud S. Wilmore, *Black Religion and Black Radicalism: An Interpretation of the Religious History of Afro-American People*, Revised and Enlarged, 2nd ed. (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1983), 11.

²⁰ Raboteau, *Slave Religion: The "Invisible Institution" In the Antebellum South*, see Chapter 3.

²¹ Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham, *Righteous Discontent: The Woman's Movement in the Black Baptist Church 1880-1920* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993). Higginbotham notes that efforts of

whom her heart hungered.... Jesus was real; he had suffered, she had suffered....

Christianity was a word she had not come to grips with, but Jesus was a reality.”²²

The invisible institution, a syncretistic blend of Christian symbols, African Traditional Religion, protest, celebration, and sorrow, was a mystical ‘reality,’ mystical because it first emphasized *experience* (an idea that factors firmly into Thurman’s understanding) of God. Williams’ analysis of the black church discusses the ‘mystical reality’ that birthed the black church. She argues:

The black church does not exist as an institution. Regardless of sociological, theological, historical and pastoral attempts, the black church escapes precise definition....I believe the black church is the heart of hope in the black community’s experience of oppression, survival struggle and its historic efforts toward complete liberation. It cannot be tampered with or changed by humans to meet human expectations and goals. The black church cannot be made respectable because it is already sacralized by the pain and resurrections of thousands upon thousands of victims. It cannot be made elite because it is already classless. In *America it came first to the community of slaves*.²³ [Italics mine].

Williams’ insight is relevant to ‘pre-institutionalized’ brush harbor worship.

Communities of slaves would escape from both the institutional arrangements of plantation life and owner authorized Christianity. The clandestine “hush harbor” religious gatherings honored a communal need for validation and free religious expression. More importantly, it gave the community of slaves a communal platform for experiencing God. While, one may disagree with her assessment that the black church is not an institution, there is no disagreement that it “came first to the community of the

the AHMS included teaching correct Baptist doctrine, biblical values, propriety, conservative morality, and a “Yankee” work ethic. They were also concerned with providing newly emancipated slaves with education.

²² Yates, *Portrait of a Practical Dreamer*.

²³ Delores S. Williams, *Sisters in the Wilderness: the Challenge of Womanist God-Talk* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1993). 205

slaves.” The black church and the invisible institution are not to be equivocated. Contemplative religious experience in the invisible institution is eclipsed by other institutional concerns and structures in both the black church and black theology, Barbara Holmes argues in *Joy Unspeakable: Contemplative Practices of the Black Church*.²⁴ Nancy Ambrose and the early communities of black Christians emphasize the expressive nature of early black Christianity and its critical acceptance of the church’s doctrines and its implicit support of problematic practices like slavery.

Thurman and his formal teacher of mysticism, Rufus Jones understood experience or encounter with God as the defining factor of mysticism.²⁵ Soelle similarly understands mysticism as a perception of God drawn from experience.²⁶ Mystical “reality” needs no further legitimation than the testimony of the one who experiences it. The invisible institution of Lady Nancy’s memory figured prominently in Thurman’s religiosity, and throughout his life, he critically engaged it as a mystical reality.

Thurman and the Black Church

Thurman describes some of his first, albeit tense, experiences with the black church below. In noting each of these, Thurman illustrates that while the church was expressive of the social concerns and experiences of the black folk it served, because it was submerged in tradition, there were moments when he did not experience its liberative

²⁴ Barbara A. Holmes, *Joy Unspeakable: Contemplative Practices of the Black Church* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2004). Holmes argues that “centered belonging” predates the institutionalized black church.

²⁵ Rufus Jones, *New Studies in Mystical Religion: The Ely Lectures Delivered at Union Theological Seminary, New York* (New York: MacMillan, 1928). Matthew S. Hedstrom, “Rufus Jones and Mysticism for the Masses,” *Crosscurrents*, no. Summer (2004), Thurman, *The Creative Encounter: An Interpretation of Religion and the Social Witness*.

²⁶ Soelle, *The Silent Cry: Mysticism and Resistance*.

effects. When Thurman was just seven years old, his father died “outside of Christ.”²⁷ Because of the church’s critical stance on burial rites for “sinners,” the presiding pastor “refused to permit him to be buried from the church and naturally was unwilling to take the ceremony himself.”²⁸ Grandma Nancy refused to allow the ruling of the pastor to stand and appealed to the board of deacons. When the deacons agreed to the family’s use of the church without the help of the pastor, Thurman and his family secured a “traveling evangelist in town, a man named Sam Cromarte.”²⁹

From the front pew, the family sat listening intently. Thurman recalls: “I listened with wonderment, then anger, and finally mounting rage as Sam Cromarte preached my father into hell.”³⁰ In the buggy ride back home, he queried his grandmother and mother. Neither indulged his young mind with any answers as to why Cromarte had preached his father’s eternal damnation. That day Thurman said to himself: “One thing is sure. When I grow up and become a man, I will never have anything to do with the church.”³¹ However, when Thurman was twelve years old, he joined Mount Bethel of his own free will and was baptized in the Halifax River.

Years later, Thurman was licensed to preach at Morehouse College, and upon graduating from Rochester Theological Seminary, he was ordained into the Baptist ministry by First Baptist Church of Roanoke, VA, where he had served two summers as assistant to the pastor while a seminarian. His home church in Daytona denied him

²⁷ Thurman, *With Head and Heart: The Autobiography of Howard Thurman*, 5.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 6.

²⁹ *Ibid.*

³⁰ *Ibid.*

³¹ *Ibid.*

permission to transfer his ordination to First Baptist, so he joined First Baptist and applied for ordination there. The pastor, Reverend A.L James, a close family friend convened an ordination council.³²

Shortly after his ordination he was called to Oberlin, Ohio, to assume the pastorate of Mount Zion Baptist Church. He and his new wife, Kate Kelly, whom he married in June of 1926 one week following his graduation from seminary, remained at Mount Zion for three formative years. While he was there he noticed that cultural and religious barriers “were crumbling.” However, he writes: “it would be many years before I would fully understand the nature of the breakthrough.”³³ Reflecting on this period of time, he admitted that religious experience rather than Baptist doctrine or theology was the point of departure for his religious and social thought. Thurman characterizes the beliefs and practices of this time period as his “pre-theological ground.” He notes:

I prayed to God, I talked to Jesus. He was a companion. There was no felt need in my spirit to explain this companionship. There never has been. God was a reality. Jesus was a fact. From my earliest memories, Jesus was religious subject rather than religious object. It was Jesus with whom I talked as I sat under my oak tree fingering the bruises and scars of my childhood. Such was the pretheological ground for me when both life and time spread out before me.³⁴

Thurman’s religious roots and ordination were in the Black Baptist tradition, but his religious ideas moved increasingly toward, what Anderson deems “iconoclastic” and

³² Ibid., 57.

³³ Ibid., 74.

³⁴ Ibid., 266.

atypical of the denomination.³⁵ Thurman eventually transcends the denominational church as he embraces the concept of community.

Thurman's Emphasis on Community

Thurman places enormous value in the "intuitive human urge for community,"³⁶ a preference for a transcendent and poetic expression of community. Editor of his papers, Walter Fluker agrees. In "The Thurman Vision: Ideal of Community," Fluker understands Thurman's preference for experience in community. He quotes Thurman from the *Search for Common Ground*: "In human society the experience of community, or realized potential, is rooted in life itself because the intuitive human urge for community reflects a characteristic for life."³⁷ Fluker further notes: "Thurman was not only a critic of religion's complicity with the 'cult of inequality,' but was constructively engaged in creating an ecclesiological model, which sought to actualize the vision of an egalitarian community."³⁸ For Thurman, the quest for community articulated the religious journey and accurately assessed the needs of society.³⁹ Thurman's linguistic aims⁴⁰ were

³⁵ Victor Anderson, *Beyond Ontological Blackness: An Essay on African American Religious and Cultural Criticism* (New York: Continuum, 1999).

³⁶ Thurman, *With Head and Heart: The Autobiography of Howard Thurman*, 7.

³⁷ Walter Earl Fluker, "The Thurman Vision: Ideal of Community," in *The Human Search: Howard Thurman and the Quest for Freedom, Proceedings of the Second Annual Thurman Convocation*, ed. Mozella G. Mitchell, *Martin Luther King, Jr. Memorial Studies in Religion, Culture and Social Development* (New York: Peter Lang, 1992), 85.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 89.

³⁹ Womanist ethicist Katie Geneva Cannon is attributed with using the religious and ethical insights of Howard Thurman and Martin Luther King in conversation with novelist and anthropologists Zora Neale Hurston. Hurston's novels described black folk life with special emphasis upon the quest for human dignity. .Katie G. Cannon, "Resources for a Constructive Ethic in the Life and Work of Zora Neale Hurston," *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 1, no. 1 (1985).

to critically engage his own biography with his inherited traditions: the invisible institution, the black church, and a growing understanding of mysticism. Thurman's beginnings were the foundation for his intellectual growth and subsequent understandings. By the time he moved to San Francisco, he had given considerable thought to the traditions of mysticism and its relation to community.

1.3 From Liberalism to Mysticism

After graduating from high school, Florida Baptist Academy, in 1919 in Jacksonville, FL., Thurman attended Morehouse College where he gained a sense of mission instilled in him by the leadership of President John Hope and Dean Samuel Howard Archer. Lorimer Milton directed his major in economics. Typically young Howard would busy himself during his summers in college. Looking for something to do between May and July of his sophomore year, while awaiting a summer program at Columbia University (New York), he moved in with his uncle in Cleveland, Ohio, and befriended the library on 79th Street. Thurman commissioned the librarian to help him prepare for the two courses he would soon take: Reflective Thinking and An Introduction to the Study of Philosophy.

During these preparatory months, Thurman read Greek and European philosophy. He was also introduced to American philosophy through a book by William James. Finally upon moving to New York for “the most significant single course” he would ever take, Thurman learned that his class would be using John Dewey’s *How We Think* and an anthology called *An Introduction to Reflective Thinking*. Thurman regarded this course

⁴⁰ If I were using an African American rhetorical schema to analysis Thurman work, I would turn to the notion of “nommo,” a classical Egyptian concept that suggests the “generative power of the spoken word.”

highly and both James and Dewey would shape his thought significantly. Thurman estimates: “As a tool of the mind, there is no way by which the value of this course can be measured or assessed.”⁴¹ While at Morehouse, two young professors, Benjamin Elijah Mays and E. Franklin Frazier continued to push him toward a love of philosophy and religion.

However, it was in New York, the fall of 1923 at Rochester Theological Seminary, then one of the most prestigious and enduring schools of American Liberal Theology, that Thurman came under the legacy of Walter Rauschenbush.⁴² This legacy was deeply instilled in three of his professors who would have a profound affect in shaping his religious thought. They are Henry B. Robins, professor of religious education and the history and philosophy of religion and missions, Conrad Moehlman, professor of the history of Christianity, and most importantly George Cross, professor of systematic theology. Together they gave the young seminarian tools to nurture his theology.

Thurman admitted that Robins’ “course in the history of religion revealed a new world to me and prepared me for many encounters in my own journey.”⁴³ Moehlman’s course on the history of Christianity introduced him “to the vast perspective of the Christian movement through the centuries, and the struggle for the survival of the

⁴¹ Thurman, *With Head and Heart: The Autobiography of Howard Thurman*.

⁴² For a fuller treatment of Thurman and the American Liberal Tradition see Clarence E. Hardy, III, "Imagine a World: Howard Thurman, Spiritual Perception, and American Calvinism," *Journal of Religion* 81, no. 1 (2001). Walter E. Fluker, *They Looked for a City: A Comparative Analysis of the Ideal of Community in the Thought of Howard Thurman and Martin Luther King, Jr.* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1989). Gary Dorrien, *The Making of American Liberal Theology: Idealism, Realism, and Modernity, 1900-1950* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2003). Luther E. Smith, "An American Prophet: A Critical Study on the Thought of Howard Thurman" (Dissertation, St. Louis University, 1979).

⁴³ Thurman, *With Head and Heart: The Autobiography of Howard Thurman*, 54.

essential religion of Jesus... (and) the great creedal battles of the church.”⁴⁴ Cross
“dismantled the structures of orthodoxy with scrupulous scholarship.”⁴⁵ Thurman notes:
“Dr. Cross would not permit us to criticize any conventional or orthodox position unless
we could also make an equally persuasive case *for* the position we sought to
undermine.”⁴⁶

At the end of Thurman’s senior year at Rochester Theological Seminary in 1926,
he confided in Dr. Cross that he had been invited to pastor at the Mount Zion Baptist
Church in Oberlin, OH. Thurman’s hope was to continue his studies at Fullerton
Theological Seminary while pastoring. Upon sharing the news with his mentor, Cross
turned to Thurman. He said:

“You are a very sensitive Negro man and doubtless feel under great obligation to
put all the weight of your mind and spirit at the disposal of the struggles of your
own people for full citizenship. But let me remind you that all social problems
are transitory in nature and it would be a terrible waste for you to limit your
creative energy to the solution of the race problem however insistent its nature.
Give yourself to the timeless issues of the human spirit.”⁴⁷

Although Thurman did not respond directly to Cross, his manuscripts speak
volumes. For him, transcending racial discourse did not mean ignoring racial discourse,
but challenging “cultural orthodoxy” and “binary assumptions” that “undergird
hierarchical binary paradigms.”⁴⁸ While Thurman did not deny race, he also did not limit
racial discourse to binary categories. Anderson concurs in his reading of Thurman,

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ Ibid., 55.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ Ibid., 73.

⁴⁸ Hildi Froese Tiessen, "Beyond the Binary: Re-Inscribing Cultural Identity in the Literature of Mennonites," *Mennonite Quarterly Review* 72, no. 4 (1998): 496.

namely, that he held “open the possibility that the apparently binary oppositions that characterize racial discourse can be transcended.” This topic will be revisited later in the dissertation.

At Oberlin, Thurman and his first wife, Kate Kelly, settled into the pastorate for two years. It was there that he had a profound awakening about the meaning of public religious expression. I quote him at length:

The experience of religion became increasingly central to my development. This was revealed to me in the gradual change in my attitude toward leading my congregation in public prayer. From the beginning of my ministry I tended to be highly self-conscious in public prayer. I found it difficult to express, in public, utterances of the inner spirit. My felt needs were so profound that at first there seemed little room for the other and possibly unconnected needs of my congregation. But as I began to acquiesce to the demands of the spirit within, I found no need to differentiate human need, theirs and my own. I became more and more a part of the life of my people and discovered that at last I was able to pray in public as if I were alone in the quiet of my own room. The door between their questing spirits and my own became a swinging door. At times I would lose my way in the full tide of emotions as a sense of the love of God overwhelmed me. At such moments we became one in the presence of God. At the same time, *my preaching became less motivated by the desire to “teach;” it became almost entirely devoted to the meaning of the experience of our common quest and journey (italics mine).*⁴⁹

Thurman sensed a dramatic change in his theology of prayer and preaching at Mount Zion. He notes that a Chinese gentleman who had been attending the church for several weeks commented: “When I close my eyes and listen with my spirit I am in my Buddhist Temple experiencing the renewing of my own spirit.”⁵⁰ For Thurman, these experiences were “breaking new ground.” But he would not know for many years their full extent. In

⁴⁹ Thurman, *With Head and Heart: The Autobiography of Howard Thurman*. Also see chapter 4 on the sermonic Thurman.

⁵⁰ Luther E. Smith, *Howard Thurman: The Mystic as Prophet* (Washington, DC: University Press of America, 1981), 30.

January 1929, Thurman left Oberlin, his pastorate, and sent his wife and daughter to live with her parents so that he could study for one full semester with Rufus Jones, a Quaker mystic at Haverford College.⁵¹

Jones underscored the philosophy of Cross and the focus on personality, but with new dimensions. He was able to cultivate in Thurman the idea of the relationship between self and society as interdependent. Thurman was then able to validate the experience of inner spirituality, not as retreat from but requisite for community as “the spirit hungers in, and because of its cultural context.”⁵² At Haverford, Thurman read the writings of Meister Eckhart, Madame Guyon, a Spanish mystic, and the mysticism of Saint Francis of Assisi. But like Jones, he did not agree with the necessity for self-negation, the *via negative*, predominant in much of mystic thought.

With the ending of the semester, came a new quest. Thurman returned to Morehouse and Spelman Colleges (1929-1931) in teaching and advising positions, then later as Dean of the Chapel at Morehouse. While in Atlanta and after fighting a long illness, Kate died. Thurman then left for Europe to mourn and refresh his mind. His trip would not be long, however, because Howard Divinity School and a long time friend awaited him. He married Sue Bailey, a traveling collegiate secretary of the YWCA, on June 12, 1932, and they moved into their new home on Howard’s campus that July.

Thurman served Howard University as Dean of Rankin Chapel and Professor of Christian Theology. He admitted being caught up in “Mordecai Johnson’s vision to create the first real community of black scholars, to build an authentic university in

⁵¹ Dorrien, *The Making of American Liberal Theology: Idealism, Realism, and Modernity, 1900-1950*.

⁵² Thurman, *With Head and Heart: The Autobiography of Howard Thurman*, 77.

America dedicated primarily to the education of black youth.”⁵³ He and Sue and their daughters opened their home to dignitaries who were guests of the Chapel and to students who had never had the benefit of faculty student relationships outside of the classroom. However, in 1935, the same year that he received an honorary doctorate from Morehouse, the Thurmans were asked to join a delegation, a “Pilgrimage of Friendship” to India, Ceylon, and Burma. He declined at first, convinced that he would have to compromise his understanding of Christianity, but later accepted the commission. The trip was marked by two unforgettable memories; a religious experience at Kyber Pass (between Afghanistan and West Pakistan) that ignited his desire for religious fellowship across racial boundaries, and a meeting with Gandhi.

In talking with Gandhi, he was exposed, first hand, to the philosophy of nonviolent resistance. Upon leaving India, Thurman asked Gandhi one final question connected to an earlier conversation they had engaged in concerning Jesus and the Sermon on the Mount: “What do you think is the greatest handicap to Jesus Christ in India?” Thurman asked. Gandhi responded, “Christianity as it is practiced, as it has been identified with Western culture, with Western civilization and colonialism....—not Hinduism, Buddhism, or any of the indigenous religions—but Christianity itself.”⁵⁴ After that they bid each other adieu.

In 1944, Thurman and his family left the campus of Howard University for San Francisco, which culminated in his life’s quest, namely the creation of a religious fellowship without racial-ethnic, cultural or socio-economic barriers. Before leaving the

⁵³ Ibid., 135.

⁵⁴ Ibid., 142.

District of Columbia, the Council of Churches in Washington hosted a farewell dinner with Mrs. Eleanor Roosevelt giving the keynote address. This year Thurman would also publish his first book, *The Greatest of These* (1944).

The Church for the Fellowship of All Peoples (also known as the Fellowship Church) was an experiment, the “blending of concerns of two men, one black, one white, moving against a background of similarities in education and religious training and yet, in important ways, coming together from opposite ends of the earth.”⁵⁵ Years later while Thurman was deciding whether to accept an invitation to go to Boston University as Dean of Marsh Chapel and Professor of Spiritual Disciplines and Resources at the School of Theology (where he ultimately served from 1953-1965), he spoke in earnest about the newness of this experiment.⁵⁶ He told President Case: “If I come, I think all of you will have a brand-new experience; you will have to learn to work in tandem with a black man. If I come, there will be times when this will cause you discomfort. Such an eye-level encounter will be foreign to your experience.”⁵⁷ The necessity and wisdom in making the statement was prompted by “repeated experiences at Fellowship Church in which substantive issues were debated not on their own merits, but on the basis of a deep-seated and, for the most part, unconscious racism” admittedly including his own.⁵⁸

⁵⁵ Ibid., 169. Dr. Alfred G. Fisk was also a co-founder; and the man who had originally invited Thurman to become a part of the Fellowship experiment.

⁵⁶ Though I will not be able to substantiate their relationship, Thurman might have been influenced some by fellow Bostonian, Kenneth L. Patton. Patton was a Universalist minister at the Charles Street Meeting House in Boston from 1949 to about 1964. He and Thurman share similar views on naturalistic mysticism, namely those ideas associated with the world of nature and our unifying relationship to it. Jerome A. Stone is helpful in making this connection. Jerome A. Stone, *Religious Naturalism Today: The Rebirth of a Forgotten Alternative* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2008).

⁵⁷ Thurman, *With Head and Heart: The Autobiography of Howard Thurman*.

⁵⁸ Ibid.

Fellowship Church became the practical testing ground for his life's work. The singular most important question for him had to do with "whether or not it is true that experience of spiritual unity and fellowship are more compelling than the fears and dogmas and prejudices that separate men."⁵⁹ Similarly, Thurman had already tested this notion (at Howard) when he began experimenting with various forms of worship. The main organizing principle involved worship through the fine arts. At Howard, he had called these special worship services "Twilight Hours." These programs featured dance, meditative readings accompanied by organ music, what Thurman referred to as an evening with "living Madonnas" (a combination of life sized reproductions of art, student models, and special music). Thurman captured his aims in *Footprints of a Dream*:

These experiments and others like them with Worship through the Fine Arts gave me more important confirmation of the fact that a way could be found to unite people of great ideological and religious diversity through experiences which were more compelling than the concepts that separated and divided. Even though the environment was somewhat controlled and to that extent artificial, the faith in the creative possibilities of such experiences could not be devalued."⁶⁰

At the inaugural service of Fellowship Church on October 8, 1944, Thurman and the other organizers confirmed their organizational mission to create "one basic unifying experience that would temporarily transcend all the barriers of religion and culture and race."⁶¹ In order to accomplish this goal, Thurman used extra-canonical sources and consequently came under great scrutiny for his heterodoxy.

⁵⁹ Thurman, *Footprints of a Dream: The Story of the Church for the Fellowship of All People*.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 28.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 41.

1.4 Thurman's Spiritual Hybridity

Thurman's heterodoxy was grounded on comparative religions.⁶² Just as his mystical aesthetic is based on the religious experience of Jesus of Nazareth, so the experiences of inter-religious ideas and theologies provided sources for his sermons, the fodder of his meditations and poetry. Even his life's work, the Church for the Fellowship of All Peoples, is a place of worship that collaborates with sacred texts from many religious traditions including: Christianity, Hindu belief, Sufi mysticism and religious poetry from varied sources. Soelle confirms that "for the study of mysticism, comparative study of religion is *indispensable*. The diversity of religious experience has an inner unity, namely the mystical core that expresses itself in such images as rebirth, unification, drunkenness, heavenly marriage, and many others."⁶³

Thurman's comparative methods are of interest to J. Deotis Roberts and Mozella Mitchell. Mitchell writes: "[T]here is much evidence in his [Thurman's] scattered writings of blending universal principles from the Greeks, the Buddhists, the Hindus, the Moslems, and other cultural expressions of religion."⁶⁴ In fact so much of universalism exists in him that he is accused of not being distinctly Christian. J. Deotis Roberts describes him thus:

Thurman is not a theologian. He is a mystic relying greatly upon philosophy and psychology as means for interpreting religious experience. As a Christian he is greatly inspired by the Jesus of history (the human example of Jesus), by the Spirit (as he empowers the inner life, and by the prophets. His dislike for Paul makes it impossible to deal with the resurrection which is central to a Christian understanding of last things.

⁶² See Richard Rose, "Howard Thurman on Religious Pluralism: Diversity in Harmony," *Journal of Religious Thought* 55-56, no. 2-1 (1999).

⁶³ Soelle, *The Silent Cry: Mysticism and Resistance*, 49.

⁶⁴ Mitchell, *Spiritual Dynamics of Howard Thurman's Theology*, 119.

He is inspired by the Quakers (especially Rufus Jones) and blends Hindu mysticism (Advaita) with the Platonic concept of the immortality of the soul.⁶⁵

Thurman's own narrative about the formation of The Church for the Fellowship of All Peoples in *Footprints of a Dream* is the most thorough theological statement on the purposes, function, and ritual life of the church (ecclesiology).⁶⁶ An unpublished account by the Public Relations Committee on the founding of the church recognizes Thurman's heterodoxy in organizing the church and the role mysticism would play in it. The booklet reads:

Because our church was born in the womb of a social issue, difficulty was anticipated in maintaining a spiritual center of integration. Even in the earliest days it was insisted that the basis of the church should be worship. However, the social issue is so acute that it has required tremendous care to vouchsafe the religious genius. In an effort in this direction, since July 1944, we have conducted many religious study groups, three-fourths of them having to do with an understanding of mystical religion. Much of the content of the preaching has been in terms of deepening the spiritual life of the people. The response at this point has been both encouraging and inspiring.⁶⁷

Thurman explains that not only was his preaching focused on "deepening the spiritual life of the people," but special study groups were devoted to the on-going study of mysticism. His belief was that understanding mysticism was directly related to the overall function of the church, and Thurman's own personal scholarship was devoted to the interpretation of mystical experience.⁶⁸ While Thurman's "spiritual hybridity" continues to be an

⁶⁶ Thurman, *Footprints of a Dream: The Story of the Church for the Fellowship of All People*.

⁶⁷ Public Relations Committee; Fellowship Church, "A Publicity Kit," (Howard Gottlieb Archival Research Center, Boston University, 1949).

⁶⁸ Howard Thurman, "Mysticism and Ethics," *The Journal of Religious Thought* 27, no. 2 (1970), Howard Thurman, "Mysticism and Social Action" (paper presented at the Lawrence Lecture on Religion and Society, 1978), Howard Thurman, "Mysticism and Social Change," *Eden Theological Seminary Bulletin* Spring, no. 4 (1939), Howard Thurman, "Mysticism and Symbolism," *Eden Theological Seminary Bulletin*

intellectual curiosity, his relationship to black liberation and womanist theological and ethical methods is instructive of its defense for the redemption of black life through Christian tradition and Thurman's hope for redemption as a multiplicity of religious experience.

1.5 Black Theology's Break With Thurman

Smith argues that academic black theology did not pursue the mystical elements of religious experience that had preoccupied Thurman's search for religious meaning for the black American.⁶⁹ His article, "Black Theology and Religious Experience,"⁷⁰ names Thurman as a precursor to black theology. Smith contends that while the work of James Cone and others "resulted in a significant corpus of literature relating theology to black religion and strategies for eradicating the social, economic, and political oppression of blacks...Far too little attention...has been given to religious experience and spiritual development; elements which are essential to a vital and enduring faith."⁷¹ He continues: "Cone never tarries with the nature and implications of religious experience."⁷² The weight of the problem for Smith is expressed as thus:

Spring, no. 4 (1939), Howard Thurman, *Mysticism and the Experience of Love, Pendle Hill Pamphlet 115* (Wallingford, PA: Pendle Hill, 1961), Howard Thurman, "Mysticism: An Interpretation," *Eden Theological Seminary Bulletin* Spring, no. 4 (1939).

⁶⁹ Lewis Baldwin notes that Thurman's impact and influence on civil rights activists, including King, though this is little noted in scholarship. Lewis V. Baldwin, "Mysticism and Social Change: The Social Witness of Howard Thurman," *Church History* 64, no. 4 (1995).

⁷⁰ Luther E. Smith, Jr., "Black Theology and Religious Experience," *Journal of the Interdenominational Theological Center* 8, no. 1 (1980).

⁷¹ *Ibid.*

⁷² *Ibid.*

Discerning the structures, dynamics, and effects of systems a complex and complicated endeavor, but the same is true for religious experience. It too requires considerable explication in order to resource a liberation consciousness. The nature and meaning of religious experience cannot be assumed; the discipline of Christian spirituality cannot be ignored. And cursory comments will not suffice for revealing their central place in Christian faith and life. If Black Theology is to inform the liberation of black people, employing the full testimony of Christian faith, more writing and discourse will have to interpret the significance of religious experience and spiritual development to liberation.⁷³

Smith wants to revive in academic black theology an emphasis on the lived experiences of people and recover the disciplines of Christian spirituality in black religion.

As a corrective, not necessarily to the problem raised by Smith, but the problem as it was raised by women due to the exclusion of women's experiences in the overall context of black religious practice, the womanist ethics and theology project adds rich contours that widen our understanding of human religious experience by flagging black women's multiple oppressions. Womanist's theological discourse emerged as early as the late 1970s with the writings of Jacquelyn Grant and mid 1980s with Katie Cannon and Delores Williams and a host of first generation self-identifying womanist scholars. With the exception of Cannon, who appropriates Thurman (and King) to connect with the work of Zora Neale Hurston in developing ethical resources for the moral sensibilities of black women, no other first generation womanist treats Thurman in any sustained way.⁷⁴

However, Smith's question concerning religious experience in the black theology project is worth sustained analysis. Smith finds an answer in Thurman to the degree that Thurman shows the significance of religious experience as providing a clue to the vitality

⁷³ Ibid.

⁷⁴ Katie G. Cannon, *Katie's Canon : Womanism and the Soul of the Black Community* (New York: Continuum, 1995), see chapters 5 and 6.

of religion (I will continue this argument in 1.5). Religious experience is an important source that contributes to the unburdening of the black theological project from what

Anderson calls a *crisis of legitimation*. Anderson writes:

The task of the black theologian is to show the critical correlations existing between black life/experience and traditional theological categories (God, humanity, Christ, eschatology, and so forth), between black religion and black radicalism (Wilmore, 1983), and the correlation between black church and black theology.⁷⁵

As Cone and others argued, within these categories, they were bound by a centripetal thread keeping black theology (a theology from the margins) tethered to the loci of traditional theology (the constant center). Just as classical theology to a large extent overlooks religious experience and distrusts mysticism, so did Cone. The latter part of the twentieth century shows considerable growth in scholarship around African American spirituality, which in almost every case considers the impact spirituality has on survival, flourishing, redemptive expression, and communion.⁷⁶

Pollard's *Mysticism and Social Change* is significant in that he employs the nomenclature, mystic-activist:

[A]s descriptive of Thurman's involvements. Such a designation...more accurately focuses attention on the real potential of mysticism as a discomfiting yet compelling and principled call to action...Mystic-activism, therefore, is a

⁷⁵ Anderson, *Beyond Ontological Blackness: An Essay on African American Religious and Cultural Criticism*, 86.

⁷⁶ Flora Wilson Bridges, *Resurrection Song: African-American Spirituality* (Maryknoll: Orbis Press, 2001). Jr. James H. Evans, *We Shall All Be Changed: Social Problems and Theological Renewal* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1997), 90. Holmes, *Joy Unspeakable: Contemplative Practices of the Black Church*. Willie James Jennings, "Wrestling with a Wounding Word: Reading the Disjointed Lines of African American Spirituality," in *Spirituality and Social Embodiment*, ed. L. Gregory Jones and James J. Buckley (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1997). James Earl Massey, "Bibliographic Essay: Howard Thurman and Rufus Jones, Two Mystics," *Journal of Negro History* 57 (1972). Jean S.J. Nestor, *Toward a Liberation Spirituality* (Chicago: Loyola University Press, 1991). Peter Paris, *The Spirituality of African Peoples: The Search for a Common Moral Discourse* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1995). Carlyle Fielding Stewart III, *Soul Survivors: An African American Spirituality* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1997), Emilie Maureen Townes, *In a Blaze of Glory: Womanist Spirituality as Social Witness* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1995).

praxis-orientation to the world which relies but in part—albeit considerable part—on the political and intellectual arguments and dictates of society; the more demanding motive is located in the obligation engendered by spiritual experience.⁷⁷

Pollard posits throughout that mysticism is viable for social change. Although Pollard notes the dynamic relationship between mysticism and activism, he also issues a caveat, a philosophical pause, writing: “from an empirical point of view no one can easily or confidently concur with Thurman that that which is socially enabling and transforming is somehow also associated with the supernatural or transcendent.”⁷⁸ Thurman, though, intentionally grounds the mystical aesthetic as the ground upon which our common life prospers. Thurman’s mystical aesthetic moves toward a certain kind of ‘ideal’ in religious life, that which is the “expansion and elevation of the mind.”⁷⁹

1.6 The Religious Function in Thurman’s Mystical Aesthetic.

Thurman’s mysticism is built on the contemplative experiences of Jesus, whom Thurman interprets as a notable disruption to his religious tradition, even while participating in it. For Thurman, religion is not adherence to creed or dogma. Religion is universalizing.

If in the religious experience a man identifies Jesus rather than God as the other principle in his religious experience, then the exclusive character of the religious experience becomes undeniable. . . . Such a position establishes on theological and metaphysical grounds a *principle of separateness* (italics his) in the human family that paves the way for the promulgation in the world of a cult of inequality that pits man against man and group against group. If such a cult is rooted in an experience so profound, as the religious experience is, then the metaphysical purpose

⁷⁷ Pollard, *Mysticism and Social Change: The Social Witness of Howard Thurman*, 1.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 8.

⁷⁹ George Santayana, *Interpretations of Poetry and Religion* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1900), 20.

that such an experience generates becomes a banner under which all manner of brutality and human misery may march. But if in the religious experience the other principle is God, who is sensed as Creator of life and Father of the human spirit, then at such a moment the individual stands on his intrinsic worthfulness as a human being and affirms in the integrity of the moment his solidarity with all mankind.⁸⁰

The religious is a foundational concept for Thurman that does not always signify “a special body of beliefs and practices having some kind of institutional organization.”⁸¹ Thurman claims that what the mystic experiences is not the revelation of some truth but “the vital experience of *truth itself*.” He writes: “What is it then that the mystic claims that he experiences? For him, it is not merely emotional, though the feeling tone is deep and pervasive. To the mystic, what he experiences is not merely a general truth, or truth in general, but rather a profound certainty that he is caught up in a vital experience of truth itself.”⁸² What Thurman describes as the “vital experience of truth itself” has philosophic undertones. John Dewey writes: “whatever introduces genuine perspective is religious.” Thurman’s “experience of truth” is correlated with Dewey’s “genuine perspective.” These two ideas both suggest that the religious has particular universalizing results. For Dewey, the religious is producing a certain kind of *effect* resulting in a “better adjustment in life and its conditions,”⁸³ a “change of will conceived as the organic plenitude of our being, rather than any special change *in will*.”⁸⁴ The next section argues that the religious, as it operates in Thurman, has this kind of outlook. The

⁸⁰ Thurman, *The Creative Encounter: An Interpretation of Religion and the Social Witness*, 148.

⁸¹ John Dewey, *Art as Experience* (New York: Minton, Balch and Company, 1934), 9.

⁸² Thurman, "Mysticism and Social Action", 20.

⁸³ Dewey, *Art as Experience*, 14.

⁸⁴ John Dewey, *A Common Faith* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1934), 17.

religious is expansive and driven toward the idea of the whole. The religious *effects* in Thurman are depicted (a) as the production of a meaningful life/world, (b) as a way of sacralizing experience, and (c) as a move toward the poetic.

Producing a Meaningful Life/World

Poets live in the transcending arc of metaphor, which creates something new from the combining of familiar but separate things. Such a semantic understanding of transcendence is not of itself a sufficient measure of mysticism, whatever the word finally means, but without it there is nothing we might properly call mystical. Without the play of poetics, theology may serve a useful intellectual work but its language will be tempted to make reality more articulate than it is.⁸⁵

Mark Burrows states in the quote above that “poets live in the transcending arc of metaphor, which creates something new from the combining of familiar but separated things.” The quote indicates purposiveness in poetic language. Transcendence here refers to a rhetorical quality in metaphor that seeks unities in meaning. Poetry is coaxing and coalescing new understanding out of the common place, assumed, or taken for granted. Poetry offers the idea of transcendence new meaning. Amongst other things, a semantic understanding of transcendence refers to its ability to recreate from the rubble of ordered and overly determined worlds. Toni Morrison helps with this notion. She writes: “The vitality of language lies in its ability to limn the actual, imagined and possible lives of its speakers, readers, writers. Although its poise is sometimes in displacing experience it is not a substitute for it. It arcs toward the place where meaning

⁸⁵ Mark S. Burrows, "Raiding the Inarticulate: Mysticism, Poetics, and the Unlanguageable," *Spiritus* 4, no. 2 (2004): 174.

may lie.”⁸⁶ Both Morrison and Burrows suggest that the *effectiveness* of language lies in its ability to labor at the threshold of experience where we are no longer who we were but not yet who we will become. Thurman’s corpus evidences a laboring on behalf of the *something new* that is created from the separateness of the binary oppositions that characterize racial discourse; for him, it is “beloved community.”⁸⁷

Burrows’ “transcending arc of metaphor” signifies a cause or loyalty that does not escape cultural aspects of group life or personality; rather, it transcends the polarization often found in life. The arc moves toward what Anderson calls “cultural fulfillment,”⁸⁸ which is the human impulse toward creative transformation. Cultural fulfillment accents the communal and individual potentials and possibilities for freedom, emancipation, and transcendence.⁸⁹ Thurman uses metaphor to metabolize polarized opposites into a positive composite, a cumulative possibility. Anderson reads Thurman as placing this possibility of language in the field of public interest because he is much more interested in Thurman’s pragmatic outcome rather than Thurman’s problematic “foundational epistemology,”⁹⁰ namely, his mysticism. At stake for Anderson is that religion ought to

⁸⁶ Toni Morrison, “The Nobel Lecture in Literature,” in *What Moves at the Margins: Selected Nonfiction*, ed. Carolyn C. Denard (Jackson, MS: University Press of Mississippi, 2008).

⁸⁷ Anderson, *Beyond Ontological Blackness: An Essay on African American Religious and Cultural Criticism*, 49.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*

⁸⁹ Anthony B. Pinn, “Rethinking the Nature and Tasks of African American Theology: A Pragmatic Perspective,” *American Journal of Theology and Philosophy* 19, no. 2 (1998): 6.

⁹⁰ Anderson notes that the consequences of Thurman’s social and moral personalism are compatible with pragmatic theology. See Victor Anderson, *Creative Exchange: A Constructive Theology of African American Religious Experience*, ed. Anthony B. Pinn and Katie G. Cannon, *Innovations: African American Religious Thought* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2008), 115.

produce some qualitative change, an amelioration of human life.⁹¹ This dissertation argues that Thurman's mystical aesthetic is not, what philosopher Nicholas Wolterstorff calls, world-aversive Christianity, an attempt to escape the world.⁹² Rather, for Thurman the religious outlook on life is "world formative." For Thurman, the mystical aesthetic redeems the world, "sacralizing" it, and making living in it possible for all.

For Thurman, such transcendence is linked to imagination. Relevant to this point, historian of religion Charles H. Long retells a fascinating story of hearing Thurman preach one day in Rockefeller Chapel at the University of Chicago. He says:

Allow me to relate a personal story about Howard Thurman...He had just related the Gospel story of Jesus temptation by the devil. If I can recall, he continued in this fashion... 'we must remember that Jesus was a human being and that he was being tempted by the most powerful and creative temptor in the universe...and he was about to succumb—but that out of the corner of his eye and the corner of his mind, there was just a small thing, almost like a dot...and this dot started moving towards him, and as it moved it moved faster and grew in size until it was hurtling towards him, a vortex of infinite speed, and as it got closer he saw that it was a singular word, and that singular word was Alone! MAN SHALL NOT LIVE BY BREAD ALONE!

In this characteristic manner Thurman did the unexpected and the eccentric; while he held us in anticipation, thinking that that word would be God, he surprised us with the very ordinary word "alone." He made the word alone of ultimate significance, and this critical recentering is what I think he is really about. He is a wrecker of structure precisely in revealing the ultimacy of the ordinary; he wishes to sustain ourselves through

⁹¹ Womanist Marcia Riggs writes that Thurman's conception of national community, "...offers formative principles which can serve as resources in the production of a contemporary social ethic for the African American Christian tradition." Marcia Riggs, "The Thurman Vision: Ideal of Community," in *The Human Search: Howard Thurman and the Quest for Freedom: Proceedings of the Second Annual Thurman Convocation*, ed. Mozella G. Mitchell, *Mk, Jr. Memorial Studies in Religion, Culture, and Social Development* (New York: Peter Lang, 1992).

⁹² Nicholas Wolterstorff, *Until Justice and Peace Embrace* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm B. Eerdmans Publishing, 1983).

meditative critique; he invites us to relive our lives, personal and communal, to be reborn through undergoing the pain of giving birth.⁹³

Thurman published a version of that sermon in *Temptations of Jesus*. In the preface, he emphasizes the role of imagination. He writes that the fundamental purpose of the sermons was the “illumination of the imagination, the stirring of the heart, and the challenge to live life meaningfully.”⁹⁴ His interest is in describing the activity of consciousness as a process of discovery. He writes: “Jesus of Nazareth had what seems to me to have been a fundamental and searching—almost devastating—experience of God.”⁹⁵

Thurman uses the imagination “as a source of insight, a way of thinking in the world without the necessary grounding in reason, ethics, or metaphysics.”⁹⁶ American poet Wallace Stevens, the man from whom I borrow the term mystical aesthetic, identifies the poet as an “orator of the imagination,”⁹⁷ which Burrows says “reminds us that the life of language moves beyond a construction of reality within the limits of reason alone, and that a disenchanted world emptied of the symbolic and denied the traces of transcendence is finally a difficult if not unbearable dwelling place.”⁹⁸ George Santayana, philosopher and contemporary of Stevens, agrees:

⁹³ Charles H. Long, “Howard Thurman and the Meaning of Religion in America,” in *The Human Search: Howard Thurman and the Quest for Freedom, Proceedings of the Second Annual Thurman Convocation*, ed. Mozella G. Mitchell, *Martin Luther King, Jr. Memorial Studies in Religion, Culture, and Social Development* (New York: Peter Lang, 1992).

⁹⁴ Howard Thurman, *Temptations of Jesus: Five Sermons Given by Dean Howard Thurman in Marsh Chapel, Boston University, 1962* (Richmond, Indiana: Friends United Press, 1978).

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, 22.

⁹⁶ Burrows, “Raiding the Inarticulate: Mysticism, Poetics, and the Unlanguageable,” 174.

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*

The poet, without being especially a philosopher, stands by virtue of his superlative genius on the plane of universal reason, far above the passionate experience which he overlooks and on which he reflects; and he raises us for the moment to his own level, to send us back again, if not better endowed for practical life, at least not unacquainted with speculation.⁹⁹

The arc of Thurman's mystical aesthetic bends toward endowing life with the enchantment that the poet commissions in her depository of metaphors. Indeed, as Long says above and worth reiterating at this point, Thurman, the poet: "[Is] a wrecker of structure precisely in revealing the ultimacy of the ordinary; he wishes to sustain ourselves through meditative critique; he invites us to relive our lives, personal and communal, to be reborn through undergoing the pain of giving birth."

Sacralizing Experience

The second effect of the religious in Thurman's mystical aesthetic is its ability to sacralize experience. In *The Sacred and the Profane*, historian of religion, Mircea Eliade argues that temples in the "great oriental civilizations—from Mesopotamia and Egypt to China and India" are involved in what he calls a "valorization" of sacred space. Eliade proposes that "the cosmological structure of the temple gives room for a new religious valorization; as house of the gods, hence holy place above all others, the temple continually resanctifies the world, because it at once represents and contains it."¹⁰⁰ Eliade argues that religious architecture, as it was developed, held within its structure

⁹⁹ Santayana, *Interpretations of Poetry and Religion*, 193.

¹⁰⁰ Mircea Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane*, trans. Willard R. Trask (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1959), 59.

“cosmological symbolism,”¹⁰¹ which gave humanity capacity to express “its thirst for being,” and prevent humanity from responding in terror at a world of “nothingness.”¹⁰² Through the creation of sacred space--the formal structure of a house of worship, devotees were able to *make sense* and express a “profound nostalgia” for a sacred world, reminiscent of the “mythical moment of creation.”¹⁰³

In *The Myth of the Eternal Return*, Eliade contends that an act “which has definite meaning—hunting, fishing, agriculture; games, conflicts, sexuality—in some way participates in the sacred.”¹⁰⁴ Eliade is quick to point out that objects of the external world are not laden with some intrinsic value or meaning, but that “objects or acts *acquire* [emphasis mine] a value, and in so doing become real, because they participate, after one fashion or another, in a reality that transcends them. Among countless stones, one stone becomes sacred—and hence, instantly becomes saturated with being- because it constitutes a hierophany, or possesses manna...or commemorates a mythical act.”¹⁰⁵

Thurman’s mystical aesthetic is an attempt to capture the sacred in ordinary experience. As an architect of the imagination, he is not creating a religious center made of bricks and mortar, but creating one at the seat of personality. Thurman moves the ancient notion of the center (of the world) from the temple, to a new site of worship, the

¹⁰¹ Ibid., 58.

¹⁰² Ibid., 64.

¹⁰³ Ibid., 65.

¹⁰⁴ Mircea Eliade, *The Myth of the Eternal Return: Or, Cosmos and History* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1954), 28.

¹⁰⁵ Eliade, pages 3-4, the Myth of the Eternal Return

human spirit, which is in keeping with his allegiance to Boston personalism.¹⁰⁶ To be sure, his understanding of religious experience has its roots in the ancient notion of cosmological center. However, Thurman's mystical aesthetic is not a nostalgic longing for a primordial sacred world. Rather, its arc bends toward creating one.

As discussed earlier in this chapter, while at Howard University Thurman began experimenting with different forms of worship other than those to be found in regular religious services with the sermon as the pivotal point. One relevant experiment is illustrative for purposes here, namely, his introduction of "Living Madonnas." Thurman began by studying the Madonna as represented in Italian art. He then selected five reproductions. He commissioned the Art department to paint their replicas and chose from among the students persons to portray the Madonna in dress as Ava Maria was played. He explains: "The idea was to render a life-size reproduction of a particular painting, giving careful attention to details of costume, pose and colors."¹⁰⁷ In orchestrating this experiment during worship, Thurman sought to capitalize on the artistic representation of Mary, mother of Jesus. In so doing, he sought to re-present motherhood as artistic variety through cultural representations of a venerated saint of the church. These artistic representations each revealed what Thurman considered the possibilities in latent ordinary experience.

¹⁰⁶ Rufus Burrow, Luther Smith, and Victor Anderson make convincing arguments on how Thurman is influenced by Boston personalism. See Anderson, *Creative Exchange: A Constructive Theology of African American Religious Experience*, Jr. Rufus Burrow, *Personalism: A Critical Introduction* (St. Louis: Chalice Press, 1999), Smith, "An American Prophet: A Critical Study on the Thought of Howard Thurman".

¹⁰⁷ Thurman, *Footprints of a Dream: The Story of the Church for the Fellowship of All People*, 27.

In this above experiment, Thurman's mystical aesthetic intervenes in the routinized life world of worship, disrupting the ordinary in worship and reinterpreting its symbols through what Santayana suggests as a kind of poetic renovation.

Every art looks to the building up of something. And just because the world built up by common sense and natural science is an inadequate world (a skeleton which needs the filling of sensation before it can live), therefore the moment when we realize its inadequacy is the moment when the higher arts find their opportunity. When the world is shattered to bits they can come and "build it nearer to the heart's desire."¹⁰⁸

Thurman renders experience sacred by revisiting and saturating ancient symbols with new meaning.

Moving Toward the Poetic

Presenting some of the earliest ideas in pragmatism John Dewey and George Santayana identify the ways in which poetry and religion are similar. They are methods by which the religious quality of experience is fulfilled. Reflecting on Santayana, Dewey writes:

Religion and poetry are identical in essence and differ merely in the way in which they are attached to practical affairs. Poetry is called religion when it intervenes in life, and religion, when it merely supervenes upon life, is seen to be nothing but poetry.' The difference between intervening in and supervening upon is as important as the identity set forth. Imagination may play upon life or it may enter profoundly into it. As Mr. Santayana puts it, 'poetry has a universal and a moral function,' for 'its highest power lies in its relevance to the ideals and purposes of life.'¹⁰⁹

Here, poetry is venerated for its capacity for cultural and religious transformation.

¹⁰⁸ Santayana, *Interpretations of Poetry and Religion*, 269-70.

¹⁰⁹ Dewey, *Art as Experience*, 17.

While Plato suspiciously questioned the value of poetic *play*, for Aristotle “poetry is at once more like philosophy and more worth while than history, since poetry tends to make general statements, while those of history are particular.”¹¹⁰ Poetry functions as the art of mimesis or of limning. “Mimesis is innate in human beings from childhood,” says Aristotle. In it, he continues: “we enjoy looking at the most exact portrayals of things we do not like to see in real life, the lowest of animals, for instance, or corpses.”¹¹¹ Poets are engaged in the act of making, ποιητες, mimesis, or limning. Literary critic and poet T.S. Eliot describes these operations as poetic *intention*.

Beyond any specific intention which poetry may have, such as I have already instanced in the various kinds of poetry, there is always the communication of some new experience, or some fresh understanding of the familiar, or the expression of something we have experienced but have no words for, which enlarges our consciousness or refines our sensibility. But it is not with such individual benefit from poetry, any more that it is with the quality of individual pleasure.... We may acknowledge this, but at the same time overlook something which it does for us collectively, as a society.... That poetry is much more local than prose can be seen in the history of European languages... And this appears perfectly natural when we realize that poetry has primarily to do with the expression of feeling and emotion; and that feeling and emotion are particular, whereas thought is general.¹¹²

In Eliot’s description of poetic intention, there results an enlargement of consciousness and the expression of feeling through representation. Thus is the poetic force of Thurman’s mystical aesthetic. Through acts of making, ποιησις, mimesis, and limning, Thurman disrupts and fulfills, projects and sees, searches and discovers

¹¹⁰ Aristotle, "Poetics," in *Aesthetics: The Classic Readings*, ed. David E. Cooper (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishers Ltd, 1997), 38.

¹¹¹ *Ibid.*, 32.

¹¹² T.S. Eliot, *On Poetry and Poets* (London: Faber and Faber, 1957), 18,19.

transcendence among and within.¹¹³ The religious function in the mystical aesthetic of Thurman attempts to produce a meaningful life/world, intervenes in sacralizing experience, and by mimesis and limning participates transformatively in cultural and religious making.

Conclusion

This chapter sought to isolate distinctive benchmarks in the formation of Howard Thurman's mystical aesthetic, a religious orientation toward life. Birthed in the Black Baptist church tradition, Thurman eventually transcends denominational thought to embrace a broader religious understanding of community. It was his spiritual hybridity, in fact, his life long study of mysticism as the vitality of religion that contributed to his understanding of the religious as that which moves toward a "better adjustment in life and its conditions." The mystical aesthetic is a transformative concept. As an architect of the imagination, the arc of language in Thurman bends toward a philosophical and poetic portrayal of the religious as a kind of creative currency making the world anew.

¹¹³ Burrows, "Raiding the Inarticulate: Mysticism, Poetics, and the Unlanguageable," 176.

Chapter II

Characterizing the Mystical Aesthetic: Howard Thurman in the Interpretation of Religious Experience

[A]n experience has pattern and structure, because it is not just doing and undergoing an alternation, but consists of them in relationship. To put one's hand in the fire that consumes it is not necessarily to have an experience. The action and its consequence must be joined in perception. This relationship is what gives meaning; to grasp it is the objective of all intelligence.¹

[M]an [sic] is a self-performing animal-his performances are, in a way, *reflexive*, in performing he reveals himself to himself.²

[P]erformances not only play out modes, they play with modes, leaving actions hanging and unfinished, so theatrical events are fundamentally experimental: provisional. Any semiotics of performance must start from, and always stand unsteadily on, these unstable slippery bases, made even more uncertain by the continually shifting receptions of various audiences.³

2.1 Introduction

The mystical aesthetic is performed even as religious language is performing. Characterizing the mystical aesthetic suggests elements of performance and the nature of experience. The quote above by anthropologist Victor Turner suggests that the self-performing being reflexively reveals himself to himself as he performs. John Dewey's notion of experience, referenced in the introductory quote, argues that religious experience--as acts of experiencing-- or performance is not without reflection and perception. Religious experience is also buttressed by aesthetic structures. Thurman's

¹ Dewey, *Art as Experience*, 44.

² Victor Turner, "Anthropology of Performance," in *The Anthropology of Performance*, ed. Victor Turner (comp.) (New York: PAJ Publications, 1987), 13.

³ Erving Goffman, "Preface," in *The Anthropology of Performance*, ed. Victor Turner (New York: PAJ Publications, 1987), xviii.

religious experience is perceived through the poetic. The mystical aesthetic is active, reflective, and reflexive. Consider Thurman's reflection on night: "Nightfall was meaningful to my childhood, for the night was more than a companion. It was a presence, an articulate climate. There was something about the night that seemed to cover my spirit like a gentle blanket."⁴ Thurman describes an experience that he had as a child, finding solace in the "darkness" of night.

Darkness is set in indexical marks to highlight not an abstract noun but a felt quality of an experience, in this case, the dark. The excerpt is no mere retelling. Rather, Thurman engages in an activity that involves reflection--an act of recalling a past experience, assigning language that captures its lived qualities--and reflexivity; it is he who remembers and relocates himself in the act. What is also assumed in religious language is 'use.' Understanding that is conveyed is made accessible for public use. Philosopher George Santayana has this in mind when he writes:

This labour of perception and understanding, this spelling of the material meaning of experience is enshrined in our work-a-day language and ideas; ideas which are literally poetic in the sense that they are "made"...but which are at the same time prosaic because they are made economically, by abstraction, and for use.⁵

For Dewey and Santayana perception and understanding are not alien from our experiences. It is by a conception of our thoughts about experience that we are able to render them or make them poetically viable for use. The mystical aesthetic is characterized as lived experience isolated for reflection, but never serving as acts of mere recalling. An introduction of the mystical aesthetic to the work of Howard Thurman reveals a particular impulse and intention: religious experience supported by aesthetic

⁴ Thurman, *With Head and Heart: The Autobiography of Howard Thurman*, 7.

⁵ Santayana, *Interpretations of Poetry and Religion*, 259.

structures that function to deepen the meaning of religious experience and broaden the way in which lived experience is understood.

This chapter begins with philosopher David Chidester's schema for identifying religious and aesthetic dimensions in religious thought. His schema identifies several "pre-critical orientations" in classical religious thought that yield particular aesthetic "options" that when appropriated become "strategies" defined by pre-determined limits. The terms "pre-critical orientations," "options," and "strategies" are off-set by indexical marks to illustrate the progressive stages that these aesthetic strategies have taken in Western thought, argues Chidester. These schema reveal several interesting possibilities for reading Thurman's mystical aesthetic in relation to religious experience (2.2). In (2.3), I examine the mystical aesthetic in relation to Thurman, public theology, and social responsibility. Here, religious philosophers, Nancy Frankenberry and Victor Anderson situate this discussion. Both of these moves serve as constitutive parts of my characterization of the mystical aesthetic as a vital relationship between religious experience and aesthetic structures. In addition, characterizing the mystical aesthetic offers constructive possibilities to Christian ethics. The mystical aesthetic rearticulates a kind of religious orientation built upon lived experience, religious thought, and deep aesthetic structures.

2.2 A Scheme for Artistic Rendering of the Religious

In "Aesthetic Strategies in Western Religious Thought,"⁶ David Chidester acknowledges that his discussion is grounded by the idea that: "[W]e can talk about

⁶ David S. Chidester, "Aesthetic Strategies in Western Religious Thought," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 51, no. 1 (1983).

aesthetic judgments implicit in religion, and not simply limit ourselves to looking for expressions of the sacred, or dimensions of religion in works of art.”⁷ For Chidester grounding the discussion means realizing two things: one, contrary to scholar of comparative religion Rudolph Otto, “religious experience is not *sui generis*.”⁸ Human experience can not be dichotomized given the complexities and stratifications of experience. Both art and religion are conceived of ordinary experience and amidst the continuous flow of life.⁹ And two, religion and aesthetics are not collapsible into a singular disposition suggesting: “religion is simply a matter of taste, feeling, and aesthetic disposition, or that aesthetic experience is a mode of religious engagement,”¹⁰ says Chidester. Chidester’s essay offers several options for looking at the role the mystical aesthetic plays in Thurman’s notion of religious experience without insisting that “religious feeling [is] a qualitatively different experience from aesthetic feeling.”¹¹

Chidester begins by asserting that throughout history, religious elements have appeared in art in one of two ways. They are identifiable by tracing two processes he names: diffusion and morphology.

⁷ Ibid.: 63.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Dewey, *Art as Experience*, 36-37. The central problem in Dewey’s book is: “recovering the continuity of esthetic experience with the normal process of living.”

¹⁰ Chidester, "Aesthetic Strategies in Western Religious Thought," 64.

¹¹ Ibid.

2.2 Diffusion

The theory of diffusion simply means that religious dimensions are dispersed or disseminated in works of art. This theory argues that conducting empirical research, like tracing the contribution religion has on a particular artist or “locating, examining, and clarifying religious sources and resources which are appropriated by artists in their work”¹² would reveal uses of religious materials. Chidester demonstrates how religious ideas find their way into cultural products. Chidester asserts that showing the influence of Aquinas’s *Summa* on Dante’s *Divine Comedy*, Calvin’s influence on Milton, Evangelical Christianity’s influence on Bob Dylan reveals specific contributions.¹³

Another modern example of diffusion would be the marble sculpture “The Hand of God” created by Auguste Rodin.¹⁴ Rodin sculpted this piece toward the end of his career, circa 1907, which depicts an open alabaster hand holding what is interpreted as the bodies of the first humans. The genesis of human life is depicted in the sculpture by: “the great life-giving hand itself... a symbol of the original creator, and perhaps quite literally, of the sculptor as well.”¹⁵ Interestingly, Howard Thurman was greatly influenced by the work of Congregational clergyman Oswald McCall, whose book *The*

¹² Ibid.: 56.

¹³ Several scholars have noted how Protestant aesthetics are displayed in various classical works of art. See William A. Dryness, "Dante, Bunyan and the Case for a Protestant Aesthetics," *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 10, no. 3 (2008). Peter Hawkins, *Dante's Testaments: Essays in Scriptural Imagination* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1999). David M. Robinson, "Poetry, Poetic Perception, and Emerson's Spiritual Affirmations," in *Shaping Belief* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2008).

¹⁴ Auguste Rodin, "The Hand of God," (New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art: Hillbrunn Timeline of Art History, 2000).

¹⁵ Ibid.

Hand of God, was inspired by the sculpture.¹⁶ It figures directly in the Thurman's unpublished document called "What We Teach" describing the organizing ideals around the Fellowship Church.¹⁷ Thurman argues that people sculpt their lives and the institutions in which they participate. *The Hand of God* is no subtle reference to religion, though it depicts the diffusive range of religious possibilities in cultural artifacts. In the same way that Chidester argues that religious materials can be identified in works of art, he also argues that aesthetic structures can be identified in religion.¹⁸

Morphology

The theory of morphology illustrates two significant ways that aesthetic structures are identifiable in religion: in both form and function. Chidester says: "With regard to structure, we often find in works of art thematic patterns of initiation, quest, symbolic death and resurrection, ascent, etc."¹⁹ The characterization of the Negro Spirituals illustrates this point. Philosopher, Alain Locke notes: "[J]ust as certainly as secular elements can be found in all religious music, there are discoverable sensuous and almost pagan elements blended into the Spirituals. But something so intensely religious and so essentially Christian dominates the blend that they are indelibly and notably of this quality. The Spirituals are spirituals."²⁰ Locke says that the Spirituals employ the use of

¹⁶ Howard Thurman, "The Hand of God," *The Journal of Religion* 20, no. 3 (1940). A photograph of the sculpture is actually pictured in McCall's book. Also see O. W. S. McCall, *The Hand of God* (Harper, 1957).

¹⁷ Howard Thurman, "What We Teach," (Howard Gotlieb Archival Research Center, Boston University).

¹⁸ Chidester, "Aesthetic Strategies in Western Religious Thought."

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Alain Locke, *The Negro and His Music* (Albany: J B Lyon Press, 1936).

religious language and demonstrate religious belief and values. Such notions of divine justice and human freedom are expressive of “basic modes of employment” that “determined the shape of history and historiography in the nineteenth century.”²¹

Chidester uses the work of historian and former professor of comparative literature, Hayden White, to reveal dominant aesthetic forms like “Tragedy, Comedy, Romance, and Irony.” White surmises that these aesthetic structures are central to the ways in which life was rhetorically understood in the nineteenth century.²² Historians and historiographers used these “basic modes of employment” and “dominant rhetorical tropes (metaphor, metonymy, synecdoche, and irony)” as determinants in historical narratives.²³ What may undergird Alain Locke’s theory of the spirituals are similar organizing principles. Locke suggests that although, the spirituals emerge out of an aesthetic pattern that is influenced by the tragic sense of life as an ancient artform (which favors display as catharsis), the aesthetic pattern merely underscores the deeply religious nature of the spirituals. In this sense the “spirituals are spirituals.” But says Chidester: “Religion and art may also be analogous in terms of function.”²⁴ To explain how religion and art may function analogously Chidester says:

In certain situations it may appear that religion and art are doing something very similar when it comes to giving shape to the world we live in. If the function of

²¹ Chidester, "Aesthetic Strategies in Western Religious Thought," 56.

²² Ibid. See also Hayden White, *Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth Century Europe* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins, 1974).

²³ White, *Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth Century Europe*. Chidester, "Aesthetic Strategies in Western Religious Thought," 57.

²⁴ Chidester, "Aesthetic Strategies in Western Religious Thought," 56.

myth is to orient the individual within a meaningful reality, then works of art that also perform this function or contribute to this end, may be described as mythic.²⁵

Consider James Weldon Johnson's "Creation,"²⁶ which is often performed during African American church services and his "Lift Every Voice and Sing,"²⁷ known as the Negro National Anthem, often sung at both religious and secular events. Both are representative of the morphing that takes place when cultural products articulate the stories, aims, or discursive ends of religious communities. They become the *Midrash* of communities, serving as the subtext to the canonized narrative, reinforcing and reaffirming the dynamism of religious experience in modern contexts for many local communities. Products like these function analogously as religious materials by orienting groups to understand stories about their origins and celebrate their lived experience in the world. Both "Creation" and "Lift Every Voice and Sing" as examples of the theory of morphology poetically undergird and celebrate common religious meaning and communal narratives that parallel biblical narratives.

Both theories of diffusion and morphology are ways of describing and locating religious influences in works of art. Diffusion describes how religion is disseminated in art. And, morphology demonstrates the reciprocal process of identifying the aesthetic in religion. Chidester also suggests three additional possibilities for tracing aesthetic structures in religion: tracing root metaphors, determining the favored sense perception

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Rinehart Holt, and Winston, Inc., ed., *African American Literature: Voices in Tradition* (Austin: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, Inc., 1992), 285.

²⁷ Ibid., 293.

(visual or auditory) that preconditions an aesthetic orientation, and analyzing the theoretic strategies that are simultaneous theological and aesthetic.²⁸

Root metaphors “condition the range of religious concepts, beliefs, and doctrines that can be drawn from [them].”²⁹ Understanding the “root metaphors” of religion and exploring artistic “sense perception” are helpful for understanding and appreciating these processes. “Root metaphors” are like detectable footprints that unmistakably tie art to religion. They are related to particular moments concretized in sacred texts. For instance, a presentation or perception of “wilderness” may relate periods of testing; “mountain ascents” come to signify a pilgrimage or a moment of transcendence; “river crossings” relate moments of transition or movement to new opportunities and possibilities.

Take for instance the root metaphor of mountain ascent in Thurman’s autobiography.³⁰ Thurman journals an episode in 1935-1936 when he and his wife, Sue Bailey Thurman, traveled with the Reverend Edward G. Carroll and his wife Phenola on a “pilgrimage of friendship” as guests of the Student Christian Movement in India, Burma, and Ceylon (now Sri Lanka). One particular day, they were invited to see the sunrise over Kanchenjunga (the Himalayas), which meant a two-mile hike up Tiger Hill and an early 2:00 a.m. departure. Of the four, only Thurman agrees to make the trek. The episode introduces several correlative biblical elements: the challenge of ascent (literally trekking up a mountain), testing physical limitations and the need to rest,

²⁸ Chidester, “Aesthetic Strategies in Western Religious Thought,” 57.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Thurman, *With Head and Heart: The Autobiography of Howard Thurman*, 127.

confrontation with darkness, a community of pilgrims, and an extraordinary illumination, which Thurman describes as the sky literally bursting “into one burnished gold radiance: everything was clear. Beyond, the solitary glowing peak of Everest rose... The glorious sight lasted no more than a minute; the clouds came together again and closed the view.”³¹

Thurman’s mountaintop experience invokes in the reader a pre-conditioned understanding related to other stories of mountain climbs. Most readers would recognize the ascent as a root metaphor related to great biblical mountain ascents, such as Moses and Mt. Sinai, or Jesus, Peter, James, and John and the Mountain of Transfiguration (Mt. Hermon).³² In biblical faith, mountain ascents represent a climb that serendipitously occasion some new insight into or encounter with divinity. In one poem, “I Felt like (Robert) Browning’s ‘Paracelsus’”, Thurman describes the experience.

I am a wanderer: I remember well
One journey, how I feared the track was missed,
So long the city I desired to reach
Lay hid; when suddenly its spires afar
Flashed through the circling clouds; you may conceive
My transport.....
But I had seen the city and one such glance
No darkness could obscure....

More than forty years have passed since that morning. It remains for me a transcendent moment of sheer glory and beatitude, when time, space, and circumstance evaporated and when my naked spirit looked into the depths of what is forbidden for anyone to see. I would never, never be the same again.³³

³¹ Chidester, "Aesthetic Strategies in Western Religious Thought," 57.

³² Harold W. Attridge, ed., *The Harper Collins Study Bible*, Student with Apocryphal/Deuterocanonical Books ed. (San Francisco: Harper One, 1989), Exodus 19 and Gospel of Mark 9.

³³ Thurman, *With Head and Heart: The Autobiography of Howard Thurman*, 127.

Although a personal and immediate account of an experience, Thurman's reflection "morphs" analogously into biblical mountain narratives. Given the allusive nature of the event, readers are prepared for its revelatory effect, a great truth revealed. Thurman continues: "My naked spirit looked into the depths of what is forbidden for anyone to see." Here also, Thurman and Moses are located analogously in the existential space of divine encounter. Moses requests to see the face of God, but God replies to him, "no one shall see Me and live."³⁴ Thurman's experience equally morphs into an awesome encounter with divinity.

Thurman participated in an experience, which was already sacralized as a "pilgrimage," an ascent up a mountain. Sense perceptions of darkness and light are metaphorically rendered with ancient, religious overtones. The mystical (reflexive) presents itself in and through both the experiencing (active) and rendering (reflection). These three phenomenological aspects of Thurman's mystical aesthetic capture his momentous encounter in his poem celebrating the event of himself a "wanderer" in search of a hidden city, which serendipitously comes into view for only a moment and then disappears. He describes its impact within a mystical aesthetic: "It remains for me a transcendent moment of sheer glory and beatitude, when time, space, and circumstance evaporated and when my naked spirit looked into the depths of what is forbidden for anyone to see."³⁵ Such recollecting is not of mere autobiographical interest; it is episodic. It is a threshold in which the mystical aesthetic relates to the whole of the experience. In the process of morphing, the experience of a work of art or mountain climbs may also be experienced religiously.

³⁴ Attridge, ed., *The Harper Collins Study Bible*, Exodus 33:20.

³⁵ Thurman, *With Head and Heart: The Autobiography of Howard Thurman*.

Chidester's two processes for identifying dimensions of the religious in works of art, diffusion and morphology, are important for thinking broadly about relationships between works of art and religious experience. In this dissertation, emphasis falls on reciprocity. What allows for the reciprocity in which the poetic comes to influence theological discourse, forming a circuitry between the non-discursive and discursive in Thurman's mystical aesthetic, again I turn to Chidester. Not only does Chidester concede that this reciprocity occurs in cultural and religious products that are conditioned by both religion and aesthetics, whose orientation include similar perceptual modes, auditory or visual, but Chidester also turns to a systematic form of analysis. Chidester suggests: "[A]nalyz(ing) theoretic strategies within a given religious tradition that are simultaneously theological and aesthetic."³⁶ He asserts that religionists have consistently used and defended the use of "artistic creativity within a theological context."³⁷ And the ways in which they have used these created works are analyzable.

Chidester describes "four interpretive strategies for reconciling poetic creativity within a theological framework."³⁸ The strategies are derived from literary critic and acclaimed editor of the *Norton Anthology of English Literature* M.H. Abrams's "four constituent elements involved in every poetic creation: the artist, the external world, the audience, and the art work."³⁹ Chidester understands them as: "four terminals which define the horizon of every creative event. But it is the appropriation of one of these constituents, as a critical center of gravity, which produces a distinctive interpretive

³⁶ Chidester, "Aesthetic Strategies in Western Religious Thought," 57.

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Ibid.: 58.

³⁹ Ibid.: 59.

strategy.”⁴⁰ Chidester’s strategies follow from the four constituent elements in Abram’s paradigm. The ecstatic element is centered upon the artist; the mimetic the external world; the heuristic the audience; and the iconic the work of art.⁴¹ Each element is “pre-critical” insofar as they expose “the religious thinker’s most basic orientation.”⁴² But as that orientation is brought to the foreground of the thinker’s intention, it is favored and appropriated as a tool. The orientation then functions as a kind of epistemological compass; it becomes a strategy, an artful means to an end.⁴³ While diffusion and morphology describe the ways in which to identify aesthetic and religious resources in religion or works of art, the following are marked as strategies for appropriating aesthetic structures in religion.

The Ecstatic

The ecstatic orientation focuses on the inner state of the poet. The focus is on the agency of the artist. Chidester argues: “[T]he author’s intention is the court of first and last appeal in any question of meaning.”⁴⁴ The expressive power of the poet is favored in this orientation. What signifies the relationship between art and religion is the poet as “seer.”⁴⁵ Chidester argues that “The poet attains a mediatorial position between divine and human realms through the ecstatic transport or the enthusiastic indwelling of

⁴⁰ Ibid.: 58.

⁴¹ Ibid.: 59.

⁴² Ibid.: 67.

⁴³ Victoria Neufeldt, ed., *Webster's New World College Dictionary*, Third ed. (New York: MacMillan, 1997).

⁴⁴ Chidester, "Aesthetic Strategies in Western Religious Thought."

⁴⁵ Ibid.: 59.

inspiration.”⁴⁶ This strategy hints at the mystical element of the mystical aesthetic. Key characteristics in this orientation are its decidedly “mediatorial position” and “ecstatic transport or enthusiastic indwelling.” While Thurman acknowledges the numinous quality of the Holy⁴⁷ throughout his writings, he asserts the availability of divine presence. With the agency of a poet and the determinacy of a pastor Thurman assumes a role: to examine and communicate the meaning of religious experience to his audiences. The ecstatic points toward Thurman’s central understanding of mysticism, that there is in the individual, “the awareness of meeting God.”⁴⁸ Thurman depicts the agency of the artist in an unpublished and handwritten essay entitled, “The Mystic as Artist.”⁴⁹ In this work Thurman depicts the mediatorial role the artist takes as a conduit of divine inspiration:

He [the artist] has to hold his ...idea, the ideal, the vision, the picture until somehow he can express it. There’s no time to bother about technique—he is in the music of research—the music of expression and incarnation is upon him....The ideal the mystic is trying to realize--is to have his whole being flooded with the light and radiance of God. The form of the ideal is shaped by his working, his beliefs, his faith, the formal center of his religious knowledge.⁵⁰

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ Rudolf Otto, *The Idea of the Holy*, trans. John W. Harvey, Second ed. (London: Oxford University Press, 1923 (Twenty-seventh printing, 1982)). Otto is helpful in the discussion of the numinous. Rationality and morality are co-terminous in the idea of the holy, though there is also something else, what he calls an “overplus of meaning” which is non-rational, but no counter to reason. For discussion on numinous see pages 36ff. Thurman agrees and underscores the rational accessibility of the idea of God. Thurman is probably influenced by Boston Personalism, though this dissertation does not explore this likely connection. See Wm Daniel Cobb, "Christian Ethics for Black Theology: The Politics of Liberation," review of Jones, Major J Christian ethics for black theology [S.I.] : Abingdon, 1974. ATLA0000263272, *Encounter* 37 (1976): 69.

⁴⁸ Thurman, *The Creative Encounter: An Interpretation of Religion and the Social Witness*, 23.

⁴⁹ Howard Thurman, "The Mystic as Artist," (Howard Gotlieb Archives, Boston University). Unfortunately, this brief work is not dated.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

Thurman assumes the artist has a mediatorial position, which he understands is cultivated by the “light and radiance of God.” The mystic like the artist has a direct sense of inspiration. The mystic’s artistic product is not merely his or her personal conception, but an incarnation of meaning. Later in that same essay Thurman says that as the artist works, “consciously and consistently” that: “he lays bare his innermost being to the vision in the very stroke....every note of the music will be instructed with the unseen play.”⁵¹

The Mimetic

In mimesis, the poet uses poetry in the service of theology. Emphasis is placed on representing or imitating forms and movements of the external world. This creative orientation employs the use of metaphor to represent or imitate universals in religion. Thurman deploys various “universal” themes in his writing. They are universal in the sense that they point to aspects of shared or common experience. For instance, Thurman often evokes such universal experiences as finitude, loss, and fatigue. The poems below connect these experiences (limits, loss, and fatigue) through metaphor. First is, “For a Time of Sorrow:”

I share with you the agony of your grief,
The anguish of your heart finds echo in my own.
I know I cannot enter all you feel

Nor bear with you the burden of your pain;
I can but offer what my love does give:
The strength of caring,
The warmth of one who seeks to understand
The silent storm-swept barrenness of so great a loss.
This I do in quiet ways,
That on your lonely path

⁵¹ Ibid.

You may not walk alone.⁵²

In "I Rest This Day in God," Thurman writes:

I do not seek the comfort of a guarantee that all my tomorrows will be safe and sure, that strength will be mine at a single time to carry all my need in the days ahead. This would be much, too much for such a one as I. I rest this day in God...⁵³

Thurman uses the mimetic device to evoke dialectical feelings and simultaneously provide (re)assurance within the scope of human experience. His poetry is a cathartic participation in the depth of human emotion. His poetry serves to acknowledge the range of human experience and the theological landscape upon which humanity understands itself in relationship to God. Thurman is not composing systematic theological treatises, but rather employing poetry to make significant statements about the reciprocal fellowship of divine and human interaction, about the agony of grief and the comfort of divine trust.

The Heuristic

In the heuristic orientation, emphasis is placed on the impact that the work of art has on the audience. It is "concerned with poetry's ability to communicate and affect an audience. In broad terms this corresponds to the democratization of the mysteries for the masses, which takes sacred doctrine 'out of academic obscurity and makes it practically useful in public affairs'."⁵⁴ With the heuristic, there is a close relationship between poetry and the moral order. Thurman's "The Perils of Immature Piety" is illustrative of

⁵² Thurman, *Meditations of the Heart*, 211-12.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 198.

⁵⁴ Chidester, "Aesthetic Strategies in Western Religious Thought."

this orientation as it ends with a poem from the *Songs of Kabir*, translated by Rabindranath Tagore.⁵⁵ Thurman writes:

Why is it that so often the biggest and most outstanding men and women on our campuses are not challenged by the faith which we profess to have? Is it because our zeal is not born of knowledge and insight that we repel men rather than attract them by what they call our “super-goodness” or “spiritual sophistication”? Is it because we seem to drag God into everything rather than to find Him as a part and parcel of all experience?

I laugh when I hear that the fish in the water is thirsty.
You do not see that Reality is in your home, and you wander from forest to forest listlessly!⁵⁶

This heuristic orientation circulates in the mystical aesthetic as an admonishing moment directed toward affecting the moral consciousness of listeners. (include context in which Thurman read it).

The Iconic

Each strategy, in summary, represents a particular association with theology. The ecstatic demonstrates poetry as continuous with theology. Use of the mimetic strategy suggests poetry is subordinate to theology. A heuristic orientation makes use of poetry in the service of theology. And finally, the iconic orientation functions to make poetry analogous to theology. Thurman’s first published book *The Greatest of These*,⁵⁷ whose title is taken from the thirteenth verse of First Corinthians, chapter thirteen, provides an

⁵⁵ Walter E.; Kai Jackson Issa Fluker, Quiton H. Dixie, Peter Eisenstadt, Catherine Tumber, Alton B. Pollard III, and Luther E. Smith, Jr., ed., *The Papers of Howard Washington Thurman: My People Need Me, June 1918-March 1936*, vol. 1 (Columbia: University of South Carolina, 2009), 51. Lecture given to college students.

⁵⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁷ Howard Thurman, *The Greatest of These* (California: Eucalyptus Press, 1946).

example. The verse reads: “And now faith, hope, and love abide, these three; and the *greatest of these* (italics mine) is love!” Thurman writes: “It [the book] affirms the faith that even in a world, weary with headache, fear and death, men may yet learn to serve the arts of life.”⁵⁸ This book is an example of the iconic in the sense that it captures his deepest religious convictions in poetic form. Thurman’s poetry is his theology. Santayana captures the significance of the iconic orientation: “[W]hen the poet enlarges his theater and puts into his rhapsodies the true visions of his people and of his soul, his poetry is the consecration of his deepest convictions, and contains the whole truth of his religion.”⁵⁹

The Greatest of These is comprised of fourteen self-titled “prose-poems.”⁶⁰ The nomenclature prose-poem hints at the iconic way poetry functions analogously to theology. Poetic structures break in upon theological prose enlarging meaning beyond the context of scripture. Thirteen of these poems are based on the thirteen verses in the thirteenth chapter of Corinthians. The first is based upon the nativity story of Jesus of Nazareth. For the sake of brevity, I will highlight Thurman’s treatment of the second of these prose-poems, entitled “Tongues of Men and Angels.”⁶¹ Thurman writes:

How much of man’s destiny turns on the magic of words!
When first man blossomed into speech,
Time froze, ‘the morning stars sang together, and all the sons of
God shouted for joy!’
Out of the infinite welter of sounds moving in
Rhythmic patterns through the world of nature,
Certain sounds, then other, and still others

⁵⁸ Ibid., ix.

⁵⁹ Santayana, *Interpretations of Poetry and Religion*, 290.

⁶⁰ Thurman, *The Greatest of These*, ix.

⁶¹ Ibid., 10.

Have been caught, isolated, charged with
Invisible elements—
Thoughts, Ideas, Hopes, Fears, Desires.
One word from a jury seals a man's fate forever, perhaps.
"I love you" becomes the bearer of meanings too vast for all but
a sigh,
Or, the empty echo in an empty sky and a deserted heaven.
"Follow me," on the lips of Jesus becomes a
Trumpet call, stirring the will to action glad and true.⁶²

This poem signals Aristotle's notion of poesis: that poetry is making. Thurman insists in the poem that speech is participating in destiny. Speech is making the future: "how much of [hu]man[ity]'s destiny turns on the magic of words?" He notes several occasions when this is true: a jury's verdict, a lover's proclamation, a savior's invitation. Thurman insists that if words illicit a response from nature, they most certainly call forth something in the lives of other people. The poem fits well as a sample of the iconic. The poem departs from scripture, endorsing the text but providing it with new and multi-layered meaning emerging out of ordinary experience. Thurman places poetry on the same playing field as theology. His poetic treatise functions like a theological treatise on the power of language.

To summarize, these four strategies reconcile aesthetics to theology. Each of them has a particular orientation—the ecstatic (favors the artist and reveals the poetic as an extension of theology), the mimetic (imitates the external world and reveals the poetic as subordinate to theology), the heuristic (exhorts the moral sensibilities of the audience and reveals the poetic as a tool of theology), and the iconic (discloses multi-layers of truth and reveals the poetic as analogous to theology). Each of these discloses aesthetic structures that are constitutive elements circulating dynamically in Thurman's mystical aesthetic. Thurman's mystical aesthetic labors through ordinary and religiously rendered

⁶² Ibid.

symbols mediating the intention of the artist, the replication of the world, the reaction of the audience, and the production of truth. In the following section, this dissertation moves toward understanding Thurman's mystical aesthetic as it functions in religious public discourse. In the next unit, I want to describe how Thurman's mystical aesthetics brings new constructive possibilities to public theology. Religious philosophers, Nancy Frankenberry and Victor Anderson expound an American radical empiricism that helps illustrate how the mystical aesthetic might operate in public theology.

2.4 The Public Significance of Thurman's Mystical Aesthetic

Thurman's mystical aesthetic, as it has been developed thus far in this dissertation, finds theological support in the tradition of American empirical theology—personalism, process, and pragmatic. However, the interest of this unit is in the public significance of Thurman's mystical aesthetic. Anderson, a pragmatic theologian, describes public theology “as the deliberate use of religious languages and commitments to influence substantive public discourse, including public debates on morals.”⁶³ He writes: “We need theological concepts and symbols that connect the spirituality of religious communicants, their participation of public religions, and their democratic citizenship.”⁶⁴ This unit proposes that Thurman's mystical aesthetic be understood not as only discursively interested in connecting spirituality, public discourse, and the exercise of democratic citizenship. It is equally committed to sustainable mediating institutions

⁶³ Victor Anderson, *Contour of an American Public Theology* (University of Virginia, 2000-2001 [cited October 2006]); available from <http://www.livedtheology.org>.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*

that can serve as laboratories for the concrete actualization of the mystical aesthetic in public theology.

Anderson observes that Thurman underscores the power of religious language, ideas, and concepts to address the lived experiences of people struggling with religious and moral meaning. I quote Anderson at length:

The theological themes that I have selected as critical principles in public theology, including finitude, transcendence, God, Grace, and Sin. They were also critical principles that lay centrally in the public theology of Howard Thurman. To these, he also included reconciliation and judgment. Thurman's practice was to take the rich vocabularies of the Christian community and construct them in such a way that they pushed beyond narrow meanings peculiar to the inner life of the community. They functioned for him as languages of social criticism. But they also elicited for him Christian responses to God's action in the world.⁶⁵

Anderson's analysis highlights an often underemphasized point in Thurman studies, which is central in his mystical aesthetic, namely, Thurman's use of Christian vocabulary and his religious tradition lent themselves to public commentary and social criticism, but not as reformulated dogma. Rather, these vocabularies are reconstituted for public purposes, toward bettering human understanding and cultural fulfillment.

Thurman writes:

When the Latin poet Horace says that he was not able to sleep because the pressure of unwritten poetry; when Bunyan tells us in his prologue that he had to put aside the work that he was doing on some sermons and other serious tracts in order to write "Pilgrims Progress;" when Walter Hampden says that he had to play Hamlet in order to keep a contract with his soul....when the Apostle Paul says, "Woe is me if I preach not the gospel;" or when Jesus of Nazareth on that memorable morning in Palestine says, "The spirit of the Lord is upon me because He has anointed me to preach the gospel to the poor;" all of these, each in his own way, is expressing the inner urge which drives him on, and he has no choice but to go, and it may be that the quest for fulfillment is the quest

⁶⁵ Fluker, ed., *The Papers of Howard Washington Thurman: My People Need Me, June 1918-March 1936*, 111.

for God; and it may be when I have found that for which my heart hungers, I have found Him.⁶⁶

Like Frankenberry, Thurman is religiously articulating a “matrix of relations,” a multi-layered and gratuitous search for and fulfillment of human value. Thurman often speaks of the inward journey, the quest for the ‘principle’ of God encountered within. But these principles are not encountered outside the domain of lived experience. Yet lived experience should not hinder the experience of God. Lived experience and the expressions of human need function as vital signposts leading to the presence of God. Thurman understands the individual common denominator of society and any condition, attitude, or experience that prevents an individual from experiencing existential truth, as a life-affirming religious category, must be addressed. For Thurman, this commitment funds his public theology. He writes:

Therefore, the mystic’s concern with the imperative of social action is not merely to improve the condition of society. It is not merely to feed the hungry, not merely to relieve human suffering and human misery. If this were all, in and of itself, it would be important surely. But this is not all. The basic consideration has to do with the removal of all that prevents God from coming to himself in the life of the individual. Whatever there is that blocks this, calls for action.⁶⁷

Thurman understands God as the ground of being. “God bottoms existence.”⁶⁸

Therefore, whatever “separates one from, the experience of God, who is the very ground of his being” calls for action. The notion of social action funds Thurman’s public theology. Thurman’s public theology emerges most profoundly in two works: *Jesus and the Disinherited* (originally published in 1949 and again in 1976) and the *Luminous*

⁶⁶ Ibid., 177.

⁶⁷ Thurman, "Mysticism and Social Action".

⁶⁸ Ibid., 20.

Darkness (published in 1965). Thurman deals with the problems of racism and segregation in a sustained way.

Thurman's mystical aesthetics reframes a poetic and existential reconstruction of life. The theological categories that Anderson considers "critical principles in public theology."⁶⁹ finitude, transcendence, God, Grace, and Sin are embedded in Thurman, but not as insular checkpoints in personal piety. Rather, they are languages of criticism, critiquing society and calling for action against all that prevents one from experiencing one's full citizenship and democratic agency. However, noticeably absent from Anderson's catalogue of critical principles, which he derives from Thurman, is salvation. In Anderson's philosophy of religion, salvation falls short of its public and social significance. The symbolic meaning is too embedded in insular notions of religion; however Thurman's description points toward new possibilities for the term.

While at Howard University, Thurman reviewed E. S. Waterhouse's *What is Salvation*, which Fluker notes is little discussed in his public discourse. Thurman writes: "if one would know objectively what salvation is he must observe its fruits. For the individual this means finding a new and larger center of focus or integration, so that the mind of Christ functions practically in character."⁷⁰ For Thurman, salvation, which has typically and historically been understood as personal and Christ centered, is broader. Salvation is less about allegiance to a single kernel of theological truth in Christian dogma, such as "while we were yet sinners, Christ died for our sins." Salvation is theologically and publically rendered truth. For Thurman, salvation functions by way of

⁶⁹ Anderson, *Contour of an American Public Theology*.

⁷⁰ Nancy Frankenberry, *Religion and Radical Empiricism* (New York: State University of New York Press, 1987), 191.

finding a new and larger center of integration. That is, for Thurman, salvation is evidenced in one's character and agency. Salvation becomes an integrated observable truth in lived experience.

Although not evoking the mystical aesthetic as an identifier of Thurman's religious orientation toward life and action, religious philosopher, Nancy Frankenberry's account of religious experience deepens that of Thurman developed in this dissertation. Like American philosopher and pragmatist William James, Frankenberry's emphasis falls on religious experience as a qualitative marker in experience, which is co-joined with aesthetic experience. They differ only on the plane of relationality. She writes:

The distinguishing mark of religious experiencing is a pervasive type of physical and conceptual sensitivity to the aesthetic matrix of relations, leading to the emergence of greater complexity, deeper intensity, and wider range of contrasts within a harmonized unity of feeling. The *felt qualities* (italics mine) of the religious dimension of experience, like those of art, are a matter of maximizing complexity and intensity in harmony. But religious experiencing, unlike aesthetic experiencing, seeks an unrestricted field of value whose harmony involves an ever-enlarging process synthesis of the widest range and deepest contrasts of relational data. The particular set of experiences interpreted as religious on the basis of this theory are therefore those that pertain to the creative transformation of existing forms of experience, enabling individuals (and cultures) to move from narrower, constricted patterns of perception and feeling to wider and deeper modes sympathetic inclusiveness.⁷¹

What Frankenberry illustrates is that commonalities exist between aesthetic experience and religious experience. What is derived from both are *felt* qualities. Both aesthetic experience and religious experience illicit some kind of response. That responsiveness is integrated or synthesized into larger meaning and deeper understanding. Frankenberry's understanding of religious and aesthetic experience echoes Dewey's logic of aesthetic experience as a continuous flow of exchange. But,

⁷¹ Ibid.

Frankenberry says what is distinctly different about religious experiencing is that meaning is never exhausted. Because religious experience is profoundly relational it “seeks an unrestricted field of value whose harmony involves an ever-enlarging process of synthesis of the widest range and deepest contrasts of relational data.”

Frankenberry stipulates that religious experiences: “pertain[s] to the creative transformation of existing forms of experience.” In other words, there is a kind of transformative intentionality in religious experience. Frankenberry’s and Anderson’s descriptions of religious experience, centered on conceptions of enlargement, widening, openness, and wholes are quite compatible with Thurman’s emphases on enlarging in terms of his mystical aesthetic. For Anderson, the religious quality of experience “is revealed in nature’s creative transformations, an openness of particular experience to a wider unity of experience, and a profound appreciation of the complexity of shared human experience.”⁷² Within Thurman’s mystical aesthetics, public theology requires the “implicit sense of broad perspectives, of the range of human life and culture, and of our own limits that constitutes a non-dogmatic wisdom.”⁷³ Thurman’s mystical aesthetics pushes beyond the insular speech situation of academic theology toward a larger felt unity of experience, aesthetically grasped.

In the following example, Thurman redirects Christian narratives, doctrines, and languages beyond insular faith claims and communities toward “enlargement.” Consider his reflection on “What is Christmas?”

Christmas is a mood, a quality, a symbol. It is never merely a fact... The mood of Christmas—what is it? It is a quickening of the presence of other

⁷² Thurman, *With Head and Heart: The Autobiography of Howard Thurman*.

⁷³ Dewey, *Art as Experience*, 43.

human beings into whose lives a precious part of one's own has been released. It is a memory of other days when in one's path an angel appeared spreading a halo over an ordinary moment or a commonplace event... Of such is the mood of Christmas."⁷⁴

Thurman's mystical aesthetic conspires with the meaning of Christmas, directing its meaning toward deeper and wider realms of relationality. The story of Christmas, a story central to Christian meaning, orients believers to the origins of its faith. Thurman enlarges this originating narrative to shape deeper meaning through lived reality. For Thurman, the story of Christmas is not a closed and conclusive event. It is a mood. It is not mere reflection. It is one's reflexive participation in and pervading feeling towards the experience of an open and deeply relational story.

Thurman's language of mood is interesting. It is a "guiding principle" for determining his central message. George Santayana notes: "as the guiding principle of scientific thinking is some connection of things in time and space, or some identity of law; so in poetic thinking the guiding principle is often a mood or a quality of sentiment."⁷⁵ What the language of mood suggests in Thurman is a prevailing sense that the unexpected breaks in upon the ordinary. Like the biblical accounts of the Christmas story, the mood of Christmas continues to break into, "the traffic of the commonplace."⁷⁶

I quote Thurman at length:

It is the cry of life in the newborn babe when, forced from its mother's nest, it claims its right to live. It is the brooding Presence of the Eternal Spirit making crooked paths straight, rough places smooth, tired hearts refreshed, dead hopes stir with newness of life. It is the promise of tomorrow at the close of every day, the movement of life in defiance of

⁷⁴ Howard Thurman, *For the Inward Journey: The Writings of Howard Thurman Selected by Anne Spencer Thurman*, 5th ed. (Richmond, Indiana: Friends United Meeting, 2002), 248.

⁷⁵ Santayana, *Interpretations of Poetry and Religion*, 268.

⁷⁶ Howard Thurman, *The Mood of Christmas* (New York: Harper & Row, 1973; paper back 1985 (Friends United Press)).

death, and the assurance that love is sturdier than hate, that right is more confident than wrong, that good is more permanent than evil.⁷⁷

As with James and Dewey, so with Thurman, Christian claims are true inasmuch as they make the world more intelligible, more livable, and more alive than without them. His meditations on Christmas, a mystical aesthetic display of public theology, are significantly ethical and socially transformative. These meditations are illustrative of the mystical aesthetic performing on the ubiquitous qualities of felt, meaningful and compelling human experience. They are also illustrative of the organizational hope Thurman had for the church he pastored.

For Thurman, the Fellowship Church was the laboratory for concretizing his public theology, an: “attempt to establish empirical validation for what to me is a profound religious and ethical insight concerning the genius of the church as a religious fellowship.”⁷⁸ He recalls:

Fellowship Church was a unique idea, fresh, untried. There were no precedents and no traditions to aid in structuring the present or gauging the future. Yet Sue and I knew that all our accumulated experiences of the past had given us two crucial gifts for this undertaking: a profound conviction that meaningful and creative experiences between peoples can be more compelling than all the ideas, concepts, faiths, fears, ideologies, and prejudices that divide them; and absolute faith that if such experiences can be multiplied and sustained over a time interval of sufficient duration any barrier that separates one person from another can be undermined and eliminated. We were sure that such ground of such meaningful experiences could be provided by the widest possible associations around common interest and common concerns. Moving out from this center of spiritual discovery many fresh avenues of involvement emerged. Art forms provided a natural expression: the development of the liturgical dance, both as an art form and an expression of worship, culminating in a dance choir...And all around all of these and other activities, one basic discovery was constantly surfacing—meaningful

⁷⁷ Ibid., 3.

⁷⁸ Thurman, *Footprints of a Dream: The Story of the Church for the Fellowship of All People*, 21.

experiences of unity among peoples were more compelling than all that divided and separated.⁷⁹

The Fellowship Church (founded in 1944) was the first church of its kind: interracial and interdenominational. Howard and Sue Bailey Thurman simultaneously understood this experiment as the accumulation of past experiences and beliefs culminating in the organization of realizable community. The church was an experiment in actualizing institutional possibilities and fulfilling what Santayana calls the greatest function of poetry: to repair and to rebuild. Santayana writes:

The great function of poetry...is this: to repair to the material of experience, seizing hold of the reality of sensation and fancy beneath the surface of conventional ideas, and then out of that living but indefinite material to build new structures, richer, finer, filter to the primary tendencies of our nature, truer to the ultimate possibilities of the soul.⁸⁰

As characterized by Santayana the mystical aesthetic is repairing the relationship between ideas and ‘the reality of sensation,’ the realm of felt qualities that lie just beneath ideas, and rebuilding structures out of the ‘primary tendencies of our nature:’ our common interests and concerns, or what Thurman more distinctly characterizes as our common ground. It was upon this plane of relationality, an unrestricted field of value, or Frankenberry’s “aesthetic matrix of relations,”⁸¹ that the Fellowship Church was founded. Meaning is rarely exhausted on this plane but widens and participates in public discourse. Frankenberry places stress on relations “to emphasize the social conception of the self, to characterize the “religious” as constituted by the greatest complexity, deepest intensity,

⁷⁹ Thurman, *Meditations of the Heart*, 148.

⁸⁰ Santayana, *Interpretations of Poetry and Religion*, 270.

⁸¹ Frankenberry, *Religion and Radical Empiricism*, 191.

and widest range of experienced contrasts, and finally to conceive the whole primarily as an aesthetic matrix rather than as a rational structure.”⁸²

The founders of Fellowship Church sought to appeal to the varieties of people that constitute American life. They sought to be the “growing edge of the entire community and to that extent [to be] prophetic for America as a whole.”⁸³ The founders sought: “to combine social awareness, spiritual motivation, and creative fellowship in a single unifying experience.”⁸⁴ In an interview with *Time* magazine in 1948, Thurman expressed early concerns with which he and Alfred Fisk, co-founder of Fellowship Church, struggled. The first church had been housed in a section of San Francisco that was “crammed with Negro war workers.”⁸⁵ Thurman explained that he was adverse to the idea of cultivating “a settlement house aura” or becoming “a dumping ground for do-gooders who would get an uplift once a week by coming to the Negro community and helping a struggling interracial activity.”⁸⁶ He wanted “people to come because of the contribution it made to their lives.”⁸⁷

In the Fellowship Church Thurman distinguishes public theology and ethical concern. Ethical concern comprises what Thurman names the “logic of individuality.” It is a concept which embraces the social whole. It is through this logic that Thurman distinguishes his mysticism from asceticism. He writes:

⁸² *Ibid.*, 111.

⁸³ Howard Thurman, “The Historical Perspective of the Church for the Fellowship of All Peoples,” (Howard Gotlieb Archival Research Center, Boston University, 1945-1947).

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*

⁸⁵ Author unnamed, “Fellowship Church,” *Time in partnership with CNN*, July 26 1948.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*

The ascetic impulse having as its purpose individual purification and living brings the realistic mystic face to face with the society in which he functions as a person. He discovers that he is a person and a personality [and] in a profound sense [this] can only be achieved in a milieu of human relations. Personality is something more than mere individuality—it is a fulfillment of the logic of individuality in community.”⁸⁸

Thurman taught members of Fellowship that they were members of the larger society.

He writes: “We were citizens in the classical Greek sense, concerned with all aspects of the welfare of the state, responsible but penetrating critics aiding in every effort to make the good life possible for all people.”⁸⁹ The relational sphere of social responsibility is broad in Thurman’s thought. He believed: “there can never be a substitute for taking personal responsibility for social change.”⁹⁰

The mystical aesthetic operates as public theology and ethical concern. It is religious in as much as it is bent toward creative transformation and aesthetic as it is built upon perception and feeling. The mystical aesthetic is intentionally relational and emerging toward possibilities of human freedom and cultural fulfillment. The mystical aesthetic points toward the growing edge in human relationality. Finally, Thurman says of the Fellowship Church:

It was not the unique essence of any particular creed or faith; it was timeless and time-bound, the idiom of all creeds and totally contained in none, the authentic accent of every gospel but limited to none, the growing edge that marks the boundaries of all that destroys and plunders and lays waste. For a breathless moment in time, a little group of diverse peoples was caught up in a dream as old as life and as new as a hope that just emerges on the horizon of becoming [hu]man[ity].⁹¹

⁸⁸ Howard Thurman, "Mysticism and Social Change," (Howard Gotlieb Archival Research Center Boston University, undated).

⁸⁹ Thurman, *With Head and Heart: The Autobiography of Howard Thurman*, 145.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, 161.

⁹¹ *Ibid.*, 162.

Conclusion

I sought to characterize the mystical aesthetic in this chapter as that which occurs out of ordinary lived experience. The mystical aesthetic is oriented toward religious understanding and deep aesthetic structures which transform, broaden, and construct meaning. I sought to identify aesthetic structures in religious discourse and religious elements in aesthetic structures through the concepts of morphology and diffusion. As well I sought to name the ways aesthetic structures are appropriated in religious discourse, namely through the: ecstatic, mimetic, heuristic, or iconic, discloses the aesthetic intent which may act respectively to mediate religious knowledge, to imitate religious feeling, to persuade toward action, or to function as its own theology.

The mystical aesthetic has public significance as it labors to transform theological concepts and symbols into experiential concepts and ideas. Themes are reconstituted for public purpose as religious experience co-joins with aesthetic experience. For Thurman Christmas has its significance as a story about a particular child born into the world, but it also contributes meaning to lives of every child born into the world. Thurman's mystical aesthetic suggests that the shared possibility that each person has to make of life a beautiful creation from the raw materials each is given. Chapter Three, reveals Thurman's reading of the spirituals as such. The enslaved created a religious life evidenced by each song that transcended the brutalities of their circumstances.

Chapter III

Reading the Mystical Aesthetic in *Deep River and the Negro Spiritual Speaks of Life and Death*

...that he [Bigger, *Native Son*] has accepted a theology that denies him life, that he admits the possibility of his being sub-human and feels constrained; therefore to battle for his humanity according to those brutal criteria bequeathed him at birth. But our humanity is our burden, our life; we need not battle for it; we need only to do what is infinitely more difficult—that is, accept it.¹

3.1 Introduction

In previous chapters, I tried to show Thurman's mystical aesthetic in a number of theorists. Chapter one constructs the mystical aesthetic out of the biographical capital of Thurman's life. According to Dewey the mystical aesthetic is a contribution to genuine religious perspective.² It seeks a better adjustment in life and its effects are producing a meaningful life/world, sacralizing experience, and enlarging consciousness and expression of feeling through the poetic.³ In chapter two, Anderson characterizes the public significance of the mystical aesthetic.⁴ He shows how Thurman's themes are reconstituted for public purposes, toward a deepened sense of human understanding and personal and cultural fulfillment.⁵ Frankenberry shows how religious experience is

¹ Lewis V. Baldwin, "Martin Luther King, Jr, the Black Church, and the Black Messianic Vision," *Journal of the Interdenominational Theological Center* 12, no. 1-2 (1984): 23.

² Chapter One, p. 24.

³ Chapter One, p. 25ff.

⁴ Chapter Two, p. 19

⁵ Chapter Two, p. 19

profoundly relational, co-joining with aesthetic experience that seeks a synthesis across wide ranges of relational data and fields of value.⁶

When relational data is aborted, as is displayed in the epigraph and portrayed in the character of Bigger Thomas in novelist Richard Wright's *Native Son*,⁷ rather than acquiescing to life and its arrangements, Bigger is subsumed by a fatalism. Although the novel is critically acclaimed as having distinctly changed American culture,⁸ for novelist and literary critic James Baldwin, who comments in "Many Thousands Gone,"⁹ the novel plays to formula and stereotype. Bigger Thomas is an urban black Chicagoan alienated from himself, his family, religion, and society. Baldwin emphatically declares that Bigger's characterization has no other possible outcomes other than that which forms the novel: arrest for the suspected rape and murder of two women and an eventual death sentence. Constrained by a nihilistic "theology that denies him life," Bigger never accepts the potentiality of his humanity. Baldwin is excessively critical of Wright, his literary mentor. However, Baldwin's point is not lost on Thurman's interpretation of the Spirituals.

Baldwin wants to counter the nihilistic tendencies of the "Negro protest novel" with another tradition found in black art, one which asserts the complexity of a racialized experience without acquiescing to the constraints produced by the diminishment of humanity. Baldwin is pointing toward the spiritual. The essay's title "Many Thousands

⁶ Chapter Two, p. 23ff.

⁷ Richard Wright, *Native Son and How Bigger Was Born* (New York: Harper Perennial, 1940; 1993).

⁸ *Ibid.*, xxviii.

⁹ James Baldwin, "Many Thousands Gone," in *Notes of a Native Son* (Boston: The Beacon Press, 1949; 1955).

Gone” is taken from the title of a spiritual by the same name. Without directly commenting on the artistic value of the spiritual, Baldwin posits its possibilities:

What the novel reflects—and at no point interprets—is the isolation of the Negro within his own group and the resulting fury of impatient scorn. It is this which creates its climate of anarchy and unmotivated and unapprehended disaster; it is this climate, common to most Negro protest novels, which has led us all to believe that in Negro life there exists no tradition, no field of manners, no possibility of ritual or intercourse, such as may, for example, sustain the Jew even after he has left his father’s house. But the fact is not that the Negro has no tradition but that there has as yet arrived no sensibility sufficiently profound and tough to make this tradition articulate. For a tradition expresses, after all, nothing more than the long and painful experience of a people; it comes out of the battle waged to maintain their integrity or, to put it more simply, out of their struggle to survive.”¹⁰

Native Son, argues Baldwin, is written as if there is no tradition in African American culture pointing toward the mystical aesthetic. Baldwin argues the novel captures the angst, the anger, the isolation of the Negro, but it fails to give any sense of the traditions, the “fields of manner,” or “rituals” that, for Baldwin are co-terminus with African American suffering. Not only is Bigger disconnected from his community, much more, he is disconnected from any sense of communal responses to survival. For Baldwin, the novel fails aesthetically because of the lack of proportion and its failure to recognize that black suffering is traditionally balanced by a comportment of rituals and sensibilities by which the human will is adjusted.

My purpose in this chapter is to analyze Thurman’s sense of the mystical aesthetic as a response to the tragic dimensions of life displayed primarily in his critical appraisal of the spirituals. Seven years after the publication of Wright’s *Native Son*, Thurman presented “The Negro Spiritual Speaks of Life and Death” at Harvard University’s

¹⁰ Ibid., 35-36.

Ingersoll Lectures on Immortality, which he published in 1947. His essay *Deep River* was copyrighted in 1945 and 1955.¹¹ The two were published together for the first time in 1975 “because the demand for them”¹² intensified during the Civil Rights Movement. Thurman argues that the Spirituals are not just codes of social protest, neither are they just attempts at psychological catharsis. The Spirituals transcend the sense of fatedness that befell Bigger Thomas. The spirituals “speak (both) life and death” for Thurman. They display the mystical aesthetic, a demonstrated willingness to acknowledge, interpret, and transcend the limits of human futility through poetic construction.

This chapter focuses on *Thurman’s Deep River and the Negro Spiritual Speaks of Life and Death*. The first section, 3.2 provides a general history of popularization of the Spirituals, then turns to social historians and theologians who have interpreted how the spirituals frame the notion of God. Section 3.3 addresses Thurman’s mystical aesthetic reading of the Spirituals.

3.2 The Birth of Song

Attempts at dating the spirituals are somewhat conjectural primarily due to their oral transmission. William Edward Burghardt DuBois declares: “The songs are indeed the siftings of centuries; the music is far more ancient than the words.”¹³ The following list compiled by civil rights activist and social historian Wyatt Tee Walker notes progressive stages of African American “sacred” music. The shifts are as follows

¹¹ Howard Thurman, *Deep River and the Negro Spiritual Speaks of Life and Death* (Richmond, Indiana: Friends United Press, 1975).

¹² *Ibid.*, 5.

¹³ W.E.B. DuBois, *The Souls of Black Folk* (New York: Bantam Books, 1989, originally in 1903), 180.

- 1619-1800 Slave Utterances/Moans, Chants, Cries for Deliverance
- 1760-1875 Spirituals/Faith-Songs, Sorrow Songs, Plantation Hymns, etc.
- 1800-1900 Meter Music/Isaac Watts, John Wesley, Ira Sankey, et al.
- 1875-1950 Hymns of Improvisation/Euro-American Hymns with “beat”
- 1925-1975 Gospel Music/Music of Hard Times (Cross Fertilization with Secular) ¹⁴

Although Walker argues “Black sacred music began, grew, developed, and expanded in the “invisible church” of antebellum slave society,”¹⁵ many of the songs in one of the earliest collections of spirituals, cited by historian John Lovell, Jr., Jr., *Slave Songs of the United States*,¹⁶ indicate that the spirituals had: “[N]othing to do with religion, camp meetings or otherwise. They were reactions to work, to individuals, to conditions, and to other miscellaneous things.”¹⁷ These songs developed in the experience of slavery.

There is a historical trail, allowing the student of the Negro Spiritual to trace not only the development of song over time, but also to outline the critical research it garnered. There appear to be three distinct, albeit overlapping, periods of inquiry regarding the spirituals: (a) from the 1860s through the 1930s, (b) from the 1890s through the 1940s, and (c) from the early twentieth century to the present. These periods are marked, respectively, by an emphasis on collecting texts and musical scores of the

¹⁴ Wyatt Tee Walker, *Somebody's Calling My Name: Black Sacred Music and Social Change* (Valley Forge: Judson Press, 1979), 38.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 39.

¹⁶ William Francis; Ware Compiled by Allen, Charles Pickard; Garrison, Lucy McKim, *Slave Songs of the United States* (org. New York (Bedford, MA): org. A. Simpson (Applewood Books, org. 1867; 1995).

¹⁷ Jr. Lovell, John, *Black Song: The Forge and the Flame* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1972), 72.

spirituals, identifying their origins, and interpreting their meaning. The four names that most frequently appear in the research on the spirituals in this early period are Lucy McKim (1862), H.G. Spaulding (1863), Colonel Thomas Wentworth Higginson (1867), and William Allen Francis (1867).¹⁸ These four popularized the text of spirituals broadly in periodicals and books.

McKim's "Songs of the Port Royal Contrabands" was a letter originally published in a popular journal of that day, *Dwight's Journal of Music*, November 8, 1862.¹⁹

McKim's primary purpose was to archive and characterize the music she heard from the slaves of Port Royal, South Carolina. While accompanying her father on a trip, she was "struck" by "this new and curious music."²⁰ What McKim articulates is that she heard a unique musical form estimated to be difficult to reproduce by any musician's standards. She characterized these songs as original ballads whose unique musicality is undergirded by sorrowful expression of a "dull daily misery" that otherwise would have gone unexpressed.²¹ Only music provided an outlet for hearing. Only this music, as a felt quality would transpose an otherwise inarticulate experience. McKim understood their value as such. She posits:

The odd turns made in the throat; and that curious rhythmic effect produced by single voices chiming in a different irregular intervals, seems almost as impossible to place on a score, as the singing of birds, or the tones of an Aeolian

¹⁸ Lucy McKim, "Songs of the Port Royal Contrabands," in *The Negro and His Folklore in the Nineteenth Century*, ed. Bruce Jackson (Austin: University of Texas Press, orig. 1862 (1967)). H.G. Spaulding, "Under the Palmetto," in *The Negro and His Folklore in the Nineteenth Century*, ed. Bruce Jackson (Austin: University of Texas Press, orig. 1863 (1967)). Thomas Wentworth Higginson, "Negro Spirituals," in *The Negro and His Folklore in the Nineteenth Century*, ed. Bruce Jackson (Austin: University of Texas, orig. 1867 (1967)).

¹⁹ McKim, "Songs of the Port Royal Contrabands."

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Ibid.

Harp. The airs, however can be reached. They are too decided not to be easily understood, and their striking originality would catch the ear of any musician. Besides this, they are valuable as an expression of the character and life of the race which is playing such a conspicuous part in our history. The wild, sad strains tell, as the sufferers themselves never could, of crushed hopes, keen sorrow, a dull daily misery which covered them as hopelessly as the fog from the daily rice-swamps."²²

McKim captures both the musicality of what she heard, attempting to describe the “odd turns,” “rhythmic effect,” and “irregular intervals.” McKim likens the singing as unique as birdsong and just as difficult to reproduce. But as difficult as McKim finds the score, she ventures successfully toward meaning. She understands that this music is expressive of a life otherwise hidden, unresearched, and neglected by the public. For McKim, the spiritual attempts to articulate the otherwise hidden life of the Negro. Her estimation of the spirituals helps shape the early response to this music. Frequent references to her letter indicate her wide influence in the later part of the nineteenth century.²³

In like manner, H.G. Spaulding provides his own kind of ethnographic research on the freedmen of St. Helena’s Island in 1863. In his essay, “Under the Palmetto,” submitted to the *Continental Monthly*, not only does he submit the words of several spirituals he also includes the musical scores.²⁴ Like McKim, Spaulding is fascinated by this music. A distracting thread of racism drifts through an otherwise striking commentary on what he observes. Spaulding reports that:

The words of the shout songs are a singular medley of things sacred and profane, and are the natural outgrowth of the imperfect and fragmentary knowledge of the Scriptures which the negroes have picked up. The substitution for these crude productions of appropriate hymns, would remove from the shout that which is

²² Ibid.

²³ Spaulding, "Under the Palmetto."

²⁴ Ibid.

now the chief objection to it in intelligent minds, and would make of the dance, to which the negroes are so much attached, a useful auxiliary in their religious culture. The tunes to which these songs are sung, are some of them weird and wild—"barbaric madrigals"—while others are sweet and impressive melodies. The most striking of their barbaric airs it would be impossible to write out, but many of their more common melodies are easily caught upon being heard a few times. This music of the negro shout opens a new and rich field of melody—a mine in which there is much rough quartz, but also many veins of sparkling ore.²⁵

Spaulding's interest in the Negro shout songs was not only an interest in an otherwise unarticulated religious life, but also an interest in a curious display of dance and strange movement. For Spaulding the spirituals speak of the sacred and profane, a syncretistic mix of African religions and Christianity. Spaulding's use of the phrase "barbaric madrigals" are the conclusions of an unfamiliar voyeurism wrestling to name a never before heard music. For him this music is a "new and rich melody," "rough quartz," and "sparkling ore."

Spaulding references the "spiritual patchwork" of the music and its drawing upon several biblical stories at once. For example, he examines the song "The Lonesome Valley." He transcribes these words:

Refrain:	O brudder William, you want to get religion, Ri down in de/ lonesome valley
Verse 1	Down in the de lonesome valley, Go down in de lonesome valley, my lord, Ri' down in de lonesome valley, You meet my Jesus dere.
Verse 2	You feed on milk and honey, You feed on milk and honey, my Lord, you feed on milk and honey, And meet my Jesus dere.
Verse 3	When Johnny brought a letter When Johnny brought a letter, my Lord, when Johnny brought a letter, He meet my Jesus dere.
Verse 4	An' Mary and Marta read 'em

²⁵ Ibid., 68-69.

An Mary and Marta read ‘em, my
Lord, An’ Mary and Marta read ‘em,
Dey meet my Jesus there.²⁶

While the reference to milk and honey seem misplaced given their biblical significance as gifts promised to the people of Israel in the book of Exodus, given a broader interpretation, the spiritual seems to convey that any sense of loneliness is met by a Jesus that the enslaved encountered as a fellow suffering servant. These cryptic images functioned to confuse outsiders, and comfort insiders. The “Lonesome Valley” signifies not a failed use of scripture, but a closely regarded one that synthesizes the meaning of story, particularly as it understands grand themes of suffering and triumph.

Colonel Thomas Wentworth Higginson, the leader of a black regiment of soldiers in the Civil War, a minister, and abolitionist, was concerned not only to record the text of these songs, but also to respect the genre.

Colonel Higginson expounds:

The words will be here given, as nearly as possible, in the original dialect; and if the spelling seems sometimes inconsistent, or the misspelling insufficient, it is because I could get no nearer. I wished to avoid what seems to me the only error of Lowell’s “Biglow Papers” in respect to dialect, --the occasional use of an extreme misspelling which merely confuses the eye, without taking us any closer to the peculiarity of sound.²⁷

Higginson develops a methodology for recording the text of the spirituals. He intended to capture their meaning without any sense of the degrading gaze evident in McKim or Spaulding’s essay. Higginson gained respect for the spirituals from his army unit. He journaled:

²⁶ Ibid., 71.

²⁷ Higginson, "Negro Spirituals."

Often in the starlit evening I have returned from some lonely ride by the swift river, or on the plover-haunted barrens, and, entering the camp, have silently approached some glimmering fire, round which the dusky figures moved in the rhythmical barbaric dance the negroes call a “shout,” chanting, often harshly, but always in the most perfect time, some monotonous refrain. Writing down in the darkness, as I best could, --perhaps with my hand in the safe covert of my pocket, -- the words of the song, I have afterwards carried it to my tent, like some captured bird or insect, and then, after examination, put it by.²⁸

Although the term barbaric is severely imposed as an oft used descriptor in these early estimations of the spirituals, the characterization is quickly followed by a distant and somber respect. In fact, Higginson’s entry reflects a romantic judgment. His use of the phrases “starlit evening,” “lonely ride by the swift river,” “glimmering fire,” and “dusky figures” underscore not just a stated respect for the music he heard, but an admiration for it. Higginson concludes the entry prepared to retire to his tent, a solitary figure, having gazed upon “the other” with empathic eyes. These songs garnered close examination by Higginson and others because of their musicality, poetry, and ability to convey a depth of human emotion.

Later in 1867 William Allen Francis would compile one of the first published books of spirituals, *Slave Songs of the United States*. Francis introduced his study with a statement: “The musical capacity of the negro race has been recognized for so many years that it is hard to explain why no systematic effort has hitherto been made to collect and preserve their melodies.”²⁹ *Slave Songs* consisted of 136 songs collected from South Carolina, Georgia, the Sea Islands, Delaware, Maryland, Virginia, North Carolina, Tennessee, Arkansas, the Mississippi River, Florida, and Louisiana.

²⁸ Ibid., 83.

²⁹

While McKim, Spaulding, Higginson, Francis, and others made significant strides in ethnographic research capturing observations from several campsites and communities, they lacked in critical reflection. McKim noted that the songs were expressive of “crushed hopes, keen sorrow, a dull daily misery.” Spaulding offered that the songs were a mixture of the “sacred and profane,” the natural outgrowth of the imperfect and fragmentary knowledge of the scriptures. Higginson’s reflections provide more of a glimpse of the scene around the military campground than the recollection of “some monotonous refrain.” This first period is valuable due to its vigorous gathering of music and circulation of essays. W.E.B. DuBois makes significant strides in interpreting black expressive culture. His seminal 1903 essay “Of the Sorrow Songs,”³⁰ is among the first to reveal a depth of meaning and hermeneutical value that black slaves created in song.

DuBois’ summations are characteristic of the drive toward interpretation of the spirituals in the second period of writings from 1890 to 1940. He surmises that the spirituals long for a new world. DuBois writes:

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. Sometime 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.”³¹

For DuBois, the sorrow songs, the “rhythmic cry of the slave” breathed an unrelenting hope “in the ultimate justice of things.”³² His estimation is not one-sided. He understands that the spirituals knew a great depth of suffering, a toiling of the human

³⁰ DuBois, *The Souls of Black Folk*.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 186.

³² *Ibid.*, 178.

spirit against death itself. However, DuBois also notes that “minor cadences of despair change often to triumph and calm confidence.” Later DuBois would write: “The words that are left to us are not without interest, and cleared of evident dross; they conceal much of real poetry and meaning beneath conventional theology.”³³ This “poetry and meaning beneath conventional theology” is a significant early twentieth century prelude to understanding the mystical aesthetic. There are hints of a mystical aesthetic reading in DuBois, namely, in his pointing toward the poetic underneath these songs, a religious sense holding together the communal life of the enslaved.

No interpreter more than Thurman acknowledges the religious elements undergirding the spirituals without attempting to explain them through the lens of conventional theology. For Thurman, the religious elements are rather interpreted through a mystical aesthetic. The spirituals are the slaves’ attempt to produce or interpret a life. They acknowledge the experience of suffering and the conditions of evil by demonstrating, through their musicality, its tone and feeling, analogy and metaphor. The slaves move to create through song, acknowledges Thurman, undergirds the creative, reflective, and reflexive understanding of themselves and their conditions. According to Thurman, they constructed aesthetic structures: mimetic portrayals of life through song. However, not everyone who encountered the spirituals had a sense of their aesthetic value.

In 1893 a German scholar by the name of Richard Wallaschek published a book in London entitled, *Primitive Music: An Inquiry into the Origin and Development of*

³³ Ibid., 182.

Music, Songs, Instruments, Dances and Pantomines of Savage Races.³⁴ Wallaschek proclaims: “American Negro spirituals mere imitations of European compositions with slight variations.”³⁵ To that point American scholar Henry Krehbiel in *Afro-American Folksongs: A Study in Racial and National Music* pointed out that: “That there should be resemblances between some of the songs sung by the American blacks and popular songs of other origin need surprise no one.”³⁶ But Krehbiel’s primary argument against Wallaschek is that he did not demonstrate his thesis by analytically engaging a single “genuine collection” in *Primitive Music*. Moreover, Krehbiel argues that Wallaschek’s critique of the spirituals is as much a critique of all American music, an indictment by Wallaschek that America had no native music.

In contrast, DuBois in “Of the Sorrow Songs” argues that the spiritual is America’s only music. In a poignant move, DuBois’ writes:

Little of beauty has America given the world save the rude grandeur God himself stamped on her bosom; the human spirit in this new world has expressed itself in vigor and ingenuity rather than in beauty. And so by fateful chance the Negro folk-song—the rhythmic cry of the slave—stands today not simply as the sole American music, but as the most beautiful expression of human experience born this side the seas. It has been neglected, it has been, and is, half despised, and above all it has been persistently mistaken and misunderstood; but notwithstanding, it still remains as the singular spiritual heritage of the nation and the greatest gift of the Negro people.³⁷

DuBois addresses detractors of the spirituals. His thesis is clear: the spirituals have been misread by many and despised by some, but like them or not their profundity is

³⁴ Henry Edward Krehbiel, *Afro-American Folksongs: A Study in Racial and National Music* (New York: Frederick Ungar Publishing, 1914), 11.

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Ibid., 15.

³⁷ DuBois, *The Souls of Black Folk*, 178.

connected to their origin. They grew out of the experience of a people despised and ill-treated who composed text and tune out of a single belief in the ultimate justice of things. As an early twentieth century social scientist, DuBois' estimation is important.

In 1903 by the time of the publishing of DuBois' essay, the Fisk Jubilee Singers, living witnesses to DuBois' point, had toured in America, England, and Germany. Three separate tours covered the span of October 1871 through July 1878.³⁸ By 1903, not only had an American public seen the essays and compilations of spirituals in text, not only had they encountered a summation from its first black Harvard trained sociologist, but they had heard the spirituals from a young traveling college choir. In 1871, George Leonard White, music director and treasurer at Fisk University, set out with the group of nine students, with all but one dollar of Fisk's money. He was sure that the music heard from these students, all of whom were ex-slaves except one arriving with little else than his clothes, would capture the hearts of wealthy whites and thus secure funds for the college. Their road to philanthropic success was hard won.

They departed from Nashville in October of 1871. They toured through Ohio, small towns and large. After a stop in Cincinnati, Chillicothe (former capitol of the state), Xenia and Delaware their earnings were slim and the crowds mostly sparse. The concert at Oberlin College would change their fate. Standing before a crowd of Northern whites gathered for the National Congregational Council, a group providing financial support to the American Missionary Association, the founding Missionary society of Fisk and many other historically Black colleges and universities in the American south, the

³⁸ Andrew Ward, *Dark Midnight When I Rise: The Story of the Fisk Jubilee Singers* (New York: Amistad (Harper Collins), 2000).

students were weary from their travels.³⁹ Author Andrew Ward reports that the Lorain County news depicted the students standing in front of a “milling” crowd of delegates just recently dismissed from a plenary session, being called back to their seats by the siren sound of the singers. The article read: “The milling divines hardly noticed at first; by one account, the troupe announced their presence not with a loud ringing anthem but with the exquisitely hush pianissimo of “Steal Away.”⁴⁰ White’s arrangements favored the pianissimo style and became “a kind of signature of the Jubilee sound.”⁴¹ Ward writes of George White’s choral direction: “He had a horror of harsh tones: everything was softened; in fact, *esses* were not just softened but sometimes omitted. They were to sing with their mouths open wide enough to fit a finger between their teeth. The singers had to blend with each other, listen to the entire ensemble; no voice except a soloist’s was to be heard above another.”⁴²

The concert at Oberlin yielded one hundred thirty dollars and a promise by the Reverend Thomas K. Beecher, also in attendance, to petition his more famous brother, Henry Ward Beecher to offer the Jubilee Singers an invitation to New York. On December fifth the Fisk Jubilee Singers arrived in New York City. On December eighteenth:

They sang in the famous Plymouth Church (Congregational) of Henry Ward Beecher in Brooklyn. Not only was the contribution generous and the applause enthusiastic, but this appearance put the Jubilee Singers solidly on the national map. They returned to Plymouth Church several times during their winter tour of

³⁹ Ibid., 130-33.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 135.

⁴¹ Ibid., 115.

⁴² Ibid.

New York, New Jersey, and New England. In New York alone, they sang for six weeks.⁴³

Though there was some fluctuation in the group over the course of years between the first tour in 1871 and the third tour, lasting from 1875 to 1878, John Lovell, Jr. records that “Another troupe, with several of the original singers, and permission from the university, toured and sang until 1885. Wherever they went, they were happily received. They gave the Afro-American spiritual a lofty fame and respect which it has never declined.”⁴⁴

In 1925 Alain Locke elevates the Spiritual to “Negro folk-classics.”⁴⁵ Locke writes:

It may not be readily conceded now that the song of the Negro is America’s folk-song; but if the Spirituals are what we think them to be, a classic folk expression, then this is their ultimate destiny. Already they give evidence of this classic quality. Through their immediate and compelling universality of appeal, through their untarnishable beauty, they seem assured of the immortality of those great folk expressions that survive not so much through being typical of a group or representative of a period, as by virtue of being fundamentally and everlastingly human. This universality of the Spirituals looms more and more as they stand the test of time. They have outlived the particular generation and the peculiar conditions which produced them; they have survived in turn the contempt of the slave owners, the conventionalizations of formal religion, the repressions of Puritanism, the corruptions of sentimental balladry, and the neglect and disdain of second-generation respectability. They have escaped the lapsing conditions and the fragile vehicle of folk art, and come firmly into the context of formal music. Only classics survive such things.⁴⁶

⁴³ Lovell, *Black Song: The Forge and the Flame*, 403-04.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 406.

⁴⁵ Locke, *The Negro and His Music*.

⁴⁶ Alain Locke, "The Negro Spirituals," in *Afro-American Writing: An Anthology of Prose and Poetry*, ed. Richard A. Long and Eugenia W. Collier (University Park, PA: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1985), 312.

Locke understands the spiritual as a classic American musical form. For Locke, the Spirituals are an indigenous music with universal appeal. They survive the conditions that produced them. The Spirituals are unique, according to Locke, because they surpass religious convention, sentimentality, and respectability. They are unique by virtue of their “being fundamentally and everlastingly human.” Surviving the temporality of folk art, they emerge through time as the “classic.” Note German philosopher of hermeneutics Georg Hans Gadamer’s definition of the classic:

We might say that the classical is a truly historical category, precisely because it is more than a concept of a period or of a historical style, and yet it nevertheless does not try to be the concept of a suprahistorical value. It does not refer to a quality that we ascribe to particular historical phenomena but to a notable mode of being historical: the historical process of preservation (Bewahrung) that, through constantly proving itself (Bewährung), allows something true (ein Wahres) to come into being.⁴⁷

There are two significant ideas at play in Gadamer concerning the classic: the act of preservation and improvisation.

In the case of the Spirituals, for example, their longevity as a musical form is attested to by their re-appearance in the Civil Rights Movement. Womanist theologian Cheryl Kirk Duggan is careful to distinguish between original, those composed before the Civil War, and redacted spirituals, improvisations of the songs of slaves.⁴⁸ That numerous college and congregational choirs continue to sing the spirituals today attest to Locke’s premise. That these songs are still meaningful for contemporary audiences substantiates Gadamer’s point, borrowing from Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel:

⁴⁷ Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, trans. Joel Weinsheimer and Donald G. Marshall, Second Revised Edition ed. (New York: Continuum 1989), 287.

⁴⁸ Cheryl A. Kirk-Duggan, *Exorcizing Evil: A Womanist Perspective on the Spirituals*, ed. Dwight N. Hopkins, vol. XIV, *The Bishop Henry Mcneal Turner/Sojourner Truth Series in Black Religion* (Maryknoll: Orbis books, 1997).

[T]he classical preserves itself precisely because it is significant in itself and interprets itself; i.e., it speaks in such a way that it is not a statement about what is past—documentary evidence that still needs to be interpreted—rather, it says something to the present as if it were said specifically to it. What we call “classical” does not first require the overcoming of historical distance, for in its own constant mediation it overcomes this distance by itself.”⁴⁹

This emphasis on the Spirituals as “classics,” resonates with Thurman’s own sense of their “timelessness.”⁵⁰ Thurman comments that the two essays that comprise *Deep River and The Negro Spiritual Speak of Life and Death*: “lay bare in my hand the gift which these songs, centuries old, are to my own spirit. For me, they are watering places for my own spirit and have enabled me to affirm life when its denial would be more ego satisfying, to honor my own heritage and rejoice in it.”⁵¹ Thurman’s mystical aesthetic reading of the spirituals argues that black American slave lives were not determined by an insurmountable fatalism. Rather his reading is interested in the meaningful life world they made despite the life-denying circumstances encroaching upon their daily lives.

The third period in the study of the spirituals, the early twentieth century to the present, was revived by several historians who were interested in their interpretation. Historian Mark Miles Fisher (1953) revisits the question of origins. Fisher meticulously notes that eight kinds of “materials” contribute to their making: African belief and custom, hymns of the 18th century, white songs of 19th century North America, biblical narratives, common metaphorical use of the idea of “pilgrim,” Christianity to a limited extent, and American history.

⁴⁹ Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 289-90.

⁵⁰ Thurman, *Deep River and the Negro Spiritual Speaks of Life and Death*, 5.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 6.

Historian Lawrence Levine argues in 1971 “Slave Songs and Slave Consciousness” for the “distinctive cultural form” of slave music. For him the pockets of scholarship that existed for well over one hundred years arguing for and against a white to black influence upon the slave music was futile. Levine insisted that slave music “was created or constantly recreated through a communal process” and understanding that process was key to understanding slave consciousness. Levine sought to move the scholarly contestations away from influences to considerations of specific meanings. Levine clarifies his point: “Without a general understanding of that function, without specific understanding of the content and meaning of slave song, there can be no full comprehension of the effects of slavery upon the slave or the meaning of the society from which the slaves emerged at emancipation.”⁵²

In the late nineteenth and early twentieth century much of mainstream culture was intrigued by the song of the slave. That an enslaved people could make an intellectual and artistic contribution to American culture was barely thinkable. The disdain for “Negro” music was evident in scholarship as far away as Germany, by scholars who dismissed the Spiritual not because of its musicality, but because of their own unacknowledged racism. Had it not been for choral groups like the Fisk Jubilee Singers and collectors like George L. White and later John W. Work who succeeded White (1915)

⁵²Lawrence Levine, "Slave Songs and Slave Consciousness: An Exploration in Neglected Sources " in *African American Religion: Interpretive Essays in History and Culture*, ed. Timothy E. Fulop and Albert J. Raboteau (New York: Routledge, 1997), 71. Historians that emerge out of the 1970s provided significant data citing slave narratives and other primary sources. Their interpretations add significantly to the history of interpretation of the spiritual, but to devote analysis to their works at this time would detract from my purpose in analyzing Howard Thurman’s mystical aesthetic reading of the spirituals. Howard University social historian John Lovell, Jr., Jr. writes *Black Song: The Forge and the Flame* in 1972. John W. Blasingame’s monumental *Slave Testimony* is published in 1972, as well as Eugene D. Genovese’s *Roll Jordan Roll: The World the Slaves Made*. These sources are worthy of full scholarly attention regarding slave religion and culture.

and archived and re-arranged these songs for public consumption, the Spirituals would not have survived.⁵³

3.3 The Mystical Aesthetic and the Spiritual as Art

A mystical aesthetic combines two modes of expression and experience. Experience is mystical in so much that it involves personal encounter and awareness of religious truth. The mystical aesthetic is born of ordinary experience that seeks to integrate experiences of all kinds toward meaning and public significance. Meaning is never exhausted in the spirituals, but finds expression in new social realities mitigated by the religious in experience.

Thurman begins his analysis of the spirituals by considering their subject matter. He insists on three major sources of “raw materials” from which the spirituals are derived: the Old and New Testaments, the world of nature, and personal experiences of religion articulated in song. The notion of “raw materials” is significant. Thurman is cautious not to interpret the spirituals as separate from the ordinary workaday realities of slaves. Thurman’s use of the phrase “raw materials” is reminiscent of Dewey’s use of the phrase “domestic utensils.” They both point toward communal uses of constituent

⁵³ Twentieth century theologians James Hal Cone and Cheryl Kirk-Duggan revisit the spirituals for their specifically theological and sociological value. Cone and Kirk-Duggan read the spirituals through liberation and womanist theologies respectively. African American religious scholar and humanist Anthony Pinn in *Why Lord* reads the spirituals following from Benjamin Elijah Mays’ reading of them as compensatory statements. In other words, the slaves understood that their suffering at present, would be compensated or find its just reward in heaven. See James H. Cone, *The Spirituals and the Blues: An Interpretation* (New York: Seabury Press, 1972)., Kirk-Duggan, *Exorcizing Evil: A Womanist Perspective on the Spirituals.*, Anthony Pinn, *Why, Lord? Suffering and Evil in Black Theology* (New York: Continuum, 1995)., Benjamin Mays, *The Negro’s God as Reflected in His Literature* (Boston: Chapman and Grimes, 1938).

elements of religion and culture that later become fixed objects as art. For instance Dewey writes:

Domestic utensils, furnishings of tent and house, rugs, mats, jars, pots, bows, spears, were wrought with such delighted care that today we hunt them out and give them places of honor in our art museums. Yet in their own time and place, such things were enhancements of the processes of everyday life. Instead of being elevated to a niche apart, they belonged to display of prowess, the manifestation of group and clan membership, worship of gods, feasting and fasting, fighting, hunting, and all the rhythmic crises that punctuate the stream of living.⁵⁴

Dewey is careful to trace an understanding of art that places objects of contemporary interest back into their historical context. He argues that museum artifacts were once mere “enhances of the processes of everyday life.” These objects were tools and furnishings, which marked tribal and utilitarian practices. These items punctuated communal and national identity. In their shapes and decorative marks, they mapped life and perpetuated communal narratives.

Thurman finds in the spirituals, those “raw materials” that signal slave life. The use of the Old and New Testament is not an intent to create a kind of theological system as much as it is a desire to narrate a personal and communal story that finds resonance in a text with religious significance and frequency of use in worship. These materials find their way in song because they “punctuate the stream of living.” Dewey adds: “Art is thus prefigured in the very process of living. A bird builds its nest and a beaver its dam when internal organic pressures cooperate with external materials so the former are fulfilled and the latter are transformed in a satisfying combination.”⁵⁵ The Negro

⁵⁴ Dewey, *Art as Experience*, 6.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 24.

spiritual speaks of life and death because these were the realms of slave experience.

Thurman's mystical aesthetic reading reveals the plight of the enslaved to not only interpret their environment, but also to integrate themselves within it. Inasmuch as black expressive culture is critical reflection on human experience, and in as much as black expressive culture seeks to transcend those elements of experience that disrupt the possibilities of human experiencing, at the point of reflection and transcendence, the mystical aesthetic becomes a hermeneutic for creating and reading experience. In the words of Frederick J. Work (1915), another collector and arranger of the spirituals says: "If any man would read the Negro's life, let him study his songs."⁵⁶

Biblical Resources: the Old and New Testaments

In Thurman's estimation the slave preacher was the single most important factor in "determining the spiritual destiny of the slave community."⁵⁷ Although the preachers' ministry was restricted, the great insight he bestowed to the slaves were that they were God's children. This insight would have far reaching effects and personal bearing upon Thurman's life through his grandmother, Nancy Ambrose, who remembered her experiences with the slave preacher: "Once or twice a year, the slave master would permit a slave preacher from a neighboring plantation to come over to preach to his slaves."⁵⁸ Thurman understood that the slave preacher would have just one message. Although often repeated, this message would take on variations to remind slaves of their significance and validate their existence and personhood. For Thurman, this sense of

⁵⁶ Lovell, *Black Song: The Forge and the Flame*, 119.

⁵⁷ Thurman, *Deep River and the Negro Spiritual Speaks of Life and Death*, 17.

⁵⁸ Thurman, *With Head and Heart: The Autobiography of Howard Thurman*, 20.

personhood, of “being a child of God” was the singular most important germ embedded in the meaning of the spiritual.

When slaves sang of the Exodus, there was a parallel identification with the theme of trust and deliverance found in Israel’s narrative of freedom from slavery in Egypt. The slaves sang:

When Israel was in Egypt’s land,
Let my people go;
Oppressed so hard they could not stand,
Let my people go;

Refrain:
Go down, Moses, ‘way down in Egypt’s land;
Tell ole Pharaoh
Let my people go.

“Thus saith the Lord,” bold Moses said,
Let my people go;
If not, I’ll smite your first-born dead,
Let my people go.

No more shall they in bondage toil,
Let my people go;
Let them come out with Egypt’s spoil,
Let my people go.

The Lord told Moses what to do,
Let my people go;
To lead the children of Israel thro’
Let my people go.

When they had reached the other shore,
Let my people go;
They sang a song of triumph o’er,
Let my people go.⁵⁹

The song begins by situating the reality of the children of Israel. They were in a land of sojourn, oppressed by an overlord, but reminded by a divine agent that triumph would

⁵⁹ Thurman, *Deep River and the Negro Spiritual Speaks of Life and Death*, 19.

soon come. The black slave found this narrative parallel to their sense of displacement, oppression and ultimate belief in the promise of freedom. Thurman writes:

The Jewish concept of life as stated in their records made a profound impression on this group of people, who were themselves in bondage. God was at work in all history: He manifested himself in certain specific acts that seemed to be over and above the historic process itself.⁶⁰

The repeated phrase in the song “Let my people go” is an important point of emphasis. It reiterated for those that sang that their freedom was of ultimate concern to God.

Although other aspects of the song highlight significant textual points, recognizing oppression as the fault of Pharaoh and affirming the work of “bold Moses,” the line “let my people go” serves as both a divine command and a communal refrain of triumph. Moses’ command to Pharaoh becomes the song of the whole slave community. And what is ultimately celebrated is not so much triumph over Pharaoh, but the awareness that God’s desire is for freedom. The song fades with the words: let my people go. Thurman emphasizes the slaves’ use of biblical resources for inspiration and affirmation: “The outstanding significance of the Bible was that it provided the slaves inspiration and illumination as they sought to thread life’s mystery with very few clues.”⁶¹ What they had found true in their experiences lived for them in the sacred Book, stories which the slave preacher had made timely.

A kind of phenomenological identification is a work in the composition entitled “Were You There When They Crucified my Lord.”⁶² The song conveys a felt religious quality of empathy. The mystical aesthetic emerges at the point of transcendence, in

⁶⁰ Ibid., 18.

⁶¹ Ibid., 20.

⁶² Ibid., 27.

which Thurman says: “It cuts across differences of religion, race, class, and language, and dares to affirm that the key to the mystery of the cross is found deep within the heart of the experience itself.”⁶³ He continues by stating that what is inferred is that the singer *was* there: “I know what he went through because I have met him in the high places of pain, and claim him as my brother.”⁶⁴ David Chidester’s aesthetic strategies (ecstatic, mimetic, heuristic, and iconic) are pertinent here again. The spiritual, in this case, has an ecstatic aesthetic function.⁶⁵ The spiritual mediates a revelation by acknowledging the experience of meeting Jesus, a fellow suffering servant, for whom universal suffering is captured in the words:

Were you there when they crucified my Lord?
Were you there when they crucified my Lord?
Oh! sometimes it causes me to tremble, tremble, tremble;
Were you there when they crucified my Lord?⁶⁶

Thurman concludes: “Here again the approach is not a conceptual one but rather an experimental grasping of the quality of Jesus’ experience, by virtue of the racial frustration of the singers.”⁶⁷ Lawrence Levine further explicates Thurman’s point. Levine understands the process of identification as a way of making their world sacred or “incorporating within this world all the elements of the divine.”⁶⁸ Turning to Eliade, Levine notes: “Man [sic] can perpetually live in the presence of his gods, can hold on to

⁶³ Ibid.

⁶⁴ Ibid.

⁶⁵ Chapter Two, 11.

⁶⁶ Thurman, *Deep River and the Negro Spiritual Speaks of Life and Death*.

⁶⁷ Ibid., 27.

⁶⁸ Lawrence W. Levine, *Black Culture and Black Consciousness: Afro-American Folk Thought from Slavery to Freedom*, 30th Anniversary Edition ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007 (originally 1977)), 31.

the certainty that within one's own lifetime 'rebirth' is continually possible, and can impose order on the chaos of the universe."⁶⁹ According to Thurman, this is exactly what the enslaved were attempting to make, namely, a world out of a "total environment [that] had conspired to din their minds and spirits the corroding notion that as human beings they were of no significance." They were, as sufferers of unending violence, re-establishing themselves and interpreting their experience as poets with all the raw materials they had.

Nature

Second, the enslaved also utilized the "raw materials" of the natural world and converted it into meaning for their lives through song. The following song builds upon the movement of the inch worm as observed on the leaf of the cotton plant. Thurman comments that "His movement is slow, deliberate, formal, and extremely dignified." Just as the inch worm created and showed a keen integration with his own environment, so the enslaved sang of theirs:

(Chorus) Keep a inchin' along,
Massa Jesus comin' by an' by,
Keep a inchin' along like a po' inch worm,
Massa Jesus comin' by an' by.⁷⁰

Inch by inch I sought the Lord
Jesus will come by and by.
Inch by inch I believed his word.
Jesus will come by and by.

If you get there before I do,
Jesus will come by and by.
Look out for me, I'm coming to.

⁶⁹ Ibid.

⁷⁰ Thurman, *Deep River and the Negro Spiritual Speaks of Life and Death*, 29.

Jesus will come by and by.

An inch, an inch, an inch along
Jesus will come by and by.
An inch, an inch, an inch we is home.
Jesus will come by and by.⁷¹

The creation of this song shows identification with the natural world and the person of Jesus as a sympathetic rescuer and timeless miracle worker. The inch worm symbolizes the slaves' ultimate sense of resistance. These nature spirituals also show their sense of 'adjustment' to or way of understanding how religious belief intervenes in life. As the inch worm moves, so does life. The inch worm is small and insignificant but ultimately committed to the movement and improbable reach of its body. It is a "po' " creature, with which the enslaved identified their own massive struggle to live, but none too disposable that Jesus would ultimately neglect.

Another example of how elements of the natural world became significant material for the spiritual is embedded in the song "Deep River:"

Deep River, my home is over Jordan;
Deep River, my home is over Jordan.
O don't you want to go to that Gospel Feast
That promised Land where all is peace?
Deep River, I want to cross over into camp ground.⁷²

Deep River, says Thurman, is "perhaps the most universal in insight, and certainly the most intellectual of all the spirituals."⁷³ He claims:

The fascination of the flowing stream is a constant source of wonder and beauty to the sensitive mind. It was ever thus. The restless movement, the hurrying, ever-changing stream has ever been the bearer of the longings and yearnings of

⁷¹ These other verses are from a recording. Fisk Jubilee Singers, *Keep Inchin' Along* (Nashville: Columbia Viva-Tonal 658D, 1925).

⁷² Thurman, *Deep River and the Negro Spiritual Speaks of Life and Death*, 70.

⁷³ *Ibid.*

mankind for land beyond the horizon where dreams are fulfilled and deepest desires satisfied. It is not to be wondered at that in this spiritual there is a happy blending of majestic rhythm and poignant yearning.⁷⁴

For the slaves universal themes were already present in the world around them. The natural world did not go unnoticed. Thus, they created songs employing mimetic structures to invoke feeling and simultaneously provide hope within the scope of human experience. Life moved like the inch worm. Freedom lay just beyond the great chasm of the river.

Thurman launches into a lengthy meditation from the words of the spiritual “Deep River.” For him, the slave sang of the river as the gateway to freedom, but the river bore its own internal significance. He suggests that the river is a metaphor for life; it has a simple beginning; it increases in momentum; it represents process; it has times of draught and flood, and finally has a goal. As every river empties into the sea, every life finds its home in God. Thurman quotes from Saint Augustine: “Thou hast made us for thyself and our souls are restless till they find their rest in thee.”⁷⁵ Thurman gazes into “Deep River” and finds a depth of meaning. It is from this slave composition that he is inspired to provide analysis beyond the words of the song. Thus, the song is read as evoking the mystical aesthetic as expression of the religious and as well an experience of the religious. In using these conceptual materials from the natural world, he reveals the creative and life-sustaining power of mimesis.

⁷⁴ Ibid.

⁷⁵ Ibid., 78.

Religious Experience

Finally, the third category Thurman recalls as a raw material from which the spiritual was composed was personal experience of the religious. Thurman uses the term “religious” here to represent broadly the slaves’ acknowledgement of a worldview comprising belief in God and personal engagement with this God and the natural world around them. Thurman seems to understand the slaves’ religious experience as a desire for meaning within a theocentric worldview. This worldview is theologically sophisticated. Over the religious impulse is a quest for meaning and adjustment, as in the song “Keep Me from Sinking Down”

Keep me from sinking down
O Lord, O my Lord,
Keep me from sinking down.⁷⁶

This song acknowledges and expresses the angst and sorrow of the singer. The song is a lamentation, a prayerful request for divine help for rescue from the full weight of slavery. This excerpt is just one example of the four types of songs that Thurman emphasizes. His list includes songs representing hope for another world, desire for consolation in this one, an incurable optimism despite circumstances, and ultimate desire for and occasional realization of freedom.

When asked by a group of young people why he gave so little attention to the element of protest and resistance in the spirituals, acknowledged by black religious thinkers as early as Frederick Douglass, Thurman rather simply responded that he sought to emphasize and recapture the dignity of the spirituals for a generation that:

Tended to be ashamed of the Spirituals or who joined in the degrading and prostituting of the songs as a part of the conventional minstrelsy or naïve amusement exploited and capitalized by white entertainers. The aim was to

⁷⁶ Ibid., 31.

denigrate and casually humiliate. It seemed urgent to me to explore the ground of hope and self-respect in the idiom of the Spirituals.⁷⁷

My sense is that Thurman recognized the symbolism or as John Lovell, Jr., Jr. says, the “social implications” embedded in many of the spirituals. For example, for Lovell and others “deliverance for the Israelites meant freedom for the slaves; Canaan meant Canada.”⁷⁸ However, Thurman does not acknowledge it. This is primarily due to his mystical aesthetic reading. It is not that the mystical aesthetic has no political significance, rather due to the limitations of this dissertation, those possibilities are not here explored. Thurman’s book, *The Luminous Darkness*⁷⁹, would serve as apt text to argue the possibilities of the political significance of the mystical aesthetic.

Thus, Thurman acknowledges the sense of “other-worldliness” in the spirituals. He references this song, which I call “Shall I Ever be One” as no title was given:

Good Lord, shall I ever be de one
To get over in de Promise’ Lan’?
God called Adam in de garden,
‘Twas about de cool of de day
Called for old Adam,
An’ he tried to run away,
The Lord walked in de garden,
‘Twas about de cool of de day,
Called for old Adam,
An’ Adam said, “Here I am, Lord.”⁸⁰

This spiritual is evident of what musicologist James Abbington refers to as “con-fusing.” Abbington explains: “there is a common practice in religious folk songs that involves

⁷⁷ Ibid., 5-6.

⁷⁸ Jr. Lovell, John, "The Social Implications of the Negro Spiritual," *The Journal of Negro Education* 8, no. 4 (1939).

⁷⁹ Howard Thurman, *Luminous Darkness: A Personal Interpretation of the Anatomy of Segregation and the Ground of Hope*, First ed. (New York: Harper and Row, 1965).

⁸⁰ Thurman, *Deep River and the Negro Spiritual Speaks of Life and Death*, 30.

con-fusing (italics his) the different characters and events in the Bible in order to complete the musical creation.”⁸¹ For example, there is both a reference to the Promised Land and events in the Garden of Eden.

Abbington is convinced by musician, scholar and early collector of the Spirituals, Nathaniel Dett that this practice was not problematic in that “since he (the slave), in making a song to fit his own needs, has inadvertently voiced the cry of the world.”⁸² “Shall I Ever Be One” conflates ideas of the Promised Land with the Garden of Eden where “God called for old Adam” a phrase repeated three times signifying the sense of personal relationship the enslaved had with God. Not only does the song exemplify Thurman’s belief that the slave communicated a hope for another world, but it also exposes a mimetic relationship patterned after Adam’s relationship to God. Personal address is evident in many other kinds of spirituals. Here the address is a plea for consolation:

Let us cheer the weary traveler,
Cheer the weary traveler,
Along the heavenly way.⁸³

or

I’m so glad trouble don’t last always.
O my Lord, O my Lord, what shall I do?
Christ told the blin’ man,
to go to the pool and bathe,
O my Lord, what shall I do?⁸⁴

⁸¹ James Abbington, "Biblical Themes in the R. Nathaniel Dett Collection *Religious Folk-Songs of the Negro (1927)*," in *African Americans and the Bible: Sacred Texts and Social Textures*, ed. Vincent L. Wimbush (New York: Continuum, 2000), 286.

⁸² *Ibid.*, 287.

⁸³ Thurman, *Deep River and the Negro Spiritual Speaks of Life and Death*, 31.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 32.

The desire for consolation evident in the song is marked by a sense of communal identity, “Let us cheer,” affirmation of hope or “incurable optimism” as Thurman points out “I’m so glad trouble don’t last always,” and desire for divine guidance, if Christ told the blind man to go to the pool, then what should I, the slave, do?

Finally, says Thurman the spirituals show an ultimate concern for and the occasional realization of freedom. Notice the spiritual “We Shall Be Free:”

Children, we shall be free
When the Lord shall appear.
Give ease to the sick, give sight to the blind,
Enable the cripple to walk;
He’ll raise the dead from under the earth,
And given them permission to talk.⁸⁵

Thurman makes two points here. One, death for the slave was the only hope of freedom. And two, what might seem a contradictory point, an eventual freedom was also actualized through song. Thurman writes: “There is at least one hymn that belongs to that moment of heartfelt realization when it finally dawned on the soul of the slave that he *was* (italics his) free.” He cites this spiritual:

Sla’ry chain done broke at las’—
Goin’ to praise God ‘til I die.
I did know my Jesus heard me
‘Cause de spirit spoke to me
An’ said, ‘Rise, my chile, your chillum,
An’ you too, shall be free!’⁸⁶

The primary point Thurman makes is that freedom was ever a hope for the slave. Never had they resigned their lives to accidental whim.

⁸⁵ Ibid., 33.

⁸⁶ Ibid.

Slave communities sought and found meaning to the questions of suffering in the texts of the Old and New Testaments, the natural world, and their own experiences of the religious. Black slaves gave the plane of their experience significance by integrating life, religious belief, social protest, sorrow, and hope all in song. Slave life, religion, and culture emerge in the spiritual as reconstructions of reality, poetic constructions both reflecting upon and transcending given realities. Thurman contends: “The existence of these songs is in itself a monument to one of the most striking instances on record in which a people forged a weapon of offense and defense out of a psychological shackle. By some amazing but vastly creative spiritual insights the slave undertook the redemption of a religion that the master had profaned in his midst.”⁸⁷ Not only were the singing of spirituals a ‘redemption of religion’ (a transvaluation of symbols and beliefs that had been used to subjugate and legislate human slave trafficking) but they exhibited a fundamental belief about humanity. They rejected any reduction of their being to slave existence. “O, Freedom” thought to be a post Civil War spiritual because of its open defiance to the institution of slavery, is here the final example of how the enslaved reclaimed their humanity in the face of brutality.

O Freedom! O Freedom!
O Freedom over me!
An’ befo’ I’d be a slave,
I’ll be buried in my grave,
An go home to my Lord an’ be free.⁸⁸

This spiritual is an example of what Thurman called the “overwhelming vitality” of the slave to affirm human existence and to defy resignation.

⁸⁷ Ibid., 40.

⁸⁸ Ibid., 33.

Attitude toward Life and Death

This last section summarizes Thurman's readings of the spirituals. By his own estimation he writes: "For many years it has been a growing conviction with me that the clue to the meaning of the spirituals is to be found in religious experience and spiritual discernment."⁸⁹ Thurman notes that both life and death for the enslaved were inevitable. The significance of the spirituals was not just that they spoke of life and death but they did so through the lens of the religious. The two arguments Thurman makes for the religious confirms the claims made in chapter two that religious experience is not resolved to those ideas, concepts, and habits that function within formal theologies and doctrinal statements. It is within reason, and already established here that slave religion drew broad lines of demarcation in describing and ascribing the religious. The first compelling argument that Thurman makes follows:

In the first place, the facts make clear that religion did serve to deepen the capacity of endurance and the absorption of suffering. It was a precious bane! What greater tribute could be paid to religious faith in general and to their religious faith in particular than this: It taught a people how to ride high to life, to look squarely in the face those facts that argue most dramatically against all hope and to use those facts as raw material out of which they fashioned a hope that the environment, with all of its cruelty, could not crush. With untutored hands—with a sure artistry and genius created out of a vast vitality, a concept of God was wrenched from the Sacred Book, the Bible, the chronicle of a people who learned through great necessity the secret meaning of suffering. This total experience enabled them to reject annihilation and affirm a terrible right to live. The center of focus was beyond themselves in a God who was a companion to them in their miseries even as He enabled them to transcend their miseries.⁹⁰

Thurman claims religion's ameliorating affects. It has the capacity to inspire endurance and to absorb suffering. From it is derived a felt quality (Frankenberry) that

⁸⁹ Ibid., 111.

⁹⁰ Ibid., 127.

which is creative and sustaining. Religious experiencing does not exhaust meaning. Instead it resists the annihilistic tendencies of that which threatens meaning. Thurman argues that through their religious understanding, the slave affirmed their right to live and that affirmation provided possibilities. Thurman's second argument is thus:

In the second place, this religious emphasis did not paralyze action, it did not make for mere resignation. On the contrary, it gave the mind a new dimension of resourcefulness....In other words, far from paralyzing action, religion made for detachment from the environment so that they could live in the midst of the traffic of their situation with the independence of solitude.⁹¹

In other words, Thurman says religion is vehicular.⁹² It allowed the slaves the space to retreat, momentarily, from the urgencies of their situation. However, the retreat was not the result of some "paralyzing action" but rather provided the awareness of new possibilities. Again, evoking Frankenberg, religious experience is profoundly relational, "it seeks an unrestricted field of value whose harmony involves an ever-enlarging process synthesis of the widest range and deepest contrasts of relational data."⁹³ Ultimately, Thurman understands religious experiencing as a significant clue for reading the spirituals. The mystical aesthetic as a framing device seeks to capture the felt and experimental qualities of the religious. The mystical aesthetic also seeks to ascribe meaning to the creative element in religious experiencing. It is the mystical aesthetic, which gives Thurman a methodology for reading religion and culture.

⁹¹ Ibid., 128.

⁹² Ibid.

⁹³ Chapter 2.

Conclusion

What is a mystical aesthetic reading of the spirituals? It is a reading of art as experience.⁹⁴ It is reading the spirituals as the poetic attempt to raid the inarticulate and the absurd and labor at the margins of that experience to create a sound heard as the guttural depth of despair, which composers have argued is almost impossible to duplicate. Religious philosopher Barbara Holmes describes it as “unspeakable joy.” However, it represents Thurman’s reading of the spirituals as the unconquerable spirit of a people creating upon the plane of brutality from their sense of the beauty of religious life. The mystical aesthetic is the indivisible composite of religious experience, poetic creation, and reflection upon what it means to live life oriented toward the beauty of one’s own soul.

The mystical aesthetic is an ‘enlargement of consciousness,’ which the enslaved articulated through their songs and dances that slavery was not the definitive point of reference in their lives. Levine argues:

Denied the possibility of achieving an adjustment to the external world of the antebellum South which involved meaningful forms of personal integration, attainment of status, and feelings of individual worth that all human beings crave and need, the slaves created a new world by transcending the narrow confines of the one in which they were forced to live. The spirituals are the record of a people who found the status, the harmony, the values, the order they needed to survive by internally creating an expanded universe, by literally willing themselves reborn.⁹⁵

Thurman captures indigenous experience and shows how persons interpreted their experience against the landscape of their specificity, and then showed how they integrated religious belief as an interpretation of their own extenuating circumstances and

⁹⁴ Santayana and Dewey, Chapter 2.

⁹⁵ Levine, "Slave Songs and Slave Consciousness: An Exploration in Neglected Sources ", 73.

in light of the possibilities that exist for transcendence. The final move in the mystical aesthetic is an act for the contemporary reader. In whatever time and space, the reader is exposed, indeed invited to perceive the possibilities of the religious by contributing their own interpretation of the religious life given the complexities of life and make sense of what it means to be human. Thurman's greatest contribution to a philosophy of religion is that he demonstrates the significance of religious experience and exposes, even in the face of gross suffering, a sense of the ethical embedded in the religious life.

Chapter IV

Preaching the Mystical Aesthetic: The Sermonic Howard Thurman

Slowly he sought to focus his eyes first on her, and then on me. In a barely audible voice he said, "Do you have something to say to a man who is dying? If you have, please say it, and say it in a hurry.

I bowed my head, closed my eyes. There were no words. I poured out the anguish of my desperation in one vast effort. I felt physically I was straining to reach God. At last I whispered my Amen.

We opened our eyes simultaneously as he breathed, "Thank you. I understand." He died with his hand in mine.¹

4.1 Introduction

This epigraph describes a scene from Thurman's autobiography where as a young seminarian and assistant to the pastor of the First Baptist Church of Roanoke, Virginia, he was called, to the hospital bedside of a dying man. With the senior pastor away for the summer, Thurman assumes all responsibilities. He arrives at the hospital with a sense of trepidation and what had become a familiar sense of "ambivalence" about his life and vocation. Nevertheless, approaching the bedside of the man he becomes dramatically aware of his own presence and inability to "raid the inarticulate"² space that lay between him and the dying man. Thurman writes: "There were no words...I felt physically I was straining to reach God." What he said or failed to say in that moment is unclear. His whispered, "Amen," declared an absolute and eternal pronouncement for which the man expressed gratitude as he lay dying with his hand clasped in Thurman's.

¹ Thurman, *With Head and Heart: The Autobiography of Howard Thurman*, 3, 4.

² Burrows, "Raiding the Inarticulate: Mysticism, Poetics, and the Unlanguageable."

This scene is a representation or mimetic display of the mystical aesthetic in lived experience. In Chapter Two, I argued that the mystical aesthetic rearticulates a quality of religious orientation built on lived experience, religious thought, and deep aesthetic structures. In Chapter Three, I offered a reading of this mimesis of the mystical aesthetic in Thurman's understanding of the spirituals. For Thurman, the black slave in America composed the spiritual as a mimesis of "the plentitude of being" that signifies the religious in experience as that which intervenes in life and makes meaning of the absurd. However, Thurman's mystical aesthetic is not lost on his preaching. This fourth and final chapter constitutes yet another mimetic display of the mystical aesthetic albeit in the experience of worship. Thurman describes the character of worship emphatically: "What bigger ideal could there be than the deepening of an experience of the living God through intercredal, interracial and intercultural worship and the practical influence of this experience in the stream of life?"³

This chapter focuses on the mystical aesthetic in Thurman's more than thirty-five years of preaching. This chapter does not represent an exhaustive study of Thurman's preaching career. Rather, it is exemplary of what Anderson describes as a 'mimetic display' in which the mystical aesthetic operates mimetically throughout a wide range of "indeterminate mimetic surplus or possibilities: cultural expressiveness, representations, assimilations, emulations, dissimulations, identifications, style, occasions, and more."⁴ This chapter treats the mimetic relationship between Thurman's mystical aesthetic, as

³ Thurman, "The Historical Perspective of the Church for the Fellowship of All Peoples."

⁴Victor Anderson, "Authenticity," in *Critical Terms in African American Studies*, ed. Dwight McBride and Mark Anthony (New York, NY: Blackwell, forthcoming).

conceived in this dissertation, and his preaching in which, the sermon operates as a mimetic display of the mystical aesthetic.

The mimetic structure underlying the opening scene imitates humanity's reach for God. Thurman recounts this episode with several aesthetic clues to the mystical aesthetic in preaching. According to him, the man looked to him for "something to say." In response, Thurman bowed his head and closed his eyes. In his felt connection with the dying man, Thurman feels himself "straining to reach God." The "Amen," is the only articulate word revealed to the reader. And the man dies holding Thurman's hand. The mystical aesthetic performs on the plane of relationality and inspiration for social responsibility. Thurman explains:

The purpose of the worship service is to inspire, challenge, instruct, convict, reassure. Perhaps its most fundamental significance is to make available to the worshiper a resource upon which he may draw in his efforts to live an intentional life with social responsibility. It is my assumption that such a commitment, namely, to live intentionally with social responsibility, is that God requires of man and at the same time, it is man's response to his encounter with God in religious experience. Against this backdrop, the importance of preaching must be interpreted.⁵

Preaching in worship is for Thurman intentional, aiming at commitment to live a life oriented toward God and the "other." For Thurman worship has a significant place in the social life. It is a resource from which to draw a sense of public significance through the deliberate use of religious languages connected to public intentions. Thurman describes worship as an integrated unit in which the "ability and gift of the preacher"

⁵ Howard Thurman, "The Relative Importance of Preaching in Liberal Worship," (Boston University, Howard Gottlieb Archival Center, 1961), 2.

should not be “the outstanding thing that is experienced rather than the worship itself.”⁶

Here is Thurman:

In significance and relevance it [the sermon] moves on an ascending and descending scale depending upon what is the total impact that the particular worship service is meant to make. There are times when the sermon is the climax, not merely because of its position in the time span, but because of the particular responsibility that the sermon has to carry in a given instance. When it is the climatic moment or experience in the total experience, then the music, the spoken word, everything that goes before prepares the way for its work. My guess is that generally the sermon is designed to fit into a pattern of this kind. In my own judgment this very seriously limits the creative possibilities of the sermon.⁷

For Thurman, the significance of preaching fluctuates given the circumstances surrounding the experience of worship. He notes that most sermons in Christian preaching are designed to serve as the climatic point of worship. Thurman, instead, opens “the creative possibilities of the sermon” by bracketing the expectations normally placed upon it and experimenting with repositioning the place that the sermon usually assumes in worship. His intent is not to diminish the importance of preaching but to free it up from its often constrained position so that it may operate experimentally. Thurman maintains that: “[I]n ‘liberal worship’ we should not be in bondage to the sermon.”⁸

Although Thurman’s cautionary note problematizes the act of preaching, judging its efficacy by the totality of the worship service, he does not underestimate its value. Advice given him by one of his professors in homiletics cautioned: “The preacher is never under obligation to preach a great sermon but...always under obligation to wrestle

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid.

with a great idea.”⁹ Thurman’s preaching mimetically displays a deepened understanding of the felt quality of the religious as a contribution to an adjustment and reorientation of will toward God and social responsibility toward the “other.” Such is the mystical aesthetic in the sermonic life of Howard Thurman.

This chapter focuses on Thurman’s book of sermons entitled *The Temptations of Jesus* (1962). *The Temptations of Jesus* (hereafter referred to as *Temptations*) is one of two books of published sermons.¹⁰ *Temptations* is a collection of five transcribed sermons originally given at Marsh Chapel, Boston University in July 1962. This was the last sermon series he presented at Marsh Chapel before his two-year leave of absence and travel abroad.¹¹ The three sections that comprise this chapter are (4.2) a structural analysis of common patterns in Thurman’s preaching, (4.3) a semantic analysis of Thurman’s preaching in relation to the homiletic theory of John McClure’s *The Four Codes of Preaching*. (I turn to *Four Codes* to employ methods of close reading, similar to what Sonja Foss refers to as “cluster criticism” in her book, *Rhetorical Criticism: Exploration and Practice*. McClure’s book is aimed more specifically toward rhetorical analysis of sermons),¹² (4.4) and a summary of the mystical aesthetic in the preaching of Howard Thurman as it limns new realities, connects to public interests, recovers aesthetic experience, and enlivens appreciation for the religious.

⁹ Howard Thurman, *The Growing Edge* (Richmond, IN: Friends United Press, 1956), x.

¹⁰ The other book is *Ibid*.

¹¹ Thurman, *Temptations of Jesus: Five Sermons Given by Dean Howard Thurman in Marsh Chapel, Boston University, 1962*, 7.

¹² Sonja Foss, *Rhetorical Criticism: Exploration and Practice*, Third ed. (Long Grove, IL: Waveland Press, 2004).

4.2 Sermonic Summaries and Analysis

Five sermons comprise *Temptations*. They are: “Not by Bread Alone,” “Tempt God,” “The Kingdoms of this World,” “At the Crossroads,” and “In the Garden.”

Concerning *Temptations*, Thurman writes:

They are not five lectures. They are not five critical essays. They are five sermons, having as their fundamental purpose the illumination of the imagination, the stirring of the heart, and the challenge to live life meaningfully.¹³

Each sermon evidences a unique structural pattern: (1) identification of a problem, (2) analysis of the problem, and (3) revelation or discovery of truth or what Thurman scholar James Massey refers to as an “insight.” Massey observes:

Thurman’s controlling concern was the insight, and he opened its truth by all means possible—graphic words, grabbing lines, strategic silence, germane gestures, poetic lines, and the insinuated tension of guided listening. The moment of hearing was a shaped experience, a controlled time, all of which made his preaching a means of vision rather than a classically developed production.¹⁴

According to Massey, Thurman’s intent was to open a singular insight to the hearer.

This idea of “opening” suggests (1) that the disclosure of meaning is gradual, (2) that the disclosure of meaning may be approached in multifaceted ways, (3) that the disclosure of meaning, once opened, may continue to offer new meaning, and (4) though Thurman did not follow any classical idea of homiletic structure, the opening of a particular sermonic insight remained a managed or controlled moment. His strategy reveals the logic of the mystical aesthetic: “Working with philosophic, existential, and religious truths, he sought

¹³ Thurman, *Temptations of Jesus: Five Sermons Given by Dean Howard Thurman in Marsh Chapel, Boston University, 1962*.

¹⁴ James Earl Massey, “Thurman’s Preaching : Substance and Style,” in *God and Human Freedom: A Festschrift in Honor of Howard Thurman*, ed. Henry James Young (Richmond, Ind: Friends United Press, 1983), 119.

to carry the hearer well beyond the claims of custom, convention, and culture, always centered in the concern to make vital religious experience understood for direct appropriation by all.”¹⁵ Massey’s notion of “making vital” affirms that Thurman’s sermonic intent is to encourage participation in experience. Charles H. Long describes this intentionality in Thurman’s preaching as a “critical recentering” in which he sees Thurman as: “a wrecker of structure precisely in revealing the ultimacy of the ordinary....He invites us to relive our lives, personal and communal, to be reborn through undergoing the pains of giving birth.”¹⁶ The following reveal Thurman’s sermonic intent toward the revelation of a singular truth.

“Not by Bread Alone”

Thurman orders each sermon according to “certain dilemmas of Jesus, growing out of temptations which he faced.”¹⁷ Paralleling the biblical texts, Thurman places Jesus’ wilderness temptations in proximity to his baptism by John. He depicts the baptism as signifying new life and affirmation of religious decision ultimately resulting in a change of will. However, the first of the temptations signify a dilemma that comes after a profound moment of clarity. Thurman writes:

When Jesus was baptized of John, a very extraordinary thing happened to him. It seemed to him that the heavens opened and that the living Spirit of the living God descended upon him like a dove and in the midst of this experience, he heard a Voice...and the Voice said, “You are my Son, in whom I am well pleased.”

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Long, “Howard Thurman and the Meaning of Religion in America.”

¹⁷ Thurman, *Temptations of Jesus: Five Sermons Given by Dean Howard Thurman in Marsh Chapel, Boston University, 1962*, 7.

And then he left; shaken to his core.¹⁸

The first dilemma is whether Jesus is to honor his compulsion to hear John the Baptist preach. The sermon then turns to the larger dilemma of the special status conferred upon Jesus after his baptism by John. Thurman surmises: “Jesus of Nazareth had what seems to me to have been a fundamental and searching—almost devastating—experience of God.”¹⁹ To fully understand this moment, Jesus is driven into the “wasteland.” Thurman depicts Jesus as saying: “I must find some place of complete and utter isolation, a chance to sense the bearings of this tremendous experience, lest I find myself betraying it or betrayed by it.”²⁰ In the “wasteland” or wilderness, Jesus confronts a Tempter. Thurman depicts this moment as a battle of Jesus’ own consciousness.

At this point in the sermon, Thurman broadens the field of meaning. He mentions a painting from a Congregational Church in Chicago illustrating this moment. “Jesus is seated on a rock overlooking a valley. That much is the traditional image which artists portray. He is looking straight ahead. As you stand watching the figure, your eyes get adjusted to the light on it, and this is what you see—dozens of fingers clutching at his mind.”²¹ Thurman illustrates the drama of Jesus’ temptation as depicted in the painting. He imagines Jesus becoming aware of his growing hunger, and what had been “on the periphery of his mind” now travels to the “center of consciousness.”²² With special status conferred upon him, why not put it “to work to administer to the needs which must be

¹⁸ Ibid., 23.

¹⁹ Ibid., 22.

²⁰ Ibid., 24.

²¹ Ibid.

²² Ibid.

met in you, if you are to be released to be in the world what you can be. Turn the stones to bread.” Thurman has identified the issue or problem in the text, namely, how to handle one’s hungers and fight against a sense of misuse of power.

The revelation or insight of the sermon is that humanity must fulfill the hunger of the body, however “the bias, the emphasis, the prejudice, the slant of life must be on the side of the hungers of [your] mind and your spirit”²³ says Thurman. In each of these sermons, Thurman reintroduces the meaning and necessity of religious experience by introducing the life of Jesus as the exemplar of religious experience. Thurman presents a problem, analyzes it, and then develops the insight, which grows in the consciousness of Jesus and subsequently that of his hearers.

“Tempt God?”

In this sermon, Thurman wrestles with another dilemma, namely, the temptation to think that life “makes an exception for you.” Otherwise put, Thurman says that part of Jesus’ temptation is sensing a position of immunity that follows the bestowal of preferred status. The Tempter came to Jesus suggesting that he throw himself down from the heights and wait for angels to “bear [him] up, so that [he would] not dash [his] foot against a stone!”²⁴ Jesus simply replies: “Again it is written, ‘Do not put the Lord your God to the test.’”²⁵ Thurman’s interpretation of this temptation suggests that if Jesus had understood himself as having a “certain position of immunity, then the ordinary logic of

²³ Ibid., 26.

²⁴ *The Gospel of Matthew* (NRSV) 4.6

²⁵ *The Gospel of Matthew* (NRSV) 4.7

life”²⁶ could be manipulated and misused. He explains: “Life is rooted and grounded in a structure of dependability. It is this that makes it possible for private enterprise, or the collective enterprise to be sustained by life. If I ignore this fact, the very force of life itself becomes an instrument of death in my hands.”²⁷ Jesus wrestles with the notion that life makes exceptions for those who hold positions of privilege. Thurman says:

If I try to do the best I can, if I have followed the law of my heart, and in ways that were deliberate and conscious, tried to understand the will of God and put myself at its disposal, if I have not withheld my compassion from the needy, and offered my thanksgiving to God for all of the manifestations of graces which he has surrounded and sustained my life, if I have an inner sense of harmony and peace with His Spirit—then this ought to give me certain pragmatic advantages in life.²⁸

Thurman is not shy using personal narratives, and he offers one in this sermon. He once visited the doctor for an annual examination. After all the tests were complete, the doctor sent him home. At the end of the week, the doctor called and asked him to come back for the results. Thurman illustrates the drama of waiting as he sensed an impending change in his future. When he went back for his results, the doctor told him: “You are in fine shape. Your heart, your lungs, all those things are in good order, but you are too heavy.”²⁹ The doctor explained what all the extra weight would do to his internal organs. Then Thurman looked at the doctor who was himself overweight! Thurman reflected: “His body knew precisely what my body knew. We were bound by the same relentless

²⁶ Thurman, *Temptations of Jesus: Five Sermons Given by Dean Howard Thurman in Marsh Chapel, Boston University, 1962*, 33.

²⁷ *Ibid.*

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 35.

²⁹ *Ibid.*

logic of orderedness that provides the structure of dependability for life.”³⁰ In other words, the insight or the revelation drawn from the sermon is that life has a logic, in which there are no positions of immunity. The lesson for humanity was that vocations of service or positions of power do not exempt one from the limits of human finitude.

“The Kingdoms of this World”

The third sermon depicts Jesus wrestling again with the notion of the limits of power. As Thurman develops the sermon, he says that the Tempter approaches Jesus and reasons that although God created the world, God did not create the relationships that exist in the world. The tempter reasons, God has limited power. The tempter goes on to explain to Jesus that not even he had power to change the relationships that exist in the world. Thurman depicts Jesus reasoning within himself about the notion of the Kingdom of God and his deep commitment to actualizing it. Thurman says of Jesus: “The one thing that he wanted to do as the result of this deep inner sense of involvement in the Will of his Father was to be able, by the details of his living, by the procedures by which he structured his private enterprise, to bring the kingdoms of this world under the rule and the order and control of God.”³¹

For Thurman, this temptation represents the dilemma of alignment. Jesus wrestles with whether to get into a strategic political alliance with Rome.³² If he pursued that route, Thurman proposes that, he might give up the integrity of his soul in exchange

³⁰ Ibid., 36.

³¹ Ibid., 45.

³² Ibid., 47-48.

for power. Thurman imagines Jesus, as Governor of Palestine, and that he might be asked to do things that violate his sense of integrity. The main insight is that for anyone: “who is willing to hold the initiative over his own life under God, even death is a little thing.”³³ In other words, says Thurman, Jesus could have aligned himself with political powers to “bring the kingdoms under the rule and the order and control of God,” but so doing, for Thurman would involve a sequence of costly personal compromises. The big insight is that one should not have to violate their sense of integrity for noble purposes. The means to an end matter.

“The Crossroads”

In this fourth sermon, the overall life of Jesus is engaged as a life full of decision making. Thurman argues that summative points are often missed in preaching in favor of more isolated truths. Preaching often focuses on singular episodes in Jesus’ life, a failure in Christian liturgy and preaching. He argues that isolating events in Jesus’ life is problematic because they misrepresent the constancy by which Jesus had to discern and decide the ramifications of a religious life. He explains:

One of the common errors, to begin on a negative note, that we experience when we think reflectively about the meaning of the life of Jesus, is to isolate a particular event, and regard it as something which stands by itself alone, not a part of the process, the story, the living stuff of his career. For instance, on Good Friday all of the concentration of the mind and the thinking is on the crucifixion, as if his life began there, as if there were no birth, no development, no logic. And so it is with the temptations. We think of them as taking place in a moment in time. Once they have been dealt with, once he has conquered them, then he goes on triumphing in the light of this conquest. How unlike our lives this is. Every battle that you win, you must win over and over again, for as long as you are

³³ Ibid., 49.

living and growing and experiencing and developing. This is dramatized in the dilemma of the crossroad.³⁴

The mystical aesthetic as a poetic construction functions here to remind listeners that the life of Jesus was not pre-determined by his status, even if already overly-determined by doctrinal apologetics. Rather Thurman presents Jesus as a moral agent whose decision making emanates from religious experience of God and “others.” The events, battles, and contemplative acts in the life of Christ are described, in fact performed as mimetic displays and heuristic invitations to participate in a religious life. Though Thurman is not given to worn interpretation of the Jesus’ narratives, his representation of these texts are determined by Thurman’s intent to present the religious life as active, open and given to the possibilities for poetic encounter between God and humanity.

After naming critical points from which Jesus’ life unfolds, Thurman says that the last days of his life expose a series of crossroads no different from others that he faced. He expounds that there “on the road that leads out of Jericho, they [Jesus and his disciples] approached a fork.”³⁵ One turn led to Galilee and Nazareth and the other “went south to Jerusalem.” At this metaphoric crossing, Thurman introduces the sermonic problem, which is the difficulty of “being true to the thinking that sent you forth.”³⁶ Jesus was confronted with a decision, go forward to Jerusalem to die on a hill, or to return home and die unharassed of natural causes. The sermon’s insight surmises that standing at a crossroad proffers distinct opportunities that write the stories of our lives.

³⁴ Ibid., 56.

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Ibid.

These moments of decision making determine the texture and grain of our personal narratives.³⁷

“In the Garden”

The last sermon in the series is a snapshot of Jesus’ prayer in the garden of Gethsemane. Thurman says: “[H]ere Jesus is dealing with the most difficult thing in religious commitment: to be able to give up the initiative of your own life; to yield at the core of one’s self, the nerve center of one’s consent to God, and to trust the act itself.”³⁸ This sermon is a finale in which: “The dilemma in the Garden is the facing of the same central problem, the same central temptation that did not ever quite desert the Master.”³⁹ This sermon wrestles with the idea of trust, what it means to trust “the act [of trust] itself.”⁴⁰ The weight on Jesus is whether the one on whom his religious experience was grounded throughout his life is trustworthy enough to carry him through the most difficult times ahead.

In summary, Thurman begins this sermon with an intriguing analysis of Judas, an unlikely start to a sermon on Jesus’ experience in the Garden of Gethsemane. Thurman forefronts Judas to depict the dilemma embedded in all human experiencing. He gives dimension to the relationship between Jesus and Judas prior to the betrayal. Of ultimate concern for Thurman is the necessity in reading the lives of both Judas and Jesus as valuable, despite the common practice of denigrating the one and valorizing the other.

³⁷ Ibid., 60.

³⁸ Ibid., 67.

³⁹ Ibid., 64.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 67.

Thurman begins by characterizing Judas as one who is vulnerable to the lore surrounding the events of his birth. Says Thurman (of Judas):

The day I was born, so my mother says,
The sun could not be seen from dawn to dusk
The clouds tipped all the trees with gloom,
The old folks shook their heads
“It’s a bad sign,” they said.⁴¹

Thurman illustrates that Judas was nurtured by stories like these. He depicts his birth and the ominous dynamics surrounding it as a terrible foreshadowing of things to come.

Judas’ mother worried, the “old folks” shook their heads, even nature, whose “sun could not be seen from dawn to dusk,” warned of a coming gloom associated with the birth of this child. Without stating so explicitly Thurman draws a connection from Judas to Jesus by suggesting that initially Judas found respite in his relationship with Jesus.

Years before I met the Master
I saw his eyes in all my dreams.
Face to face we met on the dusty road—
He spoke: my heart replied.
The pent up hunger of my restless years
Poured forth, bringing the clean limpid feeling
Of pure relief.
We understood without the aid of speech
The others talked their thoughts
But between us only the muted, the crackling silence.
Sometimes he seemed remote and far away
Sometimes as close as air I breathed.
Awareness would not let us go.⁴²

Thurman describes a budding friendship, one for which speech was not always necessary. In fact, Thurman suggests that the other disciples “talked their thoughts,” but Judas’ relationship with Jesus was such that no words were needed. Thurman characterizes their relationship with warmth of friendship until Judas’ becomes cynical of

⁴¹ Ibid., 63.

⁴² Ibid.

Jesus' claims. Thurman suggests that the turning point at which Judas' deep admiration turns to rage occurs gradually the night that Jesus overturned the tables in the temple.

Thurman depicts Judas' thoughts:

At last, Jerusalem and the Temple!
I remember his eyes,
The frightened doves, the overturned tables
The outraged cries.
My heart rejoiced! The end was near
For vaunting Roman and apostate Jew.
That night while others slept, we talked
We matched the secrets of our hearts
Like light appearing in a darkened room
I knew!
How could I have been so blind?
I felt betrayed, outraged, uprooted from my place—
I fought with the only sword my hand could reach,
Not for him, not for my own poor self,
But for God's own holy Cause—
He was the Enemy—no Messiah he....⁴³

Thurman depicts that night as one in which Judas became overwhelmingly certain of a particular truth. His experiences, conversations, sympathies had each indicated something not fully grasped until that particular night. As the disciples slept, Judas and Jesus talked, and then he knew. Thurman does not reveal particulars, but one surmises a paradigmatic shifting, a diremption of all previously held beliefs.

For Thurman, Jesus threatened the “established structure.” Thurman writes:

“And the structure fought back, not merely because it did not like Jesus. That was not the point. The structure fought back because the structure did not want to be upset.”

Thurman makes the connection that Judas finds himself defending the structure. It is not until after Judas has identified Jesus in the dark of the night in Gethsemane that his mistake becomes clear. Thurman depicts Judas reasoning with himself:

⁴³ Ibid., 64.

Now it is done—
And I am alone, bereft—
What I have lost in life
In death may I find again?⁴⁴

Although the remainder of the sermon marks Jesus' internal wrestling with commitment and its ultimacy as death, it is clear from Thurman's trajectory the "difficult dimension(s) of the spiritual life," are portrayed by both Judas and Jesus. The insight, which has broad implications for Judas' and Jesus' situatedness is clear: religious experience as it operates in the mystical aesthetic broadens one's sense of contemplative action and meaning. He illustrates that both Jesus and Judas had to come to terms with what they separately understood as their greatest ethical achievement and failure, yielding the initiative of their life to a sense of ultimacy found in God. However, the mystical aesthetic understands with a greater sense of complexity, that in yielding, a discovery is made that even "death becomes a little thing."⁴⁵

Massey understands Thurman's preaching as a "dramatic moment of sharing in which he used preaching "to help the hearers grasp truth—and be grasped by that truth."⁴⁶ Therein lays the mystical aesthetic. It is a lyrical entry into religious understanding in which Thurman takes great care to use the spoken and written word as an invitation to experience. In summary each of the sermons is intent on providing the listener an intimate look at the various textures of the struggle often embedded in the religious life. "In the Garden" is a mimetic presentation of the drama of the

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ Ibid., 67.

⁴⁶ Massey, "Thurman's Preaching : Substance and Style," 116.

contemplative life modeled by Jesus. The central insight explores trust in God as an act that does not deny the future, but rather opens it to new possibilities of fulfillment. Each of the five sermons provides a single insight. “Not by Bread” teaches Thurman’s listeners that it is common for people to have multiplicity of hungers, but to err on the side of the hungers of the mind and spirit. “Tempt God?” explores the thought that life may make exceptions for certain people, but challenges the listener to live as though there are no positions of immunity. “The Kingdoms of this World” explores the use and attainment of power, but concludes with a caution not to violate one’s sense of integrity for any purposes, no matter how noble. “The Crossroads” illustrates that most people face detrimental crossroads in their lives, but proclaims that the decisions we make are opportunities to inscribe our own narrative. And finally, “In the Garden” explores questions of faith, and insists that trust in God opens us to the possibilities that are often problematic and concretize life’s fatedness.

This first section sought to provide a structural summary of each sermon in the *Temptations*. Thurman’s basic structure was an arrangement of provocation. He introduced a problem and then underscored a particular insight. He relied on the biblical text as a launching pad for narrative development, which reached beyond the text and appropriated new meaning. The next section offers a semantic analysis of these sermons as a way of providing evidence of the kinds of linguistic decisions taking place in Thurman’s preaching. For this, I turn to John McClure’s *Four Codes of Preaching*.⁴⁷

4.3 Thurman’s Preaching Methodology: Unlocking the Codes

⁴⁷ John S. McClure, *The Four Codes of Preaching: Rhetorical Strategies* (Louisville; London: Westminster John Knox Press, 2003).

When at Boston University as Dean of Marsh Chapel and Professor of Spiritual Disciplines and Resources, Thurman was also asked to “co-teach” the homiletics course. He protested against this appointment, recalling the moment: “I threw up my hands. I said, ‘In the first place, I don’t think homiletics can be taught, and certainly not by the team approach.’” He then asked the acting dean to “give me five students from the regular class in homiletics and let me work with them in my own way.”⁴⁸ He split the semester in half. The first half of the semester, Thurman had one objective, namely, to read the Bible aloud in Marsh Chapel and share his observations with his students. Each week they read for three hours.

The second half of the semester he asked them to preach extemporaneously from pre-selected biblical passages but only after he had set a mood in the room with music from his personal record collection. If Thurman had a homiletical emphasis it was the necessity of the production of mood. He surmised: “My observation had been that so many ministers, even those who were good speakers, did not have any feeling for reading the Bible aloud so that meaning can be communicated and moods shared. This is what I wanted them to learn.”⁴⁹ Thurman seems to understand the creation of mood as necessary for hearing. In other words, in the preaching moment, Thurman is concerned to eliminate the sounds, attitudes, and prejudices that impede hearing and *feeling*.

The prior section gives a structural analysis of the sermons collected in *Temptations*. Each sermon was intent on revealing a singular insight. However, in what follows, this section examines the rhetorical conditions operating in Thurman’s sermons.

⁴⁸ Thurman, *With Head and Heart: The Autobiography of Howard Thurman*, 175-76.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 176.

Existing scholarship on Thurman's preaching is distinguished by various characteristics that mark aspects of his content and approach: "effectively [matching] substance, style, and selfhood in his pulpit work," says Massey. Thurman's personality, and the ways in which he created a spirit of brooding in his sermons, as searching moments, is a distinctive quality that accurately describes elements of sermonic experiencing.⁵⁰

Reginald Van Stephens' doctorate of ministry thesis, *The Preaching of Howard Thurman, William A. Jones, Jr., William Watley, and Jeremiah Wright, Jr.*, treats the methods of biblical interpretation, the uses of language and illustration, and voice in Thurman. Stephens casts Thurman's preaching as mystic-like preaching, and notes that there is a "stripping away of labels to speak of a common experience,"⁵¹ "a conversational pace,"⁵² and "magnetic endings."⁵³ In "Preaching as an Act of Spirit: the Homiletical Theory of Howard Thurman," Homiletician Patrick Clayborn argues that Thurman's preaching is "more than an exercise that gives voice to biblical, theological, doctrinal, and social studies,"⁵⁴ it is an act of the spirit. Although Thurman does not espouse a particular preaching method, he is appreciative of the mechanics of preaching. Clayborn notes this from Thurman's unpublished essay, "Worship and Word." Thurman writes:

⁵⁰ Massey, "Thurman's Preaching : Substance and Style."

⁵¹ Reginald V. Stephens, "The Preaching of Howard Thurman, William A. Jones, Jr. William Watley, and Jeremiah Wright, Jr.: A Comparison of Distinctive Styles in Black Preaching," (United Theological Seminary, 1992), 101.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 104.

⁵³ *Ibid.*

⁵⁴ Patrick D. Clayborn, "Preaching as an Act of the Spirit: The Homiletic Theory of Howard Thurman," *Homiletic* 35, no. 1 (2010).

Preaching is a skill, a technique and an art. It requires a particular kind of discipline because the critical tool is the spoken word. The preacher must be on friendly terms and on intimate terms with the private life and particular history of the word.... The critical tool for the preacher is the word.”⁵⁵

The following rhetorical analysis of his sermons explores the mystical aesthetic in Thurman’s preaching, preaching that opens the proclaimed word for public consumption, and invites hearers to experience scripture as living word. To do this, I now turn to John McClure’s *The Four Codes of Preaching: Rhetorical Strategies*.

McClure’s stated purpose is “to provide a rhetorical schema for the preacher or homiletician to use, given a variety of understandings of what the sermon is and does.”⁵⁶ He argues that there are four rhetorical codes that are unique to “the genre of preaching.”⁵⁷ They are the scriptural, semantic, theo-symbolic, and cultural codes.⁵⁸ These codes are “a system of signs, words, or ciphers that becomes a way of organizing a particular level or aspect of human interaction.”⁵⁹ Each code speaks to the multitude of ways in which ideas are communicated in sermons. For example, not only are sermons dependent upon the interpretation of scripture, they are also determined by their historical or cultural situatedness. McClure explains that each code “sponsors” an “intertext” of meaning in which theological intent is either supported or contradicted.⁶⁰ In other words each code bears particular kinds of sermonic content, the uses of scripture, language,

⁵⁵ Ibid.: 9, Howard Thurman, "Worship and Word: A View of the Liberal Congregation and Its Sermons," (Boston University, Howard Gottlieb Archival Research Center, Howard Thurman Papers, 1962).

⁵⁶ McClure, *The Four Codes of Preaching: Rhetorical Strategies*, 3.

⁵⁷ Ibid., 57.

⁵⁸ Ibid.

⁵⁹ Ibid., 8.

⁶⁰ Ibid.

theology, and culture, and in transporting meaning these codes offer another dimension of understanding. They communicate various “intertext” of understanding related to memory, truth, theological worldview and experience. The way the sermon is coded and the ways in which meaning is broadened in its development are dependent on certain rhetorical styles, bearing stylistic distinctions. Code, intertext, and rhetorical style all contribute to the way meaning is created in the sermon.

Scripture Code

McClure argues that “The content of the scriptural code is any direct or indirect verbal allusion to the words of the biblical texts or to the events to which the biblical text testifies.”⁶¹ Any part of the sermon, including scriptural references, is inclusive of the scripture code. Scripture sponsors an intertextuality of “anamnesis,” that is, a “special kind of remembering that intended to move a sacred person or event from the past into the present.”⁶² Holy Communion (Eucharist) is one such example. Here the ritual mimics the original supper that Jesus shared with his disciples. A celebrant invokes similar words used by Jesus. Scriptures are read describing the institution of the meal. The table is set to resemble the simplicity of the meal. Religious communities participate in past events, such as this, for the purpose of participating in religious memory.⁶³ McClure argues that the public reading or reference to scripture has the same kind of memory

⁶¹ Ibid., 16.

⁶² Ibid., 16-17.

⁶³ I made reference in Chapter 1 to Eliade who talked about the archaic communities that sacralize experience in this way. See page 26.

bearing quality. The scripture code promotes an intertextuality of anamnesis that sustains and challenges communal memory and identity.

The rhetorical style in which scripture is used and interpreted negotiates a particular kind of anamnestic hearing. To begin, the translation style vouches for a mimetic anamnesis (simple translation of the text which is seeking to imitate the meaning of the text). Second, the transition (traduction) style promotes historical distance between the contemporary listener and the text; it acknowledges the difficulty in translation and demonstrates that difficulty in the preaching. Third, the transposition style desires a representational anamnesis. This style is text centered and preaching will often take the form of the scripture used. Then, fourth, the transformation style promotes a kerygmatic anamnesis. Here, “Scripture is an evocative agent. Its role is various: to make a claim on, to encounter, to confront, to shake, to break in, to erupt, to disrupt, and to disclose. The text brings with it an encounter with the truth of oneself and the truth of God.”⁶⁴

Finally, the style most closely aligned with Thurman’s use of scripture is the “trajectionist” style.⁶⁵ McClure defines trajection as an act of “casting or throwing across.” It casts meaning across scripture to the contemporary context in which it is used. McClure writes:

Whereas the transformationist is reluctant to contextualize the gospel because of the dangers of acculturation, *trajectionist* (italics mine) preachers are constantly reexamining their own understanding of what the claims of the gospel are today...and altering that understanding periodically so that the congregation’s perception of what the claims of the text are in the contemporary context will not become locked in and stereotypical.⁶⁶

⁶⁴ McClure, *The Four Codes of Preaching: Rhetorical Strategies*, 37.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 42.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 43.

In other words, scripture is best used when interpreted for its modern setting. This style supports a heuristic anamnesis. “The congregation does not strive to imitate, understand, re-present, or stand within the claims of the foundational events of faith; they strive to discover those events and their meaning in their own midst.”⁶⁷

For example, Thurman addresses classical Christian language such as the “kingdom of God.” But he broadens the meaning and provides a fuller sense of the term, borrowing from philosophical notions to describe the kingdom of God as “ultimate ends,” “fulfillment,” and the quest associated with “having initiative over one’s life.” He opens other biblical and theological language, such as “sin,” to mean relinquishing the right to live. As Anderson argued in Chapter Two, Thurman sought the public significance of theological and religious terms. Thurman broadened meaning beyond their Christian contexts. This resulted in preaching that spoke both to the church and broader public arenas.

Massey articulates the trajectory of rhetorical style in Thurman’s preaching. He writes: “Working with philosophic, existential, and religious truths, he sought to carry the hearer well beyond the claims of custom, convention, and culture, always centered in the concern to make vital religious experience understood for direct appropriation by all.”⁶⁸ Consider the following example from Thurman’s sermon, “The Kingdoms of this World:”

Today we are considering the dilemmas created by a very deep and searching sense of commitment which Jesus had to the Kingdom of

⁶⁷ Ibid., 45.

⁶⁸ Massey, "Thurman's Preaching : Substance and Style," 112.

God. And even more than a commitment to the Kingdom of God, a deep sense of the way life had unfolded in him, particularly, since the moment of high and staggering illumination at the baptism.⁶⁹

As has already been noted, Thurman broadens the sense of “Kingdom of God,” beyond local and denominational loyalties and suggests that this relationship is characterized by a deep and abiding search for and commitment to God. However, McClure raises two potential problems with the trajectionist style, “ideological truncation” and “contradiction.” Meaning may get truncated as it is severed from its classical sense or those hearing the sermon may sense a contradiction in modern interpretation. Ultimately, McClure’s caution involves those hearing the trajectionist not relating or buying into the new meaning forged from the text especially, if they sense that new interpretations are not connected to the past from which they emerge.⁷⁰ However, in most cases in the *Temptations*, Thurman balances the use of the trajectionist style by using the text so generously in his sermons. In each of the sermons, Thurman returns, as a matter of habit, to the events in the text. Thurman does not give specifics about the book, chapter, or verse, but the narrative of the text is included in his analysis.[

Semantic Code

The semantic code refers to “the meaning of the sermon or, more profoundly, it is the meaning of the gospel as it is encoded in the language of the sermon.”⁷¹ McClure states further that “[w]hen you think about the content of the semantic code in sermons,

⁶⁹ Thurman, *Temptations of Jesus: Five Sermons Given by Dean Howard Thurman in Marsh Chapel, Boston University, 1962*, 44-45.

⁷⁰ McClure, *The Four Codes of Preaching: Rhetorical Strategies*, 45.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 53.

then you must focus on phrases or statements that actually signify meaning.”⁷² The semantic code is undergirded by the intertext of truth. In other words, truth is articulated in community through the semantics of preaching. McClure writes: “[T]ruth statements are simply the kinds of messages that help shape what is held to be true in a congregation. What a congregation and preacher hold to be true for their community is the language—shaped reality or intertext of truth in that community.”⁷³

The rhetorical styles associated with the transmittal of truth in sermons are the connotative and denotative styles. Thurman’s rhetorical style is clearly connotative. Thurman “manages meaning by delaying meaning.”⁷⁴ McClure offers a substyle, the “artistic,” which also understands how Thurman manages the sermonic moment “in a way that brings that content to light as if for the first time.”⁷⁵ Thurman’s interest in promoting the formation of ideas in consciousness fits well with this sense of McClure’s artistic substyle. It is what Massey refers to as an invitation to *experience* truth.⁷⁶ In chapter Two, Long references the sermon “Not By Bread Alone,” which he heard Thurman preach. He describes Thurman’s deliberate oratorical speed as if to slow-down the interpretation of Jesus’ wilderness temptations.

Long describes Thurman focusing on the painting of Jesus in the wastelands, struggling to remember the importance of maintaining his fast. Here, in this struggle, Jesus recalls with ease, “Man shall not live by bread.” By using a rhetorical delay of

⁷² Ibid., 56.

⁷³ Ibid., 57.

⁷⁴ Ibid., 66.

⁷⁵ Ibid., 63.

⁷⁶ Massey, “Thurman's Preaching : Substance and Style,” 117.

meaning, Thurman's sermon begins to explore the necessity of bread for the human body. He reinforces this necessity by restating Jesus' words: "Man shall not live by bread." He also reinforces the delay, by suggesting that Jesus had not remembered the end of the phrase, until out of the corner of his mind large bold letters appeared in his psyche—ALONE! "MAN SHALL NOT LIVE BY BREAD ALONE!" Thurman tags the word, alone, as the inevitable exclamation point. This sermon models a delay of meaning artistically woven for the purposes of drama and poetry. With artistic surety, Thurman is interested in showing a thoughtful, deliberate Jesus.

Theo-Symbolic Code

McClure's third code is the theo-symbolic. He distinguishes this code from the scripture and semantic codes. The theo-symbolic emerges as the church's faith story is articulated through the sermon. He writes:

Embedded within the preacher's semantic lexicon is the theo-symbolic code, which is reflected in the preacher's semantic efforts but is not equal to them. Whereas the semantic code is in many ways a product of the preacher's reactions or commitments to various theological and nontheological paradigms of meaning, the theo-symbolic code represents the emergent or full-blown theological model or structure that manifests itself in the language of the preacher's sermons.⁷⁷

The theo-symbolic code signifies "the roles theological symbols play in a larger theological structure that exists in the preacher's homiletic rhetoric."⁷⁸ Evoking scholar of structural semantics and semiotics, A.J. Greimas, each of the following "actants" shape the narrative action in the sermon (consciously or unconsciously): (1) the giver or sender,

⁷⁷ McClure, *The Four Codes of Preaching: Rhetorical Strategies*, 93.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 95.

(2) receiver, (3) the object, (4) subject, (5) helper, and (6) the opponent.⁷⁹ These symbols are at play in sermons cultivating, affirming, or challenging the congregation's worldview.

The giver is associated with the actions of God. For Thurman, the giver is articulated as the Voice of God, the Eternal, and Father. (2) The receiver is associated with humanity and creation. The receiver is the "ultimate beneficiary." The receiver is represented in *Temptations* as "the soul," "the activity of man," or the "children of God." (3) The object is the "desired object in the narrative."⁸⁰ The object is associated with "the many embodiments of redemption in the Christian narrative (eschatology, doctrines of redemption, and grace)."⁸¹ In *Temptations*, the object is represented as the kingdom of God, courage, fulfillment, healing, and sometimes as forgiveness, vitality, community and freedom. In Thurman's preaching, the object is inclusive of a variety of claims upon human life.

(4) McClure defines the subject as "symbolizations of Christ and Community." The subject is the hero or protagonist in the narrative.⁸² Christ and community are the most common subjects in Thurman's preaching. (5) The helper is defined as "the donor or enabler in the narrative without whose help the hero would not be able to attain the object."⁸³ McClure suggests a classical list of helpers that includes: the Spirit of God/Christ, the church, the sacraments, the Bible, and ministers. In Thurman's preaching

⁷⁹ Ibid., 97.

⁸⁰ Ibid.

⁸¹ Ibid., 97.

⁸² Ibid.

⁸³ Ibid., 97.

the actants are very broad. For Thurman, they may be traditional sources, personal stories, proverbs from various cultures, poetry, paintings, science, philosophy, nature, his own books, references to the study of mysticism, and personal interest stories from the news.

(6) The opponent is described as “the villain or false hero who impedes the efforts of the subject.”⁸⁴ The opponent may be symbolically located as sin, evil, the fall, or temptation. Among these, Thurman also locates this symbol with empire, fear, and relinquishing the right to live. Opponents always threaten the subject, but rarely overcome the subject. In *Temptations*, the opponent appears at the forefront of the drama. Although Thurman’s sermons rarely end in celebration, he nevertheless concludes each with insightful challenges. Thurman writes, “And he [Jesus] discovered that for a man who is willing to hold the initiative over his own life under God, even death is a little thing. Somehow he can stand whatever life does to him....Where do you stand? Where?”⁸⁵

The theo-symbolic code establishes the intertextuality of worldview. McClure understands that: “In preaching, worldviews are not only authorized and defended through interaction with the biblical text but also sometimes explored, critiqued, and changed through that interaction.”⁸⁶ Thurman may be understood as displaying a “high-negative style,” in his preaching method, which according to McClure supports an “oppositional worldview.” McClure writes:

⁸⁴ Ibid.

⁸⁵ Thurman, *Temptations of Jesus: Five Sermons Given by Dean Howard Thurman in Marsh Chapel, Boston University, 1962*, 49.

⁸⁶ McClure, *The Four Codes of Preaching: Rhetorical Strategies*, 102.

The congregation may be characterized as a community that recognizes, confronts, and suffers together in their confrontation with the sin and evil that threatens both the individual and the community....No matter what the semantic content of this structure is, the vision of an object willed but not yet received—the vision of partial resolution—dominates the preachers picture of the way things really are.⁸⁷

Because preaching of this sort identifies an opponent and only the possibility for “partial resolution,” McClure warns that two problems may arise: the problem of moralism and the problem of martyrdom. In other words, the temptation is to over-use the opponent with little hope of ever over-coming it. Thurman possibly avoids this impasse because the opponents in Thurman’s structure are not personal sins, but totalities that vilify religious experience.

The theo-Symbolic code displayed in Thurman reveals two important insights. First, the “object of desire” provides an expanded sense of Christian doctrine beyond the notion of personal salvation. The object of desire is fulfillment, vitality, and a broad sense of community. The object of desire is an enlivening of religion. Secondly, the “helper” moves beyond the traditional sources. The helpers are multitudinous. Helpers are found in a matrix of relations and the Giver is positioned as always awaiting encounter. Secondly, Thurman’s worldview is iconoclastic to both the church, as he challenges the efficacy of dogma and creed, and society as he stands in opposition to that which threatens personality. Thurman’s use of the theo-symbolic code reinforces his reliance upon personal encounter as a necessary marker of the mystical aesthetic.

⁸⁷ Ibid., 113.

Cultural Code

McClure's final code is the cultural code. Thurman's cultural code is stylized as "dialectical." This style welcomes the inclusion of cultural materials, but worries that they may be inadequate for fully transmitting beliefs about the gospel.⁸⁸ Thurman however is "synthetic" insofar as he looks for "appropriate meaning coordinates, rather than a wholesale rejection of culture or acceptance of culture by committing to transform it by first 'redeeming' its symbols."⁸⁹ McClure writes: "The preacher in this style can look deeply into the fabric of ordinary human experience and see figures for the various aspects of the Christian message where Christians are not explicitly involved."⁹⁰

The culture code in Thurman's preaching appears to have great affinities with womanist and feminist homileticians who favor weaving culture with narrative structures in scripture as a form of relating, connecting, and re-inscribing the gospel for its contemporary context. For such preachers, the word is perpetually becoming flesh. For instance, Teresa Fry Brown Professor of Homiletics at Emory University, Candler School of Theology, defines preaching as, "the verbal or nonverbal communication of the inward manifestation of a command by the Holy Spirit to relate to others something about God's presence, purpose, and power in one's life and in the lives of all humanity."⁹¹ In *Weaving the Sermon: Preaching in a Feminist Perspective*, professor of preaching and worship Christine Smith writes, "Seeing weaving as a way of life at the center of one's spirituality

⁸⁸ Ibid., 149.

⁸⁹ Ibid., 150.

⁹⁰ Ibid., 150-51.

⁹¹ Kelly Brown Douglas, *What's Faith Got to Do with It: Black Bodies/Christian Souls* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 2005), 17.

and at the heart of one's preaching requires the capacity and commitment to make connections. One is called to see one's own unique life tapestry as fundamentally and intimately related and interwoven with the tapestries of all others."⁹² Thurman uses culture as a tool that points toward, undergirds, and constructs the totality of religious meaning as it is manifested in sacred text and human life.

McClure's four codes: (1) scripture, (2) semantic, (3) theo-symbolic, and (4) cultural, contribute to the layers of meaning in any given sermon, argues McClure. In this section, I applied them to Thurman's *Temptations* as a way of providing a close reading of his sermons and rhetorically analyzing his manner of preaching. It is my contention that in Thurman's preaching the four codes arc toward the mystical aesthetic. Thurman uses a trajectionist scripture code that cast new interpretations from scripture references, and these new interpretations intend transformation of communities. Moreover, the semantic code performs a delay of meaning and artistically holds truth-claims open and inclusive of the vitality of religious experience. Furthermore, Thurman's use of the theo-symbolic code is expressed as a world-view that supports religious experience in culture and not apart from it. Although he seems to portray a high-negative symbolic style, the good news is always discoverable, and although the community may never sense a state of utter fulfillment, it senses its public significance. Finally, the cultural code selects cultural materials that mimetically display God's relationship with humanity, presented and given in their various cultural products that keep religious experience an ever broadening center of integration.

⁹² Christine M. Smith, *Weaving the Sermon: Preaching in a Feminist Perspective* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1989), 18.

Conclusion

In *Temptations*, Thurman represents the religious experience of Jesus as a clue toward providing “a genuine depth of understanding which reveals specific characteristic values which had previously passed unnoticed.”⁹³ Thurman’s mystical aesthetic in preaching limns new meanings by separating the person of Jesus from the dogmatic tradition from which he is usually interpreted and reincorporating Jesus’ experiences into the rhetorical life of the congregation. Not only is Jesus the center of these sermons, intertextually, so is humanity. Thurman’s preaching deliberately deploys religious languages with meanings beyond theological parochialism. Massey argues that Thurman sought to “remove the strangeness, difficulty, and unfamiliarity of religious concepts to make them understood for practical use in the life of faith and daily work.”⁹⁴ For Thurman, language, concerning the Kingdom of God, does not point to an unachievable vision, but toward human fulfillment and freedom. The Kingdom of God is articulated as community coming into consciousness of itself as a divine community and as mimesis of the ineffable and transcendent realities of God that include what Frankenberry describes as an “aesthetic matrix of human relations.” Thurman’s mystical aesthetic poetically provides broad perspectives of human life and culture. In preaching, the mystical aesthetic enlivens religious experience with mystery and depth.

Thurman is often criticized as departing from what is often associated with Black preaching. He is non-invested in celebratory aspects of black preaching that evokes: shouting, dancing, and other acts of celebration common to black styles of worship.

⁹³ T.M. Greene, "Artistic Greatness," in *Aesthetics*, ed. Jerome Stolnitz, *Sources in Philosophy* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1965), 81.

⁹⁴ Massey, "Thurman's Preaching : Substance and Style," 112.

However, social ethics and professor of preaching Evans Crawford, Jr. has argued that Thurman's preaching style is not atypical of the call and response style in the black church. Rather, he is convinced that the manner in which Thurman employs silences invites a "participant proclamation," a climate where silence can be shared between the preacher and the congregation.⁹⁵ Although a novel, yet convincing suggestion, Thurman's preaching transcends the institutional church. It is a bridge between the "invisible institution" of his grandmother's youth and the black denominationalism of Thurman's youth. In the intentional sermonic life of Thurman, "much of the content of the preaching has been in terms of deepening the spiritual life of the people."⁹⁶

McClure's *Codes* helps to rhetorically map this "deepening process" and its spiritual demands. Through structural and rhetorical analysis, we see that preaching reveals the sermonic life of Howard Thurman. Through this revelation, in a simple "Amen," inarticulate spaces of lived experience with congregations, as even with a dying man, come to speech and language, or in *Deep Symbols*, what esteemed theologian Edward Farley described as words of power,⁹⁷ both in what is spoken and in the delays of silence.

⁹⁵ Clayborn, "Preaching as an Act of the Spirit: The Homiletic Theory of Howard Thurman."

⁹⁶ See Chapter One, page 13.

⁹⁷ Edward Farley, *Deep Symbols: Their Postmodern Effacement and Reclamation* (Valley Forge, PN: Trinity Press International, 1996) pp.1-7.

Conclusion

For Howard Washington Thurman, there was an art to producing meaning. He was not merely content to explain an idea. He was no mere theoretician explaining the history, function, and meaning of mysticism. He was an artist inviting readers to see for themselves how religious experience expresses itself and how it lays claim upon the world of human interaction. Thurman was a mystic, but more he was a poet. This interpretation fueled this dissertation as I sought to identify, construct, and characterize the hermeneutic theory whereby Thurman interpreted and reconstructed mystical experience within the mystical aesthetic. Each chapter expanded the core thesis that the mystical aesthetic was the primary orientation of Thurman's writings. The mystical aesthetic is the active, reflective, and reflexive intention of a religious life.

Chapter One, sought to ground the mystical aesthetic in Thurman's biography. Thurman had significant educational experiences that grounded his understanding of religion. After graduating from high school at Florida Baptist Academy, he matriculated at Morehouse where he majored in economics. During a summer philosophy course at Columbia University, after his sophomore year, he studied John Dewey and William James. He graduated from Morehouse with honors and enrolled at Rochester Theological Seminary, a theological center for the study of the Social Gospel. He then pastored a church in Oberlin, OH where he came across a book by Quaker mystic Rufus Jones. After a little research, he discovered Jones taught at Haverford College, and Thurman was compelled again toward the study of religion, and spent a semester engaged in a course on the mystics. He is then afforded the opportunity to teach at Morehouse and

Spelman and later Howard University. At both campuses, he also served as Dean of the Chapel. Thurman pastored a church once more in San Francisco, the Church for the Fellowship of All Peoples, and then assumed his last teaching post at Boston University, where again he served as Dean of the Chapel.

More importantly, Thurman's home life as a boy allowed him the space to stand in critical distance from the church that he grew to love. His grandmother, Nancy Ambrose, taught Thurman a critical biblical hermeneutic that she learned while listening to the preachers that traveled to her plantation. She learned to distrust the white preachers who only preached obedience and to appreciate the black slave preacher who reminded them that they were God's children. From Ambrose, Thurman encountered the traditions and beliefs of the invisible institution. He learns that the religion of the slaves was centered on experience of God, not just in organized worship, but also through ordinary daily experience. Thurman's religious sensibilities were sharpened in nature where he found comfort and a sense of companionship.

Finally, I argued in Chapter One that Thurman was a precursor to black theology, although the black theological project departed from any significant analysis of religious experience. This departure produced certain failings in the black theology project according to Luther Smith. Thurman's mystical aesthetic offered Thurman an unorthodox method for understanding the significance of the religious. I turned to Dewey to explain what I found in Thurman as a broadened understanding of the religious as "genuine perspective" and "better adjustment." Thurman's mystical aesthetic was producing a meaningful life world, sacralizing experience, and functioning as the poetic.

Chapter Two developed the concept of the mystical aesthetic more fully. I argued that Thurman's mystical aesthetic reveals a particular impulse and intention. Religious experience is supported by aesthetic structures that function to deepen the meaning of religious experience and broaden the way in which lived experience is understood. David Chidester offered a number of possibilities for identifying aesthetic structures in religion. By identifying the structures, he argues, one can better understand how religion and art work simultaneously to make meaning. Each strategy Chidester names, the: ecstatic, mimetic, heuristic, and iconic disclose aesthetic structures that are constitutive elements circulating dynamically in Thurman's mystical aesthetic. Thurman's mystical aesthetic serves to mediate understanding between the artist and God (ecstatic); the mystical aesthetic represented and imitated universal themes in religion (mimetic); the mystical aesthetic strives to affect hearers toward moral consciousness (heuristic); and finally, the mystical aesthetic functions to make poetry analogous to theology, such as in Thurman's prose-poems (iconic).

To further the personal and public religious significance of the mystical aesthetic, I utilized religious philosophers, Victor Anderson and Nancy Frankenberry. Thurman sought to find new and larger centers of meaning, theological terms reconstituted for public purposes. These centers of understanding sought more human understanding and a deeper sense of cultural fulfillment as that which is interested in connecting spirituality, public discourse, and the exercise of democratic citizenship (Anderson). The intersections of practices, beliefs, and experiences are important to Thurman's ever expanding centers of meaning. Frankenberry described it as "unrestricted fields of value whose harmony involves an ever-enlarging process synthesis of the widest range and

deepest contrasts of relational data.” Religious experience, even mystical experience is profoundly relational. It interacts with God, self, others, symbols, texts, and public interests. In other words, the mystical aesthetic is built on lived experience. It points toward the growing edge in relationality.

Chapters three and four were display chapters. Chapter Three reads the mystical aesthetic in Thurman’s book *Deep River and the Negro Spiritual Speaks of Life and Death*. I make the point that when relational data is aborted or cut off from experiencing, the result is fatalism, evidenced in Richard Wright’s *Native Son*. James Baldwin’s critique is that the book captures the angst of the Negro but fails to give any sense of the traditions and rituals that are co-terminus with African American suffering. Ultimately, for Baldwin, Wright’s novel fails aesthetically because it does not recognize any options for black suffering other than nihilistic ones, in which the main character ultimately suffers. Thurman recognizes another option in the creation of the spirituals, and argues that the mystical aesthetic is a response to the tragic dimensions of life.

Chapter Three begins with the historical context and analysis of the spirituals. I identified three periods of inquiry regarding the study of the spirituals. Again, Thurman’s use of the mystical aesthetic is buttressed by Dewey’s notion of art as “prefigured in the very process of living.” For Thurman, the spirituals are slaves’ interpretations and integration of their environment and reflective of the various kinds of relationality they experienced. The significance of Thurman’s interpretation of the spirituals is that it extended the way in which the spirituals had been interpreted for decades. They were not only protest songs, though they sang of freedom. They were not merely compensatory songs, though they sang of an eternal justice. Thurman revealed

that these songs demonstrate the ability of slaves to integrate their various experiences and place them on the plane of “an expanded universe,” poetically creating, even under the most inhumane suffering, a glimpse of the religious life. Thurman’s mystical aesthetic reading of the spirituals offers an important example of the ethical and religious life of the enslaved.

Finally Chapter Four displays the mystical aesthetic in the preaching of Howard Thurman. Thurman’s book *Temptations of Jesus* treats the mimetic relationship between his mystical aesthetic and preaching. His preaching mimetically displays a deepened sense of the felt quality of the religious as it contributes the ideas of adjustment and reorientation of the will toward God and social responsibility toward the “other.” I began with a structural analysis of each of the five sermons and their relationship to each other. Then John McClure’s *The Four Codes of Preaching* provided a succinct method to engage the text rhetorically to look closer at Thurman’s linguistic decision making as it related to these sermons. McClure argued that preaching is substantiated by four codes: scriptural, semantic, theo-symbolic, and cultural. These codes bear a sermonic intentionality that transports understanding in a variety of ways. Thurman may be critiqued as having departed from black preaching, but his preaching transcends the institutional church. His preaching is a bridge between the invisible institution and the black denominationalism. His preaching performed the sermonic life and displayed the mystical aesthetic as public discourse.

The significance of this dissertation to Thurman studies and black religious ethics is its effort to expand the discourse on black religious experience through African American pragmatism and pragmatic naturalism. It fills the gap between black

theology's negligence to Howard Thurman and his life-long consideration of religious experience. And it extends womanist theology and ethics' treatment of religious experience and its ever widening circle of relationality, including aesthetics, towards that which connects and balances. Thurman's mystical aesthetic labors through ordinary and religiously rendered symbols. The results are the integration of evil and suffering with faith in the mystical aesthetic and its commitment to the poetic reconstruction of life. Thurman's impact upon religion, as thinkers take seriously the religious art and poetry within religious experience is a broadening of the term religious. It includes that which offers genuine perspective, produces a better adjustment in life and its conditions, that which deepens the way in which life is understood.

When Thurman poses the question, "what is Christmas?" he sought to look beyond the classical understanding of Christianity's most sacred holy day. Christmas is the announcement and birth of a child, a savior, but it is also for Thurman a mood, a sentiment, a prevailing sense that the unexpected breaks in upon the ordinary. His meditation on Christmas is illustrative of the mystical aesthetic performing on the ubiquitous qualities of felt, meaningful, and compelling human experience. Thurman reveals that religion's finest moments are not the parochial divisions that communities of faith cling to when their identity is threatened. Religion's finest moments are not even when the best of our traditions are reproduced. But religion's finest moments are when it compels a response through the irrepressible beauty of its presentation and the ever-growing matrix of its relations. Therein is religion's growing edge.

Thurman's words echo through the ages:

Look well to the growing edge. All around us worlds are dying and new worlds are being born; all around us life is dying and life is being born. The fruit ripens

on the tree, the roots are silently at work in the darkness of the earth against a time when there shall be new leaves, fresh blossoms, green fruit. Such is the growing edge! It is the extra breath from the exhausted lung, the one more thing to try when all else has failed, the upward reach of life when weariness closes in upon all endeavor. This the basis of hope in moments of despair, the incentive to carry on when times are out of joint and man have lost their reason, the source of confidence when worlds crash and dreams whiten into ash. The birth of the child—life's most dramatic answer to death—this is the growing edge incarnate. Look well to the growing edge!¹

¹ Howard Thurman, *Meditations of the Heart* (New York: Harper and Brothers Publishers, 1953). 134

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