

## Retrieving an Earth Voice: Ecological Hermeneutics, the Matter of the Text and Reading “as if it’s holy” (Jennifer Harrison, “Book Sculptor”)

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**Abstract:** Norman Habel and his colleagues include in their ecological hermeneutics, a hermeneutic of retrieval of an Earth voice (in biblical texts). This hermeneutic relies on a practice of creative imagination to “retrieve” and “perform” an Earth voice (or multiple more-than-human voices) in human language. The practice of retrieval requires an attentiveness not only to the “cry” of Earth but also to the materiality of things (including the text itself as a material thing). With reference to four poems—“Parchment” by Michelle Boisseau, “O Taste and See” by Denise Levertov, “Book Sculptor” by Jennifer Harrison, and “A Sort of a Song” by William Carlos Williams—this article critically considers ways in which a relationship between the matter of a text and an Earth voice might touch on the sacred through reading.

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**Key Words:** ecological hermeneutics, ecocriticism, poetry, the sacred, Earth Bible, voice

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**I**n 1996 Routledge published a collection of writings under the title *This Sacred Earth* edited by Roger S. Gottlieb.<sup>2</sup> The subtitle of the 673 page collection, which included such staples as Lynn White’s 1967 essay “The Historical Roots of Our Ecological Crisis” and an excerpt from Annie Dillard’s *Teaching a Stone to Talk*, was *Religion, Nature, Environment*.<sup>3</sup> More recently a collection of Thomas Berry’s writings has appeared under the title *The Sacred Universe* with a subtitle *Earth, Spirituality, and Religion in the Twenty-First Century*.<sup>4</sup> Norman Habel’s *Rainbow of Mysteries* is subtitled *Meeting the Sacred in Nature*.<sup>5</sup> What is the force of the adjective “sacred” in such contexts?

The English word “sacred” derives through French from the Latin *sacer*, to be “sacred, holy; dedicated for sacrifice”, also, in some contexts, “forfeited”, even to be

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<sup>1</sup> This article is a revised version of a paper given at the Addressing the Sacred through Literature and the Arts conference, Australian Catholic University, Strathfield, NSW, 2–3 August 2013.

<sup>2</sup> Roger S. Gottlieb (ed.), *This Sacred Earth: Religion, Nature, Environment* (New York: Routledge, 1996).

<sup>3</sup> Lynn White, “The Historical Roots of Our Ecological Crisis”, in *This Sacred Earth: Religion, Nature, Environment*, ed. Roger S. Gottlieb (New York: Routledge, 1996) 184–93; Annie Dillard, “Teaching a Stone to Talk”, in *This Sacred Earth: Religion, Nature, Environment*, ed. Roger S. Gottlieb (New York: Routledge, 1996) 32–36.

<sup>4</sup> Thomas Berry, *The Sacred Universe: Earth, Spirituality, and Religion in the Twenty-First Century*, ed. Mary Evelyn Tucker (New York: Columbia University Press, 2009).

<sup>5</sup> Norman Habel, *Rainbow of Mysteries: Meeting the Sacred in Nature*, Ebook (Kelowna, BC: CopperHouse, 2012).

“criminal” or “accursed.”<sup>6</sup> In the NRSV the English word “sacred” most commonly translates the Hebrew word *qodeš*, and refers to the “apartness, sacredness, or holiness” of God,<sup>7</sup> but “sacred” rarely appears in the NRSV translation of the Second (New) Testament. The Hebrew *qodeš* is also the most common word behind the English “holy”, which in the Second Testament usually translates the Greek *hagios*, “a cultic concept, of the quality possessed by things and persons that could approach a divinity.”<sup>8</sup> The concepts of the sacred and the holy, and the adjectives deriving from these, contain the senses of being set apart (for) and sometimes also being close to the divine. The ambiguity in the pre-Christian etymology of the English “holy” suggests not only a sense of “wholeness”, that resonates with the cultic use of the Hebrew *qodeš*, but also a link with health and good fortune, something which echoes the biblical notion of beatitude.<sup>9</sup>

Beyond dictionary definitions and concordance searches, “the sacred” is a denser concept and experience. Aspects of wholeness, health and beatitude have resonance with an ecological thinking that emphasises the interconnectedness and interdependence of things.<sup>10</sup> The character of being “set apart”, inherent in the notion of the sacred, suggests that alterity must be accounted for in any consideration of an ecological sacred. Habel writes of appreciating the “spiritual dimensions of nature” as “mysteries”, and speaks in terms of a “Presence permeating” the Earth.<sup>11</sup> Introducing *The Sacred Earth*, Gottlieb hopes “this text may fuel our awareness of what needs to be done even as it also helps remind us of our simple joy in the divinity of the earth.”<sup>12</sup> Berry refers to the “spirit dimension of the Earth”, as “a quality of the Earth itself, not a human spirituality with special reference to the planet Earth.”<sup>13</sup> Discussing the sacred and nature in contemporary thinking, Vine Deloria distinguishes between “intuiting the sacred in nature and proclaiming a site to be sacred to an individual.”<sup>14</sup> Drawing on Rudolf Otto, Deloria describes the experience (rather than the construction) of the sacred or holy in terms of the *mysterium tremendum fascinans*: “It is mysterious, upsets our intellectual beliefs with a devastating display of energy, and remains with the individual as a fascinating, attractive presence and reminder that there are dimensions to life we cannot possibly imagine.”<sup>15</sup> One could say that this experience of the sacred, is a counter-experience, an instance

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<sup>6</sup> See “sacer”, *Collins Latin GEM Dictionary* (London: Collins, 1957) 294.

<sup>7</sup> Francis Brown, S. R. Driver and Charles A. Briggs, *A Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament with an Appendix Containing the Biblical Aramaic*, based on the lexicon of William Gesenius, trans. Edward Robinson (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1951) 871.

<sup>8</sup> Walter Bauer, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*. Second ed., trans., rev. and augmented by William F. Arndt, F. Wilbur Gingrich and Frederick W. Danker (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1979) 9–10.

<sup>9</sup> “holy, adj. and n.”, Oxford English Dictionary Online. June 2015. Oxford University Press.

<sup>10</sup> For example, the second of the Earth Bible ecojustice principles is the principle of interconnectedness: “Earth is a community of interconnected living things that are mutually dependent on each other for life and survival.” Norman C. Habel (ed.), *Readings from the Perspective of Earth*, The Earth Bible 1 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2000) 24.

<sup>11</sup> Habel, *Rainbow of Mysteries* 9.

<sup>12</sup> Roger S. Gottlieb, “Introduction: Religion in an Age of Environmental Crisis”, in *This Sacred Earth* 13.

<sup>13</sup> Berry, *Sacred Universe* 70.

<sup>14</sup> Vine Deloria Jr, “The Sacred and the Modern World”, *Encyclopedia of Religion and Nature*, ed. Bron R. Taylor et al (London: Thoemmes Continuum, 2005) 1446.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.* 1446.

(perhaps a paradigmatic instance) of what Jean-Luc Marion calls “the saturated phenomenon.”<sup>16</sup>

I want to make two points here about the description of Earth as sacred. First, the qualification of the nouns Earth and cosmos with the adjective “sacred” need not mean that Earth or cosmos is to be identified with divinity. Writing of the concept of the sacred in an Australian context, Lyn McCredde says, “the contemporary sacred seeks to recognise and reconstruct what Luce Irigaray has often referred to as the incarnate, ‘sensible transcendent’ ... a refusal to separate the corporeal and the spiritual, but a languaged, creative proposing of the one with the other.”<sup>17</sup> The corporeal is a subset of the material. Moreover, through the senses, bodies are sites of interagency and co-relation of matter with matter, of experiencing the self-in-relation materially.<sup>18</sup> When speaking of an ecological sacred, rather than imaging the divine as purely immanent in matter, and its organised forms including human bodies, I propose that matter itself has a quality of transcendence, a material transcendence.<sup>19</sup> Matter is not fully graspable or knowable and carries in its otherness—even the otherness that is the material constituency of human beings—a calling forth and an openness to its being otherwise, that is, to its becoming-other.<sup>20</sup> Matter, whether it is the matter that founds an image, the matter of a writing such as a poem, or the matter of the entire Earth or cosmos, is always matter-in-becoming. In this frame, divine transcendence is a kind of uncanny immanence at the point where a material transcendence and the alterity of the divine meet in things, from the subatomic realm to the macro organisation of a forest, a mountain or a star system. What I am suggesting here is subtler I think than the notion of pantheism, and closer to what has been described as “deep incarnation.”<sup>21</sup>

Second, the experience of the sacred as a saturated phenomenon cannot be separated from the human interpreter of the experience.<sup>22</sup> For Berry the sacred is an experience, embedded in Earth and cosmos, that calls forth, even “demands”, a response that “rises from the wild unconscious depths of the human soul”, a mutual response such as an artist [or poet] might make co-creatively with other matter.<sup>23</sup> William Wordsworth’s

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<sup>16</sup> Jean-Luc Marion, “The Saturated Phenomenon”, *Philosophy Today* 40/1 (1996): 103–24.

<sup>17</sup> Lyn McCredde, “Contemporary Poetry and the Sacred: Vincent Buckley, Les Murray and Samuel Wagan Watson”, *Australian Literary Studies* 23/2 (Oct 2007): 153–67, at 154. See also, Luce Irigaray, *An Ethics of Sexual Difference*, trans. Carolyn Burke and Gillian C. Gill (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1993) 148.

<sup>18</sup> On the multiplicity of the body’s sensory engagement with its material surrounds, see Michel Serres, *The Five Senses: A Philosophy of Mingled Bodies (I)*, trans. Margaret Sankey and Peter Cowley (London: Continuum, 2008) 306. I take issue, however, with the racially charged example Serres gives on the following page to describe the multiplicity of the body.

<sup>19</sup> Anne Elvey, “Material Elements: The Matter of Women, the Matter of Earth, the Matter of God”, in *Post-Christian Feminisms: A Critical Approach*, ed. Lisa Isherwood and Kathleen McPhillips (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2008) 53–69.

<sup>20</sup> Elvey, “Material Elements” and “Ashes and Dust: On (not) Speaking About God Ecologically”, *Concilium* 3 (2009): 33–42.

<sup>21</sup> See, Niels Henrik Gregersen, “The Cross of Christ in an Evolutionary World”, *Dialog: A Journal of Theology* 40/3 (2001): 192–207; Denis Edwards, *Ecology at the Heart of Faith: The Change of Heart that Leads to a New Way of Living on Earth* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 2006) 58–60; Deborah Guess, “Deep Incarnation: A Resource for Ecological Christology”, in *Climate Change—Cultural Change: Religious Responses and Responsibilities*, ed. Anne Elvey and David Gormley-O’Brien (Preston, VIC: Mosaic Books, 2013) 107–17.

<sup>22</sup> See Shane Mackinlay, *Interpreting Excess: Jean-Luc Marion, Saturated Phenomena, and Hermeneutics* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2009) esp. 36.

<sup>23</sup> Thomas Berry, “The Wild and the Sacred”, in *Religions and Environments: A Reader in Religion, Nature and*

“Lines written a few miles above Tintern Abbey”<sup>24</sup> suggest an experience: “And I have felt / A presence that disturbs me with the joy/ Of elevated thoughts...” —a kind of pantheism: “A motion and a spirit, that impels / All thinking things, all objects of all thought, / And rolls through all things.” Wordsworth’s description of an intuition of the sacred follows on his evocation of “The still, sad music of humanity” that has the “power / To chasten and subdue.” The orientation of the speaker to tragedy is part of the experience of the disturbing immanence described. The sacred does not come as a “coup”, a blow on a screen, but is part of a saturated communion.<sup>25</sup> The intuition of phenomena through sensation implies a hermeneutic communion between the thing presenting itself and its interpreter.

While in some respects I am departing from Marion, I want to affirm his notion of the “banality of saturation.”<sup>26</sup> If, as Shane Mackinlay suggests, interpretation is part of the appearance of the phenomenon, that is, if the phenomenon in its appearing gives itself to interpretation, then the orientation of the interpreter is crucial for the apprehension of saturation and by extension of the sacred.<sup>27</sup> So, the notion of the sacred as a saturated phenomenon allows us to posit the possibility that the sacred *both* addresses us uniquely through the disturbance felt in its alterity, even otherworldliness, in the here and now of Earth and cosmos, *and* that the sacred might be utterly banal, but not entirely immanent, if only we had the capacity to pay attention. One might as Kevin Hart’s narrator does in parentheses in his poem “Mud” encounter the sacred in the “you”, “the Dark One”, who smells of the mud of the mangroves by the Brisbane River.<sup>28</sup>

## AN EARTH VOICE?

The Earth Bible Team’s ecojustice principle of voice is about paying attention in a particular way to something that might yet smell of the sacred: “Earth is a subject capable of raising its voice in celebration and against injustice.”<sup>29</sup> The further hermeneutic of retrieval asks interpreters to retrieve or recover an Earth voice in biblical texts, and this interpretive practice can be extended to other texts.

Discerning Earth and members of Earth community as subjects with a voice is a key part of the retrieval process. In some contexts their voices are evident but have been traditionally ignored by exegetes. In other contexts the voice of Earth and Earth community is not explicit, but nevertheless present and powerful. These subjects play roles in the text that are more than mere scenery or secondary images. Their voice needs to be heard. It is a voice that need not correspond to the languages of words we commonly associate with human voices.<sup>30</sup>

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*Ecology*, ed. Richard Bohannon (London: Bloomsbury, 2014) 73, 78, excerpted from Thomas Berry, *The Great Work: Our Way into the Future* (New York: Bell Tower, 1999) 48, 55.

<sup>24</sup> William Wordsworth, “Lines Written a Few Miles Above Tintern Abbey”, in *Selected Poems*, Oxford World’s Classics (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997) 57–61.

<sup>25</sup> Anne Elvey, *The Matter of the Text: Material Engagements Between Luke and the Five Senses*, *The Bible in the Modern World* 37 (Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix Press, 2011) 61–64. See Jean-Luc Marion, *Being Given: Toward a Phenomenology of Givenness*, trans. Jeffrey L. Kosky (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002) 151.

<sup>26</sup> Jean-Luc Marion, “The Banality of Saturation”, in *Counter-Experiences: Reading Jean-Luc Marion*, ed. Kevin Hart (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2007) 383–418.

<sup>27</sup> Mackinlay, *Interpreting Excess*.

<sup>28</sup> Kevin Hart, “Mud”, in *Young Rain: New Poems* (Artamon, NSW: Giramondo, 2008) 85.

<sup>29</sup> Habel, *Readings from the Perspective of Earth* 24.

<sup>30</sup> Norman C. Habel, “Introducing Ecological Hermeneutics”, in *Exploring Ecological Hermeneutics*, ed. Norman

This hermeneutic of retrieval comes as the last in a series of three, of which the first two are suspicion and identification. A hermeneutic of suspicion concerns an alertness to the anthropocentrism of biblical texts and interpretations, and an awareness that other-than-human experience and interests are frequently ignored or elided in these writings or their interpretations.<sup>31</sup> A hermeneutic of identification requires readers to recognise and experience their “deep ecological connections”, their “kinship with Earth”, and to exercise sympathy and empathy in relation to Earth and its myriad creatures.<sup>32</sup> The hermeneutic of identification is a necessary step between suspicion and retrieval, one requiring of the interpreter an ecological conversion to the other, to Earth as other.<sup>33</sup> Identification with Earth entails a recognition of human difference from and continuity with Earth others. Interpreters are prompted to know themselves other-wise, to be “converted” to an ecological frame of reference, where they understand themselves as enmeshed, and sharing habitation, with many others, and acting in accord with this understanding.<sup>34</sup> Vicky Balabanski argues that identification requires of readers an ability to draw connections, to exercise imagination, self-reflection, critique and, cautiously, a “self-transcendence” where transcendence means going beyond “the narrowly defined individualized self.”<sup>35</sup> Such identification requires an ecological conversion, a re-orientation of understanding and behaviour occasioning an active and attentive respect for difference while deeply affirming connection. Such attentiveness is a prerequisite for hearing, responding to, and speaking an Earth voice.

David Horrell, however, while affirming the focus on retrieving an Earth voice as the “most distinctive and innovative” part of the Earth Bible project, sees two problems with this approach beyond “the unavoidable anthropomorphism involved.”<sup>36</sup> First, the concept of “an” or “the” voice of Earth can elide the plurality of the Earth community whose constituents may or may not have voices of their own.<sup>37</sup> For those who have voice (birds, frogs, whales) or that sound to our ears (seas, rivers, leaves shifting in the wind, branches falling to ground), the voices are not singular. Horrell’s second concern relates to creative constructions of an Earth voice that exceed or intervene in the text rather than arising from the text itself, “for instance, imagining the cries of Earth against the injustice perpetrated against it, by humans or by God.”<sup>38</sup> For Horrell, the practice of identifying with Earth is a useful “thought-provoking” exercise, but should not be constitutive of ecological hermeneutics.<sup>39</sup> What Horrell misses or underplays in his second critique is the way in

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C. Habel and Peter L. Trudinger (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2008) 5.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid. 4.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid. 4.

<sup>33</sup> Vicky Balabanski, “The Step of ‘Identification’ in Norman Habel’s Ecological Hermeneutics: Hermeneutical Reflections on ‘Ecological Conversion’”, in *Where the Wild Ox Roams: Biblical Essays in Honour of Norman C. Habel*, ed. Alan H. Cadwallader with Peter L. Trudinger; Hebrew Bible Monographs 59 (Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix Press, 2013) 20–31.

<sup>34</sup> On ecological conversion, see, for example, Denis Edwards, *Ecology at the Heart of Faith: The Change of Heart that Leads to a New Way of Living on Earth* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 2006) 2–4; also the discussion in Balabanski, “The Step of ‘Identification’” 23–29.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid. 22–23, 31.

<sup>36</sup> David G. Horrell, “Ecological Hermeneutics: Reflections on Method and Prospects for the Future”, *Colloquium* 46/2 (2014): 156. See Elaine M. Wainwright’s response to Horrell in *Colloquium* 46/2 (2014): 166–69.

<sup>37</sup> Horrell, “Ecological Hermeneutics” 156.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid. 156–57.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid. 163.

which texts which are written from an anthropocentric perspective frequently elide other-than-human beings and their interests. Such others are often necessary to the existence of the text as a material thing, or they are elements essential to, but ignored in, the text's telling. Without Earth there is no text. To retrieve the voices of Earth and its constituents need not therefore be to bring them in as if from outside the text but to attend to them in, and drawn them out from, the text itself through a process of identification and retrieval, and sometimes reconstruction, using creative imagination.<sup>40</sup>

Gene Tucker notes that although the principle of voice seems to “personify the earth in human terms”, this principle is effectively “a summons to respect ... to listen again to the earth”, an invitation, in the mode of Dillard’s writing, “to pay attention.”<sup>41</sup> Alphonso Lingis takes a similar approach when he writes: “Today we have become aware once again that we share this planet with innumerable other living things, whose voices summon our attention and must also direct our lives.”<sup>42</sup> He takes this notion beyond “living things” to include so-called “inert matter”, asking if “outside inert matter summons and directs our material bodies in ways that biochemists have not yet been able to trace.”<sup>43</sup> Such a proposal shifts the notion of attention to the voice (or better voices) of Earth toward an attentiveness that is already a response to a summons occurring through the material-corporeal interchange between humans and the multiple others (both inside and outside the body) whose proximity (or perhaps also distance) has effects in the body. These effects already call forth a response (that is at the least biochemical but may also become philosophical, ethical and theological).<sup>44</sup> This sense of a summons that is both prior to human volition and part of human being echoes Jean-Louis Chrétien’s understanding of the *call to be* as the first vocation, to which the response is already a “yes”; this “yes”, I suggest, includes the body’s assent to its complex being-in-relation—as matter with other matter.<sup>45</sup> My suggestion is, then, that attention to the voices of Earth is already underscored by a corporeal response to the summons of material things, including but not exclusive to those we understand as living things. This prior participation in the material exchange of being needs to inform the principle of voice.

The assertion of the principle of voice, by Habel and his colleagues, echoes Berry’s claim that the spirituality he attributes to Earth is not about human spirituality extended; rather it is about something Earthy/Earthy in which humans might participate, which

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<sup>40</sup> This hermeneutic of creative imagination, and the related recovery (rather than invention) of voice in the reading of a text, parallels a feminist approach that recognised the silencing of women’s voices in androcentric texts and the interpretive task of reconstruction, to account for and bring to voice the stories and interests of the elided “other” whose absent presence was essential to the text. On creative imagination in a feminist frame, see Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *But She Said: Feminist Practices Of Biblical Interpretation* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1992) 73.

<sup>41</sup> The Earth Bible Team, “Conversations with Gene Tucker and Other Writers”, in *The Earth Story in Genesis*, ed. Norman C. Habel and Shirley Wurst. The Earth Bible 2 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2000) 21–33, at 29. See further, Earth Bible Team, “The Voice of the Earth: More Than Metaphor?”, in *The Earth Story in the Psalms and the Prophets*, ed. Norman C. Habel, The Earth Bible 4 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2001) 23–28.

<sup>42</sup> Alphonso Lingis, “The Voices of Things”, *Senses and Society* 4/3 (2009): 273–81, at 280.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.* 281.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>45</sup> Jean-Louis Chrétien, *The Call and the Response*, trans. Anne A. Davenport (New York: Fordham University Press, 2004) 18.

they cannot own but to which they might attend as to a cry.<sup>46</sup> Jan Morgan reads ecological destruction as a form of oppression analogous to the experience of the Hebrews at the beginning of the book of Exodus. They cry out. This is the paradigmatic “cry”, a sacred cry.<sup>47</sup> Drawing on Walter Brueggemann’s understanding of the role of the prophet in relation to the “cry” of the oppressed, Morgan writes: “The prophetic task becomes first to find a way to bring the cry, the hurt, to the surface, to public expression.”<sup>48</sup> Aware of the conceptual difficulties in attributing a cry to Earth, Morgan argues nonetheless that “Earth’s cry requires human mediation”, but that this is a mediation which responds to an existing more-than-human agency.<sup>49</sup> Moreover, no human articulation of an Earth voice will be complete; many are needed, individually and in concert.<sup>50</sup>

For the Earth Bible Team, while the ecojustice principles and the related ecological hermeneutics arise from the sense of Earthy/Earthly cries of oppression, the Earth voice to be retrieved is not limited to this notion of cry. Voice for the Earth Bible Team is expressive of subjecthood, something to which the careful writer/reader need attend in order to make space for the interests of Earth to be announced. Habel describes “voice” as one of the mysteries of Earth.<sup>51</sup> An Earth voice may not only lament or cry out in agony, but also celebrate or proffer a vision of an alternative to the present.<sup>52</sup> The point is that human writers understand themselves and their productions as only part of the multiplicity of co-beings, co-relations, and co-agencies of Earth, and that they speak from this understanding with an ear attuned to the alterity with which they are enmeshed.

If human interpreters of texts are to speak a voice that is in some senses other than their own, they need imagination, employing what Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza describes in a feminist context as a hermeneutics of creative imagination.<sup>53</sup> There can be no unmediated recovery of an Earth voice, but only the approximation or hint that the interpreter might, for example, as Habel suggests “hear Earth as the narrator of the story.”<sup>54</sup> How might the mud have told the story in Hart’s poem?

In a biblical text such as the parable of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:25–37) one might note, for example, the way other matter is co-agent with the human in the act of compassion, through the healing properties of wine and oil and the capacity for the pack animal to carry the wounded person.<sup>55</sup> While the material co-agency of oil and wine,

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<sup>46</sup> Berry, *Sacred Universe* 70.

<sup>47</sup> Jan Morgan, *Earth’s Cry: Prophetic Ministry in a More-than-human World* (Preston, VIC: Uniting Academic Press, 2013) 62, 66–70.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.* 49.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.* 64, 66.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.* 66.

<sup>51</sup> Habel, *Rainbow of Mysteries* 119–35.

<sup>52</sup> Morgan refers to the last of these in her chapter on “Singing”, *Earth’s Cry*, 151. See also, Nonie Sharp, “Being True to the Earth—in Peril: Finding a Voice to Touch the Heart”, *PAN: Philosophy, Activism, Nature*, no. 5 (2008): 47–58.

<sup>53</sup> Schüssler Fiorenza, *But She Said* 73.

<sup>54</sup> Habel, “Introducing Ecological Hermeneutics” 5.

<sup>55</sup> See Michael Trainor, *About Earth’s Child: An Ecological Listening to the Gospel of Luke*. The Earth Bible Commentary 2 (Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix, 2012) 174–75. Independently of Trainor, and perhaps synchronously, I have discussed the co-agency of the human (the Samaritan), the other animal (*ho ktēnos*) and the oil, wine, and other material aspects of place and circumstance, in the compassionate act, and the meaning of the neighbour, in several places, for example, Anne Elvey, “To Bear the Other: Toward a Passionate Compassion

animal and place can be described discursively, it is another and often more difficult step to tell the story with Earth, or oil or animal as narrator. The resulting writing may or may not be effective literature, however much its author has identified sympathetically and empathically with Earth and its constituents. Part of the practice of Earth Bible readings that focus on the principle of voice and the related hermeneutic of retrieval is a kind of creative writing in this mode. Habel has a moving example of Earth Voice in one of his seven rites for exploring the mysteries in nature: “Scorched Earth Sites: The Mystery of Voice” where the “Earth-Voice” speaks of the destruction to specific sites and the “People” respond: “We hear you. And we feel your pain.”<sup>56</sup> The power of this rite is not so much in the mediated “Earth-Voice” on its own, but in the gathering around a bowl filled with material symbols of destruction (for example, a chain from a chainsaw); the litany-like build-up of imagery; and most particularly the structure of call-response, including a final symbolic action and blessing. There is another aspect to this question of writing and speaking an Earth voice that I wish, however, to consider. The moving voice in this rite, and in any effective retrieval of Earth voice, is always a human voice. How is this human voice also a more-than-human Earth voice?

### THE MATTER OF VOICE

I want therefore to shift this consideration of voice to a different register, that of the shared materiality of voice and text. For humans and other animals, voice is already produced materially through the interplay of corporeal processes and qualities of air, and could be understood as a material mediation of the breath (itself material) producing sound that is picked up by the organ of hearing, the ear. Voice also has a wider meaning and takes us into that space where the inner life is produced in, and produces, certain material transformations. If humans have something that might be called voice, in all its layers of meaning, this is an instance of an attribute that is already Earthy/Earthly.

Poets and critics speak of poetic voice. Susan Stewart speaks of “the particular timbre, tone, hesitations, and features of articulation by which all the voices subject to [the poet’s] own history have shaped [the] voice’s instrument.”<sup>57</sup> In listening, the reader or hearer is listening to “the material history” of the poet’s “connection to all the dead and the living who have been impressed upon” her.<sup>58</sup> Seamus Heaney makes a distinction between craft and technique around this notion of poetic voice. Craft, he writes, “is what you can learn from other verse”, whereas technique “involves not only a poet’s way with words, his management of metre, rhythm and verbal texture; it involves also a definition of his stance towards life, a definition of his own reality.”<sup>59</sup> Voice is situated where technique emerges from craft, though as Heaney admits some poets may have strong

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(an ecological feminist reading of Luke 10:25–37)”, *Sea Changes: Journal of Women Scholars of Religion and Theology* 1 (2001) [http://wsrt.asn.au/web\\_images/elvey.pdf](http://wsrt.asn.au/web_images/elvey.pdf), and “Rethinking Neighbour Love: A Conversation between Political Theology and Ecological Ethics”, in *Where the Wild Ox Roams: Biblical Essays in Honour of Norman C. Habel*, ed. Alan H. Cadwallader with Peter L. Trudinger. Hebrew Bible Monographs 59. (Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix, 2013) 73.

<sup>56</sup> Habel, *Rainbow of Mysteries* 214-19.

<sup>57</sup> Susan Stewart, *Poetry and the Fate of the Senses* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2002) 110.

<sup>58</sup> Stewart, *Poetry and the Fate of the Senses* 110.

<sup>59</sup> Seamus Heaney, “Feeling into Words”, in *Preoccupations: Selected Prose 1968–1978* (London: Faber and Faber, 1980) 47.

technique and “wobbly” craft.<sup>60</sup> An important aspect of technique for considering ways in which a poet might be attuned to the materiality of her voice is the quality of what John Keats calls “negative capability.”<sup>61</sup> The poet stands aside from herself open to the alterity of the experience of another, human or other-than-human.<sup>62</sup> Such a stance requires sympathy or empathy for the other, and a capacity for allowing the coexistence of ambiguities.<sup>63</sup> Moreover, the attitude Keats proposes does “not flinch or look away no matter what the arresting experience.”<sup>64</sup> This is particularly important in relation to an ecological poetics, such as the Earth Bible hermeneutic of retrieval requires if it is to be effective, because attentiveness to an Earth cry is first, though not exclusively, attention to ecological destruction.

In an ecologically oriented poetics, such a stance implies not only a standing aside from self, but an acknowledgement of the entanglement of self with that “outside” toward which the poet attends. Thus, Stuart Cooke acknowledges certain of his poems as “written with” the places they evoke.<sup>65</sup> If the poet’s technique involves such a stance toward more-than-human others, this also raises questions of craft. For example, Forrest Gander asks: “Aside from issues of theme and reference, how might syntax, line break, or the shape of the poem on the page express an ecological ethics?”<sup>66</sup> We might ask: Is any particular form more expressive of an Earth voice than any other? Is it a matter of writing/reading or both?

#### THE TEXT AS A MATERIAL THING

One possibility is to attend to Earth as expressed in the materiality of the text itself. I will consider three poems which touch on Earth as subject through their foregrounding of the text as a material thing. The first is “Parchment” by Michelle Boisseau where the speaker evokes in detail the materiality of a prayer book, its indebtedness to the creatures (human and other than human) whose lives and labours went into its making and the related issues of class and justice, since this fine and costly material artefact was made for private use by a monarch.<sup>67</sup> Beginning “I’m holding in my hand the skin of a calf/that lived 600 years ago”, the poem describes the animal life that was taken for the production of a book. Respectfully, the poem evokes the two sides of the skin, the one (“the flesh side”) oriented toward the dark inside the body, the other (“the hair side”) exposed to sun and wind and rain. The plants and insects from which the pigments were derived and the birds and

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<sup>60</sup> Heaney, “Feeling into Words” 47.

<sup>61</sup> John Keats, “Letter to George and Thomas Keats”, Hampstead, December 22, 1817, in *Letters of John Keats to His Family and Friends*, ed. Sidney Colvin, The Project Gutenberg eBook, <http://www.gutenberg.org/files/35698/35698-h/35698-h.htm#XXIV> (accessed 23 Sep 2014).

<sup>62</sup> This resonates with Balabanski’s account of the hermeneutic of identification in her “The Step of ‘Identification’” 21–26.

<sup>63</sup> Mary Oliver, *A Poetry Handbook: A Prose Guide to Understanding and Writing Poetry* (Orlando: Harcourt, 1994) 80, 83.

<sup>64</sup> R. S. White, *John Keats: A Literary Life* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010) 122.

<sup>65</sup> Stuart Cooke, *Departure into Cloud* (Sydney: Vagabond Press, 2013).

<sup>66</sup> Forrest Gander, “The Future of the Past”, in Forrest Gander and John Kinsella, *Redstart: An Ecological Poetics* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2012) 2.

<sup>67</sup> Michelle Boisseau, “Parchment”, in *Trembling Air* (Fayetteville: University of Arkansas Press, 2003) 21. The full poem can be read online at Poetry Foundation: <http://www.poetryfoundation.org/poetrymagazine/browse/175/3#!/20604822> (accessed 24 Sep 2014).

other creatures from which the quill and bindings were made are carefully detailed. The threads of material being and agency that contribute to the making of the singular material artefact the speaker holds in her hands are interwoven with an evocation of the beauty of the illuminations themselves. The human labour and its cost appear particularly in the “the illuminator’s/boy assistants” who are “felled” because of their work with the yellow arsenic that is used “for flowering meadows or a lady’s long braids.” Perhaps in “felled” there is an echo of Gerard Manley Hopkins’ “Binsley Poplars”—“All felled, felled, are all felled”<sup>68</sup>—and a further connection made between human damage both to other humans and to other than humans.<sup>69</sup>

The reader could leave this poem as a witness to the complex material interdependencies of a particular ancient book, and the inter-human relations of power that went into its production. But the poem that highlights the materiality of the artefact speaks back to itself, reminding the reader of the material relations of the poem’s production in multiple material artefacts, on a printed page in the journal *Poetry*, in the author’s collection *Trembling Air*, and online, together at least hundreds if not thousands of material instances of this one poem. For each individual instance of Boisseau’s poem a narrative of interdependencies and relations of power could be told. In the poem, the stretched calf skin, flesh side and weather side, is “all inscribed / with the dark brown ink of prayer.” This “all” that comes toward the end of the first stanza includes not only the skin but the labour of “someone” who “stretched” and “scraped” the skin, described earlier in the same stanza. At one level, the reference to prayer explains that this is a prayer book, but at another level, the “ink of prayer” implies that the sacred is embedded in the materiality of the book itself, and in all its layers of indebtedness to human and other than human life and labour. The deaths and injustices that contributed to this book, and by implication to the multiple material instances of Boisseau’s poem itself, are a sacred cry to which the poem both responds and witnesses, but which it also prompts again and again by the cost of its own material existence.

Questions of matter and justice appear differently in Denise Levertov’s “O Taste and See”, where the speaker comes upon a material artefact, a subway Bible poster with the words “O taste and see” recalling Psalm 34, “O taste and see that the Lord is good.”<sup>70</sup> The poem shifts quickly from the biblical text to “all that lives / to the imagination’s tongue”, followed by a list that travels from “grief and mercy” through language to the materiality of things and human engagement with them, for which eating and digestion are symbols. With reference to Wordsworth’s “The world is too much with us”, the poem takes the reader into a world that is “not with us enough”, progressing from nouns to verbs: from tangerine and weather to the first action “to breathe them” then a list of infinitives, “to bite, / savor, chew, swallow.” The poem celebrates the taking-in and transformation of matter; through breathing and eating “to transform // into our flesh.” Without further punctuation, “our flesh” flows into “our / deaths.” Tasting and seeing, breathing and eating are reminders of the interdependent materiality of embodied, mortal human beings.

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<sup>68</sup> Gerard Manley Hopkins, “Binsley Poplars”, in *Poems and Prose*, selected and edited by W. H. Gardner (Middlesex: Penguin, 1953) 39.

<sup>69</sup> See also Kate Rigby’s readings of this poem in “Ecocriticism”, in *Introducing Criticism at the Twenty-first Century*, ed. Julian Wolfreys (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2002), 151–78, and “Introduction”, *Religion and Literature* 40/1 (2008): 1–8, at 7–8. Also Elvey, *The Matter of the Text* 44.

<sup>70</sup> Denise Levertov, “O Taste and See”, in *Poems 1960–1967* (New York: New Directions, 1983) 125.

The poem does not leave the reader with “our deaths.” The next phrase “crossing the street” enacts a crossing. By way of the names of fruit—“plum” and “quince”—the poet has humans “living in the orchard.” “[B]eing hungry” returns the reader to the subway and its associated poverty. A tension remains between the divine goodness the psalmist enjoins the reader “taste and see”, and to which the fruit of the orchard and human material engagement with things witness, and the reality of human hunger. Finally, with the reference to “plucking the fruit”, the poem recalls the primeval forest garden of Gen 2 and 3. The poem’s invitation “taste and see” evokes the goodness of both the divine and matter, suggesting that they cannot be fully separated. Moreover, in the interplay of nouns and verbs, by the movement and variation through the list of being and doing and the phrases “transform // into our flesh our / deaths” and “living in the orchard”, the poem performs the interrelatedness between humans and the Earth community of which they are part, and on which they depend for sustenance.<sup>71</sup> In hunger and death, in living and being fed, the “grief and mercy” of the middle stanza resonate.

Another poem by Levertov, “To Live in the Mercy of God”, celebrates the mercy the poet experiences by way of her embeddedness in and attentiveness to a more-than-human world.<sup>72</sup> Divine mercy is a passion, “a vast flood” that is “flung on resistance.” At one level the poem performs the speaker’s resistance to this mercy through responses to the repeated phrase “to live in the mercy of God.” At the outset of the poem, the responding image is pastoral “to lie back under the tallest / oldest trees.” The next time, the phrase “to live in the mercy of God” provokes a critique (of itself or of writing): “The complete / sentence too adequate, has no give.” The third time the phrase evokes an image of a waterfall—which echoes in the “vast flood” that the reader meets at the end—in constant motion, a torrent “flinging itself / unabating down and down / to clenched fists of rocks.” The resistance here is more-than-human, part of the interplay of water and the environs it pushes against and shapes. This water has a voice that intersects with the human voice of the poem: “Oh or A / uninterrupted, voice / many stranded.” “Stranded” not only suggests the multiple weavings of material voices to which the poet attends, but together with the images of “the clenched fist”, the “smoke” of the spray, “steelwhite” foam, “the fugitive jade”, and the final “resistance”, the poem subtly evokes the violence and industrialisation that both fissure and inhabit the pastoral images of an ecologically embedded divine mercy. For Levertov this interplay of exploitation and beauty, praise and shame, was an integral part of her poetic imaginary, of, in Heaney’s terms, her technique.<sup>73</sup>

## READING AS IF IT IS HOLY

What of the technique of the reader? The Earth Bible principle of voice is a hermeneutic principle. As such it concerns a mode of reading as much as a mode of writing. In the ninth part of Heaney’s sequence “Station Island” a confessor tells the narrator: “Read poems as

<sup>71</sup> This reading of Levertov’s “O Taste and See”, is drawn in part from a slightly longer reading of the poem in Elvey, *The Matter of the Text* 170–71.

<sup>72</sup> Denise Levertov, “To Live in the Mercy of God”, in *Sands of the Well* (New York: New Directions, 1996) 127–28.

<sup>73</sup> John Felstiner, *Can Poetry Save the Earth? A Field Guide to Nature Poems* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009) 266–74.

prayers.”<sup>74</sup> For Simone Weil, “Absolutely unmixed attention is prayer.”<sup>75</sup> Such attention, she holds, is necessary for creative work: “The poet produces the beautiful by fixing his [or her] attention on something real.”<sup>76</sup> Study—learning, reading and interpretation—is also marked by this capacity to attend.<sup>77</sup> Such attention, says Weil, needs to “be a looking and not an attachment”, but perhaps it needs also to be the kind of sensory engagement (including but not exclusive to the sense of sight) Serres, for example, practices in his philosophical meditations on the five senses.<sup>78</sup>

There is a long Christian tradition of *lectio divina* applied to scripture and in the Divine Office this applies also to the inclusion of poems as prayers. There is also a long, but neglected, Christian tradition of two books of revelation: alongside the book of scripture is the book of nature. Robin Pryor and Cath James have suggested that a practice of *lectio divina* can be applied to the book of nature.<sup>79</sup> Perhaps it might also be applied to the materiality of the text in a kind of saturated communion with texts as materially embedded not only by way of the materiality of the artefact in which they present themselves (even so-called virtual presentations are material), but also by way of the materiality that underlies image, word and voice.

Jennifer Harrison’s “Book Sculptor” picks up this possibility of reading as touching on the sacred through touching, folding, interpreting, sculpting matter and words, artefact and image.<sup>80</sup> In Harrison’s poem, “Paper birds fly from unread pages. / Stories ruffle in the wind’s stealth.” While the poem is sculpted in a fairly regular fashion, the poet’s “hands make a book into something / other” and “the godly wealth” of words becomes “a tinderbox of origami flowers.” The poem moves between the poiesis of writing *and* its undoing through a poiesis of book sculpting, which transforms a material artefact—a book, or perhaps a poem on a page—into a material artefact that is something else, “a fan, ... a dragon.” Through this undoing, which is a reversal of the undoing of the thing that occurs through metaphor, the poem evokes a poiesis of reading:

All is discipline you see. Concentrate.  
Fold and fold. Press and fold. Then, be able –  
free your pleated creatures! Read as if it’s holy.<sup>81</sup>

A later version of this poem, much changed, appears in Harrison’s collection *Colombine* and ends:

All is discipline, you see. Concentrate.

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<sup>74</sup> Seamus Heaney, “Station Island”, in *Opened Ground: Poems 1966–1996* (London: Faber and Faber, 1998), 265.

<sup>75</sup> Simone Weil, *Gravity and Grace*, trans. Emma Crawford (Routledge Classics; London: Routledge, 2002) 201.

<sup>76</sup> Weil, *Gravity and Grace* 201, 204.

<sup>77</sup> Weil, *Gravity and Grace* 205.

<sup>78</sup> Serres, *The Five Senses*.

<sup>79</sup> Robin Pryor and Cath James, “Addressing Change through the Two Books of God: Education for Cultural Change in Religious Communities”, in *Climate Change--Cultural Change: Religious Responses and Responsibilities*, ed. Anne Elvey and David Gormley-O’Brien (Preston, VIC: Mosaic Press, 2013) 185.

<sup>80</sup> Jennifer Harrison, “Book Sculptor”, *Salt Lick Quarterly* (Autumn 2003): 9. For me the poem calls to mind Elizabeth Presa’s 2000 exhibition of kimonos and wedding dresses sculpted from a manuscript of Jacques Derrida’s *Le Toucher Jean Luc Nancy*, entitled “The Four Horizons of the Page”, to which Kevin Hart responded in his “Horizons and Folds: Elizabeth Presa”, *Contretemps* 2 (May 2001): 171–75.

<sup>81</sup> Harrison, “Book Sculptor.” Cited with permission of the author.

Fold and fold. Press and fold. Then, be able—  
free your creatures. You cannot make them holy.<sup>82</sup>

The first version concludes with an imperative though without the exclamation mark that precedes it: “Read as if it’s holy.” Both versions of the poem are written for the paper sculptor Nicholas Jones, but the address is wider. The imagery of the making and unmaking of the text through attentive sculpting becomes a summons to a reader to attend in a certain way to the text, with an ear perhaps to its sacred cry as a material thing. But in the second instance, the focus shifts to suggest that no matter how careful the attention to the unmaking and making of the text—through the processes in this case of sculpting—these “creatures” cannot be made holy. There is a drawing back from the sacred in the later version. Andrew McCann critiques what he sees as a ubiquitous appeal to the sacred in Australian cultural and literary discourse, first because the notion of the sacred is so fluid, untied to particular religious traditions, but more particularly because its use can become an aesthetic substitute for ethical and political action.<sup>83</sup> Functioning in this way to gloss over the realities of colonial Australian history, “[t]he sacred ... underwrites the social order it promises to transform.”<sup>84</sup> In the Australian history of invasion/settlement, the colonial and the ecological are interconnected, as mutually reinforcing sites of damage and dispossession. Harrison’s later version of book sculptor calls into question the possibility of the sacred or holy in a situation where “when everything strung unstrings? / The tree’s corpse dissected for the violin // how beautiful that music. How haunted.” Here again is the interplay of praise and shame that Levertov offers. But I do not want to dispose of the earlier ending entirely, rather to let the two finales inform each other. What might it mean to develop a technique of reading “as if it’s holy” in a situation where “everything strung unstrings”, where ecological interconnectedness means connection sometimes more with and through damage (much of it human-induced) than with sustenance and wholeness?

## CONCLUSION

In conclusion I turn to William Carlos Williams’ “A Sort of a Song.”<sup>85</sup> Concerning Williams’ much quoted parenthetical split line “No ideas / but in things”, Michael Hamburger observes: “To begin with this is a dynamic poem of discovery; and the words in brackets are not a prescription, but part of an experience—a part of the experience, incidentally, which could not be rendered in terms of the two ‘images’ or things dominant in the poem, the snake and the saxifrage.”<sup>86</sup> “No ideas [and then the line break] but in things” emerges from the encounter with the thing of the snake which gives itself as a metaphor for writing, the writing of the poem, which in turn expresses an intention in an idea, rather than an image: “through metaphor to reconcile / the people and the stones.” Such reconciliation of human and other-than-human is central to Williams’ poetry, and happens

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<sup>82</sup> Jennifer Harrison, “Book Sculptor”, in *Colombine: New and Selected Poems* (North Fitzroy: Black Pepper, 2010) 223. Cited with permission of the author.

<sup>83</sup> Andrew McCann, “The Obstinacy of the Sacred”, *Antipodes* (Dec 2005): 152–58, at 152.

<sup>84</sup> McCann, “The Obstinacy of the Sacred” 153.

<sup>85</sup> William Carlos Williams, “A Sort of a Song”, in *The Collected Poems of William Carlos Williams Volume II: 1939-1962*, ed. Christopher MacGowan (New York: New Directions, 1991) 55.

<sup>86</sup> Michael Hamburger, *The Truth of Poetry: Tensions in Modernist Poetry Since Baudelaire* (London: Anvil Press Poetry, 1996) 32.

not by enlisting “nature” to explain human experience through simile, but by understanding human imagination as sharing in the materiality of the Earth.<sup>87</sup> Sharply at the end—and the poem itself proposes the writing should be sharp—the poem returns from ideas to image: “Saxifrage is my flower that splits / the rocks.” The word that arrests me in those two lines is “my.” A flower splitting a rock is almost a cliché for the power of a fragile thing over a stronger. Not only does the possessive pronoun avoid the cliché but also through the “my” the line enacts the reconciliation of poet and thing. Such a reconciliation is always already fissured—split—because the alterity of the material thing—Earth, material artefact, poem—toward which I might orient myself as if toward the holy is like Derrida’s impossible, simultaneously approachable and unapproachable.

Joseph Sittler, in his 1960s sermon “The Care of the Earth”, writes of the way his reading Richard Wilbur’s poem “Advice to a Prophet”, which questions what it means to be human under the threat of nuclear and ecological destruction, pushed his mind back against a wall and forced him to ask about what his religion, Christianity, could offer to such a reality.<sup>88</sup> The use of poetry or other creative writing as part of an ecological hermeneutic of retrieval needs at best to work with such impetus, bringing craft and technique together, to push the reader to ask such questions. But the hermeneutic of retrieval is also a challenge to read biblical and other texts with an ear to their materiality, as if in their material embeddedness through voice, breath, and medium, they are holy. At the same time, we need to acknowledge that this orientation toward the sacred is already fissured by our uses of it to ease what perhaps ought continually unsettle us. The final line break in *A Sort of a Song*, falls after “splits” and what might have been a “nice” poem, *read as if its holy*, may leave its reader “rocked.”

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<sup>87</sup> Felstiner, *Can Poetry Save the Earth?* 150–51.

<sup>88</sup> Joseph Sittler, *The Care of the Earth* (Facets edn; Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2004 [1964]) 52.