

## ‡ WHY *THIS* POETRY MATTERS

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The question that twenty years ago reinserted itself into public consciousness in Dana Gioia's succinct formulation—can poetry matter?—will continue to be asked. And it should be: the answers most often given are unsatisfactory, and no answer can be final or encompassing. The question insists on being asked not just once for all, but again and again.

The answers most often given are unsatisfactory because they reduce a complex interrelationship to one or another of its elements. One kind of answer, the “Great Books” kind, attributes to poetry (in general, or to certain poetry) a quality *intrinsic to the poetry itself*, some version of greatness. Either poetry as a genre (unlike, say, tawdry journalistic prose) has this quality, the answer goes, or *some* poetry does (Donne's, say, as compared to that free verse schlock people write nowadays). Such a basis for affirming that poetry can matter, though, only separates the poem from the reader and from the world, rendering the poem artifactual, a museum piece, a well-wrought urn. Donne's poetry is great, this story says, even though nobody's reading it and even though the world I live in now doesn't look much like the one Donne lived in. It's no problem if no one is in the forest to hear the tree fall.

The other frequently-offered answer, which I will call the “Dickinson” kind, locates the essential quality *in the reader*: as she, Emily Dickinson, so famously put it, “if I feel physically as if the *top of my head* were taken off, I know that is poetry.”<sup>1</sup> The problem with *this* kind of answer is that it separates the reader from the poem (and from the world). One reader encountering “There's a certain Slant of light” will feel the top of her head taken off, another will not. The feeling is entirely subjective. Nothing distinguishes having the top of one's head taken off by Gwendolyn Brooks from having it taken off by Ogden Nash. The decapitation is all.

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1 Letter 342a to Colonel T. W. Higginson, *The Life and Letters of Emily Dickinson*, ed. Martha Gilbert Dickinson Bianchi (New York: Biblio and Tannen, 1971). Emphasis mine.

The “Great Books” approach, by locating the relevant quality in the poem, pretends to strict objectivity; the “Dickinson” approach does the opposite, pretending to strict subjectivity. But isolating either the poem or the reader, locating poetry’s value exclusively in either one, neglects the complementarity and inseparability of the two so warmly insisted on by Whitman’s gesture:

each man and each woman of you I lead upon a knoll,  
 My left hand hooking you round the waist,  
 My right hand pointing to landscapes of continents and the public road.

Not I, not any one else can travel that road for you,  
 You must travel it for yourself.<sup>2</sup>

The poem (here personified as the poet himself) is active, but so is the reader. The activity and the worth of either cannot be understood in isolation from that of the other. Objectivity and subjectivity both are invoked.

To forfeit the holism Whitman depicts, as both the “Great Books” answer and the “Dickinson” answer do, is to take part for whole, to mistake sign for signified, in a literary equivalent to the way we mislead ourselves economically by accepting indicators as substitutes for what they (once) purport(ed) to indicate. The GDP is supposed to indicate the well-being of the citizenry, but GDP *is* increased when I eat a fast-food burger for lunch (petroleum-based fertilizers and pesticides, antibiotics for the feedlot cows, packaging material, thousands of miles of shipping, the various health-care costs that I incur to treat my obesity), and is *not* increased when I eat a beet salad I made myself from ingredients I grew in my backyard garden. I misrepresent—and misunderstand—my individual well-being and our collective well-being if I employ GDP as my standard of measurement. As we mislead ourselves economically by accepting indicators as substitutes, so do we humanistically. It might be a clue to whether poetry matters if it enjoys esteem for the reasons “Great Books” advocates give: it has “stood the test of time,” i.e., *survived* from its origin to the present day, enjoyed relatively

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<sup>2</sup> Walt Whitman, “Song of Myself” §46, *Leaves of Grass and Other Writings*, ed. Michael Moon (New York: W. W. Norton, 2002), 72.

wide and fairly consistent readership in the past, occasioned critical discussion, and received commendation from purported experts. And it might be a clue if I respond powerfully to it, if I feel the top of my head blown off. But GDP is not my well-being, and neither the “Great Books” nor the “Dickinson” rationale answers whether poetry matters.

If time indeed conferred worth, as the “Great Books” answer suggests, then the old would rightly be presumed worthy, and the new would need yet to prove itself so. If my feelings conferred worth, then anything I *like* would be worthy, anything I dislike unworthy. There is an alternative accounting, though, suggested by Jared Carter’s blunt declaration at the end of one of his poems, that “the purpose of poetry is to tell us about life.”<sup>3</sup> In this view, poetry is not reduced exclusively to either subjectivity or objectivity: it tells *us*, and it tells *about life*. Such a premise would shift the burden of proof of validity and relevance from new poetry onto old, and from my subjective response onto truth, or as Plato has Socrates put the matter, from *doxa* (opinion) onto *logos* (reasoned, warranted understanding)). For an old poem to tell me about life as it *is*, not only about life as it *once was*, life as it is would have to be *like*, not only *continuous with*, life as it was; and for my subjective response to have merit, life as it is for someone else would have to be like life as it is for me.

Poetry’s relevance to life seems less and less likely the farther from me the poet is in time or in other aspects of cultural context. But I want to assert that this identifies the primary stakes of poetry: to tell about life will include telling about commonalities that may not be immediately apparent. This answer, that poetry matters if and when and because it tells me about life, will resist certain kinds of generalization: what this poem tells me about life and what that poem tells me about life may not be identical. Validation will occur case by case. Consider, then, as one case, a poetry that looks *prima facie* quite unlikely to tell me about life.

Fray Luis de León (1527–91) wrote his poems in Spain more than four centuries ago. The list of differences between life as it was for him and life as it is for us now is indefinitely long. He died before Charles Babbage originated the programmable computer, before James Watt patented a steam engine, before Isaac Newton formulated his three laws of motion, be-

3 Jared Carter, “The Purpose of Poetry” in *After the Rain* (Cleveland: Cleveland State Poetry Center, 1993), 24.

fore Shakespeare wrote *Hamlet*, before Jamestown was settled. His birth was separated by fewer years from Columbus' sailing of the ocean blue than the present day is from Neil Armstrong's one giant step for mankind. So differently furnished was his world (no cell phones, no TVs, no airplanes, no bicycles, no department stores, no flush toilets) and so differently understood (no Einstein, no Darwin, no Adam Smith, no "liberté, égalité, fraternité"), that it is not obvious what his experience has in common with ours. Consequently, it is not obvious what *his* poetry might tell us about *our* lives, and thus what reason there might be for translating his poetry, or for reading it. What makes it "news that stays news"? His poetry was written in a distant *then*; what makes what his poetry tells us about life true *of*, or true *to*, life now?

Fray Luis is recognized as a major figure in Spanish literature, and his poetry enjoys canonical status. Translators and others have offered, as rationales on behalf of his work, numerous variations on the "Great Books" theme of its having stood the test of time. For instance, in *The Penguin Book of Spanish Verse*, J. M. Cohen introduces Fray Luis by noting that his poems "are modelled on Horace, and are concerned with the contrast between earthly life and the spiritual reality."<sup>4</sup> But in expressing that concern, they are not, Cohen suggests, typical of the poetry of his day. They do not simply reflect cultural expectations: "they are far more monumental and far less ornate than the poetry fashionable in his day."<sup>5</sup> Similarly, Eugenio Florit points out that, though Fray Luis's "poetic output was small," many of his poems "are without equal in Spanish poetry." They "reflect the contemplative spirit of their author and the intensity of his love of God." They are admired, Florit notes, for their "serenity and sincerity" and "for the sobriety and clarity of their style, as well as for the sublimity of their ideas."<sup>6</sup>

Not all such rationales are unqualified. Billy Collins, for example, in his introduction to Edith Grossman's anthology of "Golden Age" poetry, implies that the poems are derivative: Collins calls Fray Luis a "kind of Christian Horace," who "praised the simple life of the countryside" only

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4 J. M. Cohen, ed. and trans., introduction to *The Penguin Book of Spanish Verse*, 3rd ed. (New York: Penguin, 1988), xii.

5 *Ibid.*, xii.

6 Eugenio Florit, ed. and trans., *Spanish Poetry: A Selection* (Mineola: Dover Publications, 1965), 45.

because Horace had done so, even though Fray Luis himself “hardly experienced plain-living in his time.”<sup>7</sup> Grossman, for her part, gives only a muted appreciation, confining Fray Luis to a role in an historical movement. He is, she says, “generally considered a leading poet in the far-reaching ‘Christianization’ of the Renaissance in Spain during the sixteenth century.”<sup>8</sup> Still, even such qualified rationales rest on canonicity. “It’s not perfect,” (their remarks imply of the poetry), “but it has held up.”

I suggest, though, that it is a mistake to take durability for relevance. The reason to read Fray Luis’s poetry (the answer to the question of whether and how a 400-year-old poem might matter) is not that it has hung around, or that other readers’ heads have been blown off by it, but that it tells me about life. *My* life, *now*. There may be many ways in which it tells me about life (and if it sustains multiple readings, surely there *must* be). Here, though, I focus on one way in particular, a clue to which lies in the combination of two biographical facts about Fray Luis.

First, he devoted his adult life to the Church. Sent at age 14 to study canon law at Salamanca, he soon left to enter the Order of the Hermits of St. Augustine, to which “he made his solemn profession on 29 January 1544.”<sup>9</sup> He took a master’s degree in Theology in 1560 and remained in the Order of the Hermits, fulfilling his vocation, for the rest of his life. But the second biographical fact stands in dramatic tension with the first. On 27 March 1572, Fray Luis was arrested by an officer of the Spanish Inquisition. He was found guilty, and spent four years in prison as a result. He was imprisoned, in other words, by the very Church to the service of which he had devoted—was devoting—his life.

The combination of spiritual vocation and imprisonment by the Inquisition stands as existential evidence of what I want to call “box 4 thinking,” and insofar as his poems, like his life, engage with (inquire into, explicate, aspire toward) box 4 thinking they offer challenge and edification (they *ought* to blow off the tops of heads) to readers of *any* time period, including our own, and in any cultural context, ours no less than his. What is

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7 Billy Collins, introduction to *The Golden Age: Poems of the Spanish Renaissance*, ed. Edith Grossman (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2006), xix.

8 Edith Grossman, in *The Golden Age*, 102.

9 Colin P. Thompson, *The Strife of Tongues: Fray Luis de León and the Golden Age of Spain* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 5.

at stake, in other words, is essential, not context-dependent: like the law of gravity, box 4 does not vary in its applicability or force according to developments in human technologies or changes in human social arrangements. An explanation of my assertion can begin with the following table, intended to summarize “the four boxes” as a point of commonality between Fray Luis’s time and our own time, and thus as a basis for asserting the ongoing (and especially—my point here—the *contemporary*) relevance of his work.

		<b>Immanence Is Ultimate</b>	<b>Transcendence Is Ultimate</b>
<b>Authority Is Final</b>	1. Advocate	1.1: Hobbes	2.1: Aquinas
	2. Exemplar	1.2: Stalin	2.2: “the war on terror”
	3. Epistemological ideal	1.3: clarity	2.3: certainty
	4. Aesthetic ideal	1.4: order	2.4: simplicity
	5. Ideal posture	1.5: loyalty	2.5: piety
	6. Private danger	1.6: hypocrisy	2.6: dogmatism
	7. Manifestation	1.7: dictatorship	2.7: holy war
	8. Public danger	1.8: tyranny/enslavement	2.8: jingoism
	9. Impediment	1.9: How to <i>sustain</i> authority?	2.9: How to <i>select</i> authority?
	10. Limit question	1.10: What <i>confers</i> authority?	2.10: What about alternatives?
<b>Authority Is Provisional</b>	1. Advocate	3.1: Machiavelli	4.1: Augustine
	2. Exemplar	3.2: market economy	4.2: Socrates
	3. Epistemological ideal	3.3: profit	4.3: mystery
	4. Aesthetic ideal	3.4: brand identity	4.4: sublimity
	5. Ideal posture	3.5: self-interest	4.5: reverence
	6. Private danger	3.6: relativism	4.6: insecurity
	7. Manifestation	3.7: wealth	4.7: civil disobedience
	8. Public danger	3.8: monopoly	4.8: anarchy
	9. Impediment	3.9: How to secure one’s gains?	4.9: How to rest, decide, commit?
	10. Limit question	3.10: Is there no intrinsic value?	4.10: What assurance is there?

I present this chart only as a means to the end of articulating why the poetry of Fray Luis matters, not as an end in itself. It could be interesting to explore it thoroughly and to discuss it on its own terms, but here I sketch only the minimal outline necessary to arrive at the point I wish to make about poetry. The chart is “strong” in the sense that its divisions are exhaustive and mutually exclusive. Both horizontal and vertical divisions are either/ors: either immanence is ultimate or transcendence is, either authority is final or it is provisional. Consequently, *everyone* is, in principle, in one and only one of the four boxes. The chart is “weak” in that (a) humans are inconsistent (so I might *say* transcendence is ultimate, for instance, but act as if immanence were, or I might treat authority as final when it is convenient to do so, and as provisional when it is not), and (b) there is wide range for variation in how one defines and understands the terms (so I

might understand the terms in such a way that I would place myself in box 2, say, and you might understand the terms in such a way that you would place me in box 1). That most of us, in practice, “cheat” by wiggling from box to box confirms that merely distinguishing the boxes one from another is not an end in itself, but it also reveals the distinction as a valuable means: the more clearly I “see” the differences, the better prepared I am to *choose* a box rather than be pushed into one, and to achieve moral and intellectual consistency by remaining in the chosen box rather than moving according to convenience, or just unreflectively, from box to box.

Here in briefest summary is what I mean by each of the four “boxes” in the chart.

If I regard immanence as ultimate—if nothing “above” the world supervenes upon the world—but I regard authority as final, then my viewpoint resembles that articulated at great length by Thomas Hobbes in *Leviathan*. In his book’s most famous passage, Hobbes depicts as disastrous the result of a lack of final authority (and thus denies boxes 3 and 4). There he claims that “it is manifest, that during the time men live without a common Power to keep them all in awe, they are in that condition which is called Warre,”<sup>10</sup> in which “every man is Enemy to every man,”<sup>11</sup> and therefore there is no place for industry, culture, arts, and other human goods, but instead “continuall feare, and danger of violent death,” and human life is “solitary, poore, nasty, brutish, and short.” To prevent this worst of all conditions for humans, we must, Hobbes argues, defer to a Sovereign, but (here he rules out box 2) that deference entails a denial of transcendence. Even if “God Almighty can speak to a man,”<sup>12</sup> yet still “he obliges no man to beleieve he hath done so to him that pretends it.” Since “Miracles now cease, we have no sign left,”<sup>13</sup> and since “Sovereigns in their own Dominions are the sole Legislators,”<sup>14</sup> the “transcendent” is reduced to nothing other than what human authority—the sovereign—says it is. The transcendent is not transcendent at all, but only one guise of human authority.

One way to make the case for box 2 is given by Thomas Aquinas.

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10 Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan*, ed. C. B. Macpherson (New York: Penguin, 1968), 185.

11 *Ibid.*, 186.

12 *Ibid.*, 411.

13 *Ibid.*, 414.

14 *Ibid.*, 415.

Aquinas regards transcendence as ultimate (thus ruling out boxes 1 and 3): there is a God, by Whom the world is governed, and God is transcendent. In Aquinas’s own words:

the universal end of all things is the Universal Good; Which is good of Itself by virtue of Its Essence, Which is the very essence of goodness; whereas a particular good is good by participation. Now it is manifest that in the whole created universe there is not a good which is not such by participation. Wherefore that good which is the end of the whole universe must be a good outside the universe.<sup>15</sup>

The things of creation reflect in their nature this Universal Good. Humans, who have reason and free will, must exercise those capacities in order to participate in the Universal Good. Aquinas rules out box 4 by contending that human capacities and institutions are adequate to this Good. Natural Law endows humans with the capacity to enact Eternal Law, the principle of Universal Good, and the Church and Scripture communicate Eternal Law in terms appropriate to human capacities. In Aquinas’s own formulation, “God has the design of the government of all things,” but this government will be so much the better in the degree the things governed are brought to perfection. Now it is a greater perfection for a thing to be good in itself and also the cause of goodness in others, than only to be good in itself. Therefore God so governs things that He makes some of them to be causes of others in government—as a master who not only imparts knowledge to his pupils but gives also the faculty of teaching others.<sup>16</sup>

Human government, by realizing divine government, has final authority. (Recall that Aquinas does not assume, as would most citizens of a nation that claims separation of church and state, that government means *secular* government.)

Box 3 receives one clear characterization in Machiavelli. For him, “the chief foundations of all states” are not the fruits of divine dispensation, but “good laws and good arms.”<sup>17</sup> How we live and how we ought

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15 Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, trans. Fathers of the English Dominican Province, 2nd, revised ed. (London: Burns, Oates, and Washbourne, 1920), Ia q. 103 a. 2.

16 Aquinas, Ia q. 103 a. 6.

17 Niccolò Machiavelli, *The Prince*, trans. Luigi Ricci, revised E. R. P. Vincent (New York:

to live are radically different, and how we ought to live is altogether ineffectual: “he who abandons what is done for what ought to be done, will rather learn to bring about his own ruin than his preservation.”<sup>18</sup> No God, no Justice oversees human affairs. Boxes 2 and 4 are ruled out: there is no transcendence, no Authority over authority. For Machiavelli, it is only a logical consequence that box 1 is also ruled out. In the absence of enforcement by the transcendent, nothing makes any authority final: authority is provisional, always *made up*. His response to the ultimacy of the immanent is the opposite of Hobbes’s: for Hobbes, the absence of transcendent enforcement of authority means I should defer to authority for self-preservation; for Machiavelli, the absence of transcendent enforcement means I should seize authority for myself, for self-benefit.

Box 4 finds one articulation in the work of St. Augustine. There are other articulations, such as Kierkegaard’s distinction between Christendom—box 3, in which “we have become ‘knowing’ about Christ,”<sup>19</sup> in which we have transcendence on secure (final) authority—and Christianity—box 4, in which we are “aware, facing the offense of the contradiction”<sup>20</sup> in affirming transcendence without any final authority on which to base the affirmation. I choose Augustine here, though, because Fray Luis was an Augustinian monk. For Augustine, boxes 1 and 3 are summarily ruled out: transcendence, not immanence, is ultimate. God—Augustine’s personification of the transcendent—“is the light, the melody, the fragrance, the brilliance that space cannot contain, a sound that time cannot carry away, a perfume that no breeze disperses, a taste undiminished by eating, a clinging together that no satiety will sunder.”<sup>21</sup> Yet, unlike Aquinas’s confidence that human authority—for Aquinas, the Church—reveals and fulfills the transcendent robustly, for Augustine matters are more complicated in a way that rules out box 2 and leaves only box 4 available. The transcendent cannot be reduced to the immanent. When Augustine asks (in the paragraph immediately following the one just cited), “and what is this God?,” he re-

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New American Library, 1952), 72.

18 Ibid., 84.

19 Søren Kierkegaard, *Practice in Christianity*, ed. and trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991), 35.

20 Ibid., 136.

21 Augustine, *Confessions*, trans. Rex Warner (New York: New American Library, 1963), 215.

ceives consistent replies from the earth, the sea, and the animals: “we are not your God. Look above us.” There is transcendence, and it alone has (and *is*) authority. No human authority can adequately represent it.

Fray Luis, then, on grounds that resemble those articulated by Augustine, is willing to enter into vocation—service of God, the transcendent, the ultimate—but unwilling to accept as final an authority—the Inquisition—that claimed adequately to represent the transcendent.

I repeat that I do not mean here to defend the chart *per se*. A reader need not accept the particulars of the chart, which might itself be deeply flawed but still serve my aim of differentiating one kind of thinking as relevantly different from others. My use of the chart can be formulated in strictly hypothetical terms: *if there were* such categories, box 4 *would be* the most compelling. I do believe, though, that one might be told something about life similar to what I here claim Fray Luis tells us, in other poetry. John Keats’s concept of “negative capability,” for example, appears to me to be a description of box 4 thinking, and his attribution of negative capability to Shakespeare thus a suggestion of special compatibility between poetry and box 4 thinking, insofar as negative capability is characteristic of the best poets and the best poetry.

The choice is not an idle one, not free-floating opinion or a wholly subjective matter of taste. Choosing box 1, 2, or 3 is a mistake *with consequences*. It was so during Fray Luis’s lifetime, it is now, and it ever will be.

Amartya Sen’s *Identity and Violence* offers a clear and forceful example of how a conceptual error can result in harm to oneself and to others. Sen points out that, although group affiliations participate in the construction of individual identities, no human’s identity is composed exclusively of affiliation with one group.<sup>22</sup> Central to my decisions and to my effects on others is the arranging and prioritizing of these various affiliations in ways appropriate to my ideals and to the context. Sen’s point is that if I regard myself

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<sup>22</sup> Sen’s “small sample of diverse categories to each of which I may simultaneously belong” is vivid: “I can be, at the same time, an Asian, and Indian citizen, a Bengali with Bangladeshi ancestry, an American or British resident, an economist, a dabbler in philosophy, an author, a Sanskritist, a strong believer in secularism and democracy, a man, a feminist, a heterosexual, a defender of gay and lesbian rights, with a nonreligious lifestyle, from a Hindu background, a non-Brahmin, and a nonbeliever in an afterlife.” This excerpt is from Amartya Sen, *Identity and Violence: The Illusion of Destiny* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company 2007), 19.

and/or others as identified exclusively by one affiliation, I severely restrict the possibilities for dialogue, and I further the conditions for violence. If, for example, I reduce your identity exclusively to your being Muslim (one group affiliation to which, in post-9/11 American public discourse, identities are often reduced), and my own identity exclusively to being a Christian, then I have eliminated summarily all the common ground—perhaps we both are U.S. citizens, or live in the same neighbourhood, or have children in the same school, and in any case we both are human beings—on the basis of which we might identify common cause. I have cast you exclusively as one of “them” rather than as one of “us.” *A conceptual error* (reducing identity to only one of the numerous variables that together compose identity) *results in harm to myself and to others* (diminishing the basis for dialogue and enhancing conditions for violence).

Something analogous holds in regard to the distinction I am making here by means of the chart. Any one of three conceptual errors—denying the ultimacy of transcendence, and treating as final a human authority (box 1); recognizing the ultimacy of transcendence, but still treating non-transcendent authority as final (box 2); denying the ultimacy of transcendence, and regarding all human authority as provisional (box 3)—results in concomitant harm (tyranny in the first case, jingoism in the second, monopoly in the third).

The ill consequence of box 1, of course, is well-captured by the familiar saying, “power corrupts; absolute power corrupts absolutely.” Unchecked authority may be, as Hobbes argues, a way to deflect civil war, but that does not prevent its being also the formula for tyranny.

The ill consequence of box 2 is that if I believe both that transcendence is ultimate and that authority is final (that it communicates or is adequate to transcendence), I will be inclined to do as the United States did in the aftermath of September 11: appeal to the transcendent on behalf of my own (immanent) cause and against yours. Since there are many authorities claiming to communicate the transcendent, I will choose my preferred authority over yours, and, in any conflict, attempt to impose my authority on yours. “Freedom” and “God” and other such terms name the transcendent, but since the authority to which I defer is adequate to the transcendent, the authority to which you defer must not be. My freedom is Freedom, and my god is God.

One ill consequence of box 3 is that the untempered self-interest advocated by Machiavelli fails the Kantian test of universalizability and of complementarity of means and end. Only one person at a time can be successful at exempting himself (the masculine pronoun here, to reflect Machiavelli's gender assumptions). Monopoly, in business or in government, benefits one and harms all the rest.

The point is this: "box 4 thinking" is the most to be admired, but also the hardest to achieve and sustain. As the only box that legitimates civil disobedience (obeying, for instance, obligations imposed by Justice rather than those enforced by a justice system, when the latter contradicts the former), box 4 is the box that accommodates our most revered historical figures and even our most revered *characters* (Socrates, Jesus, Gandhi, Martin Luther King, Antigone, Cordelia). All who manage it are worthy of study and emulation. My case for the relevance of Fray Luis's poetry is that, as indicated by his life, Fray Luis achieved box 4: he recognized the ultimacy of transcendence, as evident in his life of devotion, but he did not defer to authority as if it were final, as is evident in his defiance of, and imprisonment by, his inquisitors. His poetry, like his life, reflects this important and difficult conceptual achievement. His poetry does not matter because people are still reading it more than four centuries after its composition; people are still reading it because it matters. Fray Luis rewards our attention in the same way that, say, Socrates' conversations (as presented by Plato) do: by elucidating and recommending box 4.

Though Fray Luis draws much of the imagery and language for his poems from the Christian culture of his time and place, he does so, I contend, as an expression of (among other things, no doubt) the culture-independent paradox that "box 4 thinking" in any time and place accepts the following as its conditions: we humans are mortal, yet capable of awareness whose limits extend forward and backward, well beyond the current moment and even beyond the duration of our own lives; we are material, yet imbued with consciousness, self-consciousness, and perception; we are capable not only of response to stimuli, but of such consciousness-dependent states and actions as hope, despair, and decision; we can affiliate (at scales from a couple to a transnational organization), yet our inclusions are also exclusions, so that our affiliations create strife even as they create community; this life is everything and nothing. This paradoxical condition that

is our state as box 4 describes it—transcendence is ultimate but that no human institution realizes it perfectly and finally—calls for *apposition* in at least four domains, with vehicles of apposition proper to each domain. Again, a chart provides a way of condensing the comparison:

<b>domain</b>	metaphysical	ethical	practical	formal
<b>appositional tenor</b>	situation	Ideal	practice	device
<b>appositional vehicle</b>	likeness	adequation	mimesis	repetition
<b>methodology</b>	resemble	live up to	imitate	repeat
<b>metaphor</b>	reflection/ image	harmony	approximation	replication
<b>truth criterion</b>	correspondence	consonance	congruity	coherence
<b>aspect of humanity</b>	what we are	what we might be	what we do	how we mean

The governing domain is the metaphysical. By that I mean “transcendent” and “immanent” are themselves metaphysical terms. The very drawing of the distinction (whether or not the terms refer to anything “real”) is normative: the distinction is a hierarchization. In Fray Luis’s time and place, the distinction was drawn in terms of the Biblical theme, introduced in the creation narrative in Genesis, that humans are made in God’s image. This way of drawing the distinction still has currency for many people. What I want to observe about it here, though, is that its “truth,” the aspect of its meaning that is susceptible to other formulations as well, is that though we humans be immanent, yet we bear likeness to the transcendent (or, more forcefully, our being is likeness to the transcendent).

I call the metaphysical the governing domain because the others depend on and respond to it. It presents as a fact, but it entails value. (As at least some other facts do, also. For example: humans derive their energy from food. Various values depend on and respond to that fact; e.g., I have an obligation to feed my family only because humans derive their energy from food. If we did not need food, I would have no obligation to feed my family.) This is why the division is so deep between boxes 1 and 3, on the

one hand, and boxes 2 and 4, on the other: who we are, what we ought to do, how we ought to treat one another—each is more radically different if there is not a distinction between the transcendent and the immanent than if there is such a distinction. It is also why the division between boxes 2 and 4 is deep. The answer to the question “*can we resolve the distinction between the transcendent and the immanent?*” is another fact that entails value, so one who answers “yes” (enters box 2) pretends to a different identity and embraces different obligations from one who answers “no” (thus entering box 4).

Our metaphysical situation imposes on us an ethical ideal. Insofar as likeness admits of degree, the metaphysical situation of bearing likeness to the transcendent will entail that our ideal be to bear ever *more* likeness to the transcendent, that we seek to adequate ourselves to the transcendent. Or, again in the terms that would have been most familiar for Fray Luis, our being made in the image of God will entail that we harmonize ourselves with that image. If what we are corresponds to the transcendent, then what we might be is consonant with it.

Similarly, in the domain of the practical, the appositional tenor and vehicle follow from the metaphysical. If our ideal must be to live up to the transcendent, then our practice must be to imitate it. Our practice will be mimetic. (As per Aristotle’s practical advice that if I wish to be a flute player I imitate flute players: begin doing the things flute players do.) Through such mimesis we will approximate—increase our congruity with—the transcendent. In the language of being made in the image of God, we will seek to make ourselves an ever better approximation of that of which we are an image.

This brings us to the formal domain, the domain of signification and communication, and thus the primary realm of poetry. Here, repetition is the appositional vehicle, the corollary of the vehicles of the other domains, likening the immanent to the transcendent, adequating the real to the ideal, imitating our perfect selves in our flawed selves. Repetition is why meaning is meaningful. To borrow from Wendell Berry a capsule statement about the formal: “by its formal integrity a poem reminds us of the formal integrity of other works, creatures, and structures of the world[...]. Thus the poet affirms and collaborates in the formality of the Creation.”<sup>23</sup>

Repetition as an appositional vehicle in the formal domain is not

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23 Wendell Berry, *What Are People For?* (San Francisco: North Point Press, 1990), 89.

unique to Fray Luis, of course, or even to poetry. In prayer, for example, repetition is regarded by many as efficacious, as in repetition of such received prayers in Catholicism as the “Hail Mary” or the “Our Father.” Similarly, meditation often includes, or is regarded as being induced by, repetition, such as the repetition of the syllable “om.” In reference to religious worship, to describe a form of worship as “liturgical” is to note in it the prevalence of structuring repetition.

As an example of repetition with particular relevance to Fray Luis, the Biblical Psalms, many of which Fray Luis himself translated, are structured by repetition. The first few lines of Psalm 100 illustrate the point:

Make a joyful noise to the Lord, all the earth.  
Worship the Lord with gladness;  
come into his presence with singing.  
Know that the Lord is God.  
It is he that made us, and we are his;  
we are his people, and the sheep of his pasture.<sup>24</sup>

Repetition occurs at various levels: within lines, elements are repeated, such as the idea that we are the Lord’s people, repeated as our being the sheep of his pasture; repetition also takes place as lines, as when the imperative to worship is given in line 2 and repeated in line 3; and even at the level of the stanza, the structure of declaration followed by amplification is repeated. This kind of repetition exemplifies, according to G. B. Caird, “the paratactical style in which [logical] connections are implicit and taken for granted.” Such repetition allowed the Psalmist to “set two ideas side by side and allow the one to qualify the other without bothering to spell out in detail the relation between them”<sup>25</sup> with conceptual and cultural effects: “paratactical thinking enabled the ancient Hebrew to set in close proximity two different, and even apparently contradictory, senses of a word, without the discomfort felt by the modern reader.”<sup>26</sup>

But the form of repetition employed by the Psalms is not the only form available, nor is juxtaposition of apparently contradictory ideas the

<sup>24</sup> Psalm 100, English Standard Version.

<sup>25</sup> G. B. Caird, *The Language and Imagery of the Bible* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1980), 118.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 119.

only possible effect of repetition. Metaphor is a form of repetition. My love's being like a red, red rose doubles her: she is in/as herself and in/as the rose. Representation of any kind is—as the word itself indicates—a form of repetition. And repetition need not be transitive to realize the formal aspect of ourselves. I mean: the repetition need not be repetition *of the transcendent* in order to replicate, to cohere with, the transcendent. Music, for instance, the most purely formal of our formal constructions, does not cohere with the transcendent by repeating the transcendent but by repeating notes from a scale. Similarly, poetry repeats sounds, words, lines, rhythmic patterns, and so on.

Insofar, then, as Fray Luis's poetry is the embodiment in the formal domain of the metaphysical condition of humanity as understood in box 4 thinking (as his vocation embodies that metaphysical condition in the practical domain, and his imprisonment in the ethical domain), we would expect it to employ as its appositional vehicle repetition. It does exactly that. Consider as an example Luis's poem "Vida retirada" ("Life Apart"), a poem which begins

How tranquil life is  
 for one who escapes the daily grind,  
 and instead follows  
 the narrow road  
 they've taken, those few wise, once of the world,<sup>27</sup>

and proceeds through a comparison of wise and unwise life choices to its pastoral conclusion:

Though every other  
 make himself miserable by pursuing  
 incautious power,  
 insatiably thirsting,  
 let me lie in the shade, singing.

Lying in shade,  
 with ivy and eternal laurel crowned,  
 I'll turn my head

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<sup>27</sup> This and the next passage are my own translation.

to the sweet sound  
of well-tuned strings expertly strummed.<sup>28</sup>

Besides the most obvious forms of repetition (such as the repeated stanza form, itself a pattern of repeated sounds and rhythms), there is in this poem an extraordinary amount of lexical repetition. Not one of the seventeen stanzas fails to repeat at least one word that also appears in another stanza. By my count, 27 different words are repeated, in a poem of only 85 lines (see appendix). That count does not include repetition-based forms of word play, such as the use of synonyms (e.g., two words for fountain/spring: *fuenta* in line 21 and *fontana* in line 49) or compoundings (e.g., *oro* (60) / *tesoro* (61), or *zelo* (39) / *rezelo* (40)).

What does such a quantity of lexical repetition *do*? Joseph Brodsky defines a poet as “someone for whom every word is not the end but the beginning of a thought; someone who, having uttered *rai* (‘paradise’) or *tot svet* (‘next world’), must mentally take the subsequent step of finding a rhyme for it. Thus *krai* (‘edge/realm’) and *otsvet* (‘reflection’) emerge, and the existence of those whose life has ended is prolonged,”<sup>29</sup> thus asserting that the specific version of sound repetition we call rhyme confers a kind of immortality. My assertion is not identical, but I take it as related: repetitions such as lexical repetition reiterate in the formal domain the metaphysical situation, and thus the most elemental identity, of humans. To take only one instance, *arbol* (tree), Fray Luis is a poet who, seeing spring water “winding its way among the trees,” whose roots, silent and fixed in place, draw upon the water to nourish the tree, must see again. Thus does “each tree stirs / with soothing noises” emerge, noting the leaves, *not* silent and *not* immobile, that return nourishment to the tree’s surroundings, and the identity of humans, our relationship to immanence and to transcendence, is enacted, and clarified.

Thus even a poem about withdrawing from the world tells me about the world. Fray Luis need not have anticipated the U.S. Congress, 420 years after his death, passing a National Defense Appropriation Act with Amend-

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28 A version of Luis’s original poem can be found in *An Anthology of Spanish Poetry*, ed. John A. Crow (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1979), 72.

29 Joseph Brodsky, *Less Than One: Selected Essays* (New York: Farrar Straus Giroux, 1986), 265.

ment 1031, which authorizes military arrest of U.S. citizens on U.S. soil and their indefinite detention without due process, in order to identify why that amendment is a tragic error that can have, and will have, harmful consequences: due process is an acknowledgment by authority of its own lack of finality, and elimination of due process is the assertion by authority of its finality. In effect, the Constitution and the Bill of Rights seek to realize in institutional form “box 4 thinking,” and the forms of chipping away at civil rights and due process such as the Patriot Act in 2001 and Amendment 1031 in 2011 now realize instead “box 2 thinking,” insistence that authority is final, that it perfectly embodies the transcendent, in this case Justice. The Inquisition made the identical mistake in Spain in the 1500s, and Fray Luis resisted it. His poetry tells us about life by pointing out the mistake in this contemporary enactment, and advises us to resist it now as he did then.



## Appendix

### Lexical repetitions in “Vida retirada.”

árboles	el passo entre los árboles torciendo (52) los árboles menea / con un manso ruido (58-9)
bastar	de amable paz bien abastada (72) me baste (73)
cantar	No cura si la fama / canta con voz su nombre pregonera (11-12) Despiértenme las aves / con su cantar sabroso no aprendido (31-2) tendido yo a la sombra esté cantando (80)
cielo	gozar quiero del bien que devo al cielo (37) al cielo suena / confusa vozería (68-9)
confiar	Ténganse su tesoro / los que de un falso leño se confían (61) no es mío ver el lloro / de los que desconfían (63-4)
cuidado	con ansias vivas, con mortal cuidado (20) no los cuidados graves / de que es siempre seguido (33-4)
cura	No cura si la fama / canta con voz su nombre pregonera (11-12)

	ni cura si encarama / la lengua lisonjera (13-14)
día	un día puro, alegre, libre quiero (27) en ciega noche el claro día / se torna (67-8)
esperança	libre de amor, de zelo, / de odio, de esperanças, de rezelo (39-40) ya muestra en esperança el fruto cierto (45)
flor	de bella flor cubierto (44) y con diversas flores va esparciendo (55)
huerto	por mi mano plantado tengo un huerto (42) El ayre el huerto orea (56)
huir	la del que huye el mundanal ruído (2) huyo de aqueste mar tempestuoso (25)
libre	un día puro, alegre, libre quiero (27) libre de amor, de zelo (39)
mar	huyo de aqueste mar tempestuoso (25) y la mar enriquecen a porfía (70) sea de quien la mar no teme ayrada (75)
menear	los árboles menea / con un manso ruído (58-9) del plectro sabiamente meneado (85)
monte	¡O monte, o fuente, o río! (21) Del monte en la ladera (41)
oro	que del oro y del cetro pone olvido (60) y la baxilla / de fino oro labrada (73-4)
passar	el passo entre los árboles torciendo (52) el suelo, de passada (53)
porfiar	quando el cierço y el ábrego porfían (65) y la mar enriquecen a porfía (70)
querer	un día puro, alegre, libre quiero (27) no quiero ver el zeño (28) Vivir quiero conmigo (36) gozar quiero del bien que devo al cielo (37)
romper	roto casi el navío (23) Un no rompido sueño (26)
ruído	la del que huye el mundanal ruído (2) los árboles menea / con un manso ruído (58-9)
sabio	los pocos sabios que en el mundo han sido (5) fabricado / del sabio moro, en jaspes sustentado (9-10) del plectro sabiamente meneado (85)
seguir	y sigue la escondida / senda (3-4)

	no los cuidados graves / de que es siempre seguido (33-4)
sombra	tendido yo a la sombra esté cantando (80) A la sombra tendido (81)
tender	tendido yo a la sombra esté cantando (80) A la sombra tendido (81)
ver	no quiero ver el zeño (28) Y como codiciosa / por ver y acrecentar su hermosura (46-7) de verdura vistiendo (54) no es mío ver el lloro (63)
vivir	¡Qué descansada vida (1) con ansias vivas, con mortal cuidado (20) Vivir quiero conmigo (36)