

AN ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS OF

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Title: Sin and Sacrament: Andrew Hudgins' Inversion of the Sacred and Profane

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Andrew Hudgins makes frequent use of both sacred and profane imagery and language. By inverting the sacred and profane, Hudgins renders traditional Protestant Christianity into a language palatable to the Postmodern aesthetic. A close examination of three of Hudgins' poems, "Praying Drunk," "Piss Christ," and "When the Weak Lamb Dies" demonstrates Hudgins frequent use of inversion and Christian metaphor. A concluding chapter links Hudgins' style of inversion to the Postmodern aesthetic through a brief examination of parallels between Hudgins' work and criticism by Jacques Derrida and Charles Altieri.

**SIN AND SACRAMENT:  
ANDREW HUDGINS' INVERSION OF THE SACRED AND PROFANE**

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**A Thesis**

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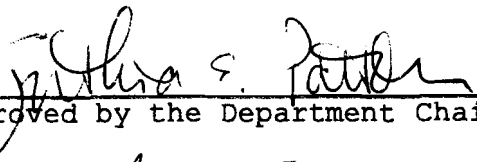
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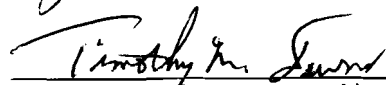
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### **Introductory Comments**

Andrew Hudgins has published five books of poetry and one book of critical essays. I first encountered his poetry in 1995 when I was a senior at a small Mennonite Brethren College. I was astonished at what I read: here was a man who had grown up in the same atmosphere of fundamentalism and conservatism that I had and yet had managed to reach maturity, both artistically and spiritually, without abandoning Christianity entirely, an abandonment which had seemed to me for years to be the only option available; one either shut up and followed or threw Christianity out, bath water, baby Jesus and all.

I met Hudgins, briefly, when he gave a lecture on the genesis of a poem at an English society conference in St. Louis. The poem he used to demonstrate the genesis of a poem was an ode to the intestine. It likened the gut to the serpent from Eden. The poem is at once humorous, spiritual, moral, and scatological. It was this lecture that provided the germination for this study.

While writing this thesis, I was fortunate enough to be able to correspond via e-mail with Mr. Hudgins and receive his insight on a number of the points I will raise. His contributions have provided me with interesting alternatives to my ideas as well as further examples, some as yet

unpublished, of precisely what Hudgins' poetry does: invert the sacred and the profane.

Hudgins' poetry exists in limbo between his somber fundamentalist, Southern Baptist roots and a near celebration of its thwarting. Perhaps because my own upbringing so closely paralleled his own, or because his gift for setting a tone is so acute, I can feel his father's hand drawn back for a slap each time he uses the word "shit." His old church recoils when he has Jesus take God's name in vain, as in "An Old Joke" (The Never-Ending 13).

In Hudgins' poetry, the power in these words is palpable. For the majority of us, such words lose their potency once we realize that everybody else is using them, too. But Hudgins would have discovered that only some others used such language. Some didn't. His parents didn't (2 Apr. 2000). His church didn't. The Southern Baptist Church's hard-line literalism when interpreting scripture and his parents' own precision and reverence for language made Hudgins more acutely aware of the power of every word (2 Apr. 2000). [1]

In this study, I intend to demonstrate that inversion of the sacred and the profane is often employed by Hudgins. This inversion, because it is a tactic shared by other Postmodern writers and articulated by Postmodern critics, places Hudgins, despite his penchant for biblical language

and metaphor, squarely within the domain of the Postmodernity. Hudgins' inversion renders traditional Protestant Christianity into a language palatable to the Postmodern mind.



## Chapter One:

### Hudgins' Inversion

"But Love has pitched his mansion in / The place of excrement; / For nothing can be sole or whole / That has not been rent." --W.B. Yeats, "Crazy Jane Talks with the Bishop"

"So those words, sacred and profane, not only have a lot of resonance for me, but are strongly linked to one another, dependent on one another" (The Glass Anvil 114).

A thrilling sense of blasphemy, a sometimes childlike thrill of naughtiness, pervades Hudgins' poetry. His blasphemous language is shocking in a way that few poets can achieve; Hudgins' voice is not one of a critic on the outside looking in. His blasphemous language surprises the reader as if it had come from the pulpit of her own church. It is easy to understand why an unbeliever might speak this way, but not a poet like Hudgins, who still operates, however centrally or peripherally, within the confines of Christianity (22 Mar. 2000).

Hudgins thrills in his use of blasphemy and the blasphemy of profanity. In "The Visible Man," from The Glass Hammer: A Southern Childhood, Hudgins describes his need for exploration and rebellion:

Grandmomma plucked pinfeathers. I stared  
 into the cavity and tried  
 to imagine such jumbled meaty things  
 inside my belly. She saved the liver  
 and tossed the heart aside. "How come?"  
 "The Bible says don't eat a heart."  
 But when she wasn't watching me  
 I snatched it from the sink and ate it,  
 unnoticed, as if I were invisible. (36)

Hudgins' delight in disobedience, to scripture and to  
 authority takes other forms, too. Even before knowledge of  
 the words comes the awareness of the ferocious intensity of  
 a moment that called for them. In "Salt," also from The  
 Glass Hammer, an uncle tricks him into trying to sprinkle  
 salt on the tails of sparrows in order to catch them. He is  
 intent upon success until

. . . I looked up and saw  
 my uncle, slack with laughter,  
 leaning against his truck. I didn't say *goddamn*  
 because I didn't possess the word --  
 or *fuck* or *shit* or *hell*. Instead,  
 enraptured by my rage, I reared back  
 and tossed his shaker high beyond scrub oak.  
 And Sonny stopped guffawing for one  
 moronically sweet moment . . . (13)

Hudgins understood very early the moment of incredulity that is so often followed by obscenities. Soon he discovered swear words as a means to express anger or incredulity, or to thwart perceived authority. He also discovered the taboo nature of such words, which he encounters in "Wisdom and Advice":

Sit straight and don't slouch. Don't whine.

No matter how poor you are, you can always be clean. Burp, fart, and hiccup at the same time and it'll kill you.

"I can't" never did nothing. *My uncle:*

A blue-gum nigger'll cut your heart out.

When I repeated it, my father

grabbed, held me by my bunched shirtfront:

"Nobody wants to hear that word.

Nobody!" (67)

Throughout The Glass Hammer, Hudgins describes his coming of age as a process of indoctrination, with the power and authority of his parents' and neighbors' religion, and even more so with the power of language, whether that language is of a religious nature or of a forbidden, blasphemous nature. These potent words, sacred and profane, are in constant tension throughout The Glass Hammer and all of Hudgins' poetry. And it is Hudgins' complicity with regard to this tension of language that makes it all the more potent in his

poetry; we know he "knows better." We know that, in his world, each prayer is divine, each transgression condemning.

Hudgins' interest in religion, particularly Christianity, was certainly affected by his parents and community. His poetry offers few clues for his attraction to the profane. In our correspondence, I asked Hudgins about his attraction to ugliness, profanity, and scatology. His reply:

My mind has always been drawn to the ugly. . . . I've tried to make this turn of mind, which may be unhealthy, into something healthy. I've always been both attracted and repulsed by statements like Blake's "Every thing that is is holy" and . . . similar statements in Whitman. It's one thing to understand that as an intellectual concept but another thing to go through the process of understanding it with your whole emotional, intellectual, and spiritual being. (23 Feb. 2000)

The result of Hudgins' effort to rectify his attraction and repulsion to such statements as Blake's is a poetic presentation of unholy actions and words as holy actions and words. In Hudgins' biographical essay "Born Again," he explains his fascination with ugliness and its uses with the following allegory:

But in church, I was now allowed to sit with my new friends from Sunday school, and to amuse myself during the service I schemed to sit behind Gary Denning, a boy whose torn right ear did not attach to his head except at the top and the bottom. In between, it bowed out from his head, leaving a vertical slit, a pink gap of flesh and gristle, and as Gary moved his head to watch the service, I scrunched down in my seat and shifted with him, trying to keep the preacher lined up in the opening, as if it were a telescopic sight. (4)

Hudgins' twisted pleasure in listening to God's words while taking aim at the preacher through the physical affliction of another person demonstrates the kind of confusion so common to his poetry: Is this moment sacred or profane? Do the language and actions described in Hudgins' poetry criticize Christianity or broaden its scope?

Hudgins' blasphemous language often coincides with the somber language of the King James Bible, the version he used growing up, and still prefers for its "more poetic" language (2 Apr. 2000). Where his sense of blasphemy and his sense of the sacred intersect, where both voices can be heard at once, is where Hudgins' poetry is at its most brilliant.

In Hudgins' poetry, the potency of language at the intersection of the sacred and profane is such that blasphemy and praise are often confused. Hudgins' inversion of the sacred and the profane accomplishes a significant goal of his poetry: by blurring the binary order inherent in American Protestantism, he renders American Protestant Christianity into a language that is palatable to the Postmodern aesthetic.

American Protestantism[2], particularly Hudgins' Southern Baptist church, espouses a binary order to extremes, such as the doctrine of eternal salvation, with its accompanying catch-phrase, "once saved, always saved." The Southern Baptist Church also allies itself with the American Protestant view that all sins are equal in the eyes of God. All sin demands damnation in hell as punishment, while a genuine prayer of contrition obliterates all sin, making one acceptable unto heaven. This is an all-or-nothing, black and white, binary Christianity in which all actions are pleasing or displeasing to God.

For Hudgins, "sacred" and "profane" are not synonymous with "good" and "evil." They are more closely allied with "beneficial" and "not beneficial" or even "beautiful" and "ugly." For Hudgins, "sacred" things are composed of tradition and biblical literality. Things that are sacred are those things that are traditionally considered conducive

to an intimate relationship with God, through Jesus Christ. Things that are traditionally considered profane are those things that inhibit such a relationship.

However, as a Southern Baptist, Hudgins would have encountered a number of "rules," if you will, concerning the sacred and profane. Very often, objects or activities that are only peripherally associated with "wrong" behavior might be considered profane. For example, because card-playing is a common activity in bars and gambling halls, all card playing is profane by association, and therefore to be avoided. Similarly, movie houses show a fictitious account of life; fiction is make-believe; make-believe is untrue; untruths are lies. Therefore, movies are bad as well. And while the Hudgins family may not have adhered to the strictest codes of conduct one might encounter in the Southern Baptist Church, with over two-hundred divisions, Hudgins no doubt was familiar with such ideology, especially in view of the number of places his family lived, such as California, Georgia, and near Paris, France.

Hudgins points out another aspect of the Southern Baptist Church that must necessarily have had a lasting effect upon his sense of spirituality, of art, of academia, and of more. In "Sit Still," Hudgins writes:

The preacher said, "We know God's word is true."  
Amen, somebody called. "How do we know?"  
We know because the Bible says it's true."

He waved the fraying book. "God says it's true.  
 And brother, that's good enough for me." Amen!  
 My father's eyes were calm, my mother's face  
 composed. I craned around but everyone  
 seemed rapt as Brother Vernon spun  
 tight circles of illogic.

. . . . .  
 And I sincerely wished that I were stupid. (The  
 Glass Hammer 50)

In the last line Hudgins accomplishes what so many poets and critics of religion have failed to do, to demonstrate a collision concerning the values of faith. Hudgins' "wish" to belong, to comprehend the incomprehensible, twists the poem into both an indictment of his old religion and an expression of desire for its power and safety. Rather than the tired cliché of the-enlightened-academic-liberates-himself-of-home-spun-mythology-previously-called-religion, Hudgins drags his faith with him out of his conservative, fundamentalist roots, kicking and screaming.

In "Andrew Hudgins's Blasphemous Imagination," Jay Rogoff notes the "major affective tension . . . between traditional Christian faith and the evolving agnosticism of [Hudgins'] personae" (25). Rogoff equates the profane activities of Hudgins' personae with agnosticism. However, this is not the only option. Because a persona begins to articulate faith-struggles, to participate in worldly



activities, or even be hounded by doubt, he is not necessarily an agnostic. Struggles and doubts make a faith more complicated, but agnosticism requires the conclusion that there can be no conclusions. Hudgins is still engaged in the faith struggle, or expressing despair in the midst of this struggle.

## Chapter II:

### "Praying Drunk"

Hudgins' poem "Praying Drunk," from his book The Never-Ending is a perfect example of a poem that uses the sacred and the profane to demonstrate both the internal tension of an intellectual faith and the difficulty of rendering binary, Protestant Christianity into terms palatable to the Postmodern aesthetic. Here are the opening lines:

Our Father, who art in heaven, I am drunk.  
 Again. Red Wine. For which I offer thanks.  
 I ought to start with praise, but praise  
 Comes hard to me. I stutter. (14)

"Praying Drunk" opens in the language of the sacred but immediately juxtaposes this language with profane action. The first line is overtly sacred, the opening lines of the Lord's Prayer: "Our Father, who art in heaven." Furthermore, throughout the poem Hudgins follows the traditional order for prayer taught to him by the Episcopalian church, to which he once considered conversion. He writes: "I was taught a simple form of prayer: Adoration, Contrition, Thanksgiving, Supplication" ("Half-Answered Prayers" 7). The poem follows this particular form faithfully, demonstrating that despite the poem's worldly matter and occasional scatological

references, all matter, sacred or profane, is framed within the context of prayer.

Before the end of the first line, however, Hudgins' persona openly admits to being drunk, a sin, especially by Southern Baptist standards. The juxtaposition of sacred and profane elements is introduced before any other themes in the poem. The reader is still uncertain as to whether the drunk is penitent, conversational, or even thankful. However with the word, "Again," Hudgins offers numerous possibilities to the reader: The drunkard has addressed God before while inebriated; the drunkard is perhaps exhausted by confession and failure; the drunkard's tone is one of chagrin; the drunkard prays only while drunk. An experienced reader of Hudgins may be reminded of other poems in which the persona knows what is wrong and yet repeatedly, indeed often joyfully, returns to his sin.

Another example of Hudgins' penchant for guilty celebration of sin and chagrined confession of failure occurs in his poem, "Huge." Hudgins describes his mother's giving him a book to learn about sex. The book was "by a Jesuit who railed against / touching yourself down there" (The Glass Hammer 88-9). A few lines later, he paraphrases Saint Paul's admonition against lust by writing, "To think / of doing something was the same / as doing it, the Bible

says." Finally, Hudgins confesses that, inspired by the book,

At night,  
Sweating, the flames of hellfire crackling  
Beneath my mattress and box spring,  
I argued with Saint Paul. He lost.

While the drunk in "Praying Drunk" offers few clues as to his attitude in the first few lines, Hudgins' own experience in the Southern Baptist church, and the sin-habit of Hudgins' characters in poems like "Huge," show that it's likely that the drunk is ashamed of his failure but he remains faithful that God hears.

Hudgins immediately subverts this impression when the drunk offers thanks for the red wine, communion wine, a sacred substance for a sacred commemoration. But in the Southern Baptist Church, grape juice is substituted for wine, because wine is one of many substances that leads to sin. The drunk man is drunk from "profane" communion wine, which in another context (the Catholic Church, for instance) would be considered sacred. So the drunkard thanks God for His wine--His blood, both holy and profane--and in the same breath admits to being drunk without precisely confessing it. He offers praise, a sacred act, for the communion drink, a profane substance to the Southern Baptist church. The irony is obvious, the man is drunk while participating

in that communion. Both the Old and New Testaments contain admonitions against drunkenness: Proverbs 23:20-21 says, "Be not among winebibbers . . . . For the drunkard . . . shall come to poverty." Ephesians 5:18 declares, "Be not drunk with wine."

The drunkard recognizes that he ought to follow the prescribed order of prayer, beginning with praise, but he makes an excuse; he stutters. This excuse evokes the biblical story of Moses, who makes a very similar excuse to God when God tells him to go to Pharaoh and demand freedom for the Israelites. In Exodus 4:10, Moses protests, "O my Lord, I am not eloquent. . . . I am slow of speech, and of a slow tongue." The drunkard, like Moses, suffers from a difficulty which inhibits his obedience to and communication with God.

Hudgins' difficulty with praise appears in another of his poems, "Psalm against Psalms," which appears in his book, The Never Ending. Hudgins writes:

Isaiah ate the blood-red ember.  
 Ezekiel ate the dung. It went in fire  
 and came out praise. It went in shit  
 and came praise from his mouth. And this  
 is where I stick. I pray: thank, ask,  
 confess. But praise -- dear God! -- it clings  
 like something dirty on my tongue,

like shit. Or burns because it is a lie.  
 And yet I try: I pray and ask  
 for praise, then force the balking words  
 out of my mouth as if the saying them  
 could form the glowing coal -- cool,  
 smooth as a ruby -- on my tongue.  
 Or mold inside my mouth the shit  
 that melts like caramel -- and thereby,  
 by magic, change my heart. Instead  
 I croak the harsh begrudging praise  
 of those who conjure grace, afraid  
 that it might come, afraid it won't. (65)

The simple proximity of scatological references to  
 scriptural and liturgical language causes many readers to  
 flinch or at least raise a questioning eyebrow. But  
 defense, if indeed defense is necessary, is simple: such  
 "offensive" material occurs right there in the Bible.  
 Hudgins only recalls it, and delights in using "shit" rather  
 than "dung." Because of the title, scriptural references,  
 and biblical language, the reader begins "Psalm Against  
 Psalms", just like "Praying Drunk," expecting sacred  
 language. Soon the reader encounters profanities, off-color  
 humor, or scatological language, and then the reader's  
 expectations change: Is Hudgins being critical of the  
 scriptural language and topics he has recently invoked? As

the reader begins to read further, it becomes apparent that no mockery or criticism is present; Hudgins is using the two "opposite" languages in a manner that provokes our expectations. He causes the reader to look at her own expectations, as well as to investigate the moral and scriptural arguments that Hudgins articulates. Hudgins blurs the distinction between formal and informal language, between the sacred and the profane. This blurred distinction is, for Hudgins, the norm. In his personal life he has found it difficult to articulate praise, a sacred act, while finding it easy to confess his sins, acts of profanity, all within the context of prayer, a sacred act. In his essay "Half-Answered Prayers" Hudgins discusses how difficult he finds offering the first part of prayer, adoration:

Though I know the real purpose of praise is not to flatter God but to help me understand my proper relation to him, I balk at praising the presence who, if he exists, has presided in this century alone over two world wars, the holocaust, the murder of the Kulaks, the rape of Nanking, two cities leveled by atomic blasts, the Chinese cultural revolution, the killing fields in Cambodia, and the influenza pandemic of 1917. The problem of theodicy--why does God

allow evil in the world?—leads all too quickly to asking how, given all the evil in the world, there can be a God. I confess to, thank, and ask for help from a God whose existence I doubt, but to praise him without confidence in his existence and his goodness twists my tongue into baffled silence. Not knowing what else to do, I repeat by rote the opening words of the Lord's Prayer, trying to find some way to inhabit them.

And this struggle to inhabit the words of prayer is exactly what the drunkard experiences: he reaches out in the words of the Lord's Prayer, probably because he, like Hudgins, knows no better way to begin. But just as Moses eventually acquiesces, so do Hudgins and the drunkard. Moses was allowed to defer to his brother Aaron to overcome his poor speaking; Hudgins and the drunkard supplant praise with thanksgiving. The drunkard tells the story of an anonymous woman with whom he used to sleep, and with whom he laughed:

Did I tell you  
about the woman whom I taught, in bed,  
This prayer? It starts with praise; the simple  
form  
Keeps things in order. I hear from her  
sometimes.

Do you? And after love, when I was hungry,



I said, *Make me something to eat.* She yelled,  
*Poof! You're a casserole!* -- and laughed so  
hard

She fell out of bed. Take care of her.

The drunkard's choice of words and his concluding request in the stanza for God to "Take care of her" betrays that his tone in the story of the woman has been, despite his admission that "praise comes hard," one of nostalgic praise, for her intimacy and for her laughter. But the woman is part of his past, and her very anonymity suggests that she was a fleeting affair. His relationship with her invokes the judgment of the Church. A traditional understanding of biblical law condemns sexual relations outside of wedlock (see 1 Cor. 6:18, 10:8, 1 Th. 4:3, etc.). The sexual union of man and wife, biblically, is considered to be a sacred act, and so again we see the inversion of what may have been a sacred act. Much as Hudgins inverted the function of communion wine, he also inverts the communion of the marriage union. The drunkard offers thanks, a sacred act but given out of order and "in absentia" for his own failure. He offers thanks for his forbidden communion with a woman, a profane act that may have been sacred in another context.

Finally, the drunkard is ready to offer contrition. He confesses two sins. The first is more cryptic than the second, but both operate within the prayer. He has barely finished saying the word "confession" when he is reminded of

the deer in his garden. Something about the garden is causing him guilt:

Next, confession -- the dreary part. At night  
deer drift from the dark woods and eat my  
garden.

They're like enormous rats on stilts except,  
of course, they're beautiful. But why? What  
*makes*

them beautiful? I haven't shot one yet.

I might. When I was twelve, I'd ride my bike  
out to the dump and shoot the rats.

While contrition is the "dreary part," it seems obvious that it comes more easily to the drunkard. It pours from him. Questions of beauty, value, sacrifice, and cruelty all churn in the words the drunkard speaks. He wonders why the deer are beautiful, and therefore not killable, while the ugly rats are hunted with zealous abandon. His confession recognizes his own failure to see the beauty of the rats, which, for the rats, is displayed in their "savage" desire to live:

It's hard  
to kill your rats, our Father. You have to use  
a hollow point and hit them solidly.  
A leg is not enough. The rat won't pause.  
*Yeep!Yeep!* It screams and scrabbles, three  
legged, back  
into the trash, and I would feel a little bad

to kill something that wants to live  
more savagely than I do, even if  
it's just a rat. My garden's vanishing.  
Perhaps I'll merely plant more beans, though  
that  
might mean more beautiful and hungry deer.  
Who knows?

The rat's ferocious desire to live is as beautiful as the deer. The deer are driven by their own want of life -- hunger -- to the drunkard's garden. His solution to "plant more beans" is flawed; he recognizes, since that "might mean more beautiful and hungry deer. / Who knows?" The drunkard begins to despair of any solution to his problem -- that of his garden vanishing and the hungry deer -- but he faithfully confesses his desire to solve his problem through violent, or even unjust, means. It is unjust to kill a rat merely for being ugly and minding its own business at the dump and allow a deer to live because it is simply beautiful, even though it is eating your own food, your own livelihood. The beautiful deer is a threat, the ugly rat is not. The drunkard recognizes his hypocrisy for preserving the thieving beauty and killing the innocent ugly, and this hypocrisy critiques larger, social values.

The drunkard confesses his hypocrisy and also his inability to solve the problem, perhaps even his arrogance at "playing God," whether through the taking of life, or merely by seeking solutions to a problem that is only a

problem because of his interference in the system in the first place; a garden is nature subjugated to the will of man. The deer has been forced to live on the edges of civilization due to urban encroachment, and thus has also been subjugated by the will of man. The deer seeks survival at the garden and the rat seeks survival at the dump.

As long as civilization has existed, rats have lived as scavengers of the trash discarded by humanity. In the drunkard's confession, the deer is, in effect, trying to become a rat. The deer is trying to live as a parasite of man since it can no longer live unhindered in nature. So Hudgins has inverted the two animals and gives the reader a new way to consider beauty and ugliness. The rat was living unobtrusively in his "natural" environment, the refuse heap. The deer was intruding and eking out its survival in an unnatural environment, the backyards of suburbia.

The drunkard's confession inverts beauty by showing a rat as a beautiful creature, first for its fierce love of its own life, and second for its living peacefully and unobtrusively in a way that is natural for its species. The deer is an "enormous rat on stilts." Awkward and huge, it lives in a way that is unnatural for its species, as a parasite of man. The deer is also a thief, an occupation we might have expected of the rat.

The drunkard's second confession flows out of the first; he cannot resolve his guilt over killing or wanting to kill for the wrong reasons, and he cannot resolve the

problem of his garden, his small piece of subjugated nature. This unresolved tension leads inevitably to despair. He wishes for a way to start over:

I'm sorry for the times I've driven  
home past a black, enormous, twilight ridge.  
Crested with mist, it looked like a giant wave  
about to break and sweep across the valley,  
and in my loneliness and fear I've thought,  
*O let it come and wash the whole world clean.*  
Forgive me. This is my favorite sin: despair --  
whose love I celebrate with wine and prayer.

If earlier the drunkard was reminiscent of Moses, here he is unmistakably a modern Noah. But the drunkard asks God to wash the earth with a giant wave. However, unlike Noah, the drunkard does not ask for preservation from the flood. He expresses a simultaneous wish for both death and cleansing; again, his request is both sacred and profane. In Christian teaching suicide is forbidden; asking God to kill you is probably not encouraged either. The drunkard's "loneliness and fear" drive him to ask God either to purge the earth of humanity or to start over and make us new again. But a wish for cleansing or rebirth is not what drives the drunkard to plead, "Forgive me." He recognizes his request as despair, not hope.

After Noah's flood, God promised never again to judge humanity through a worldwide flood. But the drunkard asks for just that -- for God to "wash the whole world clean." In

any case, the world is dirty; it needs catastrophic cleansing. The drunkard is aware that he is asking God to do something He has done before and promised not to do again. The drunkard is asking God to break His promise. The drunkard's despair is caused either by his hope that God will (or should) obliterate mankind, or by his recognition of the impossibility of such an action. To put it another way, the drunkard recognizes his, and humanity's, failure to have a more pure communion with God than wine provides, and thus asks for destruction as a kind of penance. His despair stems from his belief that mankind is unredeemable.

But the drunkard's despair, ironically, is "celebrated." More specifically, he celebrates his love of despair. His celebration is accomplished through two means, "wine and prayer" (ln. 39). These two very different modes are perfect for the task of celebrating despair. Wine, like any alcoholic beverage, is a depressant, but often used in celebration as a stimulant, an "upper." The natural function of alcohol is inverted. The reader may be reminded again of the spiritual uses of wine, and the conflict within the church over its use. Within Hudgins' Southern Baptist roots, wine is a tool of the Devil, used to overcome man and open him to the influence of sin. But as a symbol of Christ's blood and atonement, it does just the opposite. According to Protestant theology, the wine serves as a reminder of Christ in the communion service. It is taken after the minister says, "This do in remembrance of me."

The Catholic church, however, asserts that the wine is more than a reminder. Once ingested, the wine transubstantiates into the literal blood of Christ. The wine is no longer symbolic but literal as the Christian feeds upon the shed blood of a deity. Wine, therefore, serves both a celebratory purpose in the church, that of the remembrance of the salvation and atonement of Christ (in the Protestant church), and a reminder of our own complicity in Christ's death, since our salvation and atonement requires first that we admit our own guilt and partake in the sacrifice (in the Catholic church). Hudgins invokes both uses of wine -- a tool of despair, a tool of celebration -- and then goes on to do demonstrate the same duality in prayer.

Even the traditional order of prayer -- Adoration, Contrition, Thanksgiving, Supplication -- vacillates between recognition of our own fallibility and our reasons for celebration. And while Hudgins ascribes to four modes of prayer, praise and confession are surely the overarching modes, if one allows that adoration and thanksgiving are both forms of praise and that contrition and supplication are both confession of our weakness. In Judeo-Christian history, prayer involves extremes of these two behaviors: In the Old Testament, King David is described dancing in the nude, praising God. Throughout early-to-mid-Christian history, numerous examples of self-abasement can be found, through self-flagellation, the wearing of hair-shirts or

sharp wire, etc. Prayer, like wine, embodies the dual nature of the Christian spiritual life. Prayer, we often think, must be either celebratory or self-abasing. In fact, like wine, it is both, and may be used for both purposes.

Within the poem, the drunkard continues, now ready to attempt Thanksgiving, which comes more readily to his lips than praise:

Our Father, thank you for all the birds and  
trees,  
that nature stuff. I'm grateful for good  
health,  
food, air, some laughs, and all the other things  
I'm grateful that I've never had to do  
without. I have confused myself. I'm glad  
there's not a rattrap large enough for deer.

Thanksgiving, like prayer, is also expected to be a good thing, and the drunkard believes this as well. Good things to the drunkard include "good health, / food, air, some laughs, and . . . things / . . . I've never had to do / without." Essentially, the drunkard is grateful for life, and life, which includes "some laughs," must necessarily include some times of no laughter. In order for the drunkard to appreciate good health, he must know what bad health is. And knowing that there are many things that he has never had to do without must remind the drunkard that



there are others who have gone without. This process, and the already inebriated machinations of his brain, cause the drunkard to remember again the deer he earlier thought about killing. The drunkard realizes that his consideration of taking life was hypocritical amidst his own celebration of its preservation.

The story of the elephants at the zoo, however, inverts the humorous and solemn, a different type of sacred and profane:

While at the zoo last week, I sat and wept  
 when I saw one elephant insert his trunk  
 into another's ass, pull out a lump,  
 and whip it back and forth impatiently  
 to free the goodies hidden in the lump.  
 I could have let it mean most anything,  
 but I was stunned again at just how little  
 we ask for in our lives. *Don't look! Don't  
 look!*

Two young nuns tried to herd their giggling  
 schoolkids away. *Line up, they called. Let's  
 go*

*and watch the monkeys in the monkey house.*  
 I laughed and got a dirty look. Dear Lord,  
 We lurch from metaphor to metaphor,  
 which is -- let it be so -- a form of praying.

I have elected to read this poem aloud at several local poetry readings with two results. On the occasions that I have kept a straight face and remained "in character," the audience laughed. On the occasions when it was just too funny for me and I cracked a smile or paused or even laughed, the audience usually remained silent. The story seems to be such a non sequitur that it is funny. It is funny to hear the drunkard not realizing that his story is funny and taking himself so seriously. But when I broke character, the audience began to listen for the messages beneath the drunkard's words and to wonder, too, what the meaning of an elephant's probing another for food might be.

Because of the spiritual nature of the entire poem, the reader intuits that there must be a spiritual metaphor in the elephant story, or at least that the drunkard imagines there is. Some readers may even experience a pang of guilt over feeling amused at the drunkard's passion. But after providing the reader with such a mixture of amusement and poignancy, the drunkard refuses to finish. He doesn't let the reader into his head and explain. All he says is that he "could have let it mean most anything."

But the elephant story, aside from being bawdy within the sacred context of prayer, operates on several other levels. The story takes place in a zoo, which, like the garden in the earlier story, is a synthetic creation designed to suit nature to man rather than man to nature. The elephants are related to the rats and deer, in that all

survive, in the poem, within the context of man rather than nature. And just as there was beauty in the rats and deer, the elephant's reaching into another elephant with its trunk is an incredibly familiar, intimate action, and therefore arguably beautiful; it provokes weeping from the drunkard. Most creatures, human or animal, would probably react violently to such an attempt. But the receiving elephant is apparently undisturbed.

Not only is the elephant's action relevant, but so are its reasons. The elephant probes another in order to obtain a lump of manure so that it might "whip it back and forth impatiently / to free the goodies hidden in the lump." The elephant's action is again related to the rats; he feeds on refuse. Elephants and deer both unnaturally attempt to do what comes naturally to the rat, that is, to scavenge.

Another possible connection between the elephant story and the other stories told thus far by the drunkard is a single word, "again." After observing the elephants and commenting that he "could have let it mean most anything," the drunkard notes, "[B]ut I was stunned again at just how little / we ask for in our lives" (emphasis mine). The drunkard has not yet arrived at the point in the poem wherein he will make requests of God, yet the drunkard implies an understanding with God that he had previously been stunned at "how little we ask for." The deer, the rats, and the elephants all scavenge and survive; they ask for very little but the droppings-off of other life.

Hudgins equates humans with the elephants, because the elephant is the first animal depicted as scavenging from a fellow creature rather than from man. The humans in the opening stanza scavenged from each other, too. The drunkard was taking what he needed from his lover, and she was probably doing the same. The drunkard's attitude resonates in his request that she "make" him something to eat. His request, after love, goes beyond even a request for her to "fetch" food, as in, "go get me something to eat." Just like the deer, rats, and elephant, the drunkard scavenges from another for his food. And he asks her to "make" the food for him, to create it. But of course she cannot "create" food for him, she can only convert it, which is, oddly, akin to what the elephant does: converts food into another form, shit, which another elephant finds appetizing. But the woman turns the tables on the drunkard, transforming him, the shit, into food, a casserole. The people in the bed have mutually used each other to attempt to satisfy their cravings, for food and for love or sex; neither appears successful. But the deer and rats make no reference to scavenging for love or sex. The human does, and there is something, if not sexual then certainly invasive, in the elephant's penetration. And the elephants and the drunkard/woman remain passive about the penetration that has just occurred; it is merely part of the scavenging process.

Certainly there is a sexual element to the elephant's penetration of the other, made more emphatic by the reaction of the nuns. They immediately shoo the children away, not wanting them to see the naughty elephants, encouraging them to hurry off to see the monkeys. The drunkard and any reader who has ever watched monkeys for even a small amount of time laugh. The elephant's action, unusual though it was, pales into the mundane compared to the frantic mating, feces-throwing, and mutual masturbatory practices common to a monkey house. The play and scavenging exhibited by the monkeys will be strikingly less innocent (and casual) than that exhibited by the elephants.

The nuns' movement from the casual, odd elephants to the frantic, aggressively sexual monkeys will be a shock to them and to the children. They "lurch from metaphor to metaphor" in the same way the drunkard's life and stories do. The nuns and schoolchildren may miss the potential for recognizing and contemplating each metaphor, but nonetheless will "lurch" into their next opportunity to identify metaphor operating in their lives. The same lurching from story to story, metaphor to metaphor, encountered by the nuns constitutes the prayer that the drunkard offers. The drunkard's concluding request in this section is that his experiences in life and his words spoken to God are an acceptable form of prayer. He interrupts his final thought with a literal "amen," the biblical word meaning "let it be so."

The prayer seems to be finished, and the drunkard feels this too as he begins the next, and last, stanza:

I'm usually asleep by now -- the time  
 for supplication. Requests. As if I'd stayed  
 up late and called the radio and asked  
 they play a sentimental song. Embarrassed.  
 I want a lot of money and a woman.  
 And, also, I want vanishing cream. You know --  
 a character like Popeye rubs it on  
 and disappears. Although you see right through  
 him,  
 he's there. He chuckles, stumbles into things,  
 and smoke that's clearly visible escapes  
 from his invisible pipe. It makes me think,  
 sometimes, of you.

In the first part of this section, Hudgins is again projecting his own experiences onto the drunkard, just as he did with the first, and for him most difficult, part of the prayer, adoration. A sense of childishness and greed accompany his own supplications to God in prayer:

Supplication, though I still occasionally lunge  
 at it with my old [childish] . . . greed, is  
 starting to lose its grip on me. I am always  
 slightly pleased when I wake up in the morning  
 and realize that I've fallen asleep before I get  
 to my list of desires. ("Half-Answered . . ." 8)

When the drunkard confesses that he's "usually asleep by now," he is embarrassed. He feels a bit foolish for enumerating his desires, which must seem petty before an infinitely knowledgeable and powerful God. His first two requests for "a lot of money and a woman" sound starkly juvenile, and he realizes this. The words sound blurted out, hurried. The sentences at this point in the poem are very choppy in order to emphasize the drunkard's hesitation. The drunkard mocks himself for asking at all, and he mocks his own petty desires by asking, finally, for "vanishing cream," a joke. In reality, humans use it to conceal the effects of aging, while cartoon characters use it more literally, to disappear, to hide, to become invisible. And suddenly the drunkard's joke is inverted; it is no longer funny but sincere. He says that the invisible cartoon character, jovial and a bit clumsy, reminds him of God. But by admitting that he wants vanishing cream, he admits he wants to be like God. The poem's last stanza employs an inversion of the pattern of the joke in the first stanza. The drunkard was serious, albeit selfish, in asking the woman to make him some food. She inverted his serious selfishness into mockery, suggesting a magical transformation that causes him to become the very thing he desires, to turn from shit into food, something desirable, nurturing, and useful. In the last stanza, the joke inverts his facetious selfishness. Regardless of motivation, the joke transforms, as magically as in the first stanza, the

drunkard's self-abasing request into something noble, to be more like his God. He wishes to be transformed into the very thing he desires.

And just as his inversion of intent suddenly reminds him of God, his failure to become like God reminds the drunkard of his own fallibility:

What makes me think of me  
is the poor jerk who wanders out on air  
and then looks down. Below his feet, he sees  
eternity, and suddenly his shoes  
no longer work on nothingness, and down  
he goes. As I fall past, remember me.

The drunkard also relates himself to a cartoon character, but instead of Popeye, the super-strong hero who always gets the girl and defeats the evil Bluto, he is Wile E. Coyote, the hapless tragic hero who always fails. The coyote is the "poor jerk" who "wanders out on air," and pauses a moment, hanging impossibly in air, not falling until his own doom has been realized. At the moment he looks down, he falls. Even if Hudgins was not specifically thinking of the coyote here, the scene he describes is very common to the hapless antagonist of numerous cartoons. The drunkard's point of reference has changed; he no longer connects himself to Moses or Noah but, through the cartoon character's actions, to Peter walking on the Sea of Galilee; it is not until Peter takes his eyes off Jesus and looks down that he begins to sink. Below his feet "he sees / eternity" and he can no



longer stand on nothingness. The drunkard is expressing the loss of blind faith. By looking down (and away from his goal) he realizes he has nothing to stand on, and this is the root of the drunkard's struggles and "falling" from his faith; he feels that once he began to question, look around, and take his eyes off the object of his faith, he began to fall. Hudgins' reference to a cartoon character is yet another instance of his inversion of the sacred and profane. The use of Popeye and Wile E. Coyote trivialize the drunkard's relationship with God. The comparison would, no doubt, cause some people to cry blasphemy to hear God so reduced. Certainly the drunkard recognizes this trivialization; his apologetic tone reveals a sense of chagrin as he confesses how petty and limited is his understanding of his god. The latter metaphor, when the drunkard calls himself the coyote, redeems the former. By its connection to Peter walking on the water, instead of seeming trivial, the metaphor seems appropriate, and the coyote is elevated rather than Peter debased. What remains unresolved, however, is perhaps most telling. God still seems to be a gentle, befuddled, comical man of superhuman ability.

The prayer for God to "remember me" occurs frequently in the Old Testament (Strong's 868) , as does the phrase "God remembered" (Strong's 868). The contemporary English understanding of this word is inconsistent with Christian theology, which maintains that God knows all and can

therefore neither remember nor forget. In traditional Christian theology, the word is understood to include some type of deliverance: Psalm 10 begins, "Why standest thou afar off, O Lord? Why hidest thou thyself in times of trouble?" And Psalm 42:9 reads, "I will say unto God my rock, Why hast thou forgotten me?" In Matthew 27:46, Christ himself demanded to know why God had forsaken him, dying on the cross. Not only this section, but the entire poem rides the tension between blind faith and agnosticism. It allows for doubt, confusion, and despair. But it also praises and celebrates. It ends in supplication for remembrance, and, perhaps, hope for deliverance from the sudden flight downward that the drunkard mentions overwhelming him.

The structure of "Praying Drunk" follows the form of a traditional prayer, and the rhythms of the poem and of traditional prayer vacillate between celebration and despair. It is still worth noting, however, that line 39 ("whose love I celebrate with wine and prayer") is preceded and followed by 38 lines. The drunkard's confusion of appropriate and inappropriate modes and objects of celebration and despair is both structurally and thematically central to the poem. The inversion of traditional and nontraditional modes, of the sacred and profane, accomplishes something greater than a reminder that anything can be sacred, anything can be profane. The drunkard's prayer, in its entirety, requires both elements

and requires our preconceptions of things sacred and profane before it can operate. Hudgins does not invert the two in order to subvert the traditional understanding of the sacred so much as he seeks to integrate the profane into an experience of things sacred. By demonstrating the ugliness of things we thought were beautiful, and the beauty in things we thought were ugly, and the power of both, Hudgins enters into a very old theological debate. What Hudgins has confronted is the nature of evil and Hudgins asserts that ugly things exist before we can understand beauty, in the same way that without dark we could not comprehend light (and vice-versa). Hudgins takes this observation one step further by demonstrating that things ugly/beautiful, sacred/profane, and holy/unholy are therefore a part of each other and possess qualities of each other.

### Chapter III:

#### "Piss Christ"

When Andres Serrano's "Piss Christ" was revealed in 1987, it caused a cry of protest from numerous Christian groups. In Hudgins' poem "Piss Christ: Andres Serrano, 1987", Hudgins addresses his belief in the necessity of the ugly as a counterpoint, and complement, to true beauty. In an e-mail from Hudgins to me, he discusses his attraction to all things ugly:

But what is the crucifixion but that: the ultimate ugliness transformed not into beauty but the sublime, in Edmund Burke's sense of the word, but isn't in [sic] beauty? Or is our definition of beauty too limited. I heard Mark Strand say once that the subject that has provoked more great art, more great beauty, than any other subject is, when you come right down to it, a picture of a man nailed to pieces of wood. And that, along with my interest in the controversy over the photo, led me to write a poem on Andres Serrano's Piss Christ, which will be in the Microsoft's online journal Slate one of these days before too long. (23.2.2000)

Hudgins' assertion of the ugliness of the crucifixion and of the beautification of that ugliness by the church and the

art world is what prompts him to celebrate Andres Serrano's "Piss Christ."

Like Serrano, Hudgins inverts the beautiful and the ugly in his poem, demonstrating how poorly we are able to distinguish the two in this case:

If we did not know it was cow's blood and urine  
 if we did not know Serrano had for weeks  
 hoarded his urine in a plastic vat,  
 if we did not know the cross was gimcrack  
                   plastic,  
 we would assume it was too beautiful. ("Piss  
 Christ")

Indeed, had no one known the origins of Serrano's mediums, the sculpture would either have been celebrated for its beauty or, more likely, completely ignored as yet another beautiful picture of the crucifixion. Perhaps this is what Hudgins means when he says "we would assume it was too beautiful" (emphasis mine). According to Hudgins, something "too beautiful" is something that is no longer in touch with its opposite. This line foreshadows Hudgins closing lines, in which he asserts that the only useful beauty is beauty that also horrifies us. Hudgins incorporates ugliness in his description of Serrano's photograph, and concludes by asserting its beauty:

We would assume it was the resurrection,  
 glory, Christ transformed to light by light,  
 because the blood and urine burn like a halo,  
 and light, as always, light makes it beautiful.

Broken into its basic grammatical structure, this part of the poem says, literally, "We would assume it was the resurrection glory . . . because the blood and urine burn . . . and light . . . makes it beautiful." The only reason the photograph captures "the resurrection glory" is because it juxtaposes the horror and ugliness of the crucifixion with the beauty of the moment of Christ's victory over the greatest horror, eternal death. This is Hudgins' point; beauty is useless when it does not challenge, enlighten, change.

Hudgins devotes the remainder of the short poem, then, to making Serrano's piece, and his own poem, beautiful by his own definition. He reminds us of the true medium of Serrano's work, and also of our own connections to that medium:

We are born between the urine and the feces,  
 Augustine says, and so was Christ, if there was  
 a Christ,  
 skidding into this world as we do  
 on a tide of blood and urine. Blood, feces,  
 urine--

what the fallen world is made of, and what we  
make.

Our connection to Serrano's medium is a visceral one, but Hudgins immediately dignifies his scatological reference by citing his source, Augustine; he suggests to his reader the apotheosis of shit. Then he inverts his dignified scatology by inserting a quick qualifier, "if there was a Christ." This aside is no minor doubt; it presupposes questions of resurrection and the infallibility of scripture. However, an attentive reader might recall that Christ is the term reserved for the messiah; not everyone understands the Christ to refer to Jesus of Nazareth. Many Jews, for example, still await the coming Christ (the Greek word), or messiah (the Hebrew term). Hudgins causes us to doubt his doubting, because we are unsure as to which person Hudgins is doubting the existence of, the God-made-flesh Christ or the flesh-made-God Jesus. What he emphasizes in either case is the humanity, the flesh of the being in question. Regardless of whether Hudgins means the messiah or the man, both enter the world as all humans do, both leave their mortal coil behind to rot as flesh is wont to do. God or man, the connection to the flesh is inevitable, and if we declare them beautiful, Hudgins declares, we must acknowledge that they are put together of the same stuff we

often declare filthy. They are made of fragments of the fallen world and, while here, produce fragments of the fallen world:

He peed, ejaculated, shat, wept, bled--  
bled under Pontius Pilate, and I assume  
the mutilated god, the criminal,  
humiliated god, voided himself  
on the cross and the blood and urine smeared his  
legs . . .

Hudgins demonstrates the dilemma facing those who would paint a picture of Christ (literally or figuratively) which only emphasizes his deity. The dilemma works like this: If God truly became a real human, the Christ, then he necessarily would have partaken in all the natural and physical processes that accompany humanity. Too often, Christians declare these processes ugly, while at the same time asserting Christ to be perfect and perfectly beautiful. Hudgins points out that something in this logic is awry.

Hudgins (like Serrano) resists the cliché of putting a gilded edge about Christ's life and his death by crucifixion. It was a bloody, ugly, filthy process, even as described by the Gospels. Hudgins resists the iconization of the crucifixion and reminds his readers of the humanity of Christ. That accomplished, he goes on to agree with Serrano, proclaiming that the true beauty is in the



knowledge that, yes, that is blood and urine, and yes, that is Christ inside it all, and, my god, he is so beautiful, not in spite of, but through all the truth about him, through which we see him:

and he ascended bodily unto heaven,

and on the third day he rose into glory, which is what we see here, the Piss Christ in glowing blood:

the whole irreducible point of the faith,  
God thrown in human waste, submerged and shining.

Hudgins' inversion here is complete; the reader experiences the often-beautified crucifixion as an object of horror, of "God thrown in human waste," while at the same time, he is reminded how beautiful the sacrifice and the representations of that sacrifice are. God allowed his own humiliation in order to elevate all mankind; his sacrifice is beautiful of its own accord. But Hudgins also reminds us to see Serrano's sculpture as a thing of beauty -- the gold, the scarlet, and the light radiating. Hudgins' inversion of beauty and ugliness demonstrates that the two are inseparable, but that beauty and ugliness are parts of each other, usually in tension, but also that even that tension itself is a form of beauty. The poem concludes by asserting that only the beauty that utilizes this tension, contains

its own opposite, and horrifies us, too, is useful beauty:

We have grown used to beauty without horror.

We have grown used to useless beauty.



The living, unloved thing wrapped in the flesh of the dead, beloved thing conjures a myriad of referents, from the prodigal human, wrapped in his dead Christ, and being recognized and eventually loved by God, to the mode of Hudgins' poetry itself:

the live lamb wrapped in the loved scent  
of the dead one, and

the deceived ewe lets  
the orphan suckle.

Hudgins poetry, with its ubiquitous celebrations of ugliness and disquieting renderings of actions and objects we usually find beautiful, is much like the living lamb wrapped in the dead. The dead lamb is dead, hence ugly, yet beloved, hence beautiful. The living lamb is rejected, hence ugly, yet still living, hence beautiful. Only when the living, abandoned lamb and the wanted, dead lamb coexist does anything meaningful, useful, or worthy of celebration happen; here is Hudgins' kind of beauty, possessing the ugliness necessary to make it true:

Within a day,  
when he begins to shit her milk  
and she smells his shit and smells herself,  
he's hers.

Hudgins' familiar use of the scatological may seem at first almost gratuitous until once again it becomes obvious just

how apt a metaphor it is. Not until the orphan begins to expel familiar waste can the rancher and the lamb relax and the disguise come off. The mother, all along, was not smelling her long lost baby's unique odor, but her own. The lamb is no longer deceiving the mother because it is everything the dead lamb once was -- a reflection of its mother. Adoption imagery is common within the Christian church as a metaphor of the process through which one becomes a child of God, but adoption is also a term common to writers, especially in the sense that one "adopts" a persona, or adopts a certain manner of language. Hudgins' lambs are also allegorical of his poetic mode; by adopting a language that incorporates numerous profane and scatological references, he can communicate a truth to his reader that otherwise would not be palatable. The reader, in turn, will accept stories which, clothed another way, would have been ignored. This tactic appears subversive, and it is, but Hudgins adds a subtle twist by demonstrating that just as the adopted lamb soon becomes the "real," or original lamb, his inverted Christianity, wrapped in the Postmodern aesthetic, becomes the lost lamb people were looking for but could not accept unless offered in a subversive way that made them see it again, for the first time.

Postmodernism and Christianity are suddenly no longer incompatible, conflicting philosophies, but part of each

other in the way ugliness is, for Hudgins, a crucial part of beauty. Depending upon who the allegorical mother sheep in the poem is, the lamb also may be Postmodernity wrapped in the clothing of Christianity. In other words, if the duped mother represents Christianity, then the poem turns the tables and is subversively offering Postmodernity to the traditional Christian culture.

Hudgins offers a brief lesson on the use of tradition:

This is what the dead  
 are for: for use, hard  
   use, the duped  
 ewe giving suck and the orphan lamb  
 sucking more  
   than he can swallow,

If Christianity is to survive and offer meaningful worship and consolation to its practitioners and to new converts, it must adopt the language and concerns of Postmodernity. By dressing the lamb in the dead skins of traditional Christianity, the Church welcomes this new lamb and is duped into offering it life and calling it her own. But Hudgins' inversion, as in the first scenario, is not yet complete. Once the new lamb begins to drink the milk of its mother and defecate that milk, the mother recognizes her own scent and the costume is no longer necessary; the two have become one. The new lamb of Postmodernity is living by and becoming an

extension of the Church, its new mother. This conversion miracle is celebrated in the act of feeding, as the new lamb gorges itself, all the while becoming more and more the image of its adopted mother. He is now everything the dead lamb could no longer be; he overflows with life and potential:

. . . milk  
pouring down his chin, chest, legs,  
soaking  
the straw and packed dirt,  
flooding  
back into his closed eyes, splashing the ewe--  
a blessing so huge it looks like waste  
as we choke,  
gag, gulp, gag,  
gorge ourselves.

Hudgins' inversion of the mother and lamb puts new clothes on old clichés. By appearing pseudo-mystical and inclusive of the moral/spiritual ambiguity that permeates Postmodern society and literature, he "tricks" his reader into seeing Christianity for the first time, as it always has been: a religion of deep complexity and mystery.

## Chapter V:

### Conclusion

The three major poems selected and analyzed in this paper, "Praying Drunk," "Piss Christ: Andres Serrano, 1987," and "When the Weak Lamb Dies," demonstrate how frequently Hudgins inverts the sacred and the profane. Nevertheless, Hudgins does this so often that one can select blindly from any of his books[3] and find inversion operating in nearly any poem. Hudgins' awareness of the potency of language is revealed when he recalls the awful fear and delight he felt as a child in taking the Lord's name in vain, and again when using the word "nigger" in front of his father. These actions are simple childhood rebellion and exploration, surely, but in the context of poetry they become allegories and patterns of the growth or death of the low Christian church. Hudgins' poetry treats language and Christianity as sacred, powerful elements, indeed, often as near-synonyms, as in "When the Weak Lamb Dies." But Hudgins is also keenly aware of the Church's need for change in order to continue to fulfill the needs of the Postmodern world and accommodate its doubts and questions. Powerful language is not enough; neither is deference to tradition. Language, no matter how potent, is a rhetorical strategy, while deference to tradition is a type of faith. These tools must function within the context of Postmodernity or be rendered obsolete.



In 1997 Hudgins was included in David Impastato's Upholding Mystery: An Anthology of Contemporary Christian Poetry. Impastato introduces his book with a fascinating argument that contends that Christianity and Postmodernity are far more congruent than might be expected:

[P]ostmodernism as an intellectual climate proves far more congenial to the Christian poet than, for example, the romantic empiricism that nourished poets Wallace Stevens and William Carlos Williams. . . . For them and for many decades following, ultimacy was the "the" of physical objects, as Stevens himself put it, and transcendence, especially in the form of a Judeo-Christian "God," was pretty much ruled off-limits as a subject for reasonable poetry.

[T]he Christian embrace of "the word" of its scripture anticipates postmodern concerns about text and authorship. As critic Northrop Frye has pointed out, Judeo-Christian scripture is a presentation of "language events" fussed over by so many authors, redactors, and editors that all individuality of authorship in the modern sense has been smashed out of it, and for that it is all the more powerful. So at this level at

least the Christian poet is comfortable with the "polyphony of self" that language is said to mirror. Equally untroubling is the postmodern notion of history as a web of narratives . . . free of historical fact, if there is such a thing as fact, since for most Christians the "inspiration" of scripture is what gives it authority, not the precise historical status of its narrative referents. (xxii)

Impastato goes on to articulate several more key similarities between Christianity and Postmodernity:

[B]oth proceed by radically interrogating the world's wisdoms and its power arrangements. Both seek to understand human personhood less in the conventional realms of "self" than in relation to the "other," to community, and to the shaping powers of tradition. . . . [B]oth are highly suspicious of the Enlightenment deification of reason, and ultimately accept the universe, and our sense of it, as a mystery beyond the reach of rational or scientific constructs. (xxii)

It should come as no surprise, then, to note that of the fifteen poets represented in the anthology, Hudgins makes no small contribution, with twenty-five poems or selections

from longer poems throughout the book. Hudgins' poetry is a perfect example of what Impastato describes in his introduction, insofar as offering a poetic representation of Christianity-within-Postmodernity. Hudgins' poetry interrogates "the world's wisdoms and its power arrangements." It defines "'self' . . . in relation to the "'other', to community, and to the shaping powers of tradition." And Hudgins presents many poems vis-a-vis the "'polyphony of self'" created in the jumble of narrative sources, voices, and personal experience. In Hudgins' essay, "The Glass Anvil: 'The Lies of an Autobiographer,'" Hudgins reveals that many of the stories he tells within his poems are modified, adopted from other storytellers and made to appear autobiographical, or even fabricated. In this essay, Hudgins catalogues and ranks seven types of "lies" that he told while writing his poetic autobiography, The Glass Hammer. In this regard, Hudgins echoes Frye's idea of the polyphony of self:

[A]utobiography is in some ways a translation of actuality onto the page and in other ways it's a selective and imaginative re-creation of it, a work of art--and the two roles can go to bed together and enjoy their uneasy congress only by lying to one another. (93)

Consciousness of Hudgins' "lies," or "fictions," create a tension that questions the "truth" of a given story (poem), while at the same time remains intellectually aware that truth, if indeed truth is a goal of the modern reader, is only in the telling. Indeed, the idea that truth is peculiar to the story itself is a very important facet of Postmodernity; the proliferation of writers eagerly adopting the "regional" classification indicates the safety, for the writer, in claiming location as the impetus for voice. Regional writers accede to the relativity inherent in Postmodernity, while paradoxically asserting the truth, or authenticity, of their story. In Postmodernity, the story exists in flux between the voices of the author, his or her own intentional, projected voices, and those that exist of their own accord, created by community and environment--the interaction between the "self" and the community.

Hudgins, too, is frequently categorized as a regional writer; he even uses it to describe himself. William Logan, critiquing Babylon in a Jar, makes the humorous but cutting remark, "You expect Hudgins to whip out a banjo and strike up 'My Old Kentucky Home,'" (4) and declares that Hudgins' poetry is "about as authentic as Burl Ives" (3). Logan allows that "much of the South was never authentic; it was a compulsion of inauthenticities, like most cultures" (3). Logan's criticism places Hudgins squarely in the role of a

Postmodern poet, particularly because of the impossibility of defining the "authentic South." Logan unwittingly demonstrates that it is neither the region nor its authenticity that shelters the writer from Postmodernity's razor of relativity. It is the story and the interaction of voice, image, etc. within the story.

Hudgins' inversion is a tactic shared by many Postmodern writers. Whether acknowledging or lamenting Postmodernity's denial of authority, the story has replaced what, historically, might have been deferred to tradition or tacitly accepted. Hudgins, like many Postmodern writers, is drawn to the metaphysical or even supernatural as another form of shelter from the barrage of criticism that can so quickly categorize an author into irrelevance. Hudgins' definition of beauty as simultaneous, even synonymous, with ugliness, is similar to Jacques Derrida's identification of the use of the Greek word pharmakon in his essay "Plato's Pharmacy." Derrida points out the word's simultaneous meanings:

[T]his 'medicine,' this philter, which acts as both remedy and poison, already introduces itself into the body of [Socrates'] discourse with all its ambivalence. This charm, this spellbinding virtue, this power of fascination,

can be -- alternately or simultaneously --  
beneficent or maleficent. (429)

Hudgins' inversion of the sacred, or beautiful, and ugly, or profane is of the same nature as that of pharmakon that Derrida points out operating in the text of Plato's Phaedrus. The "charm" of Hudgins' sense of beauty is that it "can be -- alternately or simultaneously -- beneficent or maleficent."

Derrida's concept of differance operating within the text has become a basic tenet of Postmodern writing and criticism, to the degree that it is often taken for granted. Charles Altieri asserts that John Ashberry and C.K. Williams demonstrate "the fullest contemporary efforts to develop [an] alternative view of subjective agency . . ." (1). That these authors are wholly Postmodern is assumed, and certainly outside Altieri's scope in his essay, but the poem he selects by Ashberry opens with a series of inversions:

All that we see is penetrated by it--  
The distant treetops with their steeple (so  
Innocent), the stair, the windows' fixed  
flashing--  
Pierced full of holes by the evil that is not  
evil,  
The romance that is not mysterious, the life  
that is not life,

A present that is elsewhere. And further in the  
small capitulations  
Of the dance, you rub elbows with it  
Finger it.

As Derrida and Altieri demonstrate, inversion is intrinsic to the very language of Postmodernity, and Hudgins' ubiquitous use of it places his technique squarely within the domain of Postmodernity. Hudgins' fascination with Christian themes and language might seem at first far too traditional for the liberality and mysticality that permeate Postmodernity, but by utilizing at least one important aspect of Postmodernity, inversion, Hudgins is able to maintain his affinity for Christian tradition and language and remain relevant to the Postmodern reader.

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## APPENDIX

**"Praying Drunk"**

Our Father, who art in heaven, I am drunk.  
 Again. Red Wine. For which I offer thanks.  
 I ought to start with praise, but praise  
 Comes hard to me. I stutter. Did I tell you  
 about the woman whom I taught, in bed,  
 This prayer? It starts with praise; the simple form  
 Keeps things in order. I hear from her sometimes.  
 Do you? And after love, when I was hungry,  
 I said, *Make me something to eat.* She yelled,  
*Poof! You're a casserole!* -- and laughed so hard  
 She fell out of bed. Take care of her.

Next, confession -- the dreary part. At night  
 deer drift from the dark woods and eat my garden.  
 They're like enormous rats on stilts except,  
 of course, they're beautiful. But why? What makes  
 them beautiful? I haven't shot one yet.  
 I might. When I was twelve, I'd ride my bike  
 out to the dump and shoot the rats. It's hard  
 to kill your rats, our Father. You have to use  
 a hollow point and hit them solidly.  
 A leg is not enough. The rat won't pause.  
*Yeep!Yeep!* It screams and scrabbles, three legged, back  
 into the trash, and I would feel a little bad  
 to kill something that wants to live  
 more savagely than I do, even if  
 it's just a rat. My garden's vanishing.  
 Perhaps I'll merely plant more beans, though that  
 might mean more beautiful and hungry deer.  
 Who knows?

I'm sorry for the times I've driven  
 home past a black, enormous, twilight ridge.  
 Crested with mist, it looked like a giant wave  
 about to break and sweep across the valley,  
 and in my loneliness and fear I've thought,  
*O let it come and wash the whole world clean.*  
 Forgive me. This is my favorite sin: despair --  
 whose love I celebrate with wine and prayer.

Our Father, thank you for all the birds and trees,  
 that nature stuff. I'm grateful for good health,  
 food, air, some laughs, and all the other things  
 I'm grateful that I've never had to do

without. I have confused myself. I'm glad there's not a rattrap large enough for deer. While at the zoo last week, I sat and wept when I saw one elephant insert his trunk into another's ass, pull out a lump, and whip it back and forth impatiently to free the goodies hidden in the lump. I could have let it mean most anything, but I was stunned again at just how little we ask for in our lives. *Don't look! Don't look!* Two young nuns tried to herd their giggling schoolkids away. *Line up, they called. Let's go and watch the monkeys in the monkey house.* I laughed and got a dirty look. Dear Lord, We lurch from metaphor to metaphor, which is -- let it be so -- a form of praying.

I'm usually asleep by now -- the time for supplication. Requests. As if I'd stayed up late and called the radio and asked they play a sentimental song. Embarrassed. I want a lot of money and a woman. And, also, I want vanishing cream. You know -- a character like Popeye rubs it on and disappears. Although you see right through him, he's there. He chuckles, stumbles into things, and smoke that's clearly visible escapes from his invisible pipe. It makes me think, sometimes, of you. What makes me think of me is the poor jerk who wanders out on air and then looks down. Below his feet, he sees eternity, and suddenly his shoes no longer work on nothingness, and down he goes. As I fall past, remember me.

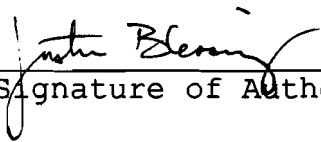
**"Piss Christ: Andres Serrano, 1987"**

If we did not know it was cow's blood and urine  
if we did not know Serrano had for weeks  
hoarded his urine in a plastic vat,  
if we did not know the cross was gimcrack plastic,  
we would assume it was too beautiful.  
We would assume it was the resurrection,  
glory, Christ transformed to light by light,  
because the blood and urine burn like a halo,  
and light, as always, light makes it beautiful.

We are born between the urine and the feces,  
Augustine says, and so was Christ, if there was a  
Christ,  
skidding into this world as we do  
on a tide of blood and urine. Blood, feces, urine--  
what the fallen world is made of, and what we make.  
He peed, ejaculated, shat, wept, bled--  
bled under Pontius Pilate, and I assume  
the mutilated god, the criminal,  
humiliated god, voided himself  
on the cross and the blood and urine smeared his legs  
and he ascended bodily unto heaven,  
and on the third day he rose into glory, which  
is what we see here, the Piss Christ in glowing blood:  
the whole irreducible point of the faith,  
God thrown in human waste, submerged and shining.


We have grown used to beauty without horror.  
We have grown used to useless beauty.

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