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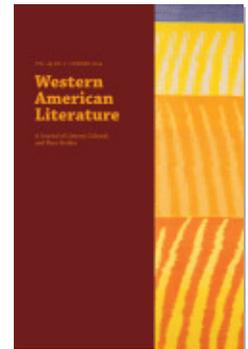
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# From Mysteries to Manidoos

Language and Transformation in Louise Erdrich's  
*The Last Report on the Miracles at Little No Horse*

LINDA KRUMHOLZ

In *The Last Report on the Miracles at Little No Horse* Louise Erdrich explores the uses of the Ojibwe and English languages to convey and sustain Ojibwe cultural beliefs in contemporary fiction.<sup>1</sup> The Ojibwe language, Ojibwemowin, plays a central role in the transformation of the protagonist, Father Damien, from a Euro-American and Catholic to an increasingly Ojibwe worldview. At the same time Erdrich adapts English to broaden its ability to express Ojibwe concepts and beliefs. Erdrich dramatizes the role of language in constructing culture while she affirms the value of Ojibwe cultural beliefs for contemporary US fiction and culture.

When the novel begins, Father Damien Modeste, the Catholic priest on the fictional Little No Horse reservation, is over one hundred years old. Father Damien is quickly revealed to be a writer, a translator, and a woman disguised as a priest. In the frame narrative set in 1996 Father Damien is interviewed by Father Jude Miller; Father Jude is visiting the reservation to investigate whether Sister Leopolda, also known as Pauline Puyat, should be nominated for sainthood.<sup>2</sup> The two priests' conversations, and Father Damien's intimations of death, compel him to remember his life; the novel spans his early years as the unconventional Agnes DeWitt, living in a North Dakota farm town, through his eight decades on the reservation. Father Damien's beliefs are transformed by his relationships with the Ojibwe people, especially his close friend Nanapush, and by his growing knowledge of the Ojibwe language and epistemology. Father Damien's transformations lead him to embrace Ojibwe concepts of the land, reconsider the mysteries of death and

the afterlife, reject Christian beliefs in the repression of the flesh, and shift his understanding of English into Ojibwe contexts and meanings.

Throughout the novel Erdrich uses Ojibwe words and phrases, some translated and some untranslated, to affirm the value and relevance of the Ojibwe language—and by association other Native languages—as a source of cultural identity and conceptual possibilities. Erdrich's inclusion of Ojibwemowin and her adaptations of English speak to the powerful role of language in Native struggles for survival.<sup>3</sup> The US government has historically attempted to destroy Native languages as part of the process meant to assimilate and, essentially, eliminate American Indians. At the same time English has been used in attempts to manipulate Indians out of existence. Eric Cheyfitz states, “translation was, and still is, the central act of European colonization and imperialism in the Americas” (104). Using language to support genocide, “legal” seizure of lands, and definitions of “Indianness” by measures of blood quantum or “status” has accompanied the intentional erasure of Native languages. Against these practices Erdrich asserts the value and persistence of Ojibwemowin.<sup>4</sup>

Erdrich's novel also demonstrates the flexibility and adaptability of English. Erdrich adapts the English language to articulate Ojibwe concepts: she uses wordplay and punning that emphasize the mutability and indeterminacy of language, she invests language with spiritual resonances, and she suggests that language and beliefs have material consequences. Father Damien's role as a Catholic priest is not incidental in Erdrich's adaptation of English. After establishing the history of the devastating role of the Catholic Church for Native people, Erdrich uses Catholic discourse to complicate and transform dominant discourse and make it more accessible to Ojibwe meanings and values. Many of the words Erdrich plays with, such as “passion,” “mystery,” and “conversion,” have specific Catholic meanings. Erdrich's wordplay and punning on Catholic meanings disrupt the perception of English as a unitary or stable language and push against the limits of dominant discourses in the United States. The Catholic discourse also infuses English with spiritual implications that are appropriate to certain Ojibwe spiritual beliefs and to ideas about the creative and transformative power of language.

Erdrich suggests ways that English and the contemporary novel can be adapted to represent Ojibwe cultural stories and beliefs. Concepts of “assimilation” and “hybridity” have been used to suggest that Native American cultural change means the end of Native cultures, but others argue that Native adaptations, such as the adaptation of the dominant language and religion, in fact demonstrate the resilience of Native cultures.<sup>5</sup> Simon Ortiz argues that adaptations of English and Christianity found in Native life and literature are continuations of Native cultures. These adaptations demonstrate “the creative ability of Indian people to gather in many forms of the socio-political colonizing force which beset them and to make these forms meaningful in their own terms” (8). In *American Indian Literary Nationalism* Jace Weaver and Craig Womack elaborate on Ortiz’s assertion; Weaver concludes, “Just as today Christianity can be for some a Native religion, English is a Native language” (34).<sup>6</sup> Gerald Vizenor describes the use of English for Native authors as paradoxical but powerful:

The English language has been the linear tongue of colonial discoveries, racial cruelties, invented names, the simulation of tribal cultures, manifest manners, and the unheard literature of dominance in tribal communities; at the same time, this mother tongue of paracolonialism has been a language of invincible imagination and liberation for many tribal people in the postindian world. (105)

Erdrich plays with and against the English language in order to explore its imaginative and transformative possibilities. Her fiction resists and revises representations of Native American people while it challenges dominant representations of US culture, law, and land.

Erdrich’s wordplay and character transformation also represent the Anishinaabe comic vision described by Lawrence W. Gross (“Comic Vision”). Of course, wordplay and character transformation are commonplace in fiction, but Erdrich creates a context that makes these elements part of an Anishinaabe tradition and worldview.<sup>7</sup> Erdrich describes wordplay as distinctively Ojibwe; her desire to learn Ojibwemowin was provoked in part by her desire to understand the wordplay and humor. In *Books and Islands in Ojibwe Country* she writes:

I wanted to get the jokes, to understand the prayers and the *ad-isoookaanug*, the sacred stories, and most of all, Ojibwe irony. As most speakers are now bilingual, the language is spiked with puns on both English and Ojibwemowin, most playing on the oddness of *gichi-mookomaan*, that is “big knife” or American, habits and behavior. (81)

According to Gross, humor and mutability are central elements of the Anishinaabe comic vision. Gross argues that Anishinaabe sacred stories, especially the stories of the Anishinaabe trickster Wenabozho (Nanabush), create a distinct comic worldview and ethics.<sup>8</sup> Gross draws from religious studies and cognitive and social psychology to create a list of characteristics of a comic worldview that includes “a high tolerance for disorder” and ambiguity (444–45); an openness to the unfamiliar; an embrace of physical existence; “situational ethics rather than rules”; ethics of forgiveness, equality, and pacifism; a “questioning of authority and tradition” (445); and an ability to turn the “hardest sufferings” into laughter and humor (448). Gross argues that the comic vision that shaped Anishinaabe culture and identity has become especially important as a method of postapocalyptic healing, a way to reconstitute Ojibwe culture and people after the genocide and land loss perpetrated by Euro-Americans. In *The Last Report* Erdrich investigates the role of languages in cultural continuity and transformation while she expands the possibilities of contemporary fiction to perpetuate an Ojibwe ethical vision within the play of language and imagination.

### **Converting Conversion: Catholicism in *The Last Report***

In *The Last Report* Erdrich uses specifically Catholic meanings of words to open up English to Ojibwe meanings. Before using Catholicism as a discursive bridge between secular Euro-American and Ojibwe concepts, Erdrich resituates Catholicism. She does this in part by redefining “conversion.” In American Indian history “conversion” is an ominous word. Conversion to Christianity was a central motivation and justification for European conquest of Native Americans and for past and present attempts to eliminate Indian religions, cultures, and languages. At the same time the transformation of belief signaled by conversion suggests an ability

to understand and embrace new ways of seeing that may be vital for respect, understanding, and justice between people. Erdrich establishes the historical context of Catholicism for the Ojibwe; she implicates conversion in the devastating role of the Catholic Church's colonial practices. Through Father Damien's spiritual transformations Erdrich redefines conversion as a dynamic position within and between different spiritual beliefs. His conversion thus retains spiritual concepts from both Catholic and Ojibwe belief systems, but it also undermines the singularity of belief and authority of Catholicism. The novel dilutes Catholicism's colonizing power and resituates it as a source of stories, symbols, and beliefs open to appropriation by Ojibwe culture.

When Agnes arrives on the reservation, her experiences of overwhelming grief and fragmented memory make her an ideal counterpart for the Ojibwe, whose collective experiences have left a legacy of profound grief and fragmented cultural memory. Agnes is sympathetic and well intentioned, but Father Damien is a priest, a bearer of white Christian power and beliefs whose mission is to convert the Native people, and his first contact with the Ojibwe has disastrous consequences. When Father Damien tells Father Jude about these events years later, he calls conversion "a most loving form of destruction" (55).

The Ojibwe initiate the naïve Father Damien into meanings of Catholic conversion. On Father Damien's first foray into the reservation Nanapush, Fleur, Kashpaw, and Kashpaw's wife, Mashkiigikwe, define the Christian drive to convert Indians as another example of white theft; white people's greed for land and animals is equated with the white God's greed for souls. Nanapush tells Father Damien a story, "Nanabozho Converts the Wolves," a trickster tale about the economic motivations behind conversion. Father Damien can easily respond to this story, since he is not motivated by personal greed, but he is confounded by the larger question posed to him by Mashkiigikwe:

"Why do the chimookomanag want us?" she growled. "They take all that makes us Anishinaabeg. Everything about us. First our land, then our trees. Now husbands, our wives, our children, our souls. Why do they want to capture every bit?"

Father Damien, whose task it was to steal even the intangible about the woman beside him, had no answer. (100)

Nanapush's stories and Father Damien's conversations with Fleur and the Kashpaws give him his first lessons in the destructive consequences of conversion; he then witnesses the destruction of the Kashpaw family in the section titled "The Deadly Conversions." Father Damien's subsequent rejection of conversion is clear in a later conversation with Father Jude:

"And you," Father Jude asked curiously, "do you believe as Sister Leopolda believed?"

"That conversion would bring about redemption?" Father Damien seemed surprised to be asked such a question. "Oh no, I believe we were wrong!" (239)

For Father Jude, Father Damien's rejection of a central tenet of Catholicism is as surprising as the question is for Father Damien.

Father Damien rejects this idea of conversion, but the concept returns when Agnes assesses the value of her life as a priest: "As Father Damien, she had blessed unions, baptized, anointed, and absolved friends in the parish. In turn, *Father Damien had been converted* by the good Nanapush. [Father Damien] now practiced a mixture of faiths, kept the pipe, translated hymns or brought in the drum . . ." (275-76, emphasis added). Through Father Damien Erdrich creates an alternative concept of conversion. Instead of depicting conversion as a transformation from one belief to another, Erdrich constructs an idea of conversion as a potential to see beyond the singularity of any one belief, as a potential for multiplicity, "a mixture of faiths."

Erdrich's redefinition of conversion can be more fully elaborated in light of John A. McClure's arguments about contemporary post-secular fiction in *Partial Faiths*. McClure argues that a number of contemporary authors reject secular rationality as the basis of reality and seek religious possibilities of meaning while at the same time showing a deep distrust of religious fundamentalisms.<sup>9</sup> The characters in these novels are transformed by spiritual experiences that awaken a sense of wonder and mystery without providing a rule-bound or enclosed system of beliefs.<sup>10</sup> McClure calls them "partial" faiths because they are open ended and incomplete and because

they are politically partial toward ideals of social transformation (ix). These novels describe the risk and uncertainty of navigating the difficulties of life without a unitary belief while remaining open to “the mysterious precincts of the spirit” (7). In a discussion of Erdrich’s *Bingo Palace* McClure describes the protagonist Lipsha’s negotiations between Catholic and Ojibwe beliefs as improvisational and parodic; he argues that Lipsha’s story is comic and antiheroic in a way that is traditionally Ojibwe (159). Erdrich sets her characters in a “context of apparently ineradicable intermixture,” while she creates “an exuberantly comic view of religiously inflected Native American resistance” (152).

McClure’s arguments illuminate the spiritual affirmation, complexity, and dynamism of Father Damien’s and Father Jude’s conversion experiences. Father Damien’s ability to find spiritual power in two very different religious practices represents both adaptability and a willingness to seek spiritual mysteries without the reassurance of stability or certainty. Agnes and Father Damien’s gender duality creates a useful analogy for Erdrich’s revision of conversion. After an initial struggle and sense of loss Agnes/Father Damien is at peace with her/his unreconciled doubleness as man and woman. The novel constructs a complexity of gender beyond even Virginia Woolf’s *Orlando*, because in *The Last Report* the combination and contradiction of being a man and a woman are never entirely ignored and never resolved. At one point Agnes experiences “an eerie rocking between genders” (78); her ability to live in that unstable dual position prepares her for her religious conversion. Father Damien’s conversion requires him to accept two sets of beliefs that have some similarities (just like the two genders do) but are at times very much at odds with each other. For example, when Father Damien seeks divine guidance so he can help Lulu Nanapush, Erdrich writes,

*Saint Augustine, Nanabozho, whoever can hear me, give me a little help now*, he prayed. The saint would have condemned the young girl’s self-display, and the notorious Nanabozho would have taken advantage of it. Such were Damien’s sources. His bedrock now was aggregate. The voices that spoke to him arose sometimes out of wind and at other times from the pages of religious books. (266)

Father Damien's conversion, however, does not create a syncretic religion.<sup>11</sup> While "his bedrock now was aggregate," the voices from the different traditions come from much different places and tell him very different things. There are points of similarity between Catholic and Ojibwe religious beliefs, but one cannot find an easy accommodation between Saint Augustine and the trickster Nanabozho. For Father Damien being Catholic and Ojibwe is like being both woman and man—at times it seems impossible, and yet it is so.<sup>12</sup>

Father Jude's conversion, shorter than Father Damien's in both time and insight, dramatizes the value of spiritual belief joined to radical uncertainty. Father Jude moves from univocal certainty and a reliance on Catholic dogma to increasing confusion and ambiguity. Early in the novel Father Jude asserts, "Right. Wrong. These are simply distinguished. Black is black and white is white" (135). Whether this is priestly certainty or naïve simplicity, his comfortable categories are undermined by his conversations with Father Damien, his newfound desire for Lulu Nanapush, his inquiry into Sister Leopolda's story, and his time on the reservation. As he struggles to keep all of his preexisting beliefs intact, he despairs: "Father Jude had been sent here to gather knowledge, but the more he learned, the more he thought, the less certainty he grasped" (239). Father Jude is now in the condition best suited for new knowledge—a condition many teachers seek to create in their students—a state of productive uncertainty. Father Jude's conversion is of great consequence. Saint Jude is the patron saint of lost causes, and Jude answers Father Damien's desire for an appropriate priest—a priest who is willing to accept a productive uncertainty—to replace him at his death (239). By the end of the novel Father Jude's Catholic beliefs are reshaped by Ojibwe values; he has begun to wonder whether sainthood is found, not in faith, chastity, and suffering, but in connection to people, in finding one's role in a greater design, in sexual passion and love, and in forgiveness.

By converting conversion, Erdrich sets both Catholicism's historically destructive role and its rich symbols and stories into Ojibwe contexts.<sup>13</sup> David McNab argues that *The Last Report* creates an unequivocal rejection of Catholicism and that "Catholic and all Christian churches are unmasked for what they have done

to Aboriginal people” (84). Conversely, Alison A. Chapman argues that the novel “revolve[s] around a central question: what makes a saint?” She reads the novel as a revision of saints’ lives, an approach that keeps Catholicism at the center of the inquiry (151). I agree with McNab that Erdrich reveals the destructive history of Catholicism but also with Chapman that Erdrich revises the saints’ lives as a form of parody and religious inquiry. Erdrich neither dismisses Catholicism nor uses it to establish the core beliefs in the novel. P. Jane Hafen writes, “Erdrich tests Christian beliefs of faith, love, sin and forgiveness and eternal life by reframing those ideas in Ojibwe experiences” (82). Erdrich’s revision of conversion resituates Catholic beliefs within Ojibwe spiritual and social contexts and thus shifts relations of power. Father Damien’s flexibility and Father Jude’s growing uncertainty challenge religious dogma and strictures and thus undermine the authority of Catholicism. At the same time the interaction between Catholic and Ojibwe practices makes Ojibwe beliefs more accessible to people from Christian backgrounds.<sup>14</sup> Erdrich’s engagement with Catholicism also enables a sustained critique of values that are often naturalized by Christianity and Euro-American culture, sociocultural values of individualism, capitalism, and private property, as well as the values that shape our intimate lives regarding sexuality, love, and death.

### **From Mysteries to Manidoos: The Translation of Agnes**

Language is central to Agnes’s conversion from Euro-American and Catholic to increasingly Ojibwe values and beliefs.<sup>15</sup> Erdrich’s language play shifts the discursive center of the novel and constructs Ojibwe interpretations of Agnes’s evolving beliefs and her death. Catholicism acts as a discourse within English that creates a bridge between dominant Euro-American and Native American discourses. The Catholic discourse in the novel transforms readers’ relationships to English. For example, certain words in the novel that only have meaning in specialized Catholic contexts—words such as “alb,” “burse,” “amice,” “chasuble,” and “maniple”—defamiliarize English (224). At the same time names such as Agnes, Cecilia, and Leopolda, as well as familiar words such as “communion” and “passion,” gain meanings in Catholic contexts; the words reverberate with multiple meanings that move between spiritual and secular

connotations. The addition of spiritual resonances within English prepares readers to understand the spiritual concepts and dimensions of the Ojibwe language. Finally, Erdrich's wordplay destabilizes and opens up meanings within English that enable both Agnes's and the readers' "translation" into Ojibwe language and concepts.

The spiritual power of language evoked in many different Native American ritual contexts has been described as "sacramental"; it is similar to the transformative power of language implicit in the Christian sacraments.<sup>16</sup> Barre Toelken writes, for example, that "the Navajos believe that language does not merely describe reality; it creates it" (390); Kenneth Lincoln asserts more broadly that "[i]deally generative in the world, words make things happen in Native America; language is the source of a world in itself" (20). The active material relationship between words and the world that these critics describe in Native American linguistic practices is implicit in the Christian sacraments, but Erdrich takes that sacramental power even further when Agnes performs her first ritual as a priest. It is late winter, and everyone on the reservation, including the nuns and Agnes, is near starvation. When Father Damien performs Communion, the wafer and wine become "a thick mouthful of raw, tender, bloody, sweet-tasting meat" and "vital blood" that leaves them "full . . . satisfied and calm" (69). Through the Latin words spoken by Agnes, an unordained impostor, the ceremony meant to convert the wafer and wine into the body and blood of Christ actually works. Father Damien's sacramental powers allow Erdrich to create spiritual possibilities within Christian beliefs that are vital for an understanding of Native American beliefs. Erdrich's use of Christianity to assert these spiritual concepts gives Christian readers, and perhaps others familiar with Christian traditions, a means of recognizing this spiritual power while also putting Native American beliefs on equal footing, thereby countering representations of American Indian religions as savage, magical, and superstitious.

Erdrich's use of Catholic discourse to disrupt dominant meanings in English is most evident in her play with words that have both secular meanings and specifically Christian and Catholic meanings, words such as "conversion," "transfiguration," and "communion." In her extended punning on the words "passion," "mystery," and "translation," the slippage of meanings and the insta-

bility of language are used to translate English words into Ojibwe meanings; to describe Agnes's shift toward Ojibwe spiritual beliefs; and to interrogate deeply held beliefs about God, love, and death.

Erdrich plays with the word "passion" in ways that question Christian and Euro-American ideas about spirituality and sexuality while she interrogates the power of stories—and the saints' tales in particular—and their role in constructing beliefs. In the chapter titled "Leopolda's Passion" Erdrich explains the specifically Catholic meanings of "passion." When Father Jude attempts to write Sister Leopolda's life as a saint's passion, Erdrich explains that

[Father Jude] found himself dwelling on the symmetry of the saints' passions, or stories, on their simplicity of line. He was having trouble with passion, from the Latin *pati*, to suffer, defined in the Catholic Dictionary as *a written account of the sufferings and death of one who laid down his life for the faith*. He was persuaded that the God he knew, at least, wanted him to write a passion, a recognition for this very complex person, Leopolda. (336)

Erdrich engages with all of the meanings of "passion" in this passage. A saint's passion recounts her or his life as a replication of the Passion of Christ, of Christ's suffering between the Last Supper and his ascent to Heaven; thus a saint's passion is a convention of storytelling. When Father Jude's passion for Sister Leopolda comes apart, instead of giving up a story line he loves, he decides Father Damien's story (and especially the mistaken version he has created) fits best into the conventions of the saint's passion. Father Jude's contemplation of passion cited above reveals other alternative and disruptive meanings. When Father Jude thinks, "he was having trouble with passion," he doesn't acknowledge the sexual and earthly meanings of this assertion as he struggles with his own unprecedented desire for Lulu Nanapush.

The consequences of Father Jude's failure to write Sister Leopolda's passion are even larger, since he "was persuaded that *the God he knew*, at least, wanted him to write [this] passion" (emphasis added). His inability to fix people's lives within the "simplicity of line" of the saint's passion threatens to undermine his entire concept of God and religion. The disruption of his beliefs is reinforced when his idea of "*the tree of Catholic tradition*" blooms into a brief

and (for Father Jude) disturbing vision: “The tree was beaded all the way down to the center of the earth and the branch of his own beliefs, the dogma and history of the Catholic Church not even a branch but a twig not strong enough for a bird to perch on, just a weak and slender shoot” (339). Through the multiple meanings of “passion” Catholic doctrine, along with the centrality of Catholicism and Judeo-Christian religions, is turned on its head.

A number of Erdrich’s chapters are titled “passions,” including “Kashpaw’s Passion,” “Agnes’s Passion,” “Lulu’s Passion,” “Leopolda’s Passion,” and finally “Father Damien’s Passion.” These chapters mock the simple story lines of the saints’ tales, instead describing the rich complexity of people’s desire, tenderness, suffering, and sacrifice. These “passions” challenge the Christian values of virginity, suffering, and the mortification of the flesh while they dramatize the beauty and value of sexual passion, earthly loves, and love for “the very thingness of the world” (215).

Erdrich transforms the word “mystery” from secular Euro-American to Christian to Ojibwe meanings. *The Last Report* is a mystery story, but neither of the central mysteries—who killed Napoleon and what is Father Damien’s secret—is a mystery to the reader. In Father Damien’s attempts to solve the mystery of Napoleon’s murder, other meanings of “mystery” arise. “Mystery” has specifically Christian meanings as “any of the 15 events (as the Nativity, the Crucifixion, or the Assumption) serving as a subject for meditation during the saying of the rosary” (“Mystery,” def. 1b).<sup>17</sup> The rosary beads, which are referred to in the novel as “mysteries,” are the murder weapon; measuring the rosary against the marks on the dead man’s throat, Father Damien finds “a set of mysteries [on the rosary] that exactly fit the wounds” (163). Father Damien must figure out who would create a rosary interspersed with barbed wire, “such a dark-spirited artifact,” to know who the murderer is (202). Thus he is faced with the mystery of the mysteries.

The mystery of the mysteries leads to Sister Leopolda and her use of the rosary, a symbol of Catholic faith and prayer, as a tool of self-mutilation and murder. Her murder of Napoleon, a consequence of her distorted desire and self-loathing, creates a profound deviation from the simple line of the saint’s tale that even Father Jude cannot overlook. The solution to the murder mystery also ties into other

mysteries: Which girls did Napoleon sexually abuse? How did the damage he caused shape individual lives as well as the relationships between people and the emerging factionalism on the reservation? What is justice in this situation? And what is the role of Christianity and the Church in the damage done to the community?

The novel moves from these mysteries to the mysteries of life and death to the meaning of “mystery” as “a religious truth that one can know only by revelation and cannot fully understand” (“Mystery,” def. 1a).<sup>18</sup> Through Agnes’s contemplations of Ojibwe life and language these mysteries are set increasingly within Ojibwe terms. In Ojibwe the word for “God” or “spirit” is “manito” (or “manitou” or “manidoo”), and “Kitschi-Manitou” (or “Gizhe Manito”) means “the Great Spirit.”<sup>19</sup> Basil Johnston asserts in *The Manitous* that “manitou” can also be translated as “mystery” and “Kitchi-Manitou” as “the Great Mystery” (xxi). Father Damien’s concept of the mystery of God comes in part from his translation of the word “manidoo”:

“Consider the word spirit, manidoo,” [Father Damien] wrote, “and all of the forms in which it resides. That which we consider vermin, insects, the lowest form of life, are manidooens, little spirits, and in their designation it is possible at once to see the penetration of the great philosophy that so unites the smallest to the largest, for the great, kind intelligence, the Gizhe Manito, shares its name with the humblest creature.” (315)

Father Damien’s translation of the Ojibwe language into English makes it possible “at once to see” central tenets of Ojibwe spirituality and epistemology. The linguistic connection between insects and the Great Spirit illustrates Ojibwe beliefs that spirit and personhood dwell in all living things; the words “penetration,” “unites,” and “shares” suggest the concepts of interdependence and reciprocity that grow from this belief. Father Damien’s descriptions of “[t]hat which we consider vermin” and “the lowest form of life” contrast Ojibwe beliefs with Euro-American worldviews in which hierarchies of value allow people to dismiss and even despise those considered smaller or lesser. Despite Christian professions of humility these “humblest creatures” are not considered valuable in Christian cosmology. Father Damien clearly admires “the great philosophy” of the Ojibwe, as well as “the great, kind intelligence, the Gizhe Mani-

to.” Agnes’s contemplations of Ojibwe language and cultural beliefs recast the novel’s mysteries so that Ojibwe perspectives frame the inquiry into the mysteries of God, death, and the afterlife.

With the word “translation” Erdrich’s play with language and her interrogation of spirituality again converge; Agnes’s death scene brings into play the multiple meanings of “translation.” Since Agnes is over one hundred years old, her death seems inevitable from the beginning of the novel. The death of Agnes’s close friend Nanapush in the chapter “Le Mooz” prefigures Agnes’s own death. “Le Mooz” (the moose) is a trickster tale that transgresses all Christian beliefs about death and even mocks the story of Christ rising from the dead. Nanapush returns twice after his death, provoked to return by Margaret’s attempts to make love to his dead body, an act they consummate after his second and last return. Nanapush reassures the people at his funeral that the “spirit world,” unlike Christian concepts of heaven, purgatory, and hell, is not a place of judgment but a place to see old friends and where “there is plenty of food and no government agents” (294). “Le Mooz” is also a poignant inquiry into love, since death compels Margaret and Nanapush to ask why they were always so hard on each other, why they were always so afraid to show their love.

Agnes has two main concerns about her death: her body must be hidden so no one will discover that Father Damien is a woman, and her soul has been promised to the devil in the form of a black dog. Agnes’s last moments are wonderfully ambiguous, open to the reader’s desires and to Christian or Ojibwe interpretations. In the last moments of her life remembering Nanapush’s death makes Agnes laugh so hard that she thinks, “*I’m going to laugh myself to death!*” and then she apparently does just that (349). Erdrich describes what happens next:

Trusting, yearning, she put her arms out into that emptiness. She reached as far as she could, farther than she was capable, held her hands out until at last a bigger, work-toughened hand grasped hold of hers.

With a yank, she was pulled across. (350)

Is the “work-toughened hand” the hand of the savior in her miraculous survival in the flood (43), the hand of Berndt or Gregory,

or the hand of Nanapush? Is she going to Christian hell, Christian heaven, or the Ojibwe spirit world? Despite her deal with the devil and the fire imagery that precedes this moment, the hand that pulls her across seems too kind and her eagerness too trusting for one to (want to) interpret this as hell. In Christian terminology “translate” means “to convey to heaven or to a non-temporal condition without death” (“Translate,” def. 1b). Has Agnes used trickster strategies? Has she managed to trick the devil and get “translated” directly to Heaven? Or has she managed a different trick? Has she been “translated” into another language, “converted” into another story based in another set of beliefs with different ideas about God, devils, and the afterlife (“conversion” is a synonym of “translation”) (“Translation,” def. 1b)? Has Erdrich translated Agnes’s story from a saint’s passion into a trickster tale? And if so, how does that story carry the reader between and across Euro-American secular, Christian, and Catholic to Ojibwe stories, language, and forms of knowledge? Through punning Erdrich destabilizes English and translates meaning into Ojibwe possibilities; she “converts” language while she puns on the word “conversion,” which also means “reversal,” which is, of course, a trickster strategy.

### **Saints and Tricksters**

Erdrich’s play with the English language, like Agnes’s conversion, sets interpretations of *The Last Report* within a dynamic convergence of Euro-American, Catholic, and Ojibwe contexts. The novel also draws upon elements of two story traditions: the Catholic saint’s life and the Ojibwe trickster tale. When the story of Sister Leopolda’s sainthood falls apart, Father Jude decides that Father Damien is the true candidate for sainthood. The novel invites readers to join in this revelation and read the novel as a revised saint’s tale.<sup>20</sup> Saints’ lives and trickster tales are both story traditions that serve *not* as models of behavior to emulate, but as the source of knowledge on ethics, God, nature, and the afterlife.<sup>21</sup> The differences in stories—the former enshrining suffering, sacrifice, and often extremes of physical mutilation in a genre of high seriousness; the latter using comedy, the forces of nature, and sometimes the profane to reveal the power, beauty, and foibles of humanity and the universe—describe key differences in the religious beliefs and epistemologies they represent.

Reading Agnes's life story as a saint's tale, *The Last Report* interrogates values espoused by Catholicism and associated with sainthood; reading Agnes's life as a trickster tale, the novel proposes the power of adaptation, transformation, and humor with a distinctly Ojibwe vision. The two interpretive frameworks reproduce for readers some of the spiritual complexity, uncertainty, and creativity faced by the characters while they illuminate the ethical and social implications of the different spiritual beliefs.

Erdrich's engagement with trickster stories is signaled by her character Nanapush, whose name is a variant of the traditional Ojibwe trickster figure also known as Nanabush, Nanabozho, and Wenabozho. Nanabozho has similarities to other Native American trickster figures; like Coyote and Raven he is a fumbler, a deceiver, and a culture hero. Nanabozho also has distinctive features and stories; his main attribute, according to Basil Johnston, is "his power of transformation," but the transformations also constitute limitations (*Ojibway Heritage* 19). Johnston explains further:

As a tadpole changes into a new being with a new form, as a caterpillar becomes a butterfly of dazzling beauty, so could Nanabush assume at will, and in an instant, a new form, shape, and existence. . . . Whatever form or shape he assumed, Nanabush had also to accept and endure the limitations of that form and nature. (19–20)

Agnes has many of the attributes of the Ojibwe trickster. In a section titled "The Transfiguration of Agnes" Agnes takes on the identities of the worst people she has met; she steals the identity of the malicious priest Father Damien and in the act becomes the thief and the actor. Because her rebirth after the flood comes on the eve of Saint Dismas, she is also associated with the Good Thief of the Christian tradition (61). Agnes is both freed and constrained in her assumed roles as man and priest.

Agnes is also identified as a trickster by Nanapush. In the chapter "The Recognition" Nanapush "recognizes" Father Damien as a woman and a trickster. While they play chess, Nanapush reveals his knowledge of her identity in order to upset Father Damien's concentration so he, Nanapush, can win the chess game. Agnes mutters, "You tricked me, old man," and Nanapush replies, "You've

been tricking everybody!" (232). The chapter, which begins with the role of chess in historical relations between Europeans and Indians, makes clear that Agnes's roles as trickster and imposter are part of a game that has life-and-death stakes (229–30). As a saint's tale Agnes's story upsets the "simplicity of line" and resists and revises Christian values and beliefs. As a trickster tale Agnes's story brings Ojibwe narrative and ethical traditions into the novel. The Catholic saints' passions and Ojibwe trickster stories do not describe different lives, but different ethics. For example, the Ojibwe suffer a great deal, but the traditional Ojibwe in the novel do not seek out or value suffering, unlike Sister Leopolda, whose acts of suffering are represented as narcissistic and self-serving. The Ojibwe do not advocate sacrifice; sharing with others is represented, not as sacrifice, but as a natural outgrowth of communal ethics.

Erdrich's evocation of the sacred Ojibwe trickster stories also perpetuates the distinctively Anishinaabe comic vision that Lawrence Gross describes. The humor, adaptability, tolerance for ambiguity, and forgiveness are features of the Anishinaabe trickster stories that define ethics as well as strategies for cultural survival. Contemporary Nanabozho stories attest to Anishinaabe survival while they help to ensure it. Gross writes of contemporary Anishinaabe writers, "Maintaining the role of cultural hero in new stories and new roles, the trickster liberates the Anishinaabe from the oppression of colonialism and opens healing vistas of the imagination" ("Comic Vision" 456).

Reading Erdrich's novel as a trickster tale also raises questions about the ethics of literary criticism. Adaptations of trickster tales in contemporary American Indian fiction are often interpreted as narratives of resistance that enact reversals in power. Tricksters have also been interpreted as figures of textual indeterminacy that disrupt the stability of meaning (Reesman xix). While textual indeterminacy can underline the responsibility readers have in creating meaning, assertions of indeterminacy can also be used to avoid responsibility, to avoid asking the question "what is at stake," and so to invite critics to appropriate texts to their preconceived beliefs.<sup>22</sup>

### **Language and Transformation**

In *The Last Report* Erdrich teases out multiple meanings of English words and thus inflects the English language to articulate Ojibwe

concepts. The novel also conveys the vitality of the Ojibwe language and the urgent need for it to survive. Throughout Father Damien's story Ojibwemowin serves as a repository of Ojibwe cultural beliefs. The language also becomes inseparable from the spiritual mysteries evoked by the novel. In *Books and Islands in Ojibwe Country* Erdrich writes, "What the Ojibwe call the *Gizhe Manidoo*, the ineffable and compassionate spirit residing in all that lives, is associated for me with the flow of Ojibwemowin" (85). By connecting the language to cultural and spiritual forces, Erdrich suggests that the survival of the Ojibwe language has consequences for the world.

Ojibwemowin plays a central role in Agnes's conversion; her major spiritual and cultural transformations grow out of her comprehension of the Ojibwe language. She arrives on the reservation an eager student who wishes "to accept and to absorb" (*Last Report* 74); when she meets Kashpaw, her first encounter with an Indian, she immediately begins to learn Ojibwe words and phrases (62). Agnes dedicates herself to the study of Ojibwemowin and to the completion of an Ojibwe grammar and dictionary begun by her predecessor. Her study of the language leads to moments in which her spiritual beliefs and identity are redefined by Ojibwe words, as in the following passage about the word "prayer":

Four times a day . . . [t]he priest stopped what he was doing, cast himself down, made himself transparent, broke himself open. That is, prayed. . . . She asked for answers, and for the spirit of the language to enter her heart. Agnes's struggle with the Ojibwe language, the influence of it, had an effect on her prayers. For she preferred the Ojibwe word for praying, *anama'ay*, with its sense of a great motion upward. She began to address the trinity as four and to include the spirit of each direction—those who sat at the four corners of the earth. Wherever she prayed, she made of herself a temporary center of those directions. There, she allowed herself to fall apart. Disintegrated into pieces of creation, which God might pick up and turn curiously this way and that to catch the light. What a relief it was, for those moments, to be nothing, a smashed thing, and to have no thought or expectation. Whether God picked up the fragments and stuck them back together, or casually swept them aside was of no consequence either to Agnes or Father Damien. (182)

Agnes/Father Damien's translation of the word "prayer" to the word "anama'ay" precipitates a conversion from Christian spiritual beliefs toward Ojibwe, especially evident in her shift from addressing the Christian trinity to the spirits of the four directions. Prayer is language directed at God or spirits; the profound dissolution of self she experiences in prayer, in which she "broke himself open" and she is "nothing, a smashed thing," opens her to multiple possibilities of spirituality and identity. Her prayer "for the spirit of the language to enter her heart" seems to have been heard (by whom?); her spirituality and identity are dissolved and remade within both the English and Ojibwe languages, within both the Catholic and Ojibwe spiritual beliefs, a duality signaled by the reassertion of her two names in the end of the passage.

Agnes's attempts to translate Ojibwe language and concepts into English perform a reciprocal process of translating her concepts and beliefs into Ojibwe. For example, when Agnes contemplates the lack of gender distinctions in Ojibwemowin, or the division between animate and inanimate in Ojibwe nouns, or the relationship between manidoogens and manito, the Ojibwe linguistic concepts give language to her conceptual and spiritual transformation (257–58, 315). The Ojibwe language also plays a role in a central moment of Agnes's conversion. After Agnes ends her affair with Father Gregory, she is suicidal; when Father Damien goes to Nanapush to say goodbye before she kills herself, she instead finds help. Nanapush performs a healing ceremony in the sweat lodge, which he explains "is our church," and the prayers in Ojibwe bring Agnes peace (214). After a religious rebirth experience Father Damien finds that he "loved not only the people but also the very thingness of the world" (215). This chapter, titled "The Sacrament," concludes:

Thus was her salvation composed of the very great and very small. The vast comfort of a God who comforted her in a language other than her own. The bread of life. The gold orange of washed carrots and the taste of salt. (216)

The sacrament of Communion has been transformed by another language and spiritual tradition. Instead of seeking redemption in suffering and self-abnegation, she finds renewal in a new version of "communion," the communion with others, and in the "bread of

life" itself, not as a symbol but in the material beauty and substance of the world. When Agnes experiences her "dark night of the soul," her rebirth is into Ojibwe, not Christian, spiritual revelation, with "a God who comforted her in a language other than her own." In Agnes's conversion the sacrament is changed by language from symbolic sustenance to an expression of love for and connection to the material world. Language transforms concepts, and those concepts represent and create ethical and spiritual relationships to the world.

The spiritual and ethical power of the Ojibwe language, its conceptual and material ability to bring the world to life and create relationships of mutual responsibility, is exemplified by the Ojibwe word for stones. Agnes explains that nouns in Ojibwemowin are not categorized by gender but by whether the noun is considered animate or inanimate. Agnes writes, "*For the Anishinaabeg, the quality of animation from within, or harboring spirit, is not limited to animals and plants. Stones, asiniig, are animate, and kettles, akikoog, alive as well*" (257). A. Irving Hallowell, like Agnes, uses rocks as examples to define linguistic categories of animate and inanimate and to derive Ojibwe concepts of personhood (149).<sup>23</sup> Hallowell writes that personhood for the Ojibwe "transcends a human appearance as a constant attribute," and he concludes, "The moral values implied [by this idea of personhood] document the consistency of the principle of mutual obligations which is inherent in all interactions with persons throughout the Ojibwa world" (158, 172). For Hallowell the Ojibwe language is the source for understanding the deepest philosophical beliefs of the Ojibwe people. In *Books and Islands in Ojibwe Country* Erdrich again uses stones to explain Ojibwe language and beliefs, and she concludes, "Stones are no longer the same as they were to me in English" (86). When the language transforms concepts, it changes relationships to the world. At the end of the novel Erdrich has Nanapush explain the connection between the Ojibwe language and the land. Nanapush asks if the earth will know the people if no one speaks the Ojibwe "names of the earth"; without the Ojibwe language, he wonders, "Do the rocks here know us?" (361, 360). In Nanapush's spiritual vision the survival of the earth is dependent upon the survival of the language and culture of the Ojibwe. Whether the power of the Ojibwe language comes from its spiritual connection or its cultural significance, Erdrich speaks for

its beauty, necessity, and potential to transform the world. She does this while demonstrating the flexibility of the English language to bring readers at least partway to understanding the responsibility of “mutual obligations” and seeing the mysteries of living, dying, loving, and playing from a contemporary Ojibwe perspective.

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#### NOTES

1. The Ojibwe are also called the Chippewa; they call themselves Anishinaabeg. I use the word “Ojibwe” here (and “Ojibwemowin” for the Ojibwe language) following Erdrich’s English usage in the novel, though the Ojibwe characters use “Anishinaabe.”

2. Many of the characters in *The Last Report* also appear in Erdrich’s novels *Love Medicine* (1984), *The Beet Queen* (1986), *Tracks* (1988), *The Bingo Palace* (1994), and *Tales of Burning Love* (1996).

3. Many Native American nations are working to retain and transmit languages, since the numbers of Native language speakers were severely reduced by US government and BIA school policies. Programs have been set up in recent years to preserve and teach Native languages; see, for example, the nonprofit group Native Languages of the Americas, the Indigenous Language Institute, and the American Indian Language Preservation at the Center of University of Arizona Institute, as well as the Falmouth Institute Native American Language Preservation Summit. The US government’s Native American Language Preservation and Maintenance—Esther Martinez Initiative, Dec. 15, 2006, provides funding for language immersion programs. Resources for learning Ojibwemowin are available through online dictionaries, college courses, and language immersion programs. Erdrich describes the power of Ojibwemowin in *Books and Islands in Ojibwe Country* (81–87); she also narrates the film *First Speakers: Restoring the Ojibwe Language*.

4. In an essay on *Love Medicine* Robert Silberman writes, “questions of language and discourse—Indian language(s) versus English, native forms of expression versus nontribal literary forms such as the novel—are inevitably questions of power” (137).

5. Jace Weaver and Craig Womack discuss problems with uses of the idea of hybridity, and Lisa Brooks discusses the greater usefulness of the term “adaptation” (Weaver 28–29, Womack 130–40; Brooks 240–41). Critics note that cultural change and adaptation are considered vital for any culture to stay alive, but when Native cultures change and adapt, they are described as “lost” (Womack, *Red on Red* 42; King 53–56).

6. David Treuer argues against this assumption: “To claim that English is a Native language is to continue [the] process [of cultural eradication].” Womack writes matter-of-factly, “English is an Indian language. I know a lot of Indians—been around them all my life—and every one of them speaks English” (120). Weaver and Womack also develop arguments that English is a Native language (Weaver 32–35; Womack 120–21).

7. Robert Dale Parker argues that the association between a formal approach and an Indian cultural tradition does not suggest that the form is inherently or exclusively Native; he writes, “a literary form . . . doesn’t inevitably carry a predictable cultural meaning or context (such as Indian or non-Indian), though we might read back onto it a cultural context that we have come to associate with it.” He continues, “The point is to identify the site of racialized and culturalized forms in the ways that we read instances of those forms, rather than in some essentializing way inherently in the forms themselves” (9).

8. Gross cites Gerald Vizenor and Erdrich as authors whose stories continue the Anishinaabe comic vision.

9. McClure argues that American Indian authors reject secular rationality for different reasons than non-Native authors. Non-Native authors are motivated by the failed promises of secular rationality; instead of peace, prosperity, and progress, global and local horrors persist. For Indian authors secularization, along with Christianization, was part of the Euro-American project to colonize and assimilate Indians (10, 11, 133).

10. McClure writes: “These characters are transformed and steadied, as it were, by the sense that the world is seamed with mystery and benignity, by awakened impulses to reverence, wonder, self-forgetfulness, and care, and by coming into company with others. These gifts make life more bearable, but they fall short of the gifts of absolute conviction and secure dwelling identified with traditional experiences of conversion or revival” (6).

11. Syncretism suggests a synthesis of two religions that does not happen here. While the religious beliefs are often “compatible” (as Father Damien writes to the Pope) (49), there are aspects of the two religions that cannot be reconciled in the novel, for example, in regard to death. In reference to Catholic and Ojibwe beliefs in Erdrich’s novels Catherine Rainwater writes, “These religions are epistemologically, experientially, and teleologically different” (165).

12. Other critics also connect Agnes/Father Damien’s gender instability to an acceptance of multiple positions and beliefs. J. James Iovannone describes Agnes/Father Damien’s “transgendered” position between and outside of gendered categories; he writes, “Erdrich undercuts any assumption that Agnes/Damien can easily be identified within a binary framework of gender” (60). Deirdre Keenan argues that Father Damien’s position between genders enables his role as mediator and that one way he mediates is “between Christianity and Ojibwe sacred beliefs and practices” (9). Leni Marshall notes that Euro-American characters such as Father Wekkle cannot accept Agnes/Father Damien as both a woman and a priest, while the respected Ojibwe men, Nanapush and Kashpaw, “accept Agnes/Father Damien

as a priest, as a companion, and as a woman” (46). Marshall argues that “permeability [of boundaries] is part of Native culture” and concludes, “Neither Father Damien nor the reader is forced to choose one spirituality over the other” (46, 47).

13. Dennis Walsh argues about Erdrich’s early novels that Catholicism provides a “dense background” for the characters so that “the larger spiritual conflicts seem to have historical grounding” in the complex history of the Ojibwe and Métis people of the Turtle Mountain Reservation (125). He concludes that “the conflict of Catholic and shamanic codes . . . asserts Chippewa values and culture. Conversely, colonialist impositions, Catholicism and capitalism especially, are derided and satirized as lacking wisdom, humanity, and spirituality” (112). See Walsh and Maristuen-Rodakowski for more information about Erdrich’s relationship to the Turtle Mountain Reservation.

14. Thomas King describes a similar strategy in Momaday’s groundbreaking novel *House Made of Dawn*: “Oh yes. Native writers creating a Native universe. For N. Scott Momaday, the answer, in part, was to write a novel in which aspects of an unfamiliar universe stood close enough to parts of a known world so that the non-Native reader, knowing the one, might recognize the other. Ironically, Christianity, which had been a door barred against Native-non-Native harmony and understanding, suddenly became an open window through which we could see and hear each other” (108).

15. Melanie Wittmier also focuses on the role of language in *The Last Report*; she argues that Nanapush teaches Father Damien the Ojibwe language and philosophy in order to teach him trickster skills. Shannon Hengen disagrees with a focus on language; she writes, “We might be tempted to argue that the priest’s journey parallels his thorough learning of the Ojibwe language” (209), but notes that Father Damien’s quest is for something that cannot be spoken. Although Hengen disagrees with my argument in this regard, her argument about the translation between Christian and Ojibwe religious concepts has many similarities to mine. She concludes that Father Damien seeks “an Ojibwe translation for the idea of Christian love. Because no word for it exists, it must be performed, and in performing it he gives much back to his community” (215).

16. Brian Swann explains, “A truly sacramental sense of language means that object and word are so fused that their creation, the ‘event’ is itself creative, bringing to this time and place the enduring powers which truly effect that which the event claims, and such action cannot be undone” (xii).

17. According to *The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church*, the “mysteries of the rosary” are “[t]he fifteen subjects of meditation connected with the fifteen decades of the Rosary. They are divided into three groups of five, corresponding to the three chaplets of which the devotion is composed, and known as the Joyful, Sorrowful, and Glorious Mysteries. The whole in order forms an epitome of the lives of Christ and His Mother” (951). In 2002 Pope John Paul II added five Luminous Mysteries (Tiriglio and Brighenti 252).

18. In *The Encyclopedia of Theology* the definition of “mystery” is many pages long; “mystery” is called “one of the most important key-words of Christianity and

its theology” (1000). In *The Catholic Encyclopedia* the definition begins, “This term signifies in general that which is unknowable, or valuable knowledge that is kept secret” (662). I chose the Merriam-Webster definition because of its succinctness, accessibility, and poetry.

19. I have gotten these variants from Frederic Baraga’s *Dictionary of the Ojibway Language* and John D. Nichols and Earl Nyholm’s *Concise Dictionary of Minnesota Ojibwe*.

20. In “Rewriting the Saints’ Lives” Chapman describes the ironies and revisions of Christianity that attend that interpretation.

21. In *Making Saints* Kenneth Woodward argues, “What makes saints interesting, therefore, is not what we find in them worth imitating—real saints are not the sort of people who try to ‘set a good example’—but rather what makes them inimitable” (403). Woodward’s descriptions of saints’ lives have suggestive connections to Agnes’s story. He writes, “it is hardly an exaggeration to say that saints *are* their stories. On this view, making saints is a process whereby a life is transformed into a text” (18). He concludes, “The cult of the saints presupposes that everyone who has existed, and everyone who will exist, is interconnected” and that “the story of a saint is always a love story. It is a story of a God who loves, and of the beloved who learns how to reciprocate and share that ‘harsh and dreadful love’” (404, 406). The literature on Native American trickster traditions is extensive. William Bright provides an overview of Native American Coyote stories; Jeanne Campbell Reesman’s introduction and collection discuss uses of tricksters throughout US literature. Basil Johnston and Niigonwedom James Sinclair discuss the Nanabush stories; Sinclair also addresses the ethics of discussions of Native trickster traditions in literary criticism. Many critics discuss Erdrich’s engagement with trickster stories and figures. A compelling reading of Erdrich’s tricksters can be found in Lawrence Gross’s essay “The Trickster and World Maintenance”; he argues, “the trickster figures [in *Tracks*] find ways to not only adapt to changing realities, but actually to thrive in the new world order” (64).

22. Some recent critics note problems with the ways Native tricksters have been associated with poststructuralism; they also criticize overgeneralized theories that ignore the cultural specificity and historical contexts of trickster figures and stories. The collection *Troubling Tricksters* addresses these concerns; see especially Fagan and Sinclair for important overviews and analysis. Regarding the responsibility of critics of Native literature, Weaver writes, “In every instance, however, one must interrogate oneself as to what is at stake—what is gained and what is lost—by any given category, not only intellectually and pedagogically, but politically and ideologically as well” (41).

23. Hallowell writes, “Since stones are grammatically animate, I once asked an old man: Are *all* stones we see about us here alive? He reflected a long while and then replied, ‘No! But *some* are.’ This qualified answer made a lasting impression on me” (147).

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