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Gnostic Contagion: Robert Duncan and the Poetry of Illness,  
and: Precipitations: Contemporary American Poetry as Occult  
Practice, and: Going by Contraries: Robert Frost's Conflict  
with Science (review)

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Throughout the book, Hodder never compromises the “fact,” as he puts it, “crucial to our understanding of Thoreau’s religious thought: that his religious ideas are only explicable in reference to the momentous experiences of euphoria that were the real ballast of his spiritual life” (131–32).

Perhaps it is this pragmatic bent and the experiential cast of their religious experiences that connect the eccentric recluse of Walden Pond and the gregarious hermit of Gethsemane to each other. They join company with a lineage of American writers who, driven by moral resolve, the pull of conscience, and the ache for something different, drift to the margins of society. From their outposts—a pond-side cabin, a cinderblock hermitage, a Paris studio, an attic in Amherst, a basement in New York City—they answer the ethical call to critique the culture of conformism at the soft core of American life, to which literary criticism and the professional study of culture are not immune. This is both a tradition of dissenting individualism and, as these two studies brilliantly remind us, the solitary quest for ultimate realities far richer and more powerful and infinitely more complex and imprecise than social constructionism would allow. Merton’s solitude brought him into a noisy and productive dialogue with a fallen world. Thoreau’s retreat plunged him into an inner world seemingly as deep as the pond he tried to sound. While what they found may be always just beyond our own grasp, their narrative explorations remain intriguing invitations to search the existential depths of faith, unity, and wholeness that lie deeper than the false bottom of modern anxieties. Good alternatives, in any event, to postmodernism’s call to drift into a freefall of disbelief where we can invent ourselves over and over and all over again.

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***Gnostic Contagion: Robert Duncan and the Poetry of Illness.* By Peter O’Leary. Middletown, Conn.: Wesleyan Univ. Press. 2002. xviii, 268 pp. Cloth, \$50.00; paper, \$24.95.**

***Precipitations: Contemporary American Poetry as Occult Practice.* By Devin Johnston. Middletown, Conn.: Wesleyan Univ. Press. 2002. xii, 200 pp. Cloth, \$40.00; paper, \$19.95.**

***Going by Contraries: Robert Frost’s Conflict with Science.* By Robert Bernard Hass. Charlottesville: Univ. of Virginia Press. 2002. xiii, 220 pp. Cloth, \$45.00; paper, \$16.50.**

It is hard to tell whether Peter O’Leary has tapped into a new way of thinking about poetry or has merely contrived new names for the familiar ways. His *Gnostic Contagion: Robert Duncan and the Poetry of Illness* examines writings by H.D., Freud, and Duncan himself for traces of “gnosis,” by which O’Leary seems to mean a nonrational or extrarational insight provoked by

the crisis of illness. Duncan's verse then becomes, in this formulation, the medium "through which he transmits his gnosis and through which it was translated to him" (21). Although O'Leary plunders mythology, psychology, and medicine for support, the reader is hard put to distinguish his thesis in any substantial way from the traditional notion of inspiration.

Turning to Duncan's poetry, however, O'Leary offers a great deal that is indisputably new. In his long, detailed discussion of "My Mother Would Be a Falconess," O'Leary looks to the notebooks Duncan kept while composing the poem, to the handwritten manuscript, and to Duncan's influences, with Robert Graves's *The White Goddess* perhaps most prominent among them. Most important, he looks at the poem itself with a level of detail rarely found in studies of such a strong theoretical bent. He discovers puns, polyvalences, allusions (private and public)—and shows how each contributes to a poem in which, he claims, Duncan "unleashes the raptor of his imagination on the memory of his mother" (163). Finally, he hears the music that is intrinsic to the poem's meaning, noting how it modulates according to mood. His fifty-six pages on "My Mother Would Be a Falconess" argue strongly for the usefulness of O'Leary's thesis, regardless of whether it is something new under the sun.

For O'Leary's "gnosis," Devin Johnston substitutes "the occult." In *Precipitations*, Johnston takes a much narrower focus than his title suggests, looking closely at the work of only three poets: H.D., Robert Duncan, and James Merrill. "When the need arises," he writes, "occultism can assist poetry in defamiliarizing the modern world and thus critiquing its pretensions to rational systemization" (2). However, even though his notion of the occult seems not unlike the old idea that a vast part of our experience resists reduction to formula or theory, his choice of words is at least partly justified by his showing how these three poets studied (or at least dabbled in) literal occultism and infused much of their poetry with what they found.

Not surprisingly, William Blake stands at the center of the triangle of poets under consideration. "Blake rebelled against the mind-forged manacles of materialist philosophy and its skepticism. He insistently opposes reason with imagination," Johnston writes, adding that for Duncan, "Blake largely serves as the prototypical poet of inspiration" (2, 4). Whatever Duncan, H.D., or Merrill thought of Blake, and whatever experiments they may have conducted with Ouija boards and séances, most readers will want to know what difference all this makes to the poetry itself. Johnston moves quickly to specifics: "[T]he poet writes in a double bind: On the one hand, he composes a poem through mastery and control over language; on the other hand, he is in subjection to that language. Following Romantic models, Duncan dramatizes this double-bind through poetics of dictation" (51). In detailed analysis, Johnston shows how this "poetics of dictation" informs the three poets' major works. Of Merrill's *The Changing Light at Sandover*, for example, Johnston demonstrates that "Merrill's limitless metaphors and personifications tend to deconstruct the essentialist notions of selfhood derived from Cartesian thought" (125).

Left undiscussed is whether Duncan's poetry, content and technique aside, really belongs in the same rank as the work of H.D. or James Merrill. *Precipitations* implicitly argues that it does, but it remains to be seen whether other readers will agree.

While Robert Bernard Hass's *Going by Contraries* does not attribute either gnosticism or occultism to Robert Frost, Hass does claim that Frost wrote out of concerns similar to those that O'Leary and Johnston describe. Confronted by the nineteenth-century conviction that science—that is, materialism, objectivism, and rationality—was well on its way to explaining all of human experience, Frost, Hass tells us, was both terrified and resistant. Fortunately, according to this view, Frost lived well into a century that “began to challenge the very epistemological foundations” of materialism and positivism (4). We are told that the theory of evolution, which at the turn of the century seemed poised to reduce humankind once and for all to a mass of adaptive chemical reactions and instincts, provoked Frost's greatest anxiety. Finding support especially in the works of William James and Henri Bergson, Hass claims, Frost reasserted the primacy of subjectivity and imagination.

The great strength of *Going by Contraries* is its examination of individual poems. Hass looks in particular to *A Further Range* (1936) as “a collection teeming with anti-Darwinian poems” (73). Of course the centerpiece to such an argument has to be “Design,” and Hass shows that even the structure of Frost's sonnet undercuts the idea that human experience can be reduced to any formulation. Where sonnets traditionally lead to “quick resolution” (62), Hass writes, Frost's “Design” inverts the form in such a way as to highlight “the failure of the evidence at hand to provide the poet with definitive answers” (62).

It is mildly surprising that Hass chooses not to examine the evolution, so to speak, of “Design” itself. There is ample documentation that Frost tinkered with the poem over a period of decades, during which, Hass says, Frost's initial terror of scientific reductionism shifted to a paradoxically reassuring skepticism. In tracing this theme, Hass uses the dates of the book publication of Frost's poems as accurate indication of their places in Frost's intellectual journey. Although this reasoning doesn't undercut Hass's argument fatally, it does call into question any neat, linear development. Especially useful is Hass's discussion of “Kitty Hawk,” a poem rarely examined in detail. It is, we are told, a “boldly religious confession” (181), in which “we do not find a Frost terrified of a material universe so devoid of sentience as to seem meaningless; rather, we see a man whose faith in a ‘something beyond wisdom’ is so strong that he faults himself for never having quite comprehended it” (182).

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