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RESEARCH ARTICLE

Aquinas in Brooklyn: Frank Samperi's "Objectivist Poetics"

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Abstract

Frank Samperi is a neglected twentieth-century American poet who produced a large body of poetry. Affiliated closely with Objectivist poetics through the mentorship of Louis Zukofsky, Samperi's work is significantly influenced by the Catholic writings of Aquinas and Dante. With a commitment to linguistic self-reflexivity, an ethics of otherness, and a resistance to abstraction and identity thinking, Samperi's work enhances and expands our understanding of the key traits of Objectivist poetics, often regarded as relying heavily on Judaic ideas and philosophies. As an Italian American Catholic, his poetry also demonstrates an immigrant's compromise with Americanization, but an equally clear alignment with the emerging American poetic counterculture in the 1960s.

Brooklyn in the 1960s was a gritty environment defined by starkly drawn ethnic enclaves, urban decay and crippling crime waves, resulting in an ambivalent relationship with the discourses of material affluence and civil rights. In a time of tumult and transition, black-and-white photographs of Brooklyn at this time are filled with vacant car lots, brownstone tenements, main roads with the ubiquitous overhead El, and young men hanging around street corners, lounging by their Cadillacs and Chevies. Long before contemporary gentrification, Brooklyn was one of the less glamorous spillover boroughs from Manhattan – basically your average dense, American inner-city sprawl. With its reputation as a sanctuary for immigrants, Brooklyn was predominantly the home of the African American, Jewish, Italian, Russian and Hispanic immigrant families struggling desperately to maintain a veneer of middle-class respectability, all the while plagued by the threats of conscription and petty street crime. Still reeling from the departure of the Brooklyn Dodgers to Los Angeles in 1957 (the once-famous Ebbett's Field now covered by tenements), Brooklynites were further rocked by the cataclysmic closure of the vast Brooklyn Navy Yard in 1966, and, along with the nation, the successive deaths of the Catholic Kennedys (1963 and 1968), Malcolm X (1965) and Martin Luther King (1968).

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Within this complex and contradictory urban and social context, one might be forgiven for thinking that, walking around the brownstones of Brooklyn's urban sprawl in the 1960s, it was unlikely that you were going to spot any angels, intimations of spiritual revelation, or indeed signs of the Christian Godhead. Yet it was precisely here that a young Italian American poet wrote one of the most dedicated Catholic religious sequences within American poetic history. He was Frank Samperi, born in 1933, whose mother never married and died of kidney failure when he was aged eleven. As an orphan (he never knew his father), he was raised with a Catholic education by his Italian American aunts, before enlisting in the army in 1953. After suffering from PTSD in the Korean War, he received the Defense Service Medal for Good Conduct with an honourable discharge in 1955 and returned to Brooklyn, where he began writing his first collection, *Song Book* (1960). On the strength of the GI Bill, he attended a writing workshop in the late 1950s at the Brooklyn Polytechnic Institute, where he was befriended and mentored by the Objectivist poet Louis Zukofsky, who also introduced him to the poet Cid Corman, a poet closely associated with Objectivist poetics.[1] In 1964, Samperi secured a teaching position in Japan, where his friendship with Corman resulted in his poems being championed in *Origin* and published in limited editions from Kyoto.

At this time, Samperi was undertaking work on his main poetic trilogy, which consisted of the volumes *The Prefiguration* (1971), *Quadrifariam* (1971) and *Lumen Gloriae* (1973).[2] In contrast to Zukofsky's Yiddish and Judaic influences, Samperi clearly derives his motivation from the Catholic mystical traditions. The trilogy draws much of its influence from St. Thomas Aquinas's theological and philosophical writings (especially the *Summa Theologica* (written between 1265 and 1274)) and Dante Alighieri's *Divine Comedy* (written between 1308 and 1320) and yet adapts them to the urban intensities of life in Brooklyn in the 1960s and 1970s. Leaning heavily on Aquinas, Samperi's trilogy explores the luminous notation of things seen, pared down in language and form, a characteristic that clearly allied him to the proponents of Objectivist poetics. In analysing Samperi's allusive poetry, this article seeks to position this poetic practice within a framework of religious identification and his Italian American ethnicity. It aims to demonstrate how a self-conscious linguistic experimentalism in the form and language of Samperi's poetry embeds an internal tension with his theology, and how this poetry in turn poses an alternative trajectory to the Judaic-influenced Objectivist poetics, contributing to and reaffirming many of the same philosophical, aesthetic and ethical principles, albeit from a Catholic perspective.

[1]Tim Woods, "Cid Corman: Editor, Translator, Poet," *Paideuma*, 41 (2014), 49–78.

[2]Frank Samperi, *The Prefiguration* (New York: Mushinsha/Grossman Publishers, 1971); Samperi, *Quadrifariam* (New York: Mushinsha/Grossman Publishers, 1971); Samperi, *Lumen Gloriae* (New York: Mushinsha/Grossman Publishers, 1973). These beautiful volumes were designed with jacket illustrations by his friend Will Petersen and the volumes have no page numbers, only sectional breaks by book title. The trilogy has been reprinted more recently in one volume entitled *Trilogy: Poems by Frank Samperi* (Nottingham: Skysill Press, 2013). For ease of identifying quotations, reference will be made to page numbers in this latter edition, parenthetically in the main text. I am grateful to Mrs Claudia Samperi-Warren for permission to quote from Frank Samperi's work.

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The sway of Objectivist poetics

Objectivist poetics emerged in the 1930s as something of a forced collocation of poets under the aegis of an invitation from Harriet Monroe to Louis Zukofsky to put together an edited volume of her influential magazine *Poetry*. That issue, entitled *Objectivists 1931* gathered together a range of poets that included Zukofsky, George Oppen, Carl Rakosi and Charles Reznikoff, amongst a number of others. Partly at the behest of Monroe, Zukofsky introduced the issue with a prefatory essay entitled "Sincerity and Objectification" that effectively laid out Zukofsky's own poetic principles. Despite Zukofsky's own resistance to writing a "manifesto" and forming a "movement," nonetheless, the document has subsequently been adopted as exactly that.[3]

The key principles that emerged from Zukofsky's essay are to do with a clarity of image and word in the poetry:

> In sincerity shapes appear concomitants of word combinations, precursors of ... completed sound structure, melody or form. Writing occurs which is the detail, not mirage, of seeing, of thinking with things as they exist, and of directing them along a line of melody. Shapes suggest themselves and the mind senses and receives awareness.[4]

Owing much to Pound's formulation of Imagism and its anti-symbolist thrust, Objectivist poetry is about the accuracy of perception through attention to detail in writing. The first step towards "sincerity" is a care for the individual word: it affirms the author's "honesty," commitment and precision, clarifying the specificity rather than the "mirage" of seeing. Laszlo Gefin describes "sincerity" as "the writer's absolute fidelity to detail," where "Zukofsky means the recognition of the particular, of the perceptibly real, of which the poet must build the artistic construct ... Sincerity is the grasping of particulars."[5] "Sincerity" is an identification *with*, rather than *of*, an object; or, as Zukofsky puts it elsewhere, "The object unrelated to palpable or predatory intent ... No predatory manifestation."[6] Implicit in this injunction to "sincerity" is a "love" for the object, which suggests a distinct ethical dimension to Objectivist poetics.[7]

[3]The emergence of Objectivist poetics as a result of this issue of *Poetry* and the prefatory essay has been widely discussed in numerous articles, and has been authoritatively documented in Mark Scroggins, *Louis Zukofsky and the Poetry of Knowledge* (Tuscaloosa: Alabama University Press, 1998), 21–28; Tim Woods, *The Poetics of the Limit* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002), 17–44; Mark Scroggins *The Poem of a Life: A Biography of Louis Zukofsky* (Tuscaloosa: Alabama University Press, 2007), 103–19; and Rachel Blau DuPlessis and Peter Quartermain, eds., *The Objectivist Nexus: Essays in Cultural Poetics* (Tuscaloosa: Alabama University Press, 1999).

[4]Louis Zukofsky, "An Objective," in *Prepositions: The Collected Critical Essays of Louis Zukofsky* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1981), 12–18, 12.

[5]Laszlo Gefin, *Ideogram: Modern American Poetry* (Milton Keynes: Open University Press, 1982), 52.

[6]Zukofsky, 16.

[7]With the theoretical aid of frameworks from Theodor Adorno and Emmanuel Levinas, this latent ethical dimension inherent in Objectivist poetics is traced by Woods, *The Poetics of the Limit*, through Oppen's practice, Olson's "Projectivist" formulations, to the po-ethical practices of the "Language" Poets. An Adornian perspective is also adopted by Ruth Jennison, *The Zukofsky Era: Modernity, Margins, and the Avant-Garde* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2012).

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"Sincerity," then, leads to "objectification" or the structure of "rested totality" of the poem: "Objectification – the apprehension satisfied completely as to the appearance of the art form as an object ... its character may be simply described as the arrangement, into one apprehended unit, the resolving of words and their ideation into structure."[8] Through verbal concentration, objectification transforms the poem into a thing, an object in the world. Peter Nicholls describes the goal of objectification as a means of limiting the creeping force of subjectivism that was appearing in various forms of modernism. Such an anti-idealist poetics, he argues, demonstrates a materiality that presented a resistance to the mind and derives "not from some identification with the poet's feeling, but from the *syntax* of the work, from a particular arrangement of words."[9]

Nicholls helpfully directs us to the language at work in Objectivist poetry, since it is here that the characteristic minimalism and bareness of Objectivist poetics emerges. He argues that "objectification" produces a reconfiguration "of the semantic field so as to accent particular items in a non-discursive way."[10] Speaking specifically about the poetic practice of George Oppen, he remarks that, in a typical Oppen poem,

> The syntax throws us off balance, with verbs appearing before their subjects and in some cases the subject remaining ambiguous ... This, perhaps, is one meaning of "thinking with the things as they exist," for the poem is "about" nothing more than the composition of the scene it articulates ... the poem's syntax becomes inseparable from the relational field of which it speaks.[11]

Dispensing with usual punctuation, with words remaining ambiguous in their referentiality in highly dense and elliptical lines, this is a poetry that maximizes its visual clarity through a concentration on the word shorn of symbolic or allegorical overtones.

Many of the key poets who make up Zukofsky's selection in *Poetry* happen to be Jewish, and it is a truth tacitly (albeit sometimes with qualification) acknowledged that Objectivist poetics emerged from a specifically Jewish cultural catalyst.[12] Indeed, as Rachel Blau DuPlessis's caveated description makes clear, a cultural (albeit not a religious) affiliation with Judaism is a clear characteristic of Objectivist poetry:

> Here a religious culture and not a religious affiliation is at issue – not affirmations of cultic particularism but an amalgam of attitudes: skepticism and critical negativity rather than redemptive fulfilment (for Judaism, no Messiah

[8]Zukofsky, 13.

[9]Peter Nicholls, *George Oppen and the Fate of Modernism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 9–10, original emphasis.

[10]Ibid., 10.

[11]Ibid., 11.

[12]For example, see Harold Schimmel, "Zuk. Yehoash David Rex," in Carroll F. Terrell, ed., *Louis Zukofsky: Man and Poet* (National Poetry Foundation: Orono, ME, 1979), 235–45; and Norman Finkelstein, "Jewish-American Modernism and the Problem of Identity: With Special Reference to the Work of Louis Zukofsky," in Mark Scroggins, ed., *Upper Limit Music: The Writing of Louis Zukofsky* (Tuscaloosa: The University of Alabama Press, 1997), 65–79.

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> has yet come): utopian hope combined with a "quarrel with God" particularly about social justice; a use of such motifs as exile, exodus, diaspora, nomadism, along with historical debates over assimilation; frankness about anti-Semitism ... a metaphorically "Talmudic" textual intricacy ... and a resistance to the saturated Christianizing of literary culture propelled by T. S. Eliot in this period.[13]

This Jewish association is further reinforced by Burton Hatlen's cautiously tentative conclusion that "all of the Objectivist poets were in varying senses and degrees Jewish," and he goes on to adumbrate a shared heritage of similar social stances, ethical actions and political engagements. Amongst these are an ethical imperative to community, a responsibility to the "other," an inclination to left-wing politics and a "specifically Jewish sense of language."[14] Although generalizing quite significantly, Hatlen argues that the Christian tradition's identification of the Greek *logos* with God, which "announces the possibility of a word that enjoys absolute presence," is in stark contrast with the Jewish tradition that "resists the attempts of the human mind to measure the absolute in our own terms."[15] However, although deeply fascinated with the Book and language, nonetheless Jewish culture finds itself wrestling with words:

> God's true name is unspeakable. Language can point toward or circle about God's presence, in commentary piled upon commentary; but he remains beyond all human words, and Truth is always already displaced. This complex relationship to language finds voice not only in Midrash but in Jewish humour, which constantly turns back on itself, to inflect toward irony words that we were prepared to hear as imbued with pathos. A similar engagement with language as a form of serious play or playful seriousness seems to me characteristic of the objectivist poets ... these Jewish poets are marked by an acute, self-reflexive awareness of – even anxiety about – the problematic character of language.[16]

As Hatlen points out, all the key Objectivist poets chose to write and speak in English rather than Yiddish or Hebrew. This cultural decision reminds us of their self-conscious marginality within a linguistic, religious and cultural milieu, where they experienced life at the cultural interface (both inside and yet outside) of American society. Blau DuPlessis identifies a malicious "semiticized discourse" in the 1910s and 1920s as poets like the Objectivists negotiated the pressures of assimilation, secularization and the construction of the "new Jew."[17] Through her process of "social

[13]Rachel Blau DuPlessis, "Objectivist Poetry and Poetics," in Walter Kalaidjian, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to Modern American Poetry* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 89–101, 92.

[14]Burton Hatlen, "A Poetics of Marginality and Resistance: Objectivist Poets in Context," in DuPlessis and Quartermain, *The Objectivist Nexus*, 37–55, 46–47.

[15]Ibid., 46.

[16]Ibid., 46.

[17]Rachel Blau DuPlessis, *Genders, Races, and Religious Cultures in Modern American Poetry, 1908–1934* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), esp. chapter 6, "'Wondering Jews': Melting-Pots and Mongrel Thoughts."

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philology," she forensically searches out the latent and covert overtones, the embedded discriminations, and the morass of anti-Semitic allusions and smears circulating in the American popular and serious discourses during the period from the 1890s to the 1930s. Yet out of this immigrant consciousness of marginalization, Blau DuPlessis remarks how poetry was enriched by a deliberate refashioning of language, syntax and form as a discursive strategy to evade the nets of the dominant ethnic racism and cultural hegemony.

Whether or not these arguments unequivocally identify Objectivist poetics as Judaic, they do depict these writers as sharing a common set of social and cultural experiences. It is a poetics that is born out of an engagement with assimilation and cultural integration; of decisions about what language in which to write (Yiddish–Hebrew–English); of an engagement between the pressures of popular and high culture; of a sensitivity to an underlying religious framework; of a clear mode of intertextuality with texts from a range of registers and languages; and of a persistent enquiry through poetry into philosophical and aesthetic questions. How, then, does an Italian American neo-Thomist Catholic like Frank Samperi fit into the picture of such a cultural poetics thirty years later? How does a quiet, inwardly focussed and self-reflexive autodidact inflect or add to the tenets of Objectivist poetics? How does Samperi's poetic practice cause us to rethink and reimagine the "nexus" of Objectivist poetics in the 1960s? Are there lessons to be learned about the characterization of Objectivist practice from a different ethnic and cultural perspective?

Samperi's *Trilogy*

Apart from his close friend and champion Cid Corman and a few more recent admirers like the poets John Martone and David Miller, Samperi has been largely ignored as a poet. His defining poetic trilogy emerges from an intense conviction that creative writing is a sacramental act and that poetry's sole purpose is to illuminate the divine light. Furthermore, the sequence embeds within it a complex poetic register that combines repeated quotation from Aquinas, theological allusion and medieval scholastic doctrine, frequent translations of and references to Dante's *Divine Comedy*, non-Euclidean mathematical concepts, set theory and algebraic formulations (Bernhard Riemann, Georg Cantor, Kurt Gödel), and the Hindu philosophy and teachings of the Vedanta and Upanishads, forging an epic poem that is going to test even the most dedicated of poetic readers.

Fundamentally, the volumes of Samperi's trilogy map out his lifelong pilgrimage in pursuit of spiritual enlightenment and the poetry represents a powerful act of devotion in searching out the divine light of God. Partly modelled on and reflecting upon Dante's religious allegory of a pilgrim's journey out of the dark forest of error into the divine light of Paradise, Samperi's work repeatedly echoes the famous Italian epic's images, structures and phrases in its striving for an absolute spiritual clarity, "since the poet's object is / Eternal Form" (*Trilogy*, 364), written "in harmonious relation to / the Holy Spirit" (*Trilogy*, 362). His poetic trilogy operates in different modes: sometimes it is didactic, almost pedantic, as it discusses Dante, Augustine, Aquinas and notions of truth and being. Elsewhere, the poetry is

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ruminative and reflective, committed as it is to contemplation as productive work.[18] Elsewhere again, poems are addressed tenderly to his family, Dolores his wife and Claudia his daughter, while others are pitched directly at the reader, challenging received conceptions of American civil society in the 1960s. Some poems set out complex ideas, concepts, explanations of epistemology and poetics; others are simple descriptions of a walk through a park or along a seashore; elsewhere, the poems are reflections of the poet's inner thoughts or analogical visions of God's form in the world.

Samperi, never without the Italian epic ("I'll take only Dante, my only book – still feel the summation of my work lies with the Commedia"[19]), regarded Dante Alighieri as a fundamental touchstone, as did many Italian American immigrants to the United States. The *Divine Comedy* became the focus of a struggle between Protestant and Catholic interpretation and cultural appropriation in the aftermath of the American Civil War, as the poem became entangled between theologians and politicians, all looking to appropriate the poet's cultural and religious authority for their causes.[20] However, by the late nineteenth century, the Italian American community had planted Dante firmly within their New York consciousness, with a statue erected to his cultural memory in Dante Park, on the Upper West Side of Manhattan, in 1921. Brought up on this iconographic poet, Samperi translated parts of the *Divine Comedy* and repeatedly incorporated passages and references into the trilogy itself (for a few examples, see *Trilogy*, 135, 331–36 and 581, the "Disigilla" section discussed later in this article).[21] Like Aquinas, Dante is a hugely influential figure, not just as a poet but as a model for a complex hermeneutic (interpretation) of the Christian universe. The *Divine Comedy* envisaged a continuity between our physical world and the heavenly world of God, angels and saints. It proposed a world rooted in God where materiality should be thought of as signs, ordered to and by the Creator. First laid out in his defence of literature written in vernacular speech rather than Latin in *De Vulgari Eloquentia* (*c.*1302–5), Dante provides us with the understanding that, since

[18]Samperi kept a daily journal to which he gave the title *Lamentations*, and from which he clearly included many cogitations and musings in various books of his poems. See John Martone, "Frank Samperi's *Lamentations*," *Italian Americana*, 21, 2 (Summer 2003), 177–84. Drawn from his *Lamentations*, Samperi writes, "to live in God is to be contemplative. It is wrong to think of contemplation as the opposite of activity: that is, contemplation is a prefiguration of the very activity that pertains to the Kingdom of Heaven." Given the dearth of easily accessible material by and on Samperi, extracts from *Lamentations*, his letters, photographs, recorded interviews, unpublished poems and reviews have been incorporated in his daughter Claudia Samperi-Warren's invaluable website dedicated to her father's work at http://poetfranksamperi.blogspot.com. The website announced in September 2024 that Frank Samperi's Archive is now housed at the Geisel Library, UC San Diego.

[19]Letter to Cid Corman dated 16 July 1971, about a family holiday to Cape Cod, available on Claudia Warren-Samperi's blog post at http://poetfranksamperi.blogspot.com.

[20]Dennis Looney, "Dante Alighieri and the *Divine Comedy* in Nineteenth-Century America," in William J. Connell and Stanislaus G. Pugliese, eds., *The Routledge History of Italian Americans* (New York and London: Routledge, 2018), 91–104, traces the astonishing cultural significance of Dante for both the New England literati (like the Bostonian Transcendentalists) and the Italian American communities from their arrival within the United States.

[21]Samperi's clearly worked from *The Divine Comedy of Dante Alighieri: III. Paradiso*, Italian text, English translation by John D. Sinclair (New York: Oxford University Press, 1961; first published 1939), which is amongst his personal books. He also possessed copies of Charles Singleton's *Dante's Commedia: Elements of Structure* (1977) and Dorothy L. Sayers's *Introductory Papers on Dante* (1954).

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language is material, and since humanity is intricately tied to both language and the material world of which it is a part, the linguistic act of interpretation lies at the centre of what it is to be human. It is to be a speaking creature in a signifying world of God's making. Dante's understanding of the language as material and as part of the world, rather than set over and against it, allows him to present the *Divine Comedy* as a means of interpreting and translating God. In his turn, Samperi finds in Dante a model for his poetic enquiry into the religious possibilities of the aesthetic, which allows him to foreground his sympathies with the Objectivist emphasis on the materiality of language whilst equally maintaining his commitment to an ethical vision. Language meets the object which in turn discloses the sacred.

This dense poetic sequence was begun in the 1950s and much of it was first published in the 1960s as individual short books of poems. As Peter O'Leary observes in one of the few critical studies of Samperi's work, the trilogy is undeniably the reassertion of Thomist doctrine by a committed Catholic visionary,[22] arguably an implicit performative affirmation of his Italian American identity through his references to Aquinas and Dante. A typical passage in the trilogy is this spiritualized list that forms the penultimate poem in "The Triune,"[23] the first section of *Quadrifariam*:

Light
intelligence
light
hill
pool
concave
mind
crystal
return
presupposition
center
angels
water
objects
transcendentals
forms
undefined
experience
individual
universal
identity

[22]Peter O'Leary, "Reversion and the Turning Thither: Writing Religious Poetry and the Case of Frank Samperi," *Logos: A Journal of Catholic Thought and Culture*, 7, 2 (Spring 2004), 54–85. Reprinted in Peter O'Leary, *Thick and Dazzling Darkness: Religious Poetry in a Secular Age* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2018), 24–51.

[23]The Triune is the Holy Trinity, the three-in-one God – the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. See John F. Johnson, "Speaking of the Triune God: Augustine, Aquinas, and the Language of Analogy," *Concordia Theological Quarterly*, 67, 3–4 (July-Oct. 2003), 215–27. All poems in "The Triune" are 35 lines down the page, often one word, or even one letter, to a line.

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eternal form
supposition
image
shadow
trace
informative
lover
contemplative
speculation
participative
reason
visional
beatific (*Trilogy*, 273)

The augmentation of extended spacing, typography and lineation intensifies the stillness of the transcendental experience for the reader, an experience that is felt in exaggerated form in the one-letter-per-line poem (*Trilogy*, 250). In a manner not dissimilar to the concentration of perception through a process of controlled "linguistic release" in Louis Zukofsky's poem "Ryokan's Scroll,"[24] the pace of these lines is determined by the reader. The visual effect is verticality, a drift down the page in a typographical "word-fall" that carries an energy and forward momentum, each word resonating with its own internal significance and oscillating with its neighboring words.[25] Resisting explicit explanation and commentary, like many lines in the poem, these words echo other parts of the trilogy, "light" and "beatific" gesture towards Dante's *Paradiso* and the vision of divine illumination; "angels" picks out the angelology embedded in Aquinas's teachings (mimicked here by the word embedded in the midst of other apparently unrelated words), and the trilogy's recurrent reference to angels "hiding" in the city (see the "Morning and Evening" section of *The Prefiguration*); "forms" gestures to the poem's mode of analogical thinking that sees God in objects; "eternal form" points to the triune and the wholeness of God; "contemplative" indicates Samperi's commitment to contemplation as active work. Indeed, challenging what he perceives to be a tendency towards a desiccated verbal formulation in poetry, Samperi's activity is a contemplation of the word itself, "Words gathering around a word" (*Trilogy*, 165), in a manner reminiscent of Nicholls's description of George Oppen's practice.

Elsewhere, Samperi's lines seem to stray into unpunctuated, theological catechism:

[24]Louis Zukofsky, "Ryokan's Scroll," in Zukofsky, *All: The Collected Short Poems 1923–1964* (New York: Norton, 1965), 207.

[25]In an addendum to his perceptive account of Samperi's poems, Cid Corman appends a note that demonstrates Samperi's acute consciousness of the typographical aspect of the poetry's verticality on the page, as well as other aspects of the spacing and typography as contributing to the "purity" of the work. Cid Corman, "Through: A Consideration of *The Prefiguration* of Frank Samperi," in Corman, ed., *At Their Word: Essays on the Arts of Language*, Volume II (Santa Barbara, CA: Black Sparrow Press, 1978), 169–82; First printed as "Review: Through: A Consideration of *The Prefiguration* of Frank Samperi," *Chicago Review*, 25, 1 (1973), 195–205.

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theological poetry Eternal Form because the identification
Use the Gift clarifies the background (the intensification)
Species in the Image
...
the glorified body the individual the universe
the identification the individual the universe formal
individual universal an identification undefined
Spirit the spirit an identification (*Trilogy*, 326–27, original italics)

Using a characteristically Latinate and Church-inflected language (Eternal Form, Gift, body, Image), these lines employ the elements of Catholic mystical doctrine. For example, the first section quoted here implies that theological poetry reflects the species of the Eternal Form, which is God, whose Image is Christ. Just as Christ clarifies God through an intensification of embodiment, so theological poetry clarifies God through an intensification of language. Consequently, poetry should engage with the Eternal Form of the Godhead. In the second section, the poem blurs the individual and the universal in the form of the glorified body, an identification that can only occur in the Spirit, part of the glorified triune. The triune, or doctrine of the Trinity, is a central aspect of Christian theology, embracing within it the wide territory of Christology, revelation, salvation, the divine nature of God and the language with which to conceptualize this. The theological complexities and subtleties about the Trinity have been the source of considerable debate over the centuries but were explored and recentred in Catholicism by Karl Rahner in the mid-1960s, prompted by the Second Vatican Council.[26] The triune is about seeing particularities without sacrificing wholeness and seeing God in objects and the surrounding world. There is a revelatory aspect in finding God in new places, in concrete objects, that leads to the possibilities of an ethical existence. The notion of the Trinity gave Samperi a means to combine his Objectivist linguistic and formalist sympathies with his notion of poetry as means to Christian revelation.

Therefore, exploring the dimensions of the triune gives Samperi's hermeneutic understanding a revelatory process. This Catholic doctrine is spelled out most acutely in the final pages of *Lumen Gloriae*:

love	knowledge	divided	
mysticism	science	divided	
union	identity	divided	
glorified body	spiritual man	undivided	(*Trilogy*, 599).

For Samperi, the division and fragmentation of social discourses are bridged and unified by the spiritual vision, the glorious light unifying all in the image of the glorified body, clearly articulated by J. Townsend:

[26]For a succinct and informative explanation of the Trinity and its associated theological debates see Fred Sanders, "The Trinity," in John Webster, Kathryn Tanner and Iain Torrance, eds., *The Oxford Handbook of Systematic Theology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 35–53.

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> These categories, taken from Aquinas's writings on "Sacred Doctrine" in his masterwork *Summa Theologica*, make use of spatial elements on the page to illustrate a progression of thought. Samperi separates Aquinas's discontinuous parts, creating a prosodic chart that shifts and resolves itself within the final line; it represents an ultimate coming together of previously divided principles.[27]

Through an integration of revelation with daily life, with history and with active and continuous scriptural interpretation, focussing upon the triune enlarges Samperi's idea of God and endows his poetry with an intensification of language, making language itself part of an intellectual enquiry. For example, the beatific vision is simultaneously an intertextual engagement with Dante, a test of linguistic aesthetic representation, and a contemplative activity that leads to a state of blessed fulfilment. These outcomes parallel those of the Objectivist poets – a focus on a linguistic intensity in epistemological investigation of objects, albeit without the sacred and devotional overtones of the Catholic principles.

Particularities and analogy

Owing to Samperi's Thomist religious conviction, one might justifiably conclude that Samperi's poetry is clearly bound into the Catholic liturgy and its rituals, and that it rarely climbs out of private meditation rooted in a nostalgic medieval religious mysticism. Yet Samperi's poetry is not merely the aesthetic prescription of the conceptual reifications of theologians. The poetry does not solely emerge from within the framework of Catholic orthodoxy and reproduce that framework as a fait accompli. On the one hand, Samperi is a poet deeply embedded in the structures of Catholic Christianity; on the other hand, his style shows a poet given to contingency, collage and coincidental urban intersections that interrupt beatific contemplation. Samperi seeks to infuse these chance landscapes with what Charles Altieri calls a metaphysic of "*radical presence*, the insistence that the moment immediately and intensively experienced can restore one to harmony with the world and provide ethical and psychological renewal."[28] Samperi seeks immanent value in things, where the road of particularities leads to the palace of God's "grace."

Indeed, when reading Samperi, his religious transformation of the material into the spiritual bumps against stubborn lumps of social history that intrude on the contemplative consciousness. Certainly, withdrawal does occur and is almost craved existentially. "I am an anchorite," he writes in *The Prefiguration* (*Trilogy*, 15), elsewhere secluding himself in his room alone for quiet contemplation:

> loneliness
> a spiritual necessity
> my room

[27] J. Townsend, "Spiritual Man, Modern Man: The Poetics of Frank Samperi," *Jacket*, 26 (2008), at http://jacketmagazine.com/36/townsend-samperi.shtml.

[28] Charles Altieri, *Enlarging the Temple: New Directions in American Poetry in the 1960s* (Lewisburg, PA and London: Bucknell University Press and Associated University Presses, 1979), 78–79, original emphasis.

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done up
as if holiness
were ambience (*Trilogy*, 313).

Yet even in this isolation, Samperi is conscious of the intrusion of the extraneous world, as the sound of the El disturbs his quiet rumination, the lines of one poem counterpointing the interweaving of the two dimensions, the inner and the outer, the silent and the noisy (*Trilogy*, 17). Even as Samperi seeks illumination in isolation ("To be saved I must / slip away from the moderns / quietly" (*Trilogy*, 23), so he is inextricably entangled with the social:

There is no
sunlight
in this
room.
Outside
the bee song
of people
and cars
penetrates
this tomb
of coldness
of darkness (*Trilogy*, 24)

The local Brooklyn culture intrudes in and permeates Samperi's consciousness all the time. The poems variously refer to a "poor drunk / asleep on the sidewalk / clutching his penis" (*Trilogy*, 516), to an evening walking home when a glass window is smashed by a brick (*Trilogy*, 547), to the graveyards off Sixth Avenue, to advertising hoardings, to street noises, to lonely old ladies, bums, prostitutes, drunks shivering in doorways, the victim of a rape attack, freight yards, dockworkers, schoolyards, repair shops and the ubiquitous El rattling overhead. The search for divine illumination is persistently challenged by these quotidian mundanities, the disjunct, the fragmented and the alienated. Furthermore, Samperi's radical political consciousness caused him to protest against the Vietnam War,[29] to espouse the rudiments of a Marxist analysis and a critique of capitalism (*Trilogy*, 355), and to see a society permeated by exploited labour and the ideology of consumption, what Samperi terms the "Material Ideal"[30]:

[29]Jack Sonenberg, ed., *Artists and Writers Protest against the War in Vietnam: Poems* (Mt. Vernon, NY: Artists and Writers Inc., 1967). Contributors included David Antin, Paul Blackburn, Robert Bly, Robert Creeley, Robert Duncan, Clayton Eshleman, Anthony Hecht, Stanley Kunitz, Denise Levertov, Walter Lowenfels, Joel Oppenheimer, Jerome Rothenberg, Frank Samperi and James Wright.

[30]Samperi, extract from *Lamentations*, available on Claudia Warren-Samperi's blog post at http://poetfranksamperi.blogspot.com.

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it takes courage to go this way
because it is not the way of the world
I mean
the heretics
can no longer be
Luther
Bruno
Campanella
heresy is going against
the Material Ideal
and only the spiritual man can do that (*Trilogy*, 354)

The spiritual poet is likened to a heretic who challenges the prevailing orthodoxy of capitalism, who champions the "workers / breaking their backs" (*Trilogy*, 357) and seeks to resist narratives that support the status quo:

reports
they simply reflect
the position's slant
and of course
the Material Ideal
is the better for it
because the solution of
all these slants lies
in the integral
that knows no differences (*Trilogy*, 359)

For Samperi, poetry is an act of contemplation, a form of release and freedom from the dullness and restrictions of labour, the deadness of popular consumerism, and of the fashionable superficiality of capitalist life. Samperi's dislocations and disjunction of syntax aim to refocus attention, to make us *see*, beyond the routine and habit of consumer passivity. In a position that has uncanny echoes of the ideological implications of identity and nonidentity later put forward by Adorno and the Frankfurt school theorists, capitalism produces "reports" that are self-serving, effectively supporting the status quo through a slanted or complicit perspective. The "reports" seek to flatten differences and to present a "sameness," an abstraction that elides differences and particularities in the interests of ensuring the perpetuation of the existing social structure. In a world that seeks to emphasize sameness, Aquinas provides Samperi with a philosophical framework and a poetic rationale to reach for differences, for the individual parts, or, as he mimetically puts it at one point, for "par tic u lar i ties" (*Trilogy*, 24). Indeed, "the underground is a mania for the particular" (*Trilogy*, 367) and the poems constantly exemplify a formal fragmentation that demands strenuous reader engagement to keep focussed on the object. Although emerging from a different cultural propulsion, there is a clear coalescence here with the Objectivist focus on the primacy of the object and "particulars." The trilogy repeatedly asserts the falsity brought about by abstraction and the necessity of

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producing what might be termed a "non-absorptive poetics," a poetics that asserts differences and particularities without subsuming them in an abstraction:

> true work can only
> have for its vision the Eternal *the final identification foregone* the
> abstractive *useless*, that is, where the abstractive subsists the
> object never fully clear of the psychological.
>
> (*Trilogy*, 424, original emphasis)

Following Aquinas's teaching, Samperi focusses upon poetic form as a series of disassembled yet interlinked fragments. Those fragments are the result of seeing daily objects and scenes as elements or indications of a greater divine whole. Commenting upon Aquinas's notion of beauty, Umberto Eco states that our pleasure in beauty "arises not out of a mode of possession, but out of an act of cognition. Aesthetic pleasure has to do with the intellect, even if it does so through the mediation of the senses. It is not like the pleasure of possession or assimilation."[31] In this description of a "non-absorptive" aesthetics, Eco continues that the ultimate Beatific Vision is a state where all the senses achieve a condition of perfect refinement, or where "the appetite comes to rest through contemplation or knowledge."[32] Through such acts of contemplation, which Samperi repeatedly presents as work (activity in the face of the more common perception of it being a passive stance), Samperi's poetry strives for the *claritas* of epiphany and the poems seek to redefine spiritual grandeur in quotidian actions and sights. Indeed, just as the poems celebrate the bored and disillusioned life encountered in Brooklyn and Kyoto, so they draw upon the residues of religious imagery from Dante that bathe the mundane world in an analogical, transubstantiated life.

This is a poetics heavily influenced by the neo-Scholastic theologians, in particular Jacques Maritain, whose revival of St. Thomas Aquinas in the 1940s and 1950s proved hugely influential. In *Art and Scholasticism*, one of Maritain's more influential books in the 1950s, he wrote on the divine mystery within nature, "The artist, whether he knows it or not, is consulting God when he looks at things."[33] As Paul Giles puts it in *American Catholic Arts and Fictions*, his magisterial study of the Catholic imagination in American literature, the Thomistic perspective is to see the concrete object as an analogical incarnation of divine truth.[34] However, Samperi's poetry seems to betray a subtle tension between neo-Scholastic objectivity and the uncontrolled interruptions derived from the slippage of writing. One theologian, David Burrell, has distinctly spied a "power of the negative" within Thomistic conceptualizations that undo "naïve congruence theories of identity."[35] Such deconstructivist

[31]Umberto Eco, *The Aesthetics of Thomas Aquinas*, trans. Hugh Bredin (London: Radius, 1988; first published 1956), 57.

[32]Ibid., 57. Eco refers to St. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, I–II, 27, 1 ad. 3.

[33]Jacques Maritain, *Art and Scholasticism with Other Essays*, trans. J. F. Scanlan (London: Sheed and Ward, 1930; first published in French 1920), 64. Jacques Maritain's volume *St. Thomas Aquinas* (1958) is amongst Samperi's personal books.

[34]Paul Giles, *American Catholic Arts and Fictions: Culture, Ideology, Aesthetics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), 365.

[35]David B. Burrell, *Analogy and Philosophical Language* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1973), 9.

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inclinations open new emphases in Samperi's work, where the power of difference trumps the power of identity. As Giles states,

> The differences and similarities between God and the world are, David Tracy asserted, equally as significant as those similarities upon which the analogical traditions in Catholic theology have traditionally insisted. It is the power of difference, Tracy declared, that prevents the idea of analogy from degenerating into an excessively domesticated sense of philosophical coherence.[36]

As Samperi maintains to Corman, human actions are "the fulfillment of difference: that is the vision of a differential world."[37]

Language and the *via negativa*

In this respect, Samperi's poetic practice is a mode of transformation or transfiguration. Although presenting the impression that he is speaking casually in an uncomplicated style, using one phrase where he could easily use another, his language persistently carries religious or Dantesque reverberations – in words like memory, light, tree, angels, branches, hills, horses, sunlight, shadows, dark – transferring an intimation of the spiritual into the actual, similar to Thomas Aquinas's model of the thing acting as an analogy of the whole. The poems work by analogy and typology – the title *The Prefiguration* indicates this – where the thing or object is the intimation or inference of that which we cannot see. The various poems are like puzzles where the pieces/words are continually reshuffled to produce a new vision: "We cannot place it in words; but even to say *that* is to place the statement in the intention rather than in the real: does this bring us before a background ever changing the moment we start to move toward it?" (*Trilogy*, 192, original emphasis). Each vision is a reworking of the material of the last vision's components, producing a slightly new configuration. This process suggests a perspective that is never settled, always shifting, because the reality cannot be accurately or deliberately "fixed," pinned down or re-presented: "literature can only approach integration" (*Trilogy*, 349). In a clear echo of T. S. Eliot's *Four Quartets*, each attempt is an approximation, only to begin anew. All of life is a dim intimation of the Godhead, a gradual recovery of the plenitude from which humanity has been severed. Everything is a series of glimpses of a totality to which we can only aspire: "What is better than what a thing is like – even tho what is / can only be gotten at suggestively" (*Trilogy*, 423). The centrality of analogy to Catholic modes of thought – the insistence on substantive links between heaven and earth – is what Paul Giles describes as "the analogical impetus [that] descends in a direct line from Aquinas' understanding of the universe as an organism whose constituents are in harmonious proportion and whose relationships are based on substantial compatibilities."[38] Analogy promotes similarity-in-difference, and Samperi is constantly aware of that tension between the like and the unlike,

[36]Giles, 366. David Tracy, *The Analogical Imagination* (New York: Crossroad, 1981).

[37]Letter to Cid Corman, 6 Sept. 1964, available on Claudia Warren-Samperi's blog post at http://poetfranksamperi.blogspot.com.

[38]Giles, 27.

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between the same and the different: "The differential world is the glorified body" (*Trilogy*, 161).

Aquinas is arguably best known for his theory of analogy. His principal question was how to speak of both God and the world: "Now we cannot know what God is, but only by what he is not; we must therefore consider the ways in which God does not exist, rather than the ways in which he does."[39] In clarifying Aquinas's position on knowing what God is by what he is not, Brian Davies points to the extensive theological background of Denys the Areopagite and followers who focussed upon the "theme of divinity beyond the grasp of language," to which Aquinas was heavily indebted.[40] Arguing that God is properly unknowable, Aquinas goes on to argue that God is also improperly knowable, namely through analogy. As Aquinas argues, analogy aids one to grasp a notion that is not susceptible of definition, as things apprehended by senses lead the mind on to some knowledge of the Divine. Known as the *via negativa*, sometimes called apophatic theology (from Greek *apophēmi*, "to deny"), this is the approach taken by theologians like Pseudo-Dionysus, Meister Eckhart, St. John of the Cross, Julian of Norwich and Walter Hilton. Samperi is clearly alive to this aspect of Aquinas's thought, since he himself has a section "Via Negativa" in *Quadrifariam* (itself an allusion to the fourfold exegetical interpretive senses of Scripture – history, allegory, tropology and anagogy).[41] Basing his study upon the case studies of the mystic philosophers Plotinus, John Scotus Eriugena, Ibn 'Arabi, Marguerite Porete and Meister Eckhardt, Michael Sells has addressed the varied nature of "apophasis" in Christian theology.[42] As an "unsaying," or "speaking away," Sells describes the way in which "the negative way" seeks to present

[39]St. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, First Part, Question 3, "Of the Simplicity of God." This is reiterated elsewhere by Aquinas, for example: "For, by its immensity, the divine substance surpasses every form that our intellect reaches. Thus we are unable to apprehend it by knowing what it is. Yet we are able to have some knowledge of it by knowing what it is not." Aquinas, *Summa Contra Gentiles*, Book 1, Chapter 14, "That to Know God We Must Use the Way of Remotion."

[40]Brian Davies, *The Thought of Thomas Aquinas* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992), 40–44. See also the discussion Thomist concepts of metaphor and analogy in the context of Aquinas's notion of the "triplex via" and the "via negativa," in Ligita Ryliškytė, "Metaphor and Analogy in Theology: A Choice between Lions and Witches, and Wardrobes?", *Theological Studies*, 78, 3 (2017), 696–717.

[41]It is not easy to find the specific edition of Thomas Aquinas's *Summa Theologica* used by Samperi, but it is not improbable that he used the standard first complete American edition, published by Benziger Bros. in New York in 1947–48, translated by Fathers of the English Dominican Province. When Samperi made a reading list for his poet friend John Perlman in 1977, he included Plotinus's *Enneads* and St. Augustine's *City of God*; Ibn Arabi (particularly Titus Burckardt's translation); a series of medieval scholars, including Bonaventura, Aquinas, Dante, Duns Scotus, William of Ockham and Giordano Bruno; and also both Moses Maimonides's *The Guide for the Perplexed* and Rabbi Moses J. C. Luzzato's *General Principles of the Kabbalah*. His personal library also contains Adolphe Franck's *The Kabbalah* and A. E. Waite's *The Holy Kabbalah*. It is clear that Samperi was intimately acquainted with the key tenets and ideas of both Christian and Jewish mysticism.

[42]Michael Sells, *Mystical Languages of Unsaying* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994). There is a long tradition and vast corpus of writing on apophatic discourse, which includes such varied analyses as Rowan Williams, "Lossky, the *Via Negativa* and the Foundations of Theology," in Mike Higton, ed., *Wrestling with Angels: Conversations in Modern Theology* (London: SCM Press, 2007), 1–24; and Jacques Derrida, "How to Avoid Speaking: Denials," trans. Ken Frieden, in Sanford Budick and Wolfgang Iser, eds., *Languages of the Unsayable: The Play of Negativity in Literature and Literary Theory* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1989), 3–70.

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an immanent and transcendent God in the same phrase. Such a theological paradox brings about a fracturing of conventional logical and semantic structures of language. Apophatic discourse

> leads to a continuing series of retractions, a propositionally unstable and dynamic discourse in which no single statement can rest on its own as true or false, or even as meaningful. In such discourse, a rigorous adherence to the initial logic impasse of ineffability exerts a force that transforms normal logical and semantic structures.[43]

Consequently, Sells argues that God can only be perceived in "the interstices of the text," in the tension between the saying and the unsaying.[44] Like Samperi's poetry, there is a sense of overflowing, which is often in tension with an intentional language; it is language seeking to liberate itself, however momentarily, from orthodox referentiality through a performative linguistic sleight of hand: "word finally one / not itself" (*Trilogy*, 271).

In the following passage, Samperi charts a route on the "negative way":

Love darkness
spirit
this
that
neither
but if love seeks
light
light
dark
dark
light
then know
negative
not negative
same
everywhere
but different if same
self
no where equal
more darkness
darkness separate
body
soul
no where one
each either
neither
other

[43] Sells, 3.
[44] Ibid., 8.

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one
neither
if one
other (*Trilogy*, 316)

This passage mimics the trajectory of knowledge of the ineffable through a language that resists that very knowledge ("this / that / neither"); ultimately, the reader loses any grip on distinctions and oppositions, since the identity between light and dark, positive and negative, one and other become deconstructed in a gradual blur of syntactical reverberations, ricochets and repetitions, and a sliding of opposites through syntactical distortion: "neither / if one / other."

This apophatic discourse lies at the centre of David Burrell's "non-foundational" reading of Aquinas. Focussing upon the way in which Aquinas pays considerable attention to the work of language in sensual activity, Burrell's study paved the way for more contemporary "postmodern" readings of neo-Scholastic thought. From an innovative viewpoint, Burrell foregrounds the linguistic structures and grammatical aspects of Aquinas's mode of thought. Influenced by his Catholic theologian mentor Bernard Lonergan, Burrell's Wittgensteinian approach explores how language shapes theological and philosophical understanding. Aquinas's "philosophical grammar" leads to distinctions between concrete and abstract terms, between existential and predicative uses of "to be," and between the thing signified and the mode of its signification. From this perspective, Burrell argues that Aquinas fulfils the "theological task he sets himself: to elucidate the parameters of responsible discourse about God."[45] The focus of Burrell's work allows us to see Samperi's poetry as acutely motivated by Aquinas's distinction between the signifier and thing signified, and how he uses that distinction to show how we can make true yet inadequate statements about the divinity. Burrell's version of Aquinas allows us to identify and comprehend Samperi's own compulsive focus on words, syntax, the operation of language, interpretation and hermeneutics throughout the trilogy. The "figurative / letter" (*Trilogy*, 251) seeks transfiguration, illumination and revelation, where "each word is in praise of the Word" (*Trilogy*, 151), but more often provides failure of vision, "our words / dust / in conflict over thought image" (*Trilogy*, 266). As Samperi reaches for the "Language ambience / word allegorical / sense anagogical" (*Trilogy*, 263), there is a simultaneous realization of inadequacy and uncertainty: "the work the word / unity / full / then the flickering" (*Trilogy*, 271). Following the Thomistic conviction that the world stands in real relation to God, as we have noted, Samperi embeds the concept of analogy within all aspects of his poetry. Poetry, and by extension language, is analogical, gesturing defectively towards an Eternal Form, about which words are otherwise unavailable or inadequate. Analogy is necessary because we have no prose for God. Through analogy we transcend our expressive and linguistic constraints. Samperi's linguistic self-reflexivity and fragmented paratactic poetic style opens a scene where signs "play," as words link, conjoin and then uncouple and detach before relinking amid the "lists" of words down or across the page(s). Albeit

[45]David B. Burrell, *Aquinas: God and Action* (London and Notre Dame, IL: Routledge and Kegan Paul and University of Notre Dame Press, 1979), 8; and Bernard J. Lonergan, *Verbum: Word and Idea in Aquinas*, ed. David B. Burrell (Notre Dame, IL: University of Notre Dame Press, 1970).

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without the Thomist metaphysical presence of an ineffable God hovering nearby, it is only with a few further steps that one arrives at a near-Derridean poetic experience of difference and deferment in signification, where the determinate meaning of words remains beyond our grasp because linguistic signs offer what they are supposed to signify never per se but always only heterogeneously through signifiers.

It is within this "entanglement" (Samperi uses this word frequently), this disorienting and perplexing linguistic consciousness, that Samperi's poetry is marked by that typical modernist nostalgia for a lost plenitude where all contradictions appear to be annulled. In this respect, a holistic vision tantalizes Samperi, even though its outlines remain never quite achieved: "work word revitalized / signification / vision neither in nor out" (*Trilogy*, 271). However, when such a vision is crossed with an emerging postmodern focus on absences and discontinuities, a world of fragmentation and difference, then the ideological hegemony of neo-Scholasticism in Catholicism begins to be fused with that contemporary American pluralism and multiculturalism that we see emerging so clearly in the 1960s. It is an engagement with this incompleteness and displacement in Samperi's writing that ensures that his poetry carries a larger aesthetic complexity and significance beyond the orthodoxy of neo-Scholastic doctrine. Samperi's poetry attempts to invest the contingent world with analogical, all-encompassing significance, his work providing a grammatical counterpart to a universalist similitude that seeks to bind disparate events into one syntactical unit.

It is just such a vision that emerges in Dante, whom we have earlier seen is a constant presence throughout the trilogy. Indeed, *Lumen Gloriae* refers to the light of glory, by which a contemplative mind is enabled an experience of the immediate vision of God, arguably a vision of Dante's Paradise. The section "Disigilla" (*Trilogy*, 581) refers to the final Canto XXXIII of "The Paradiso": "Così la neve al sol si disigilla; / così al vento ne le foglie levi / si perdea la sentenza di Sibilla". "So the snow loses its shape in the sun; / So was it that the oracles of the Sibyl, / On the light leaves, were lost in the wind" (*Paradiso*, Canto 33.64–66).[46] In this final blessed vision and prayer to the Virgin, the pilgrim Dante likens his vision to a lingering distilled sweetness left behind in his heart just as the snow melts under the sun. Commentaries on Canto XXXIII discuss the repeated inability of words and language to represent what the pilgrim sees, as words fail or fall short, are inadequate and imperfect to the vision:

> *The Paradiso* oscillates between statements of its daring originality and confessions of its impossibility, of the ineffability of its vision and of the inadequacies of language to render it. The simultaneous sense of victory and defeat within which the poem comes into being contributes to its paradoxical effects, generating the haunting pathos that subtends the poem's astonishing accomplishment.[47]

[46]Dante Alighieri, *The Divine Comedy*, trans. C. H. Sisson (London: Pan, 1981), 497.

[47]Rachel Jacoff, "Introduction to *Paradiso*," in Rachel Jacoff, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to Dante*, 2nd edn (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 107–24, 123. See also Giuseppe Mazzotta, *Dante, Poet of the Desert: History and Allegory in the* Divine Comedy (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1979), 11, who argues that the *Divine Comedy* dramatizes an experience of "a gap that separates the words from the reality they try to represent … we lodge in a world of language and to interpret the imaginary means that

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This transient, ephemeral and ineffable experience of the vision of God's glory due to the limits of language is a recurrent theme of Samperi's own wrestling with signification, with "paraphrastic words" (*Trilogy*, 149). Characterized by images of erasure, impermanence, uncertainty and impediment, Samperi's trilogy finds words to be a necessary yet problematic medium. Occasionally, one gets the impression that Samperi would like to cancel language to regain the idealized presence (and silence) of "grace," but the poetry is always doomed to negotiate the uneasy spaces between language and presence. Samperi, like Aquinas (as David Burrell's work has amply demonstrated), is constantly, almost obsessively, focussed upon the workings of language. In the section "Anamnesis" in *Quadrifariam*, he speaks about the return of words and phrases in his poems:

> interesting how these same phrases
> keep cropping up in my work
> over the years
> they're the same words
> but the significance is different (*Trilogy*, 365)

Words are elements ready for rearrangement, generating new correspondences and correlations in a sometimes frustrated sense of catching glimpses of the Eternal Light and yet knowing that it is beyond perfect articulation. As an eponymous title of one Samperi's books (*Trilogy*, 187), the "crystal" is one such image where various facets and angles are fused together in a single, albeit separable, related form. Indeed, the trilogy is largely structured as a mosaic of words and phrases, where each word has different concatenations and resonances, like a verbal kaleidoscope:

> no end to this writing
> sentences
> taking their significance
> from infinite combinations
> but when the writing has reached
> its final word
> the word reduces itself
> to closed word
> the closed word raised to another height
> only if another extension is seen
> which extension in turn
> imparts
> to everything that went before
> the vision (*Trilogy*, 313)

we must travel the distance that separates signs and meanings." Mazzotta refers to *Paradiso*, Canto XXVI, line 17, where the Fall is construed as a fall of language and God is referred to as "Alfa e O," itself the title of Samperi's collection *Alfa ed O*, published by Origin Press in Kyoto, Japan in 1976, forming the fifth part of his partially completed work *COMPREHENSOR Viator*.

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There is a tension between the many-faceted, individual words and a movement in the opposite direction, towards the structuring of the elements into a unified vision. However, although inviting the reader to engage in an imaginative collaboration of meaning, the poems often demonstrate an ambiguity brought about by the highly paratactical language, what Nicholls termed the poem's "relational field." Indeed, Samperi's poems betray an uncertainty about the extent to which the inherently transgressive and idiosyncratically subjective power of writing can reconcile itself with the dictates of objective "truth." It is just such an interest in the excess of signification that makes Samperi's poetry more than merely diagrammatic expositions of Catholic Thomist principles. Furthermore, it is this interest that arguably reinforced Samperi's value to Zukofsky and Corman. This is not the postmodern poetry of wit and parody; rather it is a high-modernist recognition of social fragmentation with some sense of religious solace as a way of reconnecting the individual to some rational higher plan for existence. However, the form of the trilogy, the use of words and the language, pits experience and knowledge against vision and desire: knowledge is of disunity, fragmentation, lack of connection, in conflict with a desire for unity and clarity, which is held just beyond attainment. Samperi pictures himself as

> longing for purity
> finding oneself
> instead
> a wanderer
> amidst
> at the edge of
> green (*Trilogy*, 558)

This image is the exemplary tension of the trilogy: a traveller yearning for an untrammelled experience of the Eternal Form, only to find oneself constantly mired in the quotidian, rambling aimlessly in the middle of nondescript ordinariness, always on the periphery or the margins of the vision. As we saw with the emergence of Objectivist poetics, memories of exclusion and peripheral existence are characteristic of the struggles to come to terms with the pressures (often racist or xenophobic) brought to bear on immigrant consciousness by the dominant culture. Samperi's own consciousness of a peripheral existence is both overtly spiritual/metaphysical and latently ethno-socio-cultural. In his search for spiritual revelation, Samperi is acutely conscious of an alienation and loneliness, a persistent severing from the absolute clarity that he desires: "How desperate and lonely the way I take ... all men may be able to go this way and not feel the strangeness of being an outsider."[48] Amid this modernist *anomie*, the poetic consciousness is always aware of the gap, of the disconnection, between desire and attainment. The poems in their form repeatedly resist the unification of the spiritual resolution or identification; Samperi can only make an "approach" rather than an attainment:

> the language becoming less visional

[48] Samperi, *Lamentations*, dated 30 Sept. 1964, available on Claudia Warren-Samperi's blog post at http://poetfranksamperi.blogspot.com.

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yet at a certain level
whatever the word
the total vision reflective
then going on
reason
a loss
the spirit cut off
Spirit seeking the spirit
in grass love
light going (*Trilogy*, 451)

Hovering on the brink of apparent beatific fulfilment, Samperi instead finds his language incapable of attaining that vision as he is severed from the Spirit with the light diminishing. Indeed, the trilogy is clearly deeply embattled, charting a struggle between the securities of inner faith and the insecurities of envisaging the Eternal Form. It is a tenacious work that carries an insistence and yearning for understanding even as it concedes its limitations and boundaries.

The tensions of acculturation

While the 1950s can be seen as the dominant heyday of neo-Scholasticism in the Catholic Church before the modernizing challenges posed by the Second Vatican Council, with increasing secularization and modernization thereafter, nevertheless it would be incorrect to regard the 1960s as a conclusion. Rather, as Amy Hungerford argues, it "was not the end of something but the beginning of something, the beginning of what Zygmunt Bauman would much later identify as a postmodern 'reenchantment of the world'."[49] Contrary to the myriad histories and sociological studies of the secularization of US society in the 1950s by such people as Will Herberg, Sydney E. Ahlstrom and Daniel Bell, it is clear that the 1960s sees a flowering of religious interest.[50] Paul Giles recognizes that work like Samperi's poetry is indicative of the "arrival and consolidation of a Catholic sensibility within the central arenas of American social and political life."[51] This acculturation of Catholicism exactly anticipated the modernizing and assimilationist thrust of the

[49]Amy Hungerford, *Postmodern Belief: American Literature and Religion since 1960* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2010), 7. Hungerford quotes from Zygmunt Bauman, *Intimations of Postmodernity* (New York: Routledge, 1991), x–xi.

[50]Will Herberg, *Protestant–Catholic–Jew: An Essay in American Religious Sociology* (New York: Doubleday & Co, 1955); Sydney E. Ahlstrom, "The Radical Turn in Theology and Ethics: Why It Occurred in the 1960s," *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science: The Sixties: Radical Change in American Religion*, 387 (Jan. 1970), 1–13; and Daniel Bell, "Religion in the Sixties," *Social Research*, 38, 3 (Autumn 1971), 447–97. See also Hugh McLeod, *The Religious Crisis of the 1960s* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), who argues that just as the Church sought a decisive religious change, this was beginning to wane by the late 1960s, as arguably the era lays the bedrock for the emergence of the religious right and the Moral Majority in the 1970s, where the Catholic Church and evangelical movements unite around fears over abortion, homosexuality and the perceived threats to social formations from the counterculture, leading to a new conservatism.

[51]Giles, *American Catholic Arts*, 428.

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Second Vatican Council in the 1960s. By the end of the decade, ethnic and religious pluralism was well established in the USA, with the Protestant hegemony seeing a challenge from the breakthrough of Catholics and Jews gaining a new confident social visibility and influence. Indeed, Timothy Smith convincingly argues that the Americanization of immigrant communities, far from precipitating a dissipation of religious belief, actually saw "the intensification of the psychic basis of religious commitment."[52] Rather than a secularizing process, "migration was often a theologizing experience" which led to significant contributions to the changing "kaleidoscope" of American society as their commitment embraced the complexities, ambivalences and contradictions of late twentieth-century American society.[53]

If we can see Samperi and other Catholic poets like Thomas Merton, Jack Kerouac, Frank O'Hara, William Everson (aka Brother Antoninus), John Berryman and Daniel Berrigan as part of this new confidence and assertion of a Catholic aesthetic in the modernist 1960s and 1970s, it does so, as Paul Giles argues, also as a relief from the solipsistic romanticism associated with the Puritan legacy. This would be the "angelic" imagination, a derogatory phrase used by Jacques Maritain and other neo-Scholastic philosophers of the mid-twentieth century "to describe the human intellect's tendency to divorce itself from the natural world and set itself up as autonomous and entirely self-referential."[54] It demonstrates how Objectivist poetics found an unlikely ally in the Catholic Samperi, his focus on particularities forming part of an implicit attack on romanticism and the latent ego-centred focus of Protestantism. Indeed, Samperi is at pains on successive occasions to efface the self, to remove any appearance of the ego:

> Should a writer gossip about his personal life?
> *autobiography*
> *modern*
> *false* (*Trilogy*, 431)
> and
> to write for Humanity *God*
> *the Subject* alters every sense of the writer as *personality*: therefore, it is not the writer's job to seek out the latest innovations of the day – the principles of the craft are perennial; he has ancient teachers, and with them he silently converses (*Trilogy*, 409)

As Objectivist poets asserted, poetry must resist the modern trap of self-expression or "personality," as writing is about engaging with objects: "to vanish is to release / the world" (*Trilogy*, 484). For Samperi, like Aquinas, beauty lies in the form of objects and religious belief is the engine that drives perception, and when that formal aspect is the object of aesthetic contemplation, it reveals itself for what it is and acquires from the encounter its aesthetic quality, unrelated to the imposition of

[52]Timothy L. Smith, "Religion and Ethnicity in America," *American Historical Review*, 83, 5 (Dec. 1978), 1155–85, 1174.

[53]Ibid., 1175, 1185.

[54]Giles, 198.

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any subjectivism: "Personalism does not belong to a spiritual art" (*Trilogy*, 317).[55] Echoing the words of the influential "Sincerity and Objectification," was it this aesthetic focus that partly attracted Zukofsky to Samperi's work? Samperi's poems are "concerned with a heterogeneous view of the external world rather than the eccentricities of private psychology."[56] In this respect, one can see an implicit criticism of the spirit of romanticism that has a tendency towards an "overflowing ego" or the construction of one's own universe. Samperi's poetry is rooted in a metaphysic of human limitation rather than of human transcendence: "more given up to God than self / self least / because self only worthy / as branch is / to light" (*Trilogy*, 315). There is no emphasis on the subjective consciousness of an individual author, for Samperi is always involved in an engagement with the preexistent world rather than as the romantic creator of a world *ex nihilo*. Just like the Objectivists, the Thomist Samperi would refuse any authorial omniscience, since authors cannot transcend time: rather, people are rooted in time, in the material grubbiness of the everyday:

> I see my work as the solution
> of the anti-hero
> I am lower
> poorer
> more truly proletarian (*Trilogy*, 314)

Giles makes a persuasive case that the emergence of this Catholic identity in the 1960s is partly a resistance to American personalism, to the American adventure, and to American selfhood and self-expression, embedded in the Protestant imagination of Poe, Melville, Hawthorne and Twain. Indeed, mulling over the relative merits of Rimbaud, Baudelaire and Mallarmé, Samperi notes, "are there not examples today of those poet [*sic*] who pose as materialists poking fun at Romanticism, and yet drawing all their strength from the I-Dwellers!? Rimbaud ... never bought the Poe postulate which the line Baudelaire–Mallarmé–Valery did."[57] Amid the middle-class comfort and consensus of the 1950s and early 1960s, we have seen that Samperi's writing is overtly critical of the American Dream that characterized this era. Moreover, Catholics represent the city as the place of community, of law and regulation, whereas for the Protestant American romantic adventurers, the city was regarded as a threat to the autonomy of the individual. Samperi is equally aware of this country–city opposition: "Some poets stay amidst nature because they feel – I guess – that to

[55]In her analysis of the Thomist concept of creating beauty, Hannah Ragusa argues that "the artist's work is inherently connected to the artist's receptivity – the word 'vision' is apt here – and the artist's vision is exactly that: a true seeing of things rather than a self-created world or a mere expression of feeling." Hannah Woldum Ragusa, "Beholding the Beauty of Being: Artistic Creativity in the Thomistic Tradition," *Logos: A Journal of Catholic Thought and Culture*, 20, 2 (Spring 2017), 105–31, 106.

[56]Giles, 266.

[57]Letter to Cid Corman, dated 30 Dec. 1975, available on Claudia Warren-Samperi's blog post at http://poetfranksamperi.blogspot.com.

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stay in the city is to be abstract: they – unknowingly, of course, falsify: in the country does not guaranty poetry."[58] Consequently, traditional American romantic spirits sought to withdraw and secede from civilization, in a sort of Thoreauvian forest or frontier, or in an individualistic Melvillean journey. Paul Giles convincingly argues that whereas

> Protestant romance dissolves the mundane world into a mere lucid spiritual allegory; Catholic realism invests the mundane world itself with sacramental significance ... [Catholic texts] prostrate themselves before the preexistent world rather than seeking romantically to transcend or redesign it. Their concentration on the mixed and unadulterated stuff of quotidian reality strikes a new note in American literature by its insistence upon the obduracy of material circumstances and upon the impossibility of any apocalyptic reordering of these circumstantial conditions of life.[59]

Within this context, Samperi's reenchantment of the apparently humdrum and everyday actions of urban existence, which creeps into every crevice of the trilogy, reinforces his antiromanticism and fully justifies his designation as the "Aquinas in Brooklyn."

In this respect, one might detect an uneasy space between assimilation and alienation, between consensus and ethnicity for the Italian American Samperi. Indeed, one might be able to see a further tension between Samperi's Thomist inclinations to community and social Catholicism, and the Protestant's notion of society as a necessary evil, an obstruction to the higher visionary impulses of the "soul." Yet this tension between Catholic and Protestant positions is not without nuance. Although focussing upon fiction after the American Renaissance, Thomas Ferraro presents a finely shaded, hybridized situation, with "a fascinating and emergent counter pulse, a Protestantism in transformative motion ... the socio-cultural and mythopoeic impact of an increasing Protestant temptation to Marian Catholicism."[60] As Catholic and Protestant cultures infuse and interpenetrate each other, Ferraro argues that one cannot supplant the Protestant literary imagination with a Catholic- or Jewish-centred aesthetic or canon. It is not an either–or relationship. Instead, one needs to conceive of a nexus of ways in which different cultural perspectives act to supplement or, indeed, reinforce existing aesthetic practices. It is to recognize that the Catholic Samperi, with his ethical responsibility to community, sits in a nexus: with those traits in Jewish culture that we saw identified by Burton Hatlen on the one hand, while also harbouring inclinations towards the Puritan ideology of individualist vision and affirmation.

[58]Samperi, *Marginalia*, 1970, available on Claudia Warren-Samperi's blog post at http://poetfranksamperi.blogspot.com.

[59]Giles, 168.

[60]Thomas Ferraro, *Transgression and Redemption in American Fiction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020), 11.

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However, just as Samperi's poetry attempts to suture and reconcile his religious and ethnic heritage within an American experimental form that allows for contradictions within a dominant cultural hegemony, he is also having to negotiate the pressures for secularization and change. As we saw, Objectivist poets had to reconcile themselves to similar pressures in the 1930s. Yet the poets weathered those social tensions and the 1960s saw a resurgence of Objectivist poetics. Cid Corman's Origin Press published Zukofsky's *"A" 1–12* in 1959, and it was subsequently published by Jonathan Cape in London in 1966; George Oppen won the Pulitzer Prize for *Of Being Numerous* (1968) to great acclaim in 1969; Charles Reznikoff published *By the Waters of Manhattan* (1962) and *Testimony: The United States 1885–1890* (1965); and Carl Rakosi returned to publishing after a long stretch of obscurity with *Amulet* (1967). Within such a context, Samperi found in Objectivist practice a poetics and philosophy that allowed for a Catholic imagination which reminds us that there is no clear demarcation between the secular and the sacred. Yet like the Objectivists, Samperi possesses the same immigrant "double consciousness": there is the pressure to integrate while privately preserving the faith, leading to an outwardly conformist stance that pulls in other directions. Consequently, one is always aware of the paradoxical oscillation between autonomous free will and religious conditioning, as a fluctuation occurs between secular freedom and spiritual devotion. Instead of a wholesale return to the model of medieval systematic theology of Aquinas, poets like Samperi, O'Hara and Berryman search for the "spiritual" within the debris of contemporary urban America; or as Giles concludes, they find glimpses of "the possibilities of faith not within the archaic structures of feudalism but amid those lacunae and absences lurking within the brave new world of humanist reason."[61]

Like the beats, Samperi sought a mode of individuation from the mass, resisting subsumption within the hegemonic politico-industrial system. While Samperi's poetry is less the brash poetics of Olson, or the shock tactics of the beats, nevertheless it shares their sense of resistance to statist incorporation, to state exploitation, and to state interpolation. Seeking an appropriately labile linguistic form, Samperi's poetics is driven by articulating social protest, negotiating a sense of alienation and achieving an ethical concern for the form of objects. From this characterization, Samperi demonstrates an Objectivist consciousness of the "other" which represents a kind of immediate demand on the self, a demand for recognition and response. As we have seen, respect for the otherness of forms, for objects, for particularities is an abiding principle in Samperi's work: "To stress ethos is to stress separation" (*Trilogy*, 317). Such an ethical position aims to remain responsive to the claims of the other without resorting to the violence of "appropriation," and attempts to preserve the integrity of the other:

> If one absorbs the other, then one loses meaning, because the identification is a relation reflective of the obviation: the other absorbed (Trilogy, 317)

[61]Giles, 525.

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Wary of any form of categorization, Samperi's poetry focusses upon and celebrates the mystery, the paradox, but also the *linguistic openness* of an individual human existence. In facing the question of how to approach this "other" object without reductionism or abstraction, the Thomist rationalism that motivates Samperi's poetics comes under pressure from his consciousness of the inadequacies of language, the limitations of which gesture towards a gap that cannot be bridged between perception and knowledge.

Samperi's poetry is not about miracles as "violations" of the natural world, but rather a spiritual discernment in the mundanities in life in Brooklyn and Japan in the 1960s – eating, sleeping, walking, hearing, seeing, writing. The intersections of memory, religion, family and locality in Samperi's trilogy are some of the key factors in asserting an ethnic identity, a concatenation that is a familiar pattern among many immigrant communities.[62] Although Samperi does not overtly speak about his "Italian-ness" in the trilogy, nevertheless his ghostly hyphenated ethnic identity is evident on every page in the references to a cultural civilization with its roots in a sophisticated Renaissance art, literature and philosophy. On the one hand, Samperi affirms his subliminal Italian American identity through the references to Aquinas and Dante, Latin and Italian languages, thereby creating a subversive resistance to narratives of assimilation and homogenization. On the other hand, Samperi's experimental form and chiselled use of language appear as a buttress against the perceived fragmentation of his contemporary culture and act as a subtle and implicit allegiance to the emerging American counterculture. From the postmodern perspective of maintaining an openness to otherness, Samperi's poetic balance between the material landscapes of America and the disembodied realm of the spirit thus demonstrates an additional route to the understanding of how Objectivist and later Projectivist poetics provided an aesthetic response and platform for a new ethical poetics.[63] Like the Objectivists, Samperi's Catholicism brought a sceptical, interrogative stance toward canonical assumptions. Samperi's poetry demands attention because it demonstrates how a Catholic rather than a Judaic impulse can reinforce and parallel Objectivist poetics' complex resistance to subjectivist expressionism and ontological identification. Samperi's poetry reinforces how Objectivist poetics is intimately concerned with an ethical poetics, it allies itself to the antiromantic impulse in Objectivist poetics, and it shows how Objectivist poetics challenges and resists any account of American literature that seeks to promulgate its undiluted Protestant tradition. Looking hard at the turmoil of society around him, Samperi's poetry emerges as an example of how a new analytical lexicon and philosophical perspective (that of neo-Scholasticism and mysticism) can elicit and refocus obscured values in Objectivist poetics.

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[62]See Christa Wirth's case study of her own immigrant family lineage in *Memories of Belonging: Descendants of Italian Migrants to the United States, 1884–Present* (Leiden and Boston, MA: Brill, 2015).

[63]See Woods, *The Poetics of the Limit*.

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Jeanette Winterson and the Politics of Reading (with Helena Grice, 1998), *Beginning Postmodernism* (1999, 2nd edn 2010), *Literature of Memory: History, Time and Space in Post-war Writing* (with Peter Middleton, 2000), *The Poetics of the Limit: Ethics and Politics in Modern and Contemporary American Poetry* (2002), and *African Pasts: Memory and History in African Literatures* (2012). He is the author of numerous articles on subjects including Louis Zukofsky, George Oppen, Cid Corman, Charles Olson, Kurt Vonnegut, Paul Auster, the ethics in literature, AIDS in South African literature, and Nuruddin Farah. The author is grateful to Mrs Claudia Samperi-Warren for permission to quote from Frank Samperi's work.

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