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Scarcity by Gift: Horizons of The “Lucy” Poems ¹

Peter Larkin

Geoffrey Hartman, who has often returned to the “Lucy” poems to take further soundings of Wordsworth and of the work of reading generally, characterises the cycle as “a group of short lyrics on the death of a young girl... [evoking] three highly charged themes: incompleteness, mourning, and memory”.² While I can’t offer an entirely fresh reading of these minutely studied poems, it may be worthwhile to reflect upon them (and on Hartman’s readings of them in particular) in the light of this “incompleteness” considered as an horizon for both loss and dedication. This broader ramification of incompleteness (which of course equally invokes mourning and memory) may also lie on the cusp of literary and theological approaches to these elusively minimal poems. The incompleteness I focus on is not confined to Lucy’s premature death, but is one which touches the theme of a “relation of scarcity” within the juncture of human and natural life which I have explored elsewhere in relation to *The Ruined Cottage*, a text completed earlier in the same year (1798) in which Wordsworth embarked on the first of what we now know as the “Lucy” poems.³

Several critics note both a connection with and a shift between the earlier social narrative and the later elegiac lyrics. James Averill points out how Wordsworth’s suspicions of “the moving accident” leads him to assume an outright elegiac voice in the Goslar lyrics, a voice suspended between narrative and lyric, not telling a full story but evoking incidents underwritten by the event of a death.⁴ Spencer Hall finds the “resignation, acceptance, and even awe at the processes of the universe” which *The Ruined Cottage* had evinced “ultimately joyless”. To go from here to the experiment of the “Lucy” poems leads to a poetic dead-end, he claims, for no “sufficient remedy” can be found for the human either in nature or beyond it.⁵ Critical judgment here pivots on what can be regarded as sufficient, but no less important to both *The Ruined Cottage* and the “Lucy” poems may be an experiment with an insufficiency which explores an ethical mourning in the narrative poem and a visionary lament in the lyrics precisely in terms of a scarcity of justification and completeness.

Another link between *The Ruined Cottage* and the “Lucy” poems is the figure of Coleridge as implicit and perhaps implicated reader. It was Coleridge

¹ This essay is an extended version of a paper presented to the Seventh Coleridge Summer Conference, Cannington, July 2000. I should like to thank the participants, and Graham Davidson and Douglas Hedley in particular, for helpful discussions.

² *Easy Pieces* (New York: Columbia U.P., 1985), 145. (Cited subsequently as EP)

³ Larkin, Peter. “Relations of Scarcity: Ecology and Escatology in ‘The Ruined Cottage.’” *Studies in Romanticism* 39 (2000): 347-364. Cited subsequently as Larkin.

⁴ Averill, James. *Wordsworth and the Poetry of Human Suffering*. (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1980), 207.

⁵ Hall, Spencer. “Wordsworth’s ‘Lucy’ Poems: Context and Meaning.” *Studies in Romanticism* 10 (1971): 159-175,p 173. Cited subsequently as Hall.

who represented the ideal interpreter of the philosophic depth of Wordsworthian narrative, it was he who had drawn the poet and his sister into Germany; perhaps it is he also who mediates the elusive hollow between narrative fragment and lyric moment in Wordsworth's poetry written there. It is this space, negotiating minimal or condensed event on the one hand, and intensely suffusive lyrical emotion on the other, which reveals Wordsworth's most original art of poetic dedication, I believe (and by dedication I mean a movement from gift to horizon via a dual fidelity to both reception and loss). It is a space which immediately called for interpretation and supplementation (as it still does), and it assumed a projection of itself towards Coleridge together with an expectation of some sort of stabilizing receptiveness back from him. We can sense the "Lucy" lyrics reproducing many of the fears of personal loss and poetic silencing that Coleridge himself might have been undergoing. Coleridge in turn was to interpret and appropriate Wordsworth's elegies to disclose the troubled relations of the self to the Romantic imagination, and Brian Caraher detects in the two letters written to Tom Poole upon the death of the infant Berkeley some interwoven echoes of the "Lucy" poems. When faced with unexpected death in the face of his own absence Coleridge is lured towards a darker vision of the imagination as possessing a power to dissolve life as well as to enhance it.⁶ The "Lucy" poems were to remain enigmatical and ghostly to Coleridge, their bleakness and impassioned reserve must have troubled him with their vision of a numinous fidelity entangled in a no less haunting concreteness of diminishment: such poetry perhaps contributed directly to a withdrawal of his interpretative proximity to Wordsworth. Was it precisely the hint of a poetics of scarcity which Coleridge could not readily respond to, even though he certainly sensed the remarkably evocative and mysteriously reposeful nature of its dedicatory horizons?

My term "scarcity" has a strategic history of its own. Originally denoting periods of seasonal shortage, it evolved in the eighteenth century into an index of demand stimulating the provision of commodities which bring refinement to a progressive civilisation; by the twentieth century it had become understood as the concomitant of a theoretically infinite desire for consumption interminably negotiating with economic production and resource substitution. Perennial scarcity could be seen as a relative and social dynamic, but by the second half of the twentieth century a sense of the liability of resource substitution was surfacing, to settle on a notion of an absolute scarcity of environmental resources when faced with unlimited growth. It's not difficult to see that Wordsworth's poetry, with its distaste for urban acceleration and its preference for the local and the frugal, should serve such an intuition of scarcity. In my reading of *The Ruined Cottage* I nudged the term "scarcity" toward a more ontological stance, one no longer confined to resource economics (Larkin, 361-2). I suggested "scarcity" also denotes a

⁶ Caraher, Brian. *Wordsworth's "Slumber" and the Problematics of Reading*. (University Park: Pennsylvania State UP, 1991), 124.

mode of finite being in which what needs to be given for human life to be at home in the natural world *has* been given, but (and here is one key to the Romantic crisis) not so as to constitute a sufficiency as such, either metaphysically or ethically.

"Scarcity" broadens out yet further if it can be supposed to underlie the condition of postmodernity as an acceleration of existence ahead of meaning. This takes us to the post-Nietzschean shortage of objects of belief or value, or to Stanley Cavell's sense that metaphysical finitude is viewed as an intellectual lack.⁷ Sources of significant experience are seen, in the context of God's death, to be lessening for human beings. Or where still found they are experienced as more fleeting and less sustaining, whether for better or worse.⁸ Paul Avis acknowledges that linguistic symbols may give insights into the real, but they can't guarantee the truth of that apprehension.⁹ It is as though where nothing can be believed with confidence, the unknowable assumes sublimely liberatory dimensions and sublimates the merely unknown. The Postmodern associates spiritual inspiration simultaneously with extreme fragility and marginality, rather than as the gate towards an ever deepening ground of being confidently expected in the Platonic tradition. Need may intensify as belief undergoes progressive mutation, and one can also speculate that such need is figured in poetry as a scarce granting by means of dedication and renewal, if poetry is taken to be an exploration of what must not be allowed to be lost, even if the ground of that reappearance cannot be secured. Paul Ricoeur sees that the principal challenge to hermeneutics resides in the loss of meaning in inherited texts, a deficit which seeps into human life generally. He has hopes of recovery, however, through an abundance of meaning still to be rediscovered in poetic texts, among which he places the Bible itself. Ricoeur goes on to define the world as the referent of all the stories we have known and cherished, so that what we call the self is not an autonomous or determined construction, but a "gift" of poetic language and literature.¹⁰

Gift figures normatively as an aspect of abundance, but I want to argue for a link with scarcity. Claire Colebrook insists that for Heidegger we only begin to know being and how to question it by how it is given, from the events of existence. Certain ways in which the world is given, however, such as the experience of angst, take us beyond existence, opening a path towards ontological questioning. The question is only possible because thinking already dwells in the world, but cannot be posited as such; rather, it is adjacent to its

⁷ Cavell, Stanley. *In Quest of the Ordinary: Lines of Skepticism and Romanticism*. (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1988), 51.

⁸ On the same point Gianni Vattimo comments: "This renunciation of presence confers on post-metaphysical philosophy... an inevitably 'fallen' character. The overcoming of metaphysics... can only take place as nihilism. The meaning of nihilism, however, if it is not... to take the form of a metaphysics of the nothing... can only think of itself as an indefinite process of reduction, diminution, weakening"; (See Vattimo, Gianni, in Jacques Derrida and Gianni Vattimo (eds). *Religion*. (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1998), 93. As I use the notion of scarcity in this paper I intend a "strong, non-nihilist" deployment of that very weakening.

⁹ Avis, Paul. *God and the Creative Imagination*. (London: Routledge, 1999), 11.

¹⁰ Vanhoozer, Kevin J. *Biblical Narrative in the Philosophy of Paul Ricoeur*. (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1990) 279-81.

world, neither fully present nor wholly given¹¹. Does this imply that existence is itself a scarcely given, the ground of an authentic scarcity? I prefer to argue for a theological poetics which doesn't broach scarcity as arising from a world only partially present, but as discovered from within a world *fully* given in unconcealment but at once placing itself before an horizon of scarcity, an horizon which engages also with rarity and wonder. Part of that wonder is the thought of the gift itself.¹²

My own deployment of the notion of scarcity arises by way of parrying the deconstructive readings of Romantic poetry by Paul de Man, Hillis Miller and Frances Ferguson¹³. Because values are not present in the expected way deconstruction has presumed their absence. John Milbank argues that both Heidegger and Derrida claim "an intellectual intuition of the eternal fixed ratio between presence and always invasive absence"¹⁴. Catherine Pickstock posits a less nihilist and more numinous trace, however, neither fully present nor wholly absent but in a mode of gift and elicitation¹⁵. The sense of scarcity I am developing here implies, as a temporal intermittency of presencing amid spatial horizons, a more oscillatory and less contentious ratio. Such a trace is an authentic "scarcity" in a positive sense, emerging from a strong absence as absence's own weaker and therefore negotiable other, as that which can grant plenitude, or presencing, but not as itself or as presence itself. The difference of scarcity is one of lessness rather than non-identity, or involves analogy understood as a return with difference, here a sparseness of return appropriate to memory and mourning. If, according to Garrett Green, presence is ultimately an eschatological term, understood as a summoning, one can respond that it is nonetheless intermittently so, present to the non-totality of its reception¹⁶. Is this to suggest that transcendence makes itself available to the response of scarcity? If so, such a transcendence would be symbolized in poetry not just at the margins of the world but as revealing itself as actively and mysteriously *less* than the self-sufficiency of that world.

¹¹ Colebrook, Claire. *Ethics and Representation: from Kant to Post-Structuralism*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh UP, 1999) 74-5.

¹² The notion of scarcity may also help to intervene between competing versions of desire: between what Richard Kearney sees as an onto-theological totality of timeless plenitude on the one hand and a radical eschatological desire as pure temporal excess on the other. (See "Desire for God" in John D. Caputo and Michale J. Scanlon (eds). *God, the Gift and Postmodernism*. (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1999)), 115-7). Scarcity enables the borders of time to be distinguished from the onflow of time.

¹³ Geoffrey Hartman comments: "As conscious beings we are always at a distance from origin. Yet to begin with absence is still an epochal or grounding maneuver". Hartman senses that absence is already too categorical to negotiate with poetic abundance. He goes on to say: "Things remembered or imagined are viewed as absent not because they are lost (though they may be) but because their 'trace' is difficult to substantialize as a noun or a name" (*The Unremarkable Wordsworth* (London: Methuen, 1987), 29. Cited as URW subsequently.

¹⁴ "The Soul of Reciprocity. Part Two: Reciprocity Granted." *Modern Theology* 17 (2001): 486-507, p489. Cited subsequently as "Soul Two".

¹⁵ Pickstock, Catherine. *After Writing: on the Liturgical Consummation of Philosophy*. (Oxford: Blackwell, 1997), 22. Cited subsequently as Pickstock.

¹⁶ Green, Garrard. *Theology, Hermeneutics and Imagination: the Crisis of Interpretation at the End of Modernity*. (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2000), 165.

II

The "Lucy" poems seem suspended amid a sketchily contrasted predicament, in which there is hardly anything to be said or done about Lucy's fate. Critics often see the Lucy cycle as poems of renunciation but the poems also seem to pose the question of where renunciation is to go. Is the speaker invoking an oblique renunciation within Lucy herself (or one taken over by her) so attenuated that it forestalls any more absolute or external separation? Lucy seems not only to collaborate with her poetic slighting but to become its votary: her diminution is a reserve conjured to hold its light at a boundary without disappearing across it. We can surmise a *scarcity of relation* rather than outright severance. Scarcity is itself relation, a self-declaring bond, though one often frightening, disappointing or challenging. As Hall writes: "The ideal human condition is not at issue in the 'Lucy' poems. The threat to being human at all is; the difficult contradiction between the life of nature and the life of man is"(Hall, 168). Faced with such contradiction, Wordsworth attempts to mediate via an ontological *contraction*, so that what threatens the human faces a diminished but concentrated moment *of* the human, a moment insufficiently supported by, but remaining unconditionally dependent on nature. The contraction waits at the limit of insufficient relation without crossing beyond it (though it is just such an attentive waiting which transforms limit to symbolic horizon). The boundary is haunted by a tutelary figure, one human enough to have been driven this far out, but as scarcely-human remaining enigmatically reposeful and remote from extremity *per se*. Is the renunciation here more to do with letting the love-object recede, and finding it recedes to a point of address? In life Lucy may have been too little known to have been addressed fully, but in death her scarce presence doesn't disappear as such but lends itself back to the boundaries of life, and on this side of them. If the "whole movement of the Lucy poems is...learning to do without" as Frances Ferguson proclaims, it is a doing without not fully externalised, a movement which unfolds across a distance both spare but sparing of the gift of relation¹⁷. The distance implies a difficult learning to be *with* what is not so much the absence of the person as a haunted insufficiency within the very patience of being-with.

In "Three Years She Grew" Lucy is shown in life sharing a "breathing balm" which is underlain by the calm of "mute insensate things". The distinctive use of "insensate" pushes the stasis implicated in calm towards death, but a death figured much more as a proleptic reversal of itself, so that we have a diminishment projecting back towards an horizon of calm. This "feels" its way toward the bleak ending of the elegy:

She died and left to me
This heath, this calm and quiet scene,

¹⁷ Ferguson, Frances. *Language as Counter-Spirit*. (New Haven: Yale UP, 1977), 173.

The memory of what has been
And never more will be.

"And never more will be" strikes an anguish which exposes the non-consolation of calm without quite unmaking it, until an undersense of "And never more needs to be" can be admitted as a marginal and insufficient meaning. If the past doesn't need to be again it is because it has been on behalf of the flow of time, part of a pulse of arrival and disappearance. The past now arrives as the limited consolation of memory, leading the poet not beyond his grief but out to the horizons of it. Time doesn't supervene on Lucy by insisting on a new arrival to replace her; rather, it includes her in an unsevered bond of love which moves on in time under the condition of scarcity. What can still be given of her, and how it is she gives what that might be, reflect all that she is made less by.

Scarcity figures rarity and intensification in the imaging of Lucy herself. The famous second quatrain from "She Dwelt among the Untrodden Ways" extols Lucy's scarceness as rarity, to the extent that *reduced* presence takes on a bearing in its own right:

A violet by a mossy stone
Half hidden from the eye!
—Fair as a star, when only one
Is shining in the sky.¹⁸

The violet/star imagery can be over-read for apparent opposition between the lowly and the cosmic. What is hidden from the eye, however, is a *brilliance* which would simply have been that of the wrong flower. In its *unhidden* aspect the right flower is seen well enough, for it is never actually invisible. And the fairness of the star in its solitary reticence may be a muted brightness reducible to the beauty of being less than itself, where singleness acknowledges something taken away. But scarcity provides a surety that something *is* being seen. That figuration is already at work in the opening quatrain, typically converting overt denial to underlying insufficiency, which in turn opens itself to the trial of a *poetic* sufficiency as intensity and rarity. Wordsworth's risk-taking is precisely to invite us to interpret the "untrodden ways" as infrequently trodden, or as minimal presence which discovers the way of itself. Similarly, "very few to love" doesn't imply that Lucy is unlovable, but that she is to be loved intensely as a rare being. She who "lived unknown" is now known less than fully but not in a mode fulfilling the negation threatened once she has "ceased to be"; it is not just that "few could know", more an assertion that "few *do* know". The knowing of a few is the manner of knowing which reaches out toward the signal reserve of a Lucy.

¹⁸ Wordsworth, William. *Poetical Works*. Ed. Ernest de Selincourt. 5 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon, 1940-49) 2: 30. Cited subsequently as PW.

If Lucy's identification with the violet indicates she has achieved the ideal condition of being hardly human at all, as David Ferry maintains, one could add that what is hard about being hardly human is the having to undergo such unsatisfactorily realised transitions involved in moving out to the borderlands of death and memory¹⁹. Brian Caraher reminds us that the planet Venus only reflects light, that its single appearance before dawn or after dusk is fleeting and evanescent (Caraher, 117). We can glimpse in this image the mode of Lucy's presencing, mainly absent in the common light of day, but mysteriously unaccompanied or as if unmediated at such vestigial moments. Her reflected light is not simply what is projected upon her by her lover, but the light of a projection which has become naturalised or rendered other by offering itself to a common horizon of reception and loss. Ferry rightly observes that natural objects like flower and star are signposts for Wordsworth toward the metaphysical place he wishes to get to, telling us the way, but also indicating that we haven't got there. They sign an incompleteness of mission (Ferry, 11). I would read this as a "strong" incompleteness, one able to reach out to Lucy, though marked by grief and failing to retrieve her as such, but an incompleteness which signals the figuration by which her *way* can be found. Lucy comes to be a tutelary figure at the margin of presencing itself, an incompleteness which allows relationship to continue knowingly unsatisfied at the point of that unfulfilment. It is a point which contests absence by tracing the diminished markers of what has been given, a gift only present in a reduced way but still as an excess or exception which binds rather than corrodes.

III

Mark Jones inquires of "Three Years She Grew" whether Lucy's death means a "benevolent nature has failed, that a malignant nature has succeeded, that Nature is indifferent, or that its benevolence passes understanding?"²⁰ These several, incompatible meanings suggest that no single one is sufficient, not as a factor of deconstructive oscillation but from within the figuration of scarcity itself. The thread of a scarcity of meaning remains in place among these interpretative contestants, a scarcity of import (to which the very conflict contributes) which reads itself as no severance of the human from the natural.

In the "Lucy" poems Wordsworth's concern isn't chiefly directed toward probing a moral integrity of feeling or the Romantic capacity for relationship. Rather, the poems dramatise an ethical concern always already "prevented" by numinous reverie, the premonitions and afterlife of dream within which the gift of relationship is first contracted and then taken up. In "A Slumber did my Spirit Seal" the withdrawal which seals the poet's spirit frames an abbreviated but visionary consciousness, not one from which he will awake to

¹⁹ Ferry, David. *The Limits of Mortality*. (Middletown: Wesleyan UP, 1959), 74. Cited subsequently as Ferry.

²⁰ Jones, Mark. *The "Lucy" Poems: a Case Study in Literary Knowledge*. (Toronto: Toronto UP, 1995), 43. Cited subsequently as Jones.

a traumatic reality but one which remains within the slender channel of unbroken reverie, itself only a mild displacement of trauma but sufficient to avert total disruption. We know what we have lost only because it is rendered scarce or remote by premonition or memory: we do not recollect what has always been absent.

The contested verb "seal" in the opening line of "A Slumber did my Spirit Seal" has connotations of closure or healing; or the very seal may be a mark of election, though some critics have more readily seen it as a blinding or deception (Jones, 31). Or if that seal is "like a hymen over consciousness" according to Hartman, it is not simply violated by death but operates within reverie more like a membrane which filters back some minority of life from the totality of absence (*URW*, 190). Death as event is not a nothing, but a reduction of life to life's own outskirting. It is a reduction which can be figured as a sheltering contraction, a making less of itself so that no contract or covenant will be broken. I do not find an abrupt and ironic difference between sleeping and awaking in the two stanzas of "A Slumber". The "now" of "No motion has she now" is not an abrupt shift forward but the now of the trance once sealing has taken place, and it is within trance that the negotiation between modes of presencing amid scarcity occur. The slumber dreams proleptically a turn *within* any irony of awakening so as to phantomise not an over-fulfilled incorporation into nature but an encounter with an enigmatic affiliation to nature which is more nearly an *under-completion*. The "touch of earth is exactly what [Lucy] does feel", J.R. Watson astutely concludes, and that touch becomes not a subversion of her presence but one felt through its *available* scarcity.²¹ The poet correspondingly has no human fears that he will be compromised in contemplating Lucy's death, for such a lessening has already been internalised by her as her mutilated presencing. Her presence is dreamed as scarce from the beginning as the thought of rarity displacing loss.

The only response to presence within a difference of scarcity in "A Slumber" would seem to be repose, facing not a life-in-death but a mode of being which remains before the horizon of its own reduction, numinously implicated in those outer limits of life which attract radiance. Hartman fears that such a death might seem better than dying into the light of common day. And that, he worries, is "to make immutability of such value that human life is eclipsed by it". Wordsworth is offering us, though, a very tenuous immutability of context, one deepened, certainly, by what Hartman describes as a "reversal into an image of *participation mystique* with the planet earth" (*EP*, 152). Lucy's rareness can be invoked, however, because she is *not* there much of the time: her non-absence is mutable because she only revisits memory and reverie from time to time, she is the living difference between the place that can know her and the presence she is. It is the slenderness of this link rather than Lucy's presence itself which is immutable. Though Lucy haunts the poet as an unconsummated force of life (as Hartman declares), Wordsworth's poetic

²¹ Watson, J. R. "Lucy and the Earth-Mother." *Essays in Criticism* 27 (1977): 187-202, p188.

experiment is with a Lucy whose presencing may be consummated in a mode of scarcity (*URW*, 190). What has been given to her life is now given at the horizons of that life: recognised as a plenitude if it is to be a gift at all, but not one to be symbolized through a wealth of reception.

IV

In close alliance with his "Lucy" readings, Hartman identifies a persistent linguistic condition of "euphemia": a naturally figurative utterance retaining the power to bless by articulating a calm, though enigmatic continuity in the face of all that threatens speech with muteness, *ie* the extremes of trauma *or* ecstasy (*EP*, 148). Hartman acknowledges euphemia as a basic feature of language, Wordsworth's strongest moments of a wellbeing of speech seen as belonging to language rather than imposed on it (*EP*, 153). As Hartman elaborates: "It may be good to view even irony as a varietal and sophisticated sort of blessing, enabling the poet to speak".²² This position seems poised before a theological horizon, though for Hartman euphemia maintains a secular reserve that assigns transcendence to reticence. Nonetheless, a language which speaks to and through death without succumbing to a deathly trauma is likely to retain a quasi-liturgical function, or to partake in the praise and ritual which Pickstock sees as the conditions which ontologically constitute the person within a recovered Platonic notion of human language and the good (Pickstock, 40). Her insight that the person who praises is free of estrangement but not fixated upon any completed identity chimes well with the persona in the Lucy poems, where a diffidence before the meaning of loss implies an emergent bond secured only so far as a certain re-orientation (Pickstock, 45). To revert to "A Slumber", Hartman finds here a "euphemistic" avoidance of curse in a "proleptic thought" which forestalls the thought of death, with Wordsworth quieting his language sufficiently until "myth is present only in unheard form and irony is the point-zero between curse and blessing" (*ST*, 147). This "unheard form" echoes Coleridge's theological reading of nature as a visible face soundlessly articulating its relation to the divine.²³ Similarly, we *see* Lucy giving consolation to the poet but cannot hear what she says. Scarcity occurs in the sensation of an achieved site of meaning but which is not a plenum: we intuit, before its horizon of elemental donation, missing dimensions. The natural world to which symbolic hope approaches no nearer than at an horizon (but reposing just there) is a wounded world, a world in need of the self-wounding words of well-speaking which Hartman characterises as operating homoeopathically (*ST*, 123). A language no longer a purely equivocal process but one which enters into a more active distance precisely as gift and offering echoes liturgy itself. Hartman understands euphemia as implying not absence

²² *Saving the Text: Literature/Derrida/Philosophy (ST)*. (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1981), 145. Cited subsequently as *ST*.

²³ Quoted in Prickett, Stephen. *Words and the Word: Language, Poetics and Biblical Interpretation*. (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1986), 148.

of mourning but one continued in a different mode. He speculates how writing itself might displace the work of mourning (understood as detachment from a lost object and re-attachment to the world) (*EP*, 152). Eschatologically, however, such an endeavour of re-attachment can only be to a world which itself negotiates between the place of the living and the place of the dead.²⁴ The euphemistic language of "A Slumber" blesses life even where re-possessed by death; it blesses the going-forth of life to life's horizons of hope and desire which serve to forestall ultimate detachment of a lost object: loss is re-negotiated in a language of attachment as scarcity. The language blesses not solely by speaking of the little there is that is well but by invoking a *bond* made transcendently slight.

V

How might the relation between scarcity and death be understood, and how is it mediated by time? Does invoking scarcity repeat the theological move in which death is embraced as radically internal to any understanding of the significance of life? The perspective of scarcity may touch more directly on the problematic, indeed traumatic, aspect of death. Pickstock acknowledges death as as much a constituent of our lives as other to it: dying in time is not abyssal but moves toward a greater living towards eternity. Living is from the outset also a dying (Pickstock, 107). And for Milbank also, time's passaging is a positive sufficiency passing into (or through) transcendence.²⁵ Against this position, I would argue that the passing of time is not without symbolic interruptions, which though they are weak or ungrounded, offer time a border of active insufficiency open to transcendence. Passage must both move through and *across* itself if it is to be inhabitable (as Milbank assumes it is) in what comes to be its own difference-before-plenitude, not merely a naturalized plenitude secured within and by the flow of time. If death can be argued as internal to life, scarcity can be argued as internal to gift and plenitude. For Pickstock time as free gift supplements itself in an infinite series, and cannot leap out back to the memory of eternity, but participates in eternity exclusively as journeying through time (Pickstock 271). This leaves aside any eventual scarcity of time within the ontic limits of a universe which itself may die. Without that ontic dimension not even seriality is inhabitable, whereas a time which can itself be rendered scarce at the hands of the ontic becomes an

²⁴ Moltmann, Jurgen. "Is there Life after Death?" in John Polkinghorne and Michael Welker (eds). *The End of the World and the Ends of God: Science and Theology on Eschatology*. (Harrisburg: Trinity Press International, 2000), 254. In the present context, one can suggest that it is scarcity which procures the never fully realisable relation between the living and the dead: the dead who haunt dream, memory or desire can never be lost enough, whilst the living are "sealed" by memory from immediate actuality, never alive enough to be unmediated by the dead.

²⁵ "The Soul of Reciprocity. Part One: Reciprocity Refused." *Modern Theology* 17 (2001): 335-391, p360 It is odd that Milbank insists on time as a one-way gift, when he is concerned to argue elsewhere against any more general notion of the gift as itself unilaterally deferring reciprocity, though the gift remains always asymmetrical for him. See "Soul Two" 503, and . "Can a Gift be Given? Prologomena to a Future Trinitarian Metaphysic." *Modern Theology*, 11 (1995): 119-161 pp 122-25. Cited subsequently as "Gift".

offerable diminishment from within a non-infinity of time.

Douglas Hedley accuses Milbank of inviting us to act as though death does not exist.²⁶ Pickstock sternly sees nothing but artifice within any defence against the horror of impermanent reality, and argues that where finite reality is resisted time is elided in favour of space (Pickstock,103). This seems too bald a contrast and too unproblematic a sense of what time may enable or disable: a time which acknowledges scarcity as an equal constituent of its passage can legitimately spatialise to the extent it allows itself to encounter a border or horizon (falling *across* its flow) before which it dedicates itself at a positive and charged limit. Milbank and Pickstock claim that for Augustine and Dionysus there is nothing defective in finitude as such; rather, what is defective is disallowing finite things from revealing their own proper finite share of perfection.²⁷ This indicates an important move in the direction of a more positive theology, but a "finite share" also implies not just a measure of frugality but a positive scarcity which in turn invokes dedication and horizon. The authors rightly observe that "for desire to be felt at all, it must be granted at least some scope of expression, which amounts to some measure of fulfilment" (*Truth*, 103). Here, I would argue, "some measure" expresses a rather scarce plenitude which is itself on the cusp of the horizontal and the vertical, of both the open and the closed (the latter in the sense of a bond). As mediated by scarcity, there is no simple kenotic turn from the vertical to the horizontal: rather, the finite can be seen as both frugally sufficient within the relay-passaging of time, *and* as actively moved to align its sense of ontological insufficiency with (and before) a transcendent horizon. Pickstock does concede that non-identical return within the series may also place time within an anticipatory prelude of a post-temporal fulfilment (Pickstock, 221). It is this prelude which I see as a genuine moment-for within time, but its precarious poise (unable to suspend the temporal flow from which it arises) partakes of an equally genuine scarcity. It authentically anticipates *from* but does not of itself command any ground *towards*.

At such a juncture, scarcity should be understood as enabling time to be on behalf of a mode of being which doesn't have to be exclusively serial, even though such an awaiting on behalf-of is refracted within time as a diminishment. Following Balthasar, Milbank conceives of both beings and Being responding to givenness from a source beyond time, where time is not Being as such but participates in it ("Gift", 153). Some basis for the relation of scarcity to time seems here suggested (Being *cannot* give itself to time so as to exclude entirely the non-temporal but in giving itself to a participation it acknowledges time as internal to the lessenable of itself, *ie* that which can

²⁶ "Should Divinity Overcome Metaphysics? Reflections on John Milbank's Theology beyond Secular Reason and Confessions of a Cambridge Platonist". *Journal of Religion* 80 (2000): 271-298,p 293. Milbank, does not, however, deny some element of loss, but tends to gloss it as the necessary concomitant of return-with-difference. See "Soul Two", 503.

²⁷ Milbank, John and Pickstock, Catherine. *Truth in Aquinas*. (London: Routledge, 2001), 290. Cited subsequently as *Truth*.

ground "weak" relations). Milbank will want to insist, however, that God is the absolute fulfilment of the interdependence of Being and time ("Gift", 154). That would risk consummating Being at its serial entry into the timeliness of itself, without reserve. I would argue against such a totality of interdependence if the fulfilled relation overruns a scarcity of *reception* which otherwise precisely reads relationship as prelude and anticipation. It is anticipation which enables the supplement of a yearning for numinous communion from the borders of time, from those horizons which are themselves non-identical to the pulsing of time.

Time is self-scarce, an active insufficiency when it can acknowledge such a border. To offer one's own death from this point is not to de-traumatize death as an unproblematic onward unfolding from life back to a transcendent enfoldment of temporality. Death never quite resolves organically within finitude but remains more starkly asymmetric: indeed finitude finds itself suspended by death in what draws out an active symbolic scarcity.²⁸ Balthasar stubbornly retains the insight that time cannot be laid hold of and he doesn't exclusively reconcile that with the serial virtue of self-abandonment, but sees the deepest moments of fulfilment as also transitory in a tragic sense. He insists no solution to the problem of temporality can be found in the horizontal movement of chronological time toward the future; rather, the extended structure of time can only be dissolved vertically by being reunfolded in the freedom of transcending love. This sense of the vertical, I suggest, we have access to only under conditions of scarcity, conditions which consummate time by granting time an edge or limit, a border which refracts back as diminishment from within the running over of time: it is a scarcity, however, which holds time apart from time, allowing human life to be lived before a dedicatory horizon.

How can this speculative role assigned to scarcity be any part of gift-giving, where divine generosity must surely be based on abundance, not scarcity? Scarcity can only obtain if God gives *to* a lesser difference of reception, which then allows the further gift of seeing in insufficiency the figure of anticipation. Abundance is given under the sign of scarce relation, a negotiation between the opacity of finitude and the translucence of a desiring spirituality which maintains its bond in weakness. Gift, as David Haney reiterates, cannot be used up, and is only lost if *not* used; when passed along it remains abundant.²⁹ Even so, finite transformation in the face of infinite yearning "uses" gift as non-completion; and this not as something horizontally interminable but as the way in which an already-granted lessens itself before the enigmas and interruptions of the towards. Where Pickstock can ask (against Levinas) "Is not a partially imparted mystery *more* mysterious than one which bears no traces in the known whatsoever?", it may also be worth asking,

²⁸ Such a finitude does not pretend radical sufficiency in its in-finite seriality, but is authentically *insufficient* where open to an horizon of dedication-towards, given that such an horizon is not securable by, though certainly cutting across, the finite.

²⁹ Haney, David P. *William Wordsworth and the Hermeneutics of Incarnation*. (University Park: Pennsylvania UP, 1993), 33.

Is not a gift which nourishes despite insufficiency the more gratefully received, in that finitude truly stretches out to meet it (Pickstock, 114)? And such a timely finitude baulks at any over-fulfilling of itself within time, were that to deprive it of an horizon which can conceive of scarcity as numinously rare. This gift cannot be received outside a certain mourning, one whose outcome renews the slender horizons of life rather than simply immersing itself within renewable life³⁰. Pickstock seeks to go beyond Heidegger by conceiving of the participation of being in Being as eternally successive plenitude rather than as death and nothingness: "Such a plenitude would mean that reality could be approached in an optative mood of desire, hope and faith, rather than Heidegger's cognitive preference for nothingness as the only disclosure of Being" (Pickstock, 113). Where plenitude is mediated by scarcity (one that shoulders the ontic burden), however, that plenitude might be more reservedly approached in an elegiac mood: for scarcity participation is not a saturated process, but is lightened (or "elated" as Hartman would say) by a watching at the horizon which comes to be valued more highly than any over-realised finite sufficiency of participation (*URW*, 182-3). Jean Luc Marion argues that "to receive the other in receiving his gift demands that the distance of the other remains in place" (quoted in Milbank, "Gift", 132-33). However, a scarce (rare) gift doesn't *remain* at a distance but is wholly given within the slightness of what it can be for: if distance takes on the arc of an horizon we can believe distance is dedicated to us and is the ground of our response. The gift undercuts rather than overtakes us and so we faithfully mourn a scarcity itself understood as the deprivation of any more *absolute* loss. Dying of itself will figure donation, or mortality is what is dedicatable, by which humans die with an unassuageable hunger for the numinous, precisely as that which has already been made known to them. A theological recognition of scarcity subsists at this point of insufficiency, strongly summoning such a rare border to life but approaching that horizon over weak ground. If paradise is where donation and plenitude will be one, finitude is to be where such an anticipation, a gift faithfully scarce, is limited to (but held within) a plenitude of dedication.

This moment of scarce relation (never solely within the imagining of eternity or strictly excluding finite nature) doesn't hover over an abyss but offers itself to what is unseverable in the bond between, a life exceeding itself in the telling of what has become not other than itself but a lessness already within itself. That relation of scarcity is in excess of the natural order as such, and in its positing of an horizon is strictly a transcendence, one for which Wordsworth at the time of the "Lucy" poems makes no idealist claims. "Mourning is not absent but continued in a different mode", Hartman writes of the euphemia within Wordsworth's spare style of utterance (*EP*, 152). In "A Slumber" we see Wordsworth attempting to evoke a mourning which

³⁰ Kevin Hart writes: [W]e need to ponder the conception of transcendental experience as a preapprehension of a horizon. That it is *Vorgriff*, a reaching out without assurance, not *Vorwissen*, a foreknowing, is important... Our questions, prompted by transcendental experience, are answered, if not fully, then as fully as we may hope for, by the word of God. "The Experience of God" in John D. Caputo (ed). *The Religious*. (Oxford: Blackwell, 2001), 167

performs the turn from loss to scarcity. This skirts fixation simply because the lost object is *not* surpassed or grown beyond. What can develop from a fixatory fidelity of memory is scarcity of relation which changes (and charges) both the losing and what is lost. Lucy's presence becomes visitational and intermittent, glimpsed in a reverie of an horizon not fully available to the light of the ordinary with its frugal sustainabilities and terminations. But it is the point at which a dedication arising out of the incompleteness of the bond between a graced imagination and nature waits. What is received as given now gives *onto*. Lucy is distributed within (*ie* is less than) the rolling earth, but attributed to more than this scattering as such, until the vestige of her presence is concentrated into a symbolic scarcity open to an horizon not in itself reducible.