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## THE RELIGIOUS/EROTIC POETRY OF REYNOLDS PRICE

Although Reynolds Price's first novel, *A Long and Happy Life*, has sold over a million copies since it won the first William Faulkner Prize in 1962, it was not until 1999 that he burst into really world-wide eminence. At that time, he joined his contemporaries John Updike, Joyce Carol Oates, and Toni Morrison in receiving what Morrison calls "the anointing," which is to say that on December 6, 1999, Price found himself on the cover of TIME magazine, guaranteeing that at least one hundred million people would see his name on that cover. Unlike Updike, Oates, and Morrison, however, Price's face did not appear on the cover; instead, Price's name was next to a Renaissance portrait of Jesus, with a text that said "Novelist Reynolds Price offers a new Gospel based on archeology and the bible." Inside the magazine, this cover story begins with TIME's statement that "A great novelist and biblical scholar examines what faith and historical research tell us after 2,000 years and emerges with his own apocryphal Gospel."

As pleasing as this "anointing" was to Price's admirers, there are two problems with this statement. First, although Price has indeed searched the apocryphal books of the Bible, which he does believe deserve more respect than they have often received, it is misleading to call his translation of the Gospels "apocryphal." For some forty years he has painstakingly, line by line, written his own translation of the Gospels with a meticulous eye toward legitimate Biblical scholarship, thereby earning the widespread respect of the community of such scholars. And secondly, though he is best known as a novelist, his greatest book could well be his *Collected Poems*, a 500-page volume published in 1997. Though it lacks the cathedral scale and design of his major novels, the poetry may (to paraphrase Robert Frost) make up in height for what it lacks in length.

Price's arrival as a poet occurred in 1982, with a talk at a SAMLA convention (later published as an essay) that he titled "Love Across the Lines." That title refers to "a love, almost Wagnerian in intensity," of the novelist for poetry and of the poet for novels. As it happens, 1982 was also the year when Price brought out his first book of poems, *Vital*

*Provisions*, the forerunner of three later volumes: *The Laws of Ice* (1986), *The Use of Fire* (1990), and *The Unaccountable Worth of the World* (1997). (The latter volume occupies the last hundred pages of *The Collected Poems* in which all of Price's poems are gathered.)

Beginning a new career in mid-life may have been an advantage for Price's poetic oeuvre. A greatly erudite, esthetically gifted man--like John Updike, a fine graphic artist; like Joyce Carol Oates, a passionate devotee of music--Price brought a large and mature array of cultural interests to these 500 pages, including narrative inventions based on Greek and biblical sources, graceful tributes to favorite singers (Leontyne Price, James Taylor) and movie stars (Vivien Leigh, James Dean), and elegiac memories of other poets (Auden, Spender, Frost, Lowell). Interwoven with these "public" poems are many devoted to intensely felt private intimacies, typically involving a parent, lover, or deceased friend, though he leavens the tone at times with affectionate poems about encounters with home-bound creatures--a heron, deer, or snake. Across the rich variety and abundance of this poetic corpus, no theme is more central or more fascinating than the interplay between Christ and Eros--that is, between the poet's devout religious imagination and his powerful erotic sensibility. In the end, this topic evokes the most powerful, original, and sustained stream of creativity in the *Collected Poems*, giving the book as a whole its central structure, narrative drive, and dramatic interest.

The centrality of Price's religious heritage is everywhere evident in his interviews. "[Christian faith] is one of the two or three central facts about all my work, maybe *the* central fact," he told a French interviewer. In "At the Heart," the essay that concludes his collection of essays called *A Common Room*, Price elaborates on what he means in calling himself "an orthodox (though not fundamentalist) Christian":

*"As a studious adult, I was confirmed in my training and vocation by the credible narratives of the four gospels and the specific and implied ethic of Jesus. . . . The miraculous events of his life are reported in a straightforward manner that compels my belief--above all, in the fact of his healing power and his bodily resurrection from the tomb. . . . All my other beliefs derive from that core."*

In an interview in *The Christian Century* (November 22-29, 1995), when asked "What aspects of doctrinal Christianity do you find most compelling?" he answered "I believe that Jesus of Nazareth uniquely participated in the identity of God--the creator, the source. The

gospel narratives have convinced me of their claim, and I've also been marinated in this faith from birth." Although Price acknowledges that such beliefs may be out of fashion among most contemporary writers, he insists that his religious faith places him among the vast majority of artists in the long view of human cultural evolution:

*"The problem with the twentieth century is . . . the Loss of Faith. I just happen to have it . . . . I have believed all my life . . . . I would hardly need to add that before about 1914, let's say, or 1920, virtually every distinguished writer in the history of the world also believed. Western art is, like it or not, essentially Christian art--until we get into the twentieth century. . . religion is the great motive force of all art, from cave paintings on, so far as we can tell."*

Along with religion, Price has also stressed the centrality of Eros in his thinking. To Terry Roberts he said, in 1983, "I suppose that love in the sense of eros, of being 'in love,' has been the main lens through which I have looked at human freedom. Perhaps that kind of love has been most important to me. . . . It's remained perilously important to me!" In the *Collected Poems*, Price deploys the interplay between his religious beliefs and his erotic sensibility literally from page one. The first poem in his first volume (discounting his brief introductory lyric called "Angel"), titled "The Dream of a House," describes the house Price was to eventually live in, with the books, paintings, and furnishings he most cherished. When he asks his dream guide "Alone?--will I be here alone?", the guide says "That's ended too." Reasonably enough, the speaker combs through his list of lovers--"Twenty-six years of candidates, /Backsliders till now"--but it turns out that none of these folks is the companion the dream has in store. Instead, the guide opens a closet door to disclose a startling image, described in the precise detail that is a hallmark of Price's poetry (CP 6):

*In the midst*

*Of tweeds and seersuckers, a man is*

*Nailed to a T-shaped rig--*

*Full-grown, his face eyelevel with mine,*

*Eyes clamped. He has borne on a body*

*No stronger than mine every*

*Offense a sane man would dread--*

*Flailed, pierced, gouged, crushed--*

*But he has the still bearable sweet*

*Salt smell of blood . . . .*

“Yours. Always,” the guide tells him about this icon-companion, a statement which was to characterize Price’s poetic oeuvre from this page forward.

To judge from these testimonies, it would seem that Price’s credentials as a Christian poet are as impeccable as those of any writer on the contemporary scene. But Price would not be a major, or even serious, writer if he did not temper his orthodox testimony with a strong dose of independent thinking. Among his major departures from traditional Christian thought, the most relevant for our purpose is his easy endorsement of sexual freedom. In this respect, he appears to agree with his title character in *Kate Vaiden*, a devout Christian believer who regards her free-wheeling sex life as an unmarried woman as innocent fun. “I’ve had worlds of fun,” she says about her erotic pleasures; “I think I can say . . . that I’ve had more fun, clean, harmless fun, than any two married women I know.”

Like John Updike, Price seems to be formulating a philosophy of Christian hedonism in such writings. Jesus may have warned that lust in the heart is the same as adultery, but Price seems altogether at ease with his theme of erotic freedom. And not only does his work give Eros, the god of passion, his due, it commonly features an even more taboo characteristic, a homosexual coloring. There is no question that scripture has condemned homosexual behavior from the story of Sodom and Gomorrah in Genesis 19 up through the harsh anathemas of Saint Paul in I First Corinthians 6:9 and Timothy 1:10. But Price’s answer in effect restates George Bernard Shaw’s argument in “The Triumph of Paulinism over Christianity.” That is, Price, like Shaw, sees Paul a great but flawed religious leader who in effect converted Jesus’ concept of a loving community into a punitive police state. In his *Christian Century* interview (November 22-29, 1995), Price expresses his theology of the matter:

*"In a San Francisco bookstore a couple of weeks ago I walked past a shelf of religious books and saw one that claims to tell what Jesus said about homosexuality. When I opened it up, it was like ten blank pages--the Jesus of the Gospels actually says very little about sexual behavior. He does condemn lust and adultery, by which he seems to mean. . . a married person having sexual relations with someone to whom he or she is not married. I think it's been tragic for the Christian church that so much of its early doctrine on the*

*conduct of human love came from Paul, an immensely eloquent and impressive man, but one who had fits over human sexuality.*

Price's third poem in *Vital Provisions*, "The Dream of Food," is a startlingly vivid, precisely detailed--but, I would argue, not pornographic--homosexual love poem. Perhaps it were best to leave its content--the speaker's first performance of oral sex--to the reader's private perusal, but suffice it to say that this "Dream of Food" pairs with the figure of Jesus in "The Dream of a House" to indicate the two most "Vital Provisions" in this first book of poems--"Food" and "Shelter" of a markedly distinctive character. From these beginning pages, Christ and Eros are off to a mostly benign rivalry for the poet's time, talent, and attention.

In the remainder of *Vital Provisions*, Section II is wholly given to Christian thought ("Nine Mysteries: Four Joyful, Four Sorrowful, One Glorious"), while the concluding Part III belongs mostly to the kingdom of Eros, though other very fine poems also enliven this segment--poems about personal encounters with Robert Frost, W. H. Auden, Robert Lowell, and Leontyne Price; a poem for his brother and one for his baby niece; and a long, affectionate portrayal of "The Annual Heron." The Christian poems of Part II display some extraordinary feats of imagination as each poem expands its epigraph--a brief passage of scripture--into a fully realized dramatic vision. Typical is "Resurrection," introduced by the lines in John 20:14-17 where Jesus discloses himself to Mary Magdalene after his crucifixion. Jesus' warning to her, "Don't touch me," becomes a keynote of the poem, set against her role in the oldest profession: "till him what she'd known/Was ways to touch" (CP 53). Her hunger to serve her dead Master, to complete his funeral rites interrupted since Friday by the Sabbath, leads her to be first into the crypt to find "No body/On the ledge-blank yards of linen, stiff/With blood" (CP 53). But there is evidence of a recent presence: "Hot padding. She gnaws it." Outdoors, meanwhile, Jesus is discovering what it feels like to be resurrected:

*He is stunned--*

*Calf, wet colt, boy dredged from sleep.*

*Each step toward her, he burns with fresh blood*

*Rushing his legs.*

Surely he loves Mary for her fidelity to him, but even so, the gift she most wants is withheld

to the end: “When she steps from the grave, sees him, knows,/He will not let her touch him.”

“Instruction,” our final sample from this group of nine Christ-centered poems, looms like an Everest of the Christian imagination. Spoken by Judas Iscariot after the Crucifixion, it addresses the mystery of its epigraph: “Throwing the coins down in the Temple Judas left and going off hanged himself. MATTHEW 27:5.” Although the scripture does not say why Judas killed himself, Price’s character study produces a wonderfully persuasive answer. The poem begins with Judas maintaining a tone of hard-boiled cynicism about “the dustup I launched/In the garden,” concerning which he felt guiltless enough to nap during the Savior’s agony: “I could sleep during the hours it would take to kosher/Him white as veal” (CP 55). Judas’s explanation of his suicide begins with “one sighting [of the risen Jesus] which/Has not been reported by loyalists”:

*Peter, John, Mary, James  
Have milked tears enough with their  
Reunions to farm a fair-sized  
Salt-lick in Sodom. I don’t grudge them  
That. The one not reported, however,  
Was to me.*

The cynical tone continues unchanged as Judas recalls his sighting, which occurred in the dining room of the inn where he had hidden himself away until Sunday evening:

*Loud clutch of Passover pilgrims  
Bound north, no face I knew.  
I’d finished [eating] when another three entered  
And sat--Klopas, his squat wife, a trim  
Tan stranger.*

Price’s Christian imagination now warms to the scene with a remarkable evocation of the Savior’s personality, accomplished without any dialogue (ellipses mine):

*The stranger stood,  
Neat as a sprout sucked up in a morning.*

*It was him, no question--crammed-  
Down, a little ashy at the gills but  
Pleasant and coming toward me.*

.....

*His hands were ruined--  
Brown holes, barely dry--  
But otherwise fit. . . .*

*I didn't speak.  
He kept silent too,  
Kept hands at his thighs.  
No pause or stare, the smile  
Never quit. He bent  
To my hair and pressed it once, quite lengthily,*

.....

*Then walked the breadth of the floor and out.*

What ensues is nothing less than the redemption of Judas, whose cynicism vanishes with Jesus' reversal of his betrayer's kiss. Now a sense of guilt--what Judas means by "honor"--both explains his suicide and indicates a reborn soul capable of judging, condemning, and executing himself for the sake of "honor":

*Halfway back  
To town in dark dry as meal, I  
Groped out a tree that promised to hold.  
Honor had lasted a full three miles.  
I lasted a full two minutes  
By the neck, longer than planned. . . .*

Although the erotic poems in Part III cannot match this level of transcendence, they do attain a strong cumulative power. Some of these are genteel love poems: "Aurora," for example, asks whether the northern lights represent "ions stunned/In our conjunction/ and fleeing north?" (CP 71). The five "Memorandum" poems, however, move toward a finale resembling "The Dream of Food," with a characteristically strong beat underscoring the erotic

mood: “For the third time/I bolt you down in gobbets--/Strengthening horse-meat,/Rank haunch of bear” (CP 84). Yet even here the Christian theme pervades: in “Memorandum 2” the speaker’s lover buys a cross and gets it blessed with prayers and water, bringing efficacy to the love affair: “The blessing undoubtedly endured our night” (CP 81). The penultimate poem of *Vital Provisions*, “Cumaean Song,” reprises the Christian theme in a new key by rendering Price’s version of Vergil’s allegedly Christological verses: “No ox fears lion however huge his power,/Even your cradle blossoms to enfold you,/Serpents perish, perish deadly weeds,/Syrian balsam springs up everywhere” (CP 86). On balance, Christ outweighs Eros in this first volume of Price’s poetry, but the love poems are nonetheless stunningly bold and original.

Midway between *Vital Provisions* (1982) and Price’s second volume of poems, *The Laws of Ice* (1986), the writer experienced the catastrophic encounter with spinal cancer that nearly took his life and left him paraplegic. In his 1994 memoir *A Whole New Life*--a book that has already become a classic of its kind--Price recalls that fateful spring of 1984 when, after feeling some pain in his leg, he checked into the Duke Hospital. The malignant tumor the doctors discovered was so advanced that immediate spinal surgery was necessary, which, along with the radiation treatment (“daily trips to Hiroshima”-CP 170), destroyed his ability to walk but left most of the tumor still active. For several terrible years his life remained at risk until a new kind of laser surgery removed the rest of the tumor. The damage to his spinal nerves, however, created, in his words, “colossal, incessant pain”--“no instant free of agony sufficient/To crystallize black coal to quartz” (CP 238). Given the choice between taking pain-killers that would dull his brain and undermine his writing career or enduring the suffering in order to write, Price obviously made the heroic choice, as seen in his prodigious output since the crisis. Fortunately, after several years of intense unrelenting pain he learned about an experimental therapy of self-hypnosis that has enabled him to ignore the pain.

The effect of this fiery ordeal on Price’s writing has been profound, and nowhere more so than in his poetry. The title *The Laws of Ice*, to begin with, is a metaphor for sudden, unwelcome, and irreversible change that can overtake anyone’s life at random. Commonly our freedom of motion seems like liquid water--“Human life/(Yours, mine)/Will glide down decades/Free as oil”--but then, without warning, the “Appalling laws [of ice]” turn the liquidity into “Rigid form--/Your statue, mine,/Perfected ice.”



Despite this implicit protest against the sufferings of the world, *The Laws of Ice* (like *A Whole New Life*) displays an altogether extraordinary strength of spirit. The Christian character of this strength is immediately evident in “Praise,” the brief prefatory poem dedicated to the Holy Spirit (“Holy flame/By any name--/Creator, Terminator”--CP 98):

*Receive this praise,*

*The due of days*

*Of hobbled terror, healing:*

*Thanks.*

A miracle of compression, that third line takes three words to encompass Price’s months-long struggle against paraplegia (“hobbled”), his ongoing fear of death by cancer (“terror”), and his precarious recovery (“healing”)--all leading up to what seems, given this context, to be a theological non-sequitur: “Thanks.”

“Thanks,” however, is not the due only of the Holy Spirit. “Ambrosia,” the opening poem of *The Laws of Ice*, proffers not only thanks (“the thanks of, say, . . . [an] English setter . . . who swabs/The master’s nutritious hand”) but worship to the speaker’s lover. Though reluctant “to bear the worship-enduring the leach/Of dilate eyes, incessant frisk of adoring/Hands,” the lover yields at length to the speaker’s idolatry (conveyed through erotic Polaroids) despite the taboo laid down by “ireful desert /Yahweh, El Shaddai, who’s made a long/Point of vouchsafing no image”--CP 102). In countering that taboo with the claim in Genesis that we are made “in his [God’s] image, after his likeness,” Price renders his own concept of God. Echoing Dante’s “Love that moves the Sun and the other stars,” Price adds to that Love an adjective of infinite complexity--“the Convex Love that monitors black/Holes, cheerleader contests, the footwork of quarks,/Famines in the Punjab.” True to its title, “Ambrosia” returns in the end to its idolatrous eroticism, finding in the lover’s body--its “crackling hair, ten local odors distinct/As dialects”--a pagan eucharist: “copious sacrament, feast of gods,/Which I turn to good.”

This dialectic between these two opening poems of *The Laws of Ice*, “Praise” and “Ambrosia,” adumbrates the design of the volume at large, but Price’s illness lends the religious theme a magnified force. Under the pressure of his own imminent mortality, Price’s belief in the supernatural assumes central importance here, expressed not only in

ecclesiastically sanctioned miracles but in spirits of the dead visibly appearing to their loved ones. In interviews, Price has claimed to know credible, sane people who have encountered ghosts, one such person being his mother, who had a visitation from her dead husband the day before she herself died. In “A Tomb for Will Price” the poet asserts a summons of his own, calling up his father’s spirit in precisely detailed, visible form--“proof of the soul, perpetual life;/Risen flesh in the form it will hold till all time ends” (CP 197). (Price’s novel *Love and Work*, published in 1968, also ends with his own persona being visited in his kitchen by the visible ghosts of both parents.)

In his memoir *A Whole New Life*, Price grants factual reality to the supernatural while recording an encounter with Jesus that occurred during the most fearful and agonizing phase of his battle against cancer. He describes it as follows:

*"At daylight on July 3 [1984], . . . an actual happening intervened. I was suddenly not propped in my brass bed or even contained in my familiar house. By the dim new, thoroughly credible light that rose around me, it was barely dawn; and I was lying fully dressed in modern street clothes on a slope by a lake I knew at once. It was the big lake of Kinnereth, the Sea of Galilee. . . . Still sleeping around me on the misty ground were a number of men in the tunics and cloaks of first-century Palestine. I soon understood with no surprise that the men were Jesus' twelve disciples and that he was nearby asleep among them."*

As Jesus wakes, rises, and walks toward him, Price says: “it was utterly clear to my normal eyes and was happening as surely as any event of my previous life.” After Jesus summons him into the water, pours handfuls over his head, and pronounces his sins forgiven, Price asks “Am I also cured?” Jesus’ answer, “That too,” closes out the episode, “and then, with no palpable seam in the texture of time or place, I was home again in my wide bed.” In *The Laws of Ice* this experience recurs in “Vision” (CP 165), which frames the essential details in thirty lines of blank verse, and a further reference in “October Sun” indicates the relevance of the episode to the patient’s recovery: “I warm again to the heat of life--/A promised stretch of upright time./A vision of cure in Kinnereth” (CP 168).

Given the gravity of these circumstances, one might suppose that Eros would present little competition to the Savior in the poetry of this critical period, but in fact *The Laws of Ice*

reveals an intensified erotic as well as religious sensibility. Sometimes his tone is playful, as in “Polar Simple,” which begins seriously enough--“Six times in precisely forty-eight hours” he and his lover attain “the earnest/Minutes of strife that always end/In blinding glare of absolute joy.” In this case the comic spirit enters with the title image--a “polar/Crocus (eight leaves locked round/A rank flamboyant pistil”--CP 144)--in which the eight leaves are the arms and legs of the lovers, and the pistil is something else again. At other times the tone edges upon bitterness, as when his lover in “The Aim” returns from their secret rendezvous to his wife, “A woman sworn to tend you always,” leaving the poet to foresee mainly solitude in the years ahead until some “calm stranger shuts my eyes.” (Much of the poem’s weight rests upon that calmness of doctor or undertaker.) Then again, these erotic memory poems can be altogether joyful, as in “Same Road,” which looks back twenty-five years to when “you gold and gleaming” and “me dark and lean” attained “bone-on-bone, adhesive flesh,/Yips of joy in rooms cramped as milk cartons” (CP 147).

Culminating this homage to Eros, perhaps, is the erotic passion of his parents in “A Heaven for Elizabeth Rodwell, My Mother” (CP 123). Here Eros battles Thanatos to a standoff as Will Price, though dying of cancer, takes his wife sexually every afternoon on the bathroom tile of his hospital ward. Based on information told to Price by his mother, the poem credits her courage as well as her husband’s in the service of Eros, in that she believes this coition will prove fatal to her: “She/Braces and thinks *This will kill me too./In a minute I’ll flood with cancer.*” Even so, as happens so frequently (and some would say quaintly) in Price’s erotic poetry, the lovers thank each other for their mutual service, she feeling so elated that after thanking him “she forgets her own doom./Saying as she grins and joins him again/’*You’ll outlast me*’ . . . /He thanks her” (CP 126).

Elsewhere in *The Laws of Ice*, Eros enlists the aid of companion deities, most notably in “Aphrodite” and “Dionysos.” One of Price’s most delightful and original poems, “Aphrodite” portrays a sudden appearance of the Greek goddess during the adolescent boy’s interlude of “ferocious self-service”:

*I froze in blue paralysis,  
Cowlick to crotch, and expected death.  
No Methodist boy could butt through this  
Not stamped on the brow with a black-scabbed L*

*For goatish lust, passport to the Pit.*

Price's persona in this poem, "crawling, appalled. . . /Through a puberty stern as trench warfare/With poison gas," may best be understood by contrast to his counterpart in Price's second novel, *A Generous Man* (1966), which appears to have been written to provide deliverance from these inhibitions. Here a middle-aged sheriff with the Edenic name of Pomeroy ("King of the Apples") advises Milo Mustian, the fifteen-year-old protagonist, to avoid celibacy: "The Lord has hung gifts on you like a *hatrack*. . . . Use what the good Lord give you *now*, and use it every chance the day provides." Certainly in "Aphrodite" the pagan goddess is pleased to help the boy enact this imperative: ". . . she endowed on me/A Himalayan glide toward snow-saddled heights/Of corporal joy I accepted with helpless/Copious tears of dumb amazement" (CP 188). There is a downside, "the certainty that never, with no one/Less than she in the maybe sixty years/That lay before me, would I stride so high/On so bright a ridge in blinding light." Seen now from the perspective of later middle age, that prophecy has proved true--"No subsequent match (though a few proximations/For which I burn the lamp of thanks)"--but Eros has been generous enough to leave the "aging vet, grateful, grinning/And fueled by hope of a second bloom" though "privately hunched for the downhill path/Torched by memory" (CP 189).

A special interest of the other "Greek" poem, "Dionysos," is its proof, in the speaker's encounter with the ancient god of dance, wine, and sexual pleasure, that even after his crippling tragedy, the poet's affinity with Eros continues unabated. Like Aphrodite and (at times) other Greek deities, Dionysos serves the poet's need to entertain fashions of human behavior that would violate traditional Judeo-Christian taboos. Unlike Aphrodite, Dionysos brings a Hellenistic pansexuality into play after entering the poet's house under the guise of a Jehovah's Witness. (It is of course the Price persona who will actually be a god's witness.) From his wheelchair Price watches his guest doze off on the sofa, then wake up an hour later prodigiously aroused--"Himself revealed, incendiary core,/A megatonnage unforeseen/By any computer or institute:/Precisely the grandest male I'd found" (CP 185).

In moving toward sexual congress the two parties exchange their identities, with Price rising miraculously to meet the other, "Irresistibly drawn onto legs/Again as apt as a working boy's/In a field of furrows of standing grain:/Not the filleted flippers I've lately worn." The god meanwhile takes his turn in Price's wheelchair, "absorbing my new skill, . . . /(The means

of thriving on a void salt prairie,/At the entire mercy of all that moves/On foot, segmented belly, or wing:/Gnats, chilled vipers, the odd escaped arsonist/Or neighbor-punk with knucks and shiv).” After their sensual encounter--“we melded . . ./ . . into one discrete/Bounded body of a grace and spangle/I’d only guessed in pornographic moments”--the visitor leaves, the poet’s paraplegia returns, and the speaker lies all night “in the same brass bed/I can no longer roll in” with a heart that “pines for touch.” In its mixture of fantasy and emotional realism, this poem effects one of the poet’s most poignant self-portraits.

If the Greek gods are a natural resource for a poetry of eroticism, their biblical counterparts might be expected to exemplify a corrective antidote. And in truth the roll-call of punished eroticism in Holy Writ covers the gamut from Lot’s incest to David’s adultery to Onan’s masturbation to the perversions of Sodom. Price’s Christian hedonism, however, contemplates a different view of the matter. In *The Laws of Ice* a powerfully engaging example of this view may be found in “Jonathan’s Lament for David.” Although the epigraph’s Biblical citation need not imply a homosexual connection (“Jonathan’s soul was knit with David’s soul”), the poem depicts a passionate love affair. Ironically, the romance thrives on the outrage of the king’s court and the priesthood--“We only flourished, fed by glare/Of priests’ eyes”--until the two youths attain a “*Love past woman’s love or God’s*”: “The first taut cords of meeting eyes/Became twined legs and hands, locked lips,/Pooled opal seed we planted deep” (CP 114). What breaks up the affair in the end is not divine interdiction but David’s political ambition, causing him to marry the king’s daughter, who is also Jonathan’s sister--“Swapping me for one pale girl/(My nursery-mate, your throneward path).” That last phrase--of a superbly elegant poem--could readily have come out of Shakespeare.

The culmination of Price’s religious/erotic poetry comes about in his trio of poems about the Holy Family, “Three Secrets.” Here Price goes boldly where few Christian poets have gone before, ushering Eros into the very holy of holies of Christian orthodoxy. Introduced as usual by Biblical citations, these poems depict the sexual predicament of their three principals. The first poem, “Joseph,” portrays the man as old and impotent, with “treacherous tool that let me down/More times than not those last years” (CP 176). What annealed his sense of cuckoldom (“I faced a hail of jokes”) was Mary’s youthful beauty--“all skin and eyes,/Lank horsehair bound at her strong-stalked neck,/The covered promise of undreamed more.” His “Secret,” among the “Three Secrets” of Price’s title, is that he saw her naked just

once, and then in no erotic mode but when she gave birth to “Her first live boy, a ten-pound wedge.” In the next poem, Mary has two secrets, the first relating to the violence of her impregnation at age fifteen by the Holy Spirit: “My skirt had melted away/In the glare. . . /And the wind scorched my legs--/. . . a girl/Flung down by the Last Resort,/His hot seed blown/Into her green womb” (CP 179). Her primary secret comes at the end of her poem, where the spectacle of Jesus screaming on the cross raises overwhelming regret that she ever conceived him. And most heretically, in the third poem Price portrays Jesus as wrestling mightily against his wholly normal sexuality “I came here fully equipped,/All requisite organs, members, glands/. . . Crisp hair and eighteen separate scents:/All triggered also by natural time” (CP 180). Those requisite organs, Jesus goes on to say, include a generous manly endowment--“At fourteen no boy anywhere near me/(Where we swam in the quarry) showed more than I”--so much so that during the Crucifixion “Even soldiers flung up cheers/At my pelvic gear.”

Behind these startling images lies Price’s premise that Jesus’ celibacy occurred strictly of his own volition: “So yes, I chose;/It was not specified in my commission./ . . . I vowed it at twelve when my fork took life.” Keeping the vow “With no more ease than a healthy stallion/Tethered in a field of fragrant mares,” the teenage Jesus barely manages to cope with his surging hormones: “More nights and dawns than any friend knew,/I gnawed the heel of my right hand/. . . Every conscious moment, I stopped my arm/On the near edge of touch.” Although the sacrifice appears justified by its purpose--“I knew I’d need clear gaze/. . . *I was always free*”--the risen Savior is grieved to learn too late, only in his new post-resurrection body, the meaning of human touch: “What my vow had forbade me knowing till now./Each particle linked, perpetual chain:/Yoking, binding, bonding in glee.” Necessary as it was, the Savior’s thwarting of Eros leads in the poem’s last line to a tone not of triumph but of grief: “I wept hot tears to learn so late.”

*The Laws of Ice* presents many other excellent poems, including “Days and Nights: A Journal,” a series of thirty-five short lyrics that record the poet’s horrifying ordeal of 1984 as it unfolded from day to day. In Price’s third volume, *The Use of Fire* (1990), that ordeal continues its harrowing presence, nowhere more memorably than in “The Eel.” Dated in July, 1984, when the “eel”--his spinal tumor--was “one foot long, thick as a pencil,” and threatening “to make this man all eel,” he stakes his rescue on the “credible vision” he had been vouchsafed, the “visible act in a palpable place/Where Jesus washed and healed his

wound,/The old eel sluiced out in the lake” (CP 227-230). He relies, too, on the intercession of other believers, such as the friend who phoned to quote “Psalm 91’s reckless vow,/He will give his angels charge over you,” and a stranger who wrote to say “I’ve got a whole convent of nuns praying for you/And they get *results*.” (“So, plainly, they did,”--CP 230, 301.)

The Christian imagination in *The Use of Fire* begins with the opening poem, “Unbeaten Play,” a lament for a young friend left paralyzed by a drunk driver. His suffering evokes comparison to the Savior’s agony (CP 217): “Spiked through the flesh to crossed rough-hewn beams/. . .While cell by cell the rusty blood swags down/A flogged and foul disjointed naked body.” You “Know you understand Christ’s final scream,” the youth is told, but understanding the Divine Will proves more difficult--the “Lord of surf and hemlocks, drunks in trucks,/Lord Who this week clubbed you to the Earth/Efficiently as any tortured madman” (CP 219). In the end, faith is the answer, with poetry an ancillary consolation:

***Here in these lines, my mind that generates them,***

***Your brief life burns, will burn through time,***

.....

***The vaster mind that sent these lines sent you,***

***Sent me to know you at the gleaming start***

***And cut your image deep in human words--***

***That mind has you forever safe in hand.***

As the opening poem in *The Use of Fire*, “Unbeaten Play” establishes a religious stance that extends throughout the volume, with heart-felt devotion to Jesus in many poems such as “Dawn (John 21),” “Easter Sunday 1989,” and the sestet about his 1980 visit to Israel (“Nazareth,” “Bethlehem,” “Capernaum,” “Gethsemane,” “Jerusalem,” “Mount of Olives”--CP 244, 295, 273-278). A substantial ambiguity remains in force, however, concerning divine justice. Sometimes it seems too much to bear, as in “Paid,” where Price’s “unblinking glare of pain” raises the question whether this “agony. . . was worth donating/Toward our retirement of Christ’s/Big loan, that hungry debt?” (CP 267). About that debt, in “Good Friday” he speculates that the purpose of Jesus’ suffering (“pain sufficient to polish steel”) is that it remains, in his heavenly state, his only memory of life on Earth, his “last possible link” (CP 268).





*To be, in one dim rented room,  
 A speechless broad tall compound creature:  
 Fertile, fragrant, unforeseen  
 And soon extinct--its only future,  
 The white museum of these white lines. . . .*

To sustain the voice of Eros through his long night of pain and paraplegia required extraordinary strength on the poet's part, but in *The Use of Fire* it was other people's sufferings that impinged most direly on his love poetry. This happened because of the AIDS epidemic circa 1990, which mingled love and death for actual people in Price's life: "Jim, With AIDS," "Tom, Dying of AIDS" (precursors to "Jim Dead of AIDS an Hour Ago" and "Tom Dead"), and the principals who narrate their stories in "Three Dead Voices" (CP 288, 289, 293, 297, 222). Though horribly dead of AIDS, the latter three figures (Director, Photographer, Teacher) recall their erotic life with satisfaction. The Director, after "Galvanizing actors' bodies," went on "galvanizing/My own frail bones with every jolt of male/Voltage I could scrounge or beg (I never bought)"; the Photographer "lurked stock-still, disguised as one/More satyr in the groaning wood"; and the Teacher relished his promiscuity when telling in graphic detail how "upwards of a hundred starvelings/Sowed their tribes of nonexistent sons/And daughters up my bore; then sowed my death" (CP 225).

So far as his own love life is concerned, the poet's memoirs evoke nothing but gratitude. They begin in chronological order when, at age thirteen, he becomes aware of his body as "one/Stupendous pleasure palace--stocked and humming" ("July 1946"--CP 232). By fifteen, "choked with seed/As any silo west of Wichita," he and a buddy lie on twin beds engaged in onanistic competition ("*Come first, fling farthest*"--"Free Fuel, Byrd Street, 1948," CP 311). This is the year, too, of "First Love, Hayes Barton, 1948," which recounts his longing to make a handsome classmate "the naked mate to my skin" while revealing "no hint/Of my dammed flood, though we laughed through sophomore/Latin class and senior P.E." (CP 312). (Hayes Barton is a high school in Raleigh, not the classmate's name.) Five years later, in "An Afterlife, 1953-1988," "the eros-octane in me,/Spilled and lit, would have jacked the crest/Of this hefty [mountain] outcrop a quarter-mile higher" (CP 351). In England, during the Rhodes Scholarship period, partners begin to materialize, affording erotic junctures at Oxford (October 1955-CP 304), Longleat Palace (May 1956--CP 305), Stockholm (July 1956--CP 233), Venice (no date--CP 334), and "Tresco, Compton, Oxford, Edinburgh,/St. Andrews,

Cambridge” (Spring 1958--CP 306)--all sites of “Bleak rented rooms in which we joined/To drowse for nurture and never failed.” Back in the USA, the long recording picks up the thread in the 1960s with “Lust and Greed: 1962” (CP 241), a graphically daring poem about oral sex with a married man, and moves down through the decades until the great crisis of 1984. Flaunting “a grace to match man’s acquisition/Of the use of fire,” these love poems celebrate above all the sense of touch--“The solace of common skin on skin,” of “permeable, mutual skin” (CP 325, 340, 341). Taken together, these erotic encounters rival in number and intensity the total impact of Price’s religious poems, leaving the rivalry between Christ and Eros fairly unresolved through the first three volumes of *The Collected Poems*.

In the final volume, *The Unaccountable Worth of the World* (1997), the balance tilts decisively at last in favor of Eros, not because of any crisis of faith but because sex and death pre-empt the artist’s canvas. Mentions of Jesus appear in only four of this volume’s 85 poems--once in a fantasy of two stricken cancer victims (himself and a dying friend) dancing at the wedding in Cana (CP 447); once in a eucharistic meditation on “how his [Jesus’] racked abandoned public death/Buys you the world again, another day” (“Another Meal,” CP 450); once in a moment of doubt whether his vision of Christ healing him in Galilee was a delusion (“no trustable cure but a putrid leak from the fistula/Of Nazi deception”--CP 458); and once when he, riding home after a church service, denies Christian charity to an AIDS-stricken bum (“I speeding on, ignoring his cupped hand;/Jesus plainly there beside him,/Watching me pass”--“Nob Hill,” CP 443).

Two poems about God and one about the Buddha round out the religious theme in this final volume. Ironically (perhaps), the latter poem, titled “The Buddha in Glory,” is the most worshipful of the three, marveling how “your broad resplendent suns/Have wheeled in such full blaze that even now/There starts within you what outlasts the suns” (CP 456). The God of Christendom, by contrast, evokes ambivalent feelings. In “After the Annual MRI Scans, Clear,” the poet charges that “You elected/Me” in scapegoat fashion to “take the blast that Your constricted heart/Required You hurl outside Yourself,” so that others might be spared. (“Bushmen. . . mountain goats. . . children. . . in the foggy north of Vietnam/Might have gone down in agony”--CP 392). The other poem pictures God in human form--“a bearded head in unrelenting profile”--sitting in silence next to Price’s hospital bed during “those snail hours of dread/When the silent sleepless unassuaged eater/Bolted my spine in miniscule but ceaseless meals./ . . . I guessed he was God” (“Scored by Light”--CP 457).

By contrast with this thin handful of God-centered poems, sex and death divide the main text of *The Unaccountable Worth of the World*, with tributes to the power of art filling up most of the space that remains. The focus on mortality results, Price says, from his entry to “the Dying Belt,” as his father called it, “when friends and enemies/Roughly my own age begin to wink out/Naturally” (CP 397). In this poem, the departed friend is Douglas Paschall, dead of cancer; in others the necrology includes the poet Stephen Spender and an AIDS victim named Lightning Brown whose slow demise occupies fully eighteen of the poems in this volume. The poems in praise of art cover a spectrum from poetry (Emily Dickinson’s “uranium core”--CP 393) to fiction (Anne Tyler--CP 408) to a Native American dance (CP 418) to piano playing (the Van Cliburn competition--CP 383) to the whole of music (“To Music”--CP 375). This last poem, which plays off Milton’s tribute to light as the “offspring of Heav’n first-born,” gives music an equal or even higher status: “Often the sun himself/Sings out in thanks for God’s other child.”

Art, death, religion--each realm of experience contributes mightily to the Unaccountable Worth of the World (death by intensifying the value of life), but in this final volume the power of Eros takes precedence over all rival powers. Oddly, perhaps, the theme begins in the opening poem, “An Actual Temple,” with a tribute to “the force of chaste wisdom” represented by the goddess Athena in the replica of the Parthenon in Nashville, Tennessee--a “power she’s earned in the unstained act,/Inimitable, of guarding her core/From longing for the flesh of mortals” (CP 360). Praise for the goddess, however, does not extend to emulation. What most distinguishes this last volume is the reawakening of passion in the poet’s broken body, moving the erotic theme from the nostalgia of long memory to the excitement of recent experience.

The long memory dates back, naturally enough, to the usual teenage muddle, “five years of moperly,/Isolation and lust more potent/Than the average Siberian nuclear meltdown” (“Legs” --CP 367). A few years later, the Rhodes Scholarship engendered a different lifestyle, according to “Back at Merton College,” where an affair from forty years earlier stills smolders in memory: “Our silent burning, secret to all/But us by night, has--look!--live coals/Still under this meaningless/Thick gray ash” (CP 391). Similar live coals enliven other memory poems in this collection, leading to “The mental roster scrupulously memorized” in “The List,” a retrospective stretching “Through decades with faces, voices,/The pleasure islands of

curl and heat/ . . . . The taste of linen and briney skin” (CP 451). To his question “What percentage of guilt or pride/Do honest men feel, skimming the roll?” the poet’s allegiance to the pleasure principle wavers not at all: “The number of my names/Dies with me; but the scales of guilt/And pride tip steeply toward pride.”

As these memory poems cross the time line of his medical crisis, an extra poignancy attends the mixing of memory and desire. When, in “Wheeled Eros,” a youthful paraplegic grieves that “I never got to penetrate a woman,” the poet draws upon his deep well of experience to measure the loss: “I long to stand/One moment and say. . . see [in] every/Cell that burns through my dry rind,/The shine and trace of wordless pleasure/From chock-full years--not memories but atoms/Of bodies and minds as fine as horse flank.”

The several stages of the poet’s erotic regeneration began, according to “Scored by Light,” with a peculiar incident during his original hospitalization, during which a visitor from Chile disrobed, straddled the bed, and pumped his seed on the patient’s shirt--“the same old lukewarm chlorinated balm/That would never pour from me again, me dry/As any mile of sand” (459). In “Entry,” however, the poet’s physical impotence becomes alleviated by means of mental eroticism. Although “since motion quit. . ./. . . the chance of bald entry to any body,/However craved, was flat denied,” he can still possess his lover’s body: “What came was a surer unstoppable entrance--/Thoroughly mental but nonetheless perfect:/The silent invasion and permeation/Of every cell of your body. . .” (CP 373).

The poet’s erotic regeneration does not stop here, however. In “Eros Tyrannos,” evidently a poem of 1997, the speaker marks “thirteen years to the month” since the last time that “every cell of my hair and hide/. . . [was] made to shine this sanguine light/In the hope of drawing you [Eros] near” (CP 426). Though it is “Plainly absurd,” given the “light years/Of distance between us; yet on you’ve come,” he tells Eros, and it appears that the sense of touch--so prevalent in all of Price’s earlier erotic poetry--now proves sufficient to his erotic needs: “The human pelt smoothed over a rack/Of elegant bones, studded with dark eyes” requires only the “jet of curiosity, joy/Or random eagerness” to permit, if not a grand Atlantic voyage, “the crossing/Of at least a minor temperate sea:/The Adriatic, say. . .” (CP 387).

Another marker in the poet’s erotic comeback may be found in the his view of the next world, which seems to hold more in common with the Muslim dream of paradise than with

Christian eschatology. In one of his *Lightning Brown* poems, Price describes for his friend a Heaven replete with sexual congress, accomplished by pilgrims who “couple safely/With cries on the order of panther wails and buffalo moans,” observed by “hawks and stern-eyed owls/Who may well envy the pitch of pleasure your face agrees/At last to show” (CP 416).

The full awakening of Eros occurs in “*Twenty-One Years*,” a title that honors the length of the poet’s relationship with one of his lovers. Two decades ago, when they had first tried “joining our selves/In a trial knot of mutual skin,” they found reason to repeat the experiment, with “New-found knots as brilliant as any/Known to an Eagle Scout” until the year “I was effectively sheered off smooth/Below the waist” (CP 384). Nine years after that traumatic event, the two lovers resumed their old ways, with the poet employing “What I have now, the parts that work” [above the waist], with an efficacy comparable to a world-famous geyser: “you bloom on schedule,/Old Faithful mate.” These renewed powers, in turn, produce a rebirth of sorts, laved in a sense of well-being: “Weeks later, basking,/I feel stripped clean still; in service again,/A scow called back from years in mothballs--/Eager to tow, dredge, breast high seas.”

As with Shakespeare’s sonnets, the authenticity of this erotic poetry is verified by the contradictory emotions of love--fear, hope, jealousy, joy, despair, and manic-depressive mood swings. Confidence soars in “*Recumbent, Sleeping*,” where the renewal of passion twenty years after “that long summer of our first communion” means “your present skin and mind/Will take whatever I offer in tribute--/My hands, lips, music, all my tantric stunts/. . . . In thanks, I merely sit and tend your sleep” (CP 385). On the next page, in “*Indoors*,” is a tribute that reminds us, as though from distant memory, of the poet’s religious feeling: “You stirring the lazy air of these still rooms/Are welcome as any caller since Christ” (CP 386). But the green-eyed god rears up in “*Scoured*,” where “your bare body oars its pleasure/On bodies fitted out for your goal,/While I wait beached by age and balkage/With this full cargo useless to serve” (CP 428). Anxiety takes over in “*Who?*”: “Who honestly, ever--above ground--trusted absent love/A whole day?” (CP 436).

The mood deepens toward fear in “*Left*,” foreseeing “the wrack of hope, assured desertion;/Which is past rescue” (CP 439). And always there is keening hunger, expressed now--in “*Eclipse*”--exactly as when, forty-five years ago, the teenage speaker “gave the ceiling one long dumb howl./For lack of a single promised phone call,/A face withheld” (CP

432). It gets worse in “Want,” where insatiable hunger--“Want as pure as a week old baby’s/. . . at the turbulent core of greed”--renders the poet’s role like that of a slavemaster called upon to give up his slave, “Yielding you freedom with the deathbed grace/Of Marse George Washington, Marse Tom Jefferson/Freeing the drained slave loose on a new life” (CP 433). An apology of sorts follows, in “Stuck in Gear,” where the main reason “I’ve aimed this furnace blast at you/In the past few weeks” is his lover’s incarnation in an irresistible body, “visibly, audibly, palpably housed/In noble elegant good-smelling quarters.” Moreover, the poet’s long battle with death has made Eros all the more appealing: “Fifteen months/Of tending Lightning in, finally, raw futility/. . . Has left me stoked to the pitch of fury/. . . Call it the next gear onward past love” (CP 434).

The mood lightens in “May Day,” where despite “Lacking your presence/A solid week--/I nonetheless hear/Your telephone voice/In a luxury of trust,/A swell of thanks/My memory bears no precedent for.” Now for a moment his passion is almost under control: “Further, I seem/Near sane in the mirrors/I’ve passed since dawn” (CP 437). And there is also gratitude, “the hour-by-hour/Thanks I’ve clocked to your account,” for “the pouring pleasure/You helped me tread” in “Westward” (CP 441). There is even a resolution, when they happen to be on opposite sides of the continent, “To brace this trust beyond a breach” (CP 442). Having tasted the wild assortment of feelings disseminated throughout Price’s love poems, perhaps we might make our final choice the island of serenity described in “Quiet Evening,” where the two lovers share their “cool-eyed care of soul for soul/. . . With no embarrassment or fear/In words and grins, stops and chuckles,” knowing “how literally feasible/The whole hope is. Can you stand to believe it?” (CP 435).

After publishing *The Collected Poems* in 1997, Reynolds Price has continued to write poems, which probably portend a new volume or at least an amended *Collected Poems* at some future date. So the interplay between Christ and Eros may yet reveal some unexpected twists and turns for the overall pattern of Price’s poetic oeuvre. Nonetheless, at the present juncture, three overall conclusions may be formulated. First, the religious/erotic focus provides the central structure of coherence and continuity for the poetry as a whole across several decades and volumes. Second, the poet’s personal investment in those themes, freely exploring his deepest core of emotion, thought, and experience, gives *The Collected Poems* a dramatic and even prophetic force unequalled by any of his other genres--fiction, drama, or prose essay. And third, the final effect of gathering this whole rich trove between one set of

covers is to place Price not only within the rare company of distinguished poet-novelists like Thomas Hardy and Robert Penn Warren but within a poetic tradition tracing back to Shakespeare and Donne.

Like the Shakespeare of the Sonnets, Price has made his verse a long-term open diary of his most intense and intimate emotional/spiritual experiences, ranging with utmost candor from the ecstatic to the excruciating. Like John Donne, Price centers his vision on Christ and Eros but with the difference that whereas Donne took them in sequence, writing love poems as a young man and religious poems in his maturity, Price takes them in tandem, interweaving the two threads across his whole poetic oeuvre. In the end, these rival themes, tapping into the artist's deepest, freshest stream of creativity, sustain a body of verse that may well be the author's finest achievement. More than any other book of his, including the novel that sold over a million a copies, *The Collected Poems* is certain to assure Reynolds Price a distinguished place in the annals of contemporary American literature.

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SOURCES:

George Gary, "A Great Deal More': Une Interview de Reynolds Price." *Recherches Anglaises et Americaines* 9 (1976)

"At the Heart," in *A Common Room* (Collected Essays of Reynolds Price)