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### Ineffable Songs: A Critical Apparatus on “The Final Truth”

I proudly declared that I would conquer God years ago. This was effectively a war declaration both against God and myself, for my desire to conquer Him was a roundabout way of wanting to conquer a cocktail of feelings ranging from self-loathing to a yearning so that I may understand myself and my place in the world. I have long since abandoned my ambitions to topple God, yet I can feel the hormonal cocktail bubbling within me to this day; however, peace has been found in what is a scarred warzone. I found this peace in writing a short story called “The Final Truth” in which the main character Milami wrestles with his faith and place in a larger design. What is interesting is that the story has not truly provided any truth, but the lack thereof has landed me closer to inner peace. To understand how this story came to be and what it is attempting to say, it is essential to shed some light on who I am as both a writer and a person.

I am a Midwestern queer man who was raised in the outskirts of Appalachia and born into a large, not deeply religious family. As one of eight siblings and one half of a pair of twins, attention was not evenly divided or bestowed to any degree I found satisfying. This facet was what made me seek a religion at a young age. I have little connection with “the church” and have been to some services, but I was only dedicated and devout for a small portion of my childhood. I was observant enough to know good behavior from bad and see what gets rewarded versus what gets punished. I knew that Christian values were “good,” so I prayed often and always

strived to do good, even if it meant snitching on my twin. If he were sold out, then I was the “good” twin by default. Reflecting on my relationship with my twin at that point, I wrote a brief poem in 2022:

*Judas Jr.*

I sold my own flesh  
by the pound, roughly one hundred total  
between the two of us;  
his to be beaten—mine to be spoiled.  
I am a people pleaser.

Being good was not enough. It did not stop me from getting molested by a boy at a young age, and it did not stop me from having sexual thoughts about other boys as a second grader; hence the “spoiled” part of the poem. My warped childhood did not seem like one until I was made aware through media coverage of gay right movements that God, my creator, supposedly hates me. I was crushed. Not only did I feel unseen by my parents and different than my peers, but I felt unloved by the grandest of things. How one goes about putting that experience into words is beyond me. I tried to pray the gay away. I forced myself to watch straight and lesbian porn—I even imagined that Jesus was actively commenting on who I forced myself to find attractive. He would wave his arms like a lifeguard warning me of deep waters when I looked at boys, and he would cry “very good” when I pretended to be interested in girls.

Jesus was not strong enough to straighten me out, and he and his Father started to look like asshats. I had been cheated. My sexuality, when considered with my trauma, seemed like it was forced upon me. I thought that God let me get hurt and that He turned when I needed him

most. He was worse than my parents and left me no choice but to try and conquer Him. I debated people in my middle school classes and would research people “debunking God” to try and make myself feel better. It did not work, and it led to a new existential issue and splitting of my identity.

Without God in my life, there was no heaven. I was destined to either die and fade into nothing, or on the off-chance God is real, burn for eternity. I could not decide which was worse, and so I slipped into depression and “caving into” some of my “gay” interests; however, I also maintained a “straight” persona. It was in this media that I consumed that I found strength and influence in my writing.

The first three sources come in the forms of songs from my favorite musical artist: Joanna Newsom. I discovered Joanna Newsom through a small snippet of her song, “Sapokanikan,” and was immediately entranced by her ethereal, pixie-like voice. Her music ponders over atomization, existentialism, and grief with lyricism that transcends into nothing short of poetry; furthermore, her voice is overtly feminine, meaning that listening to her specifically was something of a guilty pleasure for me. It appealed to the side of me that I knew would be ridiculed by a heteronormative school, so I listened to her in secret. Standing at the shores of her work, I could see how deep the water went upon hearing opening in “Sapokanikan”:

The cause is Ozymandian  
The Map of Sapokanikan  
Is sanded and beveled  
The land lone and leveled  
By some unrecorded and powerful hand

This then leads to my point about this song in specific and how it shaped my view on the world. This song was my introduction to the exact idea in Percy Shelley's "Ozymandias," i.e., humans are exceedingly small in the grand scheme of the universe and time as we know it. Newsom's song is a retelling of this same motif but through the discussion of the erasure of the Lenape people who occupied what is currently lower Manhattan. Sometimes it is not time that erases one person, but another person. Another specific line I recall often is "Sing, do you love me? Will you remember? The snow falls above me." To know that I am inevitably small and forgettable is comforting in a backwards kind of way. This new knowledge did not solve my existential fretting, but it made me feel less alone in the matter.

This brings me to the second song, "Have One on Me." The song details the life of Lola Montez and her relationship with King Ludwig I of Bavaria. For context, Lola Montez was a dancer and courtesan who gained enough favor with Ludwig that he made her the Countess of Lansfield. As Countess and Ludwig's mistress, she pushed for many liberal and anti-Catholic reforms. The response to this was a growing revolution that forced her to flee to Switzerland, where she waited in vain for Ludwig before departing to America and continuing her career as a dancer.

Her story alone is remarkably interesting to me, but there is a specific line sang from Lola's point of view that sticks with me to this day: "I saw a star fall into the sky like a chunk of thrown coal as if God himself spat like a cornered rat." A younger version of myself trembled upon hearing this line, for it was the first time in my life I had heard anyone talk about God as if He were not the creator of the universe. This reinforced my atheist ideals in my mental war against God. I felt as though I had permission to treat Him like fiction—like a rat. Furthermore, the story of Lola Montez, as detailed to some extent in the song, is inspiring to some degree, for

it demonstrates a life well lived thanks to her confidence and resilience. I personally found her anti-religious decrees started a revolution, which I found to be deeply relatable in my own war.

The final song from Joanna Newsom that I will discuss is “Ribbon Bows.” It details a woman with many troubles who buys a dog and tries to seek answers through it: “Blink once if God, twice if no God.” It was the hint I needed to understand that I could not definitively prove or disprove God, and I shall never find an answer in my inner conflict unless I pick a side and stick with it. I knew at that age, although I did not want to admit it, that I would not be able to suffocate my love. Overall, Joanna Newsom did not “destroy” my relationship with God, but she gave me the strength to question it without getting worked up. It allowed for genuine, productive discourse within myself where I could deconstruct my values and beliefs.

On the flip side of listening to Joanna Newsom, I found it necessary to develop some more socially acceptable music taste as well. In other words, I needed to find something I liked that allowed me to fit in and present as heterosexual. This brought me to the opposite side of the music spectrum and into the world of prog-metal band TOOL. I found some catharsis in listening to my introductory song, “Prison Sex,” which is about the cyclical nature of sexual abuse. This song also has a stop motion music video in which a slender black figure reads through the diary—while tearing out pages—of a porcelain doll before attacking it and using a paint brush on it. By the end of the video, the doll has a hole in its face and is painting itself with the brush before the black figure tucks it away in a drawer.

I developed an appreciation for their sound and the larger culture surrounding “alternative” scenes. What started as a façade soon became something to which I could genuinely relate. They were not afraid to showcase their pain and vent it out. They appealed to the anger I felt at being slighted out of heaven.

The song I feel is one of the more pointedly sacrilegious sources that influenced my writing was “The Pot” by TOOL. The song itself says nothing profound in terms of lyrics—it’s surface level in its description of hypocrisy with language that directs its anger at the church. Similar songs such as “Opiate” blast anger out when the singer, Maynard James Keenan, screams lyrics such as “We [God and the speaker who claims God speaks through him] want to rape you.” However, I am going to make the case that the lyrics are not always important in music.

Classical music exists as proof that the medium can inspire with nothing escaping one’s lips. It inspires other pieces and sparks moods and creative spurts within its listeners. TOOL does the same thing while also doing more, for it is also part of a subculture that promotes ideas. As a part of “alternative” culture, it promotes expression that runs against the grain and standing in stark opposition of any larger institution. It may not oppose institutions through essays in the field of academia; however, we exist in an age where the two spheres of pop-culture and art bleed into each other. Each influences the other and makes commentary on its own. Furthermore, alternative culture provided a space for people who could never feel welcome in the already established spaces within religion, capitalism, heteronormativity, etc. I found something of a home in exploring these communities and the music in it and found proof that there were people who felt like me and that they celebrated the anger I felt as valid and something worth building community around.

Aside from music, I found solace in video games since socializing was laced with the fear of being outed—a threat I faced on numerous occasions during my youth. I mostly consumed role-play games where I could escape from my normal life for however long the screen could hold my attention. One of my favorite franchises of all time with larger themes that I connect

with my work is the *Final Fantasy* series. As an anthology with sixteen main entries, the games are only connected by gameplay mechanics, similar themes, and their own series of tropes.

The relevant trope that exists in most entries is the final boss being some God-like character or entity that embodies malice or nihilism, meaning the player is forced to slay the literal manifestation of an ideology. This creates an existential narrative with a party of characters that becomes close through their shared journey of struggles and triumphs. The emphasis of these stories—what makes them memorable—is never on the larger plot but the characters' personal arcs, the fantastical worlds they navigate, and the questions posed by villains that they must answer.

The game that embodies this the best is *Final Fantasy IX*. This entry marks an embracing of the series' roots after the prior two entries experimented with what was understood to be a *Final Fantasy* game. Set on the fantastical planet Gaia—complete with crystals, a tree larger than civilization, dragons, magic, etc., the game pits the player's party against Kuja: a villain hellbent on overthrowing his creator and later destroying the world. Kuja is a scorned character who laments the fact that he was artificially created with a set purpose and tossed aside once a refined replacement—the protagonist Zidane—was created. Kuja is further driven mad by the knowledge that his lifespan is nearing its end, meaning his plan is to essentially spread the misery he feels to everyone else.

One can easily sympathize with Kuja's despair at "being made" a certain way or having "faults" that are entirely out of one's control. I connected his predestination to my own. I saw parallels in our traumas and feeling cheated; we were both used and never saw closure. This arc along with his status as the villain of the game, his androgynous design, and his theatrical mannerisms has given much traction to the argument that he is "queer coded." It felt unfair to see

that type of representation as a negative, although the narrative makes him more of a tragic figure by the end. I was able to identify with him and his fear of mortality to an alarming degree, and his cynicism seeped its way into the first draft of my story.

Before discussing the story itself, it is essential to address the question of why I chose to be a writer as opposed to a singer, songwriter, or video game developer. After all, none of the sources cited thus far exist in books or poems. I do not have, nor have I ever had the desire to learn the coding required to make a video game; however, I desired to be a singer at a very young age. I could never get over the mountain of internalized homophobia and fear of perception required for an Appalachian boy to see a future in music or theatre. The closest I came to doing so was playing the snare drum in middle school, but even that choice was made in the face of perceived jests I experienced for wanting to play the viola.

I never saw myself being represented in books at school, so I chose to read fantasy books with characters so disconnected from our reality that the only thing *anyone* could have in common with them is their struggles that are seemingly universal—the “coming of age” narrative, for example. This did not dissuade me from writing but instead fueled me to write a story for myself and people like me. That baseline desire to connect with others over our moral dilemmas is at the core of why I write and why I will continue to do so knowing that what I am saying is loosely assembled regurgitation of many other ideas of which have already been thought.

The original draft of “The Final Truth” is the venting of my cynicism clumsily wrapped in the scenario where people must decide if a society built upon religious foundation should continue to put up the front of belief if given evidence that contradicts the existence of their monotheistic God. The plot follows Milami, a reverend who has seen the power and destruction

of his religion, as he journeys with Faune, a devout general, and Vraia, a non-believing scientist, as they go and retrieve the “Final Truth.” The Final Truth is the document that is supposed to reveal the next phase of the world-dominant religion and bring them closer to seeing their god and its divine vision for humanity. When the party finds the Final Truth, Milami reads it and discovers that it is a confessional from the founder of the religion in which he admits the religion was a lie crafted out the desire to unite his people under one, harmonious banner. Milami reveals this information to Faune and Vraia who say that they should burn the Final Truth and preserve order or preserve the Final Truth and burn order respectively.

This version is more cynical than my final draft since it skips the process of walking away from belief and simply pulls the rug out from under the characters. The inner dilemma one faces when belief is challenged is at the core of what built this story, yet it is not at the focal point of the narrative; the reveal is. Furthermore, the Final Truth makes up a mere two paragraphs of a nine-page story when single-spaced. It is relegated to being a plot point and nothing more. Although the confession that one does not believe in religion is attached to the prophet in those two paragraphs, the struggle of walking away from religion is instead attached to Milami since he is meant to function as a pseudo-agnostic priest—which admittedly is a messy way of trying to write about this conflict.

Milami is meant to serve as the middle point on a linear spectrum between the absolute atheism represented in Vraia and unwavering faith represented in Faune. The plot was meant to focus on the characters and how they interact and engage in conversation surrounding their faith or lack thereof. Then they arrive at the story’s climax: the unveiling of the Final Truth. The reader, who has been on Milami’s shoulder in the middle of these conversations, is then left to decide who Milami should side with in an open ending where he sides with “her.” Since Faune

and Vraia are both women, the “her” is written in a way where it is purposefully unclear as to whose side Milami will take.

The first draft’s plot alone is strong and engaging, and I am aware of the obvious bias such a statement exudes when written by my hand; however, I am equally aware of the many faults in my execution in writing said plot. The elephant in the room lies in trying to condense a plot and broad discourse in a nine-page short story. It bred what one would expect in ham-fisted philosophical dialogue and an unfortunate thinly veiled favoritism on the author’s part for one character.

In the Vraia vs. Faune debacle, one can look at the text and see that the writer’s cynicism seeped into the debate and “middle-point” in which Milami stands. First one can investigate the inspiration that went into the naming of the two women: French. Vraia’s name is pulled from “vrai,” which is “true,” and Faune is derived from “faux,” or “false” in English. The implications of these names have multitudes. From a plot standpoint, Milami is given the choice at the end of the story to choose between living a lie—siding with Faune—or embracing a destructive truth—siding with Vraia. While this initially seems like a debate in which he could justifiably side with either woman, there is the initial connotation readers will naturally make with “truth” being better than “false.” Furthermore, plot and characterization leading up to that point is imbalanced in terms of favoring Vraia. Faune is portrayed to be a stern and overly judgmental character who even goes as far as to tell Milami to not pay mind to Vraia since she is nonbelieving. The No-General cliche role Faune fills is and not given the usual “soft side” arc that most characters in this trope are given; therefore, readers are never given the opportunity to endear to her. Vraia is given more lines on the page than Faune and further portrayed through her brilliance,

indifference, and informality, to be the quirky, mad scientist stereotype. This type of character does not require an arc for readers to find endearing *per se*.

Combining this with the choice at the end of the story is problematic and allows readers to choose a side based on which character is more likeable rather than thinking about the actual consequences of dismantling or upholding religion. One can see the bias even more when considering how the author would make this choice as a man who has *already* walked away from religion. It is more likely than not that he created a debate but subconsciously chose Vraia's side as a winner before even writing. Intention in action and desire in outcome are separable in this instance of writing. This is only a fault in the context of this story since it is initially presented as being a more open navigation of the subject.

Favoritism as well as another fault of the story is apparent in the opening scene in which Milami is watching the desert turn into hell. The giant space laser that excavates Birthelle in one fell swoop is God-like and elicits prayers and awe from Milami and Faune. Vraia is the scientist credited with the construction of this laser, thus linking her creation and human ingenuity to divinity and putting her abilities on the same playing field as the Being's. The intention in writing this was only to celebrate human ingenuity and seeing it as worthy of the praise one may reserve for a higher being. In my head, it was a positive moment reflecting my growing self confidence that I adopted after walking away from religion and accepting my queer identity; however, I can see how the moment is also sacrilegious. Furthermore, the space laser as well as Vraia's gadget replete lab coat puts the story in the genre of science-fiction, but it does so in a way that that could have been done better. How it could have been done better is best demonstrated by analyzing some of the giants of science-fiction writing.

Before and while redrafting “The Final Truth” into the story it is now, I was tasked with some extracurricular reading so I could better understand my own writing and just what exactly I am trying to convey. “The Ones Who Walk Away from Omelas” by Ursula K. LeGuin is one story I read. It is not strictly science fiction—it does not have a true plot. However, LeGuin never tries to make it a story but leaves it as a scenario. This works for her because she embraces that and leaves it within that realm. I contrast this to my first draft’s philosophical dialogue and further note that it works within the context of her “short story” because the philosophy is the entire focus. It is further pointed at the reader with fourth-wall breaking questions. I tried to take what should be a focus and condense it into mere lines on a page, and I see where that falls apart.

I am going to lump in “The Nine Billion Names of God” by Arthur C. Clarke, “The Last Question” by Isaac Asimov, and “A Sound of Thunder” by Ray Bradbury in the same analysis since they are actual stories. Each author manages to achieve what I attempted by exploring existential questions through the lens of science fiction writing. The monks in Clarke’s story need the computer’s permutations to learn the name of God. Asimov’s all-knowing computer that cannot answer one question becomes the conflict point of his story. Time travel helps to exaggerate Bradbury’s pondering over the consequences of one action and the ripple effect. The thing that makes these *good* science fiction works is the fact that the science fiction aspects are *essential* to telling the stories. Meanwhile, Vraia’s laser and gadgets are cool, but they are not *necessary* to the plot of the Final Truth. For instance, I could have rewritten it without the gadgets and had a normal excavation instead, then Milami would still have access to the Final Truth without Vraia.

With these readings and the advice to expand upon the confessional document, I wrote the second draft of “The Final Truth” with the hope of better exploring what makes one walk

away from religion. Some of the changes include entirely cutting the journey to the Final Truth since I was allotting more page space to expanding on it. Vraia and Faune are merely mentioned, and their roles are admittedly insignificant, which also means there is no philosophical dialogue between the two. Milami's role as a translator becomes more important than his priesthood as he unravels the narrative of the prophet and outwardly proclaims his disbelief to an empty room. I also attempted to shift more of the anger and cynicism on the institutions rather than the deity.

I shifted my anger off the universe and onto the new character Tefit, who schemes and manipulates the illiterate prophet, steering the religion in a direction that results in religious colonization. This change stemmed from a recent—in terms of my own life—discovery that the Bible is a collage of selected pieces by a committee I do not know and has been translated numerous times under the supervision of people such as King James I. With this knowledge, I cannot help but feel that part of the reason I think that God may despise me may be because of these committees who have agendas to promote. Perhaps my anger was entirely misplaced, perhaps there is room for a creator in my life. The prophet ends up killing his son and then enlists Lynla, who was tortured and humiliated by Tefit, to draft the confessional narrative as something of a “reset” in case Tefit’s colonialism gets out of hand. This is also the draft in which the clause of when to read the Final Truth gets revealed; it was not explained as clearly in the first draft.

The confession from the prophet is a bit more ambivalent since it must be considered that his words were transcribed and then translated. I was conscious of this as I finished the draft, but I did not want to do heavy edits immediately after finishing a draft. These filters could have provided nuance to what the prophet is truly saying; however, the translating aspects of the second draft are lacking. The many layers are also not directly acknowledged by virtue of my

lack of editing, which makes it seem as though I the writer was unaware of the presence of the filters.

The choice for some ambivalence stems from me remembering the movie, *Benedetta*. It is semi-biographical and details the life of a nun named Benedetta who claims to have visions of Jesus and engages in homosexual intercourse. I was intrigued by the idea of someone claiming to see God long after the age of prophets, but I was further intrigued by the ending. After she escapes the city and is alone with her lover, Benedetta holds her claim that her visions were legitimate. It hit me then that a prophet would *never* outwardly admit to lying; it does not make sense. Therefore, the “lies” the prophet reaped are not directly explained. This allows readers to leverage the falling of the religion on Tefit. However, this also makes the ending in which Milami tosses the Final Truth out the window questionable.

I wanted Milami to be active in the plot, for I thought it was more engaging than the open ending of the first draft. This decision does not work in execution or within the role he would play as a translator. Furthermore, the process of translating is disregarded in favor for long sections of the prophet’s narrative—which reads like an adventure novel. This marks many of the flaws in what was admittedly the most rushed draft. There is no slow burn without the act of translating, and the style between the Milami sections and the prophet sections bleed together and murder what should be two distinct voices.

There are also sections in the prophet’s narrative that are simply odd. The prophet sections include hesitation in dialogue and is written in a very contemporary style. One of the characters neighs like a horse, and they all spew cliches left and right. The largest offender though, is that this draft drops the ball on the section in which the prophet sees the Being. This brought me to the startling realization that I need to revisit the Bible.

The irony in actively reading a Bible as a queer person wanting to deconstruct it is not lost on me, especially since the first draft was born from my pure jaded-ness. Irony was also necessary, so I ignored my hesitations and read Ezekiel's encounter with a God on wheels five times over. There was also the discussion of being more aware and deliberate with the filter aspect of the story and how it contributed to the struggle one has in placing faith in something or being able to define an experience.

The last version of "The Final Truth" is the product of my reading as well as the conversations held with my professor around the filters and the word "ineffable." The sections of the prophet's narrative are chopped and refined to mimic the style of Ezekiel. I actively inverted lines of dialogue to start with "It said to me" and then the dialogue instead of the dialogue followed "he said." Knowing that these stories were first passed around orally, I emphasized repetition and read the prophet pieces aloud numerous times.

There is a more deliberate attempt to dive into Milami's translating process. I listed his devices and detailed how he checked the Final Truth for fraudulence and smudging. Milami cross references the ideas with other texts, and it is in this that he discovers the bombshell of knowledge. I even considered that the language would not share the same writing system or alphabet, so it is suggested that the Final Truth appears to read like hieroglyphics on a scroll.

Other changes include exploring Milami's past experiences, the reduced role of Lynla, the less direct villainy of Tefit, and the increased emphasis on the existential problem posed by the Final Truth, and my attempt at some loose surrealism.

I include Milami's memories of temple worship and sights for some moments of world-building, but also the development of the conflict. There is the constant recalling of flowers

blooming in a field of bodies, and what Milami chooses to remember demonstrates his changing mental state. At the beginning of the story, he focuses on the flowers in the memory. By the end, he is disillusioned and only sees the bodies and wasted lives. Furthermore, he is considering how the images he was shown in temples are false.

There is also a dream sequence for Milami in which he sees the Being; however, the events surrounding this dream make its validity questionable, as does his failure to finish the Final Truth by the end of the story. It could be argued that he experienced a fever dream induced by stress and fear. Milami's delusion in the face of things like the Sellic Skull Wall suggest that he is not the most reliable of people, even if he is a Harbinger; which is the title granted to those who were instrumental to the delivery of the Final Truth. Of course, his vision did hint to a false idol, which he believes he found at the end of the story.

I believe the loose surrealist aspects as well as the unresolved ending are necessary changes for me as I decide what this story is attempting to communicate and capture. While there is dread at the end of the story, it is the most hopeful of the three drafts. There is no outright declaration that the religion in the world is not real—a stark contrast from the first version. The problem is that it has been edited by Tefit, just as modern Christianity has gone through multiple edits. Knowing this breeds uneasiness and surreal experiences that are reflected in the new description of the Being as funnel cloud shaped deity whose instructions are left up to the interpretation of the prophet, Tefit, and Milami.

This results in the following ending:

“The room spun into the fields, the skies, the ocean, the funnel clouds, the space bleeding into the atmosphere, and back into itself. Milami, seated at his desk, was dazed amid this and failed to translate any more truth in that moment. The pictures he once knew as letters were not that anymore. They were blinding, fleeting, and seemed to reflect.”

The room spinning into various places is a collection of everything Milami has recently experienced. What I find to be stronger in this quote is how he fails to translate “any more truth.” A shocking realization, such as one where I would find out that I am abhorred by my own creator, lands me in a place where I am stuck. No amount of analysis can unravel that experience, nor can it land me any closer to pinning my identity as a queer person. My identity, both suppressed and expressed, and how my experiences and surroundings define me in conjunction with my inherent character, escapes me just as the letters in the Final Truth escape Milami and proves to be ineffable.

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