6 Jan 2026

English & Cultural Studies 1G03: Study Notes

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Donald Justice, “The Wall” (1960)

Jiangmei Wu, *Ruga Swan* (2014)

What a great pleasure it was joining you in class last evening! Please do introduce yourself to me if you get a chance in class.

This week in class we looked quickly at Donald Justice's poem, "The Wall" (see poem below, along with some beautiful paintings that depict the "same" scene that Justice conjures up in his poem and that he radically rewrites—or, to recall the subtitle of our course, *unmakes.* You can find more paintings in the Introductory Power Point presentation I used in class and now also posted on A2L).

Here are some points and questions to consider:

1. **Every text has a context, indeed, many contexts.** That's a kind of "law of literature," i.e. a principle that applies to all kinds of literature, including the texts that are the focus of this course. Contexts are already existing cultural, historical, biographical, and literary settings or circumstances that inform, activate, and irrigate a text–a poem like "The Wall," for example. But don't forget this: poems, like all literary texts, are in a robust relationship with their informing contexts, *actively* negotiating with those contexts, in dialogue with them, rewriting them, over-writing them, adapting them, sometimes almost beyond recognition. Literary texts make and unmake the tradition that informs them. A large part of reading literature means exploring that dynamic process of making and unmaking. Contexts inform texts. But texts refashion contexts. The "law" should then more accurately read: Every literary text has many contexts; and every literary text wrestles with those contexts. The relationship between text and its context goes both ways and is a major source of the endless source of energy coiled up in a poem like "The Wall."

2. At least two major contexts inform "The Wall." There are not only two, to be sure, but these are a helpful place to begin:

i) <u>The biblical story of "The Fall of Humankind."</u> Many world religions, perhaps all of them, contain "origin stories," i.e., richly suggestive and highly resonant accounts of where human beings first came from, what it was like at the beginning of humankind, and thus how on earth we came to live in the dangerous, complicated, mortal, sorrowful, and beautiful world that we do now. Origins stories say a great deal about the cultures in which they are important. They can be central to how we think of ourselves. They resonate with us and form a deep source of inspiration for thinkers and the faithful, as well as poets and painters and philosophers and students, because they speak to such elemental questions: Where do I come from? What is home? Why did everything change? What schools us into wanting things to be like we imagine they once were? "Once upon a time" is how many of these stories about the beginning begin, evoking a distant past that nevertheless has a strangely haunting pull on our lives. We will see that pull, the strange and sometimes destructive attractiveness of the dream of a better place and a better time, at several points in this course, so don't forget to keep your antennae out so that you can begin to stitch parts of this course together. For example, look for the various ways in which the dream of a better place works in El Akkad's *What Strange Paradise,* as well as in John Keat's two Odes and Ta-Nehisi Coates' *Between the World and Me.* **[Study tip: look for concepts, questions, problems that appear and then reappear, albeit in different forms, throughout this course. Draw up a map in which thee concepts, questions, and problems help stitch into one fabric.]**

Now, in the Book of Genesis (the first book of the Bible), we are told, Adam and Eve lived deliriously happily together in Eden, a paradise, a protected place of innocent joy. The couple lived under one

prohibition or edict: they were told by God not to eat the fruit of the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil. But they did anyways, and for that offence they were cast out of Eden into the heat and dust and changefulness of the world. Subsequent stories developed out of this origin story spoke of how stern angels guarded the gate back into Eden, forbidding Adam and Eve and all of their descendants from ever returning to that condition of perfection. This story has resonated with thinkers and artists for many centuries. It has been the subject of many famous paintings, several of which I have included below. Why do you think this story fascinates artists? What is it that attracts them? Why is this particular story, the story of the end of innocence and the expulsion from Eden, an endlessly fruitful source of interpretation, contemplation, and recreation?

--A still from my favourite film, Wim Wenders’ *Wings of Desire* (1987) (*Der Himmel über Berlin*, "The Sky/Heaven Over Berlin") In Wenders’ film, the angels do not discipline human beings but observe them, invisible, for the most part, but listening very to their most intimate thoughts. Perhaps that is a kind of surveillance. But one angel falls in love with a Berliner and gives up his angelic powers to be with that person. In this film and for this particular angel, Berlin is a better place to live than the heavenly realm. [Image description: a man in a trenchcoat with angel wings stands looking over a city far below.]

Donald Justice returns to the story of the “Fall of Man,” but he rewrites it in very significant ways. Sussing out how he rewrites the story, tracing the ways in which he puts the resources of poetry and language to use in rewriting that story, is a key to understanding the poem and engaging with it. Write out for yourself how the story unfolded so compactly in “The Wall” is different from the one told in the Book of Genesis. List some of the ways in which that story is told differently, marking in each case

not only that Justice rewrites the story but also, and more important, how he rewrites it, how he marshals the language of poetry to accomplish that task.

In the biblical story and in many of the subsequent reflections on it, the moment that Adam and Eve eat the forbidden fruit and commit the crime for which they and all their descendants are punished is a deeply momentous event. The great 17th-century poet, John Milton, characterized that moment this memorable way: *Earth felt the wound*, i.e., because it altered the course of history, marking an inflection point marking the passage between a perfect Eden and a deeply imperfect World, the crime shook the foundations of the planet. (Milton wrote that phrase in a long poem entitled *Paradise Lost*. Justice’s poem has been characterized as a poem that condenses Milton’s 10,556 line poem into 14 lines!) But in this poem, we barely notice the crime that is the centre-piece of Milton’s story and the events in Genesis. The poem scrupulously under-emphasizes the very thing that the biblical story gives maximum emphasis. The poem seems hardly willing to mark the event; indeed, it avoids characterizing the event as a crime or offence of any sort. All we are told is that the fruit was tasteless, i.e., unimpressive, just like the great crime its consumption supposedly signifies. –Very odd. Why does Justice rewrite the biblical story in this key way? And how does that change effectively rewrite the entire story of the “Fall of Humankind”? In this Garden of Eden did a crime actually take place? Perhaps the crime is not one that the inhabitants committed . . . but someone else. The angels? How so?

In the biblical story, Eve is said to be the source of the problem, the temptress who persuades Adam to commit the crime with her. But in Justice’s poem, the character identified as the woman is very different. –She isn’t the clichéd temptress that haunts so many stories told in the European tradition, no, not at all, but the one who awakes and who wakes everyone up. How so? Why? Look at the poem’s fine-grained details, for it is in those small details that a great deal is to be found. For example, note that the woman is the only inhabitant of Eden who is identified. The poem says there are others, but doesn’t say, for example, that there is the man, as we might expect, given the original story. In this poem there is “the woman” and “they.” Adam, Eve’s mate in the biblical account, is MIA, out of the picture, not needed. In this way Justice gives maximum weight not to the act of eating the apple but to the powers of the woman’s dream. In Justice’s story of the fall of humankind, the most momentous even is that the woman has a dream, possesses a power to seek something others do not…but probably should.

In “The Wall,” the woman is the dreamer; she has a dream, she possesses the power of imagination to see things as they really are rather than as she has been repeatedly told they are. (Remember how the last lines tell us that she and the others in Eden were told and told what to do, how to behave. By repeating that sentiment, it is as if the poem’s speaker is scolding the inhabitants of Eden for not listening to the authorities.) In her dream, the dream that wakes her up, she sees a lion sharpening its claw. As I said in class, that is a metaphor, i.e., a richly suggestive turn in language that slows us down in order to invite comparisons, reflection and discussion. It is a metaphor for what the poem will call “the world” or at least something “called the world.” What does this metaphor mean? In other words, what is the range of possible meanings of the image of a lion sharpening its claw? What does that vivid image stand for . . . and why would that wake the dreamer from her slumbers?

The woman dreams. She dreams a dream that awakens her. To what condition, what place, is she awakened? How is the world in which she lives different from the one in which she had been living? Perhaps while she lived in Eden she had always been living in a kind of dream but the time has long since come to wake up. What seemed like a flawless place wasn't. The world into which she wakes is full of flaws and claws. But perhaps it is preferable to living in a world menaced by angels who hide the walls just as they hide their furled wings. A predatory world awaits her outside the wall; but the sharpened class could just as easily be a metaphor for the menace of those scolding and policing angels *inside* the wall. What is clear is that things are more complicated than the angels suggest.

The woman dreams. The dream comes in the form of a metaphor. It is a little snippet of poetry. She writes a bit of poetry in this flawless place, poetry that is ominous, startling, and, most important, the kind of poetry that brings her to her senses. Poetry is not meant to soothe and quiet us, but to bring us to our senses. In this poem, the woman is the first poet. The poem is there to bring us to our senses.

The great American poet, Charles Bernstein, said this in a poem called "The Klupzy Girl:"

> Poetry is like a swoon, with this difference:
> it brings you to your senses.

That's a useful bit of poetry to remember going forward in this course. As Bernstein suggests here, poetry is designed to captivate you, slow you down, offer up a space of intense and rigorous discussion, thinking, and reflection, taking you abruptly away from the day-to-day and from the authorities tell you you should know. But its function is not to offer an escape from the day-to-day but much rather a smarter return. Properly speaking, poetry's *effect* is to sharpen your mind, focus your concentration, encourage you to be aware, as never before, about the fine-grained details of the world around you: "it brings you to your senses." In what ways do the texts we explore on this course going forward work to bring you to your senses? **[Study tip: And how exactly, in each case, does it accomplish that waking work? As you read each assigned course, don't forget to ask yourself this question.]**

ii) I said at the start that there are two important contexts informing this text. One concerns its content. The other has to do with its "form," i.e., the *kind* of poem it is. In this case, we are reading a **sonnet.** [The writer's choice of a form matters, since each form brings with it certain expectations, conventions, ways of proceeding. Think for example of popular music, which, roughly speaking divides up into different forms, different ways of shaping sound. I happen to enjoy Jamaican dance hall music, which follows a particular pattern that people like me recognize right away when we hear it. You might like, for example, K-pop, which has a certain sound, shares certain underlying qualities, that make it what it is. Same thing with a sonnet: if you choose to write in the form of a sonnet, there are certain rules to follow, certain expectations to be met.] So, to repeat, Donald Justice chose to write "The Wall" in a particular form of poetry called a sonnet. It helps to know that the sonnet is an ancient and honoured form of poetry, a highly and conspicuously structured form of poetry. Sonnets are a kind of poem's poem, i.e., a form of poetry that can be said for the purposes of this course to exemplify poetry. Sonnets share certain features:

--they are 14 lines long;

--they are often characterized by their immediacy or directness, as if the speaker of the poem were sharing something intimate and urgent with us;

–they often have regular rhyme schemes;

–they fall into discernable movements, i.e., they often pose a problem or establish a scene, then there is a turn, and the poem shifts gears, takes a different tack, sometimes offering a resolution to the problem that it has just established, sometimes qualifying and complicating the problem it has just posed. The turn is called a *volta*.

Not many contemporary poets write sonnets any more, which means that Justice’s poem feels strangely old-fashioned. In its contemporary context, it feels a bit rule-bound, walled in. Why would Justice have chosen this difficult, highly scripted form of poetry for this poem?

Look carefully at “The Wall” to locate the features of the sonnet form that I have described here. Track how the last words in each verse or line rhyme with other last words. I’ve marked up the copy of the poem below so you can see this for yourself and can do this sort of analysis with other poems on the course. Poems very often work with sound patterns, including rhyme. The repetition of sounds is a source of pleasure, as any of you who enjoy musical lyrics know; it also paces a poem, marking the time it takes to unfold; and it helps to knit the poem’s parts together, forming patterns to contain its prodigious, sometimes almost overflowing content. Not all poems are rhymed, as we will certainly see on this course. But rhyming remains important; think of how almost all the lyrics of all of popular music are written in rhyme. But rhyme does more than give pleasure and does more than thread the various parts of a poem or lyric into a complex whole. Rhyme is also part of how a poem works. It signals shifts in the progress of a poem. Look carefully at the rhyme of “The Wall.” Where does the rhyming pattern change? In the copy of the poem you see below, you can see both the repetitions and the changes in the rhyme. Sounds get repeated as the poem unfolds—not exactly repeated, but often very close. Note how the rhyme helps us see and hear how the poem falls into two large parts:

--Part 1 is made up of the first eight lines. This part is called the **octave.**

--Part 2 is made up of the last six lines. This part if called the **sestet.**

8 plus 6 means 14 lines in all, but containing an internal motion or pivot point between line eight and line nine. Sonnets that are organized in this way are called **Petrarchan sonnets**, named after the famous 14th-century thinker who wrote poems using this division but writing in Italian. In the 16th-century, as I mentioned in class, English authors started writing Petrarchan sonnets but in their mother-tongue—that was a real challenge because English has far fewer rhyming words than Italian. But a good author loves a challenge, and finds fuel for their imagination in the restrictions and conventions that come with adopting a certain form. And you might be interested to know that some of those English authors, including William Shakepeare, wrote sonnets but organized their rhyme schemes differently so as to

unmake the Petrarchan tradition he had inherited. But Donald Justice chooses the older kind of sonnet, the Petrarchan sonnet, the sonnet that falls into two parts marked by a shift in the rhyme scheme.

Historically, many sonnets are organized in this way: the first eight lines set the scene, pose a problem, make a claim; the last six lines complicate matters. The poem changes gears and changes its rhyme scheme at line 8, the point at which the first part of the poem yields to the second part. That’s the turning point in the poem. Turning points in poems, as I have said, are called a ***volta***. The question to ask as a reader of a poem that identifies as a sonnet is this What is happening at the point that the poem makes a turn, a change, important? As the rhyme changes, so does the poem. How so? What is happening in the poem that makes a rhyme change important and generative? How have things changed as the poem progresses, passing from one rhyming section to another?

Rhyme is only one way in which a poem puts sound patterns to use. The repetition of words and phrases is another way. Look at the last several lines of the poem, tracing the repetition of certain words and phrases there. Why does Justice repeat himself at this moment in the poem? What is the cumulative effect of that repetition or pattern?

Nnedi Okorafor at Buffalo RiverWorks. Wings courtesy Shasti O'Leary Soudant (MFA ’11). [Image description: a person stands before a monumental building with large wings unfurled.]

Another “law of literature,” so to speak is this: **beginnings and the ends of literary texts, including poems, are always weighted and freighted with significance.** Where and how a poem starts and how it concludes are important questions. “The Wall” is a great case in point. The last line is especially complex, as if the Justice were condensing a very great deal in the poem’s last breath, concentrating in one place all of the complexities of the poem as a whole. What takes place in the last line of “The Wall”? Look at the punctuation: it is a standalone sentence. The end of the poem describes the end of a certain time in the history of humankind. The ancient and honoured stories of that time characterize it as a moment of terrible sadness, loss, even horror–as you can see in the paintings below. But is that the case here? In the old stories, Eden is a place of flawless perfection. “The Wall” invites us to consider whether

flawlessness actually is perfection. Do the inhabitants leave Eden in the same way as Adam and Eve appear to do in those paintings? We will see authors questioning the supposed wonderfulness of perfection elsewhere in this course, including John Keats’s “Ode on a Grecian Urn” and “Ode on a Nightingale,” in addition to the sweet perfection that the angel offers in William Blake’s “Chimney Sweeper.”

The word used to describe how a poem ends is ***closure*****.** That’s a word I will use in subsequent lectures, so it seems good to raise it here with you. Closure a word that has certain meanings in conventional English. We say, for example, that a person grieving loss “seeks closure,” seeks a way to bring something wildly uncontrollable to an end. In literary criticism, closure means something a bit different. Closure means how a poem ends or resolves itself. Another “law of literature” might be: **Poems must draw from within themselves the resources for their own closure.** In other words, a poem cannot simply and passively stop. *It must actively bring itself to an end*. It plans for its end, so one of your tasks as a reader is to look for the ways in which it anticipates its own end and thus brings about its own conclusion. But one of the wonderful things about poems is that their resolutions or endings often raise as many questions as they answer. Closure marks the end of a poem, and it marks the culmination of its efforts along the way to bring itself to a conclusion; but the end of the poem also marks the beginning of interpretation. How does “The Wall” bring itself to this kind of ambiguous end? By rights the poem should end unhappily, given the biblical story that haunts and informs it, and given what we see in the paintings that depict this story. But that doesn’t accurately describe what is happening here? For many extraordinary artists and poets, and for the faithful, the “Fall of Humankind” and the expulsion from the garden of Eden are sorrowfully memorable events, etched into the memory of a culture. But in Justice’s hands, things are much more ambiguous. Why?

One of the ways in which the end of “The Wall” leaves matters wonderfully open-ended is the use of ***ambiguity*****.** Poets like Justice mine the English language for its richness, for the ways in which words, even ordinary words like “they” and “advanced” can, in certain contexts, have several competing meanings. “Awe” is another one of those words, since in English it means both “that which is inspiring, wondrous, the subject of reverence” and “that which is fearful, immobilizing, and dominating” (as in the U.S. Armed Forces tactic of “shock and awe.” The poem uses ambiguity to keep itself from being walled in. In this last line, where we might expect things to wrap up, ambiguities make that conclusiveness impossible. Whose wings are “unfurled”? Who advances? Who are “they”? Look carefully at the ambiguities characterizing the last line of “The Wall.” How does Justice put them to work? I.e., how do those ambiguities help us understand the poem as a whole? As important, what other points of ambiguity can you find in the poem, places in which Justice uses language in a way that invites debate, discussion, and questioning? Poems bring themselves to a conclusion. That means that the poem has, from its very opening moves, started to prepare itself for its own ending. Look at the ending of “The Wall” with that principle in mind. Where in the poem do you see hints in place that the poem will end in the curious way that it does? As I say, sussing out those hints is an important part of learning how to read a poem.

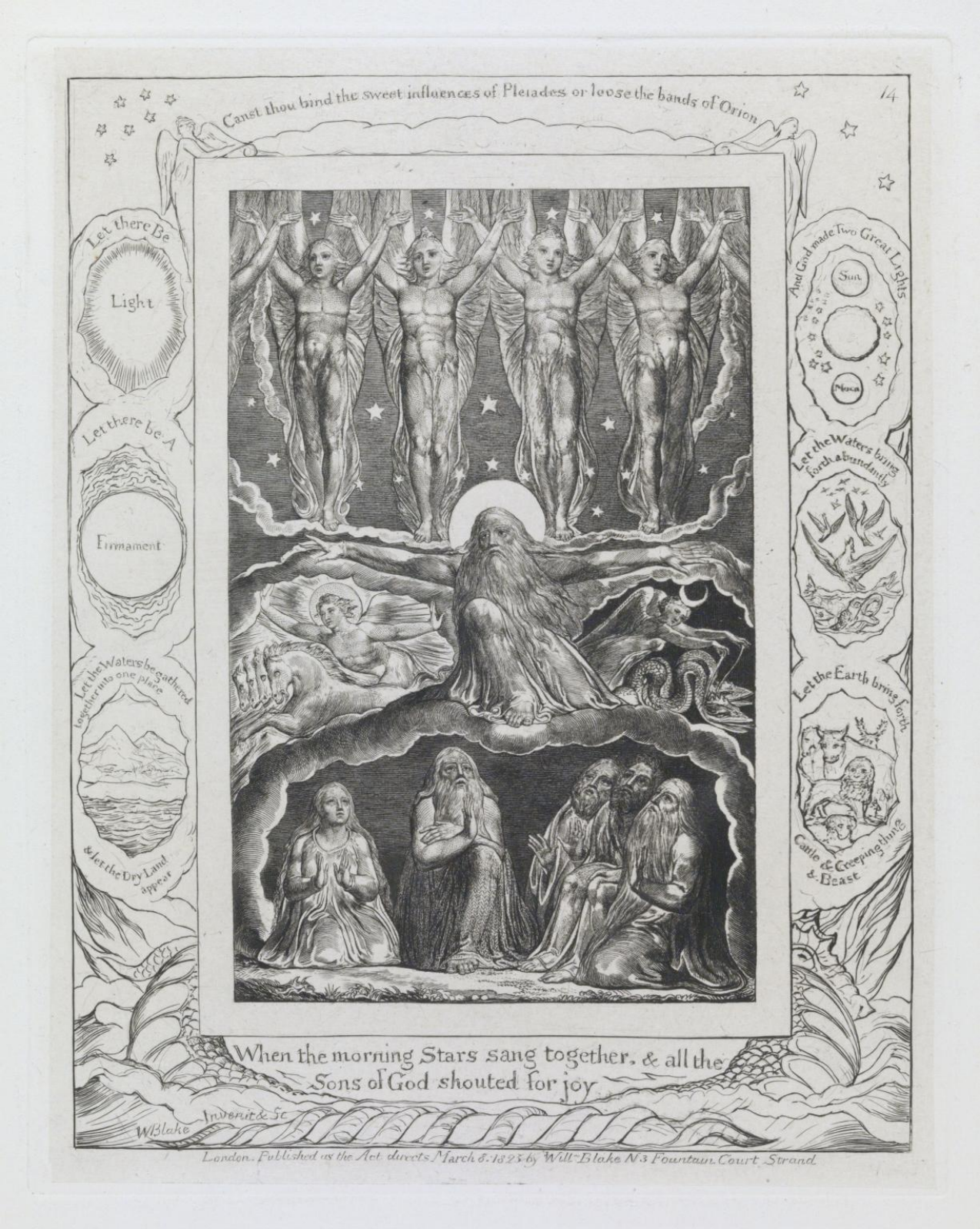
Every text has a context. Many contexts. Although this poem was published in 1960 it speaks to questions and problems worrying all of us in different ways today. That’s because walls bear the weight

of such complex significance in every age and in every place. Walls are said to protect us but the question at hand is from *what*? And, perhaps more important, *who* is telling us that we need protection? What is the supposed threat? Who profits from teaching us who is pure and who is impure? Who has schooled us into believing that we are being threatened and that a wall is needed to shield us from it? Who are *we* when we are told our lives are under siege from that which lies outside the wall? Walls are not neutral barriers but are instead erected to draw a boundary line between an inside that is *said* to be unsullied and safe and an outside that is *said* to be contaminated and dangerous. Donald Justice’s poem is inviting us to think about what it can mean to free oneself from being imprisoned by those myths of living in a pure and unsullied “inside,” what it might mean to step away from a life that is answerable to those manufactured ideals, that perfection in which the supposedly delicious fruits turn out to be tasteless and the eating of them of only minor consequence. In his poem, the angels, with their threatening power, only show themselves as threatening when the inhabitants of Eden, led by “the woman,” exercise their imaginations and see the “inside” for what it actually is: namely, a stultifying space of control and sameness. But what if you don’t want a world of control and sameness but a world of remarkable and unpredictable differences? The wall promises security through force. But when is “security” used as an alibi or ruse? How much are you and I willing to sacrifice in the name of “security”?

Thinking of Justice’s sonnet, consider this grotesque scene captured on social media in 2019. At an Indigenous Peoples March at the Lincoln Memorial in Washington D.C., Nathan Phillips, an elder with the Omaha tribe (and a Vietnam War veteran) was openly mocked by young men from Covington Catholic High School, an all boys’ school in Kentucky. Most were wearing Make America Great Again hats. “Build the Wall!,” they shouted repeatedly at Phillips. Of course, shouting that phrase at an elder is deeply disrespectful. --Not to say totally incoherent. After all, the wall to which Americans are referring when they say “Build the Wall!” is the wall President Trump fantasizes should be built between the U.S. and Mexico, not between indigenous peoples and Americans. But in another way, shouting this hopeless slogan at Phillips also has its own twisted coherence. For aren’t those boys acting like Justice’s angels? They grasp that the wall isn’t about securing borders at all but about affirming white privilege and white supremacy. It’s about dividing the world between an imagined “great” place, let’s call it “Eden,” and an outside world that is said, against all empirical evidence, to brim with violent others. And the way you do that is by declaring all those “inside” the wall to be the “rightful” inhabitants, pure and simple, and all those who don’t look or sound like you to be dangerous interlopers, contaminating elements, and threats to public order. The horrifying irony of this scene is impossible to ignore: for it was of course white settlers who all but destroyed the Indigenous peoples of the Americas. It was the white settlers who proved to be the dangerous interlopers and that made the world of the Indigenous peoples unsafe. But what is revealing is that the elders of the Omaha tribe, notwithstanding the violence that that community has suffered historically at the hands of white settlers, do not call for building walls. They are not haunted or managed by the angels of purity, isolation, and security. Instead, they advance, wings unfurled, confident in their place in a complex world inhabited by many different peoples, Indigenous and non-Indigenous, white and non-white, settlers and aboriginals, nationals and non-nationals, American and Mexican, citizen and asylum-seeker. And to the angels heavily invested in building walls, that advance and that affirmation of a mixed up world which must be negotiated and renegotiated in the name of truth and reconciliation, can only feel deeply offensive. As Justice’s poem suggests, “God

save us from the angels!” Imagine “the woman” and the “they” in the poem putting hats on saying precisely those words. The angels shout “Make Eden Great Again!”--to which the suddenly restless inhabitants, joined together, respond by walking away, by leaving this bland and walled in land. Imagine how angry that must make those angels. William Blake, the poet we also study on this course, would take one step further. “God save us from the angels!,” he would in effect say; “and lead us to embrace the devils!”--“devilishness” being his beloved figure for possessing a dissenting imagination and for finding the strength to reject those angels who come to us in our dreams flashing “bright keys” and hollow promises of safety and security. Poetry--and the imagination that makes poetry happen--is that strength.

Scene from *Angels in America* (directed by Mike Nichols, 2003), adapted from Tony Kushner’s play of the same name. [Image description: An angel dressed in white, with wings unfurled, has crashed through the ceiling and addresses a man in a bed.]



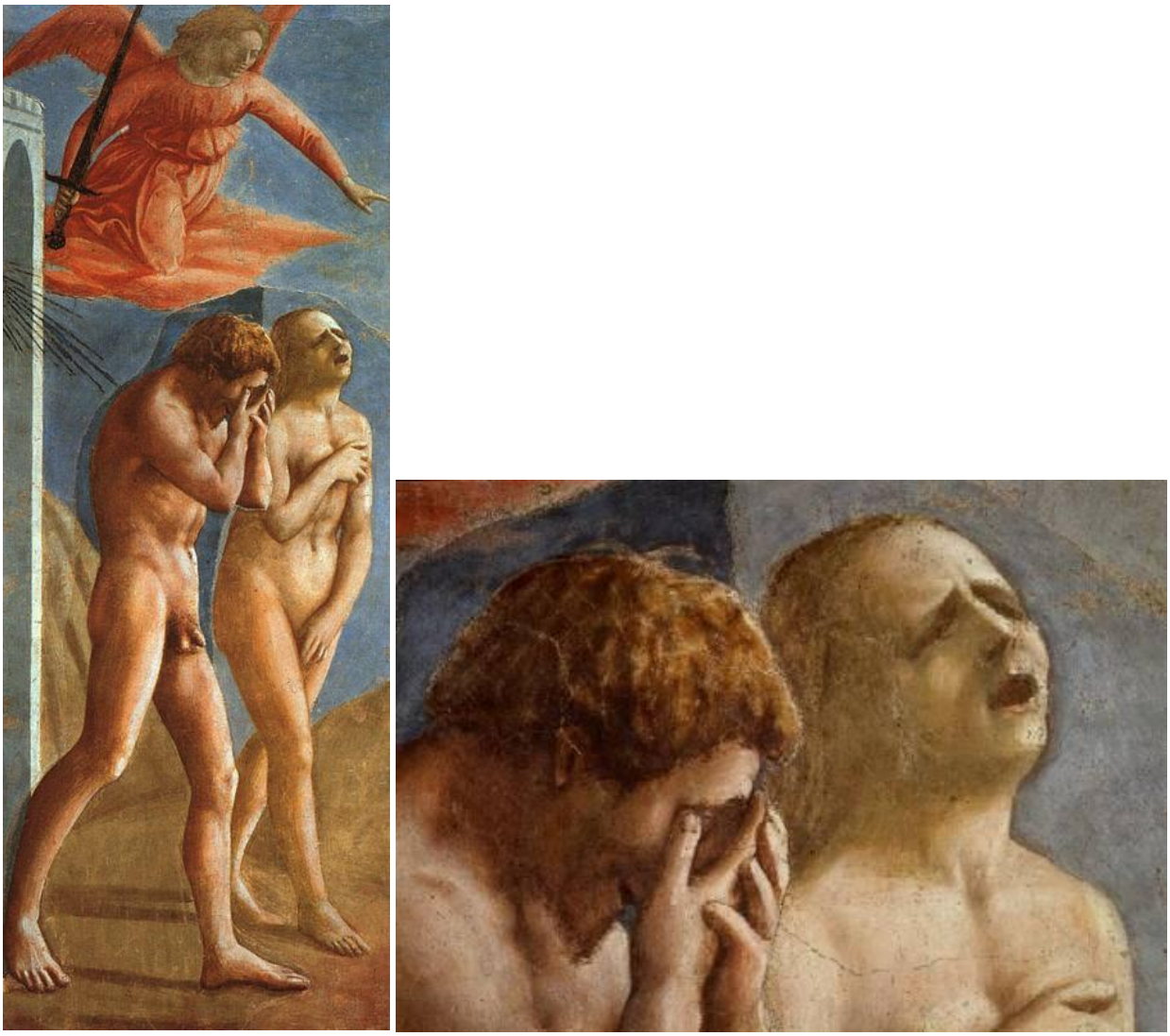
William Blake, “When the morning Stars sang together,” illustration for the Book of Job (1825) [Image description: An illustration from the *Book of Job* that shows God instructing Job, his wife, and his friends about his great power.

Above God’s outstretched hands is a band of angels, “the morning Stars,”with wings unfurled and arms outstretched. In Blake’s interpretation, God prefers to keep human beings walled in and in the dark. Who are you, he seems to ask, compared to my unlimited powers in the universe?]

Donald Justice (1925-2004), “The Wall”

	Rhyme Scheme	
The wall surrounding them they never saw;	a	[saw]
The angels, often. Angels were as common	b	[common]
As birds or butterflies, but looked more human.	b	[human]
As long as the wings were furled, they felt no awe.	a	[awe]
Beasts, too, were friendly. They could find no flaw	a	[flaw]
In all of Eden: this was the first omen.	b	[omen]
The second was the dream which woke the woman.	b	[women]
She dreamed she saw the lion sharpen his claw.*	a	[claw] *metaphor for ?
	Volta or shift/pivot	
As for the fruit, it had no taste at all.	c	[all] Shift or *volta*
They had been warned of what was bound to happen.	b	[happen]
They had been told of something called the world.	d	[world]
They had been told and told about the wall.**	c	[wall] **repetitions
They saw it now; the gate was standing open.	b	[open]
As they* advanced, the giant wings unfurled.	d	[unfurled] “they,” who?

From *The Summer Anniversaries* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1960)



Masaccio, *Expulsion from the Garden of Eden* (1425) [Image description: Adam and Eve, naked, their faces in agony, are forced out of the gate of Eden by an angel, wings unfurled, wielding a great black sword.]

Benjamin West, *The Expulsion of Adam and Eve from Paradise* (1791) [Image description: An angel, wings unfurled, casts a sorrowful Adam and Eve out of Eden, at the point of a sharp, sword-like shaft of light. At their feet lies a large coiled serpent.]