

THE COURSE OF MEMORY:

LI-YOUNG LEE AND THE AMERICAN TRADITION

by

Karl Thomas Rees

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Advisor: Keith Lawrence

Honors Dean: Scott Miller

Signature: _____

Signature: _____

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ABSTRACT

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Often labeled a poet of memory, Li-Young Lee utilizes both the power and insufficiency of memory to discover his origins. Lee's reliance on memory illustrates its capacity to achieve the mythic depth necessary to define both himself and the individual reader. But does Lee, as an Asian American, function within the Euro-centric American tradition, helping to define the American people, or does he instead function exclusively outside of it, reflecting only Asian American culture? I contend that Li-Young Lee not only belongs to the American tradition, but that his poetry, in its preoccupation with memory and the loss of origin, epitomizes it. Critics often limit Lee's poetry to a purely Asian American reading, a reading that is understandable, as Lee's poetry often attempts to recover his Chinese heritage. Yet critics fail to realize that Lee's heritage is redefined or even lost in his status as second-generation Asian American. This redefinition and loss are symptoms of American culture, which is predominately immigrant. Immigration, in fact, led to the possibility of America's finding its origins in a collective and somewhat invented European mind in the first place. It is in this manner that Lee, as an immigrant, can similarly participate in the American tradition. In fact, because of its shared interest in the condition that informed Eliot's "The Tradition and the Individual Talent," Lee's poetry actually adheres to the essay's theories. But the key factor in Lee's capacity to be traditional is the way in which he utilizes memory to combat the nihilistic threat present in

memory's own potential to be lost. In his poetry, Lee sorts through the confusion of memory and arrives at a divine sense of origin that restores his faith in an underlying meaning to his existence. This restoration is especially apparent in the poems "With Ruins" and "Furious Version." That these poems compare well in purpose and effect with Robert Frost's "Directive" and T. S. Eliot's *Four Quartets*, respectively, further evidences how Lee operates within the American tradition. Indeed, Lee's poetry suggests that the American tradition is not bound to any single originating cultures. Instead, this tradition is a search for origin that arrives at the conclusion that all Americans, and in fact all people, share a universal and divine origin.

Introduction

It all depends
on the course of your memory.
It's a place
for those who own no place
to correspond to ruins in the soul.
It's mine.
It's all yours. (Lee *The City in Which I Love You* 44-45)

“Who will remember the great work of memory itself, that basic task?” This question concludes Robert Pinsky’s 1999 essay “Poetry and the American Memory,” in which he explores how the “fragile heroic enterprise of remembering” defines the American people. The question is neither trivial nor academic; for, as Pinsky declares, “Deciding to remember, and what to remember, is how we decide who we are” (70). Perhaps no poet writing in America today answers Pinsky’s question more emphatically than does Li-Young Lee. Often labeled a poet of memory, Lee utilizes both the power and insufficiency of memory to rediscover his origins. “Memory revises me,” he declares in “Furious Versions” (*The City in Which I Love You* 14), at once describing his need for regular nourishment from its regenerative power and its god-like influence over the direction of his life. In short, Lee’s reliance on memory illustrates its mythic depth: memory is used by Lee to define not only himself but also the individual reader.

But is Lee the solution that Pinsky seeks? After all, Pinsky concentrates his discussion of “the American Memory” around a more traditional canon of American poetry, founded upon the likes of Walt Whitman, Elizabeth Bishop, William Carlos Williams, and Robert Frost. Lee, meanwhile, as an Asian American poet, does not obviously share this same Eurocentric heritage. It is not my intent to question Pinsky’s omission of Lee and other representatives of minority literatures—after all, Bishop is the most contemporary of the poets that Pinsky discusses. Rather, I ask if Lee functions within the American tradition Pinsky describes, or if he instead functions exclusively outside of it, reflecting only Asian American culture. In other words, can Lee’s poetry be considered traditionally American? If so, what does that say about—or do to—the American tradition? I contend that Li-Young Lee not only belongs to the American tradition, but that his poetry, in its preoccupation with memory and the loss of origin, epitomizes it. Furthermore, Lee’s poetry sorts through the confusion of memory resulting from this loss of origin, eventually arriving at a divine and universally applicable sense of origin that restores faith in an underlying meaning to his existence.

I divide my argument into four parts: 1) a brief survey of various viewpoints on Asian America’s role in the American tradition; 2) a definition of what I mean by “the American tradition” and how memory relates to it; 3) a general discussion of how Lee is traditional in this sense, relying primarily on a simultaneous reading of Lee’s “With Ruins” and Frost’s “Directive”; and 4) an in-depth comparison of Lee’s “Furious Versions” to Eliot’s *Four Quartets*, revealing how Lee’s approach to memory is both similar to and a departure from the approach employed by one of the Western tradition’s most “traditional” poets. Finally, I conclude with some thoughts regarding the

contribution Lee's poetry makes to this tradition, particularly in regards to its arrival at the divine.

Misinterpreting Asian American Literature

The irony of discussing Lee in conjunction with Asian American literature is that he neither considers himself an expert on the subject nor views himself as an Asian American poet. When asked how well read he is in Asian American literature, he jokes, “I’m not very well-read at all, in general. I’m a very slow reader.” Meanwhile, he prefers to classify Asian American authored literature as “art” rather than “Asian American.” “For instance,” he says, “Marilyn Chen. I think she’s a fine poet. I don’t see her as an Asian American poet.” Instead, Lee sees her as one of many artists whose locally flavored works center around an exploration of universal concepts of the divine. Says Lee, “Her subject is Asian American poetry, but ultimately she’s . . . trying to negotiate the divine consciousness and the temporal consciousness” (Lee Interview). So for Lee, at least, any discussion of Asian American literature and tradition is somewhat beside the point.

Nevertheless, as is the case with much of Asian American literature, critics often limit Lee’s poetry to a purely Asian American reading. Lending a sense of validity to such a reading is the “foreignness” with which Lee, who came to America at age seven, approaches the English language. He says, “I can’t tell if my being Chinese is an advantage or not, but I can’t imagine anything else except writing as an outsider” (qtd. Xiajing 117). Yet at the same time, such assumptions regarding the role of ethnicity in Lee’s poetry permit the reader to rob Lee’s poetry of its much wider significance. Lee expresses concern that, while reading Asian American literature through the lens of ethnicity “empowers a certain population,” it also potentially “ghettoizes the writer” and treats him or her as “a special interest” rather than “genuine artist” (Lee Interview). Zhou Xiajing affirms the negative impact of such readings on Lee’s works:

Ethnocentric readings of Lee's poems by Stern, Wang, and Zhao are not only misleading, but also reductive of the rich cross-cultural sources of influence on Lee's work and of the creative experiment in his poetry. Their readings presuppose a misconception that a pure and fixed Chinese culture has been inherited and maintained by Chinese immigrants and their descendants in America. This tendency in reading Asian American writers risks relegating their works to a marginalized niche. (114)

The tendency Xiajing mentions results from two misinterpretations: first, that Asian American literature, in order to retain its validity, must find its meaning entirely in Asia; and second, that Asian American literature cannot fit comfortably within the canon of American literature. Lisa Lowe, in her book "Immigrant Acts," describes the source of these misinterpretations as the "inevitable paradox" consequent to the dominant culture's institutionalization of an Asian American canon: "Institutionalization provides the material base . . . for a transformative critique of traditional disciplines and their traditional separations, and yet the institutionalization of any field or curriculum . . . submits [to the] educative function of socializing subjects into the state" (41). In other words, there exists an increasing fear among certain Asian Americans that acceptance in white America comes at the cost of "cultural genocide." For example, Elaine Kim's 1982 critical study of Asian American literature cites the fear of the Wakayama Group that "'Assimilation' is in fact 'cultural genocide' because it threatens to rob Asian Americans of their true past while preventing them at the same time from full and equal participation in the present" (qtd. 228). This fear implies an Asian American desire for an Asian American literature that remains meaningful only inasmuch as it remains purely Asian.

Such a fear leads many Asian American critics to the limiting conclusion that Asian American literature should be read only from an Asian perspective, further rationalizing this same attitude within the dominant culture. Furthermore, the members of this group argue that Asian Americans can never truly claim American heritage: “An Asian is an Asian until he proves himself white by his actions. He cannot, therefore, ever say ‘we’ and mean the people who produced Chaucer, Shakespeare, and Milton, or even Bob Dylan and the Beatles” (qtd. 228). This, in turn, gives rise to the second misinterpretation, the impossibility of Asian American literature finding its context or home in the larger, more generalized American literary canon.

Frank Chin, Asian America’s most outspoken literary critic, expresses equal distrust of the “Americanization” of Asian America. In his essay “Come All Ye Asian American Writers of the Real and Fake,” Chin strongly criticizes the redefinition of Chinese myths such as “The Ballad of Mulan,” which essentially redefine cultural memory and “fake” history. Says Chin:

To legitimize their faking, [they] have to . . . argue that the immigrants who settled and established Chinese America lost touch with Chinese culture, and that faulty memory combined with new experience produced new versions of this story. . . . Losing touch with England did not result in English whites losing touch with the texts of the Magna Carta or Shakespeare. (3)

One immediate challenge to the validity of Chin’s version of Asian American literature is the disbelief raised by his assertion that white Americans retain a pure version of Shakespeare or the Magna Carta. While America may have inherited the *name*

Shakespeare, films such as “West Side Story” or Baz Luhrmann’s 1996 rendition of “Romeo and Juliet” evidence an American tendency to reconstruct its own inherited traditions. That noted, Chin’s argument that Chinese American writers have lost touch with their past seems especially applicable in the case of Lee, who obsesses over his faulty memory in such poems as “Mnemonic” and “This Room and Everything in It,” and says in regards to his family history, “I grew up in a state of unknowing, and that unknowing was terrifying and rich and true and authentic” (qtd. Miller 35).

The redefinition of memory adds a subtle but tragic undertone to Lee’s poem, “I Ask My Mother to Sing.” In it, Lee listens to his mother and grandmother sing a traditional Chinese song, confessing, “I’ve never been in Peking, or the Summer Palace, / nor stood on the great Stone Boat to watch / the rain begin on Kuen Ming Lake, the picnickers / running away in the grass.” Immediately, this confession calls into question Lee’s ability to describe the pure Chinese culture that Chin demands—if he has never been there, how can the reader expect him to participate in its cultural memory? Yet despite this confession, Lee maintains that he “love[s] to hear it sung.” Obviously, the singing still functions as cultural memory, but the meaning of the singing for Lee, himself, differs from the meaning for Lee’s mother and grandmother. Whereas Lee uses the moment to *imagine* “how the waterlilies fill with rain until / they overturn,” and thus to arrive by proxy at his mother’s heritage, the women in the poem begin to cry, presumably the consequence of very *real* memories of their distant homeland. Lee’s chief response to the song is to remember his mother and dead father, as evidenced in the first four lines of the poem. However, his own consciousness is noticeably absent from the conclusion, where he must sit back and admire how “neither stops her song” (*Rose* 50). The realization that

he can never arrive at these same memories underlies Lee's admiration. Such memories are redefined or even lost in Lee's status as second-generation Asian American.

If, as Chin suggests, Asian American literature's chief value lies in its ability to perpetuate the cultures of its origin, Lee's poetry ironically fails as an exemplum of the genre to which many contemporary critics relegate it. Fortunately, Chin represents only one faction of Asian American critics. Many other critics recognize the impossibility of Chin's expectations for a pure transmission of memory. Xiajing, for instance, observes that "one's heritage is not possessed once and for all, nor is it necessarily inherited through ethnic lineage. Rather, it is changed and renewed with the changing conditions of human life and human consciousness" (115). So while Chin may disapprove of Lee's personally revised heritage, Lee fits perfectly into a new flavor of Asian American literature that Donald Goellnicht describes as "not so decidedly 'local'" in that its constituent works are not only "historically mediated forms" but also forms that "mediate history, questioning and affecting our understanding of the past and how that past is conveyed through language" (351).

Still, Chin's argument must be recognized as valid to a certain extent, in that Asian American literature, especially in the case of Li-Young Lee, displays a very real impulse towards rediscovering a "pure" heritage. This impulse competes with a counter-impulse to define oneself in American culture, effecting a debate between the need for a purely Asian culture and the reality of a redefined Asian American culture. Lee's poem "For a New Citizen of the United States" offers a perfect example of this debate. The poem presents a narrator in conflict with a familiar, yet invisible audience that wishes to forget its shared Chinese past. While the narrator invests significant meaning in such memories

as the “house where Chung hid, / Liz wizened, you Languished, and Ming . . . / hush-hushed us with a small song” (*The City in Which I Love You* 41) the audience refuses to remember, dismissing the value of the past with the statement “birds . . . fly forward” (42). As the poem progresses, Lee leaves the reader with the impression that the conflict lies also within the narrator. The narrator insists that his audience won’t remember the past and that he therefore “won’t mention” (41) it, yet the poem consists entirely of memories of the past that he has “so meaninglessly preserved” (42). The narrator seems to speak more for his own benefit than for that of his forgetful audience, convincing himself not only of the need to remember his origins, but that these memories possess relevant meaning in the first place. To the frustration of the narrator’s process of memory, the unattainable past has little effect on the present, and therefore becomes “only our / life, our life and its forgetting” (42). The need to remember—the need for heritage—becomes confused with a need to forget and thereby ease the pain of a past to which neither the narrator nor the audience can return.

Defining the American Tradition

Ironically, Lee's focus on the past as something that must be simultaneously remembered and forgotten is a key aspect of the American tradition. Acknowledging that "part of our peculiar claim to greatness as a nation rests on the fact that we have done without . . . a myth of origin" (60), Pinsky proposes that, nonetheless, "the alleged absence of memory is an illusion" (62). He argues that the absence of myth helps shape a cultural memory whose greatest task, in a sense, is to paint the past in such a manner as to create myth. This memory, concentrated around themes like "the fragility of community [and] the mystery of isolation," possesses an "elegiac quality" similar to that possessed by the narrator of Lee's "For a New Citizen of These United States," in that it is "self-contradictory in its yearning toward a past that in one way seems forgotten and sealed off, yet in another way is determinant, powerfully haunting the present" (60). This "elegiac quality" results directly from the realization that despite America's indisputable need for a myth of origin, such myths tend to break down when confronted by their historical reality or by the lack of universal cultural relevance.

T.S. Eliot describes the significance of myth in "Little Gidding" when he argues that "a people without history / Is not redeemed from time" (235-36). Eliot's statement suggests the need for "a people" to be able to trace a divine purpose in their cultural identity and course of history. But in America, at least, the task of tracing history back to a myth of divine origin is problematic. Indeed, one might argue that America possesses no history from which it can derive a pertinent myth. Of course, America most certainly has *a* history—firstly, that of its native inhabitants, and secondly, that of colonialism. But how much of either history can contemporary America honestly claim as its own personal

history or myth of origin? For all but a small and marginalized subset of the American population, the native history is irrelevant. In fact, the very existence of this native history complicates the dominant culture's attempts to ennoble its own history. Notes Pinsky: "The march of empire, colonization, and obliteration has made the dispossessed people simultaneously haunting and unattainable, a violent symbol of the past as unrecoverable yet operative, and vaguely shaming" (64). Thus, the existence of a native history deconstructs the colonial history, causing America, to some extent, to need to forget any myths of origins that it might derive from the colonial history. Furthermore, the historical proximity of colonial history reminds America that this history may, after all, not be mythic. Indeed, myth dictates the inability of the individual to recreate it, so that in its mystery and absence of detail it is to be found both power and the presence of the divine. While we may admire George Washington and Abraham Lincoln for accomplishing "mythic" deeds, their well-documented and often less-than-ideal histories offer little mystery of origin or cause for worship. Even if one can derive "myths" from their histories, one must still acknowledge that the influences of humanism and the Enlightenment—movements which center on man—are at least as operative in such myths as the presence of the divine.

This, of course, does not mean that Americans do not try to manufacture myths out of American history. For example, Whitman's "Oh Captain! My Captain!" attempts to recreate Lincoln as a tragic figure from Greek mythology. The American media offers another example with its mixed success over the last half-century in painting the Kennedy family as the builders and inheritors of America's Camelot. But such creation is an almost impossible task, as revealed in Lee's "Visions and Interpretations" (*Rose* 68-69) Lee

divides the poem into three “interpretations” of the same event, the first of which is a fantastic cemetery encounter with the ghost of his dead father. After acknowledging that this first interpretation is too fantastic, Lee presents a second interpretation, consisting of a mysterious dream that neither he nor his son understands. Lee then confesses, “Even this is not accurate. / Let me begin again,” and finally arrives at a third interpretation, one the reader is inclined to accept as the “reality”—Lee’s reading a book beside a tree. Although Lee wants to transform this reality into something mysterious and visionary, reality deconstructs the myths that he creates. Ironically, these myths seem more concrete than the reality. With each subsequent interpretation, the number of lines in each stanza decreases—from four to three to two. The sentence structure and flow of thought echo this degradation, moving from entirely coherent to confusing. The concreteness of the myths in contrast to the incoherency of reality suggests the narrator’s need to manufacture the past in such a manner as to force the randomness of memory into meaning something that the reality of it does not obviously support. Myth, however, falls apart amid a more powerful obligation to historical accuracy, leaving memory devoid of the meaning that its bearer requires of it.

The inability of the historical past to provide the individual with myth or meaning challenges both the coherence and sanity of Lee’s narrator. A similar challenge governs the themes of the majority of canonized American poets in the twentieth century. Certainly, it is a key factor in the confusion of the “To Elsie” section of William Carlos Williams’ *Spring and All*, where he pronounces that “The pure products of America go crazy” (qtd. Pinsky 67). Similarly, Pinsky sees “the defeat of reason—even the threat or presence of insanity” (62) as the chief culprit in turning the past into something haunting

that needs to be forgotten. In other words, without the meaning or sense of origin that myth provides, America's past is an omnipresent threat to the rationality of its present, with the potential to rob the individual of divine meaning and, therefore, of sanity. The process of memory becomes, as Pinsky describes, "the effort to remember in order to maintain sanity" (68). Pinsky argues that this effort is constant, inasmuch that the American people are "perpetually in the process of devising [them]selves as a people" (62). In the absence of any obvious traditions, then, this perpetual search for origin and invention of tradition effectively becomes *the* American tradition.

This tradition performs a function virtually synonymous with the function of Lee's memory in both "For a New Citizen of these United States" and "Visions and Interpretations." Memory in these poems, and indeed throughout Lee's poetry, attempts to strike a delicate balance between remembering the past in its historical sense (to maintain the reality of it), and remembering the past in such a manner that it is recreated to remind of the divine. Memory, whether it be personal or cultural, becomes the agent by which Lee searches for origin, or perhaps more specifically, the divine. Pinsky, likewise, links memory to America's search for origin in his interpretation of Frost's poem "Directive": "Frost suggests that our destiny as a people may lie in the difficult action of historical recovery—and that the source of wholeness is in memory" (Pinsky 70). This tradition of searching for origin by constructing memory as myth represents America's best effort to combat the nihilistic threat presented by the insufficiency of American historical memory. Thus, when Goellnicht describes the role of memory in Asian America as "not a luxury, an academic exercise, but the very proof of existence," he also describes the role of memory

in traditional America. In both, “the act of remembering, of putting fragments back together . . . is presented as essential for survival” (352).

That America and Asian America should share traditions of searching for origins should not be surprising. America is an immigrant culture, and as such most Americans are inevitably strangers to the land. Complicating this detachment from the land is the fact that American immigrants represent so many diverse cultures that it is difficult to arrive at a shared culture. This, in fact, may be the very reason why Lee “can't imagine anything else except writing as an outsider” (qtd. Xiajing 113)—there is no definitive shared culture to write from. This difficulty is not a recent phenomenon. The critic James Oppenheim, writing in 1920, noted that America was not an “organic fusion” like France, but “a collection” of states. Accordingly, stated Oppenheim, “Americans are held together not by unconscious identity, but by conscious ideals and interests. Americanism is not so much an impulse as a set of ready made attitudes. . . . One might expect that an American art is an impossibility” (238). Furthermore, this condition of being a collection of immigrant cultures produces its own solution to the difficulty of arriving at an American art, tradition, myth, or any other marker of identity. The fact that America is unable to trace its common ancestry to a single country simply increases the need to discover the lowest common denominator manifest in all Americans. Oppenheim proposed Walt Whitman as an example of how America could discover its art. He argues that Whitman gave America “something universal ... in the broadest sense—something equally the property of every race—camouflaged by American paint. . . . We are this universal masked in Americanism. . . . Walt was Dutch, yet Carl Sandburg, who is Swedish, can prance his soul out to the same tune and get a national expression with only a slightly

different tinge” (240). So, while immigration dilutes individual cultures, it simultaneously proposes the notion of a more universal culture. The attempt to define this abstract and unseen universal culture constitutes the search for origin that is the American tradition. According to this paradigm, then, Lee participates in the American tradition not in spite of his immigrant status, but because of it.

T.S. Eliot’s “Tradition and the Individual Talent” offers an example of this tradition at work. The “mind of Europe” that Eliot seeks in “Tradition and the Individual Talent” echoes Oppenheim’s attempt to discover identity in a more universal origin. Indeed, encompassing not only Whitman’s Netherlands and Sandburg’s Sweden but everything from England to Italy, the term “mind of Europe” almost perfectly describes the composition of early twentieth century America. On one hand, this collective mind created a melting pot, wherein it became very difficult to retain pure culture. Critic Lee Oser notes that “The American melting pot clearly threatened traditions that Eliot . . . prized above all others” (56). For Eliot, Americanism represented the demise of pure culture and the art that related it. In a 1928 preface to E. A. Mowrer’s *This American World*, for example, he labeled Americanism as a “malady” that threatened to infect Europe (qtd. Oser 55). His flight from America, as well as the flight of many early twentieth century expatriates evidences the power of such convictions. On the other hand, the European mind, at the time that Eliot wrote “Tradition and the Individual Talent,” offered Eliot the only possibility of redemption. It was, in his words, “a mind which [the poet] learns in time to be much more important than his own private mind.” It was also somehow related to the “mind of his own country” (2171). It is perhaps significant that Eliot equated “his own country” with “the mind of Europe” instead of something more

localized. Apparently, even returning to the England from which his ancestors came, Eliot had difficulty finding identity in one country alone. Instead, he traced his poetic heritage to “the whole of the literature of Europe,” which “has a simultaneous existence and composes a simultaneous order” (2171). Such consistency between the “whole of the literature of Europe” could only be read into its literary history by one whose consciousness was shaped in America, a land which obscures the reality of the differences between individual European cultures, leaving behind a more universal mind.

Eliot’s “Tradition and the Individual Talent” is intriguing, then, in that it is on one hand Eliot’s attempt to escape the melting pot of America, and on the other a pronouncement of his enslavement to it. From his insistence that the “poet must develop or procure the consciousness of the past” (2173) to his description of tradition as “a matter of much wider significance” than simply being aware of the previous generation (2171), Eliot’s theories are informed by his largely American need for the artist to arrive at some great connection to his roots, thereby establishing a meaningful identity. “No poet,” he declares, “has his complete meaning alone” (2171), which can be true of any culture, but further suggests his awareness of his confused American condition. What makes his declaration of origin in the “mind of Europe” even more interesting is his paradoxical description of the European mind as one “which changes, and that this change is a development which abandons nothing en route” (2172). Contrary to its inherent chaos, Eliot, by this statement, constructs European history as a myth whose supposed mysterious consistency appears to be guided divinely towards perfection. This creation of a European myth was not an isolated incident for Eliot—in *The Waste Land*, for example, Eliot attempted to trace European origins to India, proposing that the discovery of such

roots could restore meaning to the modern condition. The loss of pure culture that motivated Eliot not only to search for but create this myth of origin shows that his “mind of Europe” was in fact a construct of the American tradition, filling a very American need for collective origins—and not an accurate depiction of any pre-existing European tradition.

Tracing the role of the American tradition in Eliot’s “Tradition and the Individual Talent” is crucial to a discussion of Lee because the same impulses that informed Eliot’s theories drive Lee to unconsciously adhere to those theories. An examination of Lee’s labor of memory, searching for origins in American, Christian, and Chinese sources alike, reveals that his cultural memory—the ability to associate his personal experience with the accumulated experiences of the Chinese and Western traditions—plays a significant role in his attempt to uncover the influence of the divine in his own life. Lee’s engagement of cultural memory evidences his indirect adherence to the prescription of “Tradition and the Individual Talent”: that “the dead poets, his ancestors, assert their immortality most vigorously” (2171) within his work. Lee himself notes that “poets are always arguing with the dead” (“Voices”). That Lee, an Asian American, is traditional in the sense that he engages cultural memory is a fact that Eliot would appreciate, having claimed that tradition “cannot be inherited” but must be obtained “by great labor” (2171). In fact, Eliot’s insistence that tradition “cannot be inherited” suggests that, in America’s case, tradition is a product of one immigrant condition. In this tradition the individual, whether it be Lee, Eliot, or the reader, must labor to move beyond the limitations of inherited culture and discover how he or she belongs to a more universal tradition.

Of course, there are many ways in which Lee's poetry places him in traditional America—his Protestant background or his ability to put poetry into plain speech, for instance. Having mentioned cultural memory specifically, though, it is important to briefly survey the sources that constitute this memory. Among Lee's influences are the larger Western traditions of Greek mythology, Shakespeare, and the Bible, in addition to a number of prominent American poets. Kitchen points to Whitman and the Bible as the sources of "Furious Versions." He also links the source of "The Cleaving" to Lowell and the source of "The City in Which I Love You" to Eliot's *The Waste Land* (161-62). Stern, who suggests that a number of poems, including "Dreaming of Hair," have "a direct link to the later [William Carlos] Williams," nonetheless states that Lee is "reminiscent more of John Keats, Rainer Maria Rilke, and perhaps Theodore Roethke than William Carlos Williams on the one hand or T.S. Eliot on the other" (Stern 8). Lee himself lists a potpourri of influences: the book of Genesis, the epistles of St. Paul, Whitman, the Tang and Han dynasty poets, Bruno Schulz, Rilke, Emerson, Chuang-Tzu, and Lao-Tzu (Lee Interview). While his style is less allusive than Eliot's, it is still easy to find the dead poets surfacing directly in his work. For example, in "The Cleaving," the narrator says, "I would eat Emerson, his transparent soul, his / soporific transcendence" (*The City in Which I Love You* 83). Biblical allusions are especially prominent—the title poem of the same book opens with a quote from *Song of Songs* and then alludes to *Ecclesiastes* with the statement, "I never believed that the multitude / of dreams and many words were vain" (*The City in Which I Love You* 57).

It is especially notable that Lee lists the Chinese influences on his poetry in conjunction with American. The casualness of such listing suggests, as Stern notes, Lee's

“pursuit of certain Chinese ideas, or Chinese memories, without any self-conscious ethnocentricity” (9). Carol Muske describes the effect as “pairing Walt Whitman with the great Tang dynasty poet Tu Fu” (qtd. Hsu 146). Lee does not try to separate his Chinese heritage from his American upbringing; rather, he attempts to merge the two, throwing his Chinese heritage into the American melting pot and essentially extending the mind of Europe. In this manner, Lee’s poetry hints at a possible refutation of the Wakayama Group’s claim that no Asian American can adopt the dominant culture and still retain his or her Asian heritage. Lee *can* “say ‘we’” and mean not only “the people who produced Chaucer, Shakespeare, and Milton” (qtd. Kim 228), but also the people who produced Tu Fu and Wang Wei.

Lee’s debt to his Western sources constitutes a large part of Lee’s claim on the American tradition. “I guess it’s inescapable,” he says, “I’m a part of it. . . . I love David the Psalmist and Song of Songs and Whitman. So I’m a part of a tradition that is Judaic and Christian and secular North American” (Lee Interview). However, it must be remembered that his debt to these sources has nothing to do with any conscious attempt to be traditional. They are simply a reference point in his very personal search to discover what he believes to be his own divine origin. But as such, they remind the reader that Lee’s search is not unique. Lee’s search is a familiar one, shared by poets and readers from all traditions. By giving his personal search a context within the American tradition, Lee’s poetry makes the reader aware of its universal implications.

Lee and the Search for Origins

Much more significant to Lee than cultural memory is his personal memory. Although this personal memory often begins with more recent occurrences, such as experiences involving his wife or son, it almost inevitably takes trajectories to his immigrant past. Because of his own distance from this past, particularly from his father's history, which he knows only from stories, Lee's personal memory "creates" the past as much as it remembers it. This creation is not, precisely speaking, a fabrication, but rather a collecting and organizing of the fragments of the past that Lee can remember. Individually, these fragments are apparently inconsistent with and without relevance to his present life in America. However, as he connects fragments, Lee builds a sense of his Chinese origins—and, because Lee's Chinese heritage allows him to participate in the American tradition of searching for beginnings or roots, of his American origins as well. The process of recovering personal heritage through memory reveals both the confusion of the immigrant condition and the underlying universality that emerges from that confusion.

Lee's poetry often reveals his awareness of his position as an immigrant. In "The City in Which I Love You," for example, Lee finds himself wandering "throughout this / storied, buttressed, scavenged, policed / city I call home, in which I am a guest" (*The City in Which I Love You* 49). This sense of being a guest in the city he calls home is echoed in his comments on the English language: "I'm highly aware I'm a guest in the language." Yet, at the same time, he must call America his home because of his inability to fully return to his place of origin. Finding, in his words, "my birthplace vanished, my citizenship earned" (57), Lee must constantly labor to define his American citizenship, a

task that on one hand reminds him of his status as guest and on the other hand emphasizes his need to participate in American culture. “For a New Citizen of These United States,” as discussed in the first section of this essay, is a perfect example of the resulting conflict.

“The Interrogation” similarly explores this conflict. The poem is presented as a conversation between two impulses. The first, represented by italics, continually inquires into whether or not the narrator can make sense of or even remember his heritage. The second stubbornly resists these recollections, expressing its frustration with memory in its repeated declaration “I’m through with memory.” Whereas the first impulse attempts to reconcile the narrator with his immigrant history, the second insists upon a need to forget in order to survive, resolving, “No more letting my survival depend on memory” (*The City in Which I Love You* 34). Implied in this dual position is the paradox between his ancestral heritage and his American lifestyle. Lee’s poetry attempts to sort through this paradox and discover consistency between the positions. Thus, like Eliot, he searches through memory (albeit personal as opposed to historical) in an attempt to place himself in context of something more universal. Says Lee: “The purpose of memory is to remember my original identity. . . . Although my memory involves working through a lot of personal memory, ultimately what I’m trying to recover is my genuine and original identity with the cosmos, or God” (Interview). This God is ultimately the God his father, a protestant minister, has taught him to have faith in—a God whose presence Lee believes explains the course of his memory. In order to recover his original identity with this God, he must sort through his memory and discover some interpretation of the past that justifies his faith in a divine presence. He must also discover exactly what explanation this divine presence will provide for his life.

In the process of recovering an original identity, Lee encounters the same obstacles that complicate the American tradition. Lee's poetry often confronts the difficulty of investing meaning into memory. "Visions and Interpretations," for example, documents both his need to manufacture memory as myth and his obligation to historical accuracy that makes this task seemingly impossible. In "Epistle," meanwhile, Lee resolves to find meaning in a more accurate version of memory, even if that means sorting through confusion and settling for something less obviously divine than myth. This version of memory, he insists, "is not heavenly and . . . is not sweet. . . / but it is what I know, and so am able to tell" (*Rose* 14). But even this version of memory is often times inconsistent and illogical. For example, in "Furious Versions" he moves from a memory of dusting the pews at his father's "snowbound church" to what is presented as the logical conclusion that "that means I was born in Bandung, 1958; / on my father's back, in borrowed clothes, / I came to America" (*The City in Which I Love You* 13). Lee's "Mnemonic" makes similar leaps of logic, arguing, "God was lonely. So he made me. / My father loved me. So he spanked me." Lee is thus aware of and disturbed by his memory's disjunctive tendencies. In the same poem, he worries that "my father / would be ashamed of me. / Not because I'm forgetful, / but because there is no order / to my memory, a heap / of details, uncatalogued, illogical" (*Rose* 66). Such inability to organize memory constitutes a threat to sanity similar to the one that Williams expresses. For example, in "Ash, Snow, or Moonlight," Lee's disorganization makes him suddenly incapable of placing himself inside of reality, asking, "Am I stricken by memory or forgetfulness? / Is this the first half of the century or the last? / Is this my father's life or mine?" (51).

The shame and threat to sanity that result from the disorder of Lee's memory only increase his resolve to order it. That the catalyst of this shame is his father emphasizes memory's position as a function of his heritage. Thus, the main goal in his poetry is often the one he describes in "This Room and Everything in It": "making use / of the one thing I learned / of all the things my father tried to teach me: / the art of memory." Sadly, even concentrated attempts to organize memory, such as those of this poem, tend to reveal its disintegration. Throughout the poem, Lee builds up a system of mnemonics to derive such meanings out of memory as "that scent / of spice and a wound, / I'll let stand for mystery" (*The City in Which I Love You* 51). By the end of the poem, however, he can no longer remember what is connected to what. He laments:

useless, useless . . .

your cries are song, my body's not me . . .

no good . . . my idea

has evaporated . . .

it had something to do

with death . . .

it had something

to do with love. (52)

However, this poem finally suggests that, after all, memory and the search for origin that it represents may yet reveal the divinity Lee seeks. Despite the fact that he has confused the particulars of his memories, Lee is still able to arrive at the conclusion that they all "had something to do" with death and love. Lee, who believes that as an individual becomes more serious about life, his "dialogue with the culture shifts radically"

and becomes a “dialogue with his own death on the one hand, and divinity on the other” (Interview), is thus able to work through the disintegration of memory in “This Room and Everything in It” and arrive at the two defining forces of his existence. Memory launches him beyond the details of his cultural or personal memory and into a discussion between a potentially nihilistic existence and Lee’s faith in divine purpose.

Like “This Room and Everything in It,” Lee’s “With Ruins” also succeeds in investing memory with the potential to overcome its temporal insufficiency and arrive at a more universal discussion of origin and meaning. This success is especially interesting to a discussion of Lee’s place in the American tradition because the poem’s allusive nature arguably qualifies as what Eliot’s “Tradition and the Individual Talent” salutes as “simultaneous composition” between the poet and his poetic ancestors. In this case that ancestor is Frost by means of the poem, “Directive,” which poem “With Ruins” alludes to in its opening lines. For Lee, the allusion is spiritual. He says of Frost’s poem, “That poem deeply affected me; . . . there’s some sort of spiritual truth in that poem that I really digested” (Interview). But while the allusion results from Lee’s spiritual connection to “Directive,” it nonetheless results in literary connections between it and “With Ruins.” Pinsky notes the impact of “Directive” on the American tradition, hailing it as “perhaps the most profound poetic contribution” to the “project” of American memory (70). Thus, we might expect that “With Ruins” also engages the American memory. In fact, the poem seems to simultaneously operate as cultural memory, in regards to “Directive,” and personal memory, in regards to Lee’s attempt to put the poem in personal terms. In so doing, “With Ruins” becomes an extension of “Directive”—the voice of the twentieth

century immigrant adding an emphatic “me, too” to Frost’s suggestion of being able to find spiritual truth through a journey of memory.

The first stanza of “With Ruins” immediately calls attention to “Directive.” It begins:

Choose a quiet
 place, a ruins, a house no more
 a house,
 under whose stone archway I stood
 one day to duck the rain. (*The City in Which I Love You* 43)

Lines one through three allude directly to the destination of “Directive”—“a house no more a house.” With this allusion, Lee suggests to his readers that they have arrived at the same ruined locale as that at which they arrive in “Directive.” In both poems, this locale is defined by absence and loss, implying that it is haunted by the unrecoverable memories of its former inhabitants. Frost, describing the journey to the house, says that “the height of adventure is the height / Of country where two village cultures faded / Into each other. Both of them are lost” (156). Lee, meanwhile, describes the house as composed of:

The roofless floor, vertical studs,
 eight wood columns
 supporting nothing,
 two staircases careening to nowhere, all
 make it seem

a sketch, notes to a house, a three-

dimensional grid negotiating

absences,

an idea

receding into indefinite rain,

or else that idea

emerging, skeletal

against the hammered sky. (43)

This locale, in fact, needs to be haunted. Pinsky, discussing Williams' *Spring and All*, notes that "if the landscape is not haunted, Williams implies, then it is a meaningless excrement" (68). Similarly, Lee and Frost need their landscape to be haunted by an absent past in order to find meaning. If the landscape has no connection to that past, however confused it may be, then exploring the landscape can reveal nothing of one's origins.

The absence that haunts the landscape is compounded by the American melting pot. Frost's description of "country where two village cultures faded / Into each other" and thus are "lost," applies literally to colonial New England. The anonymity of these cultures, however, suggests that they could represent any of the distinct cultures that have faded into "America." The fact that Frost considers both as lost implies that the America he envisions does not preserve any of its originating cultures; rather, it creates something entirely new to replace them. While Frost would like to transport the reader "back in a time made simple by the loss / Of detail" (156)—a time whose apparent lack of detail allows the modern reader to conceive of it as the "simple" origin of the created American

culture—he acknowledges that even in New England this idealization is nothing more than the operation of a weak memory.

Similarly, Lee’s description of the landscape “negotiating absences” reminds the reader of the absent past upon which the “house no more a house” is founded. That Lee refers to multiple absences instead of one single absence emphasizes that this past is plural in nature, belonging to no single identifiable entity. Thus, Lee seems to be aware of the complexity of the American immigrant condition. He is also aware that his late arrival in America makes him a guest even to this condition. His family arrives at America, or, in terms of the poem, the house “under whose stone archway I stood / one day to duck the rain” (43), to escape the politics of Asia. Nonetheless, he recognizes commonality between the absence that afflicts his memory and that which afflicts the American memory. The poem continues:

There are no neighbors to wonder

who you are,

what you might be doing

walking there,

stopping now and then

to touch a crumbling brick

or stand in a doorway

framed by day.

No one has to know you

think of another doorway

that framed the rain or news of war
 depending on which way you faced. (44)

In this way, Lee suggests that despite the fact that his memory geographically locates itself outside of New England, the ruins are still able to affect him in the same manner as they affect Frost. In fact, Lee suggests that everyone who approaches these ruins shares the immigrant predicament:

It's a place
 for those who own no place
 to correspond to ruins in the soul.
 It's mine.
 It's all yours. (45)

There are many possible readings of this last stanza. For example, one might suppose that Lee is essentially handing the ruins over to his readers, as if to say he wants nothing more to do with them. Another reading, one which I favor, proposes that Lee wants to remind his readers of their own involvement in the ruins, essentially echoing Frost's "Here are *your* waters and *your* watering place" (157, emphasis added).

In any reading of the poem's last line, however, reader involvement is key. In fact, both "With Ruins" and "Directive" belong to a long tradition of poems in which the poet feels empowered to speak for the reader on account of the assumption that the reader and the poet are, to some extent, the same entity. This assumption in the last stanza of Lee's poem—that "mine" is also "all yours"—seems particularly indebted to Walt Whitman, who in regards to Lee, at least, may represent the quintessential American "origin" for his

poetry. In particular, I refer to Whitman's bold proclamation at the beginning of *Song of Myself*, that "what I assume you shall assume, / For every atom belonging to me as good belongs to you" (22). In the same manner that Whitman asserts the poet's inseparability from the reader, the second-person narration in both Lee's and Frost's poems emphasizes that the absence these poems describe belongs to every American. Thus, while both Frost's and Lee's journeys begin as personal ones, the assumed universality of their journeys demands reader involvement, suggesting to the reader that he, too, must confront the ruins of the past—the ruins of tradition and memory.

Lee's use of the term "negotiating absences" also suggests the need to move from absence to wholeness, a movement that both poets endeavor to create. Lee portrays the poem's confusion as a transitory state—"an idea / receding into indefinite rain, / or else that idea emerging." While this confusion recalls a very real disintegration of memory, it also makes it possible to forget that disintegration and emerge into a sense of wholeness. The effect is such that, as Lee states, "There you can remember / what you need to / remember" (43). The anonymity of the ruins permits the reader to more fully employ memory to arrive at his or her origins, in that Lee encourages the reader to substitute his or her own memories in place of the example memories he provides. The form of these memories will vary from person to person—"It all depends / on the course of your memory," Lee states. However, the memories all share the same direction: "away" (44). Thus, the ruins function as a point of origin. Lee's insistence that they allow the reader to remember "what you need to remember" emphasizes the capacity of the ruins to serve as a defining myth of origin.

This capacity of the ruins is somewhat frightening in that it represents the potential for nihilism to supplant myth or faith as the ideological source of meaning. This potential justifies the first reading of the last stanza that I proposed—that is, Lee’s poem serves primarily to suggest his frustration with memory. Under this reading, preoccupation with the ruins, and therefore with the search for origin, becomes not only pointless, but counterproductive—one should simply walk away from the ruins. In other words, one should simply acknowledge the past is ruined and get on with living in the present.

My favored reading of the last line, however, invests the ruins with a more utilitarian purpose. Reading Lee’s poem in connection with Frost’s clarifies that these ruins are also a potential catalyst to the process of recovering myth and, by extension, the process of restoring faith in meaning. Frost effects this recovery thematically, beginning with a description of absence and ending with a recipe for wholeness. The poem turns around the statement “and if you’re lost enough to find yourself” (156), implying that the landscape not only creates an absence that necessitates movement back to wholeness, but that in order to find wholeness, one must be willing to journey into and accept confusion. Frost, too, paints this state of confusion as a source of origin for the reader. Towards the end of the poem he reveals, “your destination and your destiny’s / A brook that was the water of the house, / Cold as a spring as yet so near its source.” This brook delivers wholeness to the reader. Frost implores, “Drink and be whole again beyond confusion.” Thus, that this brook is “cold as a spring as yet so near its source” implies the reader’s proximity to his or her own myth of origin. Contributing to this myth is the cup from which Frost implores the reader to drink—“a broken drinking goblet like the Grail” (157).

It may be a “broken” myth, but even so, the cup, the brook, and the house all function as a myth of origin wherein the reader can overcome the confusion of the American condition.

Lee’s willingness in “With Ruins” to remember “Directive” at the same time he remembers his own heritage evidences the simultaneous composition that Lee achieves with Frost. I must emphasize that this is by no means deliberate simultaneity. Rather, it exists because Frost and Lee, as poets writing within the American tradition, both concern themselves with a similar absence and confusion inherent to that tradition. Thus, Lee’s personal memory returns to the same ruins that Frost describes in “Directive.” And, at least in the reading I favor, both arrive at the same solution—they both recognize that (to extort a possible double meaning in “With Ruins”)—it all *depends* on the course of your memory. Only by choosing to remember in spite of the weakness of memory can one begin the process of discovering his or her identity and origins. For Lee, as for Frost and perhaps any poet, this memory must rely not only personal experiences, but on equally powerful cultural experiences—in other words, the literary, social, ethnic, and religious traditions to which the poet belongs.

Lee's "Furious Versions" and Eliot's *Four Quartets*

While a comparative reading of Lee's "With Ruins" with Frost's "Directive" is obviously warranted because of the first poem's allusion to the latter, there is no such obvious justification for my next comparative reading. In fact, Lee seemed surprised that I would even propose comparing his "Furious Versions" with Eliot's *Four Quartets* (Interview). However, there is certainly precedence for a comparison between Lee and Eliot. For example, lines three through five of "The City in Which I Love You"—"I mount the scabbed streets, / the long shouts of avenues, / and tunnel sunken night in search of you"—remind one of lines from "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock." In this context, the line "my most excellent song goes unanswered" (*The City in Which I Love You* 51), makes an interesting dual reference to the Song of Songs and to "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock." Meanwhile, as Hsu points out, "Furious Versions" echoes "Prufrock," in its opening question, "Will I rise and go / out into an American city?" (13). So it is no stretch to suppose that the voice of Eliot subconsciously reverberates in one of his poetic successors. But the justification for a comparison between "Furious Versions" and *Four Quartets* is less allusive than topical. Each poem attempts to thwart the nihilistic threat of temporal time by finding meaning in an eternal and notably Christian "divine will."

To ascertain this "divine will" each poet must confront and pass through the temporality of his own heritage. Eliot, who by the time he wrote *Four Quartets*, may indeed have plugged the hole of the American tradition with his adoption of the Anglican faith and British citizenship, nonetheless uses his poem to show the inevitable demise of British tradition over the passage of time—a problem accentuated in war's potential to

destroy both British society and the Anglican church. Thus, Eliot needed to establish a dialogue between himself and British consciousness in order to plot a divine will for his “new” nation’s future, thereby preserving meaning in his identification with his new faith. Lee’s stated purpose is similar: he is “trying to come to terms with [his] personal history and the presence of a divine will inside that personal history. Trying to find out if it existed and in what form or what shape” (Interview). Lee, too, senses that the inevitable passing of time complicates the task of exploring one’s heritage in the context of divine will, a problem he summarizes in section six of the poem:

But I own a human story,
 whose very telling
 remarks loss.
 The characters survive through the telling,
 the teller survives
 by his telling; by his voice
 brinking silence does he survive.
 But no one can
 tell without cease
 our human
 story, and so we
 lose, lose. (*The City in Which I Love You* 26)

In other words, if the “human story” cannot survive time, what does that say about the supposed divinity guiding that human story?

Much like Eliot, Lee attempts to solve this problem by establishing a dialogue between himself and his poetic heritage. Says Lee: “‘Furious Versions’ was a very personal thing. . . . I needed to write those poems. And I think that was the beginning for me of a very personal dialogue with poetic consciousness” (Interview). Implied in his effort is the logic that if God exists, and if evidence of divine intervention can be discovered in Lee’s past, the presence of the divine must therefore extend to the present and eventually to the future.

Both poems are outwardly similar in that they are written in series: the *Four Quartets* is four long poems, each consisting of four or five parts; and “Furious Versions” is written in seven sections. The poems and parts are connected not by any linear ordering, but by their continual refinement of an initial idea. Each of Eliot’s *Quartets* are set in or inspired by a different place, and each may have been written years apart, but as Eliot’s decision to group them together suggests, they form a coherent whole, each part refining and expanding previous parts by adding insights derived from new times and places. “Furious Versions,” meanwhile, consists of selections from forty or fifty drafts of the same poem. Lee gives us the final poem as “a record of the drafts exactly the way they came down” (Interview). This perpetual refinement suggests that one method both poets employ in their attempt to discover a divine will is to continuously re-write history or memory in order to construct it as something with greater meaning.

Memory, for both poets, relies on similar symbols and events. For example, both poems make frequent use of roses. The rose, as a Christian symbol, is vital to the conclusion of *Four Quartets*—that “the fire and the rose are one” (145). Lee, meanwhile, uses it in many poems, especially in his first book, *Rose*, wherein, Gerald Stern notes, the

rose comes to represent “history, the past, a ‘doomed profane flower’ to be adored and destroyed” (10). This seems consistent with its use in “Furious Versions,” wherein it becomes, as it does for Eliot, both a mnemonic device and a Christian symbol of refinement by fire. Lee states:

The mind is

a flowering

cut into time,

a rose,

the wandering rose. . . .

Each bloom unsheathed

in my mind, urges, *Remember!*

The Paul’s Scarlet!

Paul, who promised the coming

of the perfect and the departing of the imperfect. (20)

This “doomed profane flower” represents a certain permanence in its recurrence throughout Lee’s work. If it can survive its own condemnation, then it takes upon itself the same reassuring significance of the surviving rose garden in Eliot’s “Burnt Norton.”

Another prominent symbol in the poets’ memory is water. Lee writes in “Furious Versions”:

To think of the sea

is to hear in the sound of trees

the sound of the sea’s work,

the wave's labor to change
 the shore, not for the shore's sake, nor the wave's,
 certainly not for me,
 hundreds of miles from the sea,
 unless you count
 my memory, my traverse
 of sea one way to here.
 I'm like my landlocked poplars: far
 from water, I'm full of the sound of water. (25)

The water Lee refers to is the ocean that carried him to America. On one hand, the water represents the birthplace or point of origin that Lee's memory attempts to recover. This is the same point of view that Lee adopts in his poem "Water," where he describes the "Sound / of water, which is the oldest sound, / the first sound we forgot" (*Rose* 25). Eliot, in "The Dry Salvages," expresses a similar sentiment: "The river is within us, the sea is all about us." For Eliot, the water represents some unseen current that connects the human race. On the other hand, this same water represents loss or destruction. In the same poem, Eliot notes, "It tosses up losses . . . the broken oar / And the gear of foreign men" (*Four Quartets* 130). Lee's "Water," meanwhile reminds the reader of the need to forget the water—this point of origin—because of the loss it represents as a divider between America and Asia.

Perhaps the most intriguing point of comparison between "Furious Versions" and *Four Quartets* is the similarity between the Dante scene of "Little Gidding" and the end of part five of "Furious Versions." In these sections, both Lee and Eliot describe a dreamlike

walk through the streets of their hometowns, during which they encounter the ghosts of dead poets. Eliot runs into the “familiar compound ghost” (140) of Yeats, Swift, and Dante, among others. Meanwhile, in “Furious Versions,” Lee meets the ancient Chinese poets, Li Bai and Du Fu:

America, where in Chicago, Little Chinatown,
 who should I see
 on the corner of Argyle and Broadway
 but Li Bai and Du Fu, those two
 poets of the wanderer’s heart.
 Folding paper boats,
 they sent them swirling
 down little rivers of gutter water.
 Gold-toothed, cigarettes rolled in their sleeves,
 they noted my dumb surprise:

What did you expect? Where else should we be? (24)

For Eliot, the compound ghost represents, as Peter Ackroyd observes, “a recognizable entity called English literature” (271) of which Eliot envisioned himself a part. Li Bai and Du Fu serve a function similar to that of Eliot’s compound ghost, representing a Chinese origin from which Lee draws inspiration. In answer to Lee’s implied question, “What, are you here?” (the same question that Eliot asks of the familiar compound ghost in line 98 of “Little Gidding”), the dead poets answer nonchalantly, “What did you expect? Where else should we be?” The poets, it seems, are shocked to discover that Lee finds their presence in America surprising. This paints a picture of not only Lee’s ability to remember his

Chinese heritage but also of a Chinese tradition that comfortably transplants itself in American soil as a result of literary, cultural, and spiritual universals. Redefining both Chinese and American traditions, Lee displays the uniqueness of the American memory in that it creates an environment where Li Bai and Du Fu can stand next to Eliot, Yeats, Swift, and Dante. Together, these poets compose a universal “human story”—an “unbroken / stream / . . . simultaneously / told” (*The City in Which I Love You* 26). Surely, then, Lee possesses Eliot’s “historical sense” of tradition, which, with the dead poets, Chinese and American alike, creates a “simultaneous existence and composes a simultaneous order.” (“Tradition” 2171).

At the center of Eliot’s and Lee’s encounters with dead poets is the search for myth or origin. The “compound ghost” undoubtedly represents the origin of Eliot’s poetic consciousness, advising him of his identity and reassuring him that his identity will remain significant and secure in spite of the passage of time. Obtaining this reassurance from tradition or myth, in fact, seems to be Eliot’s purpose throughout much of *Four Quartets*, as he attempts to draw from and in some instances create myths of British history. Meanwhile, Lee encounters Li Bai and Du Fu as a consequence of his attempt to derive a sense of origin from his father. “Furious Versions” revolves around the father-son relationship, a cyclical connection that seems to culminate in his father’s ghostly presence in the poem’s final part:

Tonight, someone, unable
to see in one darkness,
has shut his eyes
to see into another.

Among the sleepers,
 he is the one who doesn't sleep.
 Know him by his noise.
 Hear the nervous
 scratching of his pencil,
 sound of a rasping
 file, a small
 restless percussion, a soul's
 minute chewing,
 the old poem
 birthing itself
 into the new
 and murderous century. (29)

“Someone” seems to refer both to the narrator and to his father, or perhaps more specifically, to the narrator’s realization that he is an extension of his father. Lee’s passage to China and therefore to his “origins” must inevitably pass through his father, inasmuch that, as Stern observes, “Understanding, even accepting, the father is . . . the critical ‘myth’ in Lee’s poetry.” Stern insists that Lee’s father “is more godlike” than a normal father, both in his capacity for love and in the terror his demand for perfection invokes in his son (9). Indeed Lee’s father often has dual identity—his earthly father and his Father and Heaven—as if Lee accesses the divinity of the latter through remembering the former. In his poem, “The Gift,” Lee illustrates this godlike influence. He first of all traces his personal identity back to his father. In describing a memory of his father removing a

splinter from his hand as a boy, Lee says, “Had you followed that boy / you would have arrived here / where I bend over my wife’s right hand” (*Rose* 15). But not only does his father function as myth in that Lee can trace his identity to him, but also in that Lee appears to worship him. The memory in “The Gift” concludes, “I did what a child does / when he’s given something to keep. / I kissed my father” (16). In this sense, Lee’s father is similar to Eliot’s England, whose history Eliot essentially worships in the chapel of Little Gidding. Both Lee’s father and Eliot’s England—origins which the poets can see and easily approach—become access points to a more abstract and incomprehensible divine origin.

In their exploration of personal origins, both poems espouse a need to organize memory, which serves a redemptive role for both Eliot and Lee. Eliot says, “This is the use of memory: / For liberation . . . / From the future as well as the past” (*Four Quartets* 142). Lee, meanwhile, states that “memory revises me.” But at the same time, memory inevitably reminds its bearer of the possibility that it can be rendered meaningless through its inevitable loss. Thus, Lee places emphasis on his father’s advice, “Don’t forget any of this” (*The City in Which I Love You* 18). The key factor in this loss of meaning, though, is not necessarily in forgetting. In fact, forgetting is not necessarily bad for either poet. It encourages each to look beyond the temporality of the past for what they hope to be a more eternal purpose underlying what they can still remember. Instead, the inability to organize that memory into a form that can render it meaningful is the true nihilistic threat. Eliot observes that, “Words move, music moves / Only in time; but that which is living can only die,” hinting at his regret at the potential for life to be rendered meaningless by its passage. Yet Eliot feels that if he can concentrate this movement around a “still point”—a

point at which time ceases to exist and the entire universe becomes unified in its creator—he can discover his divine origins. In other words, if one can stop the passage of time, or at least move outside to an eternal “still point,” the “words” and “music” (and thus, memory) will not only be preserved, but will bring one closer to the divine. But this can only occur if one can properly organize words and music. “Only by the form, the pattern,” says Eliot, “can words or music reach / the stillness” (*Four Quartets* 121). Incidentally, Eliot appears not to be concerned with whether or not one can organize memory enough to actually recover identity. In “East Coker” he says, “there is only the fight to recover what has been lost / And found and lost again and again. . . . / But perhaps neither gain nor loss. / For us, there is only the trying. The rest is not our business” (*Four Quartets* 132). This statement seems at least to hint that one can achieve satisfaction simply in the attempt to recover a sense of origins. As long as there remains the possibility that such origins can be recovered and must therefore exist, memory thwarts its own nihilistic threat.

Lee also notes that disorganization—time-dictated human chaos—silences memory: “Something forbids me to speak / of them in this / upheaval of forms and / voices” (*The City in Which I Love You* 17). Such disorganization removes memory’s ability to speak, and thus accelerates the loss of the “human story.” Lee also notes that “my memory’s flaw / isn’t in retention but organization,” suggesting that he already remembers everything he needs to remember. Thus, he comes to the only possible solution: “I’ll tell once and for all / how someone lived” (27). He then offers a short history of himself that culminates once again in the father-son relationship: “And always he stood erect to praise or grieve, / and knelt to live a while / at the level of his son’s eyes” (28). Telling this with such finality seems to set memory in a permanent form for the

speaker, defined not by comprehensiveness or even realism in detail but by its success in connecting those details together to create and reverently worship a pertinent myth of origin. This permanence of meaning allows memory to withstand the disintegration of time—to move, in effect, to a “still point.”

Part of this quest to organize memory is an awareness of a conflict between the temporal and timeless moment, or, in other words, between movement and the “still point.” In the temporal moment, everything is subject to change, including Lee’s attempt to “once and for all” tell “how someone lived,” and thus is subject to death. Both poets, however, describe a timeless moment that transcends the temporal and retains a sense of permanence. The foundation for such a moment lies in observation: as one searches through memory, “the past has another pattern, and ceases to be a mere sequence” (*Four Quartets* 132). This pattern is cyclical, revolving around the perhaps unattainable still point of absolute meaning. So, also, Lee’s description of “the old poem birthing itself into a new and murderous century” paints a picture of life as a cyclical pattern, revolving around some hidden point. Both poets appear to believe that it is possible to circumvent time by stepping into a new dimension of consciousness.

Eliot’s description of the timeless moment is almost cryptic, perhaps even mythical: “Not the intense moment / Isolated, with no before and after, / But a lifetime burning in every moment / And not the lifetime of one man only / But of old stones that cannot be deciphered” (129). For Lee, this timeless moment means that “the past / doesn’t fall away, the past / joins the greater / telling, and is” (*The City in Which I Love You* 26). Both poets, however, describe it as the simultaneous existence of birth and death. Says Eliot: “We die with the dying: / See, they depart, and we go with them. / We are born with

the dead: / See, they return, and bring us with them” (*Four Quartets* 144). Lee meanwhile, describes the “old poem,” which we are led to believe is his poetic consciousness, as “something / about to be dispersed, / something about to come into being” (*The City in Which I Love You* 15). Thus, both poets discover, in a sense, a timeless origin. To the extent that the past doesn’t entirely fall away, it is thus eternally relevant.

However, this concept of a timeless moment, or “still point,” conflicts with the obvious reality of the temporal moment. Eliot describes the paradox in “Burnt Norton:” “To be conscious is not to be in time / But only in time can the moment in the rose-garden, / The moment in the ardour where the rain beat, / The moment in the draughty church at smokefall / Be remembered” (*Four Quartets* 119-20). In other words, the only way to achieve permanent meaning is to escape time, yet Lee and Eliot can only explain and understand the events that define meaning in temporal terms. Thus, poetry becomes, as Lee describes, the negotiation of “the eternal consciousness versus the temporal consciousness” (Interview)—an attempt to redeem time by discovering a middle ground where it can coexist with the timeless moment. Eliot insists that this negotiation requires a deep religiosity of the poet: “To apprehend / The point of intersection of the timeless / With time, is an occupation for the saint— / No occupation either, but something given / And taken, in a lifetime’s death in love, / ardour and selflessness and self-surrender” (*Four Quartets* 136). This statement connects the task of discovering that middle ground to the conflict between faith and nihilism, suggesting that the individual can arrive at that middle ground only by becoming aware of his or her own divinity. This statement is also at once a declaration of Eliot’s intent to discover and live in the timeless moment, and his acknowledgement that he may never achieve such an existence.

“Furious Versions,” meanwhile, represents Lee’s own attempt to place himself in a timeless now. Lee insists, “These are not drafts / toward a future form, but / furious versions / of the here and now” (*The City in Which I Love You* 19). But even though Lee would like to transcend to this moment, he recognizes his own inability to do so. Thus, he essentially volunteers to remain in and confront the temporal moment. “But I’ll not widow the world,” he says. “I’ll tell my human / tale. . . / I’ll measure time by losses and destructions” (27). Lee’s negotiation between temporal and eternal consciousness ends in what is perhaps a stalemate. He is aware of an eternal consciousness, but he accepts responsibility to make sense of memory and time. Yet at the same time, his acceptance of this responsibility also represents Lee’s renewed determination to once and for all resolve that negotiation. The more he can make sense of his memory and personal history, the closer he can come to the eternal God he hopes to find at the center of their cyclical movement.

Conclusions: Beyond the Mind of Europe

There is, perhaps, a great distinction between Lee's and Eliot's attempts to redeem time—that of personal versus historical or cultural stakes. Eliot's poetry, of course, lives and dies by the ability of culture or tradition to provide the individual with meaning. But whereas Eliot's poetry "is not the expression of personality, but an escape from personality" ("Tradition" 2175), Lee's poetry stakes everything on the ability of the "expression of personality" to arrive at meaning.

Lee best describes the difference between himself and Eliot:

As time goes on, I find him really problematic. . . . His sense of the divine will is very narrowly Christian, for me. . . . His dialogue is ultimately dealing with the canon, with the culture, with the church. All of that is earthly stuff. For me, poetry has to become a vertical dialogue, has to become absolutely dealing with your personal death and a personal God. (Interview)

Lee, who suggests that Eliot "never transcended the dialogue with the culture," feels that the only way to express God is to move beyond culture, relying on personal experience to reveal the existence of the divine. He continues,

His dialogue is with already established symbols and ideas and he's not making headway into new territory to express God in a personal way. I would like to know how he senses God in his own life. His sense of God is not personal enough for me. It's more historical. . . . It has to do with England and the Anglican church. For me, that's a problem because there's no stakes, ultimately. I mean, I stake my life on it. But that means it's my

personal life. . . . That personal stake hasn't entered his work yet.

(Interview)

However, the lack of a personal stake that Lee senses in Eliot's work has perhaps more to do with the differences between the eras in which the poets write than with Eliot's supposedly overemphasized faith in modern culture. Whereas at the time Eliot writes, the composition of America is such that it can still trace the origin of its traditions primarily to the mind of Europe and thus find meaning in a culturally oriented dialogue with that mind, Lee writes in a time when the American tradition must find roots not only in Europe, but in Asia, Africa, Native America, and Latin America. Thus, the contemporary poet can no longer assume that the reader (or even he, himself) is capable of translating cultural dialogue into personally relevant meaning. Because of a lack of universality in any specific cultural heritage, the poet must refer to a primarily personal rather than cultural history in order to discover his or her identity within America.

Thus, in "With Ruins," Lee arrives at the same ruins as Frost, but whereas Frost can discuss the meaning of those ruins in terms of New England or a Grail quest, Lee must "remember another doorway" more personal in nature. In so doing, however, Lee makes the event more universal by emphasizing that any "course of memory" can bring the reader to this place and lead to the same wholeness that Frost discovers. In "The City in Which I Love You," Lee offers another example of the anonymity of culture when he observes "Over the National Bank, the flag of some republic or other" (55). Lee does not mention which national bank or which republic—that detail is lost. So on one hand, this anonymity has the potential to throw the culturally minded individual into an epistemological crisis. On the other hand, the anonymity shows a potential irrelevance in

the details of culture. The nationality of the city that Lee walks through does not matter because the personal memories that he attempts to sort through are more universally relevant. This universality is the only possible origin for the American tradition to discover: if memory is culturally rather than universally relevant, then in America, any meaning the past offers is problematic.

Lee's poetry, then, represents an expanding of America's mind of Europe to a more universal mind. "The Cleaving," the final poem of *The City In Which I Love You*, evidences the emergence of this universal mind. In it, Lee addresses his "brothers and sisters by blood and design, / who sit in separate bodies of varied shapes," and observes, "we constitute a many-membered / body of love" (81). Lee readily acknowledges the "separate bodies of varied shape" that make up the human race, but traces their origin back to a universal "blood and design." He views the entire human race as variations on or interpretations of a universal text—"God is the text," he says. He describes individual differences between members of the human race as "each one's unique corruption of those texts," and later adding, "All are beautiful by variety" (81). The poem also emphasizes the American identity of Asian America when he clarifies his statement, "these Chinatown / deaths" by adding "these American deaths" (83). Thus, Lee establishes his own claim to the American identity. Furthermore, the poem leads inevitably to a description of the American melting pot. The central figure of the poem, a Chinese butcher, gradually transforms into something universal:

He is
my sister, this
beautiful Bedouin, this Shulamite,

keeper of Sabbaths, diviner
of holy texts, this dark
dancer, this Jew, this Asian, this one
with the Cambodian face, Vietnamese face, this Chinese
I daily face,
this immigrant,
this man with my own face.” (86-87).

But for Lee, at least, this universal mind appears to lose nothing in the American melting pot. Each culture coexists in the same immigrant face, once again hinting at an underlying commonality in the American condition. Significantly, this face is Lee’s own face. By virtue of his immigrant status, he is at once Asian, Jewish, and Anglo American, or perhaps more accurately, simply American.

“The Cleaving” shows that while Lee is aware of his own status as guest in America, he is also aware of that status for all Americans. Says Lee: “I’m highly aware I’m a guest in the language. I’m wondering if that’s not true for all of us” (qtd. Miller 36). Thus, he can speak from within the American tradition not in spite of his immigrant status but because of it. Consequently, Lee contributes to a merging of Chinese and American cultures, or perhaps even a grafting of the former into the latter. Of this merging process, Lee notes, “I’m not consciously trying to do it, but I’m aware of the fact that I have two very natural tendencies in me. One is very North American. . . . [But] there’s . . . a stronger pull—and I would say it’s my Chinese background—towards greater and greater introversion” (Interview). The combined effect of these two tendencies is Lee’s significant contribution to the expansion of the American tradition to include Asian

influences. Lee, himself, seems aware of this effect, saying in regards to the American tradition that, “I suppose my contribution to it would be the contribution of a kind of Eastern sensibility” (Interview).

Exactly what this “Eastern sensibility” is, Lee does not make clear. He mentions that his Chinese heritage leads him towards “greater and greater introversion” (Interview), so convincing the reader to turn inwards for meaning may be a part of this sensibility. It may also point to a renewed emphasis on the divine, which is key to Lee’s work.

Regardless of whether his memory discusses his father, son, wife, Chinatown, or the Bible, everything in it is connected by his attempt to discover or reveal the divinity behind it. Lee’s poetry often performs the same function as that which he identifies as underlying the poetry of the Tang Dynasty (who are, of course, also part of that Eastern sensibility): “They said that a poem should perform a service for the reader. It should make the reader aware of his or her at one-ment with the rest of the universe” (Interview). Just as in “The Cleaving,” that sense of at one-ment is transmitted by showing not only how his personal history arrives at a sense of divine origin, but how the reader’s does as well.

The significance of this “Eastern sensibility” to the American tradition is not simply that it adds more diversity to America, but that it expands the strategies available for Americans to arrive at a source of origins. Thus, when Lee’s poetry engages the America tradition—that is, when it arrives at the point of confusion that drives Frost to search for origins in a New England “house no more a house,” or that drives Eliot to search for origins in a mythologized mind of Europe—Lee’s poetry can take advantage of Lee’s fresh perspective to build upon this tradition of searching. The merging of American and Chinese cultures in Lee’s poetry further evidences the final result of this

search through the confusion of memory and culture—the discovery of a universal mind, beyond time and culture. Regardless of the course of one’s memory, Lee’s poetry suggests, the modern American individual can discover meaning by sorting through that memory and tracing his or her personal history back to this divine origin.

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APPENDIX A:

TRANSCRIPT OF INTERVIEW WITH LI-YOUNG LEE

This interview, conducted by Karl Thomas Rees, was held over the telephone on the afternoons of January 30th and 31st. The first section part of the interview began on January 30th at 1:00 PM MST. Mr. Lee had to interrupt the interview because of a forgotten appointment with a life insurance agent. The interview resumed the following day at 2:30 PM MST.

Rees: First of all, thanks for talking to me today.

Lee: Oh, sure, sure.

Rees: I really love your poetry. I write poetry so it's been inspiration for me.

Lee: Great.

Rees: My first question was, which writers and poets have had the greatest influence on your writing?

Lee: Hmmm. Boy, there are so many. I don't know, the book of Genesis. The epistles, Paul. Uh, I guess Whitman. The Tang dynasty poets hugely have influenced me. The Han Dynasty poets. Bruno Schulz; he's a fiction writer, but...

Rees: Oh, I've never heard of him, actually.

Lee: Yeah, he's wonderful. He's just, I think, brilliant. His work's just full of God... Rilke. Ralph Waldo Emerson. Chuang-Tzu. Lao-Tzu.

Rees: I know you spend a lot of time discussing memory in your poetry. Are poetic traditions an important element of your concept of memory?

Lee: Well, you know Karl, I have to be honest with you. For me, the purpose of memory is to remember my original identity. Now I'm going to talk very candidly. It seems that although my memory involves working through a lot of personal memory, ultimately what I'm trying to recover is my genuine and original identity with the cosmos, or God. I suppose I think of the poem as a negotiation of the divine will and the personal will. It's evidence of that negotiation. Does that make sense?

Rees: Yeah, I think so. So, it's more about discovering yourself than perhaps having a conversation with past poets.

Lee: Yeah. But you know, I do recognize that when an artist works, I do think that there is a very long apprentice phase where your work is a dialogue with existing canon—your own canon—the poets that you love, the poets that you read. In the same way, I think, that a young person will spend very many years. Most of his or her thoughts are a dialogue with the culture. That is, it's a horizontal dialogue, an extroverted dialogue. Do you know what I mean? It's a dialogue with images of manhood or images of womanhood or images of success, or if you buy the right shoes, or if you're this person, do you buy the right car, or if you're that person... In other words, that's all a dialogue with the outer world. But I think at some point, if a person becomes serious, then that dialogue shifts radically and it becomes a dialogue with his own death on the one hand, and divinity on the other.

And I think that's replicated or that's mirrored in the development of the poet, where in the beginning a lot of his work is a dialogue with other writers, like Shakespeare or Whitman or the Chinese Han Dynasty poets, or something like that. But at some point you're no longer an apprentice and it becomes very serious, and your dialogue becomes much more anxiety ridden, I would say. And more... there's more at stake, so that your dialogue's actually with God or death or something like that. I don't know if it sounds crazy...

Rees: No, actually it's great to hear you say that... What, in your opinion is the American literary tradition? Do you consider yourself as part of it through your poetry, or do you consider yourself outside of it?

Lee: I suppose that's the business of a literary historian to kind of account for all the people who are writing. I don't think of myself, uh... I guess it's inescapable, Karl, I'm a part of it, right? I mean I love David the Psalmist and Song of Songs and Whitman. So I'm a part of a tradition that is Judaic and Christian and secular North American. I shouldn't even say secular, because I don't believe poetry is secular. I believe it's a religious activity, you know. But I guess I'm a part of it. I can't escape that. I suppose my contribution to it would be the contribution of a kind of Eastern sensibility.

Rees: Do you consider your poetry... I mean, obviously there's Chinese influences... are you trying to merge—you're probably not consciously trying to do this—but does it merge the two cultures?

Lee: Yeah, and you're right, I'm not consciously trying to do it, but I'm aware of the fact that I have two very natural tendencies in me. I mean, one is very North American. I think there's really a stronger pull—and I would say it's my Chinese background—towards greater and greater introversion. And my firm belief, and it's not... I don't know if North American poetry is even thinking about these things, but it seems to me that poetry has to have something to do with the evolution of human consciousness in general. Otherwise we're just making knick-knacks or something, you know. We're just making doilies or wall decorations, and I'm not interested in that. But I'm deeply interested in the way art is a part—is an integral part—of our evolution towards deeper, greater divinity, wholeness.

Rees: Okay. Moving on to the subject of your opinion of Asian American Literature, do you consider yourself well-read in Asian American Literature?

Lee: You know, I'm not very well-read at all, in general. I'm a very slow reader. But I have read some Asian American Literature. And you know, I love a lot of it... I mean, the same way I love other literature. I mean, I don't read it... It's not Asian American to me, it's art. And that for me is finally, like, you know, whether or not I'm reading art. For instance, Maxine Hong Kingston, she's a great artist. I don't see her as necessarily an Asian American writer. She's a great artist. Or Marilyn Chen, I think she's a fine poet. I don't see her as an Asian American poet. I mean, her subject is Asian American poetry, but ultimately she's up to the same thing. She's trying to negotiate the divine consciousness and the temporal consciousness; you know, the eternal consciousness versus the temporal consciousness. That's

what a poem is. And I think she knows that deep down, and that's what she's trying to do.

Rees: So do you think that critics who focus more particularly on the Asian American aspect of Asian American literature are taking things too far?

Lee: You know Karl, I don't know about that. I don't know anything about their pedagogy, so I don't know what they're teaching. You know, I feel ambivalent about it, Karl. On the one hand, if looking at that kind of literature empowers a certain population that has up to this point been ignored because of racial problems, then it's good. But I think if it ghettoizes the writer and refuses to see, for instance, Maxine Hong Kingston as an equal writer to, I don't know, Virginia Woolf—that somehow she is like a special interest; she's not genuine artist—I think that's problematic; that that's probably no good. But if it allows writers who have up to this point been ignored because of their race, I think that solves that problem. I mean, nobody thinks of Allen Ginsberg as a Jewish American writer. Or Philip Levine—he's a great, great poet—but nobody thinks of him as a Jewish American writer. I mean, he's just a writer, he's a poet. And it seems to me you *could* look at his work through the lens of Judaism, but I think *he* transcends it. *He* looks beyond it. I think Maxine Hong Kingston is beyond whatever little puppy hole we would like to place her.

Rees: In the thesis that I'm working on, part of what I'm thinking about is the paradigm that says that American colonialism is a movement from absence to wholeness—they come from Europe to America and there they find wholeness. And I'm trying

to put that in terms of Asian America, and I think you're poetry perhaps display this. Is there a similar movement of absence to wholeness among Asian Americans, or more particularly, in your poetry?

Lee: That's a great question, Karl. I don't know about that. I know this, Karl. I know that we are bi-cameral as human beings; that is, we have two hemispheres to our brain. We have two houses—you could think of it as the left side and the right side. And it seems to me that most of the world, and especially in education, which is I think very problematic, stresses the left brain. That is, it's logical, mathematical, rational, you know. And we don't even pay any attention to the right brain. . . . And I think that that accounts for a lot of the suffering in the world. And I think that it accounts for the kind of lack of sacred feeling in the world, in our culture—like Hollywood or MTV, you know. I think the problem is that we're not whole. We don't use both sides of the brain. And it seems to me the great thing about aesthetic consciousness is that it demands that we use both the rational and the irrational; that means the left and the right side of the brain. You know, the image making, the intuitive right side, and the logical, linear left side. So then, the wholeness I'm trying to achieve is whole brain, whole consciousness. And I think the more whole we are, the more we are able to witness the presence of a greater personhood in the cosmos—a greater wisdom than our own. As long as we're only using the left side of our brain, it seems to me that that's really dangerous. You know, Karl, it seems to me we would never bring children in the world and say use only one eye, one leg, one foot, one arm, and hop around, and you're not allowed

to use the other arm. We would never do that. It's ridiculous, I mean. And yet we cripple children from Kindergarten even through Graduate school. The over-emphasis on the left side of the brain without any regard for the right brain, that seems to me really crippling. And I think it accounts for the kind of secularism that we experience in the culture, the difference between the sacred and the profane. Because I think that the experience of the sacred is the experience of whole consciousness in the world, in our lives, in flowers, trees, clouds, everything, you know. So I would say that great thing about poetry and any kind of art is that it engages the whole brain. That's the kind of wholeness that I'm after. Does that make sense Karl?

Rees: Yeah, that makes perfect sense. That's great. Well, maybe moving on specifically to the poems I wanted to ask you about, first of all, I wanted to talk about "With Ruins." I notice in there that you begin with an allusion to Frost's "Directive"—"A house no more a house." I was wondering if you allude to it as a sort of framing device for the poem, or...

Lee: Um, no, you know Karl, I think that that poem deeply affected me; that there's some sort of spiritual truth in that poem that I really digested. So when I wrote "With Ruins" I realized that there was a lot of infusion in my blood and in my bones—in myself—from Frost. It wasn't like it was a conscious literary device for me to refer to Frost, or anything. It's just that there's a spiritual, emotional truth in that poem "Directive" that I really took to heart, I think. I mean, I worship that poem. For years it's really a true poem. So that poem, I think, fathered my poem.

Rees: You talk about it having a higher spiritual truth. What is that for you?

Lee: I guess for me it's the very real experience of mercy in the universe or love in the cosmos. That that's at the bottom of everything. And something really wishes us to evolve towards more and more consciousness of our at onement with everything else, including God. That we're not separate from God. We're not separate from birds and trees and animals and rocks. It's all one thing, highly articulated. It's not like a giant soup or anything. You know, every time somebody says at onement, other people think it's like one big soup. I don't think it's a big soup, I think it's a big essence called the cosmos, and that we're integrally involved. And, I guess, just the evolution towards that consciousness of that involvement... our at onement with all these things. I don't know if I'm making sense, Karl...

Rees: No, that makes sense. Is it just that poem that affected that way, or does Frost do that in general?

Lee: Well, many of Frost's poems do that. And many of Whitman's poems do that. And a lot of the Tang dynasty poets do that. That was, in fact... the Tang dynasty poets, they actually articulated that as their goal. They said that a poem should perform a service for the reader. It should make the reader aware of his or her at onement with the rest of the universe. They actually articulated that. I think Frost was actually afraid of that. I think Frost didn't want to be seen as a crazy old man or something like that, and I think he backed off a little. But I think when he wasn't backing off, he was right there. Like in poems like "The Sound of Trees" or "Directive." Or "West Running Brook." That one, Karl, is a great one. He

actually talks about our being one with this kind of river of existence. I think when he was clear he wrote beautifully like that.

Rees: If you had to say what your message was in “With Ruins” without writing the poem, what would you say the message was that you mean to get across to the reader?

Lee: Well, I don’t know if I was trying to get anything across I could paraphrase. I guess the poem is just the tracks I left behind. It’s just a record of my own thinking and feeling. I suppose I hope that a reader by reading through it can find a way to their own quietness or their own solitude or the place inside of their heart, or... I don’t know Karl. (Laughs).

(At this point, the interview was interrupted and resumed the following afternoon)

Rees: I wanted to ask you about “Furious Versions.” First of all, what motivated you to write the poem?

Lee: Well, it’s the same thing, you know. I guess it’s a kind of inner urgency, trying to get in touch with something like divine consciousness. But that particular poem—those pieces, the numbered sections—are actually drafts. I was writing these drafts and I couldn’t get to the poem, so what you have there is a kind of record of the drafts exactly the way they came down. I must have about forty or fifty versions, and I just picked the ones that were most coherent, so they’re kind of like stream of consciousness, almost. But a little more directed than stream of conscious. It’s like going into a trance and the words just kind of happen. . . . Just trying to come to terms with my personal history and the presence of a divine will

inside that personal history. Trying to find out if it existed and in what form or what shape.

Rees: This may be trying to dig too deep or something like that, but I had noticed and I had read a couple of other critics who noticed that the poem shows a lot of similarities to Eliot's works. And particularly, *Four Quartets*. I was wondering if that's intended, or incidental.

Lee: You know, I love a lot of Eliot. There's a lot of Eliot that I love. I love the *Four Quartets*. But as time goes on, I find him really problematic. It's almost as if his sense of the divine will is very narrowly Christian, for me. He becomes almost a mouth piece for the church. And I think that's problematic because for me, human beings weren't made by God so we could serve the church. The church serves human beings. My sense is that the same God that made the stars and galaxies and mountains and rivers—that God is a lot more inclusive than the God Eliot divines in his work. And so Eliot is problematic for me, although his music is gorgeous. I guess I'll put it this way, Karl. His dialogue is ultimately dealing with the canon, with the culture, with the church. All of that is earthly stuff. For me, poetry has to become a vertical dialogue, has to become absolutely dealing with your personal death and a personal God. It's almost as if he never transcended the dialogue with the culture, do you know what I mean? And ultimately there's little difference when you're talking with the culture whether that culture includes the Anglican church or the Roman Catholic church or a Buddhist temple or whatever. But I'm after something a little more vertically oriented. I don't know if this makes sense.

Rees: Yeah, he seems to be trying too hard to fit in with culture rather than transcend it.

Lee: Yeah. And as a result, his dialogue is with already established symbols and ideas and he's not making headway into new territory to express God in a personal way. I would like to know how he senses God in his own life. His sense of God is not personal enough for me. It's more historical or something, you know. It has to do with England and the Anglican church. For me, that's a problem because there's no stakes, ultimately. I mean, I stake my life on it. But that means it's my personal life, you know. Whereas that personal stake hasn't entered his work yet. As gorgeous as his music is. As brilliant as he is intellectually.

Rees: Would you say that that work had any influence on "Furious Versions" at all, or am I reading that into it?

Lee: Well, no, "Furious Versions" was a very personal thing. I mean, I needed to write those poems. And I think that was the beginning for me of a very personal dialogue with poetic consciousness, or God consciousness, or Christ consciousness, or Buddha consciousness, or whatever you want to call it. But I wasn't at all thinking of Eliot.

Rees: The rest of my questions are more for my personal benefit as a poet. I was wondering about your writing habits, like how much do you write, what kind of things you use to get you started writing.

Lee: Well, I write every day, you know, but sometimes they're just ideas, sometimes they're little paragraphs, just little descriptions of things. . . . So I'm writing every day, but they don't always come out as poems.

Rees: Do you set aside a time to write?

Lee: You know, Karl, I just feel like I'm doing it 24 hours a day. Yeah, whenever something occurs to me, I jot something down. Sometimes it's a line, sometimes it turns into a poem. Sometimes it's a piece of a poem. Sometimes it's a couple of paragraphs. I mean, things are always coming to me. I'm always writing things on notecards and notebooks and there's just stuff all over the place. I'm very disorganized. I tried being much more organized about it, but I felt that I was cutting it off, that I was actually narrowing myself. So I just write whenever something comes to me. It can be the silliest things, you know, like noticing something about the way my wife chops garlic, or something. . . . Last night I was pulling down the shades and I noticed that there was a strange color of purple in the sky and I just sat down and jotted something down just to make a note of that color. I mean, things are always happening.

Rees: Are you working on putting together a book right now?

Lee: Yeah, I'm handing in a book of poems to my editor this week that should be out this year.

Rees: Great. I look forward to seeing that. That's all my questions. Thanks a lot.