"And Truth—so Manifold!"—Transfeminist Entanglements

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Abstract
How are we theologically imagining feminism’s further becoming at this juncture of multiple intertwined uncertainties? Aided by a poem of Emily Dickinson, this meditation on a transfeminist (not postfeminist) potentiality within and beyond Christianity plies a trinity of entanglement (relationality), mystery (apophasis), and multiplicity (polydoxy).

Key Words
apophasis, entanglement, intersectionality, multiplicity, pluralism, polydoxy, transfeminist, unknowing, wisdom

We learned the Whole of Love—
The Alphabet—the Words—
A Chapter—then the mighty Book—
Then—Revelation closed—

But in Each Other’s eyes
An Ignorance beheld--
Diviner than the Childhood’s—
And each to each, a Child—

Attempted to expound
What Neither—understood—
Alas, that Wisdom is so large—
And Truth—so manifold!

Emily Dickinson (1862)
[Janet, if needed: (Johnson 1962, p. 144)]

At Winchester University there lives, through the intensive nurture of Lisa Isherwood, a vital fold of transnational and transgenerational feminism. It is the many transits, transitions and translations involved in this nonlinear and necessary evolution that I wish to consider under the heading of transfeminism. It is just an opening word, an experimental neologism for minding the uncertainty and the multiplicity of the situations of women at the beginning of a new and quaking millennium. Transfeminism does not
mean postfeminism. That term—already much publicized in the 80's—implies that feminism has already delivered on its promises, thank you very much, but the second wave got essentialist, strident, anti-male, orthodox, old or unsexy; that now it is time to think of women as—just people. At this point postfeminism—named or unnamed—may suggest more of a “sex and the city” mood or a got-it-already assumption than an anti-feminist positionality. And of course especially in the vicinity of theological symbols (God the Father & Co.), postfeminism reverts quickly to prefeminism.

Transfeminism would grant that feminism has almost from the start been in danger of freezing into its own orthodoxy, even as it challenges various ortho-patriarchies. Any movement that speaks a new truth strongly—and repeats it—risks orthodoxy. And will get old. There have been no stronger truth-openings in the 20th century than those provoked by the movement of women, within and beyond the churches. And truth is always an opening, dis-closure, no? So to consider feminism in this moment as transfeminism is to consider a discourse and a practice in transition, transversing the andromorphic closures of rule or habit; it is transgression in service of transformation. It is also to admit that I no longer teach a course called "feminist theology" though I often use a preponderance of texts by feminists and other women. And I sometimes write shamelessly on and on with no explicit reference to a woman author, female figure or biblical heroine, or even to the question of gender or even sex. But I consider this symptomatic not of any feminist exhaustion or postfeminist triumph but of a certain stretchy relationalism in process.

So let transfeminism signal the self-transformation of the identity politics of the so-called second wave; and at the same time, a warning against any naive confidence in our historic achievement. This transfeminist version of feminist theology will come into play here with three criteria I am finding indispensable to being a theologian, or for that matter, a woman: these will be entanglement, considered as relationality stretched from intimacy to infinity; unknowing, considered as apophatic uncertainty stretched from ignorance to wisdom; and polydoxy, considered as the teaching of the manifold, stretched from orthodoxy into pluralism. These correspond to the threefold criterion explored in the collective work of Polydoxy: relationality, mystery and multiplicity (eds. Keller and
Schneider 2011). Theos-logos speaks honestly only when it recognizes the contextual uncertainty of its own language. Over the past few decades, feminism has heightened Christianity’s attention to the relationality of language. The point was not to erase old metaphors or to reify new ones but to recognize—there where language collapses in the face of what exceeds it—at once the politics and the poetics of that logos. Theology in other words may work most constructively as theopoetics.

II

Theopoetics—an heir of an ancient theopoiesis, the ‘making divine’ of the patristic and apophatic heritage—may or may not wax poetic or even interpret poetry. But in this case I want to read with you a poem that has been haunting me. It reads as pre-feminist or proto-feminist, at least in the sense that its author was not part of the early suffrage movement, nor for that matter, of any movement. Nonetheless, and oddly, it will help to ease open the transfeminist criteria I have just named. It is by the mid 19th century New England poet whose aura of tragically reclusive Victorian femininity has obscured her dark brilliance; one can miss the edgy radicality of what she calls her "compound vision.” This is of course Emily Dickinson.

We learned the Whole of Love—
The Alphabet—the Words—
A Chapter—then the mighty Book—
Then—Revelation closed—

Pause there. She is referring to her good Christian education. “We learned the Whole of Love”: Dickinson seems to be summing up the orthodox certitudes of biblical Christianity. She lends it the texture of its letters, its literality, its revelatory Book: and Then—Revelation closed—dash. It takes a moment to realize that she means all the layers of her own compressed signifiers: the book of Revelation is the final book of The Book; it closes the canon. And with it, history itself. It seems that revelation itself, as apo-kalypsis, as dis/closure, has closed for her, and with it perhaps salvation history itself. And her private abyss of lost love echoes in this closure. This stanza makes theological trouble: the already known, already learned totality of love is by definition
closed, in its traditional rendition: this is the word of God, and Christian salvation offers the final closure. Period.

For her that closure was inseparable from the other closures imposed by conventional faith, family and language. In another poem she writes: "They shut me up in Prose—As when a little Girl /They put me in the Closet—Because they liked me "still”—. (Franklin 1999, p. 206). Again, the dash. It is the silencing of her young female voice she protests. One need anachronistically sexualize her closet to recognize the proto-feminist force of the image. And is the closet itself not already resisted by the dash itself? The dash is a much discussed syntactical impropriety of her writing, where lines, stanzas and whole poems end in dashes, insistently refusing: closure. Closerie. The closure of prose and its literalism; the closure of the closet. According to one critic (Weisbuch 1981), the dash creates a pressure, a tension, a nervous breath—and at the same time a “hinge.”

But then in Each Other's Eyes
An Ignorance beheld—

In the intimate gaze of the other—perhaps another with whom one shared the narrative that closed—ignorance has taken the place of all that we had learned, the totality of belief. And in each other’s eyes we glimpse that appalling blankness. An abysmal unknowing seems to descend. But she’s tricky. There follows immediately:

Diviner than the Childhood's—

So no mere emptiness of knowledge after all, no childish naiveté, no mere void of faith. This ignorance seems itself to be marked as something “diviner.” In the open eyes, has the closure been answered by some new dis/closure? Might we associate this divine ignorance with what the 15th century mystic Nicholas of Cusa, called the "knowing ignorance"? (Keller 2010). The one personal revelation he claimed was of this unknowing, the docta ignorantia (Cusa 1997). It is his alternative to the unknowing ignorance of believers who do not know how much they do not know, the know-it-all ignorance of those who already have the truth. Those who think they have learned “the Whole of Love”? The knowing ignorance is a Renaissance Catholic expression of a much older tradition of negative theology. Is Dickinson, in her late Puritan, transcendentalist
context, hovering mysteriously close to the sensibility of apophatic mysticism—that which unsays whatever it first says of divinity? Which unsays apodictic prose through apophatic metaphor?

Her next line seems to negate the prior one:

'And each to each, a Child—'

Attempted to expound

What Neither—understood—

Alas,

It seems that the very relation of each to each now makes possible a new effort to speak. There is insinuated a new beginning: becoming a child, again? From the perspectival interplay of this becoming-child, she seems to be reinforcing our attention to speech out of its element, in the incomprehensibility that at once pulls us to explain even as it thwarts our capacities. No grace comes cheap to Dickinson. But when it comes it bursts with revelatory force.

...that Wisdom is so large—

In other words: this unknowing yields not a void, not a *nihil* of knowing, but an excess, not knowledge but Wisdom. We will want to consider the size and the spirit of this sophic immensity, in its chaotic stretch beyond the bounds of any closure. One thinks of Luce Irigaray’s inflection of the infinite, *infini*, as the unfinished. It reveals no dearth of truth but to the contrary, a perspective then and now impossible for standard western models of knowledge or of faith:

And Truth—so manifold!

The excess of a wisdom liberated from the closure of revelation discloses: the manifold. Mirrored in the eyes of the others, she announces the multiplicity of truth. Already Augustine, in his *Confessions*, in his exegesis of the first couple of verses of Genesis in his *Confessions*, had already come upon that manifold: “an abundance of true meanings” (XII.26.p. 327). But the thinking of that originative multiplicity did not quite make it past the doctrinal closure even that of his own subsequent writings. The pluralist potential remained latent. What Laurel Schneider calls the “Logic of the One” has proven
formidable in the formation even of a trinitarian orthodoxy (Schneider 2008). We
conspired on the Polydoxy project because we find nothing so vital to the spirit,
indeed even to its attempts to ‘speak rightly ’ its orthodoxies, than attention to our
entanglement, each to each, in the abundance of this multiplicity.

So perhaps you sense how this diminutive, reclusive, New England poet hints at a
possible transfeminism. Dickinson's transgressive truth manifold—her compound vision,
contracting, achingly, so much into such brief poems—lets us expound what we also may
not yet quite understand. And in particular, where feminist revelation threatens in this
millennium to shut down, it might convey “the alphabet, the words ”—uncertainly,
relationally, multiply—of genders, sexes, opening in a manifold Wisdom.

III

What I am trying to expound, what keeps luring me and eluding me, could be called a
negatively theological relationalism. But that sounds more negative than negative
theology ever is. Perhaps, then, an apophasic entanglement (Keller 2012a, 2012 b). An
attention to how what we most need to know exceeds our capacities to capture it: but
inspires fresh speech, even theopoetics, nonetheless. Or all the more. And for some of us
it is precisely the history of our feminism in the journey through paradigms of gender, as
they have opened into other intimately entangled paradigms, that has necessitated
systematic attention to a truth so manifold... I mean especially the paradigms of sexuality
and race, ecology and economics.

I went through seminary in the mid ‘70s, just as feminist theology was coming to be as
such and as an organ of second wave feminism. Then subsequently, in a Phd program, I
gleefully worked with Rita Nakashima Brock to bring Mary Daly (GynEcology just out),
to campus. I was absorbed in the prophetic intensity of the voices of women, worried and
engaged by debates about how you could “be a feminist and a Christian too,” and
unconcerned to relativize an identity—that of Woman—that was being “heard into our
own speech”(Morton 1985). Of course I was not oblivious to the fact that my advisor
John Cobb was doing some careful woman-hearing. I was also gripped by the relational
cosmology of process theology. For all its Anglo male metaphysics it helped to articulate the feminist meaning of interdependence, constituted in a sociality that precedes and exceeds any single identity or context, even that of the human. Whitehead in the 1920s had taken a responsive sociality down to the level of the quantum interactions. So some part of me was hungry to think the manifold of populations and perspectives that was beginning to complicate the feminist voice. That part was mildly allergic to the unifying feminist certainties—even as I depended upon them. (Social movements are full of auto-allergic reactions.) Nonetheless as the wavelets of the second wave swelled and crashed, the conceptual carnage on the US scene was considerable. The tension between a monolithic focus on gender and the needs of lesbians was difficult, but often contained within the same Euroamerican cadres. First of all Black women, but then a wide spectrum of women of color, two-thirds world women as well as the hyphenated –American identities, were talking back, now not just to the pale male but, alas, to the white Woman. Breaking up a political illusion of growing unity, these voices in their multiplicity made clear that we whitefeminists did not already know them, did not speak for them, but must first be still and listen. Not easy for women only just unlearning an imposed stillness.

I have spoken elsewhere of the “apophasis of gender”: like negative theology, the negation of what we thought we knew opens us to an otherness that we have yet to understand (Keller 2008). Mystery thwarts mastery. It confronts us with our own ignorance. So the negation makes possible a new affirmation, something like the knowing ignorance—in each other’s eyes. Far from an excuse to remain ignorant, it teaches me how much more I have to learn and can. I considered this in terms of a feminist four-fold: from a genderfold to a colorfold to a queerfold to—the manifold itself. But the manifold serves as place holder for the open sequence of intersecting, entangling and asymmetrical social contexts (gendersexraceethnicityclassspecies….) which Judith Butler dubbed the “embarrassed etc.” (1990, p. 182). The ellipsis of the open ended list of names recalls Dickinson’s destabilizing dash— And it recalls not just namings but unnamings: we weren’t ladies, we were women—a term problematized then by sexual identity; we were lesbian then queer then LGBTQIA (not quite yet Dickinson’s Alphabet) ; no longer negro
but Black, then African American, womanist now, but no, some remain African American feminists; and we are hispanic or latina/o, or mujerista or—. We always leave some out, and they, or we, negated, roar self-affirmingly back, briefly silencing us/them again. And what about ageism? The differently abled? Religious difference? Animals? Or pardon, nonhuman animals? The earth itself?

Of course this restless tumult of names has provoked postfeminist eyerolling since the early 1980’s. One may lament or laugh off the impossibility of getting a liberating list stabilized in language. Or we might we welcome its excess as the symptom of ‘Wisdom so large’? Indeed it echoes the apophatic affirmation of the many names of that which infinitely eludes any name. It demonstrates how our inextricable entanglement in each other’s contexts, from the personal through the political to the planetary, makes any notion of a saturated or a separable context delusional. That separability was the problem with identity politics from the start. We meant to take account of the social nature of the self by insisting on (social) context. A good start. But we named those contexts as though they were divided from each other by evident boundaries: that is how gender and race and class were made knowable. All too knowable, eventually. A kind of essentialist closure, sealed sometimes more by knee-jerk suspicion than by conversation, hardened notions of identity and context. But if social contexts are no more discretely bounded than individuals, they live by intersection and interdependence as surely as do selves. It is perhaps not an accident that from the start voices of the most vulnerable within the women’s movement were countering the delusion of a monolithic identity-context. For instance, the notion of simultaneity was articulated already in the 1970’s by the Combahee River Collective, to express the complexity of the situation of black women as enmeshed—simultaneously—in race, class, gender and sexual oppressions. And Kimberlé Crenshaw’s notion of intersectionality helped to theorize the same challenge over a decade later (Crenshaw 1991). Though one need not infer that womanists were in general less prone to essentialism than others, it African American women who from the beginnings of the second wave were already pointing beyond the embarrassed etc. of competing contexts of oppression to a systemic complexification.
Methods poststructuralist, post- and de-colonial, have intensified the work of multiplicity, pitting difference and multiplicity against simplifying closures. And all along feminist theology has been branching into ecofeminist theology. Our sociality could no longer be described as merely human. Increasingly we recognize the hideous peril to which our civilization has subjected the context of all our contexts. We begin to understand that we have not understood, alas, the delicate interdependence composing the living earth. I cannot but allude to Lisa Isherwood’s recent book, The Fat Jesus, in which—in cahoots with “ample goddesses” the “full bodies of the women who love the earth” are with expansive wisdom enfolded in the “body of the earth” (2007, p. 138). Only an ecotheological corpulence that embraces women’s whole bodies can enfold the manifold and multiverse of bodies “so large.”

These transfeminist vectors all converge upon a manifold that is not a mere many, not a bunch of single ones, not a set of single identities externally related. This is crucial. The Wisdom of relationalism invites no relativism of multiple contexts—you in yours and me in mine, competing for scarce resources. It invites rather a conspiracy of complexification: the work of a multiplicity connected by the pli, the fold, between each of its members. Each plies the earth as living manifold. All things are unfolding in multiplicity, and simultaneously being enfolded in complex unity. This process is open-ended, infiniti, unfinished. And ultimately, theological.

As to this cosmic relationalism—I occasionally get possessed by its ancestral female voices such as the British Vicountess Anne Conway, or more recently, and probably unknown to anyone reading this: Antoinette Brown Blackwell. In 1914 she wrote The Making of the Universe: Evolution The Continuous Process Which Derives The Finite from the Infinite. “Constitutionally we are at once individual and social,” she writes. “All phases of our amazingly complex activities work together in correlation” (Blackwell 1914, p. 18). ‘Creation is a boundless and endless adaptation of coworking methods. Every invention is a new correlation’ (Blackwell 1914, p. 20) This cosmos infinite and unfinished in its interactivity is unfolding in our own constituent relationality. This is a quite extraordinary anticipation of process cosmology. “Process, as a total, is continuous
and unending, but it cooperates in the relative as local, temporary pulses or waves of action and reaction, and some of its results move onward in endless threads of changes” (1914, p.22) I do not of course argue that it was Blackwell’s gender that opened her to the vision of the self as a cosmic interactivity; but I have always argued that there were fewer obstacles in the way of female socialization to the breakthrough of a relational ontology (Keller 1986)

To encode the boundless connectivity of all localities, I am in this century intrigued by the metaphor of quantum entanglement. It suggests a wave-like “intra-activity” (Barad 2003) that instantly crisscrosses any distance: it is a cosmic simultaneity. Here let me just say that the physics of entangled nonseparabilities might lend fresh vigor to, for instance, Sallie McFague’s ecofeminist model of the universe as God's body (1993). In and as this body we glimpse a universe that appears open-ended, a multiverse in whose synergetic fields the tiny earth comes enmeshed. The members of such a body function not like a bunch of neatly bounded organs, in life-contexts stacked as in Chinese boxes. This is an unfathomably wide and wild body, even in its self-organizing complexities: something like the deterritorialized “body without organs” of Deleuze and Guattari, where bodies live within bodies and cross spacetime through virtual networks, in rhizomes that may exchange energies in simultaneities, at “infinite speed” (Deleuze). Such a “chaosmos” (Keller 2003, pp. 3-24) of reciprocal and risky relations evinces less the political theology of a hierarchical sovereignty than of the uncertainty of a radical democracy and the assemblage of a multitude (Deleuze 1968; Hardt and Negri 2004). Cosmology has never been free of politics; here we hope for a cosmopolitanism in which a cosmos of nonseparable differences becomes perceptible. Indeed Antoinette Brown Blackwell already recognized in her the cosmic scale of cooperative interactions a sociopolitical imperative: ‘to educate the intellect too exclusively at the expense of the justice which involves the social sympathies is a growing mistake’ (1914, p. 32).

Today it seems ever more manifest that the width of the relations that compose us make social justice both dauntingly difficult—and dauntlessly possible. The actualization of that just sociality now requires a mass consciousness of our ecological interdependence. The width of our nonlocal connections may doom us through its commodification by
global capitalism. And at the same time its web and cloud of virtual communication may disclose at its disturbing new speeds “the truth so manifold” that no one can remain innocent of our far-flung entanglements. Note all those ambiguous “co”-words! Consciousness, knowing-with, is itself a relational concept. And as Alice Walker writes: “No one is exempt from the possibility of a conscious connection to All That Is. Not the poor. Not the suffering. Not the writer sitting in the open field (1992, p. xi)

So I hope that in this transfeminist rendition of intersectionality, the three theopoetic criteria of dis/closure have remained in play: a knowing ignorance in our relationality as it unfolds indefinitely and as it enfolds the manifold in polydoxical truth.

IV
Truth talk however seems to demands us of us a self-questioning that opens us perilously to each other. 'In each others eyes an ignorance'...It is especially? Judith Butler who helps me to hold in language the specific unknowing that marks us as relational creatures. In Butler's work on mourning after 9.11.01, asking who we consider grievable, an extraordinary widening of her own ethical focus —beyond but not without gender/sex-- takes place: ‘It is not as if an ‘I’ exists independently over here and then simply loses a ‘you’ over there, especially if the attachment to ‘you’ is part of what composes who ‘I’ am’ (Butler 2004, p. 22). Then in Giving an Account of Oneself she asks: ‘And is the relationality that conditions and blinds this ‘self’ not, precisely, an indispensable resource for ethics?’ (Butler 2005, p. 40) That blinding, which she calls opacity or unknowingness, makes us when we perceive it all a bit queer to ourselves—and more knowingly open to the ethical call of the others. Yet the unknowing lacks for her its theological sources. Nonetheless it echoes the apophatic unknowing of the mystical that traditionally may be derived from a particular exegesis of the exodus. That is where Moses powwows with God in the dark cloud (Exodus 24:18), the source of Gregory of Nyssa's incandescent metaphor ,deployed to liberate Christians from naïve faith, of “the luminous darkness” (1978, p. 95). Early in the millennium it stimulated my own critique of Christian light supremacism (Keller 2003, p. 200-212). Not accidentally Howard Thurman titled his 1965 meditation on the grounds of hope amidst racism: The Luminous
Not that negative theology is a tradition that readily synchs with the liberation tradition. When it does, the result evinces its own luminosity:

We proclaim quite simply the deep desire and the urgent necessity of having our individual and collective body more widely respected. We dream of a tender justice; we yearn for democracy and respect for the res publica...We believe in the dimension of ‘not-knowing,’ a fundamental dimension of our being, a not-knowing that make us more humble and at the same time more combative in order to gain respect for differences and the possibility of building an interdependent society. (Gebara 2002, p. 132).

Ivone Gebara, the Brazilian theologian and sister barely tolerated by her church, traces the bend of that unknowing into “relatedness as a condition for life” (2002, p. 132). Indeed it takes place right at the heart of the ecofeminist theology—much helped by McFague—that informs her project. “We look for a Wisdom in life” (Gebara 2002, p. 132). Her prophetic-scholarly voice rising out of the chaosmos of the slums of Recife performs the sophic knowing that we cannot decouple from our own unknowing, sensed in Dickinson’s ‘Wisdom so large.’ Perhaps the future of feminism lives in the interstices of this relatedness, ever embodied in gender, sex, race, wracked by economic and ecological horror and embraced by what Gebara calls “our Sacred Body” (1999, p. 51): her paraphrase of the Body of God--that multiversally expansive metaphor!

This wisdom is already too large, and its truth so manifold—that we can expect our speech to stutter and falter, sometimes to fail and to fall silent. But as the philosopher of Jewish mysticism Elliot Wolfson writes: "silence is not to be set in binary opposition to language, but is rather the margin that demarcates its center" (2005, p. 289). This listening is part of "overcoming speechlessness"—the name of the book written by Alice Walker (2010), in response to her time in Rwanda and Gaza (and performed as a reading off-Broadway). She opens it with an homage to the peaceable Buddha. Given the geopolitically perilous US manipulations of the sibling rivalries of the family of Abraham, I want before closing to note another transfeminist truth-manifold: the interreligious. We find ourselves on this shrinking planet, entangled in a multiplicity of
religions, through bodily diasporas, virtual communication and the postsecular intensification of pluralism. All global movement for gender justice comes inextricably linked to thorny questions of religious difference—questions, for instance, of how, without relativistically abandoning our gender ethics, to practice pluralist respect for religious others whose traditions may be remaining more patriarchal than our own. What does a relational ethic require? At least the recognition that religious context also is not separable and saturated; that the Sophia we occasionally name Christ calls to us in and through a manifold of Ways, religious and irreligious. Known and unknown. In the volume *Polydoxy* (2011), the comparative theologian John Thatamanil performs not just relation to other religions, but a disclosure of relationality itself by another religion:

Relation names the truth that nothing whatsoever is what it is apart from its relation. To be is to be in relation…More rigorously still, no being whatsoever has an essence or core that is non-relationally derived, not even God. On this reading, [Buddhist] emptiness is just another way of designating that all of reality is *pratītyasamutpāda*, dependent co-arising (p. 250-1).

At least in a Christianized western context, it may be Buddhism that preeminently reveals our unknowing entanglement in one another—an ignorance addressed not by added information but by mindful transformation. He is part of a project in rethinking religious pluralism beyond mere plurality, to allow for multiple religious belongings. “Religious diversity is a natural expression of human encounter with divine multiplicity” (Thatanamil 2011, p. 139). The divine can be experienced diversely—and often not as God—just because “God” does not name an undifferentiated singularity, a plurisingularity (Keller 2003, p. 172-182.). If this multiplicity signifies no mere many, as for instance of three discrete personal entities, nor a simple One, it discloses the divine *complcicatio* (Cusa). Polydoxy gladly absorbs the orthodoxy here of Tertullian’s triune logic: “distinct not separate, different not divided” (Keller 2003, p. 231). But these folds of complexity in the divine remain abstract apart from entanglement in our own. "The universe is immensely complex," wrote Antoinette Blackwell; and then she
adds: "truth itself is complex" (1914, p. 28). That truth may seem obvious; but obviously we are all together still just getting wise to it.

According to the polydox trinity, Wisdom does not enclose a world, a religion, a gender, a sex; a race, a class, a nation, a species; it discloses the mystery, the multiplicity and the connectivity of each of these manifold bodies. To conclude, here, if not to close: we are all—perhaps—wrinkles in the open body of God, folds of intensified becoming, uncertain agents of an Infinite Complication. In a transfeminist moment, the ministry of women may embody—in all corpulence—the wisdom for working in and through our scariest tangles. Much will come unfolded, unsnarled—"diviner than the childhood’s"—even as it is all folded together otherwise, exposing yet more knotty webs. No doubt I have attempted to expound here what—alas—I still do not understand.

The wisdom so large, the truth so manifold—


