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## The Spiritual Potential of Poetry

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THE SPIRITUAL POTENTIAL OF POETRY

By

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A Paper Submitted to the Faculty of the School of Theology of Saint John's University,  
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SCHOOL OF THEOLOGY  
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Fr. Columba Stewart, OSB

Carl Schlueter  
has successfully demonstrated the use of  
Japanese

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Mr. Masaichiro Nashiro

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## THE SPIRITUAL POTENTIAL OF POETRY

This paper presents poetry as a possible means of spiritual formation and transformation. Through the example of two poets, Seamus Heaney and Matsuo Basho, as well as two poetic devices, symbol and metaphor, poetry proves capable of radically engaging and converting both spiritual attention and action. In addition, the colloquial and connotative nature of poetic language renders poetry capable of expressing spiritual matters in a manner more quotidian and concrete. As a result, spiritual edification through poetry can offer a more affective and accessible alternative to the sometimes unaccommodating technical and abstract aspects of theological and philosophical prose.

This paper may be duplicated

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Carl Schlueter

10/11/06

In the middle of the journey of our life  
 I found myself astray in a dark wood  
 Where the straight road had been lost sight of.

How hard it is to say what it was like  
 In the thick of thickets, in a wood so dense and gnarled  
 The very thought of it renews my panic.

It is bitter almost as death is bitter.  
 But to rehearse the good it also brought me  
 I will speak about the other things I saw there.

How I got into it I cannot clearly say  
 For I was moving like a sleepwalker  
 The moment I stepped out of the right way....<sup>1</sup>

In 1972 Seamus Heaney left the war-torn neighborhood where he lived in Northern Ireland and moved with his family to a small cottage in the island's less violent Southern Republic. In so doing he deserted his teaching job at Queen's University, Belfast, and with it the guaranteed security of a full-time salaried position. Heaney had made the pivotal decision to devote his entire life to writing poetry; with the support of his wife and family he undertook an enormous risk that later proved the most significant of his life. Six years into his stay, however, at the age of thirty-seven, Heaney fell into a writer's funk: he felt his art lacked clarity and depth and was devoid of a necessary sense of purpose. Heaney struggled to regain what appeared painfully absent from his work, and endeavored in vain to re-ignite an intense creative energy which had become weary and unresponsive. Finally, in a last attempt to make what had grown dull and monotonous vital and meaningful again, Heaney took to translating Dante.

Writer and literary critic Darcy O'Brien observed that shortly after Heaney began his translation, "Dante then grew on him, and became for him a constant aesthetic and spiritual companion and remains so to this day." Yet, she is compelled to ask, "How was it that Dante

came to mean so much to Heaney? What internal and external circumstances contributed to the hold that medieval mind has had on the modern one? How did *Seeing Things*, in all of its various beauties, come into being as a reaffirmation of something so old, so nearly ancient, so seemingly distant from contemporary sensibility?" In a paragraph excerpted from her essay, "Ways of *Seeing Things*," O'Brien offers the following insight:

For anyone who is not Irish it is difficult to understand how momentous the move from North to South was for Seamus Heaney....the transplanting meant a voluntary exile in many ways as traumatic as Dante's involuntary one from Florence to Verona and elsewhere on the Italian peninsula. Although the comparison may at first seem disproportionate--Dante faced execution if he returned and remained separated from his wife and children--Heaney's self banishment also involved the political, as well as rejection of many he had left behind, as some of them understood and did not like. The chief effect on him was a psychological one; he did not, at the time fully comprehend, and would not for twenty years, the degree to which his choice meant a cutting loose, though never a cutting off....His articulated sense of the decision ("I don't know how I arrived at the decision," he is said to have told a friend, "perhaps it is more accurate to say that it arrived at me"), as fated more than made, indicated the degree to which he acted impulsively rather than from reason or certainty.<sup>2</sup>

In the person and poetry of Dante Seamus Heaney sought, and after a time recovered, the ardent conviction required of him by his chosen work. At a precarious point in his life and career, Dante's poetry served as a source of affirmation and edification for Heaney. Through the life and writing of the medieval poet Heaney realized how "the trying and confusing period he had entered became the motive force of his art; to have tried to resolve the conflicts into which he had plunged himself would have been to stop writing, or at least writing well."<sup>3</sup>

Heaney agonized over his decision to move himself and his family away from the persistent fear plaguing Northern Ireland for he knew that the safety and welfare of his wife and children, though a crucial factor in his discernment, was not the sole determinant: Heaney left Ireland's tumultuous north in order to remain true to his life and work as a poet. Heaney realized

his departure to the relatively calm but unfamiliar Southern Republic would inevitably result in accusations of betrayal of that place and those people with whom he had hoped and suffered since he was a child old enough to know the atrocities of war. Yet in rediscovering Dante, Heaney found another who had confronted and courageously endured much of the same political tension and personal strain he presently faced.

In an essay entitled “Envy and Identifications: Dante and the Modern Poet,” Heaney remarks that one of the first things he came to admire in Dante was the poet’s ability to connect “the political and transcendent.” Intensifying his exile from Northern Ireland and his subsequent encounter with Dante during this period of personal despair is what Heaney describes as “the main tension between two often contradictory commands: to be faithful to the collective historical experience and to be true to the recognitions of the emerging self.”<sup>4</sup> The self emerging was the moral, spiritual, artistic self that Heaney had decidedly chosen to become; beckoned by a call to poet, Heaney, in an exiled voice not unlike Dante’s, answered.

The effects upon the perception of one living in personal or political exile cannot be overestimated; the profound and penetrating way in which disassociation forms a fugitive consciousness—one acutely aware of being estranged—is fundamentally dramatic. The understanding of one’s immediate environment as unfamiliar in relationship to distantly familiar surroundings requires a radical shift in consciousness. Amidst the sudden, disruptive recognition of displacement, this shift occasions the possibility of creative survival through appropriate adaptations: the exiled is challenged to search for new and meaningful ways to endure, explore, and express the challenges of his or her present condition. The exile experience can involve an abrupt geographic dislocation, or it may result from a raised sense of social alienation while



inhabiting well-known surroundings. Exile can also refer to a spiritual condition whereby one becomes conscious of living outside or apart from a divine presence. In the introduction to the *Oxford Book of Exile*, John Simpson admits to stretch[ing] the definition of exile as far as possible without actually breaking it,"<sup>5</sup> asserting that each of us is in exile, he writes:

We are exiles from our mother's womb, from our childhood, from private happiness, from peace, even if we are not exiles in the more conventional sense of that word. The feeling of looking back for the last time, of setting our face to a new and possibly hostile world is one we all know. It is the human condition; and the great upheavals of history have merely added physical expression to an inner fact.<sup>6</sup>

In his anthology, Simpson acknowledges that many important parallels may be drawn between the disconnection felt by so many pariahs and the exile experiences recorded in various religious texts ("from Adam and Eve to Alexander Solzhenitsyn, there is a certain pattern"). In particular, those writings and readings of exile within the Judeo-Christian biblical and prophetic traditions are especially illuminative. Regarding Dante, Giuseppe Mazzotta declares, "There is no doubt that in the *Divine Comedy* the writing of poetry is tied to the experience of exile...the poet's sense of his mission could hardly be overstated."<sup>7</sup> He writes:

Exile is the condition from which his voice rises, but the displacement does not entail a complacent isolation within a world largely indifferent to the private truth the poet witnesses. Actually the references to his own words as a palpable and edible substance place the poem within the tradition of the public utterances of biblical prophets. Like the prophets, Dante makes of exile a virtue and a necessary perspective from which to speak to the world and from which he can challenge its expectations and assumptions; like the prophets, he also acknowledges that the truth he communicates is, paradoxically, what further alienates him from the world he has already lost.<sup>8</sup>

Dante Alighieri began his masterwork while in exile and completed it shortly before his death in 1321. The poem begins with Dante alone and lost in a dark wood, impeded in his escape by three formidable beasts representing intemperance, violence, and deceit. Unable to persist

alone amidst the horrors of this place, Dante is visited by a strange spirit who offers to guide him through the dark and dangerous forest. The spirit identifies himself as the shade of the poet Virgil, whose life's work was dedicated to, and sacrificed for, an ideal far greater than himself: the peaceful and harmonious ruling of the Roman state. Dante, alone and abandoned in an alien and frightening realm, turns to Virgil for help; the poet in turn comforts him and promises to see him through the ceaseless torments of this place.

Referring to the initial crisis moment in *The Divine Comedy*, Dantean scholar John Freccero remarks, "The journey of the *Divine Comedy* begins with a conversion. The pilgrim 'comes to' after somehow having lost his way in a dark wood," and "looks up from that tangle and sees the rays of the sun striking upon a mountain-top, and knows that he must attain the summit. From that moment," Freccero declares, "the problem is no longer where to go, but rather how to get there, and the problem proves to be insoluble." He continues:

A glance up to the light, symbolic of intellectual conversion...can only represent, in the beginning of Dante's poem, an incomplete turning. Conversion is not a matter of 'either/or,' for the pilgrim who has recovered himself where he catches sight of the mountain-top is one step closer to truth than he was throughout the dark night, but he is still far removed--three beasts removed--from his final goal. His fear is only somewhat allayed...and the qualification is important. He has not yet climbed the mountain, the distant summit of which is his final destination and the desert slope, between the dark wood and the mountain proper, is an intermediate area...[thus] the pilgrim's awakening suggest both a kind of conversion to truth, and an awareness of the great gap that remains to be traversed.<sup>9</sup>

This crucial juncture becomes for Dante the beginning of a conversion experience Freccero describes as "an abrupt movement from sin and ignorance into wisdom and virtue--or so it seems at any rate, until we learn what the pilgrim will soon discover: that this slope or shore is no exit, but rather a dead end for any man left on his own. Thus, the pilgrim's escape," Freccero observes, "will be temporary and his struggle to remain on the desert slope will fail, for a sudden

movement from one extreme to another is characteristic of angels, and not of the fallen flesh.”<sup>10</sup>

It is precisely at this critical point that the shade of the poet Virgil emerges onto the scene.

Virgil immediately informs Dante that the only avenue of escape from the tempestuous beasts is the dreadful road through the *Inferno*. Dante is aware that he has been blessed with a benevolent and gifted guide, capable and fit for the task ahead of him, and with Virgil there to protect and lead him he agrees to begin the long and perilous path before him. Upon realizing the possibility that he may escape this place and be delivered safely through the hollows of Hell, Dante joyfully cries out:

Glory and light of poets! now may that zeal  
and love's apprenticeship that I poured out  
on your heroic verses serve me well!  
For you are my true master and first author,  
the sole maker from whom I drew the breath  
of that sweet style whose measures have brought me honor.  
See there, immortal sage, the beast I flee (Canto I:79-85).

Poet, by that God to you unknown,  
lead me this way. Beyond this present ill  
and worse to dread, lead me to Peter's gate  
and be my guide through the sad halls of Hell.  
And he then: 'Follow.' And he moved ahead  
in silence, and I followed where he led (Canto I:123-128).<sup>11</sup>

Freccero makes the following astute comment concerning the commencement of Dante's long and arduous journey: “The figure of a man in the act of walking was quite literally the incarnation of the act of choice, for walking was simply choosing brought down to the material plane.”<sup>12</sup> Despite the hellish terrors and purgatorial pain lying between them and their destination, Dante girds himself with a guarded hope upon the path to Paradise. Along the way, however, it becomes increasingly clear that the purpose of Dante's adventure and poem is not

simply to depict as accurately as possible the imagined topography of the after-life. Rather, Dante's poem aims to express in vivid imagery and striking detail the spiritual journey set within the human soul. Furthermore, the poem not only depicts the individual effort toward divine union, it speaks to the subsequent doubts and multifarious fears that attempt to thwart union for any and all who endeavor to attain it. As to how one endures such demanding trials and tests, the message of Dante is convincingly clear: one cannot endure them alone. Safe traverse across hazardous terrain requires the experience of another whose familiarity with such dangers is reliable and keen; the value of Dante having been blessed with the poet Virgil as his guide ought not be overlooked.

The poet as spiritual guide is one of the more engaging messages of Dante's *Divine Comedy*, and remains relevant for the contemporary spiritual seeker. While war, poverty and natural disasters continue to cripple countries and relentlessly lay claim to more innocent lives, the spiritual journey stands as a frustrating and despairing path to tread. A spiritual emissary of sorts, Virgil represents the light of reason reaching to Dante as he struggles to make sense of all he sees; confused and afraid, Dante discovers in Virgil the courage and clarity necessary for continuing his quest. In much the same manner Heaney found Dante amid the violent political tumult of Northern Ireland. In both meetings each poet encounters a literary and spiritual forebear who bore a similar burden: to make the sacrifices necessary to mark in their poetry the kind of unwavering commitment to truth and justice that their respective circumstances required.

Heaney labored deliberately throughout his life "to do the thing which always is and always will be to poetry's credit: persuade that vulnerable part of our consciousness of its rightness in spite of the evidence of wrongness all around it."<sup>13</sup> Crucial to the very essence and

purpose of his poetry is its power to remind us that we are “hunters and gatherers of values, that our very solitudes and distresses are creditable, in so far as they too are in earnest of our veritable human being.”<sup>14</sup> Heaney is not alone in this understanding of the purpose of poetry: countless other equally admirable and accomplished poets endeavor to create poetry intent on transmitting spiritual wisdom to embolden individuals and societies beset by various hardship. Heaney and these other poets seek to remain true to the principles of their poetic craft while simultaneously issuing embattled, but hopeful, pleas for personal courage and political change.

Yet it's clear that the kind of spiritual and political toil which characterizes Heaney's and others' contemporary poetry is quite different from that practiced by like-minded writers in the area of theology. The theological discipline shares with poetry a somewhat similar purpose: to reflect upon the essential and elusive natures and meanings of life in terms of the possible existence of another[another what?] In confronting these questions, however, contemporary poetry primarily proceeds in a way in which modern theology oftentimes does not: using tangible words in a colloquial voice indelibly marked by immediacy. Additionally, the discipline of theology at times attempts to determine specifically a single, right manner of living, appealing to abstract dogma and inflexible doctrines in consequence. Poetry, however, typically seeks only to communicate honest, experiential insights into any and all of the inspiring, distressing, disturbing realities of life.

Poetic language describes life in a manner characterized by the concrete and quotidian; its authenticity depends upon principles that encourage free expression and support conflicting perspectives. Perhaps it is in the identification and appropriation of the imagination, that central and deeply significant human faculty indispensable to the poetic process, that one can locate the

point of divergence of poetry from theological discourse. The threatening vitality of the imagination is valued by poets to such an extent that little effort is made to contain its precious powers within the controlled perimeters of logic and reason. According to Mazzotta, the poet's "insight into the imagination, which speculative philosophers and theologians share but from which they turn away,"<sup>15</sup> forms the very core from which the creative force emerges and vigorously manifests itself in distinctively impassioned poetic verse. He explains:

Lest this be seen as an idealistic claim about the privilege and uniqueness of poetry over the mode of knowledge made available by the discourses of theology and philosophy, let me stress that each of these theoretical discourses reveals particular aspects of and has access to the imagination...poetry does not bracket or elide these particular viewpoints; rather, it is the all-embracing framework within which theological and philosophical discoveries about the imagination are grounded and are given a concrete focus. By themselves, neither theologians nor philosophers are especially equipped to make pronouncements about the imagination, which is the province of aesthetics, the path of knowledge and the home, as it were...of the poet.<sup>16</sup>

Poetry's imaginative element lends itself well to the spiritual essence with which certain poets invest their poetry as a result of a recognized effort to express directly a personal relationship with the divine. Although this spiritual aspect may be subtle or implicit, it can also be explicit in thoughts and emotions pertaining to well-known religious themes. There is understandably a genuine and justified need for both spiritually implicit and explicit poetic expressions; each form is equally capable of effecting an individual spiritual response to a specific life event. A spiritual exchange may be initiated poetically by a question, an answer, or a new insight into the nature of an especially profound or elusive or even ordinary experience. The poetic encounter may be political in tone, moral in meaning, or concern itself with sexual, psychological, or environmental subjects. What matters in a spiritual sense, and what constitutes certain poems as authentic forms of spiritual expression, is an additional capacity to stand as

personal testament to an individual search for meaning in light of a relationship with the divine.

And this search for meaning and union is dramatically altered during periods of exile. Joseph

Kelly, in reflections from his book *Faith in Exile* reflects upon this point:

Our spiritual pilgrimages bring us through sacred space into the sanctuary of our own souls. Yet the spiritual life can just as often be a matter of losing one's place, of getting displaced. Spiritual pilgrimage can become a journey into exile. Exile is the experience of displacement. People who are exiled have been removed from their rightful place, from home, from country, from where they long to be....There is, however, another and deeper kind of alienation or exile. It is spiritual exile....Spiritual exile concerns how one experiences and reflects on relationship with God. If the spiritual life is how relationship with God is perceived and felt, then spiritual exile is a felt loss of that relationship and all it might have offered.<sup>17</sup>

But what is it specifically that makes a poem or poetry in general uniquely different from other methods of expression, namely theological discourse or philosophical dialectic, even if these are allegorical? The answer to this question lies within the power of poetic metaphor, metaphor naturally and consequently made more forceful within the context of a more contracted and condensed literary form. Simply put, the function of metaphor aims to describe an experience or communicate a meaning of one thing in terms of another. In addition, metaphor draws an intimate, and often illuminative, connection between the two objects compared; it is a special kind of trope that asserts an identity between two entities, which, in a strictly literal sense, may not often be equated. In noting this new imaginative ordering of one's reality of the world as a result of reordering the objects within it, philosopher Frank Burch Brown argues that "the metaphoric expression results not only in a transformation of the ordinary meanings of the term employed but also in a transformation of ordinary thought, an innovation in meaning that could only have been achieved through the specific expression employed."<sup>18</sup> Elaborating upon this claim, semanticist Phillip Wheelwright asserts "metaphor is the primary vehicle for that

process of semantic transformation...which is the single most important element in all expressive language...and essential to poetry.”<sup>19</sup> Understood in this manner poetic metaphor, in addition to transforming thought and language, is capable of radically altering *experience* as well. In a sense the ordinarily present way in which we related to the world becomes absent, and the previously absent way in which the world could be experienced presents itself through the connective and ordering powers of metaphor. In this way, the suggestive spiritual and mystical effects of poetic metaphor emerge clearer and considerably more distinct as metaphor becomes a vehicle capable of collapsing theological and poetic boundaries. So, too, does the poetic purpose come to parallel more closely theological intent, especially when considering the descriptive and prescriptive aspects of each: that is, how each medium is exemplary of lives that have been lived and can be led in light of newly imagined possibilities and a newly realized divine presence.

In addition to the use of metaphor poetry also employs symbols which contribute to a more dynamic and sublime appreciation and expression of human experience. A symbol’s potential to transform is equal to that of a metaphor’s: the power of both tropes is transcendental. To refer to an object as symbolic or to establish something as metaphoric, however, is not to lose the significance of it as something sentient and tangible. Figurative language simply extends and expands the literal interpretation and practical application of an object in such a way that it points past itself to represent something above or beyond its ordinary meaning. According to Wheelwright, “symbols stand for some larger aspect of life experience for which there can be no precise intellectual concept. Inevitably, then, an effective symbol must communicate by embodying or imaginatively representing the non-conceptual (as well as certain conceptual) properties of the reality to which it refers.”<sup>20</sup> Symbols and metaphors provide possible linguistic



links for knowing and experiencing the concrete and temporal in a more illuminative manner. As literary devices they are capable of expanding our common apprehension of the physical world and extending our regular vision of our immediate surroundings by directly connecting previously disparate objects. This shift in conscious perception may mark an intellectual or psychological transformation: it can also catalyze a spiritual conversion.

The aforementioned remarks regarding the spiritual possibilities of poetic metaphor imply another essential component of the modern poetic process that necessitates further examination. Somewhat paradoxically it seems that a poem's capacity to serve as a transcendent vehicle can come from the poet's ability to appropriate the inherent power of local language, ranging from indigenous to colloquial to slang: locality of a certain degree yields universality. Recognizing the native force that common words can have is a pronounced trait of poets who have learned the value of the vernacular as well as the reward of writing directly out of personal experience. Both Dante's and Heaney's poetry illustrate well the surprising power of plain language to provoke sentiment so deep as to be epiphanous.

In an essay comparing the life and work of Dante and Heaney, author Carla De Petris concentrates on each poet's struggle to respond to their country's political strife while bearing the strain of living in exile as result of their response. De Petris confirms that through the language of poetry, Dante and Heaney not only found an appropriate and effective medium of expression, but a reason for hope. She points to Dante's "mesmerizing presence in Heaney's work," from the 1970s onward, especially Heaney's expressed admiration for "the way in which Dante could place himself in a historical world yet submit that world to scrutiny from a perspective beyond history, the way he could accommodate the political and transcendent."

Dante's work, Heaney himself acknowledges, "encouraged my attempt at a sequence of poems which would explore the typical strains under which the consciousness labours in this country."<sup>21</sup> De Petris emphasizes Heaney's awareness of Dante's effort to "accommodate the political and transcendent," and notes that Dante's frustration with the inadequacies of medium to matter "provides Heaney with a wider perspective on the complexities of his own search for poetic expression." She writes:

In the contemporary Irish poet who confronts the political violence of Ulster with the inaccurate signs of English one can sense the same frustration and recklessness of the great Christian and Moslem mystics of the Middle Ages who are Dante's forefathers and who, as Furio Jesi writes in *Letteratura e Mito*, 'have often despaired of successfully expressing in appropriate language the climax of their experiences. In their writings is the constant lament over the powerlessness of language, insufficient to embrace the reality of their illuminations; still, they have continued to speak and write, opening up unknown paths of language and paradoxically enriching the sphere of language with bold and marvelous formulations at the very moment they endure and denounce its limits.' This could be said of almost every Irish writer using English from the seventeenth to the twentieth century. Changing the religious into a secular perspective it could easily apply to [Irish writers] who in different ways 'opened up unknown paths' for English. An Irish writer--and even more so a poet--writing in English experiences a sort of mystical stupor at the marvelous potentialities of his medium, his hidden numen.<sup>22</sup>

The above passage hints at two basic but significant poetic principles Heaney derives and develops from Dante. The first involves the poet's creative manipulation of language. De Petris makes special mention of Heaney's ability to accentuate an object or intensify an experience by focusing on its physical texture and thereby drawing out in vivid detail its ostensibly less significant and largely unnoticed nuances. She also notes Heaney's exceptional talent for actualizing the inert energy within words that so often lies neglected. Heaney demonstrates remarkable deftness when taking common adjectives and nouns and "metamorphosing" them into new and powerfully active verbs. De Petris underscores Heaney's "great ability to exploit

the metaphorical potential of English,” and suggests that even though “Dante is situated at the roots of Italian while the Irish poet is the product of late mutations of the English language--for both of them ‘*the natural object is always adequate symbol.*’ Hence it becomes a verb--and that means action. Life generates the name.”<sup>23</sup> This decisively poetic, dynamically linguistic act, De Petris concludes, necessarily “implies a particular kind of responsibility, involving reality as well as its shaping in words.” Dante, she observes, “resolvedly returns whenever Heaney is at odds with this idea of linguistic as well as ethical responsibility.”<sup>24</sup>

The second principle speaks to this notion of a poet’s ethical responsibility, and here De Petris stresses yet another important aspect of poetic creation: “The poet’s responsibility to life consists in the absolute devotion to his craft; seeing things is saying things.” Dante helps Heaney by reaffirming “his unconditional faith in the ‘familiar lexicon’ of the tribe, the poet’s ‘local speech,’ interwoven of vital juices, physicality, hate and love. [Heaney] considers the rejection of standard language, the language of authority and power, to be Dante’s greatest teaching...”<sup>25</sup> Heaney further testifies that “language is the poet’s faith,” and he confirms the fact that the poet “serves the people by serving their language.” In the agonizing decision of whether or not to leave Northern Ireland, De Petris sees Heaney “tormented by the conflict between embracing his responsibility as a poet or accomplishing his tribal duty of political commitment. Both choices,” she asserts, “implied a different kind of treason,” and Dante, “provided him with a ‘head-clearing simile,’” and therefore, “centuries before Heaney, Dante was serving his people by serving their language, by becoming their poet.”<sup>26</sup> Taken from his collection of poems entitled *The Spirit Level*, “St. Kevin and the Blackbird” not only is an excellent example of the spiritual and literary issues introduced above, but a powerful illustration of Heaney’s own humble

understanding of his conviction to serve:

And then there was St. Kevin and the blackbird.  
The saint is kneeling, arms stretched out, inside  
His cell, but the cell is narrow, so

One turned-up palm is out the window, stiff  
As a crossbeam, when a blackbird lands  
And lays in it and settles down to nest.

Kevin feels the warm eggs, the small breast, the tucked  
Neat head and claws and, finding himself linked  
Into the network of eternal life,

Is moved to pity: now he must hold his hand  
Like a branch out in the sun and rain for weeks  
Until the young are hatched and fledged and flown.

\*

And since the whole thing's imagined anyhow,  
Imagine being Kevin. Which is he?  
Self-forgetful or in agony all the time.

From his neck on down through his hurting forearms?  
Are his fingers sleeping? Does he still feel his knees?  
Or has the shut-eyed blank of underearth

Crept up through him? Is there distance in his head?  
Alone and mirrored clear in love's deep river,  
'To labour and not to seek reward,' he prays

A prayer his body makes entirely  
For he has forgotten self, forgotten bird  
And on the riverbank forgotten the river's name.<sup>27</sup>

It is the metaphorical power of this poem that identifies St. Kevin as a tree so deeply rooted by compassion in the suffering network of life that his posture and prayer recall the crucifixion, and in a similar self-transcendent movement he connects and then collapses the distance between the earthly and eternal. It is precisely in this unconditional descriptive and prescriptive action of serving the other that the duty of the poet comes to bear close and striking

resemblance to the commitment to charity so central to Christian spiritual teaching. In her essay De Petris makes mention of the Druids, the ancient poet-priests of Celtic culture, and claims that “Heaney’s conception of the role of the poet in contemporary Ireland was in fact Druidical.”<sup>28</sup>

For his part, Heaney believes poetry’s effort toward effecting linguistic, cultural, and institutional change is not accomplished merely by creatively transforming individual vision, but by firmly demanding that this vision be given a voice. In echoing Christianity’s conviction to eliminate sociopolitical injustice and liberate the oppressed through elevation of consciousness and conversion of action, Heaney declares:

Clearly, [creating a just and balanced society] corresponds to deep structures of thought and feeling derived from centuries of Christian teaching and from Christ’s paradoxical identification with the plight of the wretched. And in so far as poetry is an extension and refinement of the mind’s extreme recognitions, and of language’s most unexpected apprehensions, it too manifests the workings of [this] law...the idea of counterweighting, of balancing out the forces, of redress--tilting the scales of reality towards some transcendent equilibrium. And in the activity of poetry too, there is a tendency to place a counter-reality in the scales--a reality which may be only imagined but which nevertheless has weight because it is imagined within the gravitational pull of the actual and can therefore hold its own and balance out against the historical situation. This redressing effect of poetry comes from its being a glimpsed alternative, a revelation of potential that is denied or constantly threatened by circumstances. And sometimes, of course, it happens that such a revelation, once enshrined in the poem, remains as a standard for the poet, so that he or she must then submit to the strain of bearing witness in his or her own life to the plane of consciousness established in the poem.<sup>29</sup>

A tested wisdom and practical compassion are two of the more significant qualities of an authentic spirituality. Spiritual vision enlists these qualities to cultivate the sharp insight necessary to guide skillfully oneself and others through the more challenging points of an interior terrain. This shrewd perception conjoins intuition and experience to hone a capacity for spiritual discernment, understood as an acute ability to see through the innumerable diversions and distractions that hinder one in pursuit of spiritual progress. The skill of discernment

endeavors to see past immediate limitations and transient temptations characterizing the physical and finite to a fulfillment unfettered by material trappings. Spirituality's challenge is to find the existence of an eternal divine not only within the surrounding world, but also within oneself; it then develops a dynamic spiritual relationship between these internal and external realities. Spirituality works to train the willing to transcend expected comforts and familiar securities in order to overcome the attendant anxieties and fears that accompany the conversion process and its occasional periods of withdrawal. As Heaney avows above, through the use of symbols and metaphors as transformational tropes, poetry can augment and enliven the spiritual life by providing the "glimpsed alternatives," profound "revelations," and personal "standards" necessary to live it.

After first establishing common syntactical arrangements and contextual associations between words and the things and concepts they signify, poems may move beyond these conventional forms of reference to create new possibilities through the use of symbol and metaphor. In a similar movement, spirituality transfigures and transcends formal socio-political and religious structures in order to approach deeper levels of understanding and experience. Affirming the importance of systematic laws and institutional tenets to provide the foundation and guidance for society and religion, spirituality also acknowledges a need to bypass occasionally these political and ecclesial intermediaries to make a more direct divine connection. Accounts of mystics from Christian and non-Christian traditions point to numerous attempts to transcend temporal restrictions in an effort to know and experience more fully the divine. Evelyn Underhill elaborates upon the parallels between the spiritual poets and religious mystics:

But in the great swing back into sunshine which is the reward of that painful descent into the 'cell of self-knowledge,' he [the mystic] parts company with these other

pilgrims. Those who still go with him a little way--certain poets, prophets, artists, dreamers--do so in virtue of that mystical genius, that instinct for transcendental reality, of which all seers and creators have some trace...The earthly artist, because perception brings with it the imperative longing for expression, tries to give us in colour, sound or words a hint of his ecstasy, his glimpse of truth...The mystic, too, tries very hard to tell an unwilling world his secret...Symbol--the clothing which the spiritual borrows from the material plane--is a form of artistic expression...It is here that mysticism joins hands with...poetry...All kinds of symbolic language come naturally to the articulate mystic, who is often a literary artist as well: so naturally, that he sometimes forgets to explain that his utterance is but symbolic--a desperate attempt to translate the truth of that world into...this.<sup>30</sup>

In the above paragraph, Underhill mentions artistic perception and the “glimpse of truth” which “brings with it the imperative longing for expression.” She also affirms how very hard it is to “tell an unwilling world [this] secret.” The “secret” vision of which Underhill writes refers to that “transcendental reality” lying beyond an immediately visible material world. Contemplation of the physical world and the myriad objects that exist within it provides certain “poets, prophets, artists, [and] dreamers” a spiritual opportunity to extend their perception past the material to the divine within and beyond. Through patient and concentrated attention poets and mystics are capable of perceiving in and through apparently ordinary and disparate physical objects a gate of access to the eternal. For many mystics, experience of the eternal grants them a fleeting glimpse of that heavenly realm toward which they have relentlessly directed their unwavering gaze; for many poets, contact with a transcendent realm can offer the real promise of another world without political oppression, social injustice, or the pains of exile. At present, however, this peaceful other world exists only as an imagined alternative, a distantly envisioned possibility that poets capture only momentarily; and none more artfully than the Japanese poet Matsuo Basho. A brief consideration of the haiku master’s life and work will offer an insightful and compelling parallel to Heaney’s own personal standards, poetic strivings and spiritual

revelations.

月日は百代の過かかくにして、行かふ年も又旅人也。舟の上に生しようがいをかべ、馬の口とらえて老おむかふる物は、日び旅にして旅を栖とす。古人も多く旅に死せるあり。子もいづれの年よりか、片雲の風にさそはれて、ひようはくの思ひやまず、海かいひんにさすらへ、去年の秋、こうしようの破屋に蜘蛛の古巣をはらひて、やや年も暮、春立る霞の空に白川の関こえんと、そぞろ神の物につきて心をくるはせ、道租神のまねきにあひて取もの手につかず、もも引の破をつずり笠のお付かえて、三里にきゆうすゆるより、みしまの月先心にかかりて、生る方は人に誰り、杉風が別しよにうつるに。。。弥生も末の七日、明ぼのの空ろうろうとして、月は在明にて光おさまれる物から、不二の峯幽にみえて、上野や中の花の梢又いつかはと心ぼそし。むつましきかぎりは宵よりつどひて、舟に乗て送る。千じゆと云所にて船をあがれば、前せんと三千里のおもひ胸にふさがりて、幻のちまたに離別の泪をそぞぐ。

#### 行春や鳥啼魚の目は泪

是を矢立の初として、行道なをすすまず。人びは途中に立ならびて、後かげのみゆる迄はと見送なるべし。<sup>31</sup>

Days and months are passing figures of the past and future, and the years come and go like wanderers. Floating life away on a boat or leading a horse by the mouth to meet old age, everyday is a journey, and the journey is home. Many of the men of old died upon the open road. So when was it that I, blown like a cloud in a roaming dream, roamed up and down the coast, only to return to the hut by the river in the fall, to sweep away the cobwebs at the end of another year; and when the misty skies of spring returned again, I yearned to cross the Shirakawa Barrier, beckoned by Dosojin, so mad with wanderlust, so feverish for flight, I tried hard to train my hand to mend a tear in my *momohoki* (cotton pants) and replace the cords in my *kasa* (sunhat), my shins burning with moxa as the moon at Matsushima rose in my mind and I remembered how my old hut was passed on to another when I moved to Sampu's summer house....Early spring, slightly hazy dawn, 'a waning moon, a failing light,' Fuji's summit faint, Ueno and Yanaka the cherries first blossom, when would they—and would they—be seen again? Good friends gathered overnight, getting into boats to bid us farewell. Landed at Senju with heart swells for the three thousand li lying ahead, feeling the world so much a dream, tears falling at the trailhead....the *yatate's* (portable writing kit) first words, the path ahead looked like an end. Those behind us watched until only the shadows of our backs could be seen.<sup>32</sup>



In the year 1680 Matsuo Basho left Edo—a place where he had hoped both to achieve success as a poet as well as secure financial prosperity—for Fukugawa, a small town on the outskirts of the city. His new dwelling was a small, remote cottage on the banks of a river, and it was here, a year after his arrival, that a disciple, in response to the rather desolate appearance of the place, planted a *basho* tree in the garden. The tree—prized for its thin, broad leaves that were subsequently easily and often torn by the wind—not only served as an enduring symbol of the sensitivity of the poet, it became the *haigo*, or penname, that Basho would use for the remainder of his life. The opening passage from Basho's *Manuscript in My Knapsack* attests to this notable sensitivity, but uncovers as well an uncommon strength, for indeed his life and duty as a poet demanded much from him. He writes:

Within my frame of a hundred bones and nine apertures dwells a thing I have called for the moment Furabo—Gauze in the Wind-Priest. Indeed, this must refer to the ease with which gauze is torn by the wind. This creature has for long enjoyed haikai, and in the end decided to make it his life work. Sometimes he had wearied of this art and has thought of abandoning it; at other times he has made strides and has prided himself to think he was better than other poets. Inside his heart the conflict has warred, and this art has deprived him of all peace. For a time he wished to establish himself in the world, but poetry prevented him....<sup>33</sup>

The solitary tone of these lines reveals Basho's ambivalence toward and beleaguered acceptance of a lonely artist's life (*fuga*) shaped by long, arduous journeys, reflective retreats, and painstaking writing processes. One of Basho's diary entries describes one particular occasion that took place in a room at a Japanese Inn: struggling desperately to write into poetic verses the events of that day he groaned and beat his head against a wall so loudly a guest passing by rushed in to rescue him. However, despite—or, indeed perhaps because of—the suffering and sorrow forged by Basho's inexorable rhythm of embarking,

returning and writing he was able to discover solidarity with an important and influential literary forebear: the Chinese poet-wanderer Li Po. Additionally and more significantly, Basho's self-isolation and the introspection it afforded motivated him to begin studying Zen; in so doing, he claimed as his mentor, Saigyō, a Japanese monk-poet of the past in whom Basho would find courage and solace, and for whom his admiration and emulation would prove life-long.

Like Heaney, Basho's exile was self-imposed, and, like Heaney, during his subsequent journeying he endeavored always to reconnect with a poetic past and reshape it into something presently relevant and meaningful. Furthermore, the sacrifice this would inevitably demand from both of them was similarly and fundamentally of a spiritual kind. The knowledge that Heaney and Basho's chosen paths were certain to yield lingering poverty, unexpected pain, and—as each would see to it—the capture of elusive poetic truths, would lead both of them to seek out another poet to serve them not only as a literary model, but more immediately, as a spiritual guide. Regarding this critical and vital action, Basho Scholar Donald Keene refers to the following excerpt from a travel account by Basho in which, upon arriving at castle ruins a millennium old, he finds a dedication carved into a stone monument and suddenly realizes the Zen reality of the utter impermanence of all things—save poetry:

Many are the places whose names have been preserved for us in poetry from ancient times, but mountains crumble and rivers disappear, new roads replace the old, stones are buried and vanish in the earth, trees grow old and give way to saplings. Time passes and the world changes. The remains of the past are shrouded in uncertainty. And yet, here before my eyes was a monument which none would deny had lasted a thousand years. I felt as if I were looking in the minds of the men of old. 'This,' I thought, 'is one of the pleasures of travel and living to be old.' I forgot the weariness of my journey, and was moved to tears for my joy.<sup>34</sup>

According to Keane, this passage indicates Basho's newly-acquired awareness that "mountains and rivers are no less perishable than kingdoms," and in the end "only poetry remains." "The rare monument from the past confirms the precious nature of the written word," he continues, and concludes: "Basho's belief in poetry was religious, and his bonds with Saigyō and the other poets of the past were expressions of his faith."<sup>35</sup>

Throughout the years Basho's journeys would become increasingly longer and more sharply defined by the physical asceticism and spiritual rigor of the deeply religious. Before he embarked he would mark the seriousness of his aim by honoring a tradition dating back to the Middle Ages when poets were considered priests in name and appearance if not in reality: head shaved and staff in hand, he would don black robes in the manner of a Buddhist monk and strike out upon the road. Which is exactly what he did in the early days of spring in the year 1689; having just returned from another trip, Basho once more began preparing himself physically and spiritually for departure. He had made the decision to follow—literally and figuratively—in the footsteps of his Zen monk mentor by leaving on the last and most ambitious of his pilgrimages. Basho offered no explanation as to why he felt the need to leave again, other than to say "the gods of the road"<sup>36</sup> beckoned and he could not resist. Keene, however, makes note of recent scholarship that suggests "Basho, believing that 1689 was the five hundredth anniversary of the death of Saigyō, felt he should pay his respects by traveling to many of the same places as his great predecessor."<sup>37</sup> The five-month, fifteen-hundred-mile journey would prove to be an auspicious one: Basho would produce his most definitive poetic work, *Oku no Hosoi Michi* or *Narrow Road to the Interior*, with honorary references to Saigyō scattered throughout.

The title of Basho's fifth and final travel account, *Narrow Road to the Interior*, refers not only to the narrow and difficult trails he has chosen to follow: it implies as well the equally perilous spiritual paths he is about to tread. The work opens with a passage that even then had come to define the poet's dual physical and spiritual peripatetic lifestyle: "From which year was it? I was summoned by the winds of scattered clouds, with no end to thoughts of wandering."<sup>38</sup> Haruo Shirane in her pivotal book on Basho entitled, *Traces of Memory: Landscape, Cultural Memory and the Poetry of Basho* writes that "the traveler in *Narrow Road to the Interior* is a wanderer, or *hyohakusha*, one who floats on water or moves without direction, who leaves his 'body to the wind.'" "This wanderer," she continues, "is paradoxically fated to seek out the traces of the 'ancients,' the spiritual and poetic figures of the past, who implicitly become the deities of the road and summon the poet to embark on a journey through time."<sup>39</sup> Indeed, as Basho embarked he bowed low at the foot of the first mountain range, offered prayers to the founder of the mountain's priestly sect for spiritual sustenance and physical strength, and promptly set off to fulfill his obligation to what he would later call "following the Creative."

It seems whenever Basho felt his *haikai* was stagnant he left upon a journey and sought out inspiration from other people, places and poets: *Narrow Road to the Interior* would serve to verify the value of travel as creative stimulant: in this last of his major works, Basho would finally perfect the travel diary genre by fashioning a seamless fusion and perfect balance between poetry (*haikai*) and prose in the *haikai* spirit (*haibun*). Furthermore, Basho would form in this poetic work a startling series of literary combinations and aesthetic juxtapositions that would solidify his legacy as the most original and influential of the Japanese poets. Of these

remarkable accomplishments there are three, specifically, that are of particular import: the blending together of classical Chinese (*kanshi*) and Japanese (*waka*) poetry; the equating of lesser-known, local places (*basho*) with those long-considered historically and poetically significant (*utamakura*); and, finally, the elevation of vernacular poetry (*haikai*) to the realm of the poetically refined (*furyu*). Individually significant, these three elements together would become Basho's great literary boon, rewarding the travel-weary poet for not forsaking his craft despite the long and lonely life it made for him.

A fine example of the interwoven literary fabric mentioned above is recorded in *The Narrow Road to the Interior* and takes place when Basho travels to Shinobu village—the name means “longing”—to visit the famous Shinobu rock that once sat atop a nearby mountain and served as a cultural landmark as well as poetic inspiration for centuries. In the past the rock was used to rub fronds of tall grass (called *shinobugusa* or “longing grass”) into cloth in order to create a design that became associated with uncontrollable yearning. The rock was popularized by a classical poem written during the Heian Period (794-1191) and came to represent the romantic intensity of courtly love. However, the villagers of Shinobu—angered by the constant foot traffic of poets and especially tourists that trampled the barley grass growing in their fields—finally shoved the rock from its perch down into the valley where it eventually came to rest face-down and half-buried in the deep shade of the mountainside. Basho, deeply saddened by the event, nonetheless accepts it as “meant to be,” and slowly begins to realize something powerfully symbolic in the rock's new location. As he stands there in silent contemplation he suddenly sees and hears in a nearby field farm girls planting rice, and this quotidian image is inspiration for a poem. Shirane explains:

The traveler in *Narrow Road to the Interior* is disappointed to discover that an *utamakura* that had given birth to countless poems has been neglected and abused. The damaged *utamakura*, however, inspires the traveler, who sees in the hands of nearby farm girls transplanting rice seedlings a glimpse of the hands of the young women who used to press “longing grass” onto the *Shinobu* Mottling Rock. Time has obscured the literary *utamakura*, but the powerful memory of that poetic place enables the poet to find new poetry in the mundane, in the everyday commoner life of the provinces. In a *haikai* movement, the refined and the mundane, the classical and the contemporary, merge momentarily in the hands of the farm girls.<sup>40</sup>

Basho had experienced the extraordinary in the ordinary, and he seized upon it to give renewed life and meaning to his art: the rice-planting songs of young women laboring in the field at *Shinobu* had become for him as beautiful and honorable and as the most celebrated of classical verses written about the rock. In addition, this pivotal moment at *Shinobu* not only confirmed the necessity of Basho’s journey, it reconfirmed for him a battle-tested truth regarding the relationship of poetic imagination to that of direct experience: in the end, for the traveler-poet, there is no substitute for traveling.

Prior to Basho, poets and artists creating in the classical tradition inherited certain celebrated artifacts, which they were expected to use repeatedly as literary allusions in their work. The countless dangers and difficulties traveling presented, however, rendered it so undesirable that most chose instead to refer to previous works as a source of knowledge and inspiration. Basho, in the marginalized tradition of his literary and spiritual predecessors, Li Po and Saigyō, challenged once more the notion that one could capture fully the spirit of a place by encountering it indirectly through outdated copies of paintings and poems. Basho went so far as to claim one could not have confidence in the life or work of a poet who had not experienced the doubt, fear, exhilaration and isolation of traveling. Nowhere did Basho find more convincing evidence for this basic belief than in *Narrow Road to the Interior*; from this point forward it

would become for him nothing short of a formal vow which he came to refer to as: “awakening to the high, returning to the low.” Shirane writes:

Travel was also a means, to use Basho’s own words, ‘of awakening to the high, returning to the low,’ of reaching the spiritual and poetic heights of the ‘ancients,’ while returning to and facing the everyday realities of commoner, contemporary life. It was only through this multiple process, of exploring the past, engaging in a spiritual journey, visiting poetic places, and of seeking out the roots of *haikai*, in the unbounded world of everyday, contemporary life that the poet was ultimately able to envision the new in the old, to recuperate, revive, and refigure the cultural memory as embodied in the landscape.<sup>41</sup>

For Basho “awakening to the high” came to mean a conscious cultivation of the artistic and spiritual essences both within the cosmos as well as within a canonical past; alternatively, “returning to the low” identified equally valuable spiritual and aesthetic natures existing within ordinary individuals living everyday lives. The creative combination of these polarities would become for Basho a definitive and unending pursuit of *fuga no makoto*, or “poetic truth.”

Towards the end of his life, Basho, became acutely concerned that his life and art was becoming characterized by *furubi* (“oldness”) and *omomi* (“heaviness”). In response to this awareness and the attendant worries that it produced, Basho began to fashion from his poetic dictum “awaken to the high, return to the low” a literary and spiritual extension that he would refer to as *karumi*, or “lightness.” With special focus on “returning to the low,” *karumi* would come to serve as the final guiding principle by which Basho would evaluate the merit of his poetic art. As Shirane notes, “Like so many of Basho’s critical terms, *karumi* defies easy definition”; however, in general it refers to “a minimalist aesthetic, stressing simplicity and leanness.” For Basho, *karumi* would resemble *ada*, or the playful spirit of a child towards the world, and would mark a “deliberate avoidance of abstraction and poetic posturing” as well as a stated return to “everyday subject matter and diction” through “relaxed, rhythmical, seemingly

artless expression.”<sup>42</sup> This last qualifying adjective would cause Basho to suffer much criticism near the end of his life from other poets and patrons who did not see in his new style anything worthy of respect, much less admiration. Instead, Basho’s detractors saw his new poetry and its preoccupation with the ordinary and contemporary as deviating too far from the classical and refined: in short, Basho’s “return to the low” in his art had become, at least for his critics, too low. Yet Basho would remain steadfast in his insistence on the importance of the principle of lightness in his poetry—even as the confusion it caused among young disciples and the resistance it produced from respected peers resulted in increasing pain and ostracism for the aging poet.

When Basho left the bustling city of Edo to live alone in a hut by a river he did not know what this new isolation and its recurring periods of self-imposed exile would yield; what he did know for certain was that not leaving would have rendered his poetry and him spiritless. Travel, then, would be the means by which Basho would reinvigorate his poetic imagination, reconnect with the poetic past, and recreate what poetry could mean for common people living everyday lives. The life of solitary wandering would again and again awaken the poet to the spiritual heights of poetry, and return him once more to the realities of daily life having rediscovered anew its divinely precious possibilities. For Shirane, *Narrow Road to the Interior* was to become the embodiment of Basho’s poetic pursuit with its “oppositional, inversionary movement, its roots in popular, hybrid cultures, its humor, and its discovery of new vistas and new poetic partners.”<sup>43</sup> In *Narrow Road to the Interior*, Basho captures the past, explores the spiritual figure of Saigyō, and celebrates the *haikai* spirit. Leading the poetic life would mean Basho would endure an exilic existence; the relationships he would form with people, places and other poets



would come to be defined by a lasting impermanence. When the solitary poet was gripped by a self-doubt and despair that seemed inescapable, he would look to Saigyō as a spiritual guide capable of seeing him through it. The final end of Bashō's journeying would culminate in his masterwork, *Narrow Road to the Interior*, and this crowning achievement for the poet would make worthwhile all of the painful beginnings and endings suffered in between. On the twelfth day of the tenth month, 1694, at the age of fifty-one, Bashō honored that ancient and noble Japanese tradition, and wrote his *jisei*, or death poem. Earlier in his illness, when Bashō had been asked about his farewell poem by a well-meaning follower, he had replied with characteristic candor that "any of his poems could be his death poem." Nevertheless, he summoned his disciples to surround him at his bed and wrote the following words before offering up his final breath:

たび に やんで  
 ゆめ は かれの お  
 かけめぐる

Falling ill upon a journey  
 My dream wanders on  
 Across the withered fields<sup>44</sup>

In returning to Dante in the light of Bashō it becomes clear that the risk each poet took in pursuing the poetic life required two essentials for it to prove fortuitous: a visionary guide and a grounding love. Giuseppe Mazzotta attests that "Dante's dramatization of vision as love comes to him, no doubt, from the mystics' insight into the unity of all creation. What underlies all efforts to make sense of the world," he contends, "is the mystics' insight into the vital unity and interconnection of all things kept together by a knot of love....For [certain mystics], as for Dante, to know, then, is to love, to love is to see, to see is to know." He continues: "Love, knowledge,

and vision, each the foundation for the other, each the truth of the other, implicate and explicate each other in the infinite circulation of their identities and differences.”<sup>45</sup> Mazzotta suggests it is precisely “this trinity, or, if one prefers, this triad, [that] is the luminous and obscure substance of the poetry of the *Divine Comedy*.”<sup>46</sup> Dante’s vision as love, and his subsequent attempt to express this through impassioned poetic verse, bears striking resemblance to the sometimes ecstatic effort of religious mystics who attempt to articulate similar experiences of divine union. Though Mazzotta acknowledges certain similarities between the language and experience of both poets and mystics, he cautions against the misappropriation of such comparisons:

It matters little whether Dante “really” has a mystical experience or rhetorically concocts it as the overarching discourse of his poetry. It matters even less that mystical discourses, which forever stumble against the inadequacy of all discourses to contain the ineffable vision, edge, as skeptically minded historians believe, toward pathology: the ‘madness’ of the mystics is nothing more than an acknowledgment of the free circulation of language across the boundaries of sensible knowledge. As the pilgrim--dazzled by the light--forgets what he has seen and is unable to say what he saw, the poet posits the essential identity between poetic metaphor and mystical writings: both displaces light into darkness, nearness to God into distance, presence into absence, totality into fleeting traces and scattered vestiges....[do you think this is true for ALL mystical writings?] The shadow of the noonday light the poet preserves in his mind will become the basis for Dante’s radical and creative invention of an aesthetic theology.<sup>47</sup>

The meaning of the phrase “aesthetic theology” in the preceding paragraph refers to Mazzotta’s attempt to assert that Dante “still recognizes the importance of rational theology...but this cannot mean, for Dante, poetry’s subordination to a dominant theological structure other than the one he forges.” For according to Mazzotta, “the depths of the divine can[not] be fathomed only through the rigor of rational investigation.” Instead, poetry and theology must conjoin in the conviction, “first, that poetry is the path to take to come to the vision of God and, second, that the poetic imagination is the faculty empowered to resurrect and glue together the fragments of a broken

world.”<sup>48</sup>

The transformed aesthetic vision of and participation in the world is for the Christian mystic the profound experience of divine grace. The sudden experience of cosmic unity created and sustained by the force of divine love is made possible the moment one realizes and accepts the presence of an omnipresent power communicating itself in and through and for all things that are itself. According to John Freccero, for Dante such an experience marks that crucial departure point whereby the pilgrim “begins the quest which will take him beyond philosophy to the vision of God.” In addition, for Dante, the mystical encounter becomes the poetic moment that enables him “to give dynamic incarnation to his experience” which “begin[s] from the image and communicate[s] meaning in it as well as through it.” The divine communication created is “maintained by its synthesis, the Incarnation, which is to say that the...image maintains its coherence only by the grace of the vision that precedes it (and, in fact, makes it at all possible).”<sup>49</sup> Freccero comments further upon this idea of incarnation:

Georges Poulet has suggested that in the final cantos of Dante’s poem, the attributes of God are in a sense shared by the pilgrim, inasmuch as the pilgrim’s soul is a center which contains the infinite sphere of divinity. The movement by which the soul approaches God is thus a movement of ‘concentration’ that is accomplished in the depths of the soul itself. But if the pilgrim’s soul resembles God, then the mystical definition of God also applies to it...even in beatific vision, when God becomes the soul’s most intimate possession, the external world of suns and stars never ceases to exist.<sup>50</sup>

This last notion that even in beatific vision “the external world of suns and stars never ceases to exist,” is extremely significant because it serves as a reminder that even in a state of ecstatic mystical entrancement the practical reality of one’s place within the physical world of concrete forms remains. Yet this reminder is not solely of our accessory obligations in this ordinary world: it is the realization upon returning from this mystical rapture that this very ordinary world

to which one returns also offers the potential for a spiritual relationship. “Awakening to the high and returning to the low,” fashions a consciousness rooted within a concretized world and thus capable of forming intimate and dynamic connections with physical surroundings newly recognized as divine: only through the immanent can genuine spiritual contact with the transcendent occur.

The converted attention essential to poetic imagination and indispensable to spiritual experience is made possible by grace. Encountering ordinary objects anew and seeing within them their divine nature is to admit another, deeper way of experiencing the grace of a vision transformed. Yet individual, aesthetic appropriation of the power of poetic imagination is not enough: response to this newly envisioned possibility must be made manifest in corresponding actions regarding others. The radical conversion of mind must be followed by an equally radical conversion of heart: one must accept a new responsibility of living in and relating to the larger world. In order to verify the authenticity of the inner conversion, the outer relationship between self and other must reflect this interior change. As a result, the inward spiritual transformation that has taken place is now naturally expressed outwardly in the larger world through relationships with others. This effort to realize the possibilities presented to the poetic imagination demonstrates a new awareness of, and obligation to, a divine presence that infuses each of our actions with grace.

Interpreting Dante’s conversion experience as he nears the end of his underworld journey with Virgil, Freccero remarks, “[Dante’s] glance at the sun begins a movement towards the soul’s perfection which, without grace, will be halted by the last impediment between the soul and its object.” Without God’s help, Freccero continues, “man can only stagger repeatedly out of

the forest by his own power, only to return again to the misery out of which he has come...until that time, man must lean on a guide sent from heaven.”<sup>51</sup> Dante’s guide is the poet Virgil; Heaney’s guide is the poet Dante; and Basho’s guide is the poet Siagyo. The poetic vision is passed from poet-guide to poet-guide as a revelation of an imagined alternative to the reality of the present world; the vision serves as both a standard and a vow made by individuals ready and willing to accept the gift and responsibility of receiving it. The price of this vision is in turn paid through the duties and labors of offering this vision to others in a world often unready or unwilling to receive it. The responsibility of both the poet and the mystic is to articulate what is seen in the hope that another will see it as well and understand. As Freccero eloquently explains, the divine love that sustains the nature and purpose of the poetic experience demands that it be offered to others as a testament to itself. He writes:

In Dante’s view...the complete fulfillment of the soul’s desires is at the same time an integration with the rest of creation. The circular turning of the soul does not shut out external reality but rather joins with it in the majestic sweep of the final verse. If the self were a purely subjective fulfillment, a Romantic apotheosis of the self to the exclusion of all others, there would be little need of a complex approximation...But precisely because that personal fulfillment was at the same time an objective commitment to the cosmic order, it entailed a responsibility to bear witness to the Light, as do the sun and the other stars--therein lies its complexity....[Which] is not only a most intimate expression of self-fulfillment, but also public testimony of God’s grace.<sup>52</sup>

An effective spiritual teaching knows well the mysteries of the mind and heart; it is much like a well-worn map that traces even the most distant and dangerous emotional and psychological regions within. So, too, are good poems similar to good maps that mark direct and reliable inroads across elusive and perilous inner terrain; in so doing these poems not only insure the spiritual traveler’s survival, they see them through to their final destination. Furthermore, it stands that spiritual seekers making their way through unknown wilderness will increase their

chances of survival as well as improve their possibility of reaching their final destination point if accompanied by an experienced guide. As Mazzotta astutely observes, “What is true for the pilgrim is equally true for the poet’s own sense of history, shaped, as it is, by the steady acknowledgements of guides, prophets and mediators who bear and interpret God’s Word to man.”<sup>53</sup> That Dante would never have endured the tests or survived the trials of his spiritual quest without the imagined presence of the poet Virgil near him is clear.

Yet, though Virgil did lead Dante faithfully along through horrific hell fires and purgatorial terror, the crucial moment did come, as it must come at some point along any spiritual path, when the guide can take the traveler no further. Plainly put by French historian and philosopher Pierre Hadot, “Teaching is like an inner signpost which tells us in which direction we must go; but in order to reach the One, we must begin to actually walk—on a road which we travel alone, toward the Alone.”<sup>54</sup> And so it is that Dante, standing before a final, terrifying wall of fire, must now face his fear alone. Virgil has protected and comforted him thus far, guiding him safely through countless toils and snares, but now it is time for Virgil to depart, and for Dante to continue the journey without him. Standing on the other side of the wall of flames is Beatrice, symbol of divine wisdom and love. She is the single, enduring motivation for Dante’s quest; she is the one who encouraged him to begin treading this path in the first place; she is also the one who ultimately besought Virgil to come to his aid when he was alone and lost in the dark wood. At this point in his spiritual search, what is asked of Dante will be asked of each of us, the spiritually tested have endeavored to explain and for which the poets have attempted to prepare us: the decisively critical moment of our own transformation. The individual is finally called to transcend all those things that bind and fetter and separate the self:

stepping through the wall of flames finally unafraid is to be at last at one with everything in the world, that is, at one with the divine. Heaney's poem "The Journey Back" from his collection [which collection?] speaks tenderly and honestly to how this dual movement of transcendence and unification remains still very much involved in the ordinariness of the world:

'Daylight was going and the umber air  
Soothing every creature on the earth,  
Freeing them from their labors everywhere.

I alone was girding myself to face  
The ordeal of my journey and my duty  
And not a thing had changed, as rush-hour buses

Bore the drained and laden through the city.  
I might have been a wise king setting out  
Under the Christmas Lights - except that

It felt more like the forewarned journey back  
Into the heartland of the ordinary.  
Still my old self. Ready to knock one back.  
A nine-to-five man who had seen poetry.<sup>55</sup>

## NOTES

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<sup>1</sup>*Dante's Inferno*, Trans. Seamus Heaney, Ed. Daniel Halpern (New Jersey: The Ecco Press, 1993), p. 3.

<sup>2</sup>Darcy O'Brien, "Ways of Seeing things," *Seamus Heaney: the shaping spirit*, (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 1996), p. 175.

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid., p. 175.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., p. 183.

<sup>5</sup> John Simpson, *The Oxford Book of Exile*, (Oxford University Press, 1995), p. vii.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., p.vii.

<sup>7</sup> Giuseppe Mazzotta, *Dante's vision and the circle of knowledge*, (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1993), p. 179.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., p. 179.

<sup>9</sup> John Freccero, *Dante: the poetics of conversion*, (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1986), pp. 29-31.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., p. 31.

<sup>11</sup> Dante Alighieri, *Divina commedia*, Trans. John Ciardi (New York: Norton, 1977), p. 5.

<sup>12</sup> Freccero, p. 42.

<sup>13</sup> Seamus Heaney, *Crediting Poetry: the Nobel lecture*, (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1996), p. 53.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., pp. 53-54.

<sup>15</sup> Mazzotta, p. 124.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., pp. 124-125.

<sup>17</sup> Joseph Kelly, *Faith in Exile: seeking hope in times of doubt*, (New York: Paulist Press, 2003), p. 21.

<sup>18</sup> Frank Burch-Brown, *Transfiguration: poetic metaphor and the languages of religious belief*, (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press: 1983), pp. 27.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., pp. 26-27.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., pp. 30-31.

<sup>21</sup> Carla De Petris, "Heaney and Dante," *Critical Essays on Seamus Heaney*, (New York: G.K. Hall, 1995), pp. 161-162.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., p. 166.



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- <sup>23</sup> Ibid., p.166.
- <sup>24</sup> Ibid., p. 166.
- <sup>25</sup> Ibid., p. 166.
- <sup>26</sup> Ibid., p.168.
- <sup>27</sup> Heaney, Seamus,[Seamus Heaney] *The spirit level* (New York: Farrar Straus Giroux, 1996), p.
- <sup>28</sup> Ibid., p.165.
- <sup>29</sup> Seamus Heaney, *The redress of poetry*, (New York: Farrar Straus Giroux, 1995), pp. 3-4.
- <sup>30</sup> Evelyn Underhill, *Mysticism: a study in the nature and development of man's spiritual consciousness*, (New York: E.P. Dutton and Company, 1993), pp. 74-80, 233.
- <sup>31</sup> Basho, *The Narrow Road to Oku*, Trans. Donald Keene, (Tokyo: Kodansha International Ltd., 1996), pp.18-23.
- <sup>32</sup> Basho, *Narrow Road to the Far North*, Trans. Carl Schlueter
- <sup>33</sup> Donald Keene, *World within Walls: Japanese literature of the pre-modern era, 1600-1867*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999), p. 92
- <sup>34</sup> Ibid., p. 105.
- <sup>35</sup> Ibid., p. 105.
- <sup>36</sup> Haruo Shirane, *Traces of Dreams: landscape, cultural memory, and the poetry of Basho*, (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 1998), p. 98.
- <sup>37</sup> Ibid., p. 98.
- <sup>38</sup> Ibid., p. 230.
- <sup>39</sup> Ibid., pp. 236-7.
- <sup>40</sup> Ibid., 230
- <sup>41</sup> Ibid., p.252
- <sup>42</sup> Ibid., p. 269
- <sup>43</sup> Ibid., p. 252.
- <sup>44</sup> Basho, *Japanese Death Poems*, Trans. Yoel Hoffmann, (Boston, Mass: Tuttle Publishing,

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1986), pp.

<sup>45</sup> Mazzotta, p. 171-2.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid., p. 171-2.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid., p.171

<sup>48</sup> Ibid., pp. 14.

<sup>49</sup> Freccero, pp. 255, 248, 257.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid., p. 256.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid., p. 53.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid., p. 247.

<sup>53</sup> Giuseppe Mazzotta, *Dante, Poet of the Desert* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1979), pp. 275-6.

<sup>54</sup> Pierre Hadot, *What is Ancient Philosophy?*, Trans. Michael Chase (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2002), p. 167

<sup>55</sup> Seamus Heaney, *Seeing things*, (New York: Farrar Straus Giroux, 1991), p. 9