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God and Poetry

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by
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Heaven

He thinks when we die we'll go to China.
Think of it—a Chinese heaven
where, except for his blonde hair,
the part that belongs to his father,
everyone will look like him.
China, that blue flower on the map,
bluer than the sea
his hand must span like a bridge
to reach it.
An octave away.

I've never seen it.
It's as if I can't sing that far.
But look--
on the map, this black dot.
Here is where we live,
on the pancake plains
just east of the Rockies,
on the other side of the clouds.
A mile above the sea,
the air is so thin, you can starve on it.

It's still the wild west,
mean and grubby,
the shoot-outs and fist fights in the back alley.
With my son the dreamer
and my daughter, who is too young to walk,
I've sat in this spot
and wondered why here?
Why in this short life,
this town, this creek they call a river?

On a spring sweater day...
I call to the children.
We can see the mountains
shimmering blue above the air.
If you look really hard, says my son the dreamer,
leaning out from the laundry's rigging,
the work shirts fluttering like sails,
you can see all the way to heaven. ¹

This moving poem by contemporary artist Cathy Song paints an
amalgamative portrait of the modern day wild west. Overtones of the Orient appear rich and sparkling amidst Song’s sparse and dusty descriptions of life in a small western town. Yet, upon reading this poem, there is an overwhelming sense that it contains within its lines something more, something greater than itself. There seems to be some inexpressible truth lying dormant beneath the poem’s surface, just out of reach. It is a truth contained within all poetry and poetic language, yet it can never be fully articulated in words. Above all else, poetry has the ability to convey meaning in a way that supersedes human language. Because poetry transcends human language, it is the most appropriate means by which to speak not only of God, but to God as well.

The Hebrew Scripture writers, Gospel writers, and countless poets have found poetry to be the most appropriate language with which to speak both of God and to God. This thesis is an exploration of the relationship between God and poetry, and it will examine God in relation to poetry from its biblical foundations to its most contemporary forms. It will first examine why poetry is the most appropriate language for speaking of God. Next, this thesis will focus on the deep connection between poetry and prayer. Finally, the question of how poetry accomplishes these tasks will be examined and explored.

The language of poetry is a timeless and universal language. It has been spoken in nearly every age and every culture since the beginning of history. In the scholarly circles of the contemporary world, it is often taken for granted that one knows what poetry is. To say that poetry is an entity based on measure, meter, and
rhyme scheme is certainly an inadequate and antiseptic definition that seems to have been wrenched from some textbook. Yet, it is clear that all language is not the language of poetry, and all words are not written to be poetic. A tolerable definition of poetry might be found in the words of George Santayana, long-time professor at Harvard University and author of the book, *Interpretations of Poetry and Religion*: “Poetry is speech in which the instrument counts as much as the meaning--poetry is speech for its own sake and for its own sweetness.”² This is to say that the way in which the words of a poem are written matters as much as the meanings of the words themselves. It must be noted, however, that even the words of a poem are not sufficient for describing and discussing God.

Human language falls radically short of articulating the divine. God is unspeakable, yet as God’s creation, humans feel a yearning to speak about God. Perhaps Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel most clearly described this yearning when he said: “The attempt to convey what we see and cannot say is the everlasting theme of mankind’s unfinished symphony, a venture in which adequacy is never achieved.”³ The realization that adequacy can never be achieved when speaking of God should not prevent persons from making the attempt. After all, as Samuel Beckett states, “Words are all we have.”⁴

Human language, although entirely inadequate, is the only means by which humans can explain the world around them. Words, written or spoken, are the tools by which people come to understand each other, themselves, and God. Human beings are verbal animals. Words are spoken and written in an attempt to
get outside of this earthly humanness, to ponder the great mystery that is the divine. And although language is human-made, it can, on rare occasions, capture emotions and sensations which are not. Bishop Timothy O'Connell writes: "It is only in the process of communication that we come to understand." People speak of God, then, in an attempt to understand this elusive and intangible being that is the Creator. People speak of the Creator in order to better understand the significance of creation. God must be put into words, for it is only in words that people are able to articulate and come to understand the divine.

Poetry is, and has always been, an attempt to express that which is overwhelming about the human experience. Rabbi David Wolpe explains that:

When struck by a moment of awesome beauty--
the first glance at a masterpiece of man or nature--
we are silent. Later, words rush in to fill the void,
to explain the experience; but at first we cannot speak.6

As Wolpe suggests, when one is so moved as to be struck silent, the words first uttered become sacred. When the moment of silence has ceased and words rush in to fill the void, one's language is not to be employed literally. The words that are chosen to explain such moving experiences are often poetic words that convey a meaning that is greater than themselves. Thus, to take the description of such an awesome experience literally would be to remove from the experience the very qualities which make it overwhelming!

Poetry allows the reader to gain a broader and deeper understanding of the
nature of human experience. It has the ability to lift the human soul and engage the whole person—senses, intellect, imagination, memory—in the pursuit of something greater than itself. Poetry offers people a chance to pause in the midst of this fast-paced, technological world, and ponder the questions that plague their souls. Suddenly, the ordinary becomes extraordinary, and the mundane is elevated to the realm of the holy.

The poem that was chosen as an introduction to this thesis is a clear example of the way in which poetry can elevate the ordinary to the realm of the extraordinary. Cathy Song’s “Heaven” is a contemporary example of the transcendence of poetry. Throughout the poem, Song weaves literal statements with metaphorical imagery. She describes China as “a blue flower on the map,” and she says that her son’s “hand must span like a bridge to reach it.” She is not literally stating that her son’s hand is a bridge that connects Colorado to China. Rather, the image of the bridge represents the strong connection between the family’s American and Chinese ancestry.

Figurative language is language which points to something greater than itself. Throughout the poem “Heaven,” Cathy Song uses figurative language to describe feelings and emotions that cannot be articulated in literal statements. She describes China as being “an octave away.” Song states that she has never been to China, and she goes on to say, “It’s as if I can’t sing that far.” Of course Song does not think that she could literally sing her way to China! This is a figurative statement suggesting both the geographic distance between her and China, and the spiritual or emotional
distance Song feels from her heritage. Literal language is clearly inadequate for describing the emotional and spiritual aspects of human existence, thus figurative language is the only language that can suffice.

Romanian playwright Eugene Ionesco described his struggle with the inadequacy of language when he wrote, “Everything is expressible in words—except the living truth.” If, as Ionesco states, the living truth cannot be described in words, it follows that God, the ultimate truth, is even more elusive and difficult to describe. To say that God is loving is a literal statement that describes a part of God’s character. God is a just God, God is all-knowing, all-seeing, all-powerful; these are all literal descriptions of God’s characteristics that may or may not be true but nevertheless are to be understood as literal, one-dimensional statements describing God’s “personality.” The challenge when speaking of God is in the attempt to describe the nature of God or the form in which the Creator exists. The only language that can adequately describe God is the figurative language of poetry.

In the Hebrew Scriptures, God has been described as sun (Ps 84:11), rock (Dt 32:15), spring (Jer 2:13), fire (Dt 4:24), lion (Hos 5:14), and leopard (Hos 13:7-8), among many other metaphors. God is all of these, but these images are not God. God can be likened to a lion in his majesty, but this is not to say that God is a lion. God is like the sun in that all of the earth relies upon it for simple existence. Yet God is not literally the sun. People cannot say what God is. God can only be likened to that which is in the realm of human understanding.

Perhaps the most prominent image of God in the Hebrew Scriptures is that of
the eagle. In the book of Exodus when Moses first arrives at Sinai, he journeys up
the mountain to hear the words of the Lord:

Then the Lord called to him and said, “Thus shall
you say to the house of Jacob; tell the Israelites: You
have seen for yourselves how I treated the Egyptians
and how I raised you up on eagle’s wing and brought
you here to myself (Ex 19: 3-4).”

This passage describes the words chosen by God to remind the Israelites of God’s
strength and fidelity. God gives these words to Moses and tells him to pass them on
to the people of Israel. Instead of reciting all that the Lord has done for the Israelites,
the author of Exodus chooses to incorporate the eagle as a symbol of God’s loyalty
and love. The splendor of the eagle must have had some significance for the
Israelites and was therefore chosen to symbolically represent the power and
grandeur of God. This passage does not suggest that God literally lifted the Israelites
upon the wings of an eagle. Instead, it points to a certain truth about the freeing
presence of God. The symbol of the eagle allows readers to grasp the heights to
which God lifted the Israelites as they journeyed through the desert, and it forces
them to experience the Lord’s unconditional love in a deeper, more meaningful
sense.

The symbolic comparison between God and eagle is found in other traditions
as well. In “the eagle above us,” by the Cherokee poet, Cora, the narrator illustrates
the tension that exists between the transcendence and the immanence of the earth’s
Creator.

he lives in the sky
far above us
the eagle
looks good there
has a good grip on his world

his world wrapt in gray
but a living, a humid
a beautiful gray

there he glides in the sky
very far
right above us

frightful his eye
radiant his eye
the sun
his feet a deep red
there he is
right above us

spreading his wings
he remembers
who dwell down below.10

Many Christians immediately see the connection between the eagle and God in Cora’s “the eagle above us.” Some may jump to the conclusion that the eagle represents God, as we know God in the Christian sphere. But this poem is contextually bound (as is all poetry) to the culture in which it was written. Native Americans have traditionally approached the spiritual realm with a polytheistic lens. There are many gods and many spirits, most from the natural world, and they are tightly woven in a great interconnecting web of life. The earth is sacred to the Native American culture, and all of the creatures that dwell upon the earth are of equal importance. Thus, the eagle in the above poem may represent one of the gods
in the spiritual realm, the Creator of all life who is both immanent and transcendent. Or it may simply be a poem describing the grace and majesty of the eagle itself.

The Native American culture has always looked upon the spiritual world with a sense of awe and wonder. This culture has also struggled with the impotence of language in attempting to describe the power of the beyond. Upon describing the energy of the spirit world, Native American author Kena Upanishad characterizes divinity this way: "That which in the lightning flashes forth, makes one blink, and say, 'Ah!' -- that 'Ah!' describes divinity."¹¹ Upanishad can find no words to describe the divine. He can only point to the meaningless, formless, vocal reaction that comes from one who has been suddenly frightened by a flash of lightning, as the sound which most clearly articulates the transcendent.

In scripture, the Hebrew Scripture writers find themselves at a loss for words when speaking of God. Their frustration at the inadequacy of human language is a paradigm that runs through nearly every passage of the prophetic books. They are continuously overwhelmed by the glory and grandeur of God, and this emotion is used as a catalyst in the attempt to find a living language of faith. Isaiah hears a voice in the wilderness that says, "Cry!" And when the prophet asks, "What shall I cry?" The answer comes in the form of a poem:

All flesh is grass, and all its beauty is like
the flower of the field.

The grass withers, the flower fades,
when the breath of the Lord blows upon it;
Surely the people is grass.
The grass withers, the flower fades;
but the word of our God will stand forever
(Isaiah 40: 6-8).

Poetry is also the language the Psalmist chooses to express that which is overwhelming and inexpressible. In Psalm 68, God is portrayed as an anthropomorphic God, in an attempt to describe the exalted strength and eternal goodness of the divine.

O God, when you went forth at the head of your people,
When you marched through the wilderness,
The earth quaked; it rained from heaven at the presence of God,
at the presence of God, the God of Israel, the One of Sinai.

A bountiful rain you showered down,
O God, upon your inheritance;
You restored the land when it languished;
Your flock settled in it; in your goodness,
O God, you provided it for the needy.
In this psalm, God is poetically portrayed as a mighty leader, marching the Israelites through the wilderness. The psalmist does not attempt to describe the physical attributes of God; he simply puts forth these words as a powerful prayer of thanksgiving and praise.

Psalm 68 is an extremely personal psalm, and it is clear that the psalmist is writing about a truly personal God. At the beginning of the psalm, there is a sense that God is marching through the wilderness with the Israelites; indeed, God is leading them in their journey out of captivity. The God of Psalm 68 is a working God, an active God, a God that is endlessly present to the people of Israel. God is given human qualities in this psalm in an effort to bring the divine presence down to earth.

Psalm 68 demonstrates one way in which poetry can convey great meaning. Not every poem, however, is written in order to ponder the divine. Some poems are created simply to play with the power of words. In the following poem, Byron writes an ode to the sweetness of Latin. The poem, though masterfully constructed, has no deep hidden meaning. When read aloud, the words that Byron has so carefully chosen come to life in a great mouthful of description.

I love the language, that soft bastard Latin
Which melts like kisses from a female mouth
And sounds as if it should be writ on satin
With syllables which breathe of the sweet South,
And gentle liquids gliding all so pat in
That not a single accent seems uncouth,
Like our harsh Northern whistling, grunting guttural
Which we’re obliged to hiss and spit and sputter all.\(^{12}\)

In his contrast of English and Italian speech, Byron writes in such a way that the
instrument counts as much as the meaning. As the rhythm of Byron's language begins to sweep the reader away, the function of the poem allows the reader to become unconscious of the instrument. Suddenly, the fact that these images are contained within the walls of a poem is of less importance than the images themselves. Although Byron's poem is well constructed and a pleasure to read, it does not point to any greater truths than itself. It is clear that God is not the only subject about which a poem can be written. As the next selection confirms, however, poetry is the only suitable language with which to speak of God.

In his poem, "God's Grandeur," Victorian poet Gerard Manly Hopkins celebrates the wonder of God's creation. For Hopkins, poetry is an enactment of divine inspiration. Therefore, his words are to be read not only for their meanings, but for how they collectively sound when read aloud. Many of the characteristics of Hopkins' style--his disruption of conventional syntax, his coining and compounding of words, the use of ellipsis and repetition--can be understood as ways of representing the stress and action of the brain in moments of inspiration. He creates puns in order to suggest how God's creation rhymes and chimes in a divine patterning. In the act of imaginative apprehension, a language particular to the moment generates itself:

The world is charged with the grandeur of God.  
It will flame out, like shining from shook foil;  
It gathers to a greatness, like the ooze of oil  
Crushed. Why do men then now reck his rod?  
Generations have trod, have trod, have trod;  
And all is seared with trade; bleared, smeared with toil  
And wears man's smudge and shares man's smell: the soil  
Is bare now, nor can foot feel, being shod.
And for all this, nature is never spent;
    There lives the dearest freshness deep down things;
And though the last lights off the black West went
    Oh, morning, at the brown brink eastward, springs--
Because the Holy Ghost over the bent
    World broods with warm breast and with ah! bright wings.14

It is clear that Hopkins feels God’s powerful presence throughout the earth.
And although the idea of an immanent God has been prominent for centuries, the
way Hopkins chooses to express this idea is uniquely beautiful. “The world is
charged with the grandeur of God,” he writes, as if to imply that God is an electrical
current sending the divine presence throughout the world in a blinding zap of
energy. The earth is charged and recharged by God, as a battery is charged from an
outlet. By relating God’s power to something earthy, such as a powerful bolt of
electricity, Hopkins brings the power of the divine into a more concrete and tangible
form.

The second half of the first stanza is filled with images of dirt and filth.
Through descriptive images and the symbolic language, Hopkins laments the way
in which the flaws of humanity detract from the pure and pristine presence of God.
He says that all of the earth “is seared with trade... wears man’s smudge and shares
man’s smell.” These images are not to be taken literally. Nature wearing
humanity’s smudge is a powerful image that arrests the attention and appeals to the
reader’s emotions. It is clear that Hopkins uses figurative language to display the
tension that exists between nature and the civilized world.

To the delight of the reader, the second stanza of “God’s Grandeur” is as
joyfully reassuring as the title suggests. Hopkins insists that even though civilization has smudged the natural world, nature continues to flourish. "There lives the dearest freshness deep down things," Hopkins says, as testimony of the everlasting goodness of the created world. In the final images of the poem, he uses rich, figurative language to describe the grandeur of God. Morning is personified as springing in the east, while the Holy Ghost broods "with warm breast and with ah! bright wings." Perhaps this poem, more than any other example put forth thus far, exemplifies how poetry is the most fitting language with which to speak of God.

Many of the poems that have been analyzed thus far are joyful in nature. Hopkins celebrates the glory of God, while the psalmist praises the Lord in the prophetic words of the Hebrew Scriptures. Byron plays with the rhythm and rhyme of language, while in "the eagle above us," Cora celebrates the majestic presence of the eagle. Thus, poetry is a necessary tool for describing and celebrating the wonders of divinity. Yet, life, even the divine life is not always a celebration? Indeed, humans are not only called to celebrate. They are also called to suffer.

In his book, God and Human Suffering, Douglas John Hall describes his understanding of suffering: "[I am] living at a time when much of human experience has been of the kind denoted in the word suffering. To be concrete: I belong to the age of Auschwitz and Hiroshima. . . and to the decline of optimism in North America."15 Suffering is an intrinsic part of what it means to be human. Scholars point to Jesus' suffering as evidence that he was fully human as well as fully divine. Jesus' suffering, however, is not the only confirmation of his
humanity. The way Jesus deals with his suffering is also a strong testimony for his humanity. In the midst of his deepest sorrow, Jesus goes off by himself, and he prays: “Father, if it is your will, take this cup from me; yet not my will but yours be done.” Jesus’ suffering points to another truth about human existence. Human suffering must be expressed to God in prayer.

Poetry is not only the most appropriate language for speaking of God. It is the most suitable language with which to speak to God as well. Prayer is the formal name given to humanity’s attempt to speak to its creator. Although poetry is the most appropriate language for prayer, the act of prayer does not necessarily have to be an act of language at all. There are times when words cannot suffice; mere language cannot express the yearnings of the human soul. In times of great pain or immense sorrow, only silence can suffice. Still, there are times when silence is empty and impotent in expressing the needs of an aching heart. In times like these, people cry out to the Lord and fill the silence with lamentations to God. Yet, as Rabbi Abraham Heschel states,

Both are inadequate: our speech as well as our silence.

Yet there is a level that goes beyond both: the level of song.

“There are three ways in which a man expresses his deep sorrow: the man on the lowest level cries; the man on the second level is silent; the man on the highest level knows how to turn his sorrow into song.” True prayer is a song.16

For centuries people have been attempting to speak to God, yet human
language has inevitably failed. In his letter to the Romans, Paul wrestles with the impotence of human language in his description of the proper language for prayer:

When we cannot choose words in order to pray properly, the Spirit himself expresses our plea in a way that could never be put into words (Romans 8:26).

For Paul, it is only by divine intervention that human prayers are adequately expressed to God. Paul asserts that the Holy Spirit expresses human prayers when people cannot find the appropriate words with which to pray. There are, however, moments in human suffering when people must articulate their prayers to God through human language -- no matter how inadequate this language may be.

Frederick Beuchner writes of the human need to put suffering into words:

Something that lay hidden in the heart is irrevocably released through speech into time, is given substance and tossed like a stone into the pool of history, where the concentric rings lap out endlessly.17

Beuchner's statement suggests that words create the reality of suffering. By sending their prayers to God through speech, people confront the reality of their needs. Thus, human suffering must be put into words, for it is in speech that suffering becomes real. Although any language can be the language of prayer, perhaps poetry is the most appropriate language with which to speak of suffering.
The suffering cling to poetry for it has the ability to transform the painful into that which is prayerful. In the following excerpt from a poem by Sharon Olds, a mother finds hope in a poetic prayer offered during a time when her son is having a seizure.

Finally I just lean on the door-frame, a woman without belief, praying Please don’t let anything happen to him... Don’t hurt him, I cry out... don’t take his thoughts away as a kid will rip toys from another kid’s hands, don’t go up to his small dazzling brain in spangles on the high wire and push it off. There is no net. Don’t leave him in a wheelchair drooling into cereal, not knowing the dark holes are raisins. And yet if that’s the only way I can have him, I want to have him, to look deep into his face and see just the avenues of light, empty and spacious, to put on his bib as I once did, and spoon brown sugar into the river of his life. I’ll change his dark radiant diapers, I’ll scrape the blue mold that collects in the creases of his elbows, I will sit with him in his room for the rest of my days, I will have him on any terms.18

The language of poetry lends itself to prayer. As the French Scholar Henri Bremond states, “Poetry and prayer intersect, as they must...”19 In prayer, poetry conveys not simply the idea but a sense of actual participation in the realization of the transcendent. If the purpose of speech is to inform, then the purpose of prayer is to partake.20 The narrator uses poetic language to describe her thoughts and feelings while her son is having a seizure. Indeed, her entire prayer is put forth within the
lines of a poem. At the beginning of the poem, the narrator describes herself as a “woman without belief.” But by the poem’s end, she is resolute and determined. She will have her son on any terms. The poetic language employed in this prayer transforms the narrator’s suffering into a testimony of love and responsibility.

Here, a new function of poetry takes shape. As poetry describes the plight of the poor, the pain of the oppressed, and all of the fears and tears that are bound to human history, it becomes “one of the most courageous and consistent of witnesses in our time.” Poetry watches and records human suffering. It becomes the voice through which the silent and the powerless send their prayers to God. Poetry has the ability to describe the indescribable. And somehow, the knowledge that human suffering can be put into words makes the suffering itself easier to bear. The great Russian poet Anna Akhmatova created her longest work, “Requiem,” in the name of the thousands of women who were forced to wait outside the walls of a prison in Leningrad during the purges orchestrated by Stalin, for news of their incarcerated loved ones. She begins her poem with a paragraph of prose entitled, “Instead of a Preface.”

In the terrible years of the Yezov terror, I spent seventeen months waiting in line outside the prison in Leningrad. One day somebody in the crowd identified me. Standing behind me was a woman, with lips blue from the cold, who had, of course, never heard me called by name before. Now she started out of the torpor common to us all and asked me in
a whisper (everyone whispered there):

"Can you describe this?"

And I said: "I can."

Then something like a smile passed fleetingly over what had once been her face.\textsuperscript{22}

The poet's ability to describe the terror of the scene in Leningrad brings with it the hope that empowers the desperate to go on living.

It is clear that poetry is a living language of faith and a necessity when speaking of God. Horace Walpole states, "Poets alone are permitted to tell the real truth."\textsuperscript{23} The question now arises as to how poetic language accomplishes the task. What is it about poetry that makes it essential when speaking not only of God, but to God as well? The answer to this question is threefold: First, poetry contains an element of symbolism that frees readers or listeners, allowing them to imagine divinity in various ways. Next, poetic language is often metaphorical, meaning that poetry simultaneously contains truth as well as an element of fiction. Finally, the presence of the symbolic and the metaphorical give poetry the power to remove humans from their present state to experience the unearthly and intangible.

The use of symbols in poetic language brings to life the all-encompassing truth that defines human existence. Symbolism is found in poetry's use of concrete images that are meant to represent a certain feeling or happening. For example, a poet may speak of a rose as a symbol of love or chastity. Or one may speak of a dove as a symbol of peace. But symbols are not strictly linguistic. In the Christian
tradition, the cross is a symbol for the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. This holds true, whether the symbol is a concrete visual image or the symbol is alluded to in some written or spoken work. Likewise, a fish is representative of the Christian religion, and the star of David is symbolic to the Jewish tradition. Both of these are visual as well as linguistic entities.

Symbolism fuels the imagination and frees the mind from the scientific literalism that floods our contemporary world. It allows the divine to be envisioned in human terms and on a personal level. Symbols create a world in which the ordinary represents the extraordinary. So it is in the Gospel of John, where the ordinary earthly experiences of light and darkness are symbols which represent the contrast between good and evil.

In the beginning was the Word,

and the Word was with God,

and the Word was God.

He was in the beginning with God.

All things came to be through him,

and without him nothing came to be.

What came to be through him was

life,

and this life was the light of the

human race;

the light shines in the darkness,
and the darkness has not yet overcome it (John 1: 1-5).

In this passage, it is clear that light represents life, truth, and all that is good, while darkness is a symbol for death, despair, and all that is evil. The "Word" is a symbol for Christ, and the author of the Book of John seems to suggest that Christ was an entity in the beginning and that this Word was one with God.

As the Gospel of John suggests, the New Testament overflows with symbolism and symbolic language. Often, when Jesus is misunderstood in the gospels it is because his listeners do not understand his symbolic language. In the Gospel of Matthew, when Jesus speaks of yeast as a representation of the Kingdom of Heaven, he is clearly attempting to bring the idea of heaven to his listeners in an earthly and tangible sense: "The Kingdom of heaven is like yeast that a woman took and mixed with three measures of wheat flour until the whole batch was leavened" (Mtt 13: 33). So too in Mark's gospel, when Jesus speaks of a mustard seed as a symbol of the Kingdom of God, he is attempting to free the minds of his listeners to envision the Kingdom of God more fully on earth. The use of symbolism in poetic language makes it easier to understand such abstract concepts as good and evil. It follows, then, that symbolism is a remarkable means by which to grasp the ultimate abstraction, divinity.

In the following selection by Walt Whitman, it is clear that the spider is to be understood both literally and symbolically:

A noiseless patient spider
I marked where on a little promontory it stood isolated,
Marked how to explore the vacant vast surrounding,
It launched forth filament, filament, filament, out of itself,
Ever unreeling them, ever tirelessly speeding them.

And you, O my soul where you stand,
Surrounded, detached, in measureless oceans of space,
Ceaselessly musing, venturing, throwing, seeking the spheres to connect
them,
Till the bridge you will need be formed, till the ductile anchor hold,
Till the gossamer thread you fling catch somewhere, O my soul.24

In the first stanza, when Whitman speaks of a “noiseless patient spider,” he is
literally referring to a spider that is building its web. As the poem continues,
however, the spider becomes a symbol for Whitman’s soul. As the spider releases
filaments with which to weave its web, Whitman’s soul releases “threads” in search
of some connection. His soul is like the spider in its constant striving to explore and
create. This poem, however, hints at something greater than a simple comparison.
While the spider is instinctively spinning its web, Whitman seems to be pondering
a much deeper question: Can the soul be elevated to a divine connection, an
attachment to the spheres?

A second way in which poetry more fully articulates the divine is through
metaphorical language. Some scholars say that the study of metaphor began with
the study of language itself. The word metaphor was first used among Greek
grammarians of the classical period to describe the means by which language was
extended or transferred to mean something else. Suddenly a word could be
transferred from its original meaning to a secondary meaning at the same time.
One could speak not only of a person’s mouth but of the “mouth” of a river as
well.25

Janet Martin Soskice has the most complete working definition of a metaphor as it is used today: “Metaphor is that figure of speech whereby we speak about one thing in terms which are seen to be suggestive of another.”26 This definition is avowedly broad, yet it allows the reader to catch some of the simple nuances concerning the metaphor that may have been overlooked with a more complex definition. The most important aspect to note about the metaphor is that it is essentially a form of language use.

Unlike symbols, metaphors are only linguistic entities. It is true that to grasp the full meaning of a metaphor, the reader may have to use sense perception as well as many other non-linguistic observations. These are not, however, the primary functions of the metaphor itself. To say that a metaphor is primarily a linguistic entity is not to say that a metaphor is comparable to such grammatical categories as noun, verb, or adjective. These categories always display the same syntactic form. Metaphors, on the other hand, can take on many syntactic forms and still the intended meaning of the metaphor remains the same. Thus, to say that a metaphor is primarily a linguistic entity does not take away from the meaning nor the impact of the metaphor itself.

No other literary device or part of speech has had the impact of the metaphor. Images of the divine have been taken literally throughout history. History has proven that, quite often, local mythic images have been interpreted not as metaphoric representations, but as facts. Ferocious wars have been waged, and

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heated debates have taken place concerning the meaning of some metaphorical image. It is no wonder that such a controversial and powerful form of speech has been utilized in the language of poetry for decades. Perhaps Diane Ackerman, author of *A Natural History of the Senses*, states it best:

I think of metaphors as a more benign but equally potent idea of what chemists call hyperbolic. You can take two substances, put them together, and produce something powerfully different (table salt) or even something explosive (nitroglycerine).

Metaphors tease the mind into creative reflection on the mysterious God. In many metaphors, God is personified both because of the conviction that God is personal, and also because the nature of this personal God is found within the context of human experience. In the Bible, for example, God is personified as shepherd, midwife, warrior, king, mother, father, and lover. Some of the most moving metaphors in scripture are contained within the poetic language of the book of Job. In this short passage, the intense anguish and anger Job is experiencing are evident in the metaphor of God as warrior.

God has given me over to the impious
into the clutches of the wicked he has

cast me... 

He has set me up for a target;
his arrows strike me from all directions
He pierces me with thrust upon thrust;
    he attacks me like a warrior... 
My face is inflamed from weeping
    and there is darkness over my eyes 
Although my hands are free from violence,
    and my prayer is sincere (Job 16: 11-17).

Ironically, Job’s expression of God as warrior is also an expression of the
intimacy he feels when speaking of the Deity. To become angry with God is a
cleansing, healing act, a way for many to work through extreme suffering.
Therefore, Job is entirely justified in accusing the Lord of Justice for having been
unjust. Although the anger that Job feels is real and concrete, his assertion that God
is a warrior seeking to destroy him is not to be interpreted literally.

Sandra Schneiders observed: “A genuine metaphor is characterized by
linguistic tension between a literally absurd statement and that to which it points.
The literal absurdity of the statement forces the mind to seek for meaning on a
deeper level.”29 The metaphor is the only literary device that can express the real
and concrete while, at the same time, articulating it in such a way that the statement
becomes literally absurd. The following selection illustrates the tension that exists
between the literal aspects of the poem and that which is expressed through
metaphor. In the poem, “Old Women,” by contemporary artist Barbara Lau, old
women are compared to flowers as the poet’s language blooms into a fragrant
metaphor:
Old Women
wrap scarves around their necks
to hide their wrinkles,
and flatter their bosoms
with bold beads and brooches.
In dresses buttered with flowers,
in voices light as Baby's Breath,
how they bloom in the corner
of the cafeteria, billowing
over pictures of grandchildren
passed round and round like hors d'oeuvres
like jewels they plant on each hand
to occupy the spaces once held
and warmed by husbands.

Now twined around each other
arm in arm down the sidewalk,
defying the dark grave
with their colors and perfume,
old women
tending time more fragile than youth:
poinsettias in the snow.30

At the beginning of the poem, the old women are wearing "dresses buttered with flowers," and by the end of the poem, the old women have become flowers themselves. Lau uses the power of the metaphor to describe the intense beauty and fragility of old age.

Finally, poetry has the ability to remove us from our present state and to allow us to experience the unearthly and intangible. A renewed awareness of the world at large blooms through the symbolism and metaphor of poetic language. In his essay, "Poetry and Hope," Michael Dennis Browne asserts that, through poetry, "we are able to leave the microcosmic, rhythmical world of the poem and re-enter the world around it, inclined, either once again or for the first time ever to ask for
By lifting people out of this world for a brief moment, poetry grants them the opportunity to stand apart from themselves and look inside.

Perhaps one of the most uplifting texts in the Hebrew Scriptures is found in the book of Deuteronomy. Although this passage is written in prose, it is ripe with poetic language. This passage has the ability to remove readers from their present setting and connect them with the divine:

Ask now of the days of old before your time, ever since God created man upon earth; ask from one end of the sky to the other: Did anything so great ever happen before? Was it ever heard of? Did a people ever hear the voice of God speaking from the midst of fire, as you did, and live? (Dt 4: 32-33)

Perhaps it is in the poetic rhythm of the words, or the repetition of such moving and introspective questions. Whatever the case, this passage reconnects the reader with a significance, a purpose for being. It is a poetic reminder of how truly extraordinary it is to be alive.

There is a sense of transcendence in poetry, a way in which poetry connects its readers with something greater. For centuries, writers have connected and struggled with this very real, yet elusive transcendence. At its core, all poetry is spiritual in essence. Countless poets have described calling upon their muse, their creative spirit, to aid them in the arduous process of creating a poem. In his essay "The Making of a Poem," Stephen Spender describes the process of writing a poem as a transcendent, almost "out of body" experience.
The concentrated effort of writing poetry is a spiritual activity which makes one completely forget, for the time being, that one has a body. It is a disturbance of the balance of the body and mind and for this reason one needs a kind of anchor of sensation with the physical world. Many writers seem to have gone mad in their pursuit of transcendence. Benjamin Franklin, Edmond Rostand, and others found it easier to connect with their muse while soaking in a hot bath, and that is where they did most of their writing. George Sand often went from lovemaking to her writing desk, while Voltaire wrote best while using his lover’s naked back as his “living desk.” Robert Lewis Stevenson and Mark Twain wrote best while lying down. Poe supposedly wrote with his cat sitting on his shoulder, while Amy Lowell could only write while smoking cigars. In fact, she is reported to have purchased 10,000 of her favorite Manila stogies to make sure that her creative fires would continue to burn. Perhaps Socrates was on to something when he said: “It seems that God took away the minds of poets, that they might better express His.”

Poetry is a catalyst that compels people to ponder their existence. In the following selection, Nazim Hikmet, a revolutionary Turkish poet, utilizes both symbolism and metaphor to gracefully remove readers from the world, only to remind them of the fragility and impermanence of their existence:

The earth will grow cold,
a star among stars
    and one of the smallest--
a gilded mote on the blue velvet, I mean
    I mean this, our great earth.
The earth will grow cold one day,
not like a heap of ice
or a dead cloud even,
but like an empty walnut it will roll along
    in pitch black space... You must grieve for this right now,
you have to feel this sorrow now,
for the world must be loved this much
    if you're going to say "I lived..."

Poetry contains within its lines the inexpressible truth that is life. It has been spoken since the beginning of history and has expressed most clearly that which is overwhelming. Poetry gives voice to the voiceless and words to mouths that are struck with wonder. Although it falls short of fully describing the divine, poetic language empowers both the speaker and the listener with the courage to make the attempt. And although it can never completely express the yearnings of the human heart, poetry is the language most appropriate for prayer. Through symbolism and metaphor, poetry removes people from their present state, if only for a brief moment, and forces them to see the created world from a new perspective, perhaps a divine perspective. It moves people to pause in the midst of this contemporary and technological society, and to see not only the created world, but its Creator as well.


7 Winokur 302.


10 Shaking the Pumpkin, ed. Jerome Rothenberg.

12 Santayana 76.


14 Abrams 2186


19 Prayer and Poetry, A Contribution to Poetical Theory (London: Burns, Oates and Washbourne Ltd. 1927) 64.

20 Heschel 16.

21 Browne 3.

22 Browne 3.

23 Winokur 217.


26 Soskice 34.

27 Campbell 58.


29 Schneiders 25.


33. Ackerman 295.

34. Winokur 213.

35. Browne 8.
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