

**HOW TO HEAR THE MUSIC OF THE UNIVERSE:**

**A LESSON IN LIFE AND POETRY**

by

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## ABSTRACT

The intent of this paper is to contemplate the poetic, the very nature of poetry, as an antidote to the predicament that modern living presents so many of us. Part One explores facets of modern culture that interfere with meaningful and authentic living, and traces a brief history of *disenchantment*. In particular I address fragmentation, anomie, materialism, and rationalism as major concerns.

In Part Two, I consider the relationship between human life and poetry. The very *language* of poetry is explored. Various literary devices and techniques are examined in terms of their ability to confound logic and linear thinking. Further, I discuss the way in which poetry invites us to apprehend the world more profoundly as a result of its ability to free us, even temporarily, from the bondage of a *logocentric* paradigm. Poetry's ability to evoke a richer, truer, dimension is contemplated.

In Part Three I consider that poetry suggests a deeper level of existence, very like those we discover in Eastern traditions like Zen philosophy and Taoist thought. I review Eastern concepts, including *nothingness* and *interpenetration*, and examine closely the relationship between Zen and poetry. Haiku and silence are also discussed in relation to poetics.

In Part Four, I offer a series of "meditations" as a means of inspiring readers to marvel at things both simple and complex. Time, place, nature, friends and family, are considered in the context of the *poetry of life*. Finally, the paper calls for a society that can hear the "music of the universe."

## **DEDICATION**

For Ali and Krissy, the sweetest songs a life could know

For Susan, for everything

For Katherine and Michael, for always being there

For Tara, who has the heart of a poet

## **ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

Thank you to my professors Allan Mackinnon, Heeson Bai, and Geoffrey Madoc-Jones, all of whom contributed greatly to the success of this work. Your support, encouragement, and insight were invaluable. May our paths cross again. I owe intellectual debts to Charles Taylor, Octavio Paz, Pablo Neruda, and Lao Tzu.

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## PRELUDE

We have a tendency in modern living, I think, to scratch the surface of things. We are so smitten with appearances that the very substances of things, the parts that ought to really matter, are often ignored and left untapped. My own feeling is that beneath the various layers lurks a kind of magic, a nourishing spring that can satisfy even the timeless human appetite for a sense of meaning and significance.

I also sense the number of layers piling up, creating more surface distractions while at the same time becoming harder to penetrate. Determining what it is that really matters is increasingly difficult. We live amidst a swirling confusion of images and objects and people all purporting to hold the key to the magic kingdom. Like a merchant's jewels shimmering beneath polished glass, Beauty, Love, Wealth, Popularity, Happiness are seemingly spread out before us, all available at a price. What price? The price of a botox injection or a breast enhancement. The cost of a 1-800 call. The cost of the latest creams, pills and lotions. The cost of a bigger newer, television, car, house.... The price of a younger, fitter, more attractive partner. The price of a new pair of shoes. The price of a tropical holiday. Or perhaps, as one advertisement suggests, it can all be had for the price of a diet program, a set of self help CD's, and a membership to a luxury spa.

I defy these claims. I recognize that there are tremendous products and procedures and programs on the market today. I also recognize that many lives have been greatly enhanced as a result. My purpose is not to denigrate, but to challenge and to question. Why are so many people battling image and identity crises? Why have eating disorders

become so prevalent? Why are stress levels seemingly on the rise? Why does Attention Deficit Disorder seem so normal in North American culture? Why is diabetes increasing among youth and adults? Why are sexually transmissible diseases spreading rapidly among North American youth despite attempts at educating them? Why is there so much divorce and heartbreak? Why is there no time for dinner any more? Why do so many people in the wealthiest and most technologically advanced part of the free world choose to self medicate with booze and drugs? Why all the violence? Why so much garbage and waste when we know better?

I am not a pessimist, and I do not want to be branded a doom sayer arguing the imminence of the collapse of North American culture and others like it. On the contrary, I sense a people hungry for that which is genuine and good in the world. Yet, I also see a people blinded by the flashing lights of commercialism, a people run ragged on the hamster wheel of modern life, rushing about their jobs and appointments and little league games with wrinkles on their brows instead of smiles on their faces. If I was one for conspiracy theories, and I am not, I would say the establishment, whatever that is, has got us where they want us, too busy to think deeply, and too tired to do anything about it. Put simply, it is easier for us at the end of the day to visit a fast food drive thru than it is to cook a healthy dinner. We know what we ought to do, but feel too weary to carry it out. Are there not times when it seems to require superhuman strength just to live the life we think we are supposed to lead, the life with a career and laundry and making lunches and house cleaning and cooking dinner and coaching soccer and driving to dance lessons and so on?

We value action and efficiency. We respect those who are decisive. There is pressure, spoken or unspoken, to "Hurry up and make up your mind!" Ours, more than any other,

is the age of the quick response. The advent of cellular telephones, fax machines, and electronic mail, heightens the level of expectation. We want things NOW! Is it any wonder that so many people speak of "stressing out" and living life at a frenzied pace? The "rat race" and the hustle and bustle are no longer things happening out there; they are internalized. Many are the lives of quiet desperation and not so quiet desperation, lives assailed by the chronic ticking of minutes and the chronic growth of tasks and to do lists. There are people feeling guilty about taking thirty minutes for a lunch break, people who can no longer relax on a weekend, people who are afraid of idle time. Just where are we going? What are we looking for? What exactly is the rush to move forward, whatever that means?

Of course, the issue is much more complicated than I let on. Modern living is a product of history. We ended up here, living this life in this culture, not merely as a result of our own doing, but in part as a result of the path set by the generations and centuries before us. This essay, figuratively speaking, attempts to thrust its hands deeply through layers, to dip them fully into that spring, that cold, pure, secret life force that that lurks beneath the surface of things. More than this, it seeks to pull its hands back, still dripping and cool from the source, so that others might feel again how fresh and crisp is the very substance of life. Here is stuff that quenches as it invigorates.

I suppose there is another hope, the hope that the puncture created here remains open, that poetry might bubble up to the surface after having been suppressed for too long, and that life will again take on joy and wonder even in its *everydayness*. A big screen television is nice, but the smiles, the memories, the tears... this is the poetry *of life*.



## A NOTE BEFORE YOU BEGIN

In many Eastern traditions the notion of *emptiness* or *nothingness* is synonymous with a deeper reality, a reality that underlies the world of things, the world of the here and now. When you encounter a blank page in this text, as you will from time to time, you are encouraged to pause and contemplate the empty space staring back at you. I am guessing that most of you already missed the chance to do this on the preceding page. At the very least, it is a moment of silence, a respite from the busyness (and business) of life. It is also an invitation to discover that deeper reality, whatever we might want to call it. Of course, the mind will wander. This is normal. But pay attention. Think about where it wanders to. If you find yourself thinking, "I really should do some laundry," it is likely a sign that you are not used to, and indeed uncomfortable with, such open and unstructured space. You might immediately revert back to the narrower world you know not because it is better or because its demands take priority, but because it is familiar to you. The same applies for thoughts about the office, mowing the lawn, or reorganizing your cupboards. All in good time, as they say. Then again, if you are like me, maybe you really should do some laundry... In any event, there are opportunities here for those who are patient and willing. I hope you enjoy.

## INTRODUCTION

“The poem is a shell that echoes the music of the universe,” writes Octavio Paz (1973, p.4). His words are stirring. The line evokes a kind of transcendence; the literal meaning immediately rises to a poetic, figurative plain. It is, simply put, beautiful and arresting. The notion that there is a kind of music in the universe is pleasant and inspiring. Further, the suggestion that poetry is the conduit through which we might experience the song of the cosmos is romantic and attractive. Yet, for too many, the line is nothing more than this; that is to say, the line represents nothing more than an attractive, romantic sentiment. In the reality of day to day living, there is no time for poetry. Talk of shells is lovely, yes, but does not do much to pay the bills. The universe does not really ring with music. Or does it? Perhaps we have lost our ability to hear it. Who could blame us? We have surrounded ourselves with clutter and noise; indoors we’ve got televisions and hi fi sound systems, DVD players and fax machines, video games and a host of other gadgets that squeak and blare and boom. Outside, city streets hum with the incessant drone of traffic, punctuated by car horns, squealing tires and brakes, cell phones and machinery as people rush about the coming and going of their daily lives. The suburbs are not exempt; weekends at home typically play out alongside a soundtrack of leaf blowers and lawn mowers, skill saws and hammers, the neighbour’s stereo, kids’ toys, and so on. The sound of machines is ubiquitous. In addition, life seems to pass by at hyper speed. People – individuals and families - rush around at a frenetic pace. Sitting down for a meal is becoming increasingly rare and when it does happen, many people actually feel guilty. Not only is the music of the universe hard to discern amidst the clamour of modern living, but who has time and

energy to attempt it? The intent of this paper is to contemplate the poetic, the very nature of poetry, so that we might hear again the music of the universe. It is through poetic apprehension that life acquires depth, richness and beauty.

## **Poems and Poetry: A Distinction**

What is poetry? The answer is not as simple as one might think. At first, one might turn to thoughts of sonnets and ballads and lyrics; the dominant idea being that poetry is words, usually printed on a page, sometimes uttered (probably by a teacher) and occasionally remembered. Of course, opinions will vary as to its worth. Some will regard poetry as art, as a wonderful form of human expression, while others will remember it as opaque, nebulous, and disconcerting. The main point here is that most responses revolve around the notion of poetry as words or as structures of words. Few of us approach a level as sophisticated as Octavio Paz does when he remarks that “the poem is a shell that echoes the music of the universe.” His is a response, perhaps, as complete as anything we could hope for. Yet, he has much more to say that is valuable and deserving of our attention.

In his remarkable work, *The Bow and the Lyre* (1973), Paz confesses, “From the time when I began to write poems, I wondered whether it was worth while to do so: would it not be better to transform life into poetry than to make poetry from life?” (v ). The question, one Paz says had been “tormenting” him since adolescence, leads to some of his greatest insights. He wonders, “And poetry – cannot its proper object be, more than the creation of poems, the creation of poetic instants?” We see here the beginnings of an important distinction Paz makes between poetry and poems, a distinction that will central to this paper. “Not every work constructed according to the

laws of meter – contains poetry” (p.4) he tells us. A sonnet, for example, is not a poem, but a “rhetorical mechanism.” Only when the “rhetorical mechanism” has been “touched by poetry” (p.4) does it become a poem. This distinction is important. Poetry is significantly more than structures and stanzas; poetry is more than words. Many will find this concept difficult to accept. The rationalism of modern culture has virtually reduced poetry to being precisely words and structures. Poetry is poems, if you will. Nevertheless, Paz says frankly that there is “also poetry without poems.” He writes, “landscapes, persons, and events are often poetic: they are poetry without being poems....The poetic is poetry in an amorphous state” (p. 5). The implications of these insights are tremendous. What he has identified for us is nothing less than a kind of magic. We live in a world rife with “amorphous” poetry.

Put another way, what Paz suggests is that life is a series of poetic encounters. The people, the places, and the events we experience are the poetry of life; they are the “music of the universe.” These encounters have the potential to provide us with a sense that we are a part of something larger, that the universe we inhabit is simultaneously mysterious and meaningful. Our grand existential concerns are fulfilled in the face of the poetic. Ironically, modern societies continue to deny or minimize the poetic, and many people, despite their relative wealth and abundance, have a sense of life being unfulfilled, inauthentic, and disjointed. The challenge, it would seem, is to experience the wonder in the world, to attune ourselves to the poetic. First, however, we must address the *malaise* of modern living.



## **PART ONE**

### **A History of the Disenchantment**

The history of Western Culture and Western thought can be seen as a growing disenchantment, a kind of “psychic dismemberment and disintegration” (Berman, 1981, p.15), where the proliferation of a disembodied rationality has made us strangers in a strange land. We might trace the source back to the Age of Reason and the “Enlightenment project,” where minds like Descartes, Galileo, and Newton began to conclude that the world and all things in it, could be explained by logic, math, and measurement. “It was a strange century, this seventeenth Century, which begot our modern epoch,” remarks William Barrett (1958, p.4). His comments seem appropriate. Although the great thinkers of the age of Enlightenment are still “solidly planted in the mind of God,” they produced work which was to “eventually tear western civilization loose from its religious moorings” (p.4). Of course, Barrett is referring to the rise of the “new science” and its more dangerous modern form, *scientism*. Today, we see a preponderance of rational, linear thinking, the product of an intellect that is detached, disengaged, and objective. In essence, we have removed ourselves from the world around us. We see it not as something we are a part of, but as other. To understand this world that is *other*, we have a tendency to reduce it to “parts.” Despite an obvious and marked rise in technological conveniences and entertainments, there is a pronounced sense of fragmentation in daily living, and a growing feeling that life lacks unity, substance and meaning.

There was a time, hundreds of years ago, when the world was magical. Animistic cultures lived in an “enchanted” natural environment. The rocks, trees, and rivers were wondrous and alive. North America’s own First Nation’s traditions are evidence of this. Chief Dan George (1974, p. 85) tells us, “My people’s memory reaches into the beginning of all things.” George knows that the connection between the natural world and his people could not be more deeply rooted. Their relationship is both ancient and sacred. In *My Heart Soars* Chief Dan George writes (1974, p.83):

The beauty of the trees  
the softness of the air  
the fragrance of the grass  
speaks to me

The summit of the mountain  
the thunder of the sky  
the rhythm of the sea  
speaks to me

The land has a voice, a *spirit*. Chief Dan George (1974, p.37), remembering his father, explains, “The earth was his second mother. The earth and everything it contained was a gift from See-se-am...and the way to thank this great spirit was to use his gifts with respect.” An individual’s place in the world was inherently meaningful because it was undoubtedly part of a larger, grander context. One’s life occurred in the midst of vast mystery and wonder, in the presence of a “great spirit.” This is not to suggest that there was no tragedy and hardship. Certainly struggle, toil, and brutality exist throughout history. The point is the nature of the relationship between an individual and his world was supremely important and supremely valued. Morris Berman (1981, p.16) expresses it very well when he says, “A member of this cosmos was...a direct participant in its drama. His personal destiny was bound up with its destiny, and this relationship gave meaning to his life.” Berman writes, “The cosmos, in short, was a place of belonging” (1981, p.16). Today, we lack this sense of belonging. We lack poetry.

Clearly, hundreds of years ago, an individual's place in the world was not a particularly significant question. One was born into a role, and one played one's part accordingly, be it peasant, warrior, or king. Furthermore, questions as to what constituted "self" would have seemed absurd. An individual was always a part of a clearly defined whole, a tribe or clan or culture, and one simply played the part he or she was born to play, or played the part assigned to him by ruler or leader. The culture would undoubtedly admire certain virtues, and these qualities represented how one ought to live. This is not only true in animistic cultures, but is certainly true of Anglo-Saxon times and is perhaps never more evident than in the period of the Great Chain of Being. According to this doctrine, we all exist in a kind of fixed hierarchy under God, and our duties are to fulfill our God given roles. Over the years, however, the systems and structures to which everyone subscribes begin to break down. God and the Church are not as dominant, and the human being moves toward becoming the "measure of all things."

On one hand, we can argue that it is at this point that the notion of individuality takes on such significance. The individual has in a sense been freed to carve out his own destiny, his own identity. Taylor (1991, p.5) writes, "Once society no longer has a sacred structure, once social arrangements and modes of acting are no longer grounded in the order of things or the will of God, they are in a sense up for grabs. They can be redesigned ... for the happiness and well being of individuals as our goal." We need to consider the gain and loss indicated in this passage. The individual has gained freedom, but lost "sacred structure." This idea must not be taken lightly.

Who or what is the moral authority now? Who will find or create meaning in the absence of a universal code or system? Of course, we have inherited now the possibility that we might look within for answers rather than without. We need not seek an external directive

to tell us what to do. Sadly, however, our turn within has needlessly blinded us to concerns that “transcend us.” There is an *anthropocentric* take on the world. Taylor writes:

anthropocentrism, by abolishing all horizons of significance, threatens us with a loss of meaning and hence a trivialization of our predicament. At one moment we understand our situation as one of high tragedy, alone in a silent universe, without intrinsic meaning, condemned to create value. But at a later moment... a flattened world, in which there aren't any very meaningful choices because there aren't any crucial issues (p. 68).

As the next sections will attempt to show, the world we encounter today may just be this “flattened world.”

## **Individualism / Atomism**

Many notable thinkers (Taylor, 1991; MacIntyre, 1984; Kohak, 1984; Bloom, 1987) note a profound *unwellness* with the way in which we conduct our lives today. While their language differs, the essence of their message seems the same. Put simply, we have lost our way. We have erected all kinds of social constructs - institutions, bureaucracies, economies, lifestyles - and in the process lost sight of who we are and what we ought to be doing in the larger context of the cosmos. Indeed, the notion of larger context is exactly the issue. The self has, in a sense, turned in on itself; it fails to concern itself with any sort of big picture or what Taylor calls “horizon of meaning.” Consider the remarks by these notable thinkers: Kohak (1984, p.35) describes us as having “collective solipsism.” Bloom (1987, p. 83) sees in students today a “primary preoccupation with themselves.” Lasch (1991, 9. Xv) refers to a “narcissistic preoccupation with self.” Ortega (1960, p.66) refers the individual becoming “hermetically enclosed within itself.” The message is clear. The Western world suffers from a kind of rampant individualism, and we are not healthy. We fail to see ourselves

as "part of a larger order that can make claims on us" (Taylor, 1991, p.89).

Consequently, the self today faces a "continuing struggle to realize higher and fuller modes of authenticity against the resistance of the flatter and shallower forms" (Taylor, p.94).

## **Materialism / Instrumentalism**

Instead of seeking authentic "horizons of meaning" selves have turned to shallower pursuits. We have "lost sight of concerns that transcend us" and decided to live according to the "laws of instrumental reason" and "motivations that are non-moral" (Taylor, 1991, p.20). It is not surprising, then, to find people seeking to identify themselves by the size of their pay cheques, or the cars they drive, or the labels on their clothes. Indeed, our consumer culture sells "self image" and by extension, self identity. Ours might be considered the world of the inauthentic, a superficial world where media images and sound bites have drowned out the authentic and the intrinsically valuable. We may have lost the "heroic dimension" in life, but we can talk about hair products. Neil Postman (1985) has written at length about the world dominated by media and consumerist ideologies. The result, he argues, is a fragmented world, a world with a "new epistemology" that denies "interconnectedness" and that proceeds "without context." He describes our culture as one "where now this event, now that, pops into view for a moment, then vanishes again. It is a world without much coherence or sense" (p.77). Sadly, the result of this world is that the self is also unable to engage in discourse beyond the amusing and the trivial. The implications here are frightening, particularly in light of Taylor's notion that we become selves through discourse and dialogue, what he calls "webs of interlocution" (1989, p.36). If this discourse is doomed to remain trivial, the self will suffer the same fate.

In addition to the consumerist clutter we cling to, we have opted to live according to the laws of instrumental reason. We value the practical and the efficient, often with little regard to larger contexts (environment, community, future generations, etc.).

Maximizing profit seems to be the order of the day, and all those things which support this aim are somehow reasonable. While efficiency and economy are certainly valuable, they have gotten away on us, and threaten to permanently overtake things like virtue and integrity. Not only are we destroying the planet with our industry and habits, but our relationships with people are buckling under the pressure of career demands. Others are often valued for what they can do for us, nor for any inherent or intrinsic worth. This is what Taylor is referring to when he mentions the "eclipse of ends" (1991, p.10). In our culture today, it is not unusual for careers to take priority over families. The self as high income earner with lots of possessions may be more important than self as parent or spouse. Further, even if families or relationships are not deliberately sacrificed, the way in which so many selves must live as they try to "do it all" while they manage careers and families is difficult. The transition from role to role is rapid, disjointed, and extremely stressful.

## **Fragmentation**

MacIntyre (1984) provides some unique insight on the difficulties in being a modern self. In particular, he notes the way in which modern living "partitions each human life into a variety of segments, each with its own norms and modes of behaviour." He elaborates:

So work is divided from leisure, private life from public, the corporate from the personal. So both childhood and old age have been wrenched away from the rest of human life and made over into distinct realms. And all these separations have been achieved so that it is the distinctiveness of each, and not the unity of the life of the individual who passes through those parts in terms of which we are taught to think and to feel (p. 204).

MacIntyre's point is well taken. We must ask ourselves what we have gained. Why have we allowed our lives to become so disjointed? Indeed, the self today experiences a life that feels like embarking on a series of unconnected episodes. This is true of day to day living as well as the way in which one passes through the so called "phases" of one's life. The question "what is self?" or "where is self?" must be addressed here. What is the enduring element? Indeed, is there an enduring element? MacIntyre, contemplating these very questions, refers to a phenomenon he calls "liquidation of the self." Our own identities no longer seem solid. Such is the plight of the modern individual, and one that needs urgent attention.<sup>1</sup> Did we arrive here by some historical accident? Or are we responsible? Could it be that we have sacrificed a fundamental part of our very sense of *being* in the name of corporate and economic interests? Who else is to gain from our ontological disintegration.

## **Rationalism / Scientism**

There is a reason why, in his *Alternating Current*, Octavio Paz (1973, p. 116-117) writes, "Perhaps tomorrow's metaphysics, should man feel a need to think metaphysically, will begin as a critique of science, just as in classical antiquity it began as a critique of the gods." Science has become *scientism*, an ideology that divorces fact from value.

Berman says, "Subject and object are always seen in opposition to each other. I am not my experiences, and thus not really as part of the world around me" (1981, p.17). More succinctly, he says, "Scientific consciousness is alienated consciousness" (p.17). We detach. We rationalize where we might feel and experience. Rationalizing becomes *rationalism*. At the extreme, rationalism holds that only that which can be reasoned is

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<sup>1</sup> Indeed, Lasch (1991) notes that psychoanalysts today are facing complaints very unlike the "traditional phobias" and "hysteria cases" of the past; today's complaints centre around self, and include "ego loss," a sense of emptiness, flatness, futility, lack of purpose, or loss of self-esteem.

real. Consequently, we see a tendency to theorize, to explain away the workings of the world, even the natural world. Marilyn Gaul (1988, p.374) writes:

Equipped with the scales, clocks, thermometers, chronometers, chronologies, all the 'philosophical apparatus' that eighteenth century ingenuity had developed, scientists measured the earth, its age, weight, density, even its wobble, its distance from the stars and the speed at which light travels among them, believing that such calculations would help them master nature and perhaps themselves.

This kind of thinking, this approach to understanding our world, has served to alienate us from our own home. The relentless focus and concern on understanding and measuring and quantifying seems to have led us to a sense that we are masters in an inert, lifeless universe; the world around us is not only separate from us, it is ours to tinker with. And tinker we have. We have built countless infrastructures and institutions. The result is a profound discontinuity, a problem that is "one of forgetting, of the covering up of the moral sense of the cosmos and of human life therein beneath a layer of artifacts and constructs" (Kohak, 1984, p.26). We are afraid to confront the mystery and magic of our own consciousness. The self, at times, is in danger of being a machine, an amalgam of various *parts*.

## **Summing up**

The modern person finds herself in quite a position. Essentially, she is trying to survive in a frantic, fast paced world where the various demands and roles of life seem to have little unity. Thus, in some cases one may not even be sure who (what) one is. Further, the dominance of instrumental reason and rationalism do little to help bring a sense of cohesion that satisfies the human spirit and its existential yearnings. Consequently, many of us may simply be "amusing ourselves to death" with the trivial and the material, while ignoring larger purposes. Morris Berman (1981) describes it this way:



Jobs are stupefying, relationships vapid and transient, the arena of politics absurd. We have hysterical evangelical revivals...and a general retreat into the oblivion provided by drugs, television, and tranquilizers. We also have a desperate search for therapy, by now a national obsession, as millions...try to reconstruct their lives amidst a pervasive feeling of anomie and cultural disintegration. (p.17)

We are longing for that which is genuine and good. We want desperately to feel connected to a life rhythm that enriches and inspires. The music of the universe, the poetry of life, this is our true desire. Yet, our plight is such that we somehow get more and more lost in the trappings of our modern lifestyles, more and more removed from what we really seek. We yearn for substance, but find it growing increasingly distant.

## **Taylor's Response to Modernity**

In reply to an essay by Jean Bethke Elshtain, Taylor discusses the way in which the modern quest for meaning can become an aberration. He claims that

... one of the roots of the modern ideal is self-determining freedom. I mean the ideal of freedom as self-control, an ideal whose highest expression would come in self-making. I tried to describe the growth of this out of the stance of disengagement in *Sources of the Self*, but it also has a more specific basis in the evolution of modern political philosophy..... The ideal of self-control, or more radically, self-making, is one facet of the modern self, one way to give sense to the appeal to be ultimately self-responsible, to be a free agent as against a victim, or being shaped by others; it is one way of understanding the demand to be oneself, or 'authentic'. (1994, p. 230)

My thesis is an investigation that goes beyond a mere critique of modernity and investigates how the role of poetry and some aspects of Buddhist and Taoist philosophy can assist us in striving for such an authentic life. Taylor states that authenticity is

"...the notion that each of us has an original way of being human (which) entails that each of us has to discover what it is to be ourselves. But the discovery can't be made by consulting pre-existing models, by hypothesis. So it can be made only by articulating it afresh. We discover what we have it in us to be by becoming that mode of life, by giving expression in our speech and action to what is original in us" (1991, p.61)

I agree with Taylor when he notes the way in which such striving can become an aberration.

I have been trying to read phenomena like those ideals of self-making which are blind to dependence ..... as aberrations. What do I mean by 'aberration'? .... I mean that it is a twisted form of something good. My thesis is that these blind ideals are dependent on spiritual aspirations which are good. They are dependent in that ideals wouldn't have arisen historically without the underlying aspirations to make sense. They are in an important way parasitic.

The blind ideal of self-making denies the context which makes it believable as a human ideal. It trades on a confusion. It draws some of its force from the modern aspiration to take responsibility, but it suppresses what gives this aspiration its sense of and its force. (p. 230-231)

The 'dependence' which Taylor talks about is based on an understanding that our lives are necessarily dependent upon the context in which we live and that this context provides an inescapable framework, a horizon of value and meaning, from which we cannot escape. Much of the desire for power and money, which drives the modern world, is capable of flourishing only if individuals think themselves free of such frameworks. This is a key claim of Taylor's *Malaise of Modernity*, where this aberrant form of individualism combined with the dominance of instrumental rationality blind us to our true place in the cosmos.

I am not intending to undertake a broad political or philosophical analysis of this issue but would like to investigate in what way the study of poetic literature and Buddhist thought can put us in touch with what I am calling the *music of the universe*. It is my claim that if there are ways in which we can come to see, feel and understand ourselves to be part of the cosmos and not alienated from it then perhaps the forms of aberrant individualism that are so common today can be undermined and that humans can

overcome the anthropocentric world view that lies at its heart. This is of particular concern to me as a Language Arts educator who believes and hopes that the English classroom, in particular, can become both a site for resistance to aberrant forms of individualism, as well as place where the joyous celebration of poetry can assist in creating authentic self-making practices.

To be a full human agent in his view is to be a person in the ordinary meaning to exist in a space defined by distinctions of worth.

A self is a being for whom certain questions of categoric value have arisen, and received at least partial answers. Perhaps these have been given authoritatively by the culture more than they have been elaborated in the deliberation of the person concerned, but they are his in the sense that they are incorporated into his self-understanding, in some degree and fashion. My claim is that this is not just a contingent fact about human agents, but is essential to what we would understand and recognize as full, normal human agency. (Taylor, 1985, p.2)

A key feature of this notion of human agency is self-interpretation and the role this plays in the self being partly constituting by these understandings. These understandings, however, are not private but are set against a background or horizon of "strong evaluations" which are recognized as being of categoric worth as opposed to things which lack this or are of lesser value. If the background of worth is a necessary part of being human then there can be no absolute understanding of what we are as persons, because,

A being who exists only in self-interpretation cannot be understood absolutely; and one who can only be understood against a background of distinctions of worth cannot be captured by a scientific language which is essentially aspires to neutrality. (p. 4)

In this attempt to outline an account of human life constituted by self-understanding Taylor sees a central role for language. This means that the conception of language will be very different from those developed by a naturalistic theory of meaning, because

language does not only describe human life and world but helps constitute them. The importance of this claim to any theory of language education can be seen. Language in education becomes not merely an object for study but the clearing in which the self is revealed. The coming to an understanding of self or others will depend to a great extent on certain articulations which are only possible given certain linguistic resources, mainly poetic. The way in which a person shapes a form of life is in large part due to being a member of a language community which forms the background over which the individual has only marginal autonomous control.

The thesis is not an empirical study but more a speculative instrument that seeks to look these issues through a number of lenses that include both Western and non-Western traditions. These include the Romantic and Modernist poetic traditions and certain aspects of Zen Buddhism and Taoist philosophy.<sup>2</sup>

I have also attempted to form the rhetoric of the thesis in a way that reflects its intention to break down the automatization of perception that is common today by foregrounding disruptions in the normal thesis format. These breaks in traditional form are meant to both inspire reflection as well as raise the questions in a different way. I alternate between two voices, one reflective and philosophical, the other, personal and human. I do not intend to come to any hard and fast conclusions but believe that in the process of experiencing this piece that the reader will be lead to reconsider her own ideas about modern life and her role in it. In this way I remain true to my calling as an educator; one

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<sup>2</sup> While this piece makes much mention of Taylor, my work is not about Taylor per se; rather, his works have been used diagnostically in terms of addressing the issues of modernity. Taylor, too, sees a way out, and in this light we share much in common, but my response to modernity does not rely solely on his notions. There is no question, however, that his thoughts have informed the entire course of this inquiry.

who persuades people to ask the important questions, rather than feeding them already pre-digested answers.

## **What Saul Says**

John Ralston Saul's (2001) work, *On Equilibrium*, is an articulate, well considered book about balance, or rather, about the lack of balance in so many modern lives. Of course, it is also much more than this. It is an inquiry into the nature of the qualities that ought to govern human life and culture: common sense, ethics, imagination, intuition, memory, and reason. Saul's major assertion is that these qualities, taken together, form a sort of necessary matrix. The qualities must work together, must push and pull each other, in an attempt to arrive at an "equilibrium." It is precisely this dynamic interplay that provides people with a context in which to live, think, and act meaningfully and authentically. Equilibrium, then, ought to be a life quest. Yet, as Saul notes, too often what we tend to find is a distinct lack of balance resulting from a preponderance of linear thinking. The qualities he identifies are typically not working with and against each other; instead, they are regarded as distinct strands, and the only strand which is really to be trusted is reason. As Saul shows, reason taken out of the matrix of qualities, is limited and dangerous. Furthermore, a continued reliance on this quality as a single strand will not lead us out of our predicament, but will find us continuing to flounder. This will be true for individuals, as well as for societies and cultures. We must heed Saul's words, and begin to break the strangle hold of linear rationality. We must seek equilibrium by allowing all the qualities to contribute to the larger picture.

## *Common Sense*

“What is common sense if not shared knowledge?” asks Saul (p.19). Few would struggle with this idea. What we do struggle with, is the notion that knowledge is not understanding. That is, we can know something we don’t understand. We can know it, and we can use it. Sadly, common sense today is too often understood as a kind of synonymous expression for logical or disembodied knowing. This is the “false sort” says Saul. Real common sense is “essentially inclusive and human” (p.23). He offers a wonderful analogy and explanation:

The Monarch butterfly... winters in Mexico, summers in Northern Canada and reproduces in the United States on the way between the other two. It takes three generations to make the round trip, over thousands of kilometres. That means there are no Monarchs witness to the whole process. And yet they fly precisely the same thousands of kilometres, year after year....What I am describing is not instinct....nor is this the product of understanding. It is, if anything, shared knowledge. Innate shared knowledge. And it is one of the most complicated realities. Why should it be such a stretch to accept that what an idiotic butterfly can do in a non-analytic and essential inexplicable way, a human ought to be capable of doing? (p. 22)

Saul’s point is well taken. There is room for a kind of magic and mystery; there can be knowing without analysis, without understanding. What about foolish superstition, then? Is not the door now open to believe or know anything if we do not require analytical understanding? The answer is simple: no. Remember, no single quality ought to operate in isolation. When common sense is tempered with, say, reason and memory, one sees that it is most unlikely that we’d ever fall into pure fantasy.

## *Ethics*

Saul is very clear in his assertion that ethics today is marginalized. Further, the very structure of the western world, particularly as corporations, whose primary objectives are

those of self interest, have become the new "nation states." In a "sensible" society, then, "ethics is more likely to cost than to pay" (p.108). He explains: "we have created a structure which removes ethics from our daily life and makes it abnormal to flex our ethical muscle, abnormal to say no. Loyalty replaces ethics. Only through heroic opposition, which will probably damage her career and the well being of her family, can a citizen express concerns in the areas she knows best" (p.112).

These words are not hopeful. They are, however, indicative of our need for balance, for equilibrium. Reason employed without ethics or in a world that marginalizes them will only worsen the condition. Self interest breeds self interest. Ethics needs to enter the mainstream. We need to participate in the discussions; we need to help formulate the questions. "Ethics has never been easy," (p.109) says Saul. He is right. He is also right when he says that we need to make ethics "normal."

### *Intuition*

According to Saul, intuition has been well integrated into our civilization. We select whom we would like to talk to at a party, whom we would like to ask out for a first date, and what we might wear on a Tuesday morning, by appealing to our intuition. In other words, we use it all the time. This is exactly why Saul calls it "the most practical of our qualities" (p.163). We might choose a field of study or career path on intuition. The irony is that when it comes to the way in which we officially run our affairs we tend to exclude intuition. We have developed a "fear of anything not clearly demonstrated to be true through a linear process of proof" (p.180). Bureaucracies kill it, policies leave it no room, and so on. We revert back to reason, and apply it without context, in a linear and instrumental way. When we do this, we deny ourselves the fullness of reality.

Rationality is fine, but so is non-rationality. The intuitive act must be given room, and again, when tempered with our other qualities, we need not fear the outcome.

## *Imagination*

Imagination saves us from the tyranny of ideology. Yet, imagination, too, is marginalized in official business. We become slaves to the idea of truth. The language of *corporatism* and politics embraces absolute truths and the idea of explanations that will never leak. Saul tells us that “any marginalization of the imagination is an attempt at dehumanization” (p. 128). If we are unable or unwilling to imagine, we deny the other. Imagination is denigrated, written off as romanticism, as fantasy; yet, it is neither. The ability to imagine an other, to imagine oneself meaningfully in the future, to imagine health and well being, are central to good living. Imagination may be the most integrative of our qualities, for it is imagination that allows us to bring memory into the present and future to shape our stories and experiences, and it is imagination that allows the possibility of other, of better.

## *Memory*

Memory is typically imagined as having a linear shape (Saul, p.219). This is interesting, given that our life experiences so often suggest otherwise. Saul writes, “many things happen in our lives at once, often as if part of a single movement, full of contradictions” (p.219). This certainly seems the case with my life. There are “competing elements” more often than simple linear transitions. So why the insistence on the linear scheme? Saul suggests that, “a rigid memory pretends to guarantee the shape of the future by freezing that of the past” (p.218). In other words, linear schematizations are a response to uncertainty. The result is that our view of life is narrow and limited. Saul says, “Life –



the world – viewed from a single perspective is like sex through a keyhole: one dimensional, abstract, with participation reduced to voyeurism” (p.218). Memory is complex, is layered, is textured. Memory binds us to the stories of the past and can allow us to live a significant present and to venture into the future with a sense of telos. Memory works to create equilibrium: “And so memory brings us back to the shared knowledge of common sense and the prolonged, shared uncertainty of imagination, and the shared expression of intuition” (p.236).

### *Reason*

“What could be more naïve than to expect too much from a single quality?” asks Saul (p.265). Yet, this is precisely what we do with regard to reason. Ironic, isn’t it? “Why should any quality have to be both the ideal expression of our humanness and the instrumental mechanism by which we should act?” (p.265). Reason, too, ought to operate with restraint. Reason is but one part of the matrix of human qualities. Unchecked by the tensions and attractions of the other qualities, reason becomes ideology. We need to reconsider reason. Reason, put most simply, is thought. Questions of rational, non-rational, irrational, are secondary in this context. Non-linear conceptualizations are a part of thinking. A relationship, for example, may work without being rational or linear. Similarly, a fact divorced from value is hollow indeed. As Soseki (cited in Saul, p.315), the great Japanese novelist says, “[S]ometimes it is reasonable to act contrary to reason.”

### *Equilibrium and Poetry?*

Although Saul never refers to the quest for equilibrium as a poetic quest, it seems clear that it is. Reason has overshadowed qualities like intuition, imagination, and memory,

the very qualities we associate with the poetic. Put another way, we lack poetry because we have relegated those human qualities which make us receptive to the poetic to the lowest rungs. Saul's work reinforces the point that life is more than a series of isolated problems and/or issues. Life does not happen along straight lines, or in tidy boxes. A rationalistic perspective is necessarily incomplete in that it denies the fullness of experience; it denies us the poetry of life. Imagination, memory, intuition, as well as ethics and common sense are as tremendously valuable. Without them, the world is shallow, indeed. With them, the poetic dimension opens up, "horizons of meaning" become apparent, the fragments fit together, and our existence is richer and fuller. This is the real quest in life.



## **INTERLUDE: THE FIRST**

In which small excerpts are dislocated from their place in the larger structure of my work, and left floating on an otherwise empty page.

Life, we discover, contains the real poetry.

The moments of our lives we recall best are not those we remember objectively as series of detached facts, but those moments charged with passion, sorrow, terror, and joy.

Like silver polish, metaphor transforms the grey into a sparkle.

An act of kindness, unsolicited and humble.



A rupture in reason and logic creates space for the ineffable to rush in.

There is a rhythm in nature, in the cycles of the moon, the ebb and flow of the sea, the changing of the seasons, the patterns of a day. None of this is lost on the poet.

**What is it that lurks behind our language?**

**Those special timeless moments somehow bind together  
all the other moments, underlie them, provide foundation.**

The path of poetry leads to Zen.

## PART TWO

### Poems, Poetry, and the Music of the Universe

Questions about how best to experience the music of the universe are important ones. There are of course many ways. Returning to Paz, we find that reading a poem is an effective way. This is because the reading of a poem becomes a profound encounter with the poetic, a transcendent conversation that speaks to us in ways beyond the literal and the rational. Poetry is not the language of logic; it is the language of heart and mind and spirit. The poem is “the meeting place between poetry and man” (Paz, 1973, p. 5). If this discussion of the poetic is still nebulous, we must realize that there is an inherent difficulty in speaking about that which, by its nature, defies clear definition. Paz tells us that poems are like “bridges that take us to another shore” (p.12). The moment we attempt to clarify exactly what the “other shore” is, we limit its poetic possibility. In “The Watersong Ends,” Pablo Neruda speaks of “reaching the other shore of the sea which has *no other shore*” (my italics). It is a wonderful example of *intertextuality*. The poets’ works speak to each other. Surely, the primary message for us is that poetry is not bound by the constraints of the prosaic world. In poetry, the word “free at last, shows all its entrails, all its meanings and allusions, like a ripe fruit or a rocket exploding in the sky” (Paz, 1973, p.11). Consequently, the reading of a poem becomes a gateway to another world, a kind of “naked contact” through which we experience “pure time,” what Paz calls “an immersion in the original waters of existence” (p.15). His words here are powerful, and it is critical to note that any attempts he makes to characterize poetry or the poetic are also in poetry. Any other approach necessarily thwarts an attempt to capture or convey its essence. This is a testament to the magical way in which poetry speaks to us.

Poetry can perhaps be understood as a response to our frustrations with the limitations of language. On some level, we know that the actual experience of a thing, even a mundane thing like eating a piece of fruit, is not easily captured in words. Ted Hughes says, "it is when we set out to find words for some seemingly quite simple experience that we begin to realize what a huge gap there is between our understanding of what happens around us and inside us, and the words we have at our command to say something about it" (1967, p.119). We can say we enjoyed the plum, but this tells us very little about what the occasion was really like. The struggle to fit the experience into words is something like trying to squeeze into a pair shoes that are two sizes too small. We might get them on, but the result is less than satisfactory. Poets have a knack for finding the perfect (or almost perfect) fit. Indeed, a good poem is more akin to making love than it is to wearing tight shoes. This is why Paz says, "thought is a phallus, the word a vulva." The right words make all the difference:

This is just to say  
I have eaten  
the plums  
that were in  
the icebox

and which  
you were probably  
saving for breakfast

Forgive me  
they were delicious  
so sweet  
and so cold

- William Carlos Williams

Getting the words right is no easy task. I am reminded of the anecdote of Ernest Hemingway who was once asked by an interviewer about his re-writing habits. When Hemingway responded that he had rewritten the last page to one of his works more than

thirty times, the interviewer wanted to know what the trouble was. If memory serves, Hemingway responds with, "Getting the words right."

Of course, it is significant to note that poetry does not hold a dominant place in the psyche of the modern self. The rationalist, materialist, influences of our culture have perhaps damaged our sense of the poetic. The prosaic, logical, linear mind struggles with ambiguity, with figurative meaning. We prefer, most times, to restrain words, to hold them down so they do not get away on us. Unfortunately, we restrain our own experience as well. We become disconnected. Poets are masters at unleashing the music of the universe because they reconnect to the mysterious rhythms of life. They know that a single word contains a "solar system of meanings" (Hughes. 1967, p.119). They know that the right words in the right combinations can wield tremendous power and influence. Poets can transform the mundane and instill a sense of awe. Yet, many of us continue to be stymied by their work. It does not help that our educational approach to poetry is often from the analytical perspective. Poems become things to solve, and sadly for some, unnecessary riddles that should just "say what they mean." Any notion of a profound encounter is lost with such an approach. Surely, the encounter must come first, the analysis second. The soul must be moved if poetry is to succeed. Paz writes, "to classify is not to understand. And even less to comprehend" (p.5). His words hearken to Wordsworth, who once wrote, "Our meddling intellect / Mis-shapes the beauteous forms of things; / - We murder to dissect."

Reading poetry, or poems, is not a science, and is certainly much more than the solving of word puzzles. Reading a poem is more akin to magic; the relationship between the poem and the reader is such that one completes the other. "A poem is fully realized only in participation: without a reader it is only half a work" (Paz, 1973, p.29). I would like to



argue as well, that a life without poetry, without apprehension of the poetic, is necessarily incomplete. What poems do, if nothing else, is remind us that there is that which is poetic, and they invite us to discover the poetic in our own lives.

## Life as Poem

The language of poetry, notably metaphor, imagery, and symbol, speaks to us on a deep level. Indeed, a magnificent poem unearths the poetry that resides within one's being. Murray (1986) speaks of "the imaginative poet within" who has created his own "symbolizations" over time (p.155). Only when one is in touch with one's inner poet, can one make sense of the symbols and images that have recurred in one's life. The result is a kind of integration and completeness of the self, a self who can identify and experience fully moments of profundity, both beautiful and painful. And these poetic moments stay with us, become us.

Consider a poem by Greek poet C.P. Cavafy entitled "Ithaca". This poem, as Murray wisely notes, speaks to us in a way that encourages us to "retrieve our personal wealth" (p.156).

### Ithaca

When you start on your journey to Ithaca,  
then pray that the road is long,  
full of adventure, full of knowledge.  
Do not fear the Lestrygonians  
and the Cyclopes and the angry Poseidon.  
You will never meet such as these on your path,  
if your thoughts remain lofty, if a fine  
emotion touches your body and your spirit.  
You will never meet the Lestrygonians,  
The Cyclopes and the fierce Poseidon,  
if you do not carry them within your soul,  
if your soul does not raise them up before you.

Then pray that the road is long.

That the summer mornings are many,  
that you will enter ports seen for the first time  
with such pleasure, with such joy.  
Stop at Phoenician markets,  
and purchase fine merchandise,  
mother-of-pearl and corals, amber and ebony,  
and pleasurable perfumes of all kinds,  
buy as many pleasurable perfumes as you can;  
visit hosts of Egyptian cities,  
to learn and learn from those who have knowledge.

Always keep Ithaca fixed in your mind.  
To arrive there is your ultimate goal.  
But do not hurry the voyage at all.  
It is better to let it last for long years;  
and even to anchor at the isle when you are old,  
rich with all that you have gained on the way,  
not expecting that Ithaca will offer you riches.

Ithaca has given you the beautiful voyage.  
Without her you would never have taken the road.  
But she has nothing more to give you

And if you find her poor, Ithaca has not defrauded you.  
With the great wisdom you have gained, with so much experience,  
you must surely have understood what Ithacas mean.

For me, the beauty of this piece is that it makes the connection between self and poetry clear. It speaks directly to us, and asks that we find and savour the poetic in our own lives. The “beautiful voyage” is nothing other than *life* itself. The journey ought to be “long,” so that it might be filled with “adventure,” with “knowledge.” We ought to seek new and rare fruits, ought to relish them all, because when the journey does end, as end it will, we will know we have tasted much of what life had to offer us.

The following passage by Murray, invites us even more explicitly to reveal the poetry within. I urge the reader to attend to the words. Do not merely read them; obey them, and see what results:

Reflect for a while on your living. Attend to some of your finer experiences, your finer moments, or if you will, your more dreaded moments. Let the heart go out to such experiences and see where they lead you. Listen attentively and especially to dimensions of your life that

are most meaningful, persons in your life who feature prominently in it, scenes old and new that have about them an elegance or beauty that arrests you, pursuits that touch you and linger, questions that rise up frequently to haunt you, experiences that take you back to the golden and great days to inspire you, melodies and memories that bring to your heart an uplift, an ease, a smile... (p.155)

I would suggest to the reader that you may be closer now than ever to understanding the dimension of the poetic. What you may have found are the images and symbols of your life, a poetic treasure that lurks beneath the surface, and that can yield such a rich bounty when it is uncovered. This is the poetry that is the *self*.

We are all, essentially, living, breathing compositions. The idea is captured nicely by Lin Yutang (1937) in *The Importance of Living*. Lin Yutang notes that human life, even from a biological standpoint, reads "like a poem". He says, "it [life] has its own rhythm and beat, its internal cycles of growth and decay" (p.30). For Yutang, the movement from childhood to adulthood, middle age, and beyond, is like "the ripening of a fruit" or the "mellowing of good wine" (p. 31). Old age is nothing if not the "sunset of our life." Indeed, he suggests that it is from the perspective of old age that we can best appreciate our life's "patterm." We discover, if we take the time to look (and listen), that life indeed plays like a song. There is a refrain that is unmistakably one's own. He says,

One should be able to sense the beauty of this rhythm of life, to appreciate, as we do in grand symphonies, its main theme, its strains of conflict and the final resolution. The movements of these cycles are very much the same in a normal life, but the music must be provided by the individual himself (p. 31).

Yutang clearly reinforces Paz's idea that life is filled with poetic instants. These instants are not simply random moments of inspiration and poignancy. The well lived life is a beautiful arrangement; it has a theme, a motif, a melody.

I cannot overstate the value of this insight. The quest for true harmony is well begun when we seek to notice the recurring themes of our lives. What we might have taken for chaos and randomness is continually forming patterns. Even coincidences and chance encounters seem strangely part of a grand scheme. There seems at times a secret synchronicity at work. Life finds and creates symmetry. Have you ever noticed how many so called chance encounters in your life seemed to compel you in a certain direction? You happened to meet so and so, who happened to introduce so and so, and so on. In the end, you wind up in love, or with a career you never imagined, or what have you. Have you ever found that the experience of a tragedy or hardship has, over time, also resulted in a significant and positive life change that might otherwise never have played out? This is the song, the poem that Yutang speaks of. This is also why he says old age has a certain advantage. The patterns are easier to spot when we glance back and see what has occurred. The almost finished work is clearer than the work in progress.

This is not to suggest that we cannot detect our life's pattern until old age. Old age has a clearer vantage point, yes, but the receptive among us will notice it sooner. The romantic idea of fulfilling one's destiny is made more likely if we recognize the rhythm early. Paths seemingly unfold before us, and our course is somehow clearer, even amidst life's confusion. Sadly, many of us do not sense the song or poem of our life. Yutang explains,

In some souls, the discordant note becomes harsher and harsher and finally overwhelms or submerges the main melody. Sometimes the discordant note gains so much power that the music can no longer go on, and the individual shoots himself with a pistol or jumps into a river. But that is because his original leit-motif has been hopelessly overshadowed....Otherwise the normal human life runs to its normal end in a kind of dignified movement and procession. (p.31)

The denial of one's life pattern, or the complete inability to hear or sense the song, is potentially dangerous. Life seems incoherent, and this apparent lack of meaning can become unbearable. Ultimately, we find that there is always a delicate balance; sometimes we can only listen when we seek to play or direct the music. Other times we are invited or required to play or direct when we want merely to listen. Other times the symphony seems to move along effortlessly no matter what we do. In the end, the real value is in simply recognizing the symphony, in noticing our own poem. Times of sorrow and discord are inevitable, but having a sense of the overall theme of one's life provides the kind of impetus we need to carry on. We live most meaningfully when we attune ourselves to our pattern. This is our *song*, our *poem*.

"We tend in our culture to stifle the spirit," writes Charles Taylor (1989, p. 520). Whatever poetry is, I contend, it is a way for the self to nourish its spirit, and a way through the mundane. William Barrett (1958, p.132) refers to modern life as being "caught up in the web of a banal and mechanical civilization." In such a world, the self lacks depth, richness, meaning. Indeed, the prevalence of talk shows, self help books, diet plans, esteem building seminars, exercise and health products, suggest that the self may well be trying to quench a deep thirst, but failing again and again. Poetry has been called a "substitute for religion" (Barrett, 1958, p.130), although some may think this extreme. Barrett is surely onto something, though, when he claims that poetry is "a magical means of arriving at some truer, more real sphere of Being" (p.130). And while it is too much to think one might soar forever on the "wings of Poesy", as Keats once wished, it is surely valuable to know that a poetic sphere exists, and that it is accessible to us all.



## The Language of Poetry

What is it about this language of poetry that is so special? How does language become poetic? The answer is not so simple. Poetry is language beyond language. Poetry says that which is otherwise *unsayable*. It is an affront to linear thought, and a challenge to those who crave knowledge via a cut and dry one to one correspondence where this means exactly that. Poetry tends to perplex the modern, analytic mind. A language beyond language? This is an obvious contradiction; it confounds logic. To say that which is unsayable is equally preposterous. The laws of reason tell us that that which is unsayable cannot be said. Yet, I maintain, poetry says the unsayable. Poetry is dynamic, evocative. Poetry is liquid. Poetry leaks. Its movement is that of spreading out, of going beyond. For the mind that seeks to classify and quantify and contain, poetry is elusive. Poems often revel in ambiguity, equivocation, double entendres, and connotation. We can mark the metre and beat of a lyric, we can note the stanzafication, we can count the devices and mechanisms, and still not know the beauty and profundity of its substance, not feel the allure of its rhythms, not experience its poetry. We might as well catch a butterfly, note its genus, study its physical features, and never enjoy the beauty of its delicate afternoon dance across a patch of wild flowers. If we seek to know our world by clutching it, by controlling it, by reducing it to measurable properties, we kill it.

Indeed, this way of understanding is in some way backwards. We are moving in reverse. There is also a knowing by setting free, by allowing that our scientific

schematizations and representations of knowledge are always incomplete. Is it not vain to assume that the *logocentric* framework of modern life is such that it can capture and contain the complexities of the world? Like Saul (2001) notes, we need intuition, imagination, and memory to experience the fullness of the world, to know its poetry.

Tim Lilburn (1999) recognizes in poetry an enriched way of knowing. Where schematizations serve to remove us from the world, Lilburn notes that “poetry leans into the world” (p.6). He writes, “Poetry’s fundamental appetite is ecstatic; its curiosity yearns beyond this barrier of intelligibility to know the withinness of things” (p.6). The notion that “intelligibility” might serve as a “barrier” is key. Our emphasis on reason, the quality we trust most when it comes to epistemological concerns, limits our ability to really know. We have already discussed the way in which we distance ourselves as we seek to increase our objective knowledge. We attempt to deny the mysteries of the universe by sorting them into categories. We tell ourselves that this way of knowing is the most complete, but the truth is that such an approach leaves us unable to grasp “withinness.” In contrast, “The knowledge poetry seeks is the most intimate, the names it aspires to utter [are] those which its subjects... would intone if they stood to sing” (Lilburn, 1999, p.6). Lilburn suggests here that poetic language strives to give voice to the subjects themselves. That these voices might “sing” is not surprising. Scharfstein (1993, p.193) tells us, “music and poetry convey experience in some ways more completely than speech.” He also tells us, “Poetry has often been understood as the union of music with language” (p.193). All of this serves to make us appreciate even more the accuracy of Paz’s claim that, “the poem is the shell which echoes the music of the universe” (1973, p.4).



Poetry is born of song; the endurance of the word "lyric" attests to the poem's inextricable bond with music. Yet, "musical" or "lyrical" language is foreign in the commonplace of many lives. It is seen as somehow ancillary to the modern languages of reason, fact, and science, to the language of business and corporate work-speak, to the language of contest and competition, to the language of busyness that pervades a consumer capitalist culture. It is, in some ways diametrically opposed to such language. I've already argued that what these languages tend to do is reduce the world to "things" and to "processes." Consequently, the entire experiential element is missing. For example, Alisdair MacIntyre (1984, p. 206) tells us that a simple question like "what is he doing?" invites a variety of answers, any one of which might seem objectively true and complete. He says, "the answers may with equal truth and appropriateness be 'Digging', 'Gardening', 'Taking exercise', 'Preparing for winter', or 'Pleasing his wife'." The trouble of course, is that too often we will accept one response and assume, because it is accurate, it is also complete. It may be true that a person is climbing a mountain. It might also be true that she is overcoming her fears, enjoying a higher view, seeking challenge, testing new equipment, and so on. Indeed, the person climbing the mountain may be experiencing one of the more profound, mystical moments of her life. The obvious and objective answer, "climbing a mountain" is true, perhaps, but hugely incomplete.

Objective knowledge and the use of language it inspires, is not wrong, per se, just limited. Yet, this is the dominant mode for "running our affairs." This seems inappropriate. Further, the assumption that we achieve a more complete kind of understanding with objective detachment seems less than human. The poets have always known this. From tribal elders to the bards and scops, from the sonneteers and the troubadours to the beatniks and beyond - they have all known a deeper life. They

have, perhaps intuitively, perhaps by circumstance, sensed and responded to a spectrum of life's offerings in ways many of us do not. Poets and artists typically serve as a kind of conduit through which the rhythms of the universe are experienced most profoundly. It is not surprising that they should seek to communicate such experiences and visions and imaginings in verse. Poetry lets language overcome itself. The result is that the universe expands, and we are enabled to feel the fullness of its music.

## Letters of Smoke

It is very interesting to listen to what the poets have to say about poetry. Octavio Paz writes in his poem *Letter to Leon Felipe*, "Poetry/ is the crack / the space/ between one word and another." Frost tells us that "poetry is what gets lost in translation," and that "like a piece of ice on a hot stove the poem must ride on its own melting." What we see in these remarks reinforces the central distinction I pointed out earlier. Poetry is not words and structures. Poems are made of words and structures, yes, but poetry resides in people and places and experiences. This is precisely what Paz and Frost, and countless others, are suggesting. The words and structures are not ends in themselves, but beginnings. If we stop at the word, we fall short. In poetry, words and structures stretch and contort; they shrink and expand. They melt. The language of poetry is a language that evokes, a language that transports. Tim Lilburn writes, "Poetry is the rearing in language of a desire whose end lies beyond language"(1999, p.9). Lilburn elaborates: "language asserts and cancels itself, names the world and then erases the names" (p.viii).

Pablo Neruda's work vividly illustrates this *naming and erasing*. In the fourteenth poem from *Twenty Love Poems and a Song of Despair*, the speaker queries, "Who writes your

name in letters of smoke among the stars of the south?" Neruda knows that a world where we seek to carve things in stone, where we desire that which is clear and constant, is sadly incomplete. We do not know a thing by labeling it. With "letters of smoke" the name appears, only to disappear, leaving us not with the name, not with the trappings of language, but with the thing or quality itself, raw and ready to be experienced anew. This is precisely why Paz says a poem is "an immersion in the original waters of existence" (1973, p.15). We encounter the world in a poem as though it is a strange, wondrous land once again. Lilburn says, "[Poetry] is mind remembering the old world of the Garden, what it was there to be rarefied"(p.6). The point is that the language of poetry is transcendent. It wakes us from our jaded and mundane sense of life, and enables us to see our world with freshness and beauty. Again, I defer to Neruda who captures the idea best:

let us not fill our mouths  
with so many faltering names  
with so many sad formalities  
with so many pompous letters  
with so much of yours and mine  
with so much signing of papers

I have a mind to confuse things  
unite them, make them new-born  
mix them up, undress them  
until all light in the world  
has the oneness of the ocean  
a generous, vast wholeness,  
a crackling, living fragrance.

(From "Too Many Names")

This expresses well what we might call the dimension of the poetic. It is here where the human spirit finds real nourishment and sustenance.

It may well be the case that no definition can make clear the nature of poetry. The Oxford Dictionary of Current English (1985) defines poetry as: "n. art or work of poet;

poems collectively; poetic or tenderly pleasing quality.” Definitions, of course, are a kind of anti-poetry, stemming from a desire to delineate boundaries, to achieve exactness. One of my favorite American poets, Carl Sandburg, shares some definitions of his own in a piece he calls “Tentative (First Model) Definitions of Poetry.” The poem offers thirty-eight definitions of poetry, and each definition might appropriately be considered a poem of its own. The following ten excerpts show how Sandburg subverts the usual sense of defining. Any ideas about achieving exactness or marking boundaries are immediately dismissed. The contrast with the Oxford Dictionary must not be overlooked.

Ten Excerpts from “Tentative (First Model) Definitions of Poetry.”

- Carl Sandburg

1. Poetry is a projection across silence of cadences arranged to break that silence with definite intentions of echoes, syllables, wave lengths.
10. Poetry is the journal of a sea animal living on land, wanting to fly the air.
11. Poetry is a series of explanations of life, fading off into horizons too swift for explanation.
12. Poetry is a search for syllables to shoot at the barriers of the unknown and the unknowable.
19. Poetry is a theorem of a yellow-silk handkerchief knotted with riddles, sealed in a balloon tied to the tail of a kite flying in a white wind against a blue sky in spring.
23. Poetry is the silence and speech between a wet struggling root of a flower and a sunlit blossom of that flower
24. Poetry is the harnessing of a paradox of earth cradling life and then entombing it.
25. Poetry is the opening and closing of a door, leaving those who look through to guess about what is seen during a moment.
34. Poetry is a phantom script telling how rainbows are made and why they go away.
36. Poetry is the synthesis of hyacinths and biscuits.

Sandburg's whole point seems to be that poetry is a realm beyond the scope of the prosaic. Only through the language of poetry can the nature of poetry be expressed or evoked. Surely, there is enough in these lines to merit an entire paper of their own. Indeed, one might select any one of the definitions and find an almost inexhaustible well of richness. My intent here is not to provide a detailed analysis, although I am tempted, but to implore the reader to read the definitions again, slowly, and with contemplative mind. Each is a precious jewel, unique and complete in and of itself. Each shines, seems to emit its own light, while simultaneously reflecting the light of others. For surely there are some recurring themes in the imagery and the diction: "fading", "unknowable", "knotted with riddles", "paradox", "a search", "too swift for explanations", and "a phantom script" all lean in a like direction, perhaps toward a "vast wholeness" that Neruda speaks of. William Blake writes, "if the doors of perception were cleansed, everything would appear to man as it is: infinite, for man has closed himself off till he see all things thro' narrow chinks in his cavern." What follows is a more specific inquiry into some of the particular devices and techniques poets use to break the prosaic chains. Poetry, I contend, is a portal to the infinite.

## **Simile**

Simile is one of the predominant poetic devices. Simile, as the word suggests, makes "similar." Specifically, simile is a device a poet uses to compare. An image or object or quality is typically expressed as being like something else. For example, the line "her eyes are like almonds" is a simile. So is, "his hands are as rough as sand paper." What we typically find with good poets, is an ability to create comparisons and find similarities that are arresting and original. A comparison that becomes too commonplace becomes cliché. Tough as nails, fit as a fiddle, are similes, but their poetic value has surely been

denigrated. We no longer see anything fresh and unique in them. T.S Eliot, inspired by the conceits of the metaphysical poets, revolutionized modern poetry with his ability to yoke together such disparate images: "Let us go then, you and I, / when the evening is spread out against the sky/ like a patient etherized upon a table." There is an arresting effect on the reader. It is difficult to imagine a likeness in such disparate images. This is the real power of simile; it is a vehicle through which the poet can express a connection or shared quality that may escape most people. With simile, the poet shows that there can be sameness even when there is difference. In a very real way, simile binds the universe together; a person, a place, an image, an idea, can be expressed by reference to something else.

Let us consider an excerpt from Michael Ondaatje's "Sweet Like a Crow," which is an exquisite study in simile:

Your voice sounds like a scorpion being pushed  
through a tube  
like someone has just trod on a peacock  
like wind howling in a coconut  
like a rusty bible, like someone pulling barbed wire  
across a stone courtyard, like a pig drowning,  
a vattacka being fried  
a bone shaking hands  
a frog singing at Carnegie Hall.  
Like a crow swimming in milk,  
like a nose being hit by a mango...

Here, Ondaatje captures wonderfully the experience of sound. The piece, amusing and whimsical, does raise a serious philosophical question. How does one use language to relate an experience? Ondaatje suggests that the best recourse is by reference to something else. Imagine that you've been assigned the task of describing a colour, let us say green. What you soon discover is that any grasping after scientific and / or rational-linear explanations will not suffice. Green is not a technical matter as much as it

is an experience. Does this mean the task is impossible or to be ignored? Not at all; it reminds us that there is an important place for the poets and the language of poetry. The poet draws on his imagination, and requires of us the same. Ondaatje presents us with a series of outlandish visual and sound images. Our senses are engaged in such a way that it is as if we hear sounds we have never heard before. As a result of his beautifully bizarre comparisons, we are able to imagine the sound of the voice in a way that no other explanation could achieve. There are no words to explain the sound, only words and images to evoke it.

With simile, the power of the comparison often lies in the remoteness of the something else from the initial image or object. Ondaatje's poem is a fine series of examples, and as mentioned, the result is arresting and unexpected. This idea of arresting and unexpected is important. Our usual ways of perceiving and experiencing are disrupted. The world is not predictable, no matter how hard we might pretend or attempt to make it that way. Sometimes people speak of receiving "wake up calls." Often, a tragedy or disaster (or near tragedy or disaster) can, for example, foster a profound change in the way one sees and experiences life. The September 11<sup>th</sup> attack had many people suddenly realizing that love and family and relationships and sunsets are more important than money and jobs and busyness. There were many heart moving speeches about the way in which lives were being re-prioritized so that more time could be spent doing the things that really mattered with the people who really mattered. In a similar vein, simile is a kind of "wake up call." Our way of being in the world shifts, even if only for a moment, as we encounter the simile. It is as if the poets are busy stringing tiny silver threads through the randomness of the universe, creating beautiful webs of interconnectedness. This is no small feat, particularly in a modern world where fragmentation and disconnection have become dominant cultural traits. Simile shows

unity in diversity, order in disorder, pattern in chaos. Simile reminds us that the world is more a series of unrelated things and events. If anything, simile suggests that mysterious and wondrous relationships exist throughout the cosmos, and dilates our senses, so to speak, to allow us to experience the fullness of the world.

Like the granddaughter who has her great grandmother's nose, or the son who has his father's walk, there are strange and awesome resemblances in the world. Simile exposes (and perhaps creates) such resemblances. The result is a sense that the episodes and *things* of life are more closely related than we first think. Encountering a good simile is like suddenly stumbling into a family reunion and noticing the sometimes subtle and sometimes uncanny similarities (notice I've used a simile to explain simile). At other times, it is more like seeing the cousins together, knowing that a blood relation exists, but seeing no trace of similarity. This is the case when the simile yokes together things so unlike, that a connection seems impossible though it exists nevertheless. Further, the notion that a thing might best be expressed by likening it to something else gives rise to a whole series of epistemological and linguistic possibilities. The matrix might be everything. That is, a person, event, or *word* for that matter, may well derive its whole identity and meaning by virtue of its place in some kind of grander scheme. We are, as all things and episodes are, quite possibly defined only by the way in which we relate to our surroundings. One cannot be a parent, for example, without also having a child. One cannot be a husband or wife, without having a spouse. One cannot be a teacher without having students. The very identity of one depends on an *other*. While these are obvious, it may be that a similar though less traceable and less rational dependence exists with all things in the universe.



## Metaphor

Metaphor just might be the quintessential poetic device. It is, by definition, a “figure of speech in which one thing is described in terms of another” (Cuddon, 1991, p. 542). Thus, the essence of metaphor, like simile, is comparison. The expression, “her eyes are sapphire” is not literally true. We all understand the distinction between eyes and stone, and recognize immediately that the line, while objectively untrue, is not intended to be nonsensical, but poetic. We understand that this metaphor makes a connection between the organic and the inanimate, finds something similar in their respective qualities. We might imagine a sparkle or shine, a unique colour, a certain brilliance. We know that jewels are prized, and assume the beauty of the woman is also a “treasure.” Consider the metaphor by R.S. Thomas: “The heart’s flower withers at the root.” The comparison here is between the human heart (with all its connotations in tact) and a dying flower. The heart is not a flower, and yet, there is something powerful in describing it this way. Few will miss the import of the line: a love has ended. Yet, simply saying “a love has ended” seems pale by comparison. Prose is packaged too tightly. It seems to reduce, to constrain, to pin down. On the one hand, this is alluring to many. The idea that *this* can mean exactly *that* creates a sense of security. The world seems solid and exact. On the other hand, this is an illusion. Life is often uncertain, random, chaotic, and illogical. For this reason, love, perhaps the supreme subject, will always be handled best by the artists and poets. Love is not reasoned, or rational, or logical. Nor can it be measured by tools of Science and Physics.

Metaphor is clearly much more than a figure of speech. Metaphor is a way of seeing the world. Metaphor joins together different and sometimes disparate things, and finds

commonness. Its movement, like that of poetry, is one of seeking and returning. It is surely significant to note that the root of the word is “meta” meaning above. There is a going beyond which opposes a modern paradigm built on linearly conceived notions which tend to isolate and reduce meaning. According to Sewell (1964), “Metaphor is all the idiom of language untranslatable into a system of algebraic notation” (p. 33). The idea of untranslatable is paramount. In metaphor, the literal, denotative quality of words is used against itself as it were. The poet knows that words are not “denotative symbols alone, but clusters of allusive and metaphoric potential, for speculative construction” (p. 33). Metaphor exposes the limitations of words while going beyond them. Metaphor expands the universe, finds wondrous and sometimes strange harmonies, and expresses these harmonies by way of fusion, by expressing one thing in terms of another.

Canadian poet Al Purdy is a master of metaphor. A trip back from the outhouse in a winter storm is made significantly more poignant with such a device. After crossing a viciously cold and blustery expanse, he finally reaches home. He concludes the poem “One Rural Winter” with: “and the door knob / is a handle I hold onto the sky with.” The idea of the door knob as a handle for the sky shows richness; specifically, it represents a the poet’s wonderful ability to see profundity in the ordinary and mundane. A simple everyday object, in this case a piece of hardware, is connected to the universe. While its images are vastly different, in theory, Purdy is making the same kinds of connections that Blake makes in his famous lines some two hundred years ago:

To see the world in a grain of sand  
And Heaven in a wild flower  
Hold infinity in the palm of your hand  
And infinity in an hour

It is, sadly, these kinds of connections too many of us fail to make in the *day to dayness* of living. The routines and busyness of our lives often leave us with the sense that our lives lack such wonder. We look instead to our televisions and home theatres to give us meaning. For Purdy, the *day to dayness* of living is rife with the poetic. This particular poem, "One Rural Winter," embodies this idea especially well. In this piece, nothing less than the walk "half a mile to the outdoor shithouse/ with the temperature at 40 below" becomes an occasion for reflection on what it means to be a human being in the frozen desolate regions of the North. Indeed, one of the most primal of human functions has, with Purdy, found itself in the sphere of the poetic. Beautiful? Perhaps not, but the point remains that in the commonplace, too, there is magic.

Purdy writes, for example, of being "under an old pontiac...changing oil" while an attractive woman strolls by. The moment, the speaker recognizes, is a profoundly poetic one. The world stops: "everything suddenly goddam still/ The sun a hovering golden bird / nothing moves." While the metaphor here is obvious, Purdy follows up with an even better one when the speaker, still under the car, describes his unique predicament as having "both hands high /under the skirts of the world." The car and the woman seem to bleed into each other. One is described in terms of another. One is the other. Working on a car and touching a woman are tied together. We know his hands are not really under the skirts of the world, and yet, to say anything else is to reduce the moment. The moments of our lives we recall best are not those we remember objectively as series of detached facts, but those moments charged with passion, sorrow, terror, or joy. Metaphor, in fusing images together, forces a non rational, emotional, intuitive response. Metaphor evokes our humanity.

We might say that metaphor is a revolt against a narrow, routine, prosaic view of the world. As Wheelock (1963, p.21) notes, "Most of us pass through life in a state of semi-anaesthesia. The world about us has become so familiar that we no longer experience it." We are so caught up in the routines of life, so smitten by the glare of media and machinery, so busy scurrying about, that we no longer apprehend the poetic. Life, for many of us, is reduced to a fairly predictable pattern. We wake up, probably to an alarm, and initiate a well rehearsed cycle. Tuesday plays out much like Monday, and Wednesday plays like Tuesday, and so on. We eat at the same time, probably at the same places, travel the same routes, wear the same clothes, and so on. This is just normal life, is it not? And yet, there is a danger. The danger is forgetting that every day is a unique set of circumstances, with its own idiosyncratic cosmic realities, realities that will play out this moment and never again. The world is new every day. Indeed, it is new every minute, every second. Sometimes the newness is obvious, like waking up to a fresh blanket of snow, or bumping into an old friend unexpectedly at the coffee shop. More often it is subtle. It is the for sale sign around the corner that finally says sold after months of inactivity. It is the smile of the neighbour's child who suddenly has a space in his teeth. It is the woman at the deli who slices the sandwich just so. It is the robin singing in the back yard. And so on. Yes, the sun rises and sets every day, and every day it is new and wonderful. If only we could remember to look. If only we had time. If only...

Metaphor rejuvenates, it breaks through barriers and presents us with something simultaneously familiar and unfamiliar. Like silver polish, metaphor transforms the grey into a sparkle. We recognize that which has been touched, but are taken aback by its vibrancy. The ordinary becomes extraordinary. The old becomes new again. Metaphor casts a certain light on the world, and makes the things therein glow. Unfortunately, our

inheritance of an “alienated consciousness” (Berman, 1981) has led to what Sewell (1964, p.40) calls “suppression of metaphor.” The result is a life devoid of the poetic. This explains the gap that many feel in their lives. No wonder so many in North America turn to material and trivial pursuits. They are attempting to fill the holes in their lives. Going shopping, watching television, and driving fancy cars will not ultimately satisfy us. The void will subsist. We see this already. Despite our relative wealth and abundance, there continues to be growing stress, more martial discord, more loss of self esteem, more issues with anger, more drugs, more violence, and so on. Expressions like “road rage” and “air rage” are common place. We can relate to these. Yet, the pervasive sense of *something missing* offers hope. Here is the space for poetry. Here is the place where the heart and the imagination have space to grow and to flourish. We should not fear the hollow, for the music of the universe rings better here, rings clearer here.

## Personification

Personification, the imputing of human qualities on non-human subjects, is common practice among writers. The device can make for some of the most beautiful lines in verse. When Pablo Neruda writes: “The rain takes off her clothes,” (Poema XIV) or Federico Garcia Lorca writes, “Tears strangle the wind” (The Weeping), we are witness to the arresting power of personification. The prevalence of this technique speaks again to the poets need to turn to a usage of language that contradicts or confounds mere literal usage. Indeed, it is as if the poets recognize a failure of literal language in terms of its ability to convey or arrive at poetic truth. It is precisely this failure which gives figurative language an important place. Though regarded by many as false, figurative language, the language of metaphor and its sisters, has the ability to evoke more truthfully the profundity of human experience. Anthony O’Hear (1988, p. 98) writes:

For the metaphorical to be possible at all, there must be a sense of the literal words involved, in which it is possible for literal truths and falsehoods to be expressed. It is through the failure of the literal interpretation... that an audience recognizes that an utterance is intended metaphorically.

We see here the complexity of the relationship between the figurative and the literal.

One does not exist without the other. According to O'Hear (p. 106), the failure of literal language begins when we step into the arena of "feelings, experiences, and attitudes – discourse about the inner life." In this place, literal descriptions "can at most give us the outer shell of the inner" (p. 107). And we are reminded of the place we started from, and know that it is the inside of the shell where echoes "the music of the universe."

Personification has a way of making the world come alive. Nature, for example, becomes a living, breathing entity, with its own voices, its own language. The wind "howls" we say. The brook "babbles." The real beauty of personification is that it places us in a world that speaks to us. The idea is an ancient one, and hearkens to animistic cultures that exist "in the face of a sentient cosmos" (Abram, 1996, p.70). We encounter again a sun, moon, stars, trees, and animals that converse with us. Language is not reduced to letters on a page, nor to human utterances; it is the tracks of the gulls on the sand, the rain falling on leaves, the sea carving formations in stone, a dance of shadows in the wind, a pattern of clouds in an autumn sky. All of these are meaningful gestures in an expressive landscape. This is the original language, the song of the world. Our human voices are but a part of the grand symphony. Yet, we have all but drowned out the music; our human voices have become the voices of truth, and our artifacts have become more familiar to us than our natural surroundings. Weather reports come from a television. Milk comes from a plastic jug. We learn about the land and animals from books. This is not to rail against technology and conveniences, but to point out the loss of relationship. The dialogue with the "more than human world" has been largely cut off.

For thousands of years oral and indigeneous cultures lived in living, breathing landscapes. Cultural anthropologist Richard Nelson (cited in Abram, p. 69), tells us:

[t]raditional Koyukon people live in a world that watches, in a forest of eyes. A person moving through nature – however wild, remote, even desolate the place may be – is never truly alone. The surroundings are aware, sensate, personified. They feel. They can be offended. And they must, at every moment, be treated with the proper respect.

In a few hundred years we have developed quite a different mode of life. Indeed, it has been suggested that the appropriate metaphor for human presence today is “the bulldozer” (Kohak, 1984, p.90). Erazim Kohak explains , “If, in the course of the last three centuries we have become increasingly marauders on the face of the earth rather than dwellers therein, it is not because we have become more distinctively human, more distinctively cultured, but rather because we have become less so” (p.91).

Personification, in giving life to the inanimate among us, brings us closer, if even for a moment, to a primordial reality. It is not so much that the other becomes human, but that we become more human ourselves. We participate again in the “discourse of an animate earth” (Abram, 1996, p.117) and allow ourselves to be addressed by that which surrounds us. Claims can be made upon us. We are reminded that we need to answer for our actions.

Of course there are also cases when personification is used to animate even our own artifacts. Forests and brooks are one thing, perhaps, but surely machines are another. Yet, here too I see some value. In a depersonalized world where ever burgeoning technology is a reality, perhaps it is not so bad, at times, to find human traits in a piece of machinery. Certainly the relationship between human and machine is a legitimate one. Our homes and offices are stocked full of devices that we use incessantly. Yet, there are still people afraid of photocopiers, people terrified by computers. Perhaps this is because they do not see anything “human” in these machines, nothing they can

“converse” with. Poet Louis Untermeyer finds some humanity in “Portrait of a Machine.” He writes, “These naked, iron muscles dripping oil/And the sure fingered rods that never miss./This long and shining flank of metal...”. His portrayal is powerful. The machine in this case seems less like other and more familiar, perhaps even beautiful. Ironically, the poem concludes with the machine’s “master,” as “Lord of the earth, who rules but cannot learn, / Become the slave of what his slaves create.” It is a clever twist, and highly appropriate for our age. In essence, the personification of the machine becomes a means of illustrating the dehumanization of the modern person. My own sense is that this effect happens frequently in the case of imbuing human traits on a mechanical device. The technique does not so often attempt to inflate the prestige of technological advancement, as it seems to humble the humans responsible.

## Imagery

Imagery, like metaphor, seems vital to a poem’s existence. The use of imagery is so abundant, so varied, that is likely more difficult to find a poem without it. While we might have a tendency to think of imagery as visual, it in fact has a much broader scope. The Penguin Dictionary of Literary Terms (Cuddon, 1991, p.443) says an image “may be visual (pertaining to the eye), olfactory (smell), tactile (touch), auditory (hearing), gustatory (taste), abstract (in which case it will appeal to what may be described as the intellect) and kinaesthetic (pertaining to sense of movement and bodily effort) (author’s parenthesis). For the purposes of this paper I am not interested in detailing the idiosyncracies of each variety. I am interested in the overall effect of imagery upon the reader. Consider the famous closing lines from Dylan Thomas: “Time held me green and dying/ Though I sang in my chains like the sea.” The quotation is brilliant, and resonates for me every time I read it. The exquisiteness of the line is surely its masterful



blend of images. Visuals. Sound. The natural (“green”) is juxtaposed with the unnatural (“chains”). An image of unbridled freedom, “the ocean,” stands in beautiful contrast with an image of oppression, “chains.” Indeed, the line is poetically supercharged; both paradox and personification also emerge from the images.

Poets use imagery as yet another way to overcome the limitations of language. An image resonates on many levels. Indeed, the deliberate appeal of an image to our senses allows it a sort of back door entrance, a way to penetrate us despite our rationalistically trained intellect standing guard. When Paz wrote that poetry is the “space between” the words he might just as well have written that poetry is the space between the images. The magic of poet’s work tends not to be in rambling expositions, but in terse, image filled passages. Remember Pound’s “In a Station of the Metro”:

The apparition of these faces in the crowds;  
Petals on a wet, black bow.

Or William Carlos Williams’ “The red wheelbarrow”:

so much depends  
upon  
  
a red wheel  
barrow  
  
glazed with rain  
water  
  
beside the white  
chickens.

These works are staples among modern poetry compilations. There are likely thousands of papers written about these poems every year by college students around the world. Imagine, these two pieces, each less than twenty words in length, generating so much discussion, so much attention, so many words over the years. Surely, it is a testament to their value, to their ability to reach out and connect with us meaningfully. So

much is contained in so little. Less becomes more. The irony of writing twenty page essays on poems that exist on a half a page has never really escaped me. Perhaps it is because it in some ways represents a reverting back to the narrower world where rules, logic, and convention constrain the infinite that seemed to manifest in the poem. On the other hand, sometimes the best we can do is to pay such close attention to the great works. Our articulations of the mystery they contain may fall short, but it is these articulations that can trigger curiosity; people turn to Shakespeare, to Mozart, to Picasso, generations later and find treasure there as bountiful as ever.

I spoke earlier of the poetry that lurks within us all. Our lives are fraught with poetic images. I recall a former student of mine, a blonde Russian boy, very polite, with whom I would sometimes discuss, among other topics, the great Russian writers. Indeed, we had many good discussions, the kind that delved into the hearts of things. I think I was really just trying to impress him with what is really a very cursory knowledge of Russian literature. He asked if I was familiar with the work of Pushkin's "Onegin." I said I was not. He seemed disappointed and told me that his work was considered "Russian gold." It was an expression I'd never forgotten, a poetic spin on the more cliché "national treasure" concept. I've also never forgotten opening my front door late that Christmas morning and discovering a small, plainly wrapped parcel lying on the stoop. I picked it up and knew immediately it was a book. The inside of the cover had been inscribed with the words: "Russian Gold, for Mr. Nosek." Trust me when I tell you that the shine has not tarnished. The moment I opened that cover had a poetry all its own. It was an act of kindness, unsolicited and humble. It showed respect, thoughtfulness. It seemed somehow sacred, the timeless act of a student honouring his teacher. It was done silently, there was not even a knock at the door. I had concrete evidence at that moment that some of what I said and did mattered beyond the confines of the classroom. Some of what I said and did still mattered on holidays, and at Christmas

time. Yet, the moment also had nothing to do with school; it transcended the roles of student and teacher. There was something refreshingly human about the whole thing, a simple and pure expression of the connection between *two like minded* souls. And this, I realize, matters. Poetry arrived that Christmas in two forms: in the lyrics of Pushkin, and in the gesture of a student. Perhaps it is fitting that I'll never think of one without also thinking of the other. The image of a book and the image of Steven are bound inextricably together in my memory.

## Synaesthesia

A lesser known technique, but one that helps the poets to achieve in their work a transcendent quality is called *synaesthesia*. Synaesthesia is a kind of sensory metaphor, where one sense is described in terms of another. The effect of reading a line that employs synaesthesia is at first most disconcerting. We stumble into a realm where the more conventional ways of knowing do not apply. Synaesthesia blurs the distinctions we make when we apprehend a thing: size, colour, scent, texture, shape, merge and mingle. Certainly, the laws of logic and language leave us floundering; one might as well cast a net at the wind. Yet, what at first seems like nonsense, is in fact an avenue to a different way of knowing. Synaesthesia asks that we shed "the accepted perceptual logic of [our]culture" (Abram, 1996, p.9) so that we might more fully experience the phenomena of the world. Suddenly, that which exists before us and around us seems always more than the sum of its parts. Things in the world have a kind of existential weight; they exist with a kind of audacity that says "we are more than you see and think; we cannot be contained."

In a poem called "Arctic Rhododendrons" Al Purdy uses an exceptional example of the technique. During a visit north to Baffin Island, Purdy is smitten with the beauty of an

Arctic flower that blooms amidst the frozen and desolate tundra. How does one convey a sense of awe with words? How does one express a feeling or impression for which no words suffice? How does one express through the very language that constrains one? An answer might be to appeal not to our intellect solely, but to our senses. The direct appeal to our senses engages us and embodies us. We are forced to move beyond the scope of abstraction and intellectualization, and encouraged to see, hear, smell, touch, and taste. And even here, synaesthesia surprises us. Our habit of processing is thrown into question. Purdy does this beautifully: "And love [is] the sound of a colour that lasts two weeks in August and then dies/ except for the three or four I pressed in a letter and sent whispering to you." What we see is a great example of sensory blend. On one level the line is ridiculous in that it makes no rational sense. We know, however, that poetry is lyrical, not rational. The intangible quality of "love," something which has no clear form, no definable physical properties, is expressed as a sound. There is a sudden shift as we move from an intangible or abstract domain to an auditory one. This effect is further compounded when the sound is in turn expressed not through an auditory medium, but a visual one: "love the sound of a colour..." The line takes on yet another dimension as the reference to "colour" is similarly not matched by any corresponding visual media. It is not the colour of leaves or the colour of the sea, but a colour that "lasts two weeks in August and then dies." In a short expanse we move from pure abstraction to an aural mode, to a visual mode, to personification. There is a layering of modes and meaning. We are, as mentioned earlier, forced to either write the piece off entirely as rubbish and nonsense, or to allow ourselves the possibility that the rupture in reason and logic has created a space for the ineffable to rush in.

Synaesthesia is an invitation to attend to the world not just differently, but more genuinely. Synaesthesia is, if you will, an avenue to a more holistic way of perceiving, a

way to open the “doors of perception.” According to Kenneth Lincoln (cited in Abram, 1996, p.60):

Synaesthetic perception is the rule, and we are unaware of it only because scientific knowledge shifts the center of gravity of experience, so that we have unlearned how to see, hear, and generally speaking, feel, in order to deduce, from our bodily organization and the world as the physicist conceives it, what we are to see, hear, and feel.

There is certainly some commonplace evidence to support this notion: a *warm* colour, a *loud* shirt, a *brittle* sound, are familiar to us. We know what it means when people feel *blue*. According to Abram, an individual “readily transposes qualities from one sensory domain into another, according to a logic we easily understand but cannot easily explain” (p.61). There is no issue about whether or not each of the sense is a distinct modality; it is. The point would seem to be that there is a tremendous degree of overlap and interdependence. There is baffling complexity; there is mystery. We have five senses, yes, but the interplay between them is what enriches and enlivens experience. We do not just hear rhythms; we feel them. We are part of the “ceaseless dance” (Abram, p.54) of the cosmos.

The strong appeal to sense that we see is representative of the fact that the poetic sphere is accessed by a different path to knowing. Poets work from the premise that the human being ought to be moved, ought to make an emotional or psychological connection. Is it not our subjective experience of the world that makes us human? Our lives are defined not merely by objective realities, but by our individual, often non-rational responses to these realities: the births of our children, the deaths of our loved ones, and so on. We recall the moments of our lives with feelings and emotions. Have you ever had a certain song take you back to a specific time and place in your life? Have you ever felt the sweet rush of nostalgia after catching a whiff of a certain fragrance? Is

there a certain dish that reminds you of home, or of childhood, or of *that* time or *that* place? Sensual details are much more than details; they constitute part of the very essence of life. By deliberately engaging our senses, poets know that we cannot so easily detach from the phenomenal world. The disembodied intellect is not sufficient for meaningful apprehension. To be told that something has a pleasant smell does not compare with the invitation to *imagine the smell of a wind carrying citrus and wild flower from the mountains*. One is passive, the other active. One cuts us out of the loop; the other requires our participation. Earlier I spoke of a cultural *malaise*, and identified disengagement as a key contributor to the *unwellness*. Much of a poet's work is meant to reengage us. The artists might be one of our last hopes to re-establish a tie that a few hundred years of mechanization, logical positivism and rationalism helped to sever.

## Remembering the body

As Abram (1996) notes in *The Spell of the Sensuous*, we exist in this world as bodies, and the relationship between our bodies and the universe is a remarkable one. It is very curious that we should find ourselves so removed and out of tune with the natural world, for example, when our bodies are "like open circuits"(p.62). Mouths, noses, eyes, ears, skin, all of these seem specifically designed to receive the world. The air out there fills our lungs and becomes part of us; sounds of waves lapping, of fires crackling, enter our ears and become part of us; smells and fragrances rush in through our noses. Even that which grows in the earth we ingest; it too becomes part of us. Abram writes, "the boundaries of a living body are open and indeterminate; more like membranes than barriers" (p.46). His point is well taken. The body is our "insertion" into the world. Its relationship with that which surrounds it is necessarily intimate. Are we really surprised

by cancer rates and other illnesses when we think about some of the stuff we put into the environment? There is no *out there*; our bodies know this best.

The notion that our bodies might *know* is troubling for some; we typically associate the *mind* with matters pertaining to knowing. Our propensity to compartmentalize things has even lead to discussions around the so-called *mind-body split*. Exactly what constitutes mind? Most of us are willing to accept that a mind is more than a brain. Can a mind really be separated from the body? Is there a distinction? I am not so sure. After a rigorous bout of exercise my muscles know they are fatigued. My knee knows when it is sore. My skin knows how it likes to be touched. My lungs know to breathe without my conscious effort. My heart knows when to beat faster. My stomach knows how and when to digest. The body has been called a “major prophet.” The point would seem to be that its knowledge is immediate. Thus, one attentive to one’s body may well discover things that have yet to reach consciousness. This is the case of the person who awakens with a sore jaw, who realizes that she has been clenching and grinding her teeth all night. Only after reflecting on this does she realize that she is stressed by the week’s coming events.

The notion of mastering one’s body has become so prevalent that we seldom take the time to really listen to it. Instead, we subject it to a host of manipulations. Piercings, tattoos, cosmetic surgeries, body building, steroids, tanning salons, diet programs, chemicals, lotions, extreme exercises, facials, waxings, massages, peels, laser treatments, deodorants, sprays, and so on. Or there is the more passive form of neglect, epitomized by the North American couch potato. This is a body that gorges on fast and greasy food, that avoids exercise, and that becomes increasingly obese. To be sure, I am not necessarily arguing against using shampoo, getting a tattoo, having a face

lift, or eating a pizza. Rather, I am attempting to illustrate the many ways in which our bodies (and others) are subjugated. They have, in many cases, become objects, things to tinker with. As long as we continue the tradition of relegating our body to the position of something to be dominated, there will be discontinuity in our lives. We need to heed the messages of the body, and to recognize that in a fundamental way, we are our bodies.

The sensual nature of so much poetry, then, invites us to become our bodies, and thereby enables us to experience the fullness of living. A poem is not merely to be intellectualized; it is to be experienced, savoured. I never ceased to be amazed when I was teaching English to high school students by how many of them claimed to “dislike” poetry. Upon further investigation, I discovered that they did not dislike poetry at all, they disliked the mechanized, formulaic entity that it had become. For them, poetry smacked of terms, structures, and correct answers. The emphasis in school suggested that in the end it was more important to memorize the definition of synecdoche than it was to personally connect with Lord Byron. Scanning the iambic beats took priority over feeling a poem’s rhythm. Poems and poetry became just more disconnected stuff. Yet, when asked if they enjoyed paying attention to song lyrics, for example, many formerly disengaged students were able to demonstrate profound and sophisticated insight. The adolescents who claimed to be disenfranchised with the subject at hand, were in reality quite passionate about it. Their interest in music, in word play, in exploring topics like self identity, the meaning of life, death and darkness, and so on, made them perhaps the ideal students for poetry. How sad that school (and the larger culture) have reduced poetry to technical enterprise.



I remember also finding ways, as so many teachers do, to overcome the perception of poetry as a dry, overly intellectual pursuit. One of my first approaches was to simply read poems to them. While I found some success with this approach, what I soon realized was that student did not know how to listen. Put another way, they had difficulty simply being their bodies. They were not used to sensing subtle changes in rhythm, they were not used to thinking about the way sound made them feel, the way images could incite a bodily response. In many ways their senses had to be awakened. So I offered an analogy:

Poetry must be sipped like wine, not guzzled like water. A wine drinker notices the body of the wine, the weight and texture of the liquid on his tongue. He holds the wine momentarily on his tongue to ensure he enjoys the fullness of this experience. He seeks distinct flavours; noticing perhaps hints of black currant, or apple, or oak. He contemplates the colour of the wine, the clarity, the richness. The temperature is important, particularly for the red, which must be neither chilled nor warm. The wine may have a certain dryness, a way of finishing on the tongue. It may linger, or disappear quickly. Upon first opening, the wine drinker sniffs the bottle, perhaps even running the cork horizontally by his nose for extra zing (of course, this is after he has contemplated the bottle itself, enjoyed the label, discovered the country of origin, the variety of grape, and so on). He enjoys the sound of the cork being suddenly pulled, and the *glug, glug* as the liquid hits the glass. He enjoys the aroma in his wine filled glass. He enjoys the feel of the stem between his fingers, and the curve of the goblet. In essence, the true pleasure of sipping a wine requires the engagement of all the senses, and an acute awareness of what one is sensing. Listening to a poem should be like this, too.

It took a number of tries (and certainly I developed and borrowed a number of innovative and effective strategies for teaching poetry), but my students began to genuinely

respond to poems, to notice details, to feel the effects of euphony and cacophony, to make personal connections as well as universal ones. More than this, they began to change the way in which they felt about poetry. In some small way, some of them, I think, began to hear the music of the universe. And this for me is what education ought to be all about.

## Odds and Ends

The realm of figurative language is vast and complex. We have explored in some detail the mechanics of certain devices and their ability to transcend literal and linear meaning to arrive at a deeper dimension of reality. My intent is not to provide a complete catalogue of such devices, but to share some of the techniques so that the reader might get both a sense of the distinctiveness of the technique, as well as a sense of its ability to contribute to our reaching beyond the barriers of common perception and intelligibility. I have deliberately selected a cross section to include the commonly known like metaphor and simile, and the lesser known like synaesthesia. Certainly paradox and oxymoron ought to be mentioned. This is where poets create or reveal contradictions which, nevertheless, seem to point to a deeper truth (and obviously confound our inclination to linear thought and understanding). Similarly, irony, metonymy, hyperbole, synecdoche, symbolism, and allusion are specific ways of challenging us to overcome our limited ways of seeing (and experiencing) the world. In the end, however, these are merely devices, tools. Yet, they are the tools that allow poems to take us on such amazing journeys. Life, we discover, contains the real poetry. The trick is to allow ourselves to be receptive to the wonder and mystery in the everyday, because, quite simply, a life with poetry is a *better* life.

## Sound and Structure

Most of us recall from our high school English classes talk of meter and beat, of rhythm and rhyme, of sonnet and stanza. Sadly, most of us will likely recall these terms with a mixture of boredom and disdain. This is because for most of us they remained no more than terms; we failed to be transported by their power. And this is a small tragedy, because once again, the whole reason for their existence is to compel the heart, mind, and spirit to “come along.” It is one thing, for example, to learn that the rhyme scheme in “Ode to the West Wind” is Terza Rima. You might also come to know that Terza Rima means that the rhyme pattern exists in tercets, or three lined stanzas, where the following stanza keeps the second rhyme of the preceding stanza in its first and third lines, while picking up a new rhyme for its second line: ABA ; BCB; CDC; etc. And this is where most of us stop, content that we have understood the poem’s structure and rhyme. After all, we can now categorize it as well as explain its pieces. But in stopping here we have failed. We have failed to feel the flow of the lines, to be moved by the rhythm and the sounds. Part of the brilliance of this particular piece is that the lines move like the wind itself. There is a constant as well as a dynamic quality. Each stanza contains an element from the last, but also picks up something new. In this way it is like the wind, which is the always the same wind, but also different, as it shifts and tumbles, carrying with it now these leaves, now something else. There is no abrupt transition; rather it is subtle. Thus, a truer or more complete experience of this poem ought to give one the sense of riding the wind, of floating through a late autumn landscape. And the real magic is that centuries later, one can read this piece appreciatively, and still hear the same wind Shelley heard, and still marvel at the cycle of the seasons, of the darkness and the light. We come to love the poem, but also its counterparts in life.

## O, Wind, / If Winter comes, can Spring be far behind?

There is something timeless about poetry. A moment, an event, a feeling, is not merely frozen in time; it comes *alive* for us. We also come alive. Part of a poem's timelessness results from its reliance on rhythm. "Without rhythm, there is no poem," writes Paz (1973, p.56). We are born knowing the sound of a beating heart. In ancient cultures the beating drum is regarded as a life force. Before written language and symbols, we had only sounds and gestures. Oral cultures used rhyme and rhythm as a way to remember their stories; their very history as a people is thus steeped in the rudiments of poetry. Sound evokes for us something primordial. There is a rhythm in nature, in the cycles of the moon, the ebb and flow of the sea, the changing of the seasons, the patterns of a day. None of this is lost on the poet. He knows that rhythm serves to awaken "the secret powers of language" (Paz, 1973, p.45). In this way the poet works "in the manner of spells and sortileges" (p.45). Paz says, "the poet bewitches the language by means of rhythm" (p.45).

As mentioned earlier, the word lyric is derived from the Greek word "lyre," a stringed musical instrument. Poetry's ties to song and music are well entrenched. Syllables of words can be strung out to create patterns of sounds that rise and fall like a musical score. Sounds can be stressed or unstressed, and they can be arranged to produce a variety of effects: soft and mellifluous, sharp and jagged, and so on. Further, the interplay between words' meanings (connotative and denotative), images, and the sounds/rhythms a poet selects to use, produces staggering results; the writer can establish virtually any tone or mood he wishes: morose, tranquil, sinister, suspenseful, humorous, triumphant, and so on. The ability to elicit an emotional response in a reader

is heightened by effective use of the complex relationship between meaning, image, rhythm, and sound.

Sound techniques go beyond the beat patterns and rhyme. Poets make use of a host of other devices, many of them involving the repetition of sounds. Alliteration is foremost among them. Marianne Moore's line, "sun / split like spun glass" (from "The Fish") is a wonderful example of how a repeating letter sound, in this case "s" carries a kind of momentum. Though the image and the sound in this case cannot really be separated, surely the sound is vital to first grabbing our attention. There is an exaggeration, a sense that the natural order of things has been tinkered with. It is as if, after cruising on auto-pilot for some time, we are thrown off course by an unexpected bump, or in this instance, sound. And we really need to be forced off course from time to time. Too many of us sleep walk through life, lulled by the habit of routine and pattern. The world then seems banal, mundane, colourless.

There are countless other sound devices: assonance, consonance, onomatopoeia, euphony, cacophony, repetition, internal rhyme, and so on, and each, again, has its own magic. Onomatopoeia, for example, allows sounds a place to exist relatively unbridled and unfettered even in written and spoken form. The bees *buzz*, the waves *splash*, the fire *crackles* and *pops*. Engines *rumble* and tires *whirr*. Such words have immediacy, a purity, that appeals to us on a most basic level. The trappings of language are undone, the level of abstraction reduced. Language melts and the experience arises. We teach our young children that the cat goes *meow* and the turkey says *gobble gobble*. We are really initiating them into the broader discourse of nature and the world beyond human constructs. Indeed, children, not yet bothered by the abstractions of adults, might be our first poets. Certainly they seem to exhibit a love for repetition and rhyme (*Ma-ma, Da-*

*da, choo-choo, etc*). Robert Lynd (1941, p.xxi) writes, "every child is a poet from the age at which he learns to beat a silver spoon on the table." He also writes, "It is in verse that the imagination learns its first steps" (p. xxii). "We were merry with Old King Cole, excited with Little Miss Muffett, distraught with the Old Woman who lived in a Shoe," he wisely notes. The rhythmical nature of so much poetry, then, shares something in common with our earliest memories, our first encounters with the world. Poetry in some way serves to reconnect us to that child like state where the imagination knows no bounds, and the world is yet to be discovered, a place where "impossible trees bear impossible fruits, and for their sake an impossible princess comes over the sea" (Lynd, 1941, p. xxiv).



## **INTERLUDE: THE SECOND**

Pieces.



**Emptiness is the pure spring from whence it all comes.**

**Moons, cherry blossoms, the sound of rain...**

A single moment, a simple event, the fall of a leaf or the splash of a raindrop, completes itself, and somehow the infinite is achieved.

If we get inside a second, we find forever.

The taste of almond.

**As we are in time, time is also in us.**

Most of what we take to be carved in stone amounts to markings in the sand. What seems fixed and permanent, is fluid and ephemeral.

**Dream and wonder at the immensity of it all.**



## PART THREE

### Poetry and Zen

What seems evident to me is that the poets have been attempting for centuries to provide us access to a poetic sphere by inviting us and challenging us to overcome the very ways we have of seeing and experiencing the world. Virtually all of their techniques require a shift in the way we normally apprehend the world around us. It is a wonderful sort of paradox that we can gain access to a kind of poetic sphere through language that overcomes itself, through words that undo themselves. What of this poetic sphere?

What is it that lurks behind our language, behind our common modes of perceiving, beyond our rational, analytical grasping and our linear schematizations? Is this poetic sphere perhaps tantamount to romantic, sentimentalizing? Is it allowing oneself to be swept away by emotion? Is it fantasy? Or is it something else? Is there indeed a deeper, truer, reality?

Interestingly, support for the idea of a deeper, truer, reality is found in many of the Eastern philosophies, including Taoist thought and Zen philosophy. And there are many names for this deeper reality, this “mystery of all mysteries” (Lao Tzu): *Tao, Mu, Wu, Li, Nirvana, Sunyata, Brahman*, and so forth (Nakagawa, 2000, p.4). Furthermore, a common thread among many Eastern traditions is the notion that the mysteries and complexities of the world will never be captured by a *logocentric* framework. In other words, language and reason will, by themselves, always leave us short. Hisamatsu, a renowned Zen master, tells us, “In the East, thinking has never enjoyed a supreme position among other faculties (cited in Nakagawa, 2000, p.17). He explains, “The reason why thinking is disregarded, or regarded as a disturbance to the realization of the

truth, is that in the East the metaphysical does not belong to the thinkable” (p.18). Not surprisingly, we find in these traditions ways that seek to transcend thinking. Zen philosophy, for example, hinges on *satori*, which is an intuitive type of perception. Although there is no English equivalent for the word, Suzuki (1964/ 1991, p.93) distinguishes *satori* from our objective perception of things; it is instead “the perception of reality itself.” *Satori* is a state of “pure experience.” He says, “*satori* is the sudden flashing into consciousness of a new truth hitherto undreamed of” (Suzuki, p. 95). *Satori* has also been called “non-thinking” and even “spiritual awakening.”

Zen teaching devices like *zazen*, *sanzen*, *koan*, and *mondo* are all designed to “break through the restrictions of ‘words,’” (Nakagawa, p. 148) to help induce the state of *satori*. A reality deeper than language opens up. In some instances, these devices will appeal to words in order to go beyond them. Is this not precisely the case we have been making with regard to the poetic devices used in verse? *Satori* is exactly what so many poems attempt to achieve. We have just explored in depth the way in which the devices of the poet allow language to reach beyond itself so that we might transform our usual, limited ways of seeing. There is in poetry too an underlying recognition that language and logic must be overcome if we are to grasp the fullness of experience. I am reminded of Zen Master Dogo, who once said to his disciple Soshin, “When you think, you miss the point” (Suzuki, 1959, p.13). To say that poems serve to awaken us would not be inappropriate. The path of poetry leads to Zen.

Undoubtedly, this Zen like destination is still baffling to some. This is because, for too many of us, the idea of other or deeper realities is not accepted. We do not, as Chuang Tzu did, tend to question the truth of reality, and allow for the possibility of another. Lin Yutang (1937, p.41) writes:

Chuangtse said that he once dreamed of being a butterfly, and while he was in the dream, he felt he could flutter his wings and everything was real, but that on waking up, he realized that he was Chuangtse and Chuangtse was real. Then he thought and wondered which was really real, whether he was really Chuangtse dreaming of being a butterfly, or really a butterfly dreaming of being Chuangtse.

This famous story has a message. Perhaps there is more than what we see on the surface of things. Perhaps our sense of what is real is so dulled that we need to be *awakened*. Perhaps our normal state of consciousness has become so routine that it is as if we *sleep* through life. The idea of awakening after encountering deeper dimensions of reality is certainly a common thread in many Eastern traditions. In his work, *Education for Awakening*, Nakagawa (2000) finds that “a multi-stratified structure” can be traced in most Eastern Philosophy. In virtually all cases, the world of the here and now, the phenomenal world of things, is seen as the most superficial. Drawing on the great Taoist writings of *Lao Tzu* and *Chuang Tzu*, as well as the traditions of *Zen Buddhism*, *Mahanya Buddhism*, *Sufism*, *Hinduism*, and more, Nakagawa creates something he calls a “multi-dimensional framework of reality.” This framework identifies and explains the different levels of existence. Nakagawa distinguishes five layers of reality; they are the objective reality, the social reality, the cosmic reality, the infinite reality, and the universal reality (Nakagawa, p.31).

The *objective reality* is the world of the here and now, the “phenomenal empirical world of objective beings” (Nakagawa, p.31). Put another way, the objective reality is the one we are all too familiar with; it is the world of things and beings that appear to be “sensible, tangible, physical, material, and substantial” (p.31). It is, rather bluntly, a world of stuff. We might argue that it is also the realm that modern Western culture is caught up in. It is the world subject to “mechanistic world views” and “subject-object dualism” (p.31). Nakagawa says, “[this reality] is marked by concepts such as fragmentation,

diversification, separation, disconnection, and compartmentalization” (p.31). It is interesting to note that many of these qualities are the very ones we identified earlier as contributing to a cultural malady.

The *social reality* underlies the objective reality. Thus, it is a reality of more than things and beings, but of interactions and interpretations. It is the domain of thoughts, opinions, and articulations. Succinctly put, it is the world of language, where the human being is a part of a “collective, inter-subjective, social performance” (p.32). For this reason, Nakagawa describes it as a “semantic, linguistic” dimension. The things and beings of the objective reality are seen in the social reality as “meaning units” that can be “articulated, constructed, and maintained” in a fixed structure of language.

The third dimension is the *cosmic reality*. This, Nakagawa tells us, “is the deeper dimension of nature, life, and the universe that embraces the preceding dimensions.” In this dimension, “everything is dynamically and organically interconnected” (p.32). It is a realm beyond “linear causal relations” and “fixed codes of meaning.” Time and Space are not differentiated here. Things, beings, and processes are not compartmentalized nor categorized, but seen as part of a vast whole. “The cosmic world is structured not in a static manner but a fluid process of constant metamorphosis. In this sense, it is the world of Becoming, which includes both relative being and and relative non-being taking place in the flux of self-organizing, self-renewing processes of the universe.” (p.32).

The fourth dimension is the *infinite reality*. It is the “deepest” dimension of reality. Nakagawa calls it the “ontological foundation of the cosmos” (p.32). It has been called, among others, *Brahman*, *nirvana*, *sunyata*, *wu*, *mu*, *t'ai-chi*, and *li*. This dimension represents the “absolute” or the “infinite.” In both the Taoist and Zen traditions, this dimension of oneness is also, and perhaps paradoxically, conceived of as nothing or

emptiness. That nothingness is often interchangeable with the infinite is, upon closer inspection, not that surprising. Emptiness may be likened to wide open space, the blank out of which everything arises.

Although the fourth dimension is the deepest, there is a fifth dimension, the *universal reality*. This is because in eastern Philosophy there is, as Izutsu notes (cited in Nakagawa, p.33), a “twofold movement of seeking and returning.” Nakagawa explains,

In the seeking path, one starts with the phenomenal level, explores the deeper levels, and then attains the deepest level. The realization of the deepest, infinite reality is called Enlightenment or Awakening. After Awakening, the returning movement begins. In the returning path, the whole dimensions (the objective reality, the social reality, and the cosmic reality) reappear in such a way that the infinite reality manifests into them. In this way, they are radically transformed by the infinite reality. Dimension V [five] signifies this transformed reality (p.33).

The explanation is beautiful. One of the often misunderstood aspects of Eastern philosophy is addressed here. Many in the west assume that Eastern philosophy asks us to remain in some permanent meditative or blissful state where we renounce the phenomenal world altogether. In fact, the opposite is true. What we find here is that the infinite reality is not an end point. We cannot live in such a state. We can, however, experience it in fleeting moments, and use these encounters to inform and enlighten our experiences forevermore.

The idea of an awakening is important. We have already noted a tendency to sleep walk through life, to live in a state of “semi-anaesthesia.” This awakening has the capacity to enhance every aspect of our lives. It is, in my own words, to attune oneself to the poetry in life. It is to hear the music of the universe. As I mentioned earlier, Keats may be disappointed that he (and we) cannot soar forever on “the wings of Poesy,” but occasionally is plenty enough. It is enough, because the flight shows us that things are

always more than they seem. Neruda's "vast wholeness" may not be experienced everyday, but we have a comfort in knowing it underlies all that is anyway.

The seeking and returning paths are clearly evident in the work of William Blake. When Blake sees the "world in a grain of sand" he gives evidence of having explored deeper levels of reality, and of having discovered the infinite dimension. He returns with the transformed vision that the Eastern traditions speak of, a certain "wholeness of reality" (Nakagawa, 200, p.34). His poems, in turn, reveal the eternal dimension to us. We too can "hold eternity in the palm of our hand," even if only for a moment.<sup>3</sup> Poems, then, can quite clearly be an avenue to Zen. Or perhaps, Zen is a road to the poetic. Or perhaps, the distinction does not really matter.

Each time we pick up a stone, we might not be transported by the way in which it holds more history than a mind can fathom, by the way it gives us the closest, most tactile sense of forever. We may not be awed by the way it will cleave and hold shape the same way as its larger and smaller counterparts. We may not recognize that touching the rock is also to feel ourselves being touched. But some of the time is enough. It is enough to permanently and positively affect the way in which we regard stone henceforth. A kind of relationship is forged. The same can be said to hold true in a successful marriage. We do not, every time we behold our spouse, see stars, grow weak in the knees, and reel from overwhelming emotions. This condition is not sustainable. Nor does it need to be. Occasionally is enough to know the relationship is beautiful and good. Those special, timeless moments somehow bind together all the

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<sup>3</sup> Of course, a single moment can last a lifetime. A moment lingers in memory, and has tremendous power. It can be summoned at will, of course, but it can also sneak up on us insidiously, it can overwhelm us suddenly, and it can teach us and transform us, even years later.

other moments, underlie them, provide foundation. This is the whole point of the seeking and the return paths; the point is not to escape the mundane and *everydayness*, but to transform it, to provide it with a rich and meaningful framework. We do not, even in the healthiest of marriages, remain in a state of constant bliss. Conversely, a relationship that lacks meaningful moments, or finds itself unable, even occasionally, to create them or retrieve them, will flounder.

There may be some who will find I have been unfairly harsh with our modern way of living. My charges of superficiality, fragmentation, isolation, and so on may be met with claims that there are “deeper” modes of living in our society as well. Of course there are. My contention is that too few of us are living fully, deeply, authentically, poetically. Even those who claim to live a richer, more meaningful life tend to lack the kind of depth we see in the Eastern traditions. Nakagawa speaks of the modern society’s tendency to “celebrate a web-like horizontal interconnection of the universe” (p.4). By contrast, Eastern philosophy “involves the idea of multidimensional reality or vertical depth” (p.4). We seldom go beyond a cosmic sense of the world. You will recall that in this dimension we grasp the inter-connections between the beings of the world. We recognize, for example, the human being as an inter-related part of a larger order, perhaps as a player in the whole ecological system. Indeed, cosmological world views even hold that “the constitution of the human being correlates to the essential structure of the cosmos.” (Nakagawa, p.32). Certainly, there is a bigger picture here, and something richer for us than the artificial and disjointed aspects that seem to dominate our culture. Yet, there is a deeper domain we do not access. Beyond the interconnection there is *interpenetration*.

## Interconnection versus Interpenetration

Surely there is value in recognizing ourselves as interconnected with a larger, dynamic whole. We have acknowledged the issues around *fragmentation, atomism, solipsism, materialism, political indifference* and so on. Charles Taylor (1991) wisely notes our society's dangerous tendencies here. In this light, we must applaud efforts that seek to reintegrate us with a larger order. There are numerous ecological movements, for example, that encourage us to think of a nature as a whole, that implore us to make connections between our own lives and the living world around us. Similarly, there have been movements to develop education models that are more "holistic" (Nakagawa, 2000). Yet, despite our best efforts we typically fail to overcome the realm of dualities and delineations. We continue to think in terms of binaries: right or wrong, black or white, fact or fiction. Still we label. We categorize. We classify. We continue to draw distinctions, particularly between self and other. Wilber's notion of self identity (cited in Nakagawa, p.102) is that we draw "boundary lines" between self and not self. Yet, he also notes that "Boundaries are illusions, products not of reality, but of the way we map and edit reality." His insight accords with the Eastern concepts of interpenetration, which essentially suggest that beings do not merely connect, they merge and mingle.

The idea of interpenetration is captured best by the *Hua yen* school of Buddhist philosophy, which recognizes "in each atom...the universe." (Nakagawa, p.121). As I mentioned earlier, we discover that *out there* is also *in here*. We are other and other is us. The microcosm contains the macrocosm. The *Hua yen* school of philosophy often alludes to the Net of Indra, from an Indian myth. The net of Indra, king of the Gods, is



such that “not only does each jewel reflect all the other jewels but the reflections of all the jewels in each jewel also contain the reflections of all the other jewels, ad infinitum.” (Fa-tsang, cited in Nakagawa, p.125). The description is brilliant, and captures the idea that interpenetration is much more than interconnection. Boundaries disappear. It is not possible to distinguish a jewel from a reflection of a jewel. They become, essentially, the same. Each contains the other. Further, changing even one part necessarily changes the whole. Izutsu says, “A flower blooms in spring and the whole universe arises.” (cited in Nakagawa, p.126).

Interestingly, metaphor, poetry’s primary tool, operates on the same principle. In expressing one thing as another, there is interpenetration. This is clearly the case when we read lines like Keats’, “Beauty is truth, truth beauty” or Lorca’s “little boys eat brown bread and delicious moon.” Tennyson, too gives evidence in favour of the poets glimpsing the deepest truths. When he writes, “I am a part of all that I have met,” the reverse, though not expressed, holds equally true: all that I have met is a part of me. Synaesthesia is also about interpenetration. Sights merge into sounds, fragrances blend with tastes. Paradox could even be conceived as the merging of conflicting opposites. Indeed, the very act of reading a poem itself achieves interpenetration. Abram says, “Our eyes converge upon a visible mark, or a series of marks, yet what they find there is a sequence not of images but of sounds, something heard” (p.124). Ikkyu, a Fourteenth Century Zen poet, writes:

Rain, hail, snow, and ice  
Are divided from one another  
But after they fall  
They are the same water  
Of the stream in the valley

- (Blyth, 1978, p.141)

## Nothingness / Emptiness

According to Nakagawa, "Interpenetration arises when any objective, social, and cosmic relationships are negated and emptied in the absolute emptiness" (p.127). He also says, "From the viewpoints of eastern philosophy, even the universe is not seen as the all embracing ultimate reality.... Eastern philosophy is concerned with the deeper aspects of Non-being" (p.3). I mentioned earlier that the infinite reality is in many traditions associated with nothingness (*mu*) or emptiness (*sunyata*). The idea might best be grasped by imagining an eternal blank space on which all that exists is projected. Behind all that is, then, is *nothing*. And nothing, therefore, is foundational. That is to say, *all that is* depends upon *what is not*. *Being* arises with and from *non-being*. The notion is difficult for most of us raised on the premise that "nothing comes of nothing." Indeed, everything comes of nothing. A famous Japanese haiku written by Sodo (1641-1716) reads:

In my hut this spring  
There is nothing  
- there, is everything!

(Blyth, 1978, p.196)

In the ancient Tao Te Ching, Lao Tzu, writes:

Thirty spokes  
Meet in the hub  
Where the wheel isn't  
Is where it's useful

Hollowed out,  
clay makes a pot  
where the pot's not  
is where it's useful

Cut doors and windows

To make a room  
Where the room isn't  
there's room for you.

So the profit in what is  
Is in the use of what isn't.

(Le Guin, 1997, p.14)

Both these examples provide excellent introductions into the underlying value of *nothingness*. Close examination of these types of works serves only to reinforce the point. Lao tzu says, "The way is empty...ancestral to the ten thousand things." (Le Guin, 1997, p.4). The *ten thousand things*, of course, refers to the phenomenal world our normal state of consciousness experiences everyday, a world of demarcations and distinctions. *Emptiness* is the pure spring from whence it all comes, and to where it all returns.

## Haiku

You will by now, no doubt, have noticed the poetic nature of many Eastern thoughts. The use of verse would seem to be invaluable as a means to evoke and convey the deepest messages. The work of Lao Tzu could certainly be called poetry, and much of Chuang Tzu's work could be properly called poetic. Yet, there is perhaps no greater example to show the connection between poetry and eastern philosophy than *haiku*. The ancient tradition of haiku is world renowned as a powerful poetic form. Typically, we think of haiku as a three lined nature poem that follows a five – seven – five syllable count. Such a conception, though, is grossly insufficient. Roland Barthes (1970) explains that the haiku is much more complex. Its real power and beauty comes from a quality he calls "absence." According to Barthes, "while being quite intelligible, the haiku means

nothing" (p.69). The haiku is an utterance in language designed to "halt language"

(p.74). He explains:

deciphering, normalizing, or tautological, the ways of interpretation, intended in the west to pierce meaning, ie. to get into it by breaking and entering- and not to shake it, to make it fall like the tooth of the ruminant-of-the-absurd which the Zen apprentice must be, confronting his koan- cannot help failing the haiku; for the work of reading which is attached to it is to suspend language, not to provoke it. (p.72)

The absence that Barthes speaks of is precisely the haiku's ability to expose nothingness. Haiku has "the purity, the sphericity, and the very emptiness of a note of music" (p.76). Haiku "corresponds to the Buddhist Mu, to the Zen satori" (p.78). This is why Barthes calls haiku the "literary branch" of Zen.

Of all the great haiku writers, *Basho* is surely the most famous. Moons, cherry blossoms, the sound of rain, all of these find important places in his work. The images he presents resonate:

Waves on the blue ocean  
Smell of rice wine-  
The moon of tonight  
(Ueda, 1970, p.41)

Consider also:

Coming along the mountain path  
I find something endearing  
About violets  
(Aitken, 1978, p.109)

And:

In the morning dew  
Dirtied, cool,  
A muddy melon  
(Aitken, 1978, p.61)

These concise pieces seem to refresh the world. We read them, and develop a kind of heightened awareness, an acute sensitivity such that the commonplace rings with clarity and beauty. There is no trace of human ego. Robert Aiken (1978) says, “the heart of Basho’s haiku is the very foundation of human perception of things – mind itself.” (p.18). He elaborates, “Operating superficially, the mind is random in its activity and stale in its insights and images. With practice and experience, however, it is recognized as the empty infinity of the universe and of the self” (p.18-19). Haiku does follow a Zen path. The concise form of haiku, its deliberate offering of few words/images, allows it to become, perhaps, the thinnest, most transparent of veils. In this way, it is one of our best chances to glimpse eternity. Its movement is one of reduction and expansion. The universe simultaneously shrinks and expands in haiku. In it, a single moment, a simple event, the fall of a leaf or the splash of a rain drop, completes itself, and somehow the infinite is achieved. This is why Barthes (1970) says, “the haiku is not a rich thought reduced to a brief form, but a brief event which immediately finds its proper form” (p.75).

The old pond  
A frog jumps in-  
The sound of water.

- Basho (Aitken, 1978, p.25)

Haiku shows us that poetry and Zen are connected. Poetry helps to reveal the path, the way to *oneness*, to *emptiness*. This is because, as Paz tells us, “the poem/ is the air that sculpts itself and dissolves” (from “A Draft of Shadows” p.463). If we accept his notion that poetry is “the crack,” the “space” between the words, we see that nothingness is clearly the root of poetry as well as Zen. The full experience of a poem requires that we read that which is *absent*. In the words of Mario Valdes (1998, p.9), “what is to be read is not the stated, but the not stated.” He expands, “Of course there can be no absence without presence, but the absence that is to be read denies the very presence that

makes it possible" (p.9). Thus, the poem, too, shows us that, "Reality becomes a constant flow out of nothingness into becoming" (p.9). Poetry, then, follows the fluid, dynamic nature of the cosmos; *form* emerges from and returns to *formlessness*. There is no single strand, no static truth. This is the underlying principle of East; this explains the twofold movement of seeking and return.

## **Bringing it Together: Zen and Poetry**

The traditions of Zen, Taoism, and others clearly make reference to a reality greater and more fulfilling than the one we typically encounter. In this way, Eastern philosophy has much in common with the art of poetry. Poems, as we have shown, are complex constructs designed to transport us beyond the very language with which they are constructed. Poets, like Zen masters, use specific techniques to attempt to awaken us from a dull and mundane sense of the cosmos. A good poem seems to tap into a refreshing life spring, a cool clear water that invigorates and nourishes all that is. Lin Yutang (1937, p.141) says poetry provides a "freshness of vision" and a "more vital sense of life." And Zen masters, like poets, use words in ways that require us to move past them, thereby releasing us from the bonds of logic and linear thought. This is how the infinite is revealed. Life is consequently transformed.

Put another way, poetry and Zen are inextricably bound. It has been said that "Zen is poetry and poetry is Zen" (Blyth, 1978, p.116). Each is timeless. Each shows that an eternal aspect exists in even a single, fleeting moment. W.S. Merwin writes, "The translation of Zen, the translation of poetry, the translation that is poetry, appear to have so much in common as to suggest a common root, a single impulse of which they are aspects" (Aitken, 1978, p.12-13). And while we have emphasized perhaps, the way in

which poetry shares much with Eastern philosophy, surely it is also fair to say the traditions of the east seek the poetry of life. Consider the following story by Chuang Tzu:

Once there was a man who was afraid of his shadow and who hated his footprints, and so he tried to get away from them by running. But the more he lifted his feet and put them down again, the more footprints he made. And no matter how fast he ran, his shadow never left him, and so, thinking that he was still going too slowly, he ran faster and faster without a stop until his strength gave out and he fell down dead. He didn't understand that by lolling in the shade he could have gotten rid of his shadow and by resting in quietude he could have put an end to his footprints. How could he have been so stupid! (Watson, 1968, p.348)

Surely, this story is a cry to slow down and "smell the roses." It also seems a parable perfectly suited for our age. I see so many people, and so many families, rushing about to soccer practices, piano lessons, yoga classes, business seminars, with frowns on their faces. I see people convinced that if they slow down for a moment, they will be left behind. But just what they are after, I am not sure. It is good to be busy some of the time, yes. But it is also good to have free time, idle time. Many parents I know, feel that open, unstructured time is inherently dangerous for their children. That is, free time leads to drugs, promiscuity, and so on. As a result, many families seek to ensure that children are "kept busy" as much as possible. Clubs and programs can certainly be enriching and rewarding. All my life I have been active in organized athletics. But the pace today is ridiculous. I see families collapsing under stress. Families so busy they never see each other all together. Children resent their parents, while parents push their children to do more, faster, better. I see families who are not as happy as they should be. Families, like Chuang Tzu's character, who need to, more frequently, sit in the shade with their feet up. And I am convinced, should they do this, they may just find what they have been looking for.

Lin Yutang (1937) has a more modern spin on Chuang Tzu's story. He sees in modern living a high regard for "hustle and bustle." He also senses "a great deal of wistfulness,

of the divine desire to lie on a plot of grass under tall beautiful trees of an idle afternoon and just do nothing” (p.2). Yet in a world where everybody seems always busy doing something, we have become “ashamed of the word loafing” (p.2). Yutang sees this as a small tragedy. The human being should not deny his desire to loaf. What kind of world is it where we fear to acknowledge the pleasure we derive when we relax, we stretch, we dream? Yutang writes of the *everyperson*, “it is not when he is working in his office but when he is lying idly on the sand that his soul utters, ‘Life is beautiful’ ” (p.2). To be certain, Yutang would not consider lounging in front of a television or computer screen genuine, soul enriching “loafing.” As Csikszentmihalyi (1990) notes, “passive entertainment leads nowhere. Collectively, we are wasting each year the equivalent of millions of years of human consciousness” (pp.162-163). This kind of pseudo-leisure leaves us “more exhausted, more disheartened than we were before” (p.163). Yutang argues, the real models for ideal living are not our superstar athletes, our movie stars, our wealthy corporate executives; they are “the poet, the peasant and the vagabond” (p.11).

The point is clear, a life fraught with *busyness* leaves little room for poetry. Further, when we do take moments to “loaf,” we seldom engage in the pure form that Lin Yutang intends. Csikszentmihalyi (1990), a psychologist specializing in “optimal experience” (more often referred to as the experience of “flow”), writes, “One of the most ironic paradoxes of our time is this great availability of leisure that somehow fails to be translated into enjoyment” (p.83). He expands, “TV watching, the single most often pursued leisure activity in the United States today, leads to the flow condition very rarely” (p.83). Thus, we do not adhere truthfully to the principles of Yutang’s ideal loafer, the *scamp*. “The masses” may be taken in by the artificial forms of loafing encouraged by various media, but it is the *scamp* who will be “the last to be conquered” (p.12). The



scamp knows that life's poetry will manifest more often by following the way of Lao Tzu. Lao Tzu says, "Do without doing" and "Act without action" (Le Guin, 1997, p.81). Amazingly, "The Way never does anything, / and everything gets done" (Le Guin, p. 48). The notion is surely difficult for many of us to grasp. Nevertheless, Lao Tzu is adamant:

What's softest in the world  
rushes and runs  
over what's hardest in the world

The immaterial  
enters  
the impenetrable

So I know the good in not doing  
(Le Guin, 1997, p.58).

He sends a similar message in a piece Le Guin (1997, p.40) calls "Not Doing":

Those who think to win the world  
By doing something to it,  
I see them come to grief.  
For the world is a sacred object.  
Nothing is to be done to it.  
To do anything to it is to damage it.  
To seize it is to lose it.

Under heaven some things lead, some follow,  
some blow hot, some cold,  
some are strong, some weak,  
some are fulfilled, some fail.

So the wise soul keeps away  
from the extremes, excess, extravagance

Loafing is a lost but necessary art. This is not to suggest that hard work, focused effort and achievement have no place; of course they do. What it boils down to, really, is a question of balance. The world is a serious enough place most of the time. Loafing allows us to jump off the hamster wheel for a while to gain a moment of pleasure and perspective. Often what we find once we are off is that all our rushing about is not really

as important or productive as we think it is. Despite our fears, our universe does not crumble; on the contrary, things still seem to have a way of getting done.

## Silence

The classic Japanese text *The Tsurezuregusa of Kenko*, more often referred to as *Essays in Idleness* (Translated Keene, 1967, p. 143) is thought to have been written somewhere between 1330 and 1332 (Keene, p.xiii). In this text we read:

When people meet they are never silent a moment. There is always talk about something. If you listen to their conversations, most of what they say is meaningless chatter. Their gossip about society and their criticisms of other people cause much harm and little profit, either for themselves or others.

Kenko's observation from hundreds of years ago is not unlike the one made by Postman (1985). Postman, you recall, laments the quality of modern public discourse for its increasing triviality. Silence is something very few of us experience in an age where television has "become our culture" (p.79). Frankly, I suspect that silence, like loafing, has become something many of us fear. I talk to people who tell me the first thing they do when they arrive to an empty home or a quiet place, is turn on a radio or television. Our lives take place against a constant background of noise, so much so that we have, perhaps, internalized it, naturalized it. We are more at home with the buzz and drone of gizmos and gadgets than we are in the quiet. We are uncomfortable in quiet. We speak of "awkward" silence. Yet, this background noise, while comforting, serves to numb us from the richer, more substantive song of the universe, a song born in silence. For silence, is the pure background on which all sound is played.

I have been arguing all along that the music of the universe is buried in layers of noise and distraction. The Eastern traditions have something here for us as well. We have

already noted the Eastern mistrust for “words, concepts, logic, and knowledge” (Nakagawa, p.145). Instead, there is a reverence for silence. Silence too reveals the infinite. The Buddhist tradition provides the greatest example. Nakagawa says, “whenever the Buddha himself was asked by his disciples to answer philosophical and metaphysical questions or was challenged by his opponents to have philosophical discussions, he is said to have always kept silent without giving any definite answer” (p.145). The Buddha’s silence is not seen as a failure to respond, but as the most complete response. Any retort he could have offered in a language produced by abstract thinking would merely serve to lead people “astray in the labyrinth of speculation caused by questions” (Nakagawa, p.145). In this light, “silence transmits something more than can be spoken” (p.146). Lao Tzu reinforces the point: “The name you can say/ isn’t the real name/ Heaven and Earth/ begin in the unnamed” (Le Guin, 1997, p.3)

There is an emphasis in Zen traditions on *meditation*. Meditation is the art of bringing silence inward. It is, “the process of the complete denudation of the mind, the purgation of all sense of accumulation and achievement” (Krishnamurti, 2000, p.174). It is the experience of the silence which is “truth” (Krishnamurti, 1969, p.110). Typically, we in modern Western cultures imagine meditation as a matter of “technique.” We imagine that we ought to follow certain procedures, perhaps a way of sitting, or a way of breathing. We might focus on a certain image or sound. Krishnamurti (2000) tells us “That issue of ‘how’ to meditate is completely false” (p.173). He explains, “mediation is not the pursuit of any system” (p.173). Rather, “I am meditating the moment I begin to inquire what meditation is” (p.174). Meditation is not a science, but an art. It can be achieved in many ways, in many places. Its gift is silence, “not the silence of the ending of noise” (Krishnamurti, 1969, p.109), but something greater even than this. It is a

silence that is wide and expansive, that is limitless and clear. It is the silence that is eternal undercurrent of all that is.



## **INTERLUDE: THE THIRD**

A final arrangement of fragments.

**Beneath the various layers lurks a kind of magic, a nourishing spring  
that can satisfy even the timeless human appetite...**

It is through poetic apprehension that life acquires depth, richness, and beauty.



We are afraid to confront the mystery and magic of our own consciousness.

The struggle to fit experience into words is something like trying to squeeze into a pair of shoes that are two sizes too small. We might get them on, but the result is less than satisfactory.

The *well lived* life is a beautiful arrangement; it has a theme, a motif, a melody.

**If we seek to know our world by clutching it, by controlling it,  
by reducing it to measurable properties, we kill it.**

**It is here where the human spirit finds real nourishment and sustenance.**

The poets are busy stringing tiny silver threads through the randomness of the universe, creating beautiful webs of interconnectedness.

Language is not reduced to letters on a page or human utterances;  
it is the tracks of the gulls in the sand, the rain falling on leaves,  
the sea carving formations in stone, a dance of shadows in the wind,  
a pattern of clouds in an autumn sky.

Life, we discover, contains the real poetry.



## **The Poetry of Life: Four Meditations**

This next section is intended as the returning movement. It does not claim nor attempt completeness. Rather, it is a tentative venturing back from the depths we have plumbed. It is a step out of the silence, the nothingness, toward home. Home is right here, the same as it was, but also, with any luck, it is different - it is better.

## On Time

St. Augustine asked where time came from. He said it came out of the future which didn't exist yet, into the present that had no duration, and went into the past which had ceased to exist. I don't know that we can understand time any better than a child.

- Graham Greene (The End of the Affair)

Optimal experience...is turning all life into a unified flow experience...the separate parts of life will fit together - and each activity will "make sense" in the present, as well as in view of the past and of the future. In such a way it is possible to give meaning to one's entire life.

- Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi. (Flow: The Psychology of Optimal Experience)

Most of us know the feeling of time pressure, the constant ticking of the clock as we try to get through a single day. Our lives are measured in minutes. From the second the alarm clock goes, a busy and sometimes complex schedule begins. Many families I talk to describe mornings as one of the most stressful times. The effort and co-ordination required to set the day in motion is substantial. And breakfast has not even been digested yet. I have seen lurking behind refrigerator magnets appointment books and calendars as complex as the blue prints for the next space shuttle. Poetry rarely gets noticed in mad rushing about. And I mean capital P *Poetry*, not the words, but the *stuff of life*.

Notice that I did not say that poetry does not happen; I said it does not get noticed in the rushing about. Poetry, poetic moments, occur regularly. The issue is not that life is devoid of the poetic, but that we are not attuned to it. The nature of our relationship with time is such that we do not allow for that which is timeless. Have you ever noticed how there are occasions where you lose yourself in time, where the present moment swells,

and you are in it, totally unaware of the ticking seconds and minutes? Perhaps this happens when you are engrossed in an activity you enjoy, or following the twists of a train of thought. This sense of *timelessness* is key. The expression "time stood still" is often used by people when they attempt to describe the profound moments of their lives. The poetic is best realised when we can experience time in this way, when we can transcend the seconds ticking on the wall, and be "in the moment." The challenge, then, becomes one of adjusting our relationship with time so that we might experience more than its passing, but its penetrability. If we get inside a second, we find forever. A baby's smile lasts an instant, but stays with us. This is true of many things: the call of a loon, a certain sunset, the taste of almond. We must not subscribe so whole-heartedly to the idea that time moves in straight lines. Sometimes it spins and whirls and dips. Sometimes the future replays the past. Sometimes the past disrupts the present.

The notion that we are immersed in time as though it were a river washing over and around us is a pleasant one, but only half true. As we are in time, time is also in us. It is inside our bodies. You can hear it with every beat of the heart, that warm, muscular engine that produces our life rhythm. The biological clock ticks, ticks, ticks...a reminder not only of life, but of death as well, of *finitude*, of the steady march toward an end. The heart will stop beating one day. This is a certainty. It is also a mystery; it could happen tomorrow or decades from now. One never knows. And when it happens, the river of time will continue to flow, without hesitation, beyond and beyond.

It might help to conceive of the present as the meeting place of the past and the future. The idea is not a difficult one to imagine. Yet, when we extend the logic, we find the present must necessarily be eternal, for it is constantly being fed by two unending streams. This is what we must recover if we are to apprehend the world poetically. As

the novelist Gabriel Garcia Marquez notes, "time also stumbled and had accidents and could therefore splinter and leave an eternalized fragment in a room." Time does not simply happen around us, it is not the product of clocks and chronometers; it is a naturally occurring rhythm within our bodies and without. The poetry of life is apparent when we attune our rhythms to those of the world in which we belong. This is harmony in its truest sense.

I am enough of a realist to know that we cannot all quit work and ignore the realities of time commitments and constraints. There are deadlines. There are obligations. I am not suggesting we ignore these. I am suggesting we can find, even in very short spans, timeless and profound moments. They exist for us, everyday. And life can become more colourful, more meaningful as a result. I am also suggesting that to some degree we have a choice. We can conceive of a time that is not of the clock. I am the first to admit that abstract knowledge is not enough, but awareness is surely a great catalyst for change. I said there was no sure-fire method for hearing the music of the universe, and I hold steadfast to that. However, I also know that where awareness meets willingness, the incredible can happen. This is not doctrine; this is a call to blaze your own trail.

## On Place

The poetry of place is some of the most pronounced we encounter.<sup>4</sup> Every place has its rhythms, its own idiosyncratic qualities. This is true on both a macro and a micro scale. Latin America has a rhythm very unlike that of Canada or the United States; Eastern Europe has a feel that is distinct from the one we get in Western Europe, and so on. Similarly, Vancouver's Kitsilano region has a flavour that is clearly distinct from the area commonly referred to as "the Drive." Sometimes a certain room or a city block or a hillside is particularly calming or invigorating or inspiring. The key is to notice the details of the places you are. Pay attention to the smells, the colours, the sounds. Notice the people, their moods, their habits, their styles. Or notice their absence. Watch. Listen. Feel.

You will notice that there are places you encounter where you are immediately at ease, relaxed, where your spirit seems to soar. You will notice places where your heart drops and your breath quickens. You will notice that there are places meaningful to you for reasons other people may never understand. The shady spot under the maple tree where your grandmother once laid a picnic. The room where your brother accidentally broke your collarbone. The corner table by the window at an old favorite restaurant. A secret place under a bridge. A wooded grove. A stretch of beach. The forest. The park.

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<sup>4</sup> It is, in fact, not really distinct from the poetry of time, in that to be anywhere is to be somewhere in time: on the beach at noon, at the restaurant in the evening, or on the lake at dawn.

The places we have been, the places we know, the places to which we shall go, comprise the setting in which the stories of our lives unfold. Have you noticed the way that so many good novels and short stories have settings that seem inextricably woven into the fabric of the plot. In the *Old Man and the Sea*, the sea is not merely a back drop for Santiago's adventure, it is the adventure. The sea is the setting, yes, but it is also a character. It is the theme. It is as much a part of the story as Santiago is. Hemingway knows that place matters. He calls his story *The Old Man and the Sea* for a reason. Setting is not an interchangeable piece. Life does not simply happen in places, places also happen in life. The places we encounter as we live and breathe, become part of our stories.

He always thought of the sea as *la mar* which is what people call her in Spanish when they love her (Hemingway, 1952, p.29).

Everything about him was old except his eyes and they were the same colour as the sea and were cheerful and undefeated (Hemingway, 1952, p.10).

He only dreamed of places now and of the lions on the beach (Hemingway, 1952, p. 25).

Stories are sometimes sad. Sadness is part of life. There will no doubt also be places that make us sad. Places that bring us tears. Heart break, death, disease, struggle, violence - our lives will know these. Each one will happen some *place*, though it may be a place we would rather forget. Yet, these places matter. To deny them, is to deny the story completeness. I remember well a visit to Dachau, where the ovens from the *krematorium* and the gas chambers remain. Why is this place still here? Why do people continue to visit this infamous site when it evokes such unpleasantness, such inhumanity? Dachau remains, as it is, because on some level we know that despite the ugliness, it is important. Dachau shows us that sometimes it is place that tells a story, and not the other way around. In this case, the place is not forgotten, because the story it tells must be remembered.

The awareness of place as a key contributor to our life's story, then, invites a shift in our common perception. Our homes, our places of work, our cities and streets take on a fresh importance. There is a profound connection, even a Zen like *interpenetration*, that occurs between people and the places we go. They become us, even when we move on. Canadian writer Guy Vanderhaeghe (1982, p.69) writes, "the pastures we flee, no matter how brown and blighted, these travel with us; they can't be escaped." The realization of the poetic interconnection between people and place has awesome potential. I am suggesting fewer places filled with garbage, fewer unappealing strip malls and parking lots. I am suggesting more flowers, more green spaces, more trees, more parks, makes better poetry. I am suggesting that places can make people happy, and that people can make happy places, and that the harnessing of this power could improve the quality of many lives.

## On Nature

I am fortunate to have a summer place, a small cabin nestled in forest of pines, situated on the shore of a large lake. Every summer my family and I take respite here, and marvel at nature's domain. Days are filled with birds and butterflies and osprey. Sometimes we catch sight of a bear, or see deer wander the beach. This past summer a turtle swam near us, near enough that it is perhaps more appropriate to say swam with us. It is the first time we've seen one in all our years at the cabin. A red headed woodpecker stops by occasionally. Hummingbirds are regulars. A family of quail tarries awhile. There are baby ducklings, seagulls, minnows and more.

The nights are filled with stars and waves and wind. Often, we can see the moon glistening on the lake. It makes a silvery streak across the water like a bridge from fairytale. It is another world to us. Sitting at the end of the dock at night, we are usually silent, listening, feeling the universe around us, locked in a synaesthetic ecstasy. Stars. Waves. Wind. They seem to bleed into each other. The lapping of the water below us as it hits the wooden rock filled cribs seems the soundtrack to the sky. The wind is warm, and I notice nuances I never imagined: the way wind sounds differently in certain trees, depending on the type of branches and leaves. The way it can start quietly in the distance, a faint rustling that journeys forth with growing volume and strength. The way it can paint and erase patterns on the water. The way it can dance and play like a child, or howl and growl like a bitter old man or a scorned woman.



One of our favorite times is the twilight, that *in between time* when day slowly becomes night, when the sky grows purple and the clouds become pink. It is a time of transition, which is really all time, a *hello* and a *goodbye*. The horizon is a painting, a work in progress, that as it nears completion, is seemingly erased, eclipsed by shadow and darkness. A canvas is made black so that the day might paint itself over again tomorrow. Night falls beautifully here, and day rises the same.

I know we do not all have cabins on the lake. I mention the cabin because it is here where I experience nature most. We can, most of us, with a little effort, immerse ourselves for a time in nature's bounty without buying or renting a cabin. Take your children out to look at the stars. Dream and wonder at the immensity of it all. Find a plot of grass and gaze up at the clouds. Close your eyes on a warm afternoon and let the wind tussle your hair. Spend ten minutes at lunch outside for a change. Sit under the shade of a tree and do nothing, even if only for a minute. Listen to the birds. Walk in the rain. Walk in the forest. Poetry awaits.

## On Friends and Family

Remember if you will what MacIntyre says about our life stories: “we are never more (and sometimes less) than the co-authors of our own narratives” (213). It follows, that the people with whom we regularly associate, friends and family being chief among them, influence the course of our lives significantly. Ken Kesey once said, “always stay in your own movie.” The trouble is, we are always engaged in any number of other people’s movies. I may fancy myself the lead figure in my own drama, but this does not mean I am not also playing minor and/or major part in others. MacIntyre writes. “In my drama perhaps I am Hamlet or Iago or at least the swineherd who may yet become a prince, but to you I am only A Gentleman or at best Second Murderer, while you are my Polonius or my Gravedigger” (p.213). Our lives, we find, are necessarily entangled with those of others.

The notion of our being involved in many dramas is important. We have already discussed the rampant individualism and self-obsession of modern society. MacIntyre’s words serve as an invitation for us to see horizons too often shrouded in the mists of our own self-importance. While we may see ourselves as great (or not so great) leading actors, the truth is much of our life is spent in supporting roles. Our neighbours, co-workers, friends, spouses, children usually see us within the context of their own stories. In this light, our issues are not the primary concerns. We are not the centre of the universe. Rather, everybody is equally a centre of the universe. Even physics is sounding very Zen in this regard. Stephen Hawking writes, “every point can be regarded

as the centre, because every point has an infinite number of stars on each side of it” (p.5, 1988).

To sound cliché, I am suggesting that we would do better with our sense of *self identity* if we focused more on others. In order to find real happiness, we ought to seek to make others happy. We must step out of our starring roles more often, and ask ourselves how to be better in our many supporting positions. How am I as a brother? As a friend? A son? A parent? Ironically, it is in responding to these questions that our stars shine brightest. What can I contribute to better the life story of those around me? Stories are not really improved by diamond rings and fancy cars, though these items are nice to have. Often the smallest gesture is more than enough. A kind word. A smile. A handshake. A pat on the back. A please and a thank you. These are the things that really count.

The scope of our influence is greater than we can imagine. I recall one simple gesture that has enriched my life more than words can really express. Years ago, I was perhaps fifteen, my mom promised my grandfather that I would spend a summer weekend trimming his large laurel hedge. I was devastated, and fought the idea fiercely, but to no avail. That weekend became my first experience with hedge trimming. I remember well the vibration of the electric clippers and the aching in my forearms. I recall the exhausted trigger finger and the hundreds tiny nicks and scrapes from all the branches. The sour taste of green.

My grandfather was not known for his warm professions of love and appreciation. He did not typically embrace his grandchildren, or toss them up into the air and play silly games. I was not entirely sure that he was not cold and stern. On this day, though,

with eyesight failing, he would wander out periodically to where I was working, to offer me candies, or a cold drink. He was really telling me that he appreciated what I was doing. I think, when I looked into his eyes, that he was even telling me that he loved me. In any event, when my task was finally completed, my grandfather mentioned that there was something he had been meaning to give me. At the time, I had no idea that the gift would be something that I would always cherish.

He gave me his "swaggerstick." A swaggerstick is a short cane apparently carried by military officers. In World War Two my grandfather was with a regiment known as "The Queen's Own Rifles." The insignia of this regiment is emblazoned on a shiny silver handle on the top of the cane. The moment he passed me this cane was one of the most profound moments of my life. In that instant, and with a simple gesture, my grandfather had passed more than a *stick*; it was a baton, and with that passing, he had joined the past to the future, had bridged generations, and had given me a flame to carry forth.

In 1994 my grandfather's heart stopped beating; at eighty-four his time had run out. It is interesting to note that my grandfather was a teacher, an administrator, and a father of girls. Now, I find myself an administrator, a former teacher, and a father of girls. The fire still burns. One day, I will pass on the stick, and the story that goes with it. I know first hand that a simple gesture can ripple like through time, and be a source of strength again and again. My only hope is that the hand that receives it next will remember, as mine does, the first time it grasped the shiny silver handle, and know that it is laden with fire and magic and memory.

The notion that life is a narrative is paramount. Life is a series of events, a story. A good story, however, like a good life, must do more than string together events. Waking up and going to work and coming home to prepare dinner day after day, year after year, is not a particularly powerful or moving narrative. A life filled with trips to the mall, with video games, with longing for more stuff, is equally deficient. We must do things and say things that are memorable, that have meaning. It is not enough to provide *things*. Your children deserve a childhood that is rich in substance. Everyday presents an opportunity to make a life long memory, good or bad. Stop! Take the time to teach them to look at ladybugs, to jump in puddles, to chase rainbows, to hear the music. They will know soon enough about heartache about struggle, about deceit and disease. During these times they will have more to draw from than material goods; they will have a well of richness and strength. A story, too, needs its poetry. The events that will comprise the sequence of our lives must be charged with vigour and vitality, lest they become nothing but the hollow moments of a life not well lived.

We must not let the busy pace of our lives trick us into thinking that the little details do not matter. Phone mom more often, compliment your spouse or partner, and laugh with your children. Thank people. Call up an old friend. Take a trip down memory lane with someone you love. Treat a co-worker for coffee. Throw a dinner party on the condition that every guest must tell a favorite family story. Write a letter to someone you admire and explain to her the reasons why. You are, after all, a co-author of many stories, of many lives. It is time to get serious about your work.

## NOT A CONCLUSION

It seems a simple truth that many of us are caught in the framework of a modern life that encourages a shallow, hectic, mechanized lifestyle. The world of things (or the *ten thousand things*) has seduced us, consumed us, and numbed us. We are like hyperactive somnambulists, rushing about madly, but for all intents and purposes, asleep the whole time. One of the aims of this paper is to draw attention to this plight, to articulate in such a way that people will recognize the symptoms of their own condition, as well as the *hows* and *whys* (hence, the historical and philosophical explanations). The larger purpose, of course, is to suggest the possibility of a richer, more meaningful life. Beneath the surface of things, lurks an unending stream of wonder and beauty. Life is filled with poetry, but many of us must re-learn how to recognize it, how to be receptive to it. Awareness is the first step. Willingness is the second. The rest, I am afraid, is up to you. I know I called this work: *How to Hear the Music of the Universe*. I was really having some fun at your expense, appealing simultaneously to your romantic sensibility (which loved the notion of the music of the universe) and to your logical, linear sensibility (which would love a practical step by step manual). The truth is, there is no formula, no fool-proof recipe. That, in fact, *is* the whole point. Too many of us live with the illusion that rational, step by step instructions will provide all the answers. *Ten Days to a Better \_\_\_\_\_, Twelve steps to Improved \_\_\_\_\_, or Eight secrets for \_\_\_\_\_!* In the end, these works do nothing but perpetuate the myth that the answer lies in some rationalistic scheme. It doesn't. If you really want to hear the music of the universe, you need to do one thing. *Listen!* Really listen – to the wind, to your breath, to laughter, to tears, to the sound of someone's heart beating. Listen to the waves, a kiss, a butterfly. Listen to tiny

feet. And when you listen, listen not with your ears only, but with your eyes, your tongue, your nose, and your skin. Listen with your heart. Listen until the you and me disappears, until the lines all fade, until there is nothing but a vast, singing whole. This is your invitation.

In keeping with the spirit of the eternal rise and return, I shall not presume to offer a conclusion to this work. Beginnings and endings are no more than arbitrary points on imaginary lines anyway. Most of what we take to be carved in stone amounts to markings in the sand. What seems fixed and permanent, is fluid and ephemeral (it used to be a fact that the earth was flat, that the sun revolved around the earth). In any case, I am resisting a conclusion because that presumes this work concludes. It does not. May I suggest instead that it empties itself into the larger form(lessness) of the cosmos. If I have been successful at all, there will be parts of this work that will resonate, that will stay with my readers. This is not intended as hyperbole or Romanticism. When we read something we find worthwhile, does it not become part of us? The stories we cannot forget. The lines that linger. The expressions that stir us. The ideas that remain, like a slow burn, alight within us. This is the way I desire to leave off: scattering seeds, knowing, hoping, that some will take root and flourish. A garden that never ends.

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