

THE PHYSICALITY OF SPIRITUALITY: ART AS THE UNIVERSAL RELIGION

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THESIS ABSTRACT

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Religion, as an institutional and systematic set of beliefs, has been a means of division and differentiation for centuries, despite each religion's ability to unify its individual believers through shared practices and ideologies. This thesis argues that there is in fact a universal religion, one discovered in the artifacts of man: his artistic creations. Presenting various works of literature as such artifacts, this paper reveals the universal and transcendent existence of man: the physicality of spirituality. Physicality is discussed as a triad: man experiences his earthly life in a physical body, captures the essence of that experience, and expresses said essence through various art forms. This triad of physicality, of existence, is the only means of truly knowing or manifesting the soul, the spirit. Expressing the physicality of his spirituality, man takes part in a universal religion that is art; his universal language is poetry.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Introduction.....	1
The Experience of Ordinary Life.....	4
The Essence of Sensation.....	13
The Expression of Both	21
Art as the Universal Religion	27
Poetry as the Universal Language.....	33
Conclusion	40
Works Cited	41

Introduction

Religion is large - as a concept, as a power, as a presence, as a part of humanity. Being large, it is difficult to handle and nearly impossible to define, for it contains multitudes, varying and differing perspectives, interpretations, and purposes constructed by each individual believer. Often, to speak of religion is to fall into the pit of specificity, where doctrine, text, and practice war with one another, mimic one another, doubt one another. Yet many attempt to talk of a different religion -- not the “well-meaning biological device calculated to build barriers of ethical nature round human society in order to protect the social fabric against the otherwise unrestrainable instincts of the ego” (Iqbal 191) — but the religion of shared experience, of mere existence, of the soul.

Sounding a language that fails its listener as much as its speaker, communicators of the latter religious discourse sometimes struggle to find a universal lexicon, one that will simultaneously abandon and adopt the essence of each particular faith. However, close analysis of the dialogue reveals such a vocabulary, a language that explains that which may in fact be universal: the physicality of spirituality. Physicality, here, can be further defined by the experience of ordinary life, the essence of sensation, and the expression of both; together, the triad forms one’s spirituality, “that aspect of human functioning, experience, and existence which concerns the transcendent” (MacDonald 4). As is seen in several works of world literature, it is through experience that man captures the essence of a thing and through art that man expresses said essence. Art, then, is the universal religion of the soul; men are not Christians, Buddhists and Muslims, but artists — constant creators of meaning, communicating through a universal language that is poetry.

Religion in a traditional sense refers more to beliefs and customs than to experience and earthly essence, and because of this, physicality becomes problematic. Consider how religion manifests itself in an individual's life. First and foremost, it is taught, handed down from one generation to the next via sacred texts, practices, rituals, and holidays. It is culturally ingrained, so much so that it becomes part of one's psychological and personal development without even a conscious awareness of its presence. Consequently, it also becomes part of one's identity and as such creates an immediate difference, a divide even, between its host and its non-hosts, those of other religions with other identities. The realization of such distinguishing and discriminating factors comes gradually as one develops and learns about the world, though at a distance and in fragmented pieces — through history books, media, television, and the like. For many, religions other than their own remain foreign systems of belief — studied, but not experienced. Often, this leads to misconception, misinterpretation, and varying degrees of manipulation. Most individuals are raised and taught to know one religion well, and therefore one culture or one God well, while knowing little if anything of others, yet, the very foundations and conventions of religion appear to be universal. The major religions of the world — Christianity, Judaism, Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism, among others — share similar practices. Masses of people join together in public venues to praise some form of a god or gods and goddesses. Individuals pray in the comfort of their own homes, often reciting scripted words of a prescribed faith. They refer to texts and creeds, holding in their hands a Bible, a Torah, a Koran — one sacred text or another that may reveal life's purpose, man's creation, God's truth. Quite paradoxically, the same physical aspects and experiences that seemingly unify these religions are the same physical

aspects and experiences that separate them — because after all, they are not exactly the same, not identical, and neither are their believers and followers. Religion in a traditional sense uses even the physical aspects of one's being to create division: head garments, symbols, ethnic features, geographical associations. And herein lies the problem: the physicality of religion discriminates while the physicality of spirituality unites, yet mankind still relies upon the former. It is therefore necessary for mankind to rely upon something different to break down, or at least transcend, the aforementioned barriers — experience.

The Experience of Ordinary Life

Pakistani writer, philosopher, and politician Sir Mohammad Iqbal describes experience in a chapter from his book, *The Reconstruction of Religious Thought in Islam* (1930), titled “Is Religion Possible?” The religion Iqbal speaks of is what he describes as ‘Discovery,’ a “higher religion” that is “essentially experience,” specifically the experience of “search[ing] for a larger life” (182). The “religious experience” itself, however, “is incommunicable,” as the language of man tends to fail man (Iqbal 183). He knows not how to describe that which stirs within, lacks the words to appropriately name that which he believes, and yearns for a lexicon that can express the entirety of his experience - the quest, the knowledge, the discovery, the self. It is because of this incommunicability that so many rely on limiting religious texts, denominations, and their man-made institutions to supply the vocabulary through which they can attempt to explain a religious experience, especially the universality of shared experience. To overcome this conflict, one must reach the “climax of religious life” via the discovery of “the ego as an individual deeper than his conceptually describable habitual self-hood.” In essence, one must reach a state of “consciousness” that “open[s] up possibilities of life-giving and knowledge-yielding experience” (Iqbal 184-185). Iqbal considered this state of consciousness to be an ideal but not necessarily a reality for the modern man, then of the early 20th century, whom he saw as existing in turmoil:

Thus wholly overshadowed by the results of his intellectual activity, the modern man has ceased to live soulfully, i.e. from within. In the domain of thought he is living in open conflict with himself; in the domain of economic and political life he is living in open conflict with others. He finds himself unable to control his ruthless egoism and his infinite gold-hunger which is gradually killing all higher striving in him and bringing him nothing but life-weariness. Absorbed in the

‘fact,’ that is to say, the optically present source of sensation, he is entirely cut off from the unplumbed depths of his own being. (187-188)

Such a critique of the modern man denies the powerful, pivotal role his senses play in shaping his experience. Physical engagement with one’s world via the senses is, in fact, a means of spiritual development and discovery. As man perceives his environment and becomes consciously aware of its “life-giving and knowledge-yielding” properties, he partakes in a religious experience that leaves him enlightened and awakened (Iqbal 185). The experience need not be otherworldly or extraordinary; it may be as earthly and terrestrial as observing a drop of dew that seems to hold the whole world in its tiny form. Perhaps it is in seeing such simplicity that man comes to conceive of the unseen and know the “depths of his own being” (Iqbal 188).

In fact, manifest in various works of art spanning numerous decades and geographical locations is man’s natural inclination to see the unseen in the seen, the natural world, and perhaps there were no greater seers of this world than the Romantics and Transcendentalists. Writing nearly 100 years prior to Iqbal’s publication, Transcendentalist Ralph Waldo Emerson exchanged traditional religious beliefs and practices for a “greater faith in individual moral sentiment and intuition.” He questioned Christianity, Unitarianism — of which he was a pastor — and even Christ’s divinity as a means to discover truths for himself. Mistrusting and ultimately denouncing any system of beliefs that came from institutions of government, religion, and education, Emerson believed instead in man’s individual rights, his ability to establish a self-culture, and his mind or soul as an entity of divinity (Baym and Levine 505 - 507). Essential to man’s discovery of his self-culture and what Iqbal would refer to as “his own being” is his

relationship with nature, which was the central source of inspiration for Emerson's first book of the same name, *Nature* (1836). Emerson encouraged man to abandon religious experience through buildings and Biblical texts, to instead "enjoy an original relation to the universe," one that would yield a "poetry and philosophy of insight [rather than] tradition, and a religion by revelation" rather than "history" (508). Ultimately, what Emerson and the Transcendentalists believed in was a religion of experience, human and bodily experience, individually interpreted and understood experience.

Man's experience, his earthly existence, is the only evidence he needs of a supreme being; he must look to the external world for proof of God and his own soul, as Emerson calls him to do in *Nature*. The natural world, like man, is the creation of a godly force, and engaging with it is engaging with that force. To do so, man must "go into solitude" and "retire as much from his chamber as from society," abandoning the prescribed teachings of religion, government, and school. "Let him look at the stars" and marvel at their majestic presence, though "always present" (509). Let him discover in that moment that he is never truly alone, for nature is around him, in abundance, and where there is nature, there is God. The formation of this relationship, however, "does not reside in nature, but in man, or in the harmony of both" (Emerson 511). Man must be willing to see the spirituality of his surroundings in order to see the spirituality of his self. "The lover of nature is he whose inward and outward senses are still truly adjusted to each other," allowing man to discover his inward spirit via his outward experiences (Emerson 510). Ironically, it is through this physical interaction with the natural world that man strips himself of his physicality, becoming instead what Emerson refers to as a "transparent eye-ball," through which the "currents of the Universal Being circulate,"

through which man “see[s] all.” The eye-ball forms a trinity of sorts, whereby man, God, and nature become one. Shedding his bodily form, the same form that somewhat if not entirely predetermines his existence and experiences within society, man humbles himself — “all mean egotism vanishes.” According to Emerson, man only reaches this transcendence “in the woods,” where he is removed from civilization, “streets,” and “villages.” Notice he does not call man to find God or feel his own soul in churches, synagogues, and mosques; he calls him to find and feel in his natural environment, made by God, not men. “In the woods” refers not only to a physical location but to a state of mind, one which fosters spiritual discovery and development without the help of “religious teachers [who] dispute and hate each other,” separated by their differences. “In the woods, we return to reason and faith,” the understanding that mankind is “part or particle of God” (Emerson 511). And such an understanding is made possible through experience alone, not through the “biographies, histories, and criticism” of “foregoing generations” (Emerson 508).

The experience Emerson philosophizes and theorizes is precisely what Walt Whitman idealizes and romanticizes in *Song of Myself* (1855). His relationship with the natural world as he describes it is both physically erotic and spiritually pure, and it is this relationship which binds him to fellow man. Doing what Emerson suggested all men do, Whitman ventured into the woods, not only to find himself and his Maker, but to find what was universally true of “all men in all ages and lands” (354). What is universally true is experienced physically via the five senses. Like the Transcendentalists and Romantics, Whitman urges man to hold “creeds and school in abeyance,” to seek the meaning and purpose of life through empirical evidence — his own experiences (10).

Through imagery, Whitman recreates the experience of his body being in contact with nature, describing it as a harmony between the two. “Undisguised and naked,” the speaker of Whitman’s poem is “mad for [nature] to be in contact with [him]”:

The smoke of my own breath,
 Echoes, ripples, buzz’d whispers, love-root, silk-thread, crotch and
 vine,
 My respiration and inspiration, the beating of my heart, the passing of
 blood and air through my lungs,
 The sniff of green leaves and dry leaves, and of the shore and dark-color’d
 sea-rocks, and of hay in the barn,
 The sound of the belch’d words of my voice loos’d to the eddies of the
 wind,
 A few light kisses, a few embraces, a reaching around of arms ... (21-26)

The rhythms of his body are in harmony with the rhythms of nature; man’s raw, natural form is in sync with the natural world. The two become one, awakening his senses and providing him with an experience that can neither be taken “at second or third hand,” nor seen “through the eyes of the dead,” nor eaten from the “spectres of books” (Whitman 34-35). Whitman describes not a logical comprehension of a particular faith, but a reality of his earthly existence. Through the physicality of spirituality, “the unseen is proved by the seen” (53). In its raw and uncivilized naked form, his barbaric and animalistic body feels the existence of its soul: “I am the poet of the Body and I am the poet of the Soul” (Whitman 422). Part of him is finite; the other infinite, yet both essential, both equal in value. The speaker of Whitman’s poem, Whitman himself, and all of mankind are capable of embodying such dichotomies, paradoxes, opposites, for man is “large”; man “contain[s] multitudes” (1325). Man, in fact, must contain a multitude of experiences in

order to discover the meaning of life. Though Whitman calls upon the “Listener up there,” the entity who creates and gives purpose to man’s existence, he ultimately concludes that he alone is responsible for the discovery of the soul, God, and meaning, and that discovery is made possible via the physicality of spirituality (1320).

The beauty of experience is that the knowledge gained from it is uniquely and intimately one’s own, a possession of mind and soul. The Romantics of the 19th century embraced experience much in the same way Emerson and Whitman did; many of them abandoned, rejected and defied “orthodoxy,” institutional religion,” and “codified morality” in order to find personal truths, however different from those of their ancestors and contemporaries. In “Mont Blanc,” for instance, Percy Bysshe Shelley “express[es] his view of the narrow limits of what human beings can know with certainty and exemplif[ies] his refusal to let his hopes harden into a philosophical or religious creed” (Abrams and Greenblatt 698-700). While the latter point is reminiscent of Whitman, the former is not. Whitman considered men boundless, limitless; Shelley did not. Regardless, both drew their concluding truths from their surroundings and particularly nature. In search of meaning, as most men are, Shelly looked before him and within him, but not to God. In this particular work, he looked to the majestic mountain that is Mont Blanc. Unlike Whitman who apostrophizes the “Listener up there” or like Emerson who speaks of a “Universal Being,” Shelly addresses the mountain itself. The experience is solely between him and the natural world, “The everlasting universe of things / [that] Flows through the mind” (Shelley 1-2). The mystery that is man echoes from the “mysterious tongue” of the mountain “who hast a voice ... to repeal / Large codes of fraud and woe; not understood / By all, but which the wise, and great, and good /

Interpret, or make felt, or deeply feel” (Shelley 76, 80-83). Man — and all of his creativity, imagination, depth — is mirrored in the majestic, though untouched and distant. The connection, therefore, is physical via sight and spiritual via relation, as he ponders the relationship between the natural world and “human thought” (Shelley 5). The imagery and diction of the poem are reminiscent of Whitman and Emerson, despite being authored by the atheist Shelley. His atheism is in fact the most interesting, though unstated, detail of the captured moment. His religious beliefs, or lack thereof, are what contribute to the profundity of the poem, which reveals man’s conception of a soul even when a god is absent. Shelley’s speaker uses the same language that believers use to describe supreme beings and eternal parts of themselves. He explicitly refers to man’s “soul” and “spirit” (50, 57). He seems to believe that there is something immortal to existence, an “everlasting universe” that “seems eternal” (Shelley 1, 75). He writes of “a remoter world” (Shelley 49), ponders the existence of an “unknown omnipotence” (Shelley 53), and refers more than once to some other realm beyond the earthly world he inhabits: “the infinite sky,” “the overhanging heaven,” “the infinite dome / Of heaven” (Shelley 60, 65, 140-141). His lexicon is not unlike that of the faithful, forcing one to consider the universality of experience, the physicality of spirituality. God is not required; only a conscious existence is, for human beings are capable of simultaneously abandoning prescribed religions and their historical gods while embracing “spiritual union[s] beyond earthly limits” (Abrams and Greenblatt 699).

Spiritual unions are perhaps the most transcendent of human experiences and often form through the most basic of physical interactions. It is not always the grandeur of nature but “perfectly natural, ... normal experiences” (Iqbal 189) that yield spiritual

awakenings, albeit without the associations of religious sects; such experiences of “the ordinary, the man-made, the daily, and the concrete” form the stanzas of Nazim Hikmet’s poem, “Regarding Art” (Damrosch et al 348). “The greatest poet of modern Turkey,” Hikmet finds it unnecessary to venture beyond his earthly existence, even beyond the confines of his immediate environment, to discover that which is meaningful, purposeful, and spiritual. The poem’s speaker “tell[s] the ah’s / of [his] heart one by one” via descriptions of the physicality of his world (1-2). Notice the use of the word “ah’s” here as well as the word “heart.” The diction speaks of an experience - the experience of being moved, which the author later calls love. The pumping, bleeding heart is not what Hikmet is referring to, though, as the heart does not literally have “ah’s.” Here, the heart is synonymous with the spirit or soul, the same entities that people use to explain the depths of emotion and connectivity — the part of man that is bound to something or someone else. Though Hikmet describes a physical, concrete world, he essentially recreates man’s metaphysical experiences of being and knowing, for he not only admires that world objectively, but relates to it, feels it, knows it. As the speaker says, his world “speaks to [him]” (Hikmet 16). It is not traditional religious tangibles that move him, “like the blood-red beads / of a ruby rosary strung / on strands of golden hair,” but the “steel,” “copper, iron, wood, bone, and catgut” of his existence (Hikmet 3-5, 9 and 18). Though he notices nature’s wonders - the “dumb fly” caught “by the masterly spider webs” - he prefers to “look up / to” the “reinforced-concrete” creations of his “blue-shirted builders” (Hikmet 29-31). Searching elsewhere for spiritual fulfillment is unnecessary, as the religious experience is discovered in the speaker’s immediate, immanent world and existence. This is particularly true of the final stanza, which bears

the most moving of lines as the speaker professes his “love” for his “wife” and his “own children” (Hikmet 47, 51). By others’ standards, Hikmet may not possess a “poetic soul,” one that contemplates a mystical nature or the unknown and otherworldly, but he speaks of something that is all at once real, transcendent, and universal: love. The experience of loving other human beings, as well as one’s mere existence, is perhaps the most religious experience and greatest depth of consciousness man can describe — universally, that is.

The Essence of Sensation

To love or feel connected to that which is part of one's experience is to know the essence of a thing, and essence is captured via the sensations of man - the readers, perceivers, and interpreters of environment. Iqbal posits that "what we call the external world" may only be "an intellectual construction." If this is true, then "God is a percept; the world is a concept" (Iqbal 183). Man describes his experiences with a language that is accessible to him, and much of his language speaks of the sensations. Japanese writer and theorist, Yokomitsu Riichi, author of "Sensation and New Sensation," defines sensation as "an intuitive explosion of subjectivity that rips off the external aspects of nature to give direct access to the thing in itself" (37). Yokomitsu, along with a group of writers known as the "New Sensation School," "called for a literature that reveals the essence of things in a sudden shock of intuition - not by merely presenting their surface appearance nor individuals' subjective perceptions of them" (Damrosch et al 36). As man attempts to "apprehend the various existences of things in themselves," he not only observes and makes meaning of his world, but he observes and makes meaning of himself; doing so, the external — whether body or nature or object — "bursts into life" (Yokomitsu 37). This process essentially describes the "life-giving" religious experience that Iqbal urges man to embrace, yet Yokomitsu, unlike Iqbal, sees sensation as a way to achieve such an experience. Still, both philosophers see experience as a means of pondering existence, reaching deeper consciousness, and, ultimately, capturing the essence of any given thing. Capturing the essence of something is, by nature, transcendent, as one attempts to reach beyond the confines of externality and physicality

and into the depths of the thing itself; it is also, by nature, spiritual, as one is inadvertently moved within by the sensations of what he perceives without.

Such transcendence and spirituality are manifest in Farough Faroghzaad poem, “A Poem for You: To My Son Kamyar, in Hope of the Future,” which answers Yokomitsu’s call “for a literature that reveals the essence of things.” Her poem not only reveals the essence of “things” but of self, herself. Faroghzaad writes of the world she perceives through the use of imagery, thereby recreating the experiences of her existence. The recreation allows for a shared experience between Faroghzaad and her audience, which is in itself transcendent since her words reach beyond the limitations of the page and into the mind, heart, soul of the reader. Descriptions of the “parching summer’s sunset” and the “wild call of [an] outcry” that “echo[es] in the skies” of her son’s youth engage the reader’s senses, called upon to envision, to hear, to feel her world (Faroghzaad 2, 7-8). Her world is a “dark,” oppressive one where “no stars [are] shining” and “angels ... are weeping,” (Faroghzaad 31, 25-26) where “Demons ... squat in all the crossroads” and “anger burns in its whirling room” (Faroghzaad 29-30, 40). Notice, she does not mention the specifics of her physical world: she does not name Iran, nor damn its leaders, nor repeat the “futile slurs” spewed at women (Faroghzaad 17). Instead, she expresses the essence of things by appealing to the senses, conjuring the deepest of emotions, and painting a reality that could be anywhere, at any time. Through the physicality of her world, she discovers the essence of herself and presents the same to a candid audience using a universal language. Writing of her “pain,” “weak[ness],” and “hope,” she humanizes herself, magnifying the essential part of her identity: her gender (Faroghzaad 14-16). Paradoxically, the “misery that ‘woman’ is [her] name” is the gift that makes her

a mother (Faroghzaad 20). The physicality of her existence is what allows for spiritual transcendence. Though her body will perish, she will remain her son's mother; her words will make permanent her essence, as she tells her child:

That day will come when your longing eyes
will read this song of my pain over and over
You will look for me here in my words
and say to yourself, *She* was my mother. (Faroghzaad 49-52)

Delving deep into her consciousness, she discovers the essence of her being, a trinity of sorts — woman, mother, and poet. As Iqbal and Yokomitsu wanted, Faroghzaad discovered herself as an “individual deeper than [her] conceptually describable habitual self-hood” and captured that discovery in a “literature that reveals the essence of things.”

Essence may refer to “being, [or] existence, viewed as a fact or as a property possessed by something” or to “something that *is*; an existence, entity. Now restricted to spiritual or immaterial entities” (“essence, n.”). These definitions yield enlightening analyses when applied to Emily Dickinson's poem 320, otherwise known by its first line as [“There's a certain Slant of Light”] (1862). Like many of Dickinson's poems, “There's a certain Slant of Light” reads as a meditation on mortality and immortality. The speaker, observing the light of “Winter Afternoons,” comes to reflect upon the “winter” of her life, easily understood as the inevitability of death (Dickinson 2). The light is ultimately the archetypal revelation of the truth regarding our temporary existence in bodily form; symbolizing such, it is described as a weight via imagery and simile, one that “oppresses, like the Heft / Of Cathedral Tunes —” (Dickinson 3-4). However, the oppression she speaks of afflicts not the body but the soul, as the speaker refers to something “internal” upon which “We can find no scar” (Dickinson 6-7). Dickinson's

works collectively reveal her belief in immortality and eternity and often present the afterlife without speculation and doubt. Therefore, to speak instead of mortality in “There’s a certain Slant of Light” is to consider the burden it places upon the soul, for as she intimates, the soul is “Where the Meanings, are —” (Dickinson 8). It is not so much that the physical body will cease to exist; it is that the spirit will cease to experience life, sensation, emotion through said body. To know this is to know oneself. It is to accept the inevitability of death, while mourning the inevitable transformation of the soul’s existence thereafter. Consider again the aforementioned definitions of essence. Based on the former, the body may be seen as the possessor of the soul or the soul as the possessor of the body; regardless of the interpretation, the realization is that the two entities are only temporarily bound. This in and of itself is deserving of lamentation, for one knows nothing more intimately than the essence of his own existence, both physical and spiritual. And to truly know this essence is to understand how the meaning of the latter definition is limited, for recognizing oneself as an entity comprised of two parts that are the very formation of one’s identity is knowing, feeling, and living the physicality of spirituality — not “restricted to spiritual or immaterial entities.” Knowing and embracing this dichotomous identity, Dickinson’s speaker mourns for her soul’s “imperial affliction,” her soul’s greatest “Despair,” only because it so deeply loves the body it wears; after all, without it, the soul would not learn of its own essence (10-11).

Yet, the purpose of the physical is not to merely be a vehicle through which the spiritual may experience and express its existence; the physical is an essence in and of itself. Without the existence of a soul, the physical would still take on aspects of spirituality, specifically that of immortality and transcendence. Take, for instance,

William Cullen Bryant's "Thanatopsis" (1821). In 82 lines of blank verse, the poet presents his vision of death, immortality, and transcendence, minus the usual players and stage: man's soul, God, and Heaven. Instead, Bryant forces his reader to face the reality of his human existence, the inevitability of his death, and the transformative, immortal nature of his body. The experience that is central to the poem is death, and all men, regardless of the religion and god they believe in, will at some time struggle to conceive the inconceivable. What man fears most is ceasing to exist here on Earth in a physically, bodily, human form. In the "breathless darkness" and "narrow house" of burial, the body will eventually decay, losing "each human trace, surrend'ring up / [its] individual being" (Bryant 12, 24-25). Like Dickinson, Bryant learns from Nature, and he explicitly implores man to do the same: "When thoughts / Of the last bitter hour come like a blight / Over [his] spirit [...] Go forth under the open sky, and list / To Nature's teachings" (8-15). However, unlike Dickinson who laments for the soul's eventual loss of the body, Bryant rejoices in the spirit's eventual transformation of body. He attempts to allay man's fears and anxieties regarding death, and does so without perpetuating and reiterating religious depictions of otherworldly realms. What occurs after death right here on Earth is as miraculous and majestic as what occurs in the possible neverlands of afterlife: man's dead body becomes one with the natural world, "all in one mighty sepulchre" that is the earth itself (Bryant 37). His physical form does not die; it merely transforms, "mix[ing] forever with the elements," the "decorations ... / Of the great tomb of man" (Bryant 26, 44-45). Bryant's vision is like Whitman's in *Song of Myself*: "I bequeath myself to the dirt to grow from the grass I love, / If you want me again look for me under your boot-soles" (1338-1339). As Bryant and Whitman see it, the mighty

sepulchre of Earth is an “eternal resting place,” as the natural world is one of constant rebirth, renewal, and rejuvenation — one that grants immortality to man’s physicality (Bryant 31). As such, it is also an eternal teacher, harboring the lessons of “All that tread / The globe” who eventually “slumber in its bosom” — like Bryant, like Whitman (Bryant 48-50). Physicality, therefore, has a spirituality all its own and, realistically speaking, is the only existence of which man is truly certain. Embracing this fact, man comes closer to embracing his existence and his essence as an entity bound to every other living thing.

Bryant and Whitman were not the first to write of the body in such a way, as an eternal entity in and of itself. Thirteenth century Sufi mystic poet Rumi, born as Jalaluddin Mohammad Balkhi, wrote of the same means of immortality in several of his poems. Like Bryant, Rumi envisioned an eternal world that man enters through the grave, as is painted in the first several lines of his poem, “On the Day I Die”:

On the day I die, when I’m being carried to-
ward the grave, don’t weep. Don’t say,
He’s gone! He’s gone. Death has nothing to do
with going away. The sun sets and
the moon sets, but they’re not gone. Death is
a coming together. The tomb
looks like a prison, but it’s really release into
union. The human seed goes
down in the ground like a bucket into the
well where Joseph is. It grows and
comes up full of some unimagined beauty. (1-11)

Rumi consoles his audience as Bryant does - by calling attention to the universalities of death: death is not to be feared, for it is not an end or a “going away”; death is a

gathering, for it brings all who ever lived and died “into union”; death is everlasting, for the body, “the human seed,” becomes part of the earth and grows anew. “What dies in autumn comes up in spring,” whispering tales of immortality (Rumi, “What’s Inside the Ground” 5-6). Regardless of the God one believes in, the country he lives in, the century he is born in, man must confront the reality of his existence — that he is bound to this earth by a body that will one day perish, decay, cease to breathe and pump blood. This truth is in fact the reason human beings cling to religion — for consolation and confirmation that life does go on, somewhere, somehow. However, looking at the poetry of Rumi and Bryant, writers whose faiths are as different as their mother countries, one may find answers to the universally posed questions about the universally shared and inevitable experience of dying. Rather than denounce the physical existence for the spiritual one, as almost all religions do, human beings have the ability to praise and gather wisdom from the only existence they know intimately — their corporeal, ephemeral essence.

In fact, quite paradoxically, embracing the essence of physicality is what allows one to more deeply experience his spirituality. Without the physical, one would not be able to speak of or conjecture the spiritual; it is only through descriptions of that which is felt through sensation that man is able to communicate about something as conceptual and abstract as essence. Here again, one may turn to the writings of Rumi. In “The Awakening,” the speaker relies upon his sense of touch to describe a sensual, spiritual experience and the essence of that experience, presumably between himself and God. The title immediately calls attention to the juxtaposition between the literal and the figurative, the physical and the spiritual. Rumi describes the physical act of awaking to

metaphorically speak of the soul's spiritual act of awakening. It is "in the early dawn of happiness" that the speaker "wake[s] up / to [a] moment of love" upon feeling "three kisses; it is a moment that makes him "aware," perhaps for the first time (1-4, 8).

Awareness, however, is not tangible; neither is love. That which is stirring within the soul must be described, therefore, via the sensations of physicality, and Rumi achieves this through imagery. By the "tenderness" of God's "lips" and the "touch" of His "hands," the speaker awakens from a slumber, newly "aware / of this moving of / life" (Rumi 22-26, 8-10). Yet, he "can't see" the very lips and hands that he feels upon his skin, for "they are hidden from [him]" (Rumi 23, 26). God's hiddenness and invisibility is what allows him to touch the spirit so subtly, so gently, and the speaker praises Him for doing so, for awakening his soul, telling God: "it is you who keeps me alive" (Rumi 27). As in the poem, God is an unseen entity in human beings' lives, yet for as long as they have believed, they have claimed to feel His presence, His love. Invariably, human beings have attempted to describe His essence, which is as difficult as defining the word essence itself, for even man's relationship with God is experienced and understood through his material self. To describe such feelings, then, people have relied upon their physicality to both interpret and express their spirituality. Their ability to even consider the existence and purpose of a soul, of a God, or of an afterlife relies on the ability to first capture the essence of physical existence. Once captured, the essence may be communicated, and once communicated, it becomes art.

The Expression of Both

The use of art to express the essence of one's world and self is what Jale Nejdert Erzen, Turkish author of "Islamic Aesthetics: Alternative Way to Knowledge," would consider to be the purpose of art, "since all creation is the reflection of God" and therefore spiritual (72). Whereas Iqbal saw man as "unable to control his ruthless egoism" (187), Erzen, like Emerson, sees man as capable of humbling himself, losing his mean egotism, and becoming an artist of and for God. Through art, the artist brings together experience and sensation in order to communicate the "depths of ... consciousness," as Iqbal calls it (181), or the depths of the "soul," as Erzen refers to it: "Consider Avicenna, who wrote: 'Know that access to that by which our soul becomes knowing begins by way of the senses'" (71). The senses are one's means of perceiving the world, and some of those "perceptions ... resolve themselves into" "impressions," or "sensations, passions and emotions," which "make their first appearance in the soul" (Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature* 21-22). According to Erzen, the senses are therefore essential to one's spiritual development, connection to God, and artistic expression of each:

The involvement of all the senses, moreover, is taken to lead to a profound knowledge of the Absolute, a knowledge that is therefore in the most basic or fundamental way aesthetic. Any kind of artistic involvement may be a path to the knowledge of God, who is manifested in the physical, sensible appearance of the world. (71).

After all, "a wise man ... proportions his belief to ... evidence," and evidence is discovered in the "physical, sensible" and concrete manifestations of earthly existence,

absorbed via the senses (Hume, *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding* 185). Erzen endorses neither a blind faith nor an invisible deity. In fact, she does not refer specifically to a Jewish, Christian, or Muslim god and acknowledges that “except for the ninety-nine names attributed to God, God cannot be known” (72). Therefore, she refers instead to a universal God, one of the world and for the world, one who is part of the shared experience that is creation. The believer of such a God is he who “can see the value and beauty of the universe,” not one who can recite a religious text, pray daily, follow commandments, or observe religious holidays (Erzen 71). “Ultimately, it is the *process of making a work*” that allows one to discover God, both within and without, to “admire[...] God’s creation,” and to ultimately “understand[...] the spiritual world and become[...] close to it.” In essence, art is “Love,” discovered and expressed, hence its ability to be a universal language (Erzen 71-72).

Such a language is manifested in various forms, like dialects spilling from different tongues, sounding varied utterances yet speaking similar meanings. Like “that simplest lute” in Samuel Taylor Coleridge’s “The Eolian Harp” (1796), one expresses the musings of his mind and soul naturally, almost automatically and passively, nevertheless making sense of his sensations as he experiences his surroundings. Likening the harp to man, positioning both as instruments of sound, Coleridge reveals the necessity of expression and therefore creation. Without expressing its “long sequacious notes,” the harp loses its purpose, just as man loses his meaning without a mode of articulation (Coleridge 18). Likewise, the “soft floating witchery of sound” has no existence without the harp, just as thoughts and emotions have no origin without their physical counterpart, their body (Coleridge 20). In this relationship of reciprocity, something without stirs

something within, organically creating a means of expression. The harp is moved by nature's wind, "caressed" by its "desultory breeze" that yields music, and man is touched by his physical world, filled with a feeling that pours forth in voiced or muted creations – in this case, poetry (Coleridge 14). Coleridge's use of imagery and synesthesia brings together all three entities as one: the harp, the wind, and the "melodies" produced (23); doing so, he paints the existence of human beings, especially as they synthesize meaning via the senses:

O the one life within us and abroad,
Which meets all motion and becomes its soul,
A light in sound, a sound-like power in light,
Rhythm in all thought, and joyance every where –
Methinks, it should have been impossible
Not to love all things in a world so filled; (26-31)

Coleridge's diction speaks loudly of this "one life" that encompasses all, loves all. This one life, that is both physical and earthly as well as spiritual and "incomprehensible," is "At once the Soul of each, and God of All" (59; 48). All are "organic harps" telling tales of experience, whispering words of essence, creating a universal language of expression (Coleridge 45).

This universal language of creation and expression is most passionately used in "Come, Bring Your Hand Here," by Pakistani poet Fahmidah Riaz. Notably, the poem is itself a creation, an art form, whose subject is also a creation, the conception of a new life. Through sensual imagery, the speaker pays homage to the physical experience that birthed her spiritual being, as she calls her lover, the co-creator of the child within her

womb, to “feel [her] body,” to “Hear the beating of [his] child” (Riaz 2-3). Here, the physicality of her spirituality is sex, an experience that simultaneously engages all five senses, intertwines and enraptures two bodies, expresses the essence of one’s being, and creates life, the quintessential art form. In essence, the child is art, the poem is art, and sex is the “*process of making*” both “*work[s]*” (Erzen 71). Pregnant, she invites her lover to feel her so that he may “know” their child, once again calling attention to the significance of the physical in experiencing the spiritual, for the very act of touching transcends the body and reaches the soul, her once “wild spirit” now at “peace” (Riaz 14, 8). Kissing and caressing him, she asks, “What do you know of all this? / What do you know of what you have done / To me?” (Riaz 28-30). The question, of course, is answered: he has led her to discover not only “All [the] meanings” of “scriptures,” “prophets,” and “angels,” but also of “All the sung delights of mortal creatures” (Riaz 38-44). The sexual experience that created their child is the same experience that birthed her “faith” (Riaz 48). And the essence of both experiences is expressed through a third birth, Riaz’s poem: new life is born, faith is born, poetry is born. In this way, the act of creating life is likened to the act of creating art. Both require the creator to be physically bound to another — a lover, a child, a paintbrush, a canvas. Both require the creator to reach deep within herself and pull from her body and soul the creation within. Both require physicality to make manifest spirituality. If physical experience allows for spiritual discovery, then Erzen’s theory is true: by way of the senses, the soul comes to know God. This suggests that religion - the higher religion Iqbal envisions and the transcendental religion Emerson and Erzen describe — is not learned in churches or

mosques, nor read in books and heard in sermons; real religion, the religion of the soul, is experienced, absorbed via the senses, and communicated through art, creation.

In “The Lives of the Dead,” the concluding chapter of *The Things They Carried* (1990), author and narrator Tim O’Brien discusses how the act of creation, the “*process of making a work*” (Erzen 71), ultimately “save[s] us” by connecting human beings with each other, the unseen, and the dead (O’Brien 225). For O’Brien, the act of creating stories creates connections: “The thing about a story is that you dream it as you tell it, hoping that others might then dream along with you, and in this way memory and imagination and language combine to make spirits in the head. There is the illusion of aliveness” (230). Once again, the physical makes tangible the spiritual. The act of writing is itself a physical experience of the body whereby one must engage with his material world — paper, pen, typewriter, computer - in order to create, or recreate, his spiritual world - the memories, the love, the dead. Once written, the story becomes the experience of others, those who read it, hear it, feel it; once written, the story becomes immortal, forever preserving what was with what is: “[...] in a story, which is a kind of dreaming, the dead sometimes smile and sit up and return to the world” (O’Brien 225). Echoing Rumi’s “The Awakening,” O’Brien speaks of a place in time that is essentially timeless, where the living and the dead, the physical and the spiritual, the ephemeral and the ethereal come together, as one thing: “Inside the body, or beyond the body, there is something absolute and unchanging. The human life is all one thing” (236). “The human life is all one thing,” made up of body and soul, made to experience an earthly world, to discover the meaning and purpose of that experience, and ultimately to recognize the “absolute and unchanging” sameness of it all - for everyone, everywhere. Seeing such

universality and connectivity, O'Brien, like Rumi, uses art to behold the transcendent enormity that is love, specifically for she who cannot be seen: Linda, his childhood friend and first love, who died of a brain tumor when the two were just nine years old.

Knowing that the word love itself is both limited and boundless in meaning, O'Brien appeals to the readers' senses, inviting them to feel what he felt: "Even then, at nine years old, I wanted to live inside her body. I wanted to melt into her bones — *that* kind of love" (228). Through metaphorical imagery, the spiritual feeling of love becomes the physical feeling of melting. His words capture and communicate the essence of that time in his life, for although the "details [have been] forgotten, or maybe blocked out," the essence — of Linda, of his grief, of their love — still remains, a soulful connection only made possible, both then and now, because of the physical creation of art (234). Man comes to love man because he shares a physical existence with him, and man preserves that love by preserving the essence, which is thereafter felt, expressed and re-experienced via art.

Art as the Universal Religion

As Riaz and O'Brien reveal, art is not merely a means of capturing experience; it is experience. Art is not merely a way of beholding essence; it is essence. And as a means of expressing both the former and the latter, it is religion — that of the soul, practiced by all, universally understood. It is the manifestation of the human experience, the human essence — what has been referred to here as the physicality of spirituality. Religion, after all, is essentially a system and expression of beliefs; art is no different. Human beings are constant creators and communicators of beliefs, especially those regarding the meaning of life, the existence of God, the possibility of an afterlife, the recognition of the soul. Quite simply, religion accomplishes three things: it provides a narrative for what was, a history of sorts that includes the Maker(s) and the made; it provides an explanation for what is, teaching man about his earthly existence and at times instructing him on how to live; and finally, it creates a vision of what will be — Heaven, Hell, Nirvana, reincarnation, nothingness. Again, art accomplishes the same. Each work produced is not only a product of the present but will one day be a product of the past as it gradually becomes a contributing piece of the historical narrative. As a representation of life, it inadvertently shows man his own existence, teaches him about humanity, harsh realities, and beautiful truths. As is evident in the works discussed thus far, art is also the vehicle through which man contemplates and creates eternity. And if there happens to be no realm, no sphere of such, then art itself becomes man's immortality, existing long after generations and centuries of bodies perish. Unlike the major religions of the world, art is part of mankind everywhere, each individual who inhabits this earth. Whether the creator or the created, man practices art: the composer of music and the listener of songs;

the sculptor of statues and the admirer before them; the painter of frescoes and the one gazing in awe; the singer of opera and the audience of tears; the photographer of moments and the moments between people; the writer of poetry and the reader of verse. In each creation to which man is drawn, he sees himself, life, or God in some way. He connects in some way, for art is a religion of physicality, and physicality is the shared experience of man, the concrete tangibility of spirituality. He is not lost to the stories of prophets who may or may not have lived. He is not confused by the variety of versions that attempt to explain life and death. He is not forced to envision the invisible — fantastical imaginings of gods, goddesses, kingdoms and thrones.

For these reasons and more, art is a religion; it is the religion of the body and the soul, and as such, it does what other religions fail to do: it unites all of mankind, communicates the spiritual experience, gives form and physicality to that experience, and allows for universally shared practices. To conjecture about art in this way, it is necessary to turn to the greatest philosophers and philosophies of mankind. In *The Republic* (380 B.C.), Plato — reiterating the teachings of Socrates — positions the artist as a vessel through which divinity works via demigods, muses, daemons. As such, artists are imitators and their creations mere imitations: “the painter” is “the imitator of that which ... others make[,] and the tragic poet is an imitator, and therefore, like all other imitators, he is thrice removed from the king and from the truth” (Plato 1175). Such beliefs hold the inspiration of creation outside of oneself, the creator, who is seemingly only a temporary embodiment or possessor of the divine, imitating the original creations of “God” who “is the author of ... all ... things” (Plato 1174). However, the artist deserves a bit more recognition and more suitable definition, one that gives credence to

the physicality of human experience and to the human being as Maker. It is true that man is inspired by something external, but that externality is his world. Man is moved by that around him, which stirs that within him, his very own soul. The experience of being moved within by that which is without is the only evidence man has of God and his own soul; experience is in fact the only necessary evidence. If experience is one's only reality, then art is much more than imitation; it is an eternal re-experience. The act of creation alone is a re-experience, and the act of re-experiencing thereafter is a preservation of the original essence.

Seeing man's essence as the manifestation of his physicality, German philosopher and poet Friedrich Nietzsche contends with Socrates' and Plato's vision of the artist, specifically in regards to the source of an artist's inspiration. In *Human, All-Too-Human: A Book for Free Spirits* (1878), Nietzsche acknowledges and denounces the tradition of associating inspiration, or genius, with something or someone "miraculous," a tradition he considers a "trap" (230-231). While "it is to the interest of the artist that there should be a belief in sudden suggestions, so-called inspirations; as if the idea of a work of art, of poetry ... shone down from heaven like a ray of grace," there is a truth more real: "In reality the imagination of the good artist or thinker constantly produces good, mediocre, and bad, but his *judgment*, most clear and practiced, rejects and chooses and joins together" that which he creates (Nietzsche 237-238). The former process is comparable to what Plato described, with man being the vehicle through which supreme beings work to create art; whereas the latter process is comparable to what has been described herein, with man experiencing his world and existence, capturing its essence, and expressing both via art. Man, as an artist, is constantly producing; his imagination is constantly

working. The process of what Nietzsche considers “*judgment*” is part of the re-experience, whereby the artist evaluates whether or not that which he creates accurately or thoroughly captures the essence of the original experience, feeling, sensation. When the sensations evoked by the piece are that of the sensations evoked by the experience, all are in harmony; all become one in that final creation. The only “sudden out-pouring” of inspiration that Nietzsche speaks of is that which follows a “length of time” during which “the productive power has been suspended ... and has been hindered in its outflow by some obstacle.” The result of such suspension is creation, the “sudden out-pouring” of experiences and essences, long kept but not expressed: “The capital has only *accumulated*, it has not suddenly fallen down from heaven.” What occurs during the lapse of time between one creation and another is what Nietzsche refers to as “inward working,” whereby the artist makes sense of his world, his engagements, his self (239). His physicality being internalized, understood, and reflected upon becomes what he knows to be his spirituality - the meaning and purpose of things, all that is and is not. Looking at artists and art in this way - as Nietzsche does and without the role of demigods or daemons — one is left to rely upon the role of physicality and earthly existence in any act of creation: the tangibility of art, the abstraction of meaning, the miracle of new life. Mankind everywhere creates in one or more of these ways and therefore participates in the universal religion that is art; conclusively, then, all men are artists, like Riaz who not only creates poetry but creates life and meaning; like O’Brien, who creates stories that create lives for the dead; like Beethoven, who creates the “Ninth Symphony” that recreates an experience for his listener, one that causes him to feel as

though he is “floating above the earth in a starry dome with the dream of *immortality* in his heart” (Nietzsche 236).

While Nietzsche regarded art as the anti-religion, it is more accurately *the* religion - of the soul, of mankind, of all. As a religion, it “raises it[s] head where [traditional] creeds relax. It takes over many feelings and moods engendered by religion, lays them to its heart, and itself becomes deeper, more full of soul, so that it is capable of transmitting exultation and enthusiasm, which it previously was not able to do” (Nietzsche 234).

Religion, in the traditional sense, tends to denounce the physical experience while praising the spiritual one; it calls attention to the temporality of the body and the permanence of the soul. It belittles and even condemns bodily sensations, especially those of pleasure and indulgence, rapture and ecstasy, while associating spiritual sensations with purity and goodness. Philosophers like Nietzsche saw the danger in such thinking, in damning man’s only real, true, known existence. Art does the opposite:

Above all, for centuries it has taught us to look upon life in every shape with interest and pleasure and to carry our feelings so far that at last we exclaim, ‘Whatever it may be, life is good.’ This teaching of art, to take pleasure in existence and to regard human life as a piece of nature, without too vigorous movement, as an object of regular development, — this teaching has grown into us; it reappears as an all-powerful need of knowledge. (Nietzsche 302)

Seeing art in this way, mankind becomes his own subject; his world, his source of inspiration; and his physicality, his greatest means of making meaning. Just as Whitman urges man to “hold creeds and schools in abeyance” in *Song of Myself*, Nietzsche urges man to consider the wonder of his physical existence that so artfully connects him to this world and its inhabitants, his fellow man. For what one experiences here and now, “those

extra and super-personal sensations,” is being “experienced on behalf of a nation, of humanity, of all civilization” (Nietzsche 240-241). That in and of itself is art, for connectivity is created by universally shared sensations, which are themselves the creators of meaning. Such creations — of connection, of life, of meaning — are made possible via the physical experience. All that is needed to answer life’s most complex and perplexing questions lies about man and within him. As 20th century theologian and philosopher Alan Watts so poetically states, “I am what I know; what I know is I.” The “‘external’ world of theoretical objects is ... just as much a unity as the ‘internal’ world of experience.” In essence, man’s physicality *is* his spirituality; man himself is a creation as wondrous as any part of his physical world: “the sun is I, the air is I, and society, of which you are a member is also I — for all these things are ... essential to my existence” (108-109). All that is part of the natural world and the manmade world are likewise creations. Therefore, everything is art, a creation of some sort, bearing meaning of some sort, speaking a language of some sort.

Poetry as the Universal Language

That language is poetry — not poetry in the technical sense of the word, but poetry in the sense that all discourse that speaks of and from the spirit through the body is poetic, whether in verse, prose, broken sentences, or fragmented speech. Just as religion has a Bible, a Torah, a Koran, art has poetry to convey, instruct, comfort, inspire.

Religion has the word of God; art has the word of man. One resonates in some; the other, in all. Poetry makes audible the voice of the spirit; physicality allows for that voice to sound — and be heard. It is the latter of the two that is most essential, for the shared essence of experience via expression is what allows art to become the universal religion of man. While it is true that all art is a means of expression — and therefore a language, a means of communication — the art of language, and specifically poetry, provides an accessibility unparalleled by other art forms. To some extent, Nietzsche concurs: “The form of a work of art, which gives speech to [the artists’] thoughts and is, therefore, their mode of talking, is always somewhat uncertain, like all kinds of speech” (259).

However, as Shelley argues in “A Defence of Poetry” (1840), poetry is as “connate with the origin of man” as language is, and “the nature itself of language ... is a more direct representation of the actions and passions of our internal being” than any other mode of expression (790; 792-793). In essence, poetry is the most accessible art form, as it is merely language, which every human being uses — to some degree — to understand and communicate with his surrounding world.

Art in any form is open to interpretation, but that is not to say that any interpretation is correct. It is, in fact, easier to interpret the artist’s meaning and intention by that which utilizes words, than it is to understand that which uses paint, clay, piano

keys without lyrics. Of course, other forms offer an immediacy that language does not. Beethoven can move his listener to tears with a symphony; that listener knows only the emotion of the sound, not the story, not the meaning. So perhaps it is not that works of language are necessarily easier to interpret, but that such works allow for more detail, conveyance, description, and clarity. And perhaps this is the reason Nietzsche called poets — the masters of language and words — the “lighteners of the world,” for light illuminates and makes clear that which was once dark, unseen, only barely understood (232). However, he saw them as lighteners of the past, not the present:

Poets, inasmuch as they desire to lighten the life of man, either divert his gaze from the wearisome present, or assist the present to acquire new colors by means of a life which they cause to shine out of the past. To be able to do this, they must in many respects themselves be beings who are turned towards the past, so that they can be used as bridges to far distant times and ideas, to dying or dead religions and cultures. (232-233)

This is only partially true, for the poet must also be present within the present in order to be a lightener of the past, present or future: “he not only beholds intensely the present as it is ... but he beholds the future in the present” (Shelley, “A Defence of Poetry” 792).

The poet is one who completely engages with the present experience of things in order to then express its essence once the experience has passed. The poet allows for his experience to then become a re-experience or a new experience for his audience, who also engages with the art form in the present. The past is past within seconds of a moment’s passing; therefore, the poet has no other choice but to be timeless: preserving the present by reflecting on the past so that it may be experienced again in the future.

This is essentially the purpose of any artist and his work of art, of any poet and his poem: to connect all, to immortalize all.

Art, and specifically poetry, bears in itself an immortality of sorts, and because of that immortality, it continues to create connections that transcend all temporal and physical barriers, meaning time and place as they are understood to exist in the physical world. In defining art as the “raiser of the dead,” Nietzsche inadvertently defines poetry’s purpose in being the immortal voice and language of art:

[It] fulfills the task of preservation and even of brightening up extinguished and faded memories; when it accomplishes this task it weaves a rope round the ages and causes their spirits to return. It is, certainly, only a phantom-life that results therefrom, as out of graves, or like the return in dreams of our beloved dead, but for some moments, at least, the old sensation lives again and the heart beats to an almost forgotten time. (Nietzsche 231-232)

Poetry is the music set to memory, as the poet “participates in the eternal [and] the infinite” (Shelley “A Defence of Poetry” 792). It is the voice of those still heard long after their bodies perish. It is the diary full of life’s happenings and heartbreaks. It is the eulogy read at Christian burials, the prayers whispered at mosques. It is, most simply, the dialogue between two people consoling each other for their woes, debating the meaning of life, speaking on behalf of their souls. It is the voice of the spirit, the physicality of the spirit, the language of the universal religion that is art. And the poet is he who makes such transcendence possible, for only he can assure man that at least some version of eternity exists, and man needs such reassurance: “Man as a being of sense, wants his life to make sense, and he has found it hard to believe that it does so unless ... there is an eternal order and an eternal life behind the uncertain and momentary experience of life-

and-death” (Watts 13). That sense is only gained, truly felt and known, through physicality, thereafter expressed in language. Poetry, as that language, provides man with immortality, but more importantly, it speaks of emotions and sensations that gesture toward spirituality and the possibility of life after death. The poet sees this possibility, for the poet sees all through an “eye [that] can integrate all the parts” of the world, and “it is this which distinguishes the stick of timber of the wood-cutter, from the tree of the poet” (Emerson 509-510). The poet, therefore, is the visionary who “exert[s] a double vision” through eyes that “see near things as comprehensively / as if afar” and “distant things as intimately deep” as if close enough to touch (Browning 5.184-188). He sees the nearness of his physicality, the distance of his immortality, and holds them just the same. The poet sees all, feels all, reaches all, hence his role as the herald of a universal language of a universal religion.

However essential poetry is in immortalizing humankind’s existence, allowing one epoch to dance with another, it is far more powerful in making meaning of the present for the present, gathering its speakers, listeners and readers to partake in a shared experience. For this reason, the role of the poet is arguably the most important role of mankind, for just as all men are artists in some way, all men are poets, too, or at least have the ability to speak or comprehend the language of poetry. After all, “poetry is the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings,” a definition that defines poetry by experience, essence and expression, rather than by form, structure, and mechanics (Wordsworth 242). All human beings understand the language of emotion, especially of “powerful feelings.” To be fair, however, Wordsworth’s “Preface to *Lyrical Ballads*” (1802) was his attempt to define the poetry of those with acquired writing skills who set

their pen to paper in hopes of being published; he was neither arguing that all language of the soul is poetry, nor that poetry is the language of art. Yet, he did believe that “poetry is the image of man and nature,” a profound proclamation that suggests everything is poetry, just as everything is art. He called for the creation of a poetry that possesses a commonality and universality to it, not only in its content but in its delivery and accessibility; he called for the creators of such “to choose incidents and situations from common life, and to relate or describe them, throughout, as far as was possible, in a selection of language really used by men” (241). As he saw it, “the poet writes under one restriction only, namely, that of the necessity of giving immediate pleasure to a human being possessed of that information” (247). In this way, the poem forms a bond between the poet and his audience, a candid world. The poet, through his poetry, creates the physical means by which all men connect and communicate:

He is the rock of defence of human nature; an upholder and preserver, carrying everywhere with him relationship and love. In spite of difference of soil and climate, of language and manners, of laws and customs, in spite of things silently gone out of mind and things violently destroyed, the poet binds together by passion and knowledge the vast empire of human society, as it is spread over the whole earth, and over all time. (Wordsworth 248)

There is no description more beautiful, nor more fitting than Wordsworth’s description of the poet as he brings together all of mankind, much like one longs for God himself to do. Speaking from one soul to another soul, of all souls, the poet becomes the illuminator of the world, as Nietzsche suggests. Only, the light he shines is upon the physical world, the earthly existence of man; it illuminates the essence of things, forcing man to see the meaning of all, conjuring the spirit to move within the body.

The light of “poetry is indeed something divine,” for even a single poem “is the very image of life expressed in its eternal truth” (Shelley, “A Defence of Poetry” 798; 794). As spreaders of this light, speaking and writing in poetic tongues, poets become the universal communicators of and for humankind:

Poets ... are not only the authors of language and of music, of the dance and architecture and statuary and painting: they are the institutors of laws, and the founders of civil society and the inventors of the arts of life and the teachers, who draw into a certain propinquity with the beautiful and the true that partial apprehension of the agencies of the invisible world which is called religion” (Shelley, “A Defence of Poetry” 792).

Shelley’s poets are not necessarily the Shakespeares of society who have mastered verse and drama; they are those who use language in all its various forms, as rhetoricians, philosophers, creators, and commoners. They are those who see language’s purpose in capturing not only one’s spirit but the spirit of an entire age (Shelley, “A Defence of Poetry” 802). These are the poets Wordsworth envisioned, those who have the ability to keep their audience “in the company of flesh and blood,” allowing them to see and hear the human voice — no different than their own (244). They are those who can abandon elitist and exclusive “poetic diction” in order to “convey their feelings and notions in simple and unelaborated expressions” of prose or metrical composition (Wordsworth 244; 241). The poet is, in fact, each and every living being who expresses the essence of his experience in a physical world, touching the spirits of those near and far; for even those far removed from the poet’s physical body are near to his body of work, his poetry. Making connections in such a way — through language, a simple exchange of words — one comes to intimately and personally know another, regardless of the differences that

tend to separate human beings. Through poetry, people “give [the spirit] voice / With human meanings,” transcending physical barriers of gender, race, class, and creed in order to make known the shared experiences of physical existence (Browning 5.125-126). The poet, speaking from his soul and through his body, has the ability to reach the many lands of this earth, to reveal the commonalities and universalities of life, to show the sameness of man’s physicality, his flesh and blood, however different the soil is beneath his feet. While Nietzsche appropriately saw poets as the “raisers of the dead,” they are more importantly the liberators of the living — freeing them from silence, releasing them from prejudices, connecting them to all.

Poets allow for such liberation by speaking from their “hearts, large-rounded as the globe,” setting the “hearts [of others] beating pure, as well as fast” in hopes of touching “the soul within [the] soul,” the very depths of man (Browning, 5.1181, 469, 414). Speaking from the heart is the “out-pouring” of the “inward working” that Nietzsche described. It is the “spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings” that Wordsworth imagined. It is “the image of life expressed in its eternal truth” that Shelley discussed. It is poetry: the meaningful utterances that tell of sufferings and celebrations; of woeful and joyful undulations; of imaginings and contemplations; of impressions and sensations. It is the language of physicality, the breath of spirituality, for poetry is the universal language of both mankind and mankind’s universal religion – the one true and “living art, / Which thus presents and thus records true life” (Browning 5.221-222).

Conclusion

If art teaches man anything, it is that he is not so different from his fellow man. All are bound to this earth for a time, for a purpose. Physical existence, then, is not to be belittled in the presence or contemplation of the spiritual; it is to be magnified, celebrated. After all, if there is a Creator, this world is His creation. Man is to stand in awe of it, of himself. He is meant to see the sameness of his existence, intended to discover the mystery of his presence. Seeing how similar his own creations are, he has to acknowledge the universal religion that is art, in all its various forms, with all its various symbols; he has to hear the universal tongue that is poetry, in all its various rhythms, with all its various sounds. For all reveal a shared experience, one that transcends temporal and spatial barriers, as well as cultural, racial, and gender divides. From such transcendence comes one revelation: art and only art is the all-encompassing, all-embracing faith. Within it, all religions have a place, all creeds have a space, all gods have a face since all are the makings of man. Art excludes none; it allows each and all to be artists – creators of life, bearers of meaning. It permits variation and interpretation, skepticism and cynicism. And for all its differentiation, it yields a more powerful and permanent connectivity between and among human beings than any other system of belief, both past and present, simply because it is founded not on custom and tradition but on man's existence, here and now. Manifest in art, in man's one true religion, is the physicality of his spirituality: man experiences this world, discovers the essence of this world, expresses the beauty of this world. Man is this world. Perhaps that should be his God.

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