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Within this thesis, I posit that poetry, rather than philosophical argument, is a more effective means of expressing and understanding the nature of mystical experiences. William James' analysis of mysticism inspires the theoretical approach utilized in this thesis. An analysis of the unique qualities of poetic language within mystical discourse is given. Cross-cultural mysticism between Abrahamic and Buddhist religious traditions is analyzed, along with a comparative exegesis of mystical poets from these traditions. Theologian Ursula King's feminist critique of mysticism informs the discussion of feminine mysticism, which transitions into an analysis of female mystical poets.

Proceeding from the creatively novel usage of language employed by the mystical poets throughout this thesis, I conclude that the "transrational" quality of mystical experiences is more suited for poetic language. Poetic language is a meditative exercise within the context of mystical literature, because rather than pedantically

leading to a conclusion *via* argumentation, this language intends to invoke a profound experience within the reader.

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To Express The Inexpressible:
Poetry As Philosophy Within Mystical Discourse

by
Jarrod Hyam

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APPROVED:

Major Professor, representing Philosophy

Director of Interdisciplinary Studies

Dean of the Graduate School

I understand that my thesis will become part of the permanent collection of Oregon State University libraries. My signature below authorizes release of my thesis to any reader upon request.

Jarrold Hyam, Author

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To Express The Inexpressible:
Poetry As Philosophy Within Mystical Discourse

Introduction

The eye in which I see God is the same eye in which God sees me.

My eye and God's eye are one eye and one seeing, one knowing, and one loving.

–Meister Eckhart

This statement, poetically uttered by Christian mystic Meister Eckhart, archetypically expresses the mystical intuition that ultimately, self and cosmos form a seamless unity. Mystics are vital to every world religion, from indigenous spiritual traditions to Abrahamic and Asian religions. Mystics seek an intimate and direct unification with the sacred. Along the path of this intimate longing for unification, these contemplatives reach an ecstatic experience described by scholars as a “unitive” or mystical experience. Across religious contexts, there are commonalities in the descriptions of the *unio mystica*, or mystical union with the sacred.¹ Though mystical states are qualitatively different and subject to differing interpretations among religious traditions, the similarity of phenomenological qualities is striking.

An exemplary feature of mystical experiences is a sense of the ineffable. These transformative experiences are awe-inspiring to such a degree that they defy the categorical rationality of the intellect. Language as a representational system appears to break down when a mystic intends to explore or discuss the qualities of a mystical experience. Poetry, however, is a form of linguistic expression, which is able to

¹ William James included a groundbreaking chapter on mysticism in *The Variety of Religious Experiences* in which he catalogued a list of these common characteristics.

transcend the ordinary limits of linguistic expression. Verbal language is a symbolic system intended to express the contents of one's thoughts; verbal language is thus a vehicle to make transparent one's conceptual consciousness. Since mystical experiences purportedly transcend the limits of discursive intellection, language as means of conceptual expression is likewise incapable of effectively describing mystical states. Poetry, with its power to alter the syntactical qualities of language and engage one's mind in creatively novel ways, is an alternative to the conventional use of language within the context of mysticism. A question to be examined is thus: *can poetry serve as an effective means of philosophizing when conventional language cannot?*

This interdisciplinary thesis explores the interconnected facets of philosophical analysis, religious studies, and mystical literature. Rather than approaching religion in general, Mahāyāna Buddhist mysticism will serve as the focus of religious analysis. Mahāyāna Buddhism is an appealing focus because philosophers within this tradition thoroughly analyze language, ontology, and utilize rigorous rational philosophical argumentation to present their conception of the world within the framework of conceptual knowledge, while maintaining an equally robust mystical tradition that clearly indicates experience of the ultimate transcends conceptual limitations.

The analysis of Western visionary poetry shows intriguing similarities with Mahāyāna Buddhist mysticism. Nonetheless, a careful exegesis will reveal that the conclusions reached by these poets, while sometimes leading to insights that parallel Buddhist mystical experiences, are unique to the religious, poetic, or secular contexts of the poets, rather than being identical to Buddhist philosophical insights.

Chapter Two sets forth the theoretical approach that this thesis rests upon. The

limitations of language will be explored, along with an argument for why poetry can be an effective alternative to the conventional use of rational prose. A working definition of “mystical experience” is posited, as well as an analysis of logic and reasoning in the Western philosophical tradition, along with the unique form of knowledge acquisition termed *gnosis*. The central question of this thesis is an epistemological one: what is the relationship between direct mystical insight, or *gnosis*, and the insights derived from analytical philosophical reasoning? William James refers to such mystical insights as “noetic.” “. . . They are states of insight into depths of truth unplumbed by the discursive intellect. They are illuminations, revelations, full of significance and importance, all inarticulate though they remain; and as a rule they carry with them a curious sense of authority for after-time” (308). *Gnosis* results in lightning flashes of insight unlike the analytical power of reasoning. The role of this intuitive mode of knowing within mysticism, a mode distanced from the analytical, argumentative approach of philosophical reasoning, will be explored.

Chapter Three of this thesis will examine the philosophy of 7th century Buddhist epistemologist Dharmakīrti. Dharmakīrti systematically presented and analyzed the notions of valid knowledge within a Buddhist framework, which included both analytical reasoning and unmediated mystical experiences (*yogipratyakṣa*). Dharmakīrti’s thorough analysis of the intellect’s rational capabilities, along with his analysis of meditative insight, forms a pertinent theoretical framework for this thesis. Elucidating Dharmakīrti’s theory illustrates that though some of the mystical poets studied in this thesis were highly critical of reasoning at the expense of imagination and emotion,

conceptual reasoning is an important aspect of spiritual training within the Indo-Tibetan Buddhist tradition, insofar as it prepares one's consciousness for a direct, nonconceptual realization.

Chapter Four will include an examination of visionary or mystical poetry, and it will clarify the nature of mystical experience in general and will also serve as a comparison with Buddhist visionary poetry. I have chosen mystical poets from a variety of religious traditions for the comparative value they add to this study. This chapter will examine the poetry of non-Buddhist Western poets, including an exegesis of Christian visionary Meister Eckhart's poetic sermons. The mystical poetry of Jalāl ad-Dīn Muḥammad Rūmī, William Blake, and Percy Bysshe Shelley will be analyzed. Due to the unique qualities of feminine mysticism along with the androcentric nature of many world religions, a section of this chapter will be dedicated to the feminine approaches to mysticism, inspired by theologian Ursula King, with an analysis of medieval Christian mystic Hildegard of Bingen and modern poet Mary Oliver. Postmodernist poet-philosopher Helene Cixous argues for a uniquely feminine way of conducting philosophy that involves a poetic and experimental usage of language, a claim that fits well into the conceptual framework of this thesis.

The poets to be studied stunningly describe mystical experiences in relation to different spiritual contexts: secular, Abrahamic, or in panentheistic terms. The relation between their poetry and Buddhist philosophy will be explored, as well as whether Buddhist thought influenced their poetic or mystical approaches.

Chapter Five will analyze the poetry of the following Buddhist mystics: the

Japanese Shingon mystic Kûkai, Indian tantric adept Saraha, and Tibetan yogi Milarepa. These individuals were highly acclaimed practitioners of their religious traditions who utilized poetry as both an aesthetic and spiritual exercise.

Chapter Six will conclude this thesis with a discussion of the important role of mysticism within world religions generally, and why the subversive power of poetry has a unique power. Mystical poetry is a meditative exercise aimed to cultivate existential liberation, and both composing and reading mystical poetry can be liberative, transformative exercises.

Methodology

A methodological question raised is: how can the systematic analysis of Buddhist philosophy function in harmony with an analysis of visionary poetry, both Western and Buddhist? Discussing the more technical analyses of mysticism can elucidate the nature of mystical experience (objective study); this can then be compared with the literary *expression* of these states (subjective study). Proceeding from this, I will present reasons for why this transformative experience is better suited for poetic language than the rational restrictions of philosophical argument.

This thesis provides both an interdisciplinary and cross-cultural analysis. Given the considerable difference in cultural, religious, and temporal contexts among the mystical poets in this analysis, sensitivity to these differences will be exercised. A starting premise for comparative philosophy is that an edifying dialogue can result from the comparison of philosophical and religious traditions separated by cultural barriers;

nonetheless, caution must be employed so as not to conflate the unique features of these traditions.

Review of the Literature

Following the influx of cross-cultural philosophical analyses in the 19th and 20th centuries that resulted in novel translations and a newfound interest in crossing cultural barriers, along with ethnographic studies of worldwide indigenous spiritual traditions, the door was opened to engage in an analysis of mysticism that went beyond the study of Abrahamic religions alone.

Influenced by this cross-cultural analysis, William James (306-307), reviewing the literature of world religions, summarized a list of common characteristics among mystical experiences. This list, though a debated one, offered a groundbreaking entry into the philosophical study of mysticism based on the analysis of multiple world religions and secular contexts. By providing a point of similarity among diverse traditions, due to mystical experiences have intriguing similarities despite immense differences in linguistic and religious backgrounds, James' work greatly influenced current mystical studies. James noted that these experiences "are more like states of feeling than states of intellect" (307). Proceeding from this observation, contemporary American philosopher George Santayana wrote a thorough analysis of the role of imagination and understanding in mysticism, as well as a compelling analysis of the ancient relationship between visionary poetry and religions (10-15).

Steven T. Katz' *Mysticism and Philosophical Analysis* continued the cross-cultural mystical analysis inspired by James' work; Katz (50-55) discusses the

epistemological and linguistic difficulties of analyzing mystical experiences, given the claims to ineffability, the differences in ontological claims, the uniqueness of phenomenological qualities in specific religious contexts, and so forth. Also in *Mysticism and Philosophical Analysis*, Robert M. Gimello (178) updates the list of common mystical features set forth by James, and this list of features serves as the working definition of “mystical experience” discussed below.

A recurring theme among these analyses is that of ineffability: mystical experiences are of a “transrational” quality, going beyond the discursive intellection of reasoning, and they result in such profound experiences so as to be unspeakable, defying the limitations of language as a representational system. For the purposes of this thesis, I will use the term “transrational” to refer to the modality of consciousness invoked during mystical experiences; this modality is seemingly irrational, but more accurately this form of cognition is a *unique* form of rationality that transcends discursive, logical intellection. Humanistic psychologist Abraham Maslow utilizes the term “peak experience” to refer to mystical rapture, and he claims that poetry, metaphorical language and “primary process language” found in dreams are more effective in communicating the ineffable qualities of peak experiences (75). My thesis supports this claim, and the cross-cultural and inter-religious comparison of mystical poetry within this study intends to illustrate that poetry, rather than philosophical argumentation, is a unique form of philosophizing that is more effective in the expression and understanding of transrational mysticism.

Given this claim, an exploration of the role of reasoning and argumentation within Western philosophy is conducted. Singh (465-466) discusses Heraklitus’ notion of *logos* as a divine ordering principle that should be reflected by philosophers in the process of

reasoning; this claim that philosophy results from the process of logical reasoning was further refined by Plato, and codified in Aristotle's systematic study of rational argumentation. However, Johnston (90) and O'Donoghue (187) note that there is a seemingly irrational quality in mystical experiences, a modality of cognition that moves outside the range of discursive logic – a transrationality. Poetic language, by altering the syntactical qualities of language and utilizing symbolic and evocative images, can serve as an alternative to rational language in expressing this transrational mystical modality.

Gnosis

One aspect of mystical experiences is a “noetic” insight, an intuitive insight, which synthesizes and integrates, “in that it brings things together in a new pattern, i.e. integrates them, instead of, as in analytical thought, breaking them into parts” (Happold 37). “Noetic” is derived from *gnosis*, an ancient Greek term referring to direct spiritual insight. Jeffrey John Kripal expands upon this way of understanding: “But there is a third epistemology. . . following Quispel I suggest that we think of it as fundamentally gnostic. The gnostic does not *believe* tenets or *discover* truths, like an orthodox religionist, on the one hand, or like a rationalist, on the other hand. The gnostic *knows*. . .” (515). These sudden flashes of insight lead to mystical knowledge claims that result not from reasoning, but from intuitive realizations.

Dharmakirti: Conceptual Reasoning and Yogic Perception

7th century Buddhist philosopher Dharmakirti continued a Buddhist epistemological project to establish the criteria for the attainment of valid knowledge. Dunne (509) sets out Dharmakirti's emphasis on the importance of conceptual understanding of fundamental truths (e.g. *anatman* – non-self, the Noble Truths) to the generation of a nonconceptual, unmediated and direct experience: yogic perception. *Apoha* theory (Blumenthal 3; Dreyfus 226), an epistemological theory regarding how language, which utilizes universals, can be used to cultivate valid knowledge about particulars, is one of the foundations of Dharmakirti's theoretical pursuit. For instance, to utilize the word "tomato" is not to refer to a substantive essence, but to utilize a concept that indirectly signifies a specific object by negating all non-tomato entities (Blumenthal 3). By working *via negativa* rather than referring to entities that possess an essential self-nature, this linguistic approach aligns with the central Buddhist notion of *śūnyatā*, the lack of inherent, substantive essence in phenomena. This illustrates the conventional nature of language which indirectly apprehends, unlike direct experience. Georges Dreyfus comments, "Thus, conceptual consciousness distorts reality by making it fit into artificially created categories. It thereby obscures the fundamental differences between the objects that we judge to be similar" (230). If language is faulty in its ability to convey directly one's experience of reality, how does mystical poetry fit into this conundrum? Is there something unique about poetic expression that allows it to subvert the inherent limitations of language?

Indian tantric poet Saraha (Jackson 80-85) is then introduced, and his mystical

poetry illustrates an attempt to reconcile these difficulties. Saraha refers to an intentional object of meditation as a “referent” (Tib. *dmigs*), being a concept or image focused on during meditation. Ultimately, the referent is a nonreferent – a nonconceptual realization of *śūnyatā*., both in the sense of realizing the emptiness of essences and attaining a state beyond reference and conceptuality. “The real nature of thought” is therefore ineffable. This insight is “empty” insofar as no word can describe the experience and there is no fixed object to hold on to. To think of there being a distinct meditator (subject) and meditation (object) is also flawed; ultimately, nondual realization grasps a unified continuum of experience. Additionally, mystical poetry serves a unique function insofar as it can *invoke* mystical rapture and invite the reader to co-participate in the poet’s mystical experience: mystical poetry can thus invoke an experience that neither teachings nor words can encapsulate. Saraha’s poetry is further analyzed in the chapter discussing Buddhist mystical poetry. Given these theoretical challenges, poetry has been posited as an alternative to conventional language when intending to refer to states of *gnosis*. Mystical experiences, having profoundly emotive and paradoxical qualities, are more appropriately expressed in poetic form, since poetry can alter the rules of syntax and semantics and engage the mind creatively in ways that rational prose cannot.

Le Mystique Féminin

Feminist theologian Ursula King (96-97) discusses the androcentric nature of many world religions, and argues that there is a uniquely feminine approach to

mysticism, due to male-centered concentrations of power within religious institutions, historically denying women access to formal education, and other factors of socially constructed gender traits. Sandra A. Wawrytko (202) offers a list of uniquely feminine mystical characteristics, and given a survey of feminine mystical literature, her list is compelling. Postmodern feminist philosopher Helene Cixous (Nye 46-48) pushes for an expressive, emotional language to be utilized within philosophical discourse. This claim complements the discussion of feminine mystical literature, insofar as feminine mystical poetry is often highly expressive, erotic, and personal.

These are the primary theoretical influences of this thesis. The remaining review of literature shall be integrated throughout this work. Proceeding from Cixous' claim for a unique celebration of language, and aligning this thesis with my interdisciplinary bridging between philosophy and poetry, I will conclude my thesis in poetry, rather than strictly following the pedantic prose of my philosophical forebears.

Chapter Two: Expressing the Inexpressible

"The mystic and the schizophrenic find themselves in the same ocean, but whereas the mystic swims, the schizophrenic drowns." -R.D. Laing

A common feature found across the diversity of religious traditions is that they have exoteric – or publicly accessible – expressions, and forms of esoteric expression. The term ‘esoteric’ is derived from the Greek *ἐσωτερικός*, referring to inwardness, or a dwelling within one’s being. Those drawn to the esoteric tend to be the mystics of these traditions, who, generally speaking, approach the sacred in an introspective, contemplative fashion. Religious mystics have drawn their inspiration from every world religion, including secular and indigenous spiritual contexts. Scholars of mysticism report a common yearning to unify with the sacred, however that may be conceived in the mystic’s particular tradition. Some religious traditions consider such pursuits as heretical, while others regard them as embodying the tradition’s noblest ideals. Along the path of this intimate longing for unification, these contemplatives reach an ecstatic experience described by scholars as a “unitive” or mystical experience, in which the boundaries between self and the sacred seem to dissolve.

Mystical experiences manifest transformative experiences of such magnitude that they are often described as being supernatural in character. These states are interpreted in relation to the mystic’s religious context, and though these theological interpretations vary, there are underlying similarities to these experiences. Mystics from a variety of

traditions are often set aside to inhabit a spiritual vocation, such as the archetypal shaman in tribal cultures, the Tantric yogins of Tibetan Buddhist traditions, and so forth. Though this niche is not as explicit in modernity, the visionary impulse continues, and mystics continue to struggle with interpreting and expressing the seemingly inexpressible nature of mystical experiences.

Mystics are the solitary visionaries of religious traditions, initially inspiring the vast philosopho-religious systems of the world, whose whispers travel on the timeless breeze, invoking the sacred beyond the bounds of space and time. “The very beginning, the intrinsic core, the essence, the universal nucleus of every known high religion. . .has been the private, lonely, personal illumination, revelation, or ecstasy of some acutely sensitive prophet or seer” (Maslow 19).

Defining “Mystical Experiences”

Mystical experiences occur across radically different religious contexts. Nonetheless, the commonality of features described in mystical experiences prompted scholars such as Mircea Eliade and William James to posit a “universal mysticism,” a core mystical experience that occurs regardless of religious background. William James catalogued a list of these common characteristics in *The Variety of Religious Experiences*, a groundbreaking work that continues to influence the philosophical study of mysticism. Proceeding from James’ synthesis, religious scholar Robert M. Gimello compiled a more recent list of shared mystical features that shall serve as a working definition of the general term “mystical experience” within this thesis:

- A feeling of oneness or unity, variously defined.
- A strong confidence in the ‘reality’ or ‘objectivity’ of the experience, i.e. a conviction that it is somehow revelatory of ‘the truth.’
- A sense of the final inapplicability to the experience of conventional language, i.e. a sense that the experience is ineffable.
- A cessation of *normal* intellectual operations (e.g. deduction, discrimination, ratiocination, speculation, etc.) or the substitution for them of some ‘higher’ or qualitatively different mode of intellect (e.g. intuition). (Emphasis in original).
- A sense of the coincidence of opposites, of various kinds (paradoxicality).²
- An extraordinarily strong affective tone, again of various kinds (e.g. sublime joy, utter serenity, great fear, incomparable pleasure, etc. – often an unusual combination of such as these) (Gimello 178).

These features are commonalities of mystical states found in Abrahamic, Hindu, Buddhist, Taoist, and shamanic traditions. Buddhist philosophy, a primary area of research within this thesis, offers an exhaustive list of the differing qualities of mystical states on the path to ultimate awakening. Though mystical states are qualitatively different and subject to differing interpretations among these traditions, the similarity of phenomenological qualities is striking.³

Experiential qualities that recur through the writing of the mystical poets studied

² e.g. a sense of the interdependent nature of “good” and “evil,” female and male, night and day, temporality and eternity, individual and cosmos, and so forth. Dualisms that tend to separate oneself from the flux of the universe often dissolve during mystical experiences.

³ Cf. M. Eliade’s *Shamanism: Archaic Techniques of Ecstasy* and *Yoga: Immortality and Freedom* for erudite analyses of Central Asian and Indo-European shamanism, indigenous religious systems that, Eliade argues, provide the philosopho-religious foundations of Hinduism, Buddhism, and Taoism.

in this thesis are: 1.) a sense of a transcendent identity that spans beyond an isolated, separate ego, i.e., a sense of unity with the entire cosmos, manifested as an obliteration of ego or as an expanded identity that is simultaneously the personal ego and the All; 2.) an intuition that all of existence, including all that is tragic and sorrowful, is sanctified; 3.) an overwhelming sense of love, in the form of *agápē* or unconditional, spiritual love; 4.) mystical techniques based on sensory deprivation, fasting, psychological reconditioning, intensive prayer, psychotropic plants, spontaneous visions, meditation, asceticism, and nature retreats; 5.) the emphasis on Imagination as a spiritual, transformative power; 6.) becoming a receptive conduit, empty of thought and desire, through which a prophetic voice courses through, captured in poetry.

Throughout this thesis, comparison will be drawn between the mystical insights of the poets in study and fundamental ideas of Buddhist philosophy. Among these recurring qualities listed above, 1.) has affinities with the important Buddhist notion of *anatman*, the lack of an inherent, enduring self that thus lacks any ontological divide between self and the universe. 2.) parallels the Buddhist insight of *anuttara-samyak-sambodhi*, roughly translated as “unexcelled, all-pervading enlightenment,” that is, all things are blessed with perfection and inherent enlightenment. 3.) is similar to the Mahāyāna Buddhist emphasis on compassionate, loving kindness as a spiritual motivation. 4.) relates to the elaborate and technical systems of yoga and meditation developed in Buddhist concentrative exercises.

These recurring motifs and the relations to Buddhist philosophy will thus be explicated throughout this thesis.

Poetry and the Limitations of Language

Mystics discuss the *unio mystica*, or union with the Absolute, as a transformative experience of such enormous power that it defies one's comprehension; that is to say, the limits of discursive logic are reached when attempting to grasp mystical experiences conceptually. These experiences are considered ineffable due to the relationship between verbal language and discursive intellection. Interestingly, the word "mystic" comes from the ancient Greek μύειν, meaning "to close one's eyes, mouth" (Schürmann xiv). This etymology demonstrates the ancient relationship between mystics and vows of silence, as well as the esoteric impulse to approach the divine inwardly by "closing one's eyes."

Verbal language is a symbolic system that engages in a feedback loop with one's thoughts; verbal language is thus a vehicle to make transparent one's conceptual consciousness. Since mystical experiences purportedly transcend the limits of discursive intellection, language as a means of conceptual expression is likewise incapable of effectively describing mystical states.

The supposed ineffability of mystical experiences is a primary philosophical focus of this thesis. Language as a representational system appears to break down when attempting to convey the transcendental qualities of a mystical experience. It is noteworthy that Gimello's description of mystical ineffability states that mystical experiences are inapplicable to *conventional* language: throughout the centuries, though many mystics do retain a vow of silence, there is nonetheless an impulse to describe these experiences in oblique and highly symbolic language, resulting in a vast collection of mystical literature. Poetry, with its power to alter the syntactical qualities of language and engage one's mind in creatively novel ways, is an alternative to the conventional use

of language within the context of mysticism.

Humanistic psychologist Abraham Maslow, in his influential work *Religions, Values, and Peak Experiences*, utilizes the term “peak experiences” to describe mystical rapture. Regarding peak experiences and poetic language, he states,

Poetic and metaphorical language, physiognomic and synesthetic language, primary process language of the kind found in dreams, reveries, free associations and fantasies, not to mention pre-words and non-words such as gestures, tone of voice, style of speaking, body tonus, facial expressions – all these are more efficacious in communicating certain aspects of the ineffable. (85)

Thus, poetry’s dynamic power to shift syntactic structures and its association with dreams and ‘irrational’ qualities of consciousness creatively alters the functions of language. Poetic language, utilized by a mystical writer, engages the mind in a unique and awe-inspiring fashion that powerfully impacts both writer and audience.

The role of poetry in religion is a vital and ancient one. The Vedas, humanity’s most ancient sacred literature, providing the foundational framework of Hindu thought, are written as poems; the recitation of the sounds themselves was considered to have a magical sonic power. Homeric epic hymns and Greek mythologies were recited as oral poetry. Laozi’s *Tao Te Ching*, one of the most influential texts of Chinese philosophy, is written in verse. Both the New and Old Testaments are written in profoundly musical language. Much of Buddhist philosophy is written in verse. Indigenous shamans often convey their mystical journeys in highly symbolic and poetic language. Poetry’s ability to modify the conventional usage of language to convey mythopoeic themes and spiritual rapture grants it an important position within the history of religious traditions.

However, the role of poetry within the Western philosophical tradition is a

strained one. Though Pre-Socratic philosophers such as Parmenides and Heraklitus wrote in verse, the Platonic influence on the Western philosophical project prompted distrust in poetic philosophizing. Plato, though praising the poet's ability, mocked the poet's pretensions to truth in *Ion*, and in his *Republic*, suggests that poets be banished altogether in an ideal republic. Plato does this not to refute the aesthetic and sublime power of poetry, but to demonstrate that poets, by *representing* reality in their work, do not convey the transcendent Forms as accurately as philosophical argument. Poetry is but an imperfect imitation of an imperfect physical realm, while philosophy – *via* reasoning – can bring the soul closer to Truth. Following Plato's argument, the Western philosophical tradition relies on the power of reasoning and argumentation in the apprehension of knowledge and wisdom.

***Logos* and Rational Argument in Philosophy**

The *modus operandi* of conducting Western philosophy, from the Pre-Socratics onward, is to analyze the nature of reality *via* rational argumentation. The cosmos was understood as possessing a divine ordering principle, *logos* (λόγος). Ancient Greek philosopher Heraklitus analogized this cosmic order with the Word and Reason: "All things come to pass in accordance with this Word" (qtd. in Singh, 464). Knowledge in the Greek sense of *gnosis*, mystical revelation, results from a rational understanding of this *logos*, "...it is only the wise few who employ Reason to understand the Divine Order of the universe that have ('legitimate') knowledge in the true sense of the term" (Singh 465). Philosophers following Heraklitus' influence were thus to understand and convey

this *logos* through reasoning; Plato and Aristotle later explored the nature of reason, refining the rules and scope of rational argumentation. Thus, a rational understanding of the universe is essential to the project of Western philosophy, and this logical investigation is equally important in the Indo-Tibetan Buddhist traditions.

However, there appears to be a quality in mystical experiences that isn't "rational" in the traditional sense of that term. As discussed by Gimello, the "normal," analytical aspects of the intellect are substituted for a more intuitive form of cognition. As stated by religious scholar William Johnston:

...(S)ince mysticism is a retreat to a new level of conscious life and the actuation of a cognitive power ordinarily latent and unused, it leads to a new realm of reality in which logic, syllogism, causality, and the rest are no longer valid. Reason, this theory holds, has no more relative value: the highest knowledge is utterly irrational (90).

This claim is not asserting that a rational understanding of the universe is ineffective or needs to be replaced; rather, mystical experiences appear to be of an entirely unique phenomenological quality, a quality that defies the constraints of discursive logic. Thus, an alternative to rational discourse is needed. Poetic language is this alternative, and it is an appropriate alternative to philosophical argument in the examination and expression of mystical experiences.

Mystical traditions utilize logical reasoning as a conceptual starting point which will eventually be transcended: "It [mysticism] is seen by others as an extension of the conceptual, as a kind of exalted thinking that tends to go beyond the range of words, that goes beyond metaphysical discourse yet is somehow continuous with it. In this sense Plotinus was a mystic as Descartes was not, Spinoza was a mystic in a way that Kant was

not” (O’Donoghue 187). This use of logical reasoning as a conceptual starting point to be transcended is certainly central to traditional Indo-Tibetan Buddhist thinking as found in the writings of key figures like Dharmakīrti and Tsongkhapa (1357-1419).

While the Indo-Tibetan Buddhist tradition emphasized the importance of philosophical argument and logical reasoning for the attainment of valid knowledge and the cultivation of wisdom, reasoning and philosophical argument were less emphasized in the East Asian Buddhist traditions, of which Zen is a major school. Blossoming from the confluence of Taoism, a mystical tradition deemphasizing intellectuality, and Ch’an Buddhism,⁴ Zen developed into a tradition skeptical of reasoning, philosophical speculation, and the desire for enlightenment derived from external means, such as devotion to the Buddha or clergy. Zen masters often ridiculed those students who attempted to attain realization *via* conceptuality and philosophy, and Zen anecdotes recited for spiritual instruction often involve students falling into mud, being struck by sticks, and other visceral experiences as forms of direct psycho-physical realization. Thus, there is a tension in Buddhist schools between emphasizing philosophical rigor and emphasizing direct, meditative insights or *gnosis*. The *koan*, a paradoxical, seemingly nonsensical use of language, is another important tool in the Zen tradition. The *koan* skillfully utilizes concepts to undermine and transcend concepts. In the chapter dedicated to Western mystical poets, the relation between *koans* and Zen thought will be illustrated in the analysis of Blake and Shelley’s poetry.

The Indo-Tibetan Buddhist traditions stress the importance of both philosophical

⁴ A word translated to “Zen” in Japanese. This Mandarin term is derived from the Sanskrit *dhyāna*, meaning “meditation.” This etymology illustrates the Ch’an emphasis on meditation as the primary means to direct insight.

rigor and direct meditative insight, while the Zen tradition tends to critique reasoning and intellectual rigor as elaborate traps rather than liberative tools. Throughout this thesis, this tension between reasoning and nonconceptual direct experience is also evident in the writings of mystical poets, and the approaches range through a spectrum of emphasis. Eckhart, for example, valued reason insofar as it could prepare the mind for the ultimate realization as unity with God, which is beyond language and images; this approach to reasoning and *gnosis* is parallel to Dharmakīrti's epistemological project. Another example is that of Blake, who continually criticized the Enlightenment praise of reasoning as destructive to the creative, visionary powers latent in humanity; his visionary poetic project was thus one of spontaneous creativity and revelation as both a spiritual and aesthetic out-flowing.

Thus, Buddhist traditions disagree on the role of discursive logic in the cultivation of enlightenment, and there is also a diversity of opinion regarding logic and direct insight among the mystical poets explored in this thesis.

Gnosis As Mystical Insight

The second feature on Gimello's list of mystical commonalities, a strong confidence in the "reality" or "objectivity" of mystical experiences, is termed "noetic" in mystical analysis. Knowledge about the universe seems to appear directly within the depths of one's psyche. Regarding this noetic quality, F.C. Happold discusses Indian thinker Radhakrishnan: "The Indian philosopher Radhakrishnan also emphasizes this noetic quality, when he calls mysticism 'integrated thought,' in that it brings things

together in a new pattern, i.e. integrates them, instead of, as in analytical thought, breaking them into parts” (Happold 37). This again illustrates the unique qualities of consciousness encountered in mystical experiences; the revelatory nature of mystical experiences operates along a groove of cognition unlike the quotidian usage of rational intellect. Mysticism as “integrated thought” leading to noetic revelation corresponds to Percy Shelley’s description of the poetic imagination as a synthesizing form of cognition, distinct from the analytical quality of reasoning; reason in relation to this poetic imagination is “as the shadow to the substance” (9).

The English word “noetic,” along with the English word “knowledge,” is derived from the ancient Greek *gnosis* (γνῶσις), referring specifically to a form of direct spiritual insight. This, in turn, is derived from the Sanskrit term *jñāna*, a term widespread in Indian religions to refer to spiritual knowledge. Buddhists distinguish *jñāna*, this experiential wisdom, from *prajñā*, which is a conceptual, rational wisdom. Jeffrey John Kripal states in his intriguing article “Comparative Mystics: Scholars as Gnostic Diplomats,”

Gilles Quispel has suggested that Western culture possesses three ways of understanding—faith, reason, and *gnosis*—and that the third (knowledge that comes from intuitive, visionary, or mystical experience of the divine, rather than from either faith or reason) has been the least developed (514).

Kripal expands upon this way of understanding: “But there is a third epistemology. . . following Quispel I suggest that we think of it as fundamentally gnostic. The gnostic does not *believe* tenets or *discover* truths, like an orthodox religionist, on the one hand, or like a rationalist, on the other hand. The gnostic *knows*. . .” (515)

This knowing sometimes contradicts the claims of orthodox religions, and thus

the mystic as gnostic knower is often alienated from religious orthodoxy, such as with Blake or Shelley, or even persecuted as a heretic, as in the case of Meister Eckhart. Gnostic epistemology is “beyond belief” (Kripal 515), not dependent on dogma or religious institutions, resulting from direct *gnosis* rather relying only on faith and reason.

This next section will discuss the epistemology of Buddhist philosopher Dharmakīrti, and how his analysis of conceptual reasoning and direct mystical insights adds a unique contribution to discussing the tension between conceptuality and transrational mystical insights.

You never enjoy the world aright, till the Sea itself floweth in your veins, till you are clothed with the heavens, and crowned with the stars: and perceive yourself to be the sole heir of the whole world... Till you can sing and rejoice and delight in God, as misers do in gold, and Kings in sceptres, you never enjoy the world. –Thomas Traherne
(qtd. in Happold, 371-372)

Chapter Three: Dharmakīrti on Yogic Perception and Conceptual Reasoning

Free the potent elephant
of mind,
and don't look there for concepts;

let that vast mountain
drink the river's water,
and dwell on the shore as it pleases. –Saraha (110)

Buddhist philosopher Dharmakīrti (ca. 7th century) continues the epistemological analyses of the Pramāṇa school, which was founded in the 6th century by Dignāga. Pramāṇa philosophers concern themselves with what constitutes valid knowledge and the means by which valid cognition or knowledge is derived. According to the Pramāṇa school, valid cognition derived from direct yogic perception is defined as being free from conceptual construction (*kalpanāpodha*) and non-erroneous (*abhrānta*) (Woo 439). For Dharmakīrti, the cultivation of inferential valid knowledge about selflessness, the Four Noble Truths, etc., are critical in the cultivation of direct yogic perception.

According to Pramāṇa philosophers, there are two types of valid knowledge: inference (*anumāna*) and direct perception (*pratyakṣa*); objects of perception are particulars with a definite temporal and spatial existence, while universals, which words refer to, are conceptual constructs without causal efficacy (Blumenthal 3). Inferences are conceptual and direct perceptions are non-conceptual. Universals, as conceptual constructs, are thus considered to be unreal.

***Apoha* Theory**

Concepts are mental constructions that generalize information obtained through the senses. Words within a given language are individual signs that denote these mental constructs. For example, after one perceives specific examples of trees numerous times, one can utilize the concept of “tree” to refer to these entities in a general sense. Thus, concept formation is deeply interwoven with direct sensory perception, a point emphasized by Dharmakīrti: “...conceptuality arises as a result of our experiences. In this way, conceptual thoughts are connected indirectly to reality” (Dreyfus 226).

However, positing these universals as having some kind of fixed conceptual essence contradicts the Buddhist philosophical notion of entities lacking an inherent, fixed essence. Both Dharmakīrti and Dignāga stress the realness of particular entities, since they arise from direct perception, while emphasizing the unreality of universals (Dreyfus 209). Dignāga’s *apoha* theory is a linguistic theory that describes the relationship among concepts, language, and perceived objects within the context of Buddhist philosophy. *Apoha* theory aims to explain away the problem of how language, which refers to can be used to refer to particulars and thus be a vehicle for accruing valid knowledge about reality through the use of inference.

According to Dignāga, language refers not to universals, but through a process of negation, or exclusion (*apoha*), language eliminates all that is not referred to by a specific word. Rather than words referring to an “essence,” they simply exclude all entities that are not within the word’s domain of meaning. To utilize the word “tomato,” then, is not to refer to a substantive essence, but to utilize a concept that refers to a specific object

while negating all non-tomato entities (Blumenthal Sec. 3). By working *via negativa* rather than referring to entities that possess an essential self-nature, this linguistic approach aligns with the central Buddhist notion of *śūnyatā*, the lack of inherent, substantive existence among phenomena. Dharmakīrti emphasizes two distinct forms of cognition. The first form of cognition is direct perception in which an object is apprehended as it is, while the second form is the abstract mentation involved when one conceptually reflects on an object; “(w)hereas perception apprehends real entities, universals are the objects apprehended by thought” (Dreyfus 217). Dharmakīrti posits these two forms of cognition to reconcile the ability to ascertain valid knowledge with the absence of real universals.

Though the first mode of cognition, direct perception, apprehends an object “nakedly,” this object is only ascertained after the process of conceptual mediation. A perceived oval-shaped white entity thus moves from an unlabeled image to the concept of “egg.” Georges Dreyfus expands on this point by stating, “Unlike perception conceptual activity does not mirror reality but relates to universals, which it mistakenly projects onto reality” (218). This mistaken conceptual projection is a deeply problematic distortion within Buddhist philosophy. Primary Buddhist philosophical notions are *anātman*, the lack of an enduring, essential self, as well as *śūnyatā*, the lack of inherent, substantive existence among phenomena. A fundamental Buddhist project is to liberate oneself from falsely clinging to the mistaken idea of an inherently existent self. Likewise, an adept is to liberate herself from clinging to what appears to be permanent, substantive existence among phenomena. As a philosopher of language and epistemologist, Dharmakīrti concerns himself with positing a proper use of language that avoids these faulty modes of

conceptual projection.

A difficulty with utilizing concepts to form generalities or universals among individual entities is the distortion of generalization. With the example of the concept “tree” discussed above, though trees generally share similar characteristics, each individual tree is a unique entity radically different from every other tree subsumed under the concept “tree.”⁵ Dreyfus comments, “Thus, conceptual consciousness distorts reality by making it fit into artificially created categories. It thereby obscures the fundamental differences between the objects that we judge to be similar” (230). Again, the erroneous projection of concepts onto reality can hinder one’s undistorted perception of reality “as it is.” And yet, Dharmakīrti wants to use language in logical inferences to infer valid knowledge. Thus, *apoha* theory was presented to address this philosophical quandary.

The inability to express the profoundly transformative qualities of a mystical experience – the sense of the ineffable – is analyzed by Dharmakīrti in intriguing ways. Though focusing on experience generally rather than mystical experiences specifically, Dharmakīrti has insightful reflections on the nature of ineffability.

As discussed in the *apoha* exegesis of this chapter, language relates to our world – albeit indirectly – through a process of elimination. According to Dharmakīrti, “Words do not relate (*pravṛtti*, *jug pa*) [directly] to individuals for [these individuals] are discrete [entities]. Therefore, the object of words relates solely to conventions” (qtd. in Dreyfus

⁵ Cf. Nietzsche’s *Über Wahrheit und Lüge im außermoralischen Sinn*, “On Truth and Lies in a Nonmoral Sense,” for an edifying analysis of this same issue: “Every word immediately becomes a concept, inasmuch as it is not intended to serve as a reminder of the unique and wholly individualized original experience to which it owes its birth, but must at the same time fit innumerable, more or less similar cases—which means, strictly speaking, never equal—in other words, a lot of unequal cases. Every concept originates through our equating what is unequal” (Nietzsche 513).

263). Commenting on this, Dreyfus notes, "...for the Buddhist epistemologist, reality is beyond the direct scope of thought and language. Accordingly, reality is said to be unutterable, ineffable, transcending description, and so forth" (263-264). Profound implications result from this sense of ineffability. Since language is critiqued as being a conventional fiction, a system of conventions needed for communication, language as such does not relate directly to reality, and thus no linguistic expression can accurately convey one's experience.

Direct Yogic Perception

A debated notion within Dharmakīrti's epistemology is that of yogic perception, or *yogipratyakṣa*. This second type of valid knowledge is non-inferential, direct perception. Yogic perception is a state of mystical absorption unmediated by conceptual filters. Dharmakīrti claims that these perceptions are direct perceptions freed of conceptual distortion (*vikalpa*) (Woo 440). As a proponent of the Pramāṇa school, Dharmakīrti grounds the notion of *yogipratyakṣa* with the two criteria of valid cognition listed above. Analyzing the nature of *yogipratyakṣa* illustrates that both conceptual knowledge and direct meditative insight are indispensable for Dharmakīrti's soteriological project.

According to Dharmakīrti, in the process of meditation (*bhāvanā*), a yogi's meditative concentration culminates in yogic perception (*yogipratyakṣa*). Prior to this stage of concentration, images focused upon in the yogi's mind will appear as clearly as if they were present to the yogi's senses – this clarity increases until the mental image is a vivid manifestation of perception (*viśadābhā*) (Woo 439-440). After this stage of

termination (*paryanta*), yogic perception occurs, in which the perceived meditative object is grasped with complete vividness.

These meditative objects of direct yogic perceptions are selflessness, emptiness, or the Four Noble Truths. Dharmakīrti argues that though yogic perceptions may seem “imaginative” since these perceptions grasp objects of a strictly mental nature, they result in valid knowledge because yogic perceptions are a form of indeterminate cognition (*nirvikalpaka*). Indeterminate cognition involves perceiving an object directly, free from conceptual filtering; “the indeterminate is vivid because it is produced by the presence of its object while the determinate is unclear because it does not rely on the presence of the object it conceives” (Woo 442). Yogic perception, by vividly apprehending an object without recourse to conceptual mediation, is thus considered to be a valid form of perception due to its indeterminate cognitive nature.

Therefore, Dharmakīrti posits yogic perception as a valid form of perception. “Dharmakīrti defines *yogi jñāna* as intuition of a mystic that is produced from the subculminational state of deep meditation on transcendental reality. Buddhists, like other mystics, believe in the fact of intuitive realizations... The experiences acquired in the state of *samādhi* are perceptual ones because they are vivid, presentational, and direct” (Bhatt and Mehrotra, 48). “Intuition” is a rather vague term within philosophical discourse. In the context of Dharmakīrti’s mystical intuition, it again refers to a nonconceptual, direct experience accessed through meditation.

As to the nature of what is experienced in *samādhi*, or the meditative absorption of yogic perception, Dharmakīrti claims that mystical visions or mental objects of meditative focus are ultimately unreal, parallel to hallucinations; however, if these states

aid in liberation, reduce suffering and afflictive emotions, then the reality or unreality of the visions and meditative objects are not important – only the soteriological effectiveness is relevant.⁶ (Dunne, “Realizing the Unreal” 515). In this sense, Buddhism has much in common with pragmatism. Yogic perceptions are thus states of valid cognition because they are “trustworthy” (*saṃvādin*) (Dunne, *Foundations of Dharmakīrti’s Philosophy*, 226).

There are difficulties with the notion of *yogipratyakṣa* insofar as liberative effects are concerned. Dharmakīrti appears to be contradicting his account of perceptions. As Georges Dreyfus asks, “If perception cannot eliminate wrong views, how can yogic perception root out delusions, since this constitutes an elimination of superimpositions?” (413). Dharmakīrti’s answer returns to the notion of meditative stages in yogic perception. After the termination (*paryanta*) that results in the state of insight meditation (*vipaśyanā*) prior to yogic perception, a focused concept appears so completely vivid that it becomes nonconceptual. A meditative concept – such as impermanence or no-self – is somehow *attained* and absorbed into the flux of consciousness after being conceptually grasped. Such meditative insights into these fundamental philosophical truths are vital to Buddhist contemplative practice. One might ask – is this insight, despite its vividness, also a conceptual construction, albeit a highly refined concept?

Though Dharmakīrti is a bit ambiguous regarding the difficulties of *yogipratyakṣa*, Tibetan commentators expand on this issue. A discussion by Dreyfus states that yogic perception is apperceptive, or introspective reflection, rather than

⁶ On this note, Dharmakīrti comments, “Therefore, whether it be true or untrue, whatever is meditated upon will result in a clear, nonconceptual cognition when the meditation is perfected” (qtd. in Dunne, *Foundations of Dharmakīrti’s Philosophy*, 306).

perceptive; this apperception is “...less an active cognizing than a heightened state of receptivity reached through the elimination of obscurations” (413). Furthermore, “(i)t is a state in which the mind of the yogi does not apprehend any object but merely abides in its luminosity... Yogic perception, then, is a state of pure apperception in which all conceptualization has been eliminated and in which the nonconceptual state of the mind is clearly revealed” (Dreyfus 414). Thus, in analytical meditation, a mental dialectic is practiced in which the grasping of conceptual constructs culminates in the illuminating insight of nonconceptual yogic perception, an activity more accurately termed apperception.

Concepts are pragmatically useful insofar as they serve as bases for meditative realizations. They serve to anchor the mind with a proper orientation in preparation for meditative insight. In an article on Dharmakīrti’s theory of yogic perception, John Dunne states, “It thus seems clear that, in formulating his theory of yogic perception, Dharmakīrti focuses on the movement from a conceptual understanding of the Noble Truths to a nonconceptual realization of them” (Dunne, “Realizing the Unreal” 509) – being a realization gained in yogic perception.

Likewise, Anne Klein comments,

The Mādhyamika system describes a yogic direct perceiver’s direct and non-dualistic cognition of emptiness as being like fresh water poured into fresh water; subject and object – the mind and emptiness – are fused in one... Gelukba stresses again and again that a correct non-conceptual realization of emptiness begins with a factually concordant conceptual consciousness. (214-215)

Without this “factually concordant” framework, a meditator can easily be lost in reverie, distraction, confusion, or in extreme cases, psychosis can result. The mind, carefully prepared with fundamental Buddhist ideas, finally blossoms with the liberating realization of *samādhi* or meditative absorption. What begins as an abstract, intangible conceptual truth is experienced directly – attained. Thus, the subtle dialectic between thought and realization is brought to fruition by Buddhist practitioners: “(t)he nature of this understanding is claimed to be such that approaching it unlocks the ordinary dualistic patterning of conceptual thought” (Klein 17).

Thus, an adept begins with inferences regarding the primary notions of Buddhist philosophy. Rather than remaining at a strictly intellectual knowledge of these truths, the inference blossoms into an insight that illumines one’s entire being. Eventually, inference alone is transcended, in a state of “apprehending what has been apprehended” (*grhītagrahaṇa*) (Dunne, *Foundations of Dharmakīrti’s Philosophy* 306).

Thus far, I have analyzed Dharmakīrti’s attempt to reconcile the constraints and benefits of language with Buddhist philosophical training. Is there an alternative to conventional language that can reconcile linguistic expression and nonconceptual mystical states? If language is faulty in its ability to convey directly one’s experience of reality, how does mystical poetry fit into this conundrum? Is there something unique about poetic expression that allows it to subvert the inherent limitations of language?

Yogic Perception and Mystical Poetry

Poetic language is a subversive form of expression insofar as it challenges the conventions of a given language. The basic rules of grammar, syntax, and semantics are selectively modified and creatively transformed into something novel within poetic expression. In a sense, the inability of language to relate directly to our world is taken for granted in poetry, and even exaggerated, to evoke the symbolic and imaginative – rather than concrete and factual – qualities of language. Poets celebrate the ambiguity and imprecision of language; their worlds of expression can be more similar to the blurry amorphousness of dreams than the linear processing of waking experience.

Indian tantric adept and poet Saraha, circa 10th century C.E., polemically reflects on the ineffable nature of one's ultimate identity thus:

If the guru
doesn't explain the teaching
the pupil won't comprehend—

but the ambrosial taste
of the innate nature
who can declare what that's like? (85)

With this couplet, Saraha comments on the delicate balance of spiritual training. He illustrates the importance of learning under a spiritual teacher, while subtly cautioning to not become mired in the teachings themselves. Throughout Saraha's poetry, he is consistently skeptical of gurus, rational philosophy, the elitism and trappings of spiritual communities, and the ascetic, life-denying tendencies of both Hindu and Buddhist practices. As both a tantric practitioner and poet, Saraha subverts the dominant

assumptions and practices of Buddhism, as well as the conventional usage of language.

Though obliquely referred to as being similar to divine nectar, the nature of one's ultimate being is unspeakable. Only the illumination of direct experience can grant this *gnosis*.

Saraha states in another couplet:

The real nature of thought
is the referent, the nonreferent
is emptiness;
the flaw is the duality—
there is no yogin
who meditates upon it. (111)

This fits well into Dharmakīrti's epistemological analyses. Here Saraha refers to an intentional object of meditation as a "referent" (Tib. *dmigs*), being a concept or image focused on during meditation. Ultimately, the referent is a nonreferent – a nonconceptual realization of emptiness, both in the sense of realizing *śūnyatā* and attaining a state beyond reference and conceptuality. "The real nature of thought" is therefore ineffable. This insight is "empty" insofar as no word can describe the experience. To think of a meditator (subject) as being distinct from meditation (object) is also flawed; ultimately, nondual realization grasps a unified continuum of experience.⁷

Though Saraha is wary of clinging to words – "but resist words, and you'll get past words" (103), – he nonetheless writes poetry with words. This paradox of

⁷ "These ecstasies culminate in an enlightened awareness or gnosis – often referred to as 'the innate' (*sahaja*) or the great seal (*mahāmudrā*) – in which the mind's natural purity and luminosity, its nondual realization of emptiness, and an experience of great bliss or ecstasy are indissolubly interfused" (Jackson 12).

expressing the inexpressible is a current running throughout mystical poetry. Herein is a unique function of poetry that differs from the conventional usage of language utilized in rational discourse. A functional difference between poetry and prose is that while prose relies strictly on the meaning generated from words to express a given statement, poetry can – in a sense – lift one above the page, invoking an imaginative space, a newfound and creative semantic field.

In both of Saraha's quoted couplets, there is an implicit reference to mystical insight, an insight that defies conceptuality and the words used to express concepts. Parallel to the Zen adage of a "finger pointing to the moon," Saraha is attempting to point his readers to an experience that neither words nor teachings can encapsulate, though they can facilitate this meditative insight.

Visionary poets, from medieval Christian mystics to Tantric adepts and the Romantics, intend to capture an experience parallel to yogic perception, a state of pure apperception in which the luminosity of mind, previously veiled, shines forth blindingly. Certain mystics practice sensory deprivation, others turn to vast natural landscapes for inspiration, while others utilize forms of meditation or intensive prayer to reach these states of luminosity. Being conscious of the limits of language, knowing that words cannot directly refer to these insights, these poets still push to the utmost boundaries of language in order to refer to *and invoke* this luminous rapture. In a sense, these poets are guiding the reader to share in this experience. Rather than using language in a strictly pedantic or representative way, mystical poetry is an *outflowing*, a true ecstasis in which the poet merges with the reader, beyond the bounds of space and time. This form of mystical poetry serves to catalyze mystical experiences in the readers themselves.

In Conclusion

This chapter has analyzed Dharmakīrti's complex notion of *yogipratyakṣa*, or yogic perception, within the greater context of *apoha* theory from Dignāga's school of epistemology, Pramāṇa. Dharmakīrti's criteria for valid knowledge, continued from the Pramāṇa school, was discussed, as well as the reliance on both conceptual reasoning and direct meditative insight in the culmination of wisdom. The nonconceptuality invoked in yogic perceptions, and the difficulty of language to describe these spaces, has been explored. Language's inability to express directly one's experience – ineffability – has also been examined.

Given these theoretical challenges, poetry has been posited as an alternative to conventional language when intending to refer to states of *gnosis*. Mystical experiences, having profoundly emotive and paradoxical qualities, are more appropriately expressed in poetic form, since poetry can alter the rules of syntax and semantics and engage the mind creatively in ways that rational prose cannot. Additionally, mystical poetry inspires a meditative exercise that invites readers to share in and invoke mystical experiences themselves.

Chapter Four: Western Mystical Poets

“The poet makes himself a seer by a long, prodigious, and rational disordering of all the senses. Every form of love, of suffering, of madness; he searches himself, he consumes all the poisons in him, and keeps only their quintessences.” –Arthur Rimbaud

This statement by Rimbaud illustrates well the struggle and relentless diligence practiced by mystical poets. Utilizing the alchemical term “quintessence,” or spiritual essence, the profound yearning, isolation and even madness experienced by mystics must be transformed into spiritual fuel, the inspiration of the sacred. A poet is thus to become a conduit for the sacred, a seer, akin to the Vedic *ṛṣi* who did not compose the Vedas, but rather received the hymns in ecstasy.

This chapter explores the visionary poetry of Christian theologian Meister Eckhart, Persian Sufi Jalāl ad-Dīn Muḥammad Rūmī, and Romantics William Blake and Percy Bysshe Shelley. These writers were inspired by different aesthetic and religious motivations. Eckhart was a priest, while Rūmī was a founder of an esoteric Muslim sect. Thus, they were fundamentally religious figures who poetically wrote of their mystical insights. Contrarily, Blake and Shelley were poets, iconoclastic and alienated from religious orthodoxies, who were drawn to mystical experiences and described or mythologized them in their visionary poetry. Differing in their vocations, these figures nonetheless utilized poetic language to express the inexpressible. Though writing from non-Buddhist traditions, these poets exhibit intriguing similarities with Buddhist philosophy that will be expanded upon. Additionally, a feminist critique of mysticism will be included, along with an analysis of Benedictine nun Hildegard of Bingen and

ecopoet Mary Oliver's mystical poetry that illustrates the unique qualities of the feminine approach to mysticism.

Meister Eckhart

Medieval Christian mystic Meister Eckhart (1260 -1328) was a controversial figure during his lifetime, and he was brought before the court of the Franciscan Inquisition for heresy shortly before his death. Eckhart's intimate sense of oneness with God was controversial during the religious climate of 13th century Europe, when the Catholic Church wielded immense political and religious power. Iconoclastic and unique in his mystical understanding of God's nature, his usage of the Old German terms "nothingness" (*niht*) and the ultimate ground of Being (*grunt*) grants him intriguing affinities with Buddhist philosophy.

A translated passage from Eckhart's sermon "Every Excellent Gift" addresses spiritual aspirants thus:

...You are looking for nothingness; this is why you find nothingness. If you find nothingness, it is because you seek nothingness. All creatures are mere nothingness. I do not say that they are small or anything at all: they are mere nothingness. What has no being is nothing. Creatures have no being, for their being depends on the presence of God. Were God to turn away from all creatures, be it for an instant, they would all fall into nothingness. (qtd. in Schürmann, 63-64)

This rather abstruse passage is interpreted by translator Schürmann as, "Hence, to keep one's look riveted on things is the source of harm: in themselves they are non-being, nothingness, for their being comes from elsewhere... they [created beings] are nothingness in themselves, for their being belongs to God" (63-64).

"Furthermore, Eckhart maintains that the One, as transparent and transcendent nothingness, encompasses and penetrates all" (Radler 111). As an individual soul yearns for union with God, it can, in mystical rapture, enter the infinite God that is beyond God,

whose nature is *niht* – not a something, nor a nothing, though “nothingness” is the only applicable word insofar as it engages the intellect *via negativa*. All of creation thus shares in divine nature:

There is a firm ontological link between the One, the Trinity, and creation. . . This continuity between Creator and creature, time and eternity, sanctifies creation and transience in all its grittiness and overcomes a duality between Creator and creature similar to the interpretation of *samsara* and *nirvana* (conditioned reality is Boundless Openness in Mahayana thought) (Radler 111).

However, this comparison is problematic. A dependent unity between a creator God and creation is unlike *samsara* and *nirvana*, insofar as neither form of existence within Buddhist thought is created by a supreme being. Thus, though there may be a parallel between the unity of creation and Creator in Eckhart’s thought and the overcoming of self-and-cosmos duality in Buddhist thought, this is unlike the unique metaphysical qualities of *samsara* and *nirvana*.

What this claim attempts to be stating is that according to Eckhart, insofar as God’s infinite being encompasses all, all things are thus in seamless unity with God. Radler’s comparison of this unity with the unity of *samsara* and *nirvana*, though of an entirely different ontological order than the monotheistic notion of God and creation, refers to Nāgārjuna’s thesis that *samsara*, this conditioned world of flux and suffering, is not different from the liberative, unconditioned bliss of *nirvana*.

Eckhart’s claim, thus, refers to our innate divinity. The nonduality between *samsara* and *nirvana* refers to the latent enlightenment within us that must be unveiled rather than attained. There is a parallel between Eckhart’s notion of nothingness and Buddhist ontology. There is no known evidence to illustrate a Buddhist influence on

Eckhart's mysticism, and given the time frame of his life, it is highly improbable that he knew of Buddhist texts or religious practices. Nonetheless, the parallel between his theological speculation and Buddhist philosophy is noteworthy. Robert E. Carter, influenced by Zen philosopher Ueda Shizuteru's conception of Zen as "non-mysticism," discusses the comparative analysis of Zen Buddhism and Eckhart's notion of nothingness, "Second, the non-mystic's experience of the oneness of all things takes us beyond the 'things,' beyond God, and even beyond Being, to non-being, nothingness, *mu*. It is as though a hole opens, and this empty hole or opening leads infinitely beyond" (15). Ueda comments, "we can see something analogous to the Zen sense of nothingness... in Meister Eckhart's idea of the nothingness of the Godhead" (qtd. in Carter 6).

Likewise, the notion of *grunt*, the ultimate Source that is within and yet transcendent of all creation, is parallel to Eckhart's nothingness, insofar as it can only be approached *via negativa*, beyond conceptual constraints; this divine ground, according to Eckhart, is "pure possibility" (qtd in Carter 14), the "God beyond all conceptions of God..." (Carter 14). *Grunt* is a primary metaphorical term utilized by Eckhart, and "...it can be used to refer to that which is hidden, innermost, or that which is most proper to a thing, namely its essence. Eckhart and his followers used it often in this fourth sense to refer to the depths of the soul, the bottomlessness within us" (Carter 4). Akin to the Hermetic axiom "As above, So below," the innermost essence of an entity, insofar as it is ultimately *niht* – nothingness – co-exists with the innermost essence of God. This divine ground is a dynamic one, and God is thus understood as an ongoing, fluctuating process, rather than as a specific entity. Eckhart's conception depends on a monotheistic centralizing of an ultimate source, God, which differs greatly from the Buddhist

metaphysical notion of emptiness. Masao Abe writes, “Monotheistic oneness does not include the element of self-negation and is substantial, whereas nondualistic oneness includes self-negation and is nonsubstantial” (qtd. in Rudy 15). Therefore, the unity described by Eckhart as ultimate nothingness involves a metaphysical substance, being the ultimate Being as God, while the Buddhist *śūnyatā* refers to no such substantial existent.

Regarding this relation between individual and “the nothingness of the Godhead,” Eckhart’s conception is quite radical: “The innermost in God is identical with the innermost in us. At this level, there is an ‘absolute unity’ of God and the human person. In this sense, we are already divine, already one with God. Both God and we humans share the same origin: ‘the ground that has no ground’ (Carter 4). The paradoxical term “ground that has no ground” is akin to the use of paradoxical language utilized both in Taoism – the Wayless Way – and Buddhism – the Gateless Gate. With such phrases, we are urged to move past the dualistic usage of binary conceptuality, into the *mysterium tremendum*, as Eliade puts it, that transcends conceptualization. As one wanders into the awe-inspiring mystery of existence, Eckhart pushes the wayfarer to realize her unity with God. One maintains her individual identity, delicate as that is, while paradoxically embracing the Identity that spans beyond the individual self. This revelatory relationship is a unique form of dialectic: “Dialectic as existence, as praxis, as exercise, preserves both the stillness and the motion, celebrates both fusion and difference” (Radler 113).

Speaking in Wordlessness

Meister Eckhart shares the concept-wariness posited by mystics across other religious contexts. Carter expands on Eckhart's wariness of language, "... 'absolute nothingness' is Eckhart's way of indicating that the ultimate God, or, as I like to say it, the nothingness beyond God, is beyond words and conception. Indeed, even to speak of God's essence is to have said too much" (Carter 6).

The movement from reasoning to a kind of "meta-reasoning" is an archetypal mystical journey to align oneself with the sacred in contemplation:

Contemplative prayer demands the rejection of concepts of God; and St. John of the Cross asks for the most rigorous detachment from all thoughts, ideas, and images of any kind, as well as from all formulations of dogma. This is not to say that these ideas and views are erroneous... but simply that they are imperfect and should be transcended when superthinking enters the conscious mind. Eckhart can speak of being so poor that one does not even 'have a God' (Johnston 190).

Though one may utilize language in prayer, Eckhart, following the suggestion of St. John of the Cross, urges us to move past the words and conceptual artifices that limit our apprehension of God. Time and again, Eckhart's sermons focus on self-emptying, returning an open and receptive grace, and developing a sense of detachment from the delusive clinging to a separate, autonomous ego-self.

Though Eckhart did not proclaim himself a poet, and though his sermons are often moderated by the serene breezes of a cautious intellect, his teachings nonetheless break into rapturous verse. A common poetic image utilized by Eckhart is the desert (Stone 235), that spiritual longing in one's soul that is akin to a pilgrim wandering through an

endless desert, purifying and emptying herself to uncover her latent divinity. Eckhart's serene use of poetic language manifests in the following sermon:

. . .Here is what I say now: it [a power in the mind] is neither this nor that [*weder diz noch daz*], and yet it is a something. It is raised above this and that [*diz und daz*], higher than the sky is above earth. . .It is free of all names and devoid of all forms, entirely bare and free, as void and free as God is in himself. It is perfect unity and simplicity as God is unity and simplicity, so that in no way one can peer into it (qtd. in Stone 232, "Jesus Entered.")

Thus, *via* Eckhart's teachings, the most effective mystical attitude is one of calm simplicity, grace, and self-emptying, akin to the tranquil and disciplined lifestyle of Zen adepts. In the open desert of one's mind, flora may suddenly burst through the landscape of one's being, enriching soil that was once barren, as the devotee nakedly confronts her ultimate nature: unified with all of creation, and thus ecstatically unified with God.

Rūmī

Persian poet-mystic Jalāl ad-Dīn Muḥammad Rūmī (1207 – 1273) represents an archetypal mystic: iconoclastic within his religious tradition, overwhelmed with religious emotionality to the point of ecstasy, Rūmī struggled to express the inexpressible in language. Rūmī consistently compares his mystical ecstasy to wine drunkenness, and he speaks of himself as being an empty vessel, void of reason and consciousness, as he becomes the story which he recites and is merely an unconscious mouthpiece of God (DeLamotte 59). Rūmī thus writes his poetry in states of divine inspiration, in the sense of the Latin word it is derived from, *inspiratus*, overcome by the Spirit. The Mawlawī Sufi order, an esoteric sect of Islam, was founded by Rūmī’s students proceeding his death; these Sufis are known as the Whirling Dervishes, due to a trance-inducing dance involving repetitive spinning. Though there appears to be no Buddhist influence on Rūmī’s theology or poetry, he reaches conclusions that parallel both Eckhart’s notion of God as the dynamic ground of existence and the Buddhist nondual realization of emptiness.

Rūmī’s mystical approach is *via negativa*, and the negating aspects of his approach are illustrated in a major work, the *Mathnawī*. Major aspects of this path are: renunciation from “worldly” activity such as politics, wealth, and distracting entanglements – even one’s family may be renounced if they hinder one’s mystical progress; mortification and asceticism: “the body is a wine cup to be shattered” (qtd. in DeLamotte 59), and poverty (*faqr*) – both in monetary and spiritual terms. Thus, an involved diligence and set of techniques is utilized for this mystical process of radical

disillusionment. An important process in this approach is *fanā*, a term often translated as “mystical obliteration,” though its context is difficult to translate: “. . . Empty-handed, empty-minded and desire-less, he is and he is not. He has and he has not the feeling of existence. He knows nothing, he understand nothing. He is in love, but with whom he is not aware of. . .” (Arasteh 19). As this mystical self-emptying continues, along with a sense of absence, a newfound sense of fullness arises, “. . . in order to eliminate the subject-object relation and achieve union. . . This state of union, the climax of the annihilation of the partial self, is identical with ecstasy and gives the impression of a natural intoxication. Among the Persian Sufis this painless ecstatic trance sometimes lasted for days or weeks. . .” (Arasteh 19). Mystical rebirth is thus a necessary aspect of this process.

A method utilized in *fanā* is an intensive meditative concentration coupled with practices of sensory deprivation. Thought is stilled, because as Rūmī states, “the intellect cannot swim in the sea of Love; the mind is drowned, put to sleep, destroyed in the fire of *fanā* and the fire of Love, swept away by the waves of ecstatic bewilderment” (qtd. in DeLamotte 66). In this receptive state, with willpower, intellection, and desire negated, one is empty enough to receive the beatific vision, the blissful apprehension of *gnosis* in which the individual swims into the infinite ocean of God. This experience is described by Rūmī in many ways: a paper God writes upon, a fish feigning to be dead and so bourn by the waters, a gnat drowned in honey without initiative or conscious existence or movement of its own (DeLamotte 67). The partial sense of self-consciousness thus gives way to a totality of oneness with all existence, and Rūmī as mystical poet is but a conduit for the influx of sacred inspiration.

This sense of liberating transcendence, of moving beyond the duality of subject and object, self and cosmos, is a theme revisited continually among the mystics studied in this thesis. From this consciousness of unity, experiencing the pulsing heartbeat of existence with all creation, Rūmī writes:

If there be any lover in the world, O Muslim – ‘tis I.
 If there be any believer, infidel, or Christian hermit – ‘tis I.
 The wine-dregs, the cup-bearer, the minstrel, the harp, and the music
 The beloved, the candle, the drink and the joy of the drunken – ‘tis I.
 The two and seventy creeds and sects in the world
 Do not really exist: I swear by God that every creed and sect – ‘tis I.
 Earth and air and water and fire, knowest thou what they are?
 Earth and air and water and fire, nay, body and soul too – ‘tis I.
 Truth and falsehood, good and evil, ease and difficulty from first to last,
 Knowledge and learning and asceticism and piety and faith – ‘tis I.
 The fire of Hell, be assured, with its flaming limbs,
 Yes, and paradise and Eden and the Houris – ‘tis I.
 The Earth and heaven with all that they hold,
 Angels, Peris, Genies and Mankind – tis ‘I (qtd. in Arasteh 21-22).

Akin to Eckhart’s *grunt*, the sacred Being of God is continually in manifestation, and spiritual aspirants are capable of ecstatically joining this ground of existence. It is this lived experience of cosmic unity that Rūmī likens to being truly awake, while life devoid of *fanā*’s *gnosis* is akin to being asleep. Similarly, “Buddha” is a title for one who is Awakened.

Rūmī was intrigued by philosophical speculation, but quickly realized that “(r)eason can only help him reach the door of wakefulness” (Arasteh 117). Reasoning can spark the flame of inspiration and lead the aspirant to a life of spiritual contemplation, concentrating the mind to clear away distractions, but in itself it is not sufficient for realization.; “(i)ndeed, this limitation in philosophy turned Rumi from

conventional life to Sufism (Arasteh 103). Regarding this tension between reasoning and direct mystical insight, Rūmī writes,

In replying to the voice of the real self, the intellectual voice gives its excuses: 'I am preoccupied with things of a higher nature, such as jurisprudence, philosophy, logic, astronomy and medicine.' In answer, Rūmī's voice, representing the real self, replies, 'If you are concerned with astronomy and all matters involving the earth, then you should realize that they are all related to your life. Actually you, yourself are the root and all the other things are offshoots. To know yourself is the greatest of accomplishments' (qtd. in Arasteh 108).

Therefore, Rūmī continues the tradition of entering *gnosis* as a means of obtaining direct mystical insight, outside the limits of conceptual constructions; the goal of utmost primacy, according to him, is the attainment of self-realization.

Love As Metamorphosis

Rūmī often praised the power of love, in its erotic, interpersonal, as well as mystical manifestations. Its power enables a seeker of God to awaken to mystical unity, metamorphosing with wings of spirit to behold the sacred. As a highly sensitized poet, he felt the pangs and desires of love to an overwhelming degree, and bewildered by its mysterious nature, he asks: "One night I asked love, say truly who are you? / She replied: I am everlasting life; the succession of happy life" (qtd. in Arasteh 76). Though well aware of the tragedies and suffering of existence, Rūmī equates life itself with love, manifesting as a kind of ontological force. Similarly, the German word *leben*, "to live," is nearly identical with *lieben*, "to love," illustrating that numerous cultural perspectives

equate living with loving. After wandering through the world's vastness, tasting its joys and poisons, Rūmī reflects,

I tasted everything
I found nothing better than you.
When I dove into the sea,
I found no pearl like you.

I opened all the casks,
I tasted from a thousand jars,
Yet none but that rebellious wine of yours
Touched my lips and inspired my heart (qtd. in Arasteh 76).

Rūmī considers this power of love supreme to intellectual power, for “Intellect does not know and is bewildered in the religion of love; / Though it might be aware of all sects of religion” (qtd. in Arasteh 79). With this concluding line, he critiques the many divisions and factions of religion, so often leading to contention and violence.

The more one renounces, the emptier one becomes, with attachments and compulsions gradually dropping away, the more one is receptive to the infinite Love of God. States Sufi scholar A. Reza Arasteh, “Where reason fails, love conquers, and where thought is powerless love proves all-pervailing” (80). Wherever this Love manifests, all is transformed by the sacred fire:

Through love thorns become roses, and
Through love vinegar becomes sweet wine
Through love the stake becomes a throne,
Through love the reverse of fortune seems good fortune,
Through love a prison seems a rose bower,
Through love a grate full of ashes seems a garden
Through love a burning fire is a pleasing light
Through love the Devil becomes a Houri.
Through love the hard stone becomes soft as butter.
Through love grief is a joy.
Through love ghouls turn into angels,
Through love stings are as honey,

Through love lions are harmless as mice,
 Through love sickness is health,
 Through love wrath is as mercy (qtd. in Arasteh 79).

Love in this Sufi mystical sense is a spiritually inspired, selfless love akin to the strong emphasis on compassionate acts in Mahāyāna Buddhism, in which *karuṇā* refers to a compassionate, loving kindness, equally important as the cultivation of wisdom. In Mahāyāna, the role of the compassionate *bodhisattva*, a practitioner motivated out of compassionate love to assist all beings, is raised to a level of utmost importance.

Rūmī also emphasizes the importance of spiritual love as a motivating force. Taken to this profound degree Rūmī describes, love alchemically transmutes all things beneficently, and the Sufi mystic immerses in this power, invoking *gnosis*, wherein “. . . it burns the desires of the senses and as a result arouses every sense, increases the power of intuition and leads to insight. Thus, in human life love is superior to intellect” (Arasteh 79).

Aflame with this spiritual intoxication, Rūmī describes the passing from *fanā* as the disintegration of an isolated ego-self to *baqa*, a state of complete union transcendent of rational intellection:

Once more I rose above the heart, reason, and soul;
 The beloved appeared in my midst; we rose above the midst.
 We turned from *fana* [the removal of “I”-a state of partial integration] and quickly entered *baqa* [a state of total integration].
 We searched the signless and rose above the symbol (qtd. in Arasteh 84).

This last line referring to the “signless,” in which he “rose above the symbol,” is intriguing. *Baqa* is thus a mystical absorption that rests on no images or conceptions.

This unmediated experience parallels Saraha’s discussion of an intentional object of

meditation as a “referent” (Tib. *dmigs*), being a concept or image focused on during meditation. Ultimately, the referent is a nonreferent – a nonconceptual realization of emptiness, both in the sense of realizing *śūnyatā* and attaining a state beyond reference and conceptuality. “The real nature of thought” according to Saraha is therefore ineffable, and though utilizing a different technical term, Rūmī appears to enter a similar mystical state beyond conceptuality.

Thus, Rūmī’s mystical poetry is a celebration of Love as spiritual, transformative force. Following the Sufī path, Rūmī engaged in a diligent regime of spiritual exercises, and his ecstatic mode of trance-inducing whirling led to the establishment of the Whirling Dervishes Mawlawī sect of Sufism. Rūmī pushes for the spiritual aspirant to go further and further, beyond self-doubt, rational restrictions, and “worldly” distractions to the degree of complete renunciation from all that would remove one from spiritual practices. Rūmī’s method of realization is primarily a gnostic one. Similar to the Buddhist nondual realization of unity with all existence, his poetry sings of this ecstatic unity:

.....

I am not the sea, neither am I empty of the sea.
 I am the leaf of the tree in every breeze.
 I am wet from the water of the stream. . .
 I am drunk of the wine of oneness, I am free from colour and smell
 I am so unaware here; I have another place in mind;
 I don’t know vinegar from sugar, I don’t know a vat from a jar
 (qtd. in Arasteh 85).

William Blake

Thou perceivest the Flowers put forth their precious odours,
And none can tell how from so small a center comes such sweets
Forgetting that within that Center Eternity expands
Its ever during doors...

-William Blake, "Milton"

English poet William Blake (1757 – 1827) was a powerful figure in the Romanticist literary era, writing mystical poetry inspired by an iconoclastic and controversial religious background. Considering himself primarily an artist, Blake experienced visions and mystical experiences from early childhood, and these natural visionary states, rather than a specific religious orthodoxy, influenced his visual art and poetical works. Blake was influenced by fringe Protestant movements, Swedish mystic Emanuel Swedenborg, and German mystic Jakob Böhme (McCaslin 174). Blake built his religious poetry on an idiosyncratic mythology of his own: the fall of the primeval person Albion results in the Four Zoas, or human faculties: Urizen (Reason), Luvah (Emotions), Tharmas (Bodily Instincts) and Urthona (Imagination / Wisdom); Blake criticized 18th century deism as a Satanic, or Urizenic, construct which stifles human imagination and inspiration (McCaslin 174). In this context, Blake appears to align the Enlightenment emphasis on reasoning with Luciferian pride. Blake's criticism of the overemphasis on reasoning intellection at the expense of inspiration and rapture is a repeating theme throughout his poetic works. Interestingly, the male figure Albion – representing England – is eventually redeemed by the presence of feminine Jerusalem, reconciling the gender separation and dualisms that mark the state of fragmented, unsanctified existence.



"Glad Day," Blake's artistic rendering of Albion, painted in 1795

Skeptical of both the Church and clergy, Blake insists that all created beings partake in holiness, and this sanctity is concentrated in those who are blessed with Imagination, what Blake terms the "Divine Imagination:" "The only priesthood required is the mediating power of the Imagination, defined as that faculty in human consciousness which participates in eternity" (McCaslin 175). This parallels Eckhart's insistence on the inherent unity between creation and God: "The 'divine self' of Blake is... closer to the divine self of Eckhart, the ground of unified being and knowing that can be tapped only through kenotic (self-emptying) love, not mere knowledge" (McCaslin 178).

Blake consistently emphasizes the prophetic power of Imagination, which engages a dialectic in which the human mind can transform the quotidian features of

existence into something truly sanctified and sublime. Imagination is a religious power, and it goes beyond the traditional meanings of this term as mere reverie or daydreaming, “By ‘Imagination,’ he does not mean merely the faculty of the artist to see beyond the surface of things, but the capacity of all humans to participate in Creative Spirit in the largest sense” (McCaslin 179).

Though Blake was exposed to an early translation *The Bhagavad-Gita* (McCaslin 177), there appears to be no evidence of an explicitly Hindu or Buddhist influence on his thought and artistry. Nonetheless, the parallels between his ideas and Buddhist philosophy are intriguing. Blake’s *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* parallels aspects of Buddhist philosophy; the title itself refers to an overcoming of dualism, by symbolically “marrying” the binary opposites of Heaven and Hell,⁸ and the overcoming of dualisms⁹ is also an ontological feature of Buddhist philosophy that has parallels with the Mahāyāna notion of the unity of *samsara* and *nirvana*. This abstruse work is etched in plates, with poetry written alongside highly symbolic paintings.

Throughout *The Marriage*, the terms “abyss” and “void” are repeatedly used, though Blake leaves these terms openly ambiguous. John G. Rudy, in *Romanticism and Zen Buddhism*, makes a compelling comparison between Blake’s “abyss” and Zen *koans* (104), due to the usage of paradoxical language to transcend conceptuality in both Blake’s work and the *koan*.

Plates 6-7 mention “the abyss of the five senses” (xvii), and this section

⁸ The tension between “good” and “evil” is deeply entrenched in Western thought, prevalent in Abrahamic religions as well as ancient Zoroastrianism and Manichaeism.

⁹ A fundamental dualism to be overcome is the deluded sense of an individual, essential self that is distinct from the flux of the universe; ultimately, this self lacks a permanent, enduring essence (*anatman*).

culminates with the evocative conclusion: “How do you know but ev’ry Bird that cuts the airy way / Is an immense world of delight, clos’d by your senses five?” (xvii). Rather than asserting a claim in this stanza, he instead proffers an open-ended question. This unique usage of language, “How do you know but ev’ry Bird that cuts the airy way,” appears to be an attempt to engage the reader directly in an act of co-participation. Rudy writes,

. . .like Zen *koan*, the possibility not simply of representing the abyss in linguistic form, that is, of pointing to it, but of evoking it as the living ambience or environment of the reader’s deepest nature. . . We must be the bird to know the bird in the same sense that Shenxiu requires his students to be the text of the *Nirvana Sutra* in order to really know the *sutra* (104).

In Plate 4, Blake points out the errors of “All Bibles or sacred codes” (xvi), involving the splitting of reason from emotion, soul from bodily desires. In a further gesture of the marriage of opposites, Blake responds to this by claiming there is “no Body distinct from Soul” (xvi): “To the extent that we can know Blake’s contraries, we must know them in ‘delight,’ in the abyssal realm of lived knowledge inclusive of yet beyond the word” (Rudy 105).

Regarding these bodily desires which Blake celebrates, he was far removed from the ascetic practices common to mystics worldwide. Contrary to the Christian values prevalent in 18th century England, his mystical-poetic project celebrated the sensual and erotic qualities of life as aspects of the sacred. As poet William Butler Yeats beautifully reflects,

Instead of seeking God in the deserts of time and space, in exterior immensities, in what he called ‘the abstract void,’ he believed that the further he dropped behind him memory of time and space, reason builded upon sensation, morality

founded for the ordering of the world; and the more he was absorbed in emotion; above all, in emotion escaped from the impulse of bodily longing and the restraints of bodily reason, in artistic emotion; the nearer did he come to Eden's 'breathing garden' to use his beautiful phrase, and to the unveiled face of God (qtd. in White 42).

Profound emotion, empowered by Imagination, is thus a further pathway to the sacred, to the "unveiled face of God."

In the Zen tradition, along with the arts of flower arrangement and calligraphy, poetry is itself a meditative practice, "...a means of shedding the self in order to evoke original face in the place where the true self is neither self nor not-self" (Rudy 93). *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, overflowing with paradoxes and conundrums, is also a meditative practice; rather than being a strictly aesthetic expression, this work, composed of both paintings and polemical poetry, intends to invoke the Divine Imagination within his readers by co-participating in Blake's visionary journey. Poetry as meditative practice has a unique function, both linguistically and psychologically; it is akin to spiritual practice in which

(t)he Buddhist monk discovers in the dynamics of butting up against a linguistic wall that language negotiated as an opportunity for freedom rather than for definition transcends its inability to describe the indescribable and evokes in compensation a meditative process inclusive of, yet beyond language. One's true home is the place where language begets the meditative dimension of that which cannot be described but which forms the abyssal freedom of our deepest nature. (Rudy 111-112)

In plate 16, Blake writes, "Some will say, 'Is not God alone the Prolific?' I answer: 'God only Acts & Is, in existing beings or Men'" (xxiii). This is a unique way to describe God's nature: "Blake's 'existing beings' covers the same range of global possibility as Buddhism's *tathata* or suchness. . . The nature of this 'order' is freedom

understood not as a place of choice between competing alternatives but as the moving, generative ground of all existence” (Rudy 124). This parallels Eckhart’s conception of God as the dynamic ground of existence, *grunt*.

Critiquing the Enlightenment emphasis on the power of reasoning, plate 21 of *The Marriage* begins: “I have always found that Angels have the vanity to speak of themselves as the only wise; this they do with a confident insolence sprouting from systematic reasoning” (xxv). Critical of reasoning as the sole means of gaining knowledge, Blake is also referring to the Angel in plates 17-20; this Angel, accompanying Blake in the abyss, chastises Blake for his sacrilegious ideas. Blake remains meditative and observant in the abyss, “I remain’d alone, & then this appearance was no more, but I found myself sitting on a pleasant bank beside the river by moon light hearing a harper who sung to the harp. . .” (xxiv), while the Angel is indignant, informing Blake “. . .consider the hot burning dungeon thou art preparing for thyself to all eternity, to which thou art going in such career” (xxiii). Though Blake constantly morphs his form and ideas throughout his voyage to the abyss and visionary travel to the celestials, the Angel is static, and this is the “confident insolence” Blake criticizes: “. . .The man who never alters his opinion is like standing water, & breeds reptiles of the mind” (xxiv).

Ever insistent upon the mystical awareness of *coincidentia oppositorum* – the union of opposites – Blake states, “Attraction and Repulsion, Reason and Energy, Love and Hate, are necessary to human Existence” (xxiv). Roger R. Jackson makes an intriguing comparison between Blake and tantric mystic Saraha; both embraced sensuality, asserted the necessity of paradox, rejected institutional religion, and critiqued the role of reasoning in the apprehension of mystical insight; interestingly, both poets

often wrote in aphoristic couplets (47).

Blake's idiosyncratic visionary poetry is a unique entryway into the creative aspects of the religious mind. Rather than seeking out religious institutions, Blake was highly critical of them, and instead wrote from his own spontaneous and personal mystical experiences. Encountering visions of both angels and devils, Blake sought to understand the underlying reality that transcended the polarities of good and evil. The paradoxical language of *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, akin to Zen *koan*, utilizes concepts to undermine the restriction of concepts, and invokes the reader to move past dualistic constraints that veil one's perception of life's sacred exuberance. Additionally, Blake's understanding of God's "isness" grants him affinities with *Tathata* as "suchness" in Buddhist philosophy.

Percy Bysshe Shelley

A major source of mystical inspiration is the vast landscapes of the natural world, where one can retreat from the vicissitudes and frustrations of urban life to the primal rhythms of nature. Nature retreats are so integral to the mystical impetus that “nature mysticism” is considered a category in itself. Percy Bysshe Shelley (1792-1822) exemplifies the visionary Romanticist impulse to find inspiration – both aesthetic and spiritual – in the pristine vastness of mountains, ravines, and natural landscapes.

Though there is no textual evidence to illustrate Shelley’s interest in Buddhist philosophy, he was influenced by Sir William Jones, philologist and Asiatic scholar who proposed a linguistic theory that posited Sanskrit as the ancient root of Indo-European languages (Drew 232-233). Jones, along with Mountstuart Elphinstone, traveled to Kashmir and the Hindu Kush mountain range, which they referred to as the Greek term “Indian Caucasus;” these explorations led to a surge of European scholarship to examine Indian influences on Platonic and Neo-platonic philosophy, due to Alexander the Great’s legendary journey to India (Drew 233-234). Through Jones’ influence, Shelley immersed himself in Hindu mythology and Vedantic philosophy. This influence is most pronounced in Shelley’s *Prometheus Unbound*, in which overt Hindu mythological themes are included; indeed, due to Shelley’s knowledge of this newfound Indian scholarship, he identified the ancient Prometheus of Aeschylus as being of Indian origin (Drew 259).

Nonetheless, there are themes in Shelley’s poetry that correspond with Buddhist philosophy. “Mount Blanc” is a meditative reflection on a natural environment that

conveys a mystical sense of awe and self-emptying union. Nature mysticism is a kind of *tabula rasa* retreat for mystical practitioners, and natural settings arouse a profound reverence, and even fear, in the solitary contemplative. This sense of sublime rapture is expressed well in the first verse of Shelley's "Mount Blanc:"

The everlasting universe of things
Flows through the mind, and rolls its rapid waves,
Now dark - now glittering - now reflecting gloom -
Now lending splendor, where from secret springs
The source of human thought its tribute brings
Of waters, - with a sound but half its own. (II. 1-6)

Shelley invokes a sense of timelessness with this stanza, written from a transpersonal perspective. The reader is not directed toward Shelley's perception or any specific frame of reference, but is instead provoked to perceive the "everlasting universe of things" *sub specie aeternitas* – from the viewpoint of eternity. Likewise, the mind that this everlasting universe flows through is not the poet's singular mind, but appears to be a consciousness of the cosmos itself. "The mind is an enabler, or source, of the flowing of the universe – a cause of, as well as a means by which, the universe moves. In both cases, mind is a generative priority that eludes definitive location and formal antecedent" (Rudy 48). Microcosm reflects macrocosm, and "(l)ike the 'secret springs' of human thought, the source of the world-sound that the poet avers is hidden in motion" (Rudy 48)

Akin to Eckhart's notion of *grunt*, this "universal mind" is in process, dynamically manifesting itself through all creation. Accessing this universal mind, however, is a delicate art – seeing as how this mind is "now dark – now glittering – now reflecting gloom." "Mind and cosmos are so deeply conflated as to be hidden, 'secret.' And yet all things are visible as the result of their flowing" (Rudy 48).

“The source of human thought,” the mysterious origin that Shelley obliquely refers to as “secret springs,” thus invokes a metaphysics that identifies the mind of the individual observer of Mount Blanc with a timeless (“everlasting”) mind of the universe, described by Zen poet Daito:

Portrayals of the enlightened mind inevitably shade into descriptions of universal Mind, because the two are ultimately one. For Daito, this Mind is “originally silent and still.’ It has neither color nor shape, yet ‘it fills the world’ and its radiance exceeds the brightness of a ‘hundred thousand suns and moons.’ It is unborn, undying, free from the wheel of transmigration, beyond any aspect of past or future (Kraft 115).

A Defence of Poetry: Shelley as Mystic-Philosopher

Shelley’s opus *A Defence of Poetry* is both a treatise on poetry and an articulate discussion of the intersection of poetry, philosophy, and religion, written with a strong Platonic influence; the *Defence* illustrates well his mystical conception of poetry. Shelley continues the legacy of poets being historically linked to soothsayers, shamans, and visionaries, directly attuned to a sacred dimension. Early in *A Defence of Poetry*, he aligns poetry with prophecy:

Not that I assert poets to be prophets in the gross sense of the word, or that they can foretell the form as surely as they foreknow the spirit of events: such is the pretence of superstition, which would make poetry an attribute of prophecy, rather than prophecy an attribute of poetry. A poet participates in the eternal, the infinite, and the one; as far as relates to his conceptions, time and place and number are not (9).

Shelley thus identifies poetry with prophecy. He does not refer to prophecy in the “gross” sense of predicting the future; it is instead an ability to capture aspects of reality

not apparent to the senses. Shelley refers to this liminal space as “...that partial apprehension of the agencies of the invisible world which is called religion” (8). By referring to the “invisible world,” Shelley propagates the religious intuition of a non-visible, transcendent realm that is ontologically prior to the sensory, material world. This immutable, transcendent realm first appears in Western philosophy with Parmenides, and his position is embraced and philosophically refined by Plato. Centuries prior to this, Hindu and Buddhist philosophers posited a similar notion; Vedantic philosophers posited *Brahman*, the infinite and transcendent ultimate Reality, while Mahayana Buddhist philosophers refined the subtler notion of *Śūnyatā*, the undifferentiated interdependent unity of all phenomena, often described as being “empty” of absolute essences. This idea is persistent in world philosophy, and it is still maintained in the Christian notion of a divine Heaven beyond the material world of mortals. Elsewhere, Shelley states, “Listen to the music, unheard by outward ears, which is as a ceaseless and invisible wind, nourishing its everlasting course with strength and swiftness” (33). He again urges the reader to attune to the invisible world, by perceiving unheard music that is akin to an “invisible wind,” a delicate presence that seems to originate in celestial realms.

Apprehending the invisible world “is called religion,” as quoted above, and this apprehension is the gift of prophetic poets. Poet-prophets who participate “in the eternal, the infinite, and the one” thus convey the mystical sense of unity and transcendence of space and time described in many religions, approaching the insight of *anatman*, the lack of an inherently existent self in Buddhist thought, which opens into a nondual unity with all of existence.

Knowledgeable of Greek language and thought, Shelley distinguishes reason (το λογικειν, a cognate of *logos*) from imagination (το ποιειν, *to poieiu*, from which “poetry” is derived) (3). From these linguistic roots, it is already evident that Shelley identifies poetry with the imaginative faculty. Imagination synthesizes while reason analyzes, and the latter is “as the shadow to the substance” (4). Shelley thus finds imagination’s synthetic ability more valuable than the logical faculty, and this informs his critique of philosophy. *A Defence* is written as a poetic-philosophical treatise, and thus the analytical *logos* is utilized; as a poet, however, Shelley simultaneously utilizes the synthetic power of poetry, and the prose of this text often reads as musical verse. Utilizing both of these faculties is an aspect of prophecy, insofar as prophets analyze the nature of reality while synthesizing the sublime poems that are religions.

Again, the mystical tension between the reasoning intellect and the imagination is present in Shelley’s treatise. Interestingly, the etymological root of “poetry” aligns with the ancient Greek word for imagination, illustrating the archaic, imaginative fountainhead of poetry. Similar to Blake’s notion of Imagination, Shelley stresses the importance of imagination as something truly sacred, even prophetic, that allows one to apprehend aspects of our world inaccessible to reason alone.

As a philosophical skeptic, Shelley remains aloof of organized religion. Regarding organized religion, he states, “Hence all original religions are allegorical, or susceptible of allegory, and, like Janus, have a double face of false and true” (9). Shelley is thus rather modern in his figurative or allegorical interpretation of scriptures; this, of course, aligns with his idea of religious inspiration being inherently poetic rather than Truth. This is a position shared by Nietzsche and Santayana. Both philosophers argued

that all religions, viewed as cultural practices and conceptual structures, are, at their roots, the inspired out-flowing of poets rather than any “Truth” that captures the nature of reality. Nietzsche proclaims, in his influential *Thus Spake Zarathustra*:

Ah, there are so many things betwixt heaven and earth of which only the poets have dreamed! And especially above the heavens: for all gods are poet-symbolisations, poet-sophistications! Verily, ever are we drawn aloft – that is, to the realm of clouds: on these do we set our gaudy puppets, and then call them gods and Supermen – . . . Penitents of the spirit have I seen appearing; they grew out of the poets. (39, “Poets”)

Though a single, unitary Truth is eschewed by Shelley, poetry nonetheless can reach into the eternal, unveiling the transcendent realm described by Plato. “...(I)ts secret alchemy turns into potable gold the poisonous waters which flow from death through life; it strips the veil of familiarity from the world, and lays bare the naked and sleeping beauty, which is the spirit of its forms” (Shelley 52). While Plato sought to understand Beauty as an archetypal Idea, motivating the philosophical quest to mentally uncover essences, poetry directly unveils and manifests beauty. All seemingly mundane and familiar “everyday” perceptions – a swaying tree limb, the bustle of passers-by, a child’s smile – are transformed, exalted to the level of rapture. Likening the poetic ability to alchemy is appropriate, since alchemists talked of an “occult” or hidden science which unveils Nature’s obscured secrets.

Thus, Shelley allocates mystical poetry with a prophetic power, insofar as the transformative power of imagination is employed. The creative out-flowing of poetry from the chaos of one’s ever-fluctuant consciousness is a meditative, liberative act. Religions themselves are critiqued as allegorical forms of poetry. As Shelley states, “A Poet participates in the eternal, the infinite, and the one; as far as relates to his

conceptions, time and place and number are not,” and this mystical unity parallels a Buddhist mystical insight of *anatman*, being “. . .the state of perfect selflessness and oneness with all things” (Rudy 16).

Le Mystique Féminin

Given the profoundly androcentric nature of religious traditions, exemplified by the worship of a Father God in Abrahamic religions, the perspective of feminine mysticism is marginalized. Women *qua* women continually confront a dialectic in which they must prove themselves to be “equivalent” in stature to male mystics (King 96-97). Though separating gender analyses in mysticism may be criticized – “Ultimately, the challenge of the spirit is a trans-sexual one pointing to wider connections and greater sharing beyond all differences” (King 96), mystical literature illustrates a marked difference in the feminine approach to mysticism. The intensely emotional language of feminine mysticism, exemplified well by Christian medieval mystics such as Teresa of Avila, Hildegard of Bingen, and Julian of Norwich, demonstrates that

women mystics stress subjectivity and personal experience more than external factors and objectivisation. Given the vivid directness of expression and the wide prevalence of love mysticism among women, one wonders whether women embody a more concrete, emotional and perhaps even romantic type of mysticism rather than the intellectual and abstract type found among men (King 102).

Due to factors of social conditioning, women across cultures are often conditioned to be receptive and self-sacrificial, while encouraged to cultivate strictly “feminine” qualities such as emotionality and tenderness; these qualities are deemphasized among males in patriarchal cultures. As a result of this socialization, Carol Christ argues that “...the traditional roles assigned to women encourage the habit of receptivity which is at the heart of mystical oneness” (qtd. in Wawrytko 198), and feminine mystical literature is pronouncedly erotic and emotional compared to the serene intellectualism of male

mystics. Given this difference in orientation, Sandra A. Wawrytko offers a compelling list of unique feminine mystical elements:

- a. The method of feminine Mysticism: EROS¹⁰
- b. The attitude of Receptivity: Openness to the Beyond
- c. The encompassing quality of Mystical Union: All-is-One-ness
- d. The embodied Mystic: The Link with Nature (202).

Proceeding from this list of elements, exegeses of female mystical poets will follow, whose poems illustrate this unique approach to mystical practice.

Postmodern theorist Helene Cixous critiques the male dominated usage of language in rational discourse, which is termed “phallogocentric” language.

Phallogocentrism refers both to the privileged masculine perspective in rational discourse (phallogocentrism), as well as the pursuit of a singular Truth (logocentrism). She reframes language as a creative attempt to overturn this masculine emphasis, which can also undermine the common dualisms in language, e.g. good/evil, light/dark, body/mind, and so forth. Creative, poetic language can thus be a *bodily* act of freedom that transcends strictly mental intellection, resulting in a novel form of philosophizing: “It is not that one should leave the philosophers to their philosophizing and write poetry, but that a different kind of knowledge is possible and preferable. Expressive language, so long an embarrassment to linguists and semanticists, is the medium for this new knowledge” (Nye 47).

This emotive, expressive form of language manifests in the female mystical poets described in this chapter, and Cixous’ critique of language also influences my conclusion

¹⁰ Eros in feminine mysticism is “manifested as both passionate outpourings and erotic overtones in imagery” (Wawrytko 203).

to this thesis. The poets analyzed in this chapter – Hildegard of Bingen and Mary Oliver – challenge the masculine privilege to truth by utilizing the feminine approach to mysticism discussed above, and they also challenge a single, all-encompassing truth employed in logocentrism by expressing their unique and emotive personal experiences.

Hildegard of Bingen

Benedictine nun Hildegard of Bingen (1098 – 1179) was a fascinating and profound visionary. Living in medieval Germany in the Rhine River Valley (*Rheinhessen*), Hildegard was denied Latin and liberal arts education because of her gender. Despite this denial of formal education, Hildegard experienced visions as a child and continued to experience visionary revelations throughout her lifetime, inspiring her spiritual quest. Hildegard wrote of a crippling condition that resulted in migraines and ocular hallucinations in which flashing sparks erupted throughout her field of vision (Butcher 17).¹¹ Though physically difficult, these episodes were also marked by profound visionary experiences, which occurred throughout Hildegard's life, beginning in childhood. Hildegard was a unique philosopher and poet, writing from her own personal experiences, with a life deeply devoted to the celebration of God.

Hildegard's impassioned and expressive devotion to God, along with a sense of open receptivity, is shown in "The Zither of Love,"

Heaven's my home, and God's love is my desire. I will seek to yearn for my Creator above all things. My greatest wish is to do what You ask me, God. Give me wings of determination and kindness, so I can soar above the stars of heaven, doing Your good will. You and Your holiness are all I need. Make me your zither of love!" (148)

Expressing this almost painful longing, Hildegard's redemption comes from her humble and one-pointed dedication to perform the holy works of God. With a one-

¹¹ Neurological maladies, such as epilepsy and severe migraines, are common in mystics. Psychotic symptoms, seizures and psychopathological behavior are signs of a shamanic calling in many indigenous cultures (Eliade 24-26). Modern neuroscientist V.S. Ramachandran investigates religious experiences in temporal lobe epileptics, who often have profound mystical experiences regardless of religious beliefs.

pointed exertion of will, she desires to be solely focused on loving kindness and service for God. Her passionate yearning manifests the presence of *eros*.

Hildegard's major work was *Scivias*, "Know the Ways of the Lord," and she composed many songs as well as letters to spiritual cohorts. Her literature is sometimes framed in the form of humble prayer to God, sometimes structured as dramas, and other times written from mystical experiences in the first-person, as the voice of God. As a conduit for the voice of God, she writes in "On The Holy Spirit:"

I am the ultimate fiery force igniting every spark of life. My breath knows nothing of death. I see you as you are and I judge you. I fly through the most distant galaxies of space on wings of wisdom, creating order wherever I go. I am the divine flame of life, I burn above the golden fields, I sparkle on water, and I shine like the sun, the moon, and all the stars. Together with the loving, hidden power of the wind, I make everything come alive. Remember that I'm also Reason. I inform the wind of the first Wind that created all things. I'm your breath, I'm the breath of all things, and none die because I am that Life. (153)

Hildegard allows herself to be a mouthpiece of prophecy with this verse. It is interesting that she continually refers to breath and wind, as one definition for the Latin word *spiritus* that becomes the English "spirit" literally means "breath." Also, in the chapter discussing Buddhist mystical poets, tantric adept Saraha builds his spiritual-poetic endeavor on a notion of an immaterial "subtle body" composed of countless channels of subtle breath, *prāṇa*. There is thus a mystical identification between breath-as-wind and spiritual power, and God "informs the wind of the first Wind that created all things" according to Hildegard's vision. As a conduit, Hildegard is a mouthpiece, a flute upon which God blows forth inspired music.

Hildegard of Bingen's spontaneous visions led her to live a religious life during an extremely androcentric religious atmosphere in medieval Europe, which is why she is

revered as a figure of hope and triumph. Through a process of ever intensifying self-emptying, she became a conduit for the voice of God, which she sings lyrically.

Mary Oliver

Modern ecopoet Mary Oliver draws inspiration from the Christian faith. With eyes turned to God, her religious quest is also firmly grounded in the natural world, and thus her poetry is an intriguing synthesis of Judeo-Christian elements and nature mysticism. Inspiration drawn from the natural world is integral to Oliver's religious-poetic quest, as she states in *Winter Hours*, "I could not be a poet without the natural world. Someone else could. For me the door to the woods is the door to the temple. Under the trees, along the pale slopes of sand, I walk in an ascendant relationship to rapture, and with words I celebrate this rapture" (98-99).

Oliver wrote her most recent work, *Thirst*, after the death of her partner Molly. Initially, Oliver ambiguously addresses her poems to the second person "you," which apparently refers to Molly. Eventually, this second person reference becomes the You of God, beginning with "Six Recognitions of the Lord." Oliver, after reflecting on the loss of her beloved, directs all of her longing and thirst toward God. She states, "The physicality of the religious poets should not be taken idly. He or she, who loves God, will look most deeply into His works" (7). This line, from "Musical Notation 1," sets out the *modus operandi* of *Thirst*. "Physicality" in the context of this collection of poems refers to a profoundly sensuous engagement with Earth. Throughout the book, Oliver ruminates over the minutest details of daily life, whether it is feeding her dog, seeing newfound roses blossoming, or calmly viewing the animals of nature. Any contact with Earth is a grace of "His works." Oliver's approach exemplifies the unique qualities of feminine mysticism described in the experiences of women mystics: Eros manifests in

her passionate and sometimes painful longing for God; her attitude as a poet is one of vulnerable, patient receptivity; and the encompassing quality of union overflows her verse, which is entirely grounded in the panoramic beauty of the natural world.

Her wish to blur the boundary between self and nature – and thus to spiritually participate – is a consistent theme in *Thirst*. This spiritual motivation is discussed in “Nature, Spirit, and Imagination In The Poetry of Mary Oliver” by Douglas Burton-Christie:

She seeks instead to understand how and where the natural world takes root within us, how we are challenged and even transformed in the process of wakening to nature's soulful presence. In this sense, adequation, or respect for nature's "otherness," the necessary climate for engaging in the process of correspondence, or imaginative apprehension of nature as revelatory (82).

Transformation is thus essential to the poems of *Thirst*; transformation from grief to joy, from alienation to unity with God.

In a beautiful gesture of yielding, Oliver ruminates in “Coming to God: First Days:”

Lord, I will learn also to kneel down
into the world of the invisible,
the inscrutable and the everlasting.
Then I will move no more than the leaves of a tree
on a day of no wind,
bathed in light,
like the wanderer who has come home at last and kneels in peace,
done with all unnecessary things; every motion; even words. (23)

With this verse, Oliver peacefully surrenders to the Mystery. She is still in her First Days with God; despite her autumnal age, she considers herself to be a humble beginner, still learning how to live the spiritual life. Her identity merges with that which is beyond her physical self: bathed in light, moving as the leaves of a tree would. On a

windless day, a tree barely moves; thus, in her life, there is nothing she *must* do. The poet is “home at last,” in peaceful repose, no longer resisting life, but rather gently swaying with it. Her motionlessness is, in itself, prayer. Oliver continually ruminates on inner silence, stillness, prayer, and longing for the Christ throughout *Thirst*. She realizes that the religious life is one of openness to the sacred, a calm acceptance of nature's cycles, which requires a self-disciplined stillness and reflective receptivity. This stanza implies that sometimes, even words are unnecessary; silence is required even of a word-obsessed poet. During her quiet moments of rapture, while bursting with gratitude, she is filled with awe and appreciation for God's splendor.

The tension between self and nature – an immense desire to be engulfed, intertwined, merged – is a consistent theme in ecopoetry. Poets of nature are drawn ever deeper into the natural world, and are almost inevitably tempted to anthropomorphize animals or plants, or to dissolve the boundaries between themselves and beings of nature. *Thirst*, resulting from a diligent effort of introspection and nature-contemplation, travels beyond a separate, isolated self: “Hardly an obliteration of self, this is an expansion of self, in the high Romantic mode of Emerson and her other forebears” (Johnson 97). This sense of interconnected unity that moves past the isolated ego is evident in “On Thy Wondrous Works I Will Meditate,” a poem panentheistic in tone:

Glory to time and the wild fields,
and to joy. And to grief's shock and torpor, its near swoon.

So it is not hard to understand
where God's body is, it is
everywhere and everything; shore and the vast fields of water,
the accidental and the intended

over here, over there. And I bow down
participate and attentive. (57)

“Glory to time” is a bit ambiguous, but may imply a celebration of the finite – our temporally-bound and fragile bodies. Not only does Oliver observe the cosmos, she *participates*. This participation involves utmost attention, and also a bowing down – in “Coming to God: First Days” she also speaks of kneeling – thus her reverence is humble and open. She exclaims glory even to grief. The love of nature which is therefore the love of God has truly transformed her mourning and longing. The oceans and shore, Earth's vast expanse, even unintended pain – all of this is holy. “God's body being everywhere and everything” implies that Oliver is part of God, as is all of Earthly creation. Vicki Graham comments, “She immerses herself, however briefly, in the natural world, perceives it sensually, and becomes part of it. The poems she writes allow us to become part of this world with her, letting us cross the boundaries we draw around ourselves and flowing, for a few moments, ‘into the body of another’” (371). By crossing this boundary, subject and object, self and cosmos, blend ecstatically together. Wilderness, to Oliver, is where God's infinite masks are revealed. “To merge with the non-human is to acknowledge the self's mutability and multiplicity, not to lose subjectivity” (Graham 353). This visionary unifying thus informs Oliver's sense of the sacred within her poetry, and this impulse develops a unique approach to mystical union, synthesizing Christian beliefs with nature mysticism and emotional catharsis.

Oliver's religious quest is one of attention, participation, catharsis and celebration, and can be quite engaging rather than an ascetic denial. Her poetic life opens up this sanctified space, and thus her poetry moves beyond personal expression into the

lyricism of spiritual hymns. Janet McNew states, “Her vision involves not transforming nature into a more satisfactory imaginative realm but rather, paradoxically, using poetry to create a human who is more genuinely natural” (McNew 74). Oliver recreates herself as this genuinely natural person; therein is her religiosity.

Mary Oliver’s poems speak to a place deep in our souls: for there is something we hunger for that no food will satisfy. There is something we thirst for that no liquid will quench. Her spirituality results from an intimacy with the natural world’s cycles and creatures. Careful attention, reverence, and emotional catharsis synthesize to form Mary Oliver’s powerful spiritual ecopoetry.

Love for the earth and love for you are having such a long conversation in my heart. Who knows what will finally happen or where I will be sent, yet already I have given a great many things away, expecting to be told to pack nothing, except the prayers which, with this thirst, I am slowly learning. (69)

Chapter Five: Buddhist Mystical Poets

The poets described in this chapter were practitioners of an esoteric form of Buddhism known as tantra (Tib. *rgyud*). Tantra derives from esoteric texts that developed into an elaborate system of meditation and spiritual techniques, often involving controversial practices as discussed below. Scholars typically agree that these tantric texts originated in India around the 5th or 6th centuries C.E., but their exact origins are quite obscure (Powers 220). From India, tantra was absorbed into Tibet in the 7th through 13th centuries. Through the integration and spiritual transmutation of desire, sexuality, and afflictive emotions, which are often discarded as impediments in exoteric Buddhism, the tantric path is considered highly powerful and a rapid path toward enlightenment. Rituals, symbols, and visualizations are employed, along with a disciplined channeling of profound desire, joy, and bliss (Powers 225). This has a clear parallel with the notion of sublimation used both in medieval alchemy and psychoanalysis, in which erotic desire and harmful emotions are channeled in a diligent fashion to energize spiritual impetus. Such a channeling of erotic and desirous emotions is also evident in the mystical poets studied in this thesis, especially in the writings of Hildegard, Blake, and Rūmī.

Saraha

Indian tantric adept Saraha (circa 9th or 10th century C.E.) was an influential *mahāsiddha* (“great adept,” often shortened as “*siddha*”) and mystical poet. The *siddhas* were extremely accomplished adepts celebrated in Indo-Tibetan Buddhism, shrouded in mystery and legend. According to a twelfth-century compilation, eighty-four legendary *siddhas* existed, many of whom employed esoteric techniques of the Yoginī tantras, texts which involved controversial sexual and meditative practices; these tantras were significant to the Tibetan Buddhist orders of the Kagyu, Sakya, and Gelug (Jackson 5).

Saraha utilized the *dohā*, or couplet, to structure his song-poems. His poems were written to express his ideas and experience gained from meditative practice. Since many of these poems were probably originally oral, written down centuries later, it is difficult to trace these written works directly to Saraha as the originator (Jackson 7). Further analysis of Saraha’s poetry is discussed in relation to Dharmakīrti’s epistemological project in the chapter on Dharmakīrti and Yogic Perception.

Elucidating the nature of the Yoginī tantras helps in understanding the unique and antinomian context of Saraha’s practices, philosophy and poetry. These tantras align with the Buddhist soteriological project of attaining enlightenment *via* a nondual experience of reality, but the tantric worldview also diverges from certain Buddhist principles. The following are significant aspects of the Yoginī tantric worldview:

1. The cosmos is understood as a sacred realm or *mandala*, inhabited by powerful goddesses (*yoginīs*)¹² who manifest both wrathful and beneficent, blissful qualities.
2. Accompanying the physical body is a “subtle body” comprised of various channels of subtle energy (*nāḍīs*), esoteric seals (*mudrās*) and other subtle physiological components.
3. Yogas that engage the subtle body lead to ecstasies which culminate in a blissful *gnosis* conferring a nondual realization of one’s ultimate nature, referred to as “the innate” (*sahaja*).
4. Akin to alchemy, the “grosser” aspects of one’s being – anger, frustration, anxiety, and other afflictive emotions – must be confronted and transmuted into spiritual energy.
5. The human body is a sacred focus of spiritual pursuit rather than an object to be ascetically rejected.
6. Following this fifth premise, dualistic conceptions such as “pure” or “impure,” “good” or “evil” must be transcended. Mindful utilization of bodily energy and the subtle body is integral to yoga practices. Substances considered highly impure in Indian culture, such as alcohol, semen, and even blood, can be ingested in ritualistic contexts, along with sexual yogas and meditation in graveyards. Accordingly, conventional morality is willingly transgressed.

¹² The significance of these powerful goddesses illustrates a unique feature of Tantra, which is an emphasis on both “masculine” and “feminine” qualities, and the union thereof – rather than emphasis on one at the expense of another – in spiritual practices.

7. Initiation from an enlightened guru is essential for tantric success (Jackson 13).

Thus, though the Yoginī tantras overlap with the soteriological project of Mahāyāna Buddhist schools, many of these tantric practices were controversial. Saraha, as an iconoclastic thinker, critiqued aspects of both Hindu and Buddhist traditions and included his perception of decadent tantric practices in his polemical poems.

***Citta-Vrtti-Nirodha* (Ceasing the Fluctuations of Thought)**

This famous line from Patanjali's *Yogasutra* illustrates the necessity in yogic practice to cease the turnings of conceptual thought, and this injunction is continued in tantric practices. Again, the mystical emphasis on entering a transrational modality of awareness is stressed. Regarding this, a couplet of Saraha reads, "Where thought and breath / no longer roam, / and sun and moon don't shine – / there, fool, repose / your mind!" (66). This couplet refers to the subtle body, comprised of subtle breath energies (*prāṇa*) and fluctuations of consciousness, both of which need to be stilled: "...the experience of ecstasy and enlightenment that lie at the culmination of the path are impossible without becalming the conceptual mind and the breath, so that one may work with clarity and care in the subtle body" (Jackson 30). Saraha consistently claims that there is no mystical experience or realization to attain; what is needed instead is a revealing of the innate luminosity of one's being, which in itself can grant nondual,

enlightened awareness. A practitioner is rediscovering rather than attaining.

Saraha continues his polemics with:

From the start
the sky is pure;

looking and looking,
you only block the view.

Stopping up the sky
like that,
flawed in his inmost thought,
the fool is uncomprehending. (70)

This poem appears to critique an overreliance on rational philosophy that can lead one astray – “you only block the view.” One’s mind is like a sky, inherently clear and pure, that becomes muddled in the process of striving for a sky-like clarity of mind! Being “flawed in his inmost thought” refers to conceptualization; Saraha is critical of philosophers and pundits who obsessively use analytical reasoning rather than directly experiencing the bliss of *gnosis*. Thus, one’s mind is the locus of enlightened awareness, but this mind can simultaneously lead to delusion through discriminatory distinctions that artificially impose conceptual constructs onto phenomena; “saṃsāric distinctions / are forms of mind,” he states elsewhere (71).

To do a deed
or not to do a deed –
when comprehension is sure,
there is no bondage or freedom.

It’s beyond syllables
but claiming to explain it

which of a hundred yogins
will point this out? (77)

Saraha tactfully points to the ultimate “comprehension” resulting from direct *gnosis*, which neither involves a being in bondage nor a being to be liberated; all conceptual categories are transcended. Continuing the mystical acceptance of paradox, this truth is “beyond syllables” though he nonetheless still writes verse. Herein is a unique pedagogical function of mystical poetry; though still relying on words and conceptual consciousness to both write and read this couplet, the poem serves to move one *beyond* conceptual grasping into the field of liberative *gnosis*. Of this realization, no words suffice: “which of a hundred yogins,” and who of the most articulate thinkers can possibly describe the ultimate nature of the *mysterium tremendum*? We are answered by silence. Insofar as poetry can engage the mind by inspiring spiritual *pathos*, and by utilizing language to transcend language, poetry is itself a spiritual discipline to cultivate enlightenment.

Kūkai

Kūkai (775-835) was a Japanese monk and founder of esoteric sect Shingon. Shingon is often termed Esoteric Buddhism in English, and akin to the discussion of esotericism in Chapter Two, Shingon emphasized the cultivation of inwardness; within one's being both seeker and sought reside, for enlightenment dwells within all beings in latent form.

After traveling to China and being initiated into Vajrayana, the tantric Buddhism practiced in Tibet, Kūkai returned to Japan and built his teachings upon the Vajrayana texts the *Mahāvairocana Sutra* and the *Vajraśekhara Sutra* (Hakeda 79). Well-versed in both Sanskrit and Chinese, Kūkai sought a novel approach to Buddhism by exploring its original Indian foundation *via* these esoteric sutras and prominent Indian Buddhist philosophers such as Nāgārjuna (Hakeda 143), hoping to reveal the esoteric core of Buddhist philosophy.

Kūkai developed a motto for his spiritual quest, which reads “attaining enlightenment in this very body” if translated literally: “(t)he choice of the word ‘body’ over the normally expected ‘mind’ underscores the basic character of Kūkai’s religion: emphasis on direct religious experience through one’s total being and not merely through the intellect” (Hakeda 78). Paralleling Blake’s statement “no Body distinct from Soul,” Kūkai insisted on realization occurring through the totality of one’s body rather than being a strictly mental phenomenon.

Across the religions of India, stemming back to the ancient Vedas, sacred syllables, or *mantras*, are chanted, and the sonic power of these sound waves possesses a

magical power. Kūkai praised the power of *mantra*, and his chanting of *mantra* along with the composition of poetry were considered to be powerful and esoteric practices, as he states in this verse:

A mantra is suprarational;
It eliminates ignorance when meditated upon and recited.
A single word contains a thousand truths;
One can realize Suchness here and now.
Walk on and on until perfect quiescence is reached;
Go on and on until the primordial Source is penetrated. (79)

Mantras as chanted sound waves thus have a profound effect on one's consciousness that can invoke awakening in a nonconceptual fashion. Kalu Rinpoche comments on the use of *mantra* in Tibetan Buddhism,

(I)n the Vajrayāna context, we recite and meditate on mantra, which is enlightened sound, the speech of the deity, the Union of Sound and Emptiness....It has no intrinsic reality, but is simply the manifestation of pure sound, experienced simultaneously with its Emptiness. Through mantra, we no longer cling to the reality of the speech and sound encountered in life, but experience it as essentially empty. Then confusion of the speech aspect of our being is transformed into enlightened awareness. (qtd. in Powers 231)

Kūkai struggled to express mystical insights in language, and he gave up on writing and turned to painting at one point, “(b)ecause of the very nature of samadhi [meditative realization] in which it is said both the seer and the seen are unknown, it is beyond any discursive description” (Hakeda 80). Nonetheless, he returned to poetry, utilizing it as a unique pedagogical technique – inspiring awakening in readers as a co-participative act – described in the discussion of Saraha's usage of mystical poetry. His motivation for poetry was to transform “everyday” mind into the enlightened awareness

discussed by Kalu Rinpoche.

Elsewhere, Kūkai poetically reflects on the effectiveness of the Mahāyāna

Buddhist path:

.....
 It [Mahāyāna] does not exclude even animals or birds.
 The flowers in the spring fall beneath the branches;
 Dew in autumn vanishes before the withered grass.
 Flowing water can never be stopped;
 Whirling winds howl constantly.
 Eternity, Bliss, the Self, and Purity are the summits on which we
 ultimately belong. . . (139)

The first line refers to the compassionate emphasis in Mahāyāna, which stresses the inherent enlightenment dwelling within all beings. The rest of this stanza poetically reflects on the beautiful, yet transient features of the natural world. Nonetheless, as these cycles continually flow on seemingly without end, one awakened can enter into the timelessness of eternity, merging into unity with the cosmic landscape.

Regarding the ultimate, nondual realization of Buddhism, Kūkai sings,

Meditate on a lotus flower; be aware that your intrinsic nature is also pure!
 Behold the fruit of the lotus cup; realize that you too are endowed with excellence of mind!
 When the seeing and the seen are fused into one vision of Truth. . . (271)

The enlightened mind thus exudes a delicate, beneficent fragrance like that of a lotus flower, bringing tidings of loving-kindness to all beings.

Kūkai's poetry serves as mystical pedagogy, aiming to describe and invoke the inexpressible ultimate invoked by tantric Buddhist practices. Kūkai brought tantric Esoteric Buddhism to Japan in the form of Shingon. According to his poems, realization

is a flash of illumination that travels through the entire body, and utilizing the tantric practice of *mantra* along with the arts of poetry and painting, Kūkai intended to convey a mystical transmission to readers and fellow practitioners that would vibrate one's entire body with realization.

Milarepa

Tibetan yogi Milarepa (1052 – 1135 C.E.) is a legendary figure in the history of Tibetan Buddhism. The story of Milarepa's life is intriguing and mysterious. He was born in Kya Ngatsa, a village in the western Tibetan region of Gung-thang.

In the 15th century, a rather dramatic biography of Milarepa entitled *Mi-la-rnam-thar* emerged, illustrating stories of Milarepa's life that are now legendary. In his youth, due to the death of his father and the loss of familial inheritance to an aunt and uncle and thus pressured by his mother, he learned black magic and caused a hailstorm to destroy crops and kill a number of people. Realizing the wickedness of this act, he renounced his lifestyle and eventually met his teacher, Marpa, who severely tested Milarepa's capabilities and ethical stature. Marpa was known as the Translator due to his translation of major Sanskrit Buddhist texts into Tibetan (Clarke xii). Training with Marpa, Milarepa meditated in caves, practicing the yogic generation of body-heat within the frigid Himalayan Mountains, clad only in a cotton loincloth. Milarepa also practiced the esoteric art of *Lung-gom-pa*, allegedly able to run at extraordinary speeds for days at a stretch.

Milarepa continued to study with Marpa, and eventually trained as a solitary practitioner, eventually reaching full awakening (*Vajradhara*). Milarepa had numerous disciples, including the renowned disciple Gampopa who propagated Milarepa's teachings and lineage.

Milarepa was an advanced adept of yoga, and he stressed intensive meditation rather than conceptual, philosophical training, and this critique arises in his poetry.

Through this process of purification and profoundly diligent meditative practice, Milarepa often sung out in beautifully lyrical hymns, which were collected into a book of songs. Milarepa wrote poems as polemics, teachings of subtle meditative insights, and also as spontaneous outflows of inspiration.

According to the following song, Milarepa was visited by goddesses asking for spiritual instruction. Milarepa then sings,

.....
 Meditate continually upon the uncertainty of the hour of death.
 Believe your own bodies to be the tutelary deity
 and act according to the words of power of secret utterance;
 meditate upon your knowledge as the void that passes all understanding
 and continually be conscious of the truth. (45)

This song reiterates the tantric themes present in Kūkai and Saraha's poetry.

“Believe your own bodies to be the tutelary deity” refers to the body as a sacred focus of spiritual practices, and tantric adepts in Deity Yoga identify themselves with the awakened qualities of a Buddha; “act according to the words of power of secret utterance” refers to the esoteric powers of *mantra*, utilized in tantric meditations. “Meditate upon your knowledge as the void that passes all understanding” points to the nondual realization of emptiness that transcends conceptuality.

In the following poem, Milarepa discusses the animals and varying activity he perceives from his cave hermitage. After reflecting on these images, drifting in and out of a *gnosis* that meditates upon the impermanent nature of all entities, Milarepa writes,

Beholding this, I the sage
 upon my precious rock that is visible afar
 consider appearance the similitude of impermanence,
 and meditate upon the pleasures of sense as the reflection in water.
 I look upon this life as the illusion of a dream,
 meditate with compassion for the ignorant
 and feed upon the void of space.
 I meditate in undisturbed ecstasy
 and all the manifold images that arise before the mind,
 aye all the things that the three worlds contain,
 appear insubstantially. (83)

Like a dream, our lives vanish into impermanence, dissolving into eternity.

Though this existential truth is apparent, much of our activity and turmoil derive from perceiving our existence as a permanent and substantial phenomenon. As a solitary contemplative devoted to diligent meditation, Milarepa perceives the transient and insubstantial nature of all entities. As reflections in water are mirage-like, so are perceptions filtered by afflictive emotions and a deluded sense of an isolated self, leading to endless cycles of suffering. Continuing upon this, Milarepa rhetorically asks, “Know ye not that happiness is a dream? / Know ye not that praise and blame are insubstantial? / Know ye not that appearance is the mind itself? / Know ye not that the mind itself is Buddhahood?” (85). He thus points out that ultimately, the mind is the origin both of untold suffering and blissful, enlightened wisdom.

The ultimate, nondual realization of Mahāyāna Buddhism is one of identification with the entire universe, both the physical universe as well as nonmaterial realms, as well as the realization of emptiness, the lack of inherent, substantive existence among all phenomena and entities. Milarepa’s oblique references to the “void” and the insights

derived from *gnosis* refer to this nondual realization. Scholar David Snellgrove comments on this realization,

Thus the maṇḍala represents the self-identification of the microcosm (the human person) with the macrocosm, which has the nature of samsāra for the unenlightened mind; conversely, it reveals itself as the perfect expression of buddhahood when all misleading distinctions disappear in the enlightened state of nonduality (qtd. in Powers 229).

Milarepa's poem thus discusses this interplay between unenlightened, delusive clinging and the enlightened realization that understands the insubstantiality of all things, along with the enlightened quality, or buddhahood, of all existence from the perspective of enlightenment.

Tibetan tantric adept Milarepa represents a certain extreme in mystical practice, insofar as he retreated from the mundane affairs of human activity to a cave in order to practice tantric meditative and mystical techniques one-pointedly. He was skeptical of philosophy and the rational use of intellect to understand the nature of reality, preferring to rely strictly on ascetic and mystical techniques. Nonetheless, he is a revered and legendary figure in Tibetan Buddhism, a tradition that stresses great importance on a philosophical, rational investigation of reality alongside mystical practice.

Similar to the other Buddhist mystical poets discussed in this chapter, Milarepa consistently points to a direct realization that goes beyond the power of intellection. Additionally, his poetry serves as mystical pedagogy, lyrical hymns, and polemical critiques. A hermit that lived in extreme solitude, Milarepa is an exemplar of the extraordinary potential of the human spirit, and his life illustrates what can be accomplished with a fervent and one-pointed exertion of concentration.

Chapter Six – Concluding Reflections

“I’d rather hum, and have my soul tattooed to my tongue, and let the scriptures be sung in gibberish; for words be simple fish in my soul-quarium, and intellect can’t swim. . .”

-Saul Williams

This thesis has looked at the role of conceptual reasoning in Buddhist mystical training, a foundation meant to be eventually transcended. The limitations of language and conceptuality itself are reached when attempting to describe the paradoxical, seemingly unspeakable qualities of mystical experiences. Given that noetic insight is a deeply emotional experience, poetry, rather than rational prose, is more effective in conveying these insights. The verse of mystical poets throughout the world’s religious traditions, along with poets who stand outside of these traditions, has been explored as frames of reference for poetic philosophizing. An examination of the history of Western philosophy shows that though philosophizing is built on reasoning and rational argumentation, there are other modalities of cognition and linguistic expressions to be employed in philosophy.

Philosopher of language Ludwig Wittgenstein famously states in 5.6 of his *Tractatus*: “*The limits of my language mean the limits of my world*” (149, emphasis in original). Thus, at the fringe of what is linguistically expressible, an experiential abyss that mystical poets struggle to convey, the symbolic, representational nature of language breaks down. No words can express a mystical realization that spans beyond symbolic conceptuality, but concepts can still point to such an experience, albeit obliquely, as well as creatively alter and undermine the conventional usage of language. Where the wall of

inexpressibility is reached, poetic language can reform language into an entirely unique vehicle, navigating a course around this boundary.

A survey of the mystical poetry analyzed within this thesis illustrates that a transrational modality of consciousness is encountered during mystical experiences. Though some mystics remain in silence, others choose to express and to understand these experiences *via* language, but in a uniquely poetic form of language that subverts the conventional usage of syntax and semantics within language.

Regarding this unique usage of language as a vehicle to express the inexpressible qualities of mystical experiences, Wittgenstein reaches the conclusion to his famous treatise on logic, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, with the following enigmatic statements:

6.4312: . . .If by eternity is understood not endless temporal duration but timelessness, then he lives eternally who lives in the present. . .

6.44: Not *how* the world is, is the mystical, but *that* it is.

6.522: There is indeed the inexpressible. This *shows* itself; it is the mystical (emphasis in original).

7: Whereof one cannot speak, thereof one must be silent. (185-189)

Proposition 6.4312 resonates well with the transpersonal poetry of Blake and Shelley, as well as with the Zen emphasis to focus on the eternal moment. 6.44 illustrates that the mystery of existence is *that* there is existence at all, and the scientific investigation of *how* the world works may distract one from this sense of awe. 6.522 analogizes this mystical quality with the inexpressible: there are simply no words, no

symbolic representations, of this mysterious aspect of reality. The original German of the second sentence in proposition 6.522 reads, “Dies zeigt sich, es ist das Mystische.”

“Zeigt sich” translates to either “manifests itself” or “shows itself,” but Wittgenstein leaves this claim ambiguous: somehow, the inexpressible *shows* itself, and therein is the mystical. This paradox is a consistent one within this thesis: the inexpressible, which by definition defies the capability to be expressed, somehow still manifests, and this manifestation is seen in the unique usage of language utilized in mystical poetry, wherein poetry serves to invoke a sense of sanctity and to move the mind of the reader into transrational consciousness.

The *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, a classic of analytical philosophy along with the works of Russell and Whitehead, dismantles its usage of rigorous, analytical language with the enigmatic conclusion of proposition 7: one must remain silent whereof one cannot speak. Ultimately, then, the mystic is left in silence, in a nonconceptual apprehension of reality.

Poetry and Philosophy as Subversive

As a practice, in the Greek sense of *techné* or a practiced craft, philosophy has always been subversive. The Western philosophical tradition witnessed the trial and untimely death of Socrates, the madness of Nietzsche as his own philosophy devoured himself, and the brutal murder of Hypatia; all of these losses resulted from an unflinching dedication to the practice of philosophy. The *śramaṇa* movement of India, composed of wandering ascetic-philosophers, also invoked controversy. This movement established heterodoxical thinkers, such as the Śākyamuni Buddha, who undermined the religious,

caste, gender and socio-political values ingrained in Indian culture. As a practice of rigorous questioning, often leading to controversy and the stirring of established social norms, philosophy is thus a subversive craft.

When poetry becomes philosophical, it too is subversive. While philosophy as a practice questions the given norms and underlying assumptions employed in the understanding of the world, the creative usage of language in poetry subverts the ingrained assumptions of philosophy: being that rational discourse is the preferred method of practicing philosophy, and that the nature of reality can be discovered strictly through logical means. When language becomes art, as in poetic language, these assumptions are inverted and challenged.

On this note, the political aspect of poetry, an aspect not touched upon in this thesis, is of interest. Blake's *The Marriage* ends with fervent language celebrating the revolutionary power evident in the recent American and French revolutions, while Shelley ends *A Defence* with an analogy comparing poets with world legislators. Mystical poets are thus often led to political activism, since their visions of unity provoke a sense of compassion and interconnectedness, rather than the quietism associated with some mystical practitioners. The *bodhisattva* aspirant in Mahāyāna Buddhism is urged to assist all beings, ceaselessly. Rather than retreating into the ineffable, mystics often intervene in political affairs, motivated by a compassionate sense of duty.

I introduce a poem by Kūkai as a catalyst for reflection: "Being painted by brushes of mountains, by ink of oceans / Heaven and earth are the bindings of a sutra revealing the truth" (qtd. in Parkes 116). That is, with a careful, attentive awareness, the world around us can speak the enlightening truths of a *sutra*, a spiritual scripture. To

acknowledge the sanctity of existence is not to ignore the tragic injustices of our world, but to confront these realities to acknowledge the interconnected web of being, weaving all beings into interdependence. Framed in Buddhist as well as scientific terminology, Brian Brown discusses this interdependence,

This movement of the mind from ignorance to wisdom, from crass materialism to the universe as sacred body, is the very movement of Absolute Consciousness from an implicit to an explicit self-awareness...[There is] a primary reality that actualizes a concrete self-awareness in human reflection. Together, with them [biology and physics] it advocates an urgent challenge that humanity free itself from a distorted arrogance and recognize itself as originated in dependence upon a reality more than itself, that it is conditioned by and coexists in dynamic interdependence with all things. (136)

Directly attuning to this “reality more than itself” is mystical *gnosis*, a direct illumination of the sacred dimension of our world. Though vital knowledge about our universe derives from scientific investigation and a disciplined usage of reasoning, there is yet something else that reason alone cannot access.

A recurring theme throughout this thesis, especially emphasized by Blake and Shelley, is the transformative power of Imagination. Termed by Blake the “Divine Imagination,” our imaginative ability allows us to establish elaborate ethical systems, artistic creations, social and political systems, and to rewrite ourselves creatively within the ever-flowing flux of existence. Imagination is redemptive, for it allows us to imagine what has never been before, and to make manifest the infinite possibilities dreamt by our consciousness.

Mircea Eliade concludes his *Shamanism: Archaic Techniques of Ecstasy* by claiming:

It is likewise probable that the pre-ecstatic euphoria constituted one of the universal sources of lyrics poetry. . .He [a shaman] ends by obtaining a 'second state' that provides the impetus for linguistic creation and the rhythms of lyric poetry. Poetic creation still remains an act of perfect spiritual freedom. Poetry remakes and prolongs language; every poetic language begins by being a secret language, that is, the creation of a personal universe, of a complete closed world. The purest poetic act seems to re-create language from an inner experience that. . . reveals the essence of things. It is from such linguistic creations, made possible by pre-ecstatic 'inspiration,' that the 'secret languages' of the mystics and the traditional allegorical languages later crystallize. (511)

This ecstasy, from the ancient Greek *ecstasis*, *ἐκ-στασις*, "standing outside oneself," again referring to the transcendence of an isolated, separate ego that is a recurring motif throughout the mystical literature examined in this thesis. It is within this experience of unity that the most sublime of lyrical poetry streams forth. This secret language described by Eliade constantly creates and recreates new universes. The poetry written by these visionaries is itself an act of meditation, a creation which "still remains an act of perfect spiritual freedom" by creatively rewriting the rules of syntax and employing Imagination, which is truly a sacred gift. A mystical poet, by standing outside herself in ecstasy, can also invoke the reader of this poetry to co-participate in the mystical experience, whether the poet is alive or is now a mote of dust that joined the passing breeze centuries ago. Poetry as *ecstasis* thus transcends the bounds of space and time.

The mystical poet works as the technician of the sacred, exploring and expressing the religious impulse incessantly. Pushed to the extent of madness, a "wine cup to be broken," these poets suffer from a ravenous thirst that can be satiated only by ecstatic union with the cosmos, as the illusory walls of an isolated self dissolve away into the vast mystery.

Visionaries translate nature's hidden whispers to humankind, becoming conduits for the cosmic symphony. Heavenly ambrosia overflows from their chalices as we are invited to co-participate in the sacred beatific vision, the *unio mystica* that invokes the eternal.

With the free play and celebration of language, we invoke the auspicious breeze of Eleusinian Mysteries, breathing incantations into the timeless winds.

In this sacred dance of life, of which we are but dew upon the waving, transient grasses, are we any different than caterpillars? – caterpillars who, after shedding the cocoon of self-obsession and delusion, fly aloft with newfound wings into the golden sundrenched breeze?

To have the wine cup shattered, the wine cup of our fragmented, illusory sense of self, is thus to embrace our ultimate identity that is at oneness with the entire cosmos. To be broken, then, is the highest gift.

Pythagoras spoke of the “celestial music of the spheres,” a music that emanates from the celestial spheres in their orbits and rotations, a music that is lost to human beings as we gradually lose our sense of wide-eyed wonder proceeding childhood. As one's ear becomes re-attuned to this music, we find ourselves to be instruments of this cosmic symphony, empty vessels for the universe's sacred breath to course through, singing out melodies of aching beauty.....

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