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CHAPTER 13

On the Foundations and Norms of Poetry

Patrick Laude

The connection between poetry and contemplation has been highlighted on many accounts and in many ways, so much so that it has become a sort of truism. In common parlance, the poet is often considered as an intuitive and meditative soul who enjoys a rare ability to contemplate reality in a more profound and subtle way than most of his fellow humans do. Accordingly, one often deems poets to be endowed with a mediumistic ability that somehow allows them to gain access into the deepest layers of reality. By virtue of this ability, the poet was traditionally conceived as a mediator or a channel between the essence of things and the magic of words, crystallizing his perceptions into sounds and images that pierce through the veil of trivial usage and bring miracles out of language. However, the idea of poetic contemplation covers a wide spectrum of phenomena, and while all genuine poetry is in a sense "contemplative," it does not follow that the discipline of contemplative practice necessarily enters into the alchemy of poetic creation; hence the need to specify the scope of our understanding of contemplation.

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In the Christian spiritual tradition, contemplation has often been defined in contradistinction to the reading of Scriptures (*lectio divina*), meditation and the practice of vocal prayer. The latter is most often envisaged as a personal, volitional and sentimental motion of the soul directed toward God. In contrast, meditation involves the discursive process of reason, even though this discourse may be accompanied by the evocation of images and ultimately results in emotional affects, as in the practice of Ignatian meditation. In contemplation, as suggested by the prefix "con-," motion and discourse are somehow superseded by a synthetic, immediate and inarticulate mode of being—not mere thinking—that entails both totality and centering. Contemplation engages our entire being while rooting it in the unshakable ground of

the Divine; it suggests union with God, and therefore Self-sufficiency and repose in Being.

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In contrast with this self-contained and synthetic character of contemplation, poetry always implies, by definition, the idea of a production, poems or *poêmata*. Etymologically speaking, the Greek word *poiêsis* literally means creation, and specifically refers to creation in the realm of the *logos*. Although the scope of the term *logos* has tended to become more and more limited to the plane of rationality, its original meaning remains far from being exhausted by its reference to the realm of the discursive mind. The etymology of the Greek word suggests the idea of a gathering or a collecting, thereby alluding to the distillation of a unity of understanding and discourse out of a multiplicity of perceptions.

In Christianity, the *Logos* was to be understood in the context of the Incarnation and therefore identified with Christ as the Divine and human manifestation of the redeeming Truth. In this context, the Word may be best defined as the perfection and prototype of Creation in God—the Model for all things so to speak—while being also—from another standpoint—the perfection and culmination of Creation in man; hence the central position of mankind in the universe, a position that is symbolized, in the Bible,[1] by the human privilege of naming creatures. The human ability to "name" beings clearly pertains to the Word as point of junction between the Divine and the human. The *Logos* is the nexus between these two realms, and thus the means of communication *par excellence* between the two; it is both divine Revelation and human Invocation. In the first case, God speaks in a human language as it were, while man's prayer is most fundamentally a divine idiom.

From the standpoint of the "descent" into being, the "poetic" Act of God through His Word is Creation, whereas in the perspective of the "ascent" toward God, this Act is to be understood as the theomorphic and deifying Norm[2] and the Way back to God. As is most directly expressed by the prologue of the Gospel according to St. John, God creates through His Word:

[1] Genesis 2:19-20.

[2] Hence the Catholic idea of the "imitation of Christ," *Imitatio Christi*.

In principio erat Verbum,
Et Verbum erat apud Deum,
Et Deus erat Verbum.
Hoc erat in principio apud Deum.
Omnia per ipsum facta sunt:
Et sine ipso factum est nihil, quod factum est.[3]

Mankind, in his universal aspect, therefore constitutes the Divine "Poem" *par excellence*, and as such the prototype of the whole Creation.

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In India, the sacred syllable *Omkara*, as a quintessence of Divine Revelation, constitutes the essence of all poetry. Similarly, in Islam, the Quran is the divine Revelation, and the divine Name *Allāh* is—for Sufis—the synthesis of the Book. Each in its way can be viewed as the quintessence of poetry. The point of view of Far Eastern traditions is somewhat different in that it does not stem from Revelation as a Book or as an Original Utterance. In the Chinese and Japanese traditions—by virtue of the Shamanistic roots of Taoism, Confucianism and Shintō, the word or the book is Nature, or it is synthesized by the fundamental "signatures" that are the combination of cosmic principles, *yin* and *yang*, as manifested first and foremost in the *I Ching*. It could be said that these traditions do not consider poetry as a prolongation of the verbal irruption of the Supreme in the world but that they rather envisage poetical creation as a mode of conformity to the immanent "traces" of the Divine in Nature.

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Whether one considers the Divine Word as expressed through Revelation and Scriptures or as manifested in the Book of Nature, the human poet is but an imitator of the Divine Poet since his "logical" (stemming

[3] As it is presented in St. John's prologue, the relationship between *Deus* and *Verbum* is what Coomaraswamy proposed to define as a "distinction without difference." This expression is Coomaraswamy's translation for the Sanskrit *bhedabheda*. It is implied by the double function of *Verbum* as substantive "predicate" of *Deus* and as object of the preposition *apud* ("with" in the sense of abiding by). God is "no different" from His Word since the Word is, so to speak, the irradiation of God, but He is "distinct" from His Word in so far as the Word is the Prototype of Relativity.

from the *logos*) utterance is simultaneously a "poetical" work (referring here to *poiêsis* as creation or "making"). In their original root, "poetry" and "logic" are one and the same.[4] It is through a profound attention to this reality that Emerson associated the Son of the Christian Trinity with the Sayer and with Beauty (the Father corresponding to the Knower and the True and the Spirit to the Good and the Doer). On the basis of this association, one may understand the deepest meaning of his elliptical formula: "Beauty is the creator of the universe." The Son is the Perfection of Creation and He is also its Door. Beauty is the Hidden Perfection of God from which all things are created. In its essence, or at its height, poetry is accordingly the echo of the Divine Logos. Poetry may thus be understood as the essence of language, or it could also be said that the very root of language was—or is—poetry, before the distinction between poetry and prose could be drawn. Every word, therefore, virtually partakes of poetry, even before being used in a line or a sentence, because every word is a symbolic treasury of virtually limitless implications. Whence flows Emerson's reminder concerning the synthetic character of poetry: "It does not need that a poem should be long. Every word was once a poem." And there is little doubt that when Mallarmé proposed to "give a purer meaning to the words of the tribe" (*donner un sens plus pur aux mots de la tribu*), he had some intuition of this original poetic vibration of the word, particularly of its root. The primordial power of this radical vibration—in which the auditory and semantic dimensions are as it were fused together—explains why poets are in fact the keepers of the symbolic richness of words. They both "attend to" the integrity of language and "open" it by unveiling the limitless potentialities of its foundations. In all spiritual traditions, we find the idea that language was originally much richer and more synthetic than it is today. Language has tended to become reduced to its practical and communicative dimension, be it purely social or idiosyncratic, whereas its essence is actually symbolic. In other words, poetry is not only a means of communication with others and expression of oneself, it is also—and above all—a way for transcendent Reality to manifest itself in and through words,

[4] "According to traditional doctrines, logic and poetry have a common source, the Intellect, and far from being contradictory are essentially complementary. Logic becomes opposed to poetry only if respect for logic becomes transformed into rationalism, and poetry, rather than being a vehicle for the expression of a truly intellectual knowledge, becomes reduced to sentimentalism or a means of expressing individual idiosyncrasies and forms of subjectivism" (Seyyed Hossein Nasr, *Islamic Art and Spirituality* [Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1987], p. 91).

images and music. By virtue of this symbolic power not only to represent and communicate but also to make present, it is fundamentally polysemic: it offers multiple strata of meaning and cannot be reduced to the single horizontal dimension of conceptual communication. This virtually unlimited multiplicity of meanings—unlimited in proportion to the depth of poetry—must not however be confused with the relativistic claim that reduces poetry to a matter of subjective readings in the name of hermeneutic freedom. The very partial merit of this relativistic claim lies in the emphasis it places upon the individual as a locus of actualization of meaning. However, the "making" sense of the poem is not only a matter of subjective actuation, it is also and first of all one of objective and essential potency. Metaphysically speaking, one must maintain the radical objectivity and ontological power of the word both as *shaktic* or "magic" reality and as pure potentiality. In this sense, the Word is the very act of Being.

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As a way of access to the primordial richness of language, poetry is deeply connected to memory and anamnesis, memory being understood here in its profound and quasi-timeless connection with truth, and not simply as a psychic repository of ideas and images. Coomaraswamy has emphasized the fact that traditional literature—before the advent of modernity—was exclusively poetic:

> Ours is a prose style, while the traditional lore of all peoples—even the substance of their practical sciences—has been everywhere poetical.

In contrast, the modern and contemporary disjunction between the intellective dimension of "logic" and the domain of poetry testifies to a desacralization of knowledge on the one hand, and to a debasement of poetry on the other hand. It is one of the major symptoms of what Gilbert Durand has proposed to call the "schizomorphic" sickness of modern man, i.e the fragmentation of inner and outer reality that results in disintegration and irreconcilable oppositions.

In many cosmogonies, the process of creation is presented as an encounter between two complementary principles that are both necessary in order for the world to be. The Bible tells us that "the Spirit of God was hovering over the waters" whereas Hindu cosmology refers to *Purusha* and *Prakriti* as the two principles of manifestation. The first of these principles is active, determinative and "informing" while the second is plastic and receptive. Analogously, the poetical

work tends to be conceived as the outcome of the encounter between "form" (*idea* or *eidos*, intelligible principle) and "matter" (*hylê*, substantial or hypostatic principle), or a "meaning" and a "form" (taken this time in the ordinary sense of the word). We find the same complementary pair of creative principles—with different emphases and nuances—in all major poetics, and the harmonic coincidence of the two elements involved is always understood as being brought out by the clear subordination of the substratum in relation to the intellective form.[5] This "crystallization" of the coincidence between intellective essence and linguistic substance is primarily effected through meter. As God "disposes everything according to measure, number, and weight" (*omnia in mensura, numero et pondere disposuisti* [Wisdom of Solomon, 11:20]), as He manifests the world through the qualitative measures of cosmic order, the poet analogously creates by manifesting the *eidos*, the spiritual meaning, within the domain of linguistic substance and through meter. In other words, the form is as if absorbed by the essence through the prosodic number. The latter is the very mode of poetic creation. It is not an arbitrary constraint but the very expression of quality and intelligibility within the realm of quantity.[6] Number is the prototype of measure and it is therefore the manifesting and ordering principle of creation, the poem.[7]

In so far as number and measure are none other than expressions of unity, they also constitute the essence of rhythm as the "formal" pole of poetry. Rhythm, which plays such a central role in contemplative meditation and methods of invocation, must be understood as the expression of Unity within multiplicity; it is the very "vibration" of the One. In and through it the "other" participates in the "Same." In this connection, rhythm is closely associated with incantation as a spiri-

[5] As Ray Livingston articulates it: "The universe itself, properly viewed by the Intellect, or the 'eye of the heart,' as it is often called, is the result of the marriage of Harmony (*sāman*) and the Word (*rc*) or, in another idiom, the union of essence and substance. . . . When there is a true union of those principles, the result is 'an effective harmony and the reproduction of the higher of the two principles involved'" (*The Traditional Theory of Literature* [Minneapolis, 1962]), p. 77).

[6] In René Guénon's words: "One may say that measure is in relation to number, in reverse analogy, what manifestation is in relation to its essential principle" [*On peut dire que la mesure est par rapport au nombre, en sens inversement analogique, ce qu'est la manifestation par rapport à son principe essentiel*] (*Le règne de la quantité et les signes des temps* [Paris, 1945], p. 41).

[7] "Number, gentlemen, number! Or else order and symmetry; for order is nothing else than ordered number, and symmetry is nothing but perceived and compared order" (Joseph de Maistre, *Les soirées de Saint-Petersbourg* [Paris, 1821], 2:125).

tual method of return to the One. Through rhythm, the One makes itself present in multiplicity, the Formless inhabits form: rhythm is the *barzakh* (the intermediary zone) between the instant of eternity and temporal sequence. From an animic standpoint, the mobility and perpetual "otherness" of the soul may be integrated by means of the "sameness" of the reoccurring patterns brought out by rhythmic practice. As Ananda Coomaraswamy has pointed out, the "singsong" reading of sacred texts is none other than the "performing" aspect of this rhythmic law. Monotony and absence of psychic expressiveness is a direct manifestation of the spiritual grounding of sacred chant in the One. This principle is central in sacred and liturgical psalmody, as is testified to by authentic Gregorian chant and traditional Quranic recitation. It is important to keep in mind, in this connection, that poetry should be read aloud, preferably sung. Poetry is not only a manifestation into the realm of multiplicity, it is also an exteriorization, and singing is the very symbol and means of this exteriorization. In this context, it should be recalled that the sacred text—essence or epitome of all poetical works, and always eminently poetic itself, as is the Quran in the context of the Arabic language—proceeds by what has been characterized by Frithjof Schuon as a kind of ruse.[8] It makes use of multiplicity and exteriorization in order to bring back the ten thousand things to the One. This is what could be called the alchemy of diversity. Accordingly, rhythm functions both as an expression of the One and as a necessity stemming from the spiritual and intellectual structure of our being. As a reflection of the *Logos*, it is the ebb and flow of Reality.

On the "substantial" plane of "words," rhythm, or meter is like the imprint of the One. And it could be said, in this connection, that through rhythm, meter or prosody, form participates in the essence. On the highest level, the essence is to be understood as the ineffable

[8] "Like the world, the Quran is both one and multiple. The world is a multiplicity which disperses and divides; the Quran is a multiplicity which gathers and leads to Unity. The multiplicity of the sacred Book—the diversity of words, sentences, images and narrations—fills the soul, and then absorbs it and transposes it, in an imperceptible manner, through a kind of 'divine ruse,' in a climate of serenity and immutability. The soul, which is accustomed to the flow of phenomena, gives herself to this flow without resistance, she lives in them and is divided and dispersed by them, and even more—she becomes what she thinks and what she does. Revealed Speech has the capacity of welcoming this same tendency while reverting its motion thanks to the celestial character of its content and its language, in such a way that the fishes of the soul enter without distrust, and at their customary pace, into the divine net" (English version of *Comprendre l'Islam* [Paris, 1976], pp. 54-55).

Principle—since God is the meaning of everything—the vibrant Silence that is the alpha and the omega of all poetry and all music, of all worlds. However, we must also consider the relationship between essence and form from the standpoint of "meaning" or "content." The latter is always considered as more determinative or ultimately as more "real" than the formal structure.[9]

In Japanese poetry for example, the *haiku* must fulfill some "formal" requirements that pertain to rhythm, as well as to the lexicon, but it cannot be a *haiku* without integrating an "essential" element without which it is not a *haiku*, the *hai-i*, the *haiku* spirit.[10] Similarly, Hindu poetics entirely revolves around the notion of *rasa* or "taste," a notion that evokes the divine and beatific infinitude as it is experienced by and through the Self. It is a participation in the music of the Infinite.

Now such terms as *hai-i* or *rasa* refer to a somewhat "ineffable" and "indefinite" reality—although they may give rise to very specific descriptions and classifications in terms of their modalities—precisely because they pertain to Infinitude, as expressed in the Hindu concept of *ānanda* or, in a different way and in Japanese parlance, in the term *fueki*, the "metaphysical ground," "non-articulated wholeness" (Izutsu), or Naught.[11] On whatever level and in whatever mode one may consider it, this infinite (opening onto the Boundless) and indefinite (that cannot be caught in the net of concepts and words) Reality is the end (in both senses of *telos* and limit) and the essence of poetry, but it is also transcendent in relation to the poem as a formal structure. Here, the analogy between the poem and the human subject allows for a clearer understanding of the relation between "essence" and "form": in Hindu terms, just as *Ātman* is both transcendent and immanent in relation to the individual self, the "spirit of the poem" is

[9] As Livingston points out: "The letter or sound is the outward aspect which is of little importance compared to the spirit or meaning embodied in the words" (*The Traditional Theory of Literature*, p. 78).

[10] ". . . *Haiku* as a 17 syllabled verse is formally similar to the upper strophe of *waka*, except that every *haiku* must have *kigo* (season-word). However, the mere fulfillment of this formal requirement does not necessarily produce a *haiku*, if it is devoid of *hai-i* (*haiku* spirit), as is often the case. A verse of 17 syllabled words with the inner division of 5/7/5 without *hai-i*, even if it is provided with *kigo* (season-word), would not make a *haiku;* it could at the very most make an imperfect *waka*. That which makes a *haiku* genuinely *haiku* is not its formal structure but rather the *hai-i*, the *haiku* spirit" (Toshihiko and Toyo Izutsu, *The Theory of Beauty in the Classical Aesthetics of Japan* [The Hague, 1981], pp. 64-65).

[11] *Fueki* refers to the intrinsic nature of the infinite Void whereas *ānanda* suggests the dynamic power of the infinite Self.

both the very principle of the poem as well as being something situated beyond the poem as a formal entity. If poetry cannot be easily defined, it is not because it is vague or purely subjective, but because it is situated at the junction between form and essence, and opens onto the Infinite.

To put it in a paradoxical way, poetry "has something to say" which "cannot be said." It "has something to say": it may not be didactic in the negative sense of the word, but it is still, if genuine, the result of a kind of necessity, the outcome of a pressure or a need to crystallize a "meaning" into a "form." A contemporary poet such as Rainer Maria Rilke was still very keenly aware of this urgent and necessary character of poetry—the best name for which is inspiration—when he wrote to a would-be poet:

> This most of all: ask yourself in the most silent hour of the night: *must* I write? Dig into yourself for a deep answer. And if the answer rings out in assent, if you meet this solemn question with a strong, simple "I must," then build your life in accordance with this necessity.[12]

Poetry is "given to" or rather "imparted upon" the poet, whether it has the crystalline brevity of *haiku* or the powerful grandeur and length of the epic.[13] This is the inspiration from the "gods" or from the "muses" that the twentieth-century surrealists caricatured with their "automatic writing," confusing the light of the super-conscious with the darkness and chaos of the sub-conscious. Being literally "inspired," true poetry is therefore a rare occurrence, especially in times of spiritual scarcity such as ours.

"Which cannot be said": poetry is akin to experience, or let us say to presence. Poetry is the articulation of a contemplative perception. It is the result of an encounter between a subject and an object, and ultimately the verbal crystallization of an identification between them.

[12] *Letters to a Young Poet* (New York, 1987), p. 6.

[13] As Seyyed Hossein Nasr comments upon one of the masterpieces of Sufi poetry: "Shaykh Mahmud Shabistarī, the author of the *Gulshan-i rāz* (*The Secret Rose Garden*), which is one of the greatest masterpieces of Persian Sufi poetry, writes: 'Everyone knows that during all my life, I have never intended to compose poetry. Although my temperament was capable of it, rarely did I choose to write poems.' Yet in spite of himself, Shabistarī, in a period of a few days, and through direct inspiration (*ilhām*) composed one of the most enduring and widely read poetical masterpieces of Oriental literature. Moreover, he composed in perfect rhyming couplets and the *mathnawī* meter while remaining oblivious to the canons of prosody as contained in the classical works on the subject" (*Islamic Art and Spirituality*, pp. 93-94).

In the modern world, poetry is often conceived as "subjective" and purely "emotional" because of a misunderstanding or an abuse of this principle. Normatively, poetry is the crystallization of what Daumal quite suggestively calls "an objective emotion." Objective in the sense that it is grounded in an archetype—the essence of a phenomenon or a perception—and emotional in the sense that the soul reacts to this archetype in which she recognizes, more or less clearly, her very substance. In this sense, sentiments can be quite objective, and certainly more so than ineffective reasoning severed from its intellective and intuitive root.

Let us consider Japanese *haiku* as an example: in it, the subject participates in the very mode of nature's operations. The poem is like a glimpse into the emergence of the Whole, of the Infinite, into a given form, a given ambience. In a sense, *haiku* constitutes a limit of poetry since, with it, language is reduced to its minimal manifestation, in order to suggest the full Reality of That from which the phenomenon emerges. In this regard, poetry must suggest the very ineffability of the object that it attempts to convey. It is a form of the Formless. Baudelaire had an intuition of this function of poetry when he defined it as a capacity to recover childhood and perceive a given phenomenon "in all its freshness, as the very symbol of reality." One could say of the true *haiku* what Titus Burckhardt so suggestively wrote of Far Eastern landscape painting:

> In paintings of landscapes of a Buddhist inspiration (*ch'an*), all the elements, mountains, trees and clouds, are present only to mark, in contrast, the void from which they seem to spring forth in this very instant and against which they detach themselves as ephemeral islands.

Of course, not all poetry must conform to this "minimalistic" pattern. However, even the most expanded plenitude of expression, if truly poetic, tends to resonate with contemplative Silence, this vibrant essence that is none other than the Heart as source of all songs.

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