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Poetry and the Art of Meditation: Going behind the Symbols

Cover Page Footnote

Stan Scott has taught philosophy, literature, and writing for many years at the University of Maine—Presque Isle. Current interests include studies in the Bible as literature, environmental ethics, philosophy of education, and literature of peace and justice. He is the author of *Frontiers of Consciousness: Studies in American Philosophy and Poetry* (Fordham UP, 1991, 1994) and numerous scholarly articles in such journals as *Thoreau Quarterly*, *Philosophy and Literature*, and *Thought*. He is currently at work on a new book on critical thinking and the practice of non-violence.

Poetry and the Art of Meditation: Going behind the Symbols

Stan Scott

Can poetry guide readers to spiritual experience? If so, what kinds of texts transmit such experience, and what form does this experience take? Many teachers in the world's spiritual traditions emphasize that what we call *spirituality* is not just a feeling or an abstract state of mind, but *an actual experience*. The English word *spirit*, from the Latin root *spirare*, to breathe, is defined as "the living principle or animating force within living beings" (*American Heritage Dictionary*). As a student of both poetry and spiritual teachings in Eastern and Western traditions, I see a strong vein of gold in poetry, expressing the quality of experience implied by the adjective *spiritual*. To find this animating force of spiritual experience in poetry, we may need to discover or invent new forms of inquiry that lead us "below the floorboards," so to speak, behind conventional theoretical or academic approaches to texts. Reader-response theory can get us started toward such discoveries by showing us how to read in a way that goes beyond cognitive activity and by showing how the power of the written word in poetry leads one into the *realization of an experience* as outlined in the text. If texts can actually lead to experiences that are more than cognitive or vicarious, as reader-response theorists have argued, how do we know which texts do lead to spiritual experience? To find such texts, I would say, we start by recognizing spiritual values in literature.

As we read, we search the text for testimony, and search our own heartfelt responses for intuitive knowledge, of the animating force within living beings. Then we attune ourselves to that kind of testimony and knowledge. This attuning means that we approach the poem in a way that allows it to awaken in us not just an aesthetic or cognitive response but a response that goes into a deeper dimension of the self, or consciousness, a dimension that historically has been called *Spirit*. This kind of response can come to a sincere reader, as we will see in this paper, by taking the implications of reader-response theory further and experimenting with methods of reading that involve contemplation. One of these is the Benedictine practice of *lectio divina* or "sacred reading"; another is the Eastern practice of "passage meditation."

Spirit doesn't easily give up its secrets to intellectual analysis. Though sometimes buried in the subconscious part of the mind, Spirit is not irrational. Though hidden, it *can* be directly known. Such knowledge is the subject of the writings of mystics and saints. Though sometimes found in the content of poetry, it does not come simply from applying theory. We gain knowledge of Spirit by coming

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into relation to it. If the text comes from a realized experience of Spirit, the text can be a bridge that brings readers into such a relation. As education theorist Parker Palmer has argued, discovering this elusive thing called *spirituality* within ourselves is like encountering a wild animal in the forest. The bear may be inherently powerful, capable of overwhelming us, but it is also likely to be shy and to hide in deep forest from human contact. If we learn to be still and wait for it with full attention, eventually it shows itself. Similarly, the key to finding *Spirit*, in a text as in oneself, is developing the power of attention and learning to *be still*.

When approached systematically, being inwardly still is called *meditation*. Classically defined as “*the control of thought-waves in the mind*” (Patanjali), meditation is not usually a journey into occult realms. It is “a simple practice that focuses on the development of attention” (Miller 51). Serious study is a necessary means to understanding literature. But the act of study may become part of a practice that yields results more important than conventional understanding as it enables us to develop greater powers of attention. As philosopher Simone Weil explains in her extraordinary book *Waiting for God*, a Christian or spiritual approach to school studies involves the realization that “prayer consists of attention”:

It is the orientation of all the attention of which the soul is capable toward God. . . . School exercises only develop a lower [narrowly focused] kind of attention. Nevertheless, they are extremely effective in increasing the power of attention that will be available at the time of prayer. . . . Never in any case whatever is a genuine effort of the attention wasted. It always has its effect on the spiritual plane and in consequence on the lower one of the intelligence, for all spiritual light lightens the mind. (105-06)

The concepts of prayer and meditation are different ways of expressing the idea of a practice that leads to the core experience of Spirit. That practice involves developing an ability to quiet the mind and direct attention to the dimension of depth (Spirit or Soul) within individual consciousness.

Clearly, poetry makes unusual demands upon our attention. By surrendering to these demands, we develop a capacity for complete attention, or presence with the text. We come to *realize* (discover the reality of) an experience that our personal relation with the text makes possible. When we read a text that places a value on spiritual experience and involves spiritual perception, the act of reading gives birth to spiritual experience in us. Look, for example, at lines from Psalm 46 in the Hebrew testament (King James Version):

God is our refuge and strength,
a very present help in trouble.
Therefore will not we fear,
though the earth be removed,
and though the mountains be carried into the midst of the sea.
.....
Be still and know that I am God.

By inviting stillness in the mind, the lines move us into a kind of experience that spiritual teachers call meditative or contemplative. As I am using the term,

meditation is an activity that quiets and focuses the mind's chaotic energies. It enables us to find a "center" within consciousness where peace is known. The Psalmist offers a teaching about the meditative art, an art that is sometimes called "centering." He instructs his readers to "be still," calling us to an act of quieting the psychic energies and bringing them to a single point, as a magnifying glass brings the sun's rays to a focal point that can ignite paper. The teaching contained in the Psalm is instruction in being still. From such a state, we see with increasing clearness how to distinguish what is authentic from what is phony or meaningless in ourselves or our surroundings. Though often obscured or damaged by anxieties and cravings, whether personal or imposed on us by our culture, the act of centering that occurs in reading the text sets us on a course of removing fear and so restoring our vital relations to Spirit. If we follow the leading signaled by the instruction to be still, we start on a path of eliminating mental turbulence and delusion, a path that restores sanity and objectivity to our way of seeing reality. We begin to see the world from a standpoint that transcends "normal" perspectives.

The transcendental state that we call *spiritual* is evoked in us by a shift in the literary code called "point of view." In the Psalm the author begins writing from an objective point of view that describes God in the third person as someone who offers "refuge" and "help" in trouble. He then shifts to a first person perspective, the "I" that announces "I am God." As a literary code, point of view enables the reader to have a powerful kind of experience called *identification*. As we read, we perceive from the point of view presented in the text, and at a certain point we are no longer reading *about* a character but seeing *through that character's eyes*, or point of view. When the Psalm shifts from third to first person, it encourages us to shift from *making observations* about "God" to *identifying* with the God-perspective. By so doing, it not only tells us *about* such a perspective, but it also evokes a mood of stillness essential to realizing that perspective in our own experience.

Looking at Psalm 46 in this way illustrates the point that, in reading poetry meditatively, our minds may make a switch from knowing the text "objectively," as separate from the self, to a personalist form of knowing that, in the words of Palmer, "calls for our own conversion" (39). "To learn," writes Palmer, "is to face transformation. To learn the truth is to enter into relationships [in this case with a scriptural text] requiring us to respond as well as initiate, to give as well as take. . . . Objectivist education is a strategy for avoiding our own conversion" (40). The "conversion" brought about by reading poetry meditatively makes new epistemological claims upon us, causing us to awaken within ourselves a more dynamic way of knowing, with fuller participation in the experience behind the words of the text. To find poems that come from meditative or spiritual experience involves some discernment and may require moving outside the literary canon. But active reading of meditative poetry can make such awakenings possible, altering not only the contents of our knowledge but also the knower and transforming the self by bringing it into more authentic self-knowledge.

To make the shift of attitude needed for reading texts in this way, there is a practice known among Benedictine monks as *lectio divina*, or sacred reading, which can be especially helpful. This method can show us ways to go behind the words to the root experience in poems and to actualize their spiritual teachings. This method of reading involves holding the attention lovingly and silently on a

passage of scripture or another text for long periods. In this way moments of encounter that Martin Buber calls “actual presentness” may occur (12). We become actually present, not simply with the physical artifact called a text but with its inner or spiritual teaching. In his attempt to redefine education as “spiritual formation,” Palmer explains: “Where schools give students hundreds of pages of text and urge them to learn ‘speed reading’, the monks dwell on a page or a passage or a line for hours and days at a time.” Because it is done “at a contemplative pace,” the method of *lectio divina* “allows reading to open, not fill, our learning space” (76). Such “meditative reading of brief texts is not only to create a space for learning but to bring the reader into obedient dialogue with the person behind the words” (101). Similarly, in advocating a meditative practice called “centering prayer,” contemporary monk Thomas Keating argues that sacred reading “involves the kind of dynamic that happens in making friends with anyone. . . . At first you feel awkward and strange in one another’s company, but as you get better acquainted, and especially as you feel yourself going out to the goodness you perceive in each other, . . . you are at ease to rest in one another’s presence with just a happy sense of well-being” (45). In this way *lectio divina* works as “a methodless way of meditation. It does not depend on some particular technique, but on the natural evolution of friendship. . . . It is a personal exchange” between oneself and the text (46). Like other authentic meditative practices, sacred reading opens consciousness to wider fields of experience enabling a personal contact to happen in our “meetings” with the poetic text. The text then becomes a channel for a teaching that itself evokes spiritual experience and spiritual development of the reader’s consciousness.

Like an ancient scripture, T.S. Eliot’s great modernist poem *Four Quartets* (1942) can provide a powerful experiment in sacred reading. Look for example at three seminal passages:

After the kingfisher’s wing
Has answered light to light, and is silent, the light is still
At the still point of the turning world. (175)
.....
at the still point, there the dance is,
But neither arrest nor movement
.....
Except for the point, the still point,
There would be no dance, and there is only the dance. (173)

Is the image of the dance a signifier for an intangible harmonic order underlying existence? Eliot’s use of paradox (“neither arrest nor movement”) helps the reader to loosen consciousness from its conventional moorings and to look deeper into the nature of things. If “there is only the dance,” how do we attain experience of it or participate in it? The answer, found in the majestic symbol of “the still point of the turning world,” is not simply an abstract reference to a point in geometric space but is more specifically an invitation to identify with a concrete point of view. That point of view is experienced in Eastern as well as Western spiritual traditions by a practice called single-pointed attention and is beautifully defined in many books by Sri Eknath Easwaran. For Easwaran the practice involves sitting, usually in silence for extended periods of time, with the mind

focused on an inspired passage, until we come to rest in its presence. Practicing such contemplative meditation allows us to relinquish gradually anxieties and external compulsions as we come into personal relation to what philosopher Martin Heidegger calls “the truth of being” expressed in (or between) the lines of poetry. The feeling of that truth is what is meant by “the still point” in Eliot’s lines. The realization of such truth comes about as a teaching or spiritual transmission from the root experience of the poet by means of the text to the reader. If we are ready for the teaching, Eliot’s lines offer coded instruction in how to find the still point in the midst of the turmoil of everyday life (“turning world”) and show us how to participate in the “dance,” signifying grace, within the circumstances of that very world.

In “Ash Wednesday” (1930), a poem that signaled his own conversion to a spiritual worldview, Eliot conveys the experience of single-pointed attention in more explicitly Christian terms. In archetypal images Eliot invokes this experience:

And the light shone in darkness and
Against the Word the unstilled world still whirled
About the centre of the silent Word. (96)

The practice of *lectio divina* would ask us to read and reread such lines, holding them lovingly for an extended period in consciousness, with the aim of making friends with the words and their author, reading slowly enough to let each word and its meaning sink like a stone into the pool of the subconscious. In this way we expose ourselves to what Eliot called “the music of poetry,” expressed here in its alliteration (especially the repetition of musical consonant sounds *s* and *l*), rhythms (iambic pentameter in two of the lines), and other codes such as the reference to the “Word,” an allusion to the Greek word *logos*. For the pre-Socratic philosopher Heraclitus (sixth century BCE), as in the prologue to the gospel of John, *logos* is a name for a cosmic principle that creates order out of chaos and holds all the phenomena of the universe in what the Greeks called “cosmos” (harmony). In the gospel it is also a symbol for Christ. But, because we can both speak the “word” and comprehend the meaning of the “Word” (*logos*), the term symbolizes a center of power inherent in our own consciousness, enabling us to perceive and experience that order. When we learn to approach the lines through an act of sacred reading, we practice “centering,” encountering the “silent Word” as the animating force that stands “against” the “unstilled world” of human conflicts. By learning to read in this way, letting the words be transmuted into experience, we involve ourselves in spiritual formation. We engage in a deliberate practice leading to grace, compassion, and the wider fields of awareness and action that characterize spiritual experience.

Poetry as Spiritual Inquiry

In probably his most fully realized work of art “Sunday Morning” (1915), another modernist American poet, Wallace Stevens, presents the character of a woman evolving an inner awareness of spiritual experience in contrast to conventional religion. The poem uses the literary code of personal point of view to make us see from the perspective of its central character. As in many other literary texts, images of silence are used here as signifiers of meditative experience.

So, as we overhear the woman's interior monologue, sensing with her "the holy hush of ancient sacrifice" and traveling with her in reflective reverie to "silent Palestine," we are invited to share in this meditative experience:

The day is like water, without sound,
 Stilled for the passing of her feet
 Over the seas, to silent Palestine,
 Dominion of the blood and sepulchre.
 Why should she give her bounty to the dead?
 What is divinity if it can come
 Only in silent shadows and in dreams?

By presenting the woman's questions, the text also questions *us* as readers, prodding us into further inquiry and dialogue with her:

Shall she not find in comforts of the sun,
 In pungent fruit and bright, green wings, or else
 In any balm or beauty of the earth,
 Things to be cherished like the thought of heaven?

The answer given in the text is that

Divinity must live within herself:
 Passions of rain, or moods in falling snow;

 All pleasures and all pains, remembering
 The boughs of summer and the winter branch.
 These are the measures destined for her soul. (CP 67)

Can we read the poem in ways that bring not just *knowledge about* it, but *realization* of the "measures" that lead us to *our own* inner development? The text confronts us with the questions—what is divinity? what is soul?—within the naturalistic assumptions of the poem. Can we read this text as a way to find new dimensions of awareness in the contexts of our own experience? We recognize familiar phenomena in figurative phrases like "Passions of rain, or moods in falling snow," "the boughs of summer and the winter branch." Such phrases are forms of what critic Stanley Fish calls "rhetorical presentation." They tell us about familiar objects or feelings. But the structure of the text is not straightforward rhetorical presentation. It takes essentially a different form, one that Fish calls "dialectical presentation." By posing its questions, the text implicitly asks for a response. It challenges us at levels deeper than its more familiar rhetoric of feelings, objects, and sensations. Its dialectical structure offers ideas, questions, and propositions that challenge us to discover truths on our own. If we are interested enough to enter more fully into its spiritual domain, the poem questions conventional notions of religion or divinity that many readers have brought to it. By asking "What is divinity?", the poet takes us into a realm of spiritual inquiry. And with the answer that "Divinity must live within herself," he presents not a propositional truth but a conditional idea to be *realized* by us in our own experience as we engage with the dialectic of question and answer from the central character's point of view.

According to another reader-response theorist Wolfgang Iser, “In literary works, . . . the message is transmitted in two ways, in that the reader ‘receives’ it by composing it” (22). The idea of receiving by composing the message essentially reverses the conventional view that reading is a one-way transmission of knowledge from text to reader. In the reader-response model, reading is a dialogue in which the reader invents new ideas, or new perspectives, based on the experience of reading. According to Iser, “the aesthetic effect is robbed of [its] unique quality the moment one tries to define what is meant in terms of other meanings that one knows” (what Fish calls “rhetorical presentation”). If “one automatically seeks to relate [the text] to contexts that are familiar . . . the effect is extinguished, because the effect is *in the nature of an experience*” (22, my italics). If we see Stevens’ “pungent fruit and bright green wings” or “comforts of the sun” simply as familiar objects and feelings, we lose the most important effect the poem can have: to be a leading into a new experience. In the act of reading, “the meaning of a literary text is not a definable entity, [in Iser’s view] but, if anything, a dynamic happening” (22).

How can we experience the text as such a “dynamic happening”? According to Iser, “As the reader passes through the various perspectives offered by the text and relates the different views and patterns to one another he sets the work in motion, and so sets himself in motion, too” (21). In “Sunday Morning” you and I may be moved by the rhetoric of the text to follow the woman’s interior monologue and pass with her through changes of mood and attitude. As we *feel* the workings of its literary codes (its intensely personal point of view, rhythms, cultural signifiers such as “Palestine” and “divinity”), the text forms a catalyst, enabling us to “set the work in motion,” and so set ourselves personally in motion, to perceive new meanings. These meanings come into being through our personal dialogue with the stream of experience found in the text. If we are to grasp the idea that “divinity must live within herself,” we do so by getting to the core experience contained in the text and realizing it as experience within *ourselves*. We experience not just conventional empathy with a character and her plight but *identification* with the meditative and spiritual experience encoded in the text. By reading dialogically, we engage in a dynamic act, an act which entails *defamiliarizing* the images and literary codes, setting ourselves in motion toward a new experience of our own, in this case linking fruit, green wings, rain and snow, and the passions associated with them, to a realization that divinity lives within the self.

To Read is to (Re)create an Actual Experience

Most events pass us by in weak or degenerate states of attention and so are misappropriated. While the effect of mass culture is often to distract or divide attention, reading poetry can have exactly the opposite effect, by giving one a sense of what it means to have a fully realized experience. Reading poetry in this way is moving toward integration of one’s whole outlook, including critical as well as receptive powers of the mind. To approach reading as a practice of meditation invokes this range of mental powers in the reader and so has a way of breaking some of the hypnotic effects of the culture of mass media. So developing the ability to learn through meditative reading is a force for the transformation of consciousness. As a means of expanding the power of attention, reading is

not a passive experience but a creative act parallel to the writing of the text. Read less as an observer than as a participant, and the poem becomes a door that allows one to enter and relive the core experience that went into the creation of the text. If the text has come from meditative experience, reading is a way to re-enact the same qualities of mind, heart, and attention that produced the text in the first place. As an act of *re-creation*, reading demands something more than conventional analysis, interpretation, or the application of theory. That “something more” is to get the lived experience, present behind the symbols, that brought the text into being.

In his powerful late poem “Credences of Summer” (1946), Stevens calls to “us” as readers in commanding first-person plural references, reminiscent of scriptural commands:

Let's see the very thing and nothing else.
 Let's see it with the hottest fire of sight.
 Burn everything not part of it to ash.
 Trace the gold sun about the whitened sky
 Without evasion by a single metaphor
 And say this, this is the centre that I seek. (*CP* 373)

The lines give instruction in what has been called in Eastern philosophy “spiritual discrimination,” a kind of applied critical thought, that distinguishes between real experience and fabricated images of experience (Shankara). When the search for truth is a kind of burning—“the hottest fire of sight”— we can see “the very thing and nothing else” what is most real about the world and human identity behind the deceptions of mass culture or personal bias. The way to succeed in the search is to *decondition* perception. We “burn everything not part of it to ash.” Cleansing the mind of its baggage of conditioned responses allows us to “see” more of what is really there. Animated by a “fire,” not of the letter but of the spirit, this vision, unlike ordinary conditioned perception, burns every deception to ash. The text calls upon us to realize an actual experience of what in Eastern philosophy is called nondualistic perception in which there are no deceptive screens between the seer and the seen.

What Lies behind the Symbols?

In another great poem, “The Sail of Ulysses” (1954), written in his later years, Stevens presents the character of Ulysses from Greek legend as “*Symbol of the seeker*” in interior monologue. Ulysses reflects that each person’s life is

an approach to the vigilance
 In which the litter of truths becomes a whole. (*Palm* 390)

Through “vigilance” (i.e., attention), we realize the reality of “A life beyond this present knowing” (390):

The ancient symbols will be nothing then.
 We shall have gone behind the symbols
 To that which they symbolized, away
 From the rumors of the speech-full domes,
 To the chatter that is then the true legend,
 Like glitter ascended into fire. (391)

For Ulysses, as for us, the ancient symbols, whether in religion or politics, have hardened into social constructions. It is only by acts of vigilance (read “attention”) that we “go behind the symbols.” In contrast to the claims of fundamentalists (whether Christian, secular humanist, Hindu, Buddhist, or Muslim) for the infallibility of (their own) scriptures or teachings, Stevens takes something like a postmodernist stand: for Ulysses “There is no map of paradise.” In this world, “the genealogy/Of gods” has been “destroyed” or, as we might say, deconstructed. As in Taoist or Zen practice, destroying the genealogy of gods is for Stevens a way of emptying the mind, clearing it of presuppositions. From the clearing we come, by vigilance, to experience a “life beyond this present knowing.” We find our “misgivings dazzlingly/Resolved in dazzling discovery” (390). We leave the realm of “rumors” and uncover the “true legend” that unfolds authentic existence. The clearing unfolds ultimate reality: “The outlines of being and its expressings, the syllables of its law” (*CP* 423–24), as Stevens puts it in “Large Red Man Reading.”

Seeing the world through Ulysses’ point of view, we feel with him the longing for paradise as well as the absence of a map to find it. So we may be impelled to read in a way that takes *us* “behind the symbols.” What do we find by doing so? “That which they symbolized” can only mean an actual experience, something real and tangible. The reader’s new realized experience involves participating in a nonconventional way of knowing discovered by the poet. Like an ancient sage, Stevens includes his readers as participants in his discovery with the first-person plural pronoun: “We shall have gone behind the symbols.” By the literary chemistry of identification, we come with Ulysses to new knowledge as well as a new way of knowing. In Eastern philosophy this way of knowing is called nondualism where the screens between the knower and the known are eliminated. Ulysses comes to understand how it is that “knowing/And being are one” (390), and the text invites us into this understanding. The “ancient symbols,” e.g., of the gods and paradise, will then be as “nothing.” Like the meditative practitioner who awakens to truth through silent meditation, we will have attained the actual experience they symbolized, an integration of being and knowing. We may not come into knowledge of a conventional paradise or divinity, but by vigilance we may find something more meaningful, a form of experience in which *what is* (being) is directly known “beyond this present knowing.”

Reading to Go behind the Symbols

To read poetry meditatively is to follow its leadings into spaces that may lie beyond our own present knowing. In other words, reading sacred texts or poems like those of Stevens and Eliot we have been exploring may evoke what Iser calls a “dynamic happening” that restructures the matrix of knowing. As we learn to go behind the symbols, we go into a kind of initiation, discovering qualities of experience known at first only to the poet but which are now transmitted, through the chemistry of reading, as spiritual teaching by the text. If we choose to read texts that contain coded instructions in the art of meditation, we are choosing to participate in a dynamic happening that the text makes possible. Cognitive learning often demands great intelligence. It is still the gold standard in schools and universities and may be indispensable to academic studies and to critical thought. But it tends to hold the text at a distance from the reader. And all too often school

studies may end up deepening the breach between the student and the text, between the student and real knowledge, unless we approach studies from a more personal attitude, like that of a Parker Palmer or a Simone Weil, as an opportunity to expand our personal powers of attention and discernment.

The practice of *lectio divina* treats certain texts as avenues into the domain of meditative and spiritual experience. If a teacher has practiced some version of *lectio divina*, perhaps bolstered by insights from reader-response theory or other sources like those we have discussed, and develops skill and confidence in entering the meditative spaces of poetry, the practice can be introduced effectively to undergraduates or other students. From my own experience, I believe the method shows great promise for enhancing students' ability to make meaning from texts and to take more joy in their studies. From this method, all readers may learn to practice a new kind of literacy, reading both "the word and the world" with greater critical discrimination (see Freire and Macedo) and going behind the manipulative constructions of mass culture to see things more clearly as they are. By practicing this method of study, students become more reflective citizens, more adept at discerning differences between the deceptive and the authentic elements of the human scene and acting with greater responsibility toward what is authentic in themselves and others. ☐

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