

Addressing the Human Condition: Poetry, Religion, and the Visionary in Western Poetics

“We are all psychologists, and some people, without the benefit of credentials, are great psychologists. Among them are poets and novelists...we look to the arts for edification about the painful dilemmas of the human condition.”

-Steven Pinker, Harvard professor of Evolutionary Psychology

I. The Human Condition

The *main objective* of my academic study is addressing the antiquated and imprecise notion of the *human condition*. Socio-Biologists and Evolutionary Psychologists have quite convincingly reintroduced the concept of “human nature” with ample evidence, and with this rediscovery of human nature has come a re-evaluation of the human condition. Philip Selznick, professor Emeritus of Law and Sociology at Berkeley, has defined “human nature” in Social scientific (non-Socio-Biological) terms as, “the needs, vulnerabilities, and aspirations that characterize all human populations.” The Socio-Biologist would add to this definition of “human nature” both genes and evolutionary adaptations to the species, like language. Selznick, in alignment with Sociology and the Social sciences, defines the “human condition” as the “setting within which” human nature “develops or is frustrated” (*The Moral Commonwealth*). I want to combine the notion of “human nature” with the notion of a “human condition” so that we may generalize the *constants* that every human being must experience. These constants are:

- 1) A Physical Environment
- 2) A Social Environment
- 3) A Physical Body, conditioning Physical Needs
- 4) The act of Reproduction

Through the fields of sociology and socio-biology we have a strong understanding of how physical environments and social environments shape and determine individuals through a process generally known as “evolution” or “acculturation,” which basically can be understood as a process whereby individual organisms respond and adapt to an ever-changing environment. Individual organisms, in order to live, must meet the demands and conditions of their specific physical and social environments. An individual organism does have specific physical needs determined by the biological structure of its species, gender, and individual genes, but the individual satisfies each need according to the conditions of both climate, culture, and the socio-economic modes of production, where additional social “needs” are determined and facilitated.

Further, there is a more nebulous, and in our modern world a seemingly contested, constant known as “reproduction.” Traditionally this notion has been focused solely on child bearing and is wrapped in all sorts of sexist stereotypes and gender bias, but I want to generalize the notion of reproduction by theorizing it within a wider scope that, I would argue, allows us to reach an important part, perhaps the most important part, of both human nature and the human condition. I would argue that issues of gender aside, every human being *needs* to “reproduce” and that this need can be satisfied through many

different (and often inclusive) means. Again, the primary means has historically been *child bearing and parenting*, which is a prime directive of our biological makeup.

However due to modern mores and reproductive technology, child bearing and parenting has become an *optional* activity to many.

There are also other forms of reproduction that are equally imperative to the individual, which are often not acknowledged. Through the evolutionary developments of consciousness and culture, I would also argue that three other means of reproduction have emerged over the centuries of human evolution that are of central importance to both “human nature” and coming to terms with the “human condition.” These are: *ego development, linguistic communication, and artistic creation*. I would argue that the individual’s creative discovery, exploration, and facilitation of these innate modes of reproduction are essential factors of what we might term “human nature.” But at the same time, I would also argue that these modes of reproduction (i.e. the means of human creativity) are central components in all moral, epistemological, and teleological constructs, which are set against and in dialogue with our knowledge of the human condition. In essence I am arguing that human beings use the processes of subjective reproduction (ego development, linguistic communication and artistic creation) as the primary means to understand the human condition (biological, social, and geo-political environments), and that the processes of subjective reproduction is a series of “creative acts,” and thus the concept of “human creativity” should be a central concept in the social scientist’s understanding what is “human.”

The term and concept of “poetry” has been used for some 2000+ years as an abstract frame of reference with which to discuss how the constants of human nature

(subjectivity, personality, and reproduction) address the constants of the human condition (environment & society). My inclusive definition of “poetry” as “human creativity” (or human reproduction, or subjective reproduction) while it is perhaps the oldest definition of the word poetry, it’s original content has been lost through the centuries, perhaps most notably through the modern and post-modern denial of human nature (see Pinker *The Blank Slate*). The word poetry has evolved to become an elitist concept of metrical verse defined by formalist conventions and academic traditions of “high culture.” Versification and formalist conventions are NOT poetry although they can represent technical expressions of poetry. Simply put, “Poetry” is the creative expression of self, society, environment, and/or imaginative concepts singularly or in relation to each other via a wide range of *reproductive* strategies: **language** (oral or written, metrical or free, fictional or factual), **movement** (dancing, sculpting, sports), or **psychological experience** (ego development, relationship building). All three categories describe the process of human beings engaging in *creative acts*, which is the root concept of the ancient Greek word *poietai*, meaning making, shaping, forming, or creating. Poetry means creation or procreation. Poetry is the reproduction of both subjectivity and community. **Poetry is human nature creatively coming to terms with the human condition.**

The primary avenue that this process has taken is what we would call “ideology” which is a SEEING, NAMING, KNOWING process that creates a WORLD VIEW or ORIENTATION or GESTALT: A Whole Way of knowing and living. And the primary expression of “ideology” for thousands of years was “Religion.”

II. Poetry and Religion

"Religion," Terry Eagleton wrote, "is the single most powerful ideological force which human history has ever witnessed."¹ But what is religion? First we must separate two phases of the religious experience, which, while not really separate, have become divorced over the centuries of secular incursion. There is the 1) *direct experience of sacred reality* and there is the 2) *ritualized enactment of or immersion in that reality*. Again, for "primitive" human beings or for most native and indigenous traditions, one cannot separate these two component parts as they flow together in a single harmony like biological beings *dwelling* "naturally" within a *place*, physical beings connected to their physical environment. In ancient Chinese thought, Taoism, Confucianism, and Neo-Confucianism, the sacred reality (*Tao*) and the ritual immersion in that reality (*Te*) were bound together, illustrated in such sacred books as *Tao Te Ching* or *The Analects*. But within the post-modern we are aware of empty rituals and "going through the motions" devoid of spiritual significance. So let us revisit the spiritually unified ground of ritual traditions and sacred being.

Religion is grounded in myth and myth is pure ideology at work. Myth is *seeing*, *speaking*, and *living* at one with "reality."² It is an existential state of "openness to the world," living in "relation" to the surrounding environment, a part of the whole. This creates a sense of "cosmos," which is a feeling and a knowing of the world from the inside, a lived relational identity with the world because it is known like a family

¹ Eagleton, Terry. *The Idea of Culture*. Ibid. 68.

² The anthropologist Bronislaw Malinowski once wrote, "myth in its living, primitive form is not merely a story told but a reality lived." qtd. in. *American Indian Myths and Legends*. Ed. Richard Erdoes and Alfonso Ortiz. New York: Pantheon Books, 1984. xv.

member, lived in like a home. To dwell³ in the sacred or a sacred place is to dwell in the "real," the "source of life and fecundity."⁴ It is also a state of "seeing," which mystics like William Blake or Rumi call "vision," and this mystical seeing is a knowing of reality.⁵

This seeing is a state of being as William Blake famously said, "As a Man is so he Sees," and it can become a ritualized type of action. Joseph Campbell explains vision as seeing "life as a poem and yourself participating in [that] poem...a vocabulary in the form not of words but acts" thus "heaven and hell are within us, and all the gods are within us."⁶ It is a state of "possession" where the worshiper "is" the sacred being, "embodies" the sacred, "receives life forces into his own being" to "establish a constructive relationship with these powers."⁷ Ritual is the formalized or reverent embodiment of this reality through actions like song, dance, trance, or storytelling.

And the interesting thing about religion is that although it is explicitly and thoroughly social, it is also intensely individual, so much so, that one could argue, as did William James in his classic The Varieties of Religious Experience (1902) or Gordon Allport in The Individual and His Religion (1950), that religion is almost exclusively

³ Martin Heidegger was enamored with the concept "to dwell" (*Gestell, bauen, buan, bin, bist*) and theorized it in a similar way as we are using the term: "Building Dwelling Thinking" and "Poetically Man Dwells." Poetry, Language, Thought. Trans. Albert Hofstadter. New York: HaperCollins Publishers Inc., 1971.

⁴ Eliade, Mircea. The Sacred and the Profane: The Nature of Religion. Trans. Willard R. Trask. San Diego: Harcourt, Inc., 1959. 95, 166-67, 28-29.

⁵ Smith, Huston. Forgotten Truth: The Common Vision of the World's Religions. New York: Harper Collins, 1992. 112. See also: Beach, J. M. "The Mytho-poetic Tradition: What Should Not Be Forgotten" and "A Way of Seeing." Towards a New Mythology. Ibid. Beach, J. M. Studies in Poetry: The Visionary. (unpublished manuscript).

⁶ Campbell, Joseph with Bill Moyers. The Power of Myth. New York: Anchor Books, 1988. 65, 46.

⁷ Jahn, Janheinz. Muntu: The New African Culture. Trans. Marjorie Grene. New York: Grove Press, 1961. 48, 63-64.

individual because almost never do two people experience the same sacred reality in the same way or with the same intensity. A further extension of this thesis is that of the universal phenomenon of the "shaman," the "medicine man," the "bard," the "poet," the "master (teacher)," or the "priest" who *see* more deeply than most because of a more refined or sensitive faculty of *vision* and, because of this, they "mediate" the sacred to their community: "The Holy Man goes apart to a lone tipi and fasts and prays. Or he goes into the hills in solitude. When he returns to men, he teaches them and tells them what the Great Mystery has bidden him to tell."⁸ But in most, if not all, ancient mythological rites and stories the "individualistic principle," the "dangerous and unpredictable force of individual endowment," is "suppressed" in favor of the sacred dimensions of the social and communal, for in terms of tribal survival, community oriented values are more important than the individual.⁹

Moses saw the burning bush and then delivered his people from Egypt and later went up the mountain to speak with God and descended to give the people God's Law. Jesus went into the desert and fasted for 30 days and returned to heal and teach the multitudes. The Buddha left his family and wandered alone until he reached Nirvana and experienced the Ultimate Reality, but he returned to the human world to show others the way. Plato tells of the prisoner who escaped from the cave to experience the Real only to feel compelled to return to the cave, stumbling like an idiot to share his experience and free the others. Muhammad often left his family to practice *tahannuth* until one day an

⁸ Chief Piece of Flat Iron of the Oglalla Sioux told to Natalie Curtis. The Indians' Book. qtd. in. Joseph Campbell. Primitive Mythology. New York: Arkana, 1991. 243.

⁹ see Chapter 6: "Shamanism" in Campbell. Primitive Mythology. Ibid.

angel of Allah dictated the Qu'ran to the supposedly illiterate merchant and Muhammad preached the Word of God unto the disparate Arabian tribes creating a unified federation.

What is important here is that it seems individuals are responsible for the origins of almost all the major and minor world religious traditions, and that each religious tradition is centered on teaching others to *see* and *know* reality (or God) just like the visionary, to experience the world like the shaman, and thereby, to have a group of individuals unite over an idea and become part of a community of like-minded people, which becomes, in turn, the ritualized location of the sacred: "For where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them."¹⁰ The visionary can become a priest figure and mediate the sacred or something more like a teacher and point others down the path of their own transformation, but it takes the spark of an individual to become a catalyst in order to get the communal chemical reaction moving.

From the Axial age we are aware of the tradition where some teacher expounds upon an Ideal proposition so that the student must work their way towards it and, thereby, glean the master's wisdom and become themselves enlightened (The Buddha, Socrates, Plato, Confucius, Mencius). "In the Beginning the Word was God" and then "the Word became flesh and lived among us."¹¹ The *logos* of St. John derived from Platonic notions of the rational, which can be defined as "that in man which enables him to live for something," "what lets him identify and set appropriate goals and then focus his life on achieving them...dangling the carrot of some 'god' or aim to urge them on...pursuing the goal that will ultimately benefit him."¹² Platonism and Christianity impel their followers

¹⁰ Mathew. 18:20. The New Oxford Annotated Bible. New York: Oxford University Press, 1994.

¹¹ John. 1:1, 14. The New Oxford Annotated Bible. New York: Oxford University Press, 1994.

to seek out the One behind and above the mutable many so that they may transcend the material world in order to reach the Ultimate, unchanging and eternal Reality, which is "God."

Buddhism, likewise, teaches its adherents to see more clearly by cleaning the doors of perception from the "pollution" of "mental states," which can cause attachment to this world and thus suffering, but of course they are not trying to seek out God, just the reality of human consciousness:

If one, though reciting little of texts,
Lives a life in accord with dhamma,
Having discarded passion, ill will, and unawareness,
Knowing full well, the mind well freed,
He, not grasping here, neither hereafter,
Is a partaker of the religious quest.¹³

Buddhism, like Platonism, hinges on the duality of "appearance" and "reality" (the Two Noble Truths), but unlike Platonism, Buddhism teaches that the "conventional" world of appearance and the "ultimate" world of reality are both "objects that can be known," they are both real and can be sensually apprehended. But in a spiritual sense, both objective

¹² Gottlieb, Anthony. The Dream of Reason: A History of Western Philosophy from the Greeks to the Renaissance. New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2000. 207. Gottlieb quotes from R. L. Nettleship's Lectures on the Republic of Plato.

¹³ Buddha. The Dhammapada. Trans. John Ross Carter and Mahinda Palihawadana. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000. I: 1, 20.

existences are unreal or a diversion from our higher self, and thus they both need to be discarded on the path to Nirvana, which is divine nothingness.¹⁴

These examples stress the idea that the religious experience is primarily located within the individual human mind. Milton's famous phrase, "the mind can make a heaven of hell or a hell of heaven" echoes the old Buddhist proverb, "to every man is given the key to Heaven; the same key opens the gates of hell." Of course the inevitable extension of the individual experience through the religious process is the ritual enactment, which is primarily communal and done for social purposes and often denies or suppresses all notions of individuality. The fundamental principle that I wanted to stress in this short discussion on religion is that religious experience operates within language and makes linguistic truth claims (epistemology), but is ultimately about experience (ontology) as the psychologist Alan Watts described in many of his books. It is this very personal seeing and knowing of reality, what Abraham Maslow calls a "peak experience," which allows for a transcendent (beyond the personal) motivation, which creates values, and it is for these values, according Maslow, that the religious person lives.

I would like to conclude this discussion by saying that I have presented the positive aspect of religious experience, but there is a negative side as well. The neo-Freudian Erich Fromm, drawing heavily from both Freud and Marx, argued that on the one hand religion and God are about human potential and the freedom for spiritual development, but on the other, religion can be about power and authority, which strip all agency from the human and can alienate the individual from his/her own being.

¹⁴ Newland, Guy. Appearance and Reality: The Two Truths in the Four Buddhist Tenet Systems. Ithaca: Snow Lion Publications, 1999.

III. Western Poetics and the Visionary

- A) Poetry was the living meaning of ancient cultures expressed symbolically:
verbally and visually: **Mythos= story, narrative,**
- B) **Logos= form, order, reason (rationality)**
- C) **Poetics** = concept of poetry (Plato & Aristotle)
- D) Plato

Plato attacked the mytho-poetic on two famous counts. First, In *Meno* and *Ion*, Plato attacked a commonly held notion at the time that poets were divinely inspired by the gods. He indirectly suggested that humans can corrupt or misinterpret divine communications and concluded that one must critically analyze poetry to make sure that it meets divine standards. Second, in books 2, 3 and 10 of *The Republic*, Plato directly charged that poets do corrupt the divine through misleading imitations and further, that the very mechanism of orality prohibited people from appreciating and learning the more accurate development of conceptual thought (specifically, dialectical reasoning) as a means to apprehend the divine, but also on a mundane level, to more effectively perfect the means and ends of social and political life. Plato wanted a thinking poetry and such are his *Dialogues*.

- E) Aristotle

Aristotle's treatise sought to understand the "poetic art as a whole" and link it to "human nature," which would become a bedrock conceptual analogy for thousands of years.¹ Aristotle traced the trajectory of poetry from its oral

mytho-poetic origins (Homer) to the more refined mytho-poetic medium of tragic drama perfected by the Greeks (Aeschylus, Sophocles and Euripides). Aristotle's poetics, at least so far as we know from the extant fragments, focused on the more modern variation of tragic drama developed by the ancient Greeks and Aristotle attempted to analyze and define the central devices that defined the dramatic genre. There are four points of discussion that Aristotle highlighted, which every student of poetry should be aware of since they can be considered the core principles of most Western theories of poetry: 1) poetry is created by a learned and/or an inspired individual; poetry is prophetic in that it can describe what may happen either in the present or future; 3) poetic works must be considered as "whole" works that are "complete" in themselves; and finally 4) the poetic is centered on "verbal expression" which is in its essence the "conveyance of thought through language"

F) Decadance of the Roman Empire and the preminance of Christian iconography,

G) Latin Scholastic tradition of Rhetoric, formal rules for communication combined with Christian dogma curbed creativity.

Ingenium, Exercitatio, Imitatio, and Lectio. (Ben Johnson) Basically these four principles can be translated as: 1) genius or natural creative talent; 2) the ability to exercise or use that genius or talent; 3) the ability to imitate other creative works or forms; and 4) the ability to learn and master the study of a creative tradition, such as poetry.

H) “Renaissance” because of the “rediscovery” of many ancient manuscripts and of pagan culture in general (often, ironically, because these “rediscovered” documents had been preserved by Islamic scholars through the dark ages of European despotism), that conceptual forays into poetry again flourished. However, when many Western Early Modern poets and scholars sought to write a poetics it was often framed in a defensive manner as the idea of poetry had lost much of its currency. One of the most famous “defenses” of poetry in the Early Modern period was made by a young Englishman, named Sir Philip Sidney. Sidney’s *A Defense of Poetry* (1595 C.E.) represents not only the return to a conceptual appreciation of poetics and the mytho-poetic, but it also marks the Early Modern reaction against Papal authority and the Latin language. Thus, the re-conceptualization of poetry was accompanied by the individuality endemic to Protestantism, the proto-nationalism associated with the rise of modern notions of statehood, and the new appreciation of linguistic endeavor fueled by the expansion of vernacular expression.

- 1) poets are *poitens* (makers) as the ancient Greeks believed;
- 2) poets can be considered *vates* (prophets) as the Romans popularized;
- 3) poets are not verbal “versifiers” but are in fact moral and intellectual teachers;
- 4) poetry can be philosophical (i.e. conceptual and logical) and can be considered a medium of “popular philosophy;” and
- 5) poetry can emotionally “move” people to act “virtuously.”

Sidney’s concept of poetry can be seen as the foundation of the emerging Romantic tradition in Western thought, which would become perhaps the most fertile, creative, and intellectually daring period in the history of poetic philosophy.

I) Mirror to Lamp

mimesis, which marks a dramatic shift of meaning from the Early Modern to the Romantic period. The concept of *mimesis* was derived in ancient Greece and was a central principle of Aristotle's *Poetics*. Basically the concept means: the creative artist's prime task was to accurately *represent* or *reflect* the actual, which was either the actual physical world or, in Platonic thought, the actual Ideal world. The prime directive of poetic action was to *mirror* nature, the real, the good, or the heavenly. However, as the creative source gradually moved from the gods to "man" and human knowledge produced a scientific endeavor that sought to not only know the world, but to *act on* it and *change* it – some Enlightenment metaphors used the theological notion "redeem" – the concept of poetic *mimesis* gradually evolved from the mirror to the *lamp* metaphor: the creative spirit does not reflect, but reveals, illuminates, and re-creates.ⁱⁱ

F) Poetry and Divinity: Who can be a poet?

It was not until the Early Modern Period that certain enthusiastic and iconoclastic thinkers again dared to place creative agency within the realm of human beings – some dared so much as to suggest that the creative power of the Christian God, *the Word*, could be a metaphor for the creative potential of humankind. However, the notion of poets being exceptional was not seriously challenged and it still clung to definitions of human creativity, albeit, the poet's powers were located definitively within human nature (not the divine). With the rise of Western Early Modern science and mystical alchemy came the notion of the exceptional creative genius, the man-god in heroic pursuit of knowledge and truth.

Symposium, Plato (Two definitions of poetry):

[The priestess Diotima asks] “you know that poetry is many kinds of making; for when anything passes from not-being to being, the cause is always making, or poetry, so that in all the arts the process is making, and all the craftsmen in these are makers or poets.” “Quite true,” [Socrates] said. “But yet,” said she, “they are not all called poets; they have other names, and one bit of this making has been taken, that concerning music and verse, and this is called by the name of the whole. For this only is called poetry, and those who have this bit of making are called poets.”ⁱⁱⁱ

This is a very important passage for many reasons. First, Plato defines the Greek word ποιητες (*poietes*), which means maker, shaper or former and has the connotation of creator. This Greek word is the root for the English word “poetry,” which has come to have the specific meaning that Diotima evoked: poets are creators of language often expressed through music and verse. However, we see the wider definition of the original Greek concept, which involves the creation or making done by any “craftsman.” All creative endeavor was (and is) poetry, but Diotima said that the creative endeavor of word-artists had been privileged and had come to claim the exclusive title of “poet.” This transference of meaning arose due to the central position given to verbal poetry in Ancient Greek society, which at the time of Plato was broken down into two main forms: *rhapsodes* (poets who publicly recited poetry, usually traditional pieces by the likes of Homer or Hesiod) and *dramatists* (poets who produced public plays at gatherings, feasts and festivals). But the wider application of the word “poet” included all forms of creative endeavor, which by extension would include all elements of society. Thus, under the broad definition of poetry, all human beings are or have the potential to be poets where they seek to express their creativity through disciplined action.

Visionary: (Active seeing: Seeing that not only acts, but interacts with the world – (relationship) Blake equates the inner “Vision” of the poet with poetry, as his emphasis is on “seeing” the world more so than expressing that vision. For Blake, the act of “seeing” the world is a creative act in and of itself. The poet infuses sensory perception with the imagination and sees poetry reflected in the external world.

The exciting phenomenon associated with the Romantic preoccupation on “active” Vision is that it had social and political reverberations, literally the Romantic theory of subjective empowerment and creative activity inspired and effected progressive social change. The American Transcendentalist movement was supportive to a number of progressive social movements: Ralph Waldo Emerson and Walt Whitman were ardent supporters of democracy and early feminism, while Henry David Thoreau was an active participant for the abolition of slavery. Shelley’s religious iconoclasm, atheism and radical republicanism inspired both George Bernard Shaw and his socialist Fabian circle as well as Gandhi and his Indian independence movement. The German Romanticism of Hegel sparked the radical theories of the Young Hegelians, which gave rise to the radical Romantic movements of Marxism and Marxist Socialism.

Nietzsche criticizes and berates the very Western tradition he works within and calls false the established dreams and ideals that humans had beaten into rigid dogmas and tyrannical religions. Nietzsche invokes human creativity to break with the past and to find new ideals and dreams in order to work towards a post-humanistic future. Thus his prototypical poet-creator Zarathustra^{iv} in anarchistic fashion must first plunge into iconoclasm

and destroy the old values and laws in order to make way for the new: “the man who breaks their tablets of values, the breaker, the lawbreaker; yet he is the creator...[the inventor] of a brighter flame...the creative body created the spirit as a hand for its will...to create over and beyond himself” (23-24, 30-31, 35, 64-65). This is the heart of Romantic poetics: the Visionary sees and actively perceives not only what is, but what could be and out of that vision rises the disciplined activity, the art of the poet, which will “create man’s goal and gives the earth its meaning and its future” (194-204). It was a fervent and vital poetics that was overshadowed and corrupted by the political atrocities and failures of the 20th century, fragmenting two centuries of utopian-minded poetics into the slow dissolution of the visionary craft. Poetry exists in the wake of the 20th century, disillusioned, yet yearning for the will and integrity to create; for those who dare the vision awaits.
