Inspirational and Mystical Writing in Literature

The terms inspirational and mystical are often used interchangeably when describing religious literature. It is the intent of this paper to provide a distinction between these two types of religious writing, as well as to distinguish inspirational and mystical writing from other types of religious literature.

The Oxford English Dictionary defines inspiration in definition I as "The action of blowing on or into." In section II, definition 3, we encounter a refinement of this concept as it applies to sacred writing "The action of inspiring; the fact or condition of being inspired (in sense of 4 or 5, of INSPIRE v); a breathing or infusion into the mind or soul. A. spec. (*Theol.*, etc.) A special immediate action or influence of the Spirit of God (or of some divinity or supernatural being) upon the human mind or soul; said *esp*. of that divine influence under which the books of Scripture are held to have been written." [1]

From this definition, we can see that inspiration is literally the "blowing into" of the spirit of God, upon the human soul, in order to influence or determine sacred writing.

Turning again to The Oxford English Dictionary, we find this explanation of the word mystical in definition I "Having a certain spiritual character or import by virtue of a connexion or union with God transcending human comprehension; said especially with reference to the Church as the Body of Christ, and to sacramental ordinances." [2]

In Evelyn Underhill's book *Mysticism*, (Preface, page xiv), we find an expanded definition of the term, which provides a supplement to the definition in the *OED*.

> Broadly speaking, I understand it (mysticism) to be the expression of the innate tendency of the human spirit towards complete harmony with the transcendental order; whatever be the theological formula under which that order is understood. This tendency, in great mystics, gradually captures the whole field of consciousness; it dominates their life and, in the experience called "mystic union," attains its end. [3]

While the definitions of mysticism cited above involve an interaction between God and man, it is obvious that the direction of the interaction is from man to God, as opposed to that of inspiration, which is from God to man. The primary distinction in inspirational and mystical writing is therefore one of direction. By implication, the second difference in these two forms is that since inspirational writing is directed from God to man, its import and weight must be greater than mystical writing which is directed from man to God, and is therefore subject to the limitations and unique characteristics of man's constitution.

Having provided definitions of inspirational and mystical writing, we can distinguish these two forms of literature from other religious writing. Theological writing deals primarily with the understanding of divinity; philosophy deals with the study of wisdom or knowledge; metaphysics deals with first principles; and general religious poetry, while dealing with themes associated with divinity or spirituality, must be distinguished from inspirational and mystical poetry, in that the aims of such writing do not necessarily involve communication with divinity.

To return to our discussion of inspirational poetry, we can distinguish two distinct forms of "inspired" writing: sacred and secular. Sacred writing is generally held to encompass Scripture, and in those "inspired" Scriptural writings, a reference to the divine presence is acknowledged by the human subject. An example of inspired writing will be provided from the Old and New Testament, respectively, to illustrate the divine nature of the author and the reception of revelation by the human subject. In Ezekiel, 2:1-2, the prophet relates that he is approached by a divine being, who provides instruction to him:

> This was the vision of the likeness of the glory of the Lord. And I saw, and I fell upon my face, and I heard the voice of one that spoke. And he said to me: Son of man, stand upon thy feet: and I will speak to thee.
> And the spirit entered into me after that he spoke to me: and he set me upon my feet: and I heard Him speaking to me. [4]

Paul relates his conversion in the *Acts of the Apostles, 9: 3- 7* and once again, we are confronted with the presence of the divine, who is made known to a human subject.

> And as he went on his journey, it came to pass that he drew nigh to Damascus; and suddenly a light from heaven shined round about him.
> And falling on the ground, he heard a voice saying to him: Saul, Saul, why persecutest thou me?
> Who said: Whou art thou, Lord? And he: I am Jesus whom thou persecutest. It is hard for thee to kick against the goad.
> And he, trembling and astonished, said: Lord what wilt thou have me to do?
> And the Lord said to him: Arise and go into the city, and there it shall be told thee what thou must do. Now the men who went in company with him, stood amazed, hearing indeed a voice, but seeing no man. [5]

In both examples presented above, we see a divine presence talking to the human subject, and instructing the subject to act or do a certain thing. In both cases, the human subject is later ordered to reduce their experience to writing, so that other men can learn from their examples.

The subject of inspiration in secular writing is not as straight-forward as that in Scriptural writing, although the tradition of seeking inspiration from a divinity is similar to the Hebrew prophets in the Old Testament. The tradition of seeking divine aid in classical writing begins with the Greek epic poems, and continues as a convention in all epic poetry. In the *Iliad*, Homer begins his poem with an invocation to the muse Calliope “Sing o Goddess,

the anger of Achilles, son of Peleus, that brought countless ills upon the Achaeans." [6] In the *Odyssey*, the author begins with a similar invocation to the muse "Tell me, o Muse, of that ingenious hero who traveled far and wide after he had sacked the famous town of Troy." [7] Virgil continues this tradition with his epic, the *Aeneid*, when he invokes the help of the muse to provide inspiration to his poem in lines 13-17:

> Tell me the reason, Muse: what was the wound
> To her divinity, so hurting her
> That she, the queen of gods, compelled a man
> Remarkable for goodness to endure
> So many crises, meet so many trials? [8]

The invocation to the muse for inspiration, while a convention, was not without religious significance, however. To the Greeks and Romans, their poetry was at once civic and religious, and in both the *Odyssey* and the *Aeneid*, the religious significance was highlighted by a journey to the netherworld, a journey guided by a great seer who was in the service of the gods.

Following the advice of Circe, Odysseus travels to the underworld to receive advice for his trip homeward, and visits the blind prophet Teiresias (*Odyssey*, Book IX). In the netherworld, Odysseus meets his fallen comrades, Teiresias, and his dead mother, among other shades. Odysseus'

conversation with the ghosts of his comrades sheds light on the Greeks' views of the afterlife:

> Thus, then, did we sit and hold sad talk with one another, I on the one side of the trench with my sword held over the blood, and the ghost of my comrade saying all this to me from the other side. [9]

In the *Aeneid*, Virgil draws on the convention of the afterlife established by Homer. Aeneas, looking to find directions to Latium in order to found the city of Rome from the ashes of fallen Troy, visits the Cumaean Sibyl. The Sibyl conducts Aeneas to the underworld, where he is greeted by the ghosts of the dead (*Aeneid*, Book VI, lines 928-935).

> Meanwhile, Aeneas in a secret valley
> Can see a sheltered grove and sounding forests
> And thickets and the stream of Lethe flowing
> Past tranquil dwellings. Countless tribes and peoples
> Were hovering there: as in meadows, when
> The summer is serene, the bees will settle
> Upon the many-colored flowers and crowd
> The dazzling lilies – all the plain is murmuring. [10]

Later in the journey to the netherworld, Aeneas will meet with his father Anchises, and will learn of the founding of Rome, and the noble race which Aeneas will establish. The journey of both Odysseus and Aeneas to the underworld represents a physical journey in the afterlife, and also a journey of self-discovery for the heroes. It is only after visiting the

netherworld that both heroes are made aware of their final destiny: in the case of Odysseus, to re-claim his patrimony, and in the case of Aeneas, to start a new city.

The themes of the journey to the underworld, the assistance of a spiritual guide, the description of the souls of the dead, and a meeting with the hero's ancestors, will continue in epic poetry.

Dante Alighieri borrows from the classical authors in writing his epic poem, the *Divine Comedy* and makes use of the themes of the afterlife; infusing his poem with Christian notions of damnation, purification, and redemption. Dante begins his poem by noting that he had fallen into the way of darkness, and was searching for a way to the light (*The Inferno,* Canto I, verses 1-6)

> Midway in our life's journey, I went astray
> From the straight road and woke to find myself
> Alone in a dark wood. How shall I say
> What wood that was! I never saw so drear,
> So rank, so arduous a wilderness!
> Its very memory gives a shape to fear. [11]

His prayers are heard by Beatrice, and through the intercession of Mary, Dante is provided with Virgil to be his guide through the regions of purgatory and hell, which he must visit in his journey, before he is admitted to the light of heaven. It is fitting that Virgil act in place of Teiresias and the

Sibyl as Dante's guide through hell: in the person of Virgil, Dante combines the seer with the poet who acts as guide and guardian to the underworld. Dante, aware of the conventions of epic poetry, invokes the aid of the muses and Virgil to help him in his journey (*Inferno,* Canto II, lines 1 – 6)

> O Muses! O high genius! Be my aid!
> O Memory, recorder of the vision,
> Here shall your true nobility be displayed!
> Thus I began: "Poet, you who must guide me,
> Before you trust me to that arduous passage,
> Look to me and look through me – can I be worthy? [12]

Consciously echoing the scene in which Aeneas journeys to the underworld, Dante and Virgil descend to the vestibule of hell, where they are greeted by a countless multitude of souls (*Inferno*, Canto III, lines 109-114)

> As leaves in autumn loosen and stream down
> Until the branch stands bare above its tatters
> Spread on the rustling ground, so one by one
> The evil seed of Adam in its fall
> Cast themselves, at his signal, from the shore
> And streamed away like birds who hear their call. [13]

After journeying through hell and purgatory, Dante prepares for the ascent to heaven, this time accompanied by Beatrice. Once more, Dante invokes the muses (in this case Apollo, father of the muses) for aid in relating the events of his journey (*Paradiso,* Canto I, lines 13 – 25)

O good Apollo, for this final task
Make me the vessel of your excellence,
What you, to merit your loved laurels, ask.
Until this point, one of Parnassus' peaks
Sufficed for me; but now I face the test,
The agon that is left; I need both crests.
Enter into my breast; *within me breathe*
The very power you made manifest
When you drew Marsyas out from the limb's sheath.
O godly force, if you so lend yourself
To me, that I might show the shadow of
The blessed realm inscribed within my mind. [14] (Italics mine)

Although these verses follow the formula of the invocation of the muse, they also provide a clue to the nature of inspiration in poetry. Dante is consciously alluding to the in-breathing of the divine to provide assistance with his writing. At this stage of the poem, Dante has passed both literally through the narration of the work, and figuratively, through hell and darkness to the light of reason and grace. As the poem progresses, Dante no longer has to ask for inspiration from the muses: he talks directly with angels and saints; indeed in some instances, the saints have direct access to the poet's thoughts. At this stage of his journey, Dante has entered into a direct communion with the heavenly host, and only has need of words to write down his observations. The poet has passed into a state of direct

revelation, similar to that experienced by Ezekiel when he was taken up to heaven.

Borrowing once more from Virgil, Dante meets his progenitor, Cacciaguida, in *Paradiso*, Canto XV, lines 88 – 94, and continues the theme of meeting with one's progenitors in the journey to the underworld:

> "O you, my branch in whom I took delight
> Even awaiting you, I am your root,"
> So he, in his reply to me, began,
> Then said: "The man who gave your family
> Its name, who for a century and more
> Has circled the first ledge of Purgatory,
> Was son to me and was your great-grandfather;" [15]

In *Paradiso* Canto XXXIII, Dante reaches the tenth heaven, known as the Empyrean, and there meets Mary, mother of Jesus. Here his vision is completed, and the sight of Mary is described in lines 1 – 15:

> Virgin mother, daughter of your Son,
> More humble and sublime than any creature,
> Fixed goal decreed from all eternity
> You are the one who gave to human nature
> So much nobility that its Creator
> Did not disdain His being made its creature.
> That love whose warmth allowed this flower to bloom
> Within the everlasting peace – was love
> Rekindled in your womb; for us above,
> You are noonday torch of charity
> And there below, on earth, among the mortals
> You are a living spring of hope. Lady
> You are so high, you can intercede,
> That he who would have grace but does not seek
> Your aid, may long to fly but has no wings. [16]

Finally, in the highest heaven, his vision is bathed in light and grace, and he understands, intuitively, the power of that light for salvation, *Paradiso*, lines 76 – 82

> The living ray that I endured was so
> Acute that I believe I should have gone
> Astray had my eyes turned away from it.
> I can recall that I, because of this,
> Was bolder in sustaining it until
> My vision reached the Infinite Goodness. [17]

Dante, more than the classical poets, emphasizes the nature of inspiration in writing poetry. Taking the conventions of classical poetry as his starting point, Dante elevates the themes of the afterlife, and achieves a kind of inspiration usually reserved for the scriptures.

Milton, following the lead of Dante, takes for his theme the fall of the angels and mankind in *Paradise Lost*. Like Dante, Milton appropriates the theme of the invocation of the muses in starting his epic (*Paradise Lost,* Book I, lines 6 – 20)

> Sing, heavenly muse, that on the secret top
> Of Oreb, or of Sinai, didst inspire
> That shepherd, who first taught the chosen seed,
> In the beginning how the heavens and earth
> Rose out of chaos: or if Sion hill
> Delight thee more, and Siloa's brook that flowed
> Fast by the oracle of God; I thence
> Invoke thy aid to my adventurous song,

That with no middle flight intends to soar
Above the Aonian mount, while it pursues
Things unattempted in prose or rhyme. [18]

That Milton invokes the aid of the classical muses, as well as the muse that inspired the "shepherd" Moses, hints that he is aiming for something more than a classical interpretation of the epic. Indeed, Milton's invocations to the muses continue throughout the work, until by book IX, the muse is visiting him in his sleep to provide guidance to his writing (*Paradise Lost*, IX, lines 20 – 26):

…If answerable style I can obtain
Of my celestial patroness, who deigns
Her nightly visitation unimplored,
And dictates to me slumbering, *or inspires*
Easy my unpremeditated verse;
Since first this subject for heroic song
Pleased me long choosing, and beginning late;… [19] (Italics mine)

Here, as in Dante, we see the effects of an in-breathing, an inspiration, providing the guidance and meaning for the poet's work. Finally, in books XI and XII, as Michael the archangel relates man's future to Adam (including the coming of Christ), we witness firsthand the act of divine revelation (Paradise Lost, Book XII, lines 6 – 12):

Thus thou hast seen one world begin and end;
And man as from a second stock proceed.
Much hast thou yet to see, but I perceive
Thy mortal sight to fail; objects divine

> Must needs impair and weary human sense;
> Henceforth what is to come I will relate,
> Thou therefore give due audience, and attend. [20]

In the examples presented above, both scriptural and secular, we have shown how the act of inspiration, literally an in-breathing of the divine, proceeds from the spirit to man, and how man relates his experience through the art of writing.

Having explored the inspirational form of writing, we can move on to mystical writing, remembering that the mystic seeks God, and that this form of writing will be characterized by a journey from man to God. Just as inspired writing is sometimes symbolized as a journey of discovery, so too is mysticism seen as a journey. The mystical journey is a search for God, a search that oftentimes is characterized by asceticism, poverty, and privation as Thomas Merton relates in his work *Contemplative Praye*r (pg. 34):

> Sometimes prayer, meditation and contemplation are "death" – a kind of descent into our own nothingness, recognition of helplessness, frustration, infidelity, confusion and ignorance. [21]

The key to the journey of the mystic is self-renunciation: once this is achieved, union with God is possible. Ameen Rihani, the Sufi mystic expresses the need for renunciation of the self in his poem *Renunciation*:

> At eventide the pilgrim came
> And knocked at the Beloved's door.

"Who's there!" a voice within, "They name?"
"'T is I," he said – "Then knock no more.
As well ask thou lodging of the sea –
There is no room herein for thee and me."

The Pilgrim went again his way
And dwelt with Love upon the shore
Of self-oblivion; and one day
He knocked again at the Beloved's door.
"Who's there?" – "It is thyself," he now replied,
And suddenly the door was opened wide. [22]

Similarly, another Sufi mystic, Hallaj Husain ibn Mansur describes the union of the human with God. This union occurs only when the self is renounced, so that man can join with the divine.

I am He Whom I love, and He whom I love is I:
We are two spirits dwelling in one body.
If thou seest me, thou seest Him,
And if thou seest Him, thou seest us both. [23]

Once the mystic achieves the act of self-renunciation, he is more focused, he thinking becomes clearer, he finds new meaning in everyday things; in effect he is presented with a new world, more real than the apparent world of his senses. The discovery of new meaning on the part of the mystic is explained by Evelyn Underhill in her book *Mysticism*, page 74:

> Here, in this spark or "part of the soul" where the spirit, as religion says, "rests in God who made it," is the fountain alike of the creative imagination and the mystic life. Now and again something stings it into consciousness, and man is caught up to the spiritual level, catches a glimpse of the "secret plan." Then hints of a marvelous truth, a

> unity whose note is ineffable peace, shine in created things; awakening in the self a sentiment of love, adoration, and awe. Its life is enhanced, the barrier of personality is broken, man escapes the sense-world, ascends to the apex of his spirit, and enters for a brief period into the more extended life of the All. [24]

Having attained this state of union with God, the mystic then attempts to convey his experience to other men to serve as a guidepost to the attainment of unity in God. In writing about his experiences, the mystic must rely on symbolism, since he is unable to convey his experience through other means. Once again, Underhill provides an explanation for the use of symbolism by the mystic (*Mysticism*, page 79):

> The mystic, as a rule, cannot wholly do without symbol and image, inadequate to his vision though they must always be: for his experience must be expressed if it is to be communicated, and its actuality is inexpressible except in some side-long way, some hint or parallel which will stimulate the dormant intuition of the reader, and convey, as all poetic language does, something beyond its surface sense. Hence the large part which is played in all mystical writings by symbolism and imagery; and also by that rhythmic and exalted language which induces in sensitive persons something of the languid ecstasy of a dream. [25]

The writing of the mystic seems to take on strange qualities, combining images, symbols, and sounds in ways not commonly experienced. Thomas Merton, in his poem *In Silence*, refers to everyday objects in new ways, and in so doing, gains new insight into a world more real than the world of the senses:

Be still
Listen to the stones of the wall.
Be silent, they try
To speak your

Name.
Listen
To the living walls.
Who are you?
Who
Are you? Whose
Silence are you?

Who (be quiet)
Are you (as these stones
Are quiet). Do not
Think of what you are
Still less of
What you may one day be.
Rather
Be what you are (but who?) be
The unthinkable one
You do not know.

O be still, while
You are still alive,
And all things live around you
Speaking (I do not hear)
To your own being.
Speaking by the Unknown
That is in you and in themselves.

I will try, like them
To be my own silence:
And this is difficult. The whole
World is secretly on fire. The stones
Burn, even the stones
They burn me. How can a man be still or
Listen to all things burning? How can he dare
To sit with them when

All their silence
Is on fire? [26]

This state of union with God, whereby man achieves a higher form of reality, and expresses this achievement through symbol, image and sound is just now being studied by science. In their book *Why God Won't Go Away*, doctors Andrew Newberg, and Eugene D'Aquill provide a biological explanation of the mystic state. In their biological research, which they combine with extensive scholarship on mystical experience, these medical practitioners offer an insight into the types of states experienced by the mystic (*Why God Won't Go Away,* page 112):

> Mystical experiences are also set apart, from all hallucinatory states, by the high degree of sensory complexity they usually involve. First, hallucinations usually involve only a single sensory system – a person may *see* a vision, *hear* a disembodied voice, or *feel* a presence, but rarely are multiple senses simultaneously involved. Mystical experiences, on the other hand, tend to be rich, coherent, and deeply dimensioned sensory experiences. They are perceived with the same, and in some cases increased, degree of sensory complexity with which we experience "ordinary" states of mind. In plainest terms, they simply feel real. [27]

To sum up: mystical writing, therefore, describes man's search for God through self-renunciation. Once a state of self-renunciation is completed, the soul joins with God in a unified state. The mystics express

their state of union with God through symbol, image, and other sensory forms in an attempt to relate their experience to other men.

Both inspirational and mystical writing are concerned with man's relationship to God. In inspirational writing, it is God talking through man and relating his words to mankind. In mystical writing, the order is reversed, and man seeks God, and then writes down his experience. In both forms of writing, man is confronted with the divine, and seeks to understand the implications of the meeting. In most cases, the meeting with the divine is too intense, too real, producing in man "Thoughts that do often lie too deep for tears." [28]

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