



Book of the Spirit Notes

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In developing this small collection - it was always destined to be a small collection, a chapbook - I wanted to celebrate - to write in praise of - writing, particularly poetry, love poetry especially, by creating a work in which the medium itself was the message, and by raising that message, that cardinal medium, on high. I suppose that I came to see in this venture a similarity with other paeans, other celebrations, perhaps even with older devotional traditions that glorify one incomparable certainty - a supreme entity. Eventually, that comparison shaped both the language and the structure.

Thus, perhaps inevitably, many of the poems merge the secular with the theistic - the word with the Word, if you like - the language borrows from religions and there are references drawn from religious works.

I think *that* is probably underselling it! As the poems took shape what emerged was significantly more complex. The poems blended the struggle to write - to find words (I am aware of the irony given the words on the page) - with love, even passionate love, perhaps mostly obviously in Song of Praise, and with an almost religious passion. And the sea? The sea is ever present in my work, extending all the way to the horizon! But I will leave you to find your own understanding of the work.

There are four sections.

The **Introit** - something sung at the beginning of a religious service - sets the scene, placing reader and writer alike within a world, reminding them of their insignificance, as drops in the grand scheme of things - in the ocean - as they try to understand, and in the case of the writer try to express the beauty of communication, and thereby of destiny, fate and truth in mere words.

While I have made no attempt to produce a religious - quasi-religious - service or order of service in the central section, the **Sunyata**, the works fall within the canon of a service. They do not form a liturgy but rather are a collection of the elements often found in religious services.

The three poems in **Satori**, are perhaps the most conventionally religious, and readers will probably recognise the stories referenced. Perhaps this section might be thought of as equivalent to a sermon, moving the work towards a conclusion by exploring themes in ways that leave the congregation with something - perhaps enlightenment - to ponder on their way home.

The final section - **Apocrypha** - contains two poems that are not truly a part of the book of praise but which seemed, to me, to follow on from it - to fit in with the general ethos.

The following is the Introduction that you will find printed in the book:

Rooted in the mythologies of religion, of church, synagogue and the Zen Buddhist temple or monastery, and calling, too, on the Graeco-Roman gods and muses, this collection borrows words, terminologies and phrases as well as their characteristic styles to resonate with the Christian and Jewish language and liturgies, with just a whisper of Far Eastern religions. Blending near identical theologies around a single belief system, a religion centred on love, there are echoes of the Old Testament of the Bible, and of the Torah, the Talmud, and Midrash and Kabbalistic teachings. For example, Kabbalistic teaching suggests that the manifestation of God that we perceive is his unity, when he transitions from nothing to one, just as Zen masters understand the nothingness of the godhead: a God present in nothingness. Despite this heritage, the collection speaks from - and for - the spirit of the modern world. It is the voice of our deepest, most primal faith.

The **Book of the Spirit** could be seen as a secular supplication or rogation to love and to the word—with a small 'w', the written word—to the ability to use words well with love, in praise. In praise of writing itself; in praise of the spiritual; in praise of love. As it is in the prophet Hosea, "Take with you words and turn to the Lord: say unto him..." (Hosea 14:2). Sing unto love. Sing unto the Gods.

Many of my traditional images, found in many of my poems and writings - time, the horizon, the sea - as well of course as love, find a place again in these lines - in my prayers.

Notes

Most of the poems reference earlier works – both religious texts and poems, or teachings, and some of the connections may not be obvious. These notes should help.

Introit

Something sung at the beginning of a religious service.

Above the Horizon

A repeated theme in my writing - both poetic and prosaic - is the sea and the horizon, often the horizon as the present spot where our future flows towards us and the past drops away behind us - beyond the horizon. Being *at* the horizon is, of course, impossible.

Some of the descriptive phrases echo Dewi Emrys' Welsh englyn, 'Y Gorwel' (The Horizon). Dewi Emrys was a journalist and a religious minister as well as the poet who won the Chair at the 1948 Welsh National Eisteddfod. The translation is by David Llewelyn Williams (*The Cambrian News, Society Newsletter*, Welsh Society of Vancouver, Canada, July 2012 [p.7]). The englyn as originally written in Welsh is:

Wele rith fel ymyl rhod - o'n cwmpas,
Campwaith dewin hynod.
Hen linell bell nad yw'n bod,
Hen derfyn nad yw'n darfod.

... which may be rendered in English as:

Behold an illusion like a wheel's rim,
A magician's work surrounds us.
An ancient distant non-existent line,
An endless border it cannot define

Eternity Not Eternity

The final two lines of the poem refer back to lines in a section of *The Conference of Birds* (The Peacock's Excuse), written by the Sufi poet, Farīd ud-Dīn Aṭṭār of Nishapur, c.1140.

Sunyata

That which exists absolutely without predication.

Psalm

Psalms: Songs of lament or thanksgiving.

Two of the nine muses born to Zeus and Mnemosyne were Thalia, pastoral poems, and Erato, love or lyric poetry.

The Torah (the compilation of the first five books of the Hebrew Bible) Midrash (a rabbinic mode of interpretation. The word itself means "textual interpretation", "study", or "exegesis") suggest that Moses' stammer/inability to speak clearly stemmed from the incident when - on the advice of his wise men - Pharaoh wished to determine whether the baby Moses was a threat to him. His advisers said that the child should be offered a choice: if he reached out for gold and gems it would indicate intelligence and thus that he was a threat but that reaching for the equally tempting glowing

firecoals would indicate no threat. Moses reached out for the gold, but an angel directed his hand to the coals. Moses snatched a glowing coal and, as babies do, put it to his lips. He burned his tongue, but his life was saved.

Babylon - babbling, loss of words; also 'call down my verses from the trees' (harps). Psalm 137:

By the rivers of Babylon,
There we sat down, yea, we wept
When we remembered Zion.
We hung our harps
Upon the willows in the midst of it.
For there those who carried us away captive asked
of us a song,
And those who plundered us *requested* mirth,
Saying, "Sing us one of the songs of Zion!"

How shall we sing the LORD's song
In a foreign land?
If I forget you, O Jerusalem,
Let my right hand forget *its skill!*
If I do not remember you,
Let my tongue cling to the roof of my mouth—
If I do not exalt Jerusalem
Above my chief joy.

Nothingness or nonthinking is shikantaza, and lies at the heart of the art of Zazen (seated meditation) where the mind has no object or focus at all: a Japanese Sōtō Zen Buddhist practice.

"[God] who led you through that great and terrible wilderness, *in which were* fiery serpents and scorpions and thirsty land where there was no water; who brought water for you out of the flinty rock..." (Deuteronomy 8:15)

The secret name - The name of God is a mystery. Because the Jewish religion considered it a blasphemy to pronounce it - God's name is never spoken and is not known to Moses.

Hineni (Hebrew): Here I am.

Spoken Psalm

Initially there were three muses: one born from the movement of water, another who makes sound by striking the air, and a third who is embodied only in the human voice: called Meleta or "Practice", Mneme or "Memory" and Aoide or "Song". One of the (later) nine muses (daughters of Zeus and Mnemosyne), is Erato (the muse of love poetry and lyric poetry).

Selene is goddess of the moon.

Canticle

Canticle: Song of praise with lyrics taken from biblical or holy texts.

The Kabbalah (Hebrew - literally "reception, tradition" or "correspondence" - is an esoteric method, discipline and school of thought in Jewish mysticism) suggests that the manifestation of God that we perceive is his unity, when he transitions from nothing to one.

"The wilderness and the wasteland shall be glad for them,
And the desert shall rejoice and blossom as the rose" (Isaiah 35:1).

"John replied in the words of Isaiah the prophet, 'I am the voice of one calling in the wilderness'" (John 1:23).

"For righteousness is immortal" (Apocrypha, Solomon 1:15).

Antiphon

Antiphon: a response, often sung.

Aoide: Muse of Song.

"Remember ye not the former things, neither consider the things of old. Behold, I will do a new thing; now it shall spring forth; shall ye not know it? I will even make a way in the wilderness, *and* rivers in the desert." (Isaiah 43: 18-19).

Hymn

Hymns: Songs of praise for God's work in creation or history.

You cannot describe God in words. He is beyond definition. If we try to describe him, he becomes reduced to our description. (Kabbalah).

The final verse references the ontological argument by St. Anselm of Canterbury in the 11th century which sets out to show that it is self-contradictory to deny the existence of a greatest possible being: That, than which nothing greater can be conceived, cannot exist in the understanding alone.

or:

If God exists as an idea in the mind but does not necessarily exist in reality, then we can imagine something that is greater than God. But we cannot imagine something that is greater than God thus God exists.

Prayer

In Kabbalistic cosmology evil emanates from the 'other side', a dark place where the light of God does not reach.

Shantih: Sanskrit word for peace, extreme peace of the soul; (*cf. The Waste Land* by T. S. Eliot).

A Prayer for Deliverance

Again, evil emanates from the 'other side', a dark place where the light of God does not reach (Kabbalistic cosmology).

I will be as the dew unto Israel; he shall grow as the lily, and cast forth his roots as Lebanon. His branches shall spread, and his beauty shall be as the olive tree, and his smell as Lebanon. They that dwell under his shadow shall return; they shall revive as the corn, and grow as the vine... (Hosea 14: 5)

Piyyut

Piyyut: a Jewish liturgical poem, usually designated to be sung, chanted, or recited during religious services. Most follow some poetic scheme, often an acrostic, as here 'Hineni Lord, Amen'.

The Kabbalah suggests that you cannot describe god in words. He is beyond definition. If we try and describe him, he becomes constrained by our description.

In the language of the Zohar (foundational work in the literature of Jewish mystical thought), symbolism "touches yet does not touch" the essence.

Song of Praise

Rabbi Akiva advocated that the Song of Songs be included in the Bible, seeing the erotic poem as a parable of the love between God and humanity.

The German Rabbi Amnon's final hymn to his congregation as he lay dying ended in a series of questions, possibly based on Ishmael's chant in *Hechalot Rabbati* - The Greater Book of the Heavenly Palaces.

Evensong

"Love righteousness, ye that be the judges of the earth" (Apocrypha, Solomon 1:1).

"And the Lord God said, Behold, the man is become as one of us, to know good and evil" (Genesis 3:22).

If God was all that existed, where could he place the physical universe? Isaac Luria (C16 Kabbalistic master) suggested that God created space by contracting into his essence leaving behind a void - nothingness - in which creation could take place.

"Meister Eckhart understands a true freedom, a freedom without God, a 'godlessness' wherein the nothingness of the godhead, and thus the essence of God, is present." (Ueda Shizuteru: "Nothingness" in *Meister Eckhart and Zen Buddhism*)...

Interestingly,

...Godhead
is the colonisation by mind

of untenanted space...

'Night Sky'

by R S Thomas

Rashi (Talmudic scholar) suggests that in calling out to Adam to know where in the garden he was, something He must have known, God wanted to start a conversation - a thought later expanded into the idea that God needs people even as people need their Gods.

Or, as St Augustine said, "Thou hast formed us for Thyself" (St. Augustine of Hippo, *Confessions* 1,1.5).

Satori

Enlightenment.

The Carpenter

[No notes.]

Eternity: a Ghazal

A Ghazal is composed of five-plus couplets that are structurally, thematically, and emotionally autonomous. Each line of the poem should be the same length. The first couplet introduces a scheme, made up of a rhyme followed by a 'refrain'. The remaining couplets pick up the same scheme in the second line only, repeating the refrain and rhyming the second line with both lines of the first stanza. The final couplet usually includes the poet's signature, referring to the

author, frequently by including the poet's own name or a derivation of its meaning.

The First Winter

Readers may note some similarity with the second part of T S Eliot's 'Ash Wednesday, 1930' which begins:

Lady, three white leopards sat under a juniper tree

and also borrows the voice of God. Sometime after revisiting 'Ash Wednesday', the idea for 'The First Winter' was born - an unconscious echo.

Apocrypha

Something outside the main body of work (from the Greek: to hide away) and may be classified in this way because it is of questionable validity or relevance.

Paeon

In the style of Paul Cellan.

Vespers

[No notes.]

