

The Poetics of “Standing in Relation”
William James in Conversation with Transcendent Poets
Expressing Relation with the Divine

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Abstract

The Poetics of “Standing in Relation”:

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This dissertation undertakes the study of religious experience in religious poetry utilizing the ideas of the twentieth century American psychologist and philosopher William James. James’s ideas that the religious impulse is personal, relational, and experiential with its source in the inner life of the individual provide the lens for this study. Because poetry draws from the inner life for its creation and tells of personal experience it provides rich potential for testing James’s ideas across historic, cultural and religious contexts. The four poets in this study draw from these varying contexts and are also highly popular in contemporary English translations. They include thirteenth century Persian Sufi master Jalal al-din Rumi, fourteenth century Kashmiri renouncer Lal Ded, and Hindu *bhakti* poets of northern India, Kabir and Mirabai of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. These poets were chosen for their large body of work using the relational language of love, longing and nearness to the unseen and their influence within their cultures and traditions across generations. Prominent in their poetry is relational language and experience with an external “other” as well as an experience of internal relation which James’ might have identified as the *MORE*. The poets will be discussed along these two trajectories; relation to an external other (Rumi and Mirabai) and internal relation (Lal Ded and Kabir). Drawing on a variety of perspectives addressing human to non-human relation provides support for the commonality of such relation. Historical elements demonstrate the long use of poetry as a religious form of language used to communicate with and establish relation to what is beyond human. During the research it became clear that a large number of unknown individuals composed songs and poems later attributed to Lal Ded, Kabir and Mirabai. This finding addressed a lingering question about the possible effects of religious ecstatic poetry and how widely such poetic expression is recognized by others. This comes around again to James and suggests that his view of religion as personal, relational and experiential between an individual and what is perceived as divine may continue to provide insight in contemporary studies.

Personal Statement

My interest in studying the expression of personal relation to the transcendent in religious poets developed out of my own experiences of reading ecstatic poetry. My first acquaintance with these poets around the year 2000 was initially through Jane Hirschfield's 1994 anthology *Women in Praise of the Sacred: 43 Centuries of Spiritual Poetry by Women*. This was followed by Coleman Barks' renditions of Rumi's poetry in *Birdsong, Like This* and *The Essential Rumi*. In reading these poems I heard what I felt was my own original language, not heard in my protestant upbringing, in diverse spiritual readings nor in the poetry I'd been exposed to. From about 2003 to 2005 I read only ecstatic poetry and Lao Tzu. These years were filled with unusual (to me) experiences of unity, knowledge, and love. Rather than being conscious of personal healing there was a profound sense that there was nothing to heal. A number of years later when reading William James's *Varieties of Religious Experience* it seemed that he more than other spiritual and religious writers knew what was going on in experiences of transcendence. The poets were teaching a kind of devotion, surrender and relation with the divine which offered "fruits for life" beyond what traditional religious organizations seemed to offer. Further, the poets expressed a wholeness through this relation beyond what contemporary modalities of healing seem to offer.

While studying political theory at Arizona State University in the early 1990's I had the good fortune to take a religious studies course from Kenneth M. Morrison who introduced me to the anthropology of religion and to the ideas of Martin Buber in *I and Thou*. My own most profound experiences of mind are reflected in the three confluent elements making up this dissertation discovered at unique moments over a 10 year period: religious studies, ecstatic/relational poetry and William James. While Martin Buber is only treated briefly in the section on relation his theory of a linguistic-relational constitution of being was an early seed influencing my interest in this research area.

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Definitions:

Divine (also Unseen)

Used as James used the term as a signifier for an ultimate source or greater power and is non-human. The Unseen is a neutral term for the same.

“Other”-

With a capitalized “O” designates something which is non-human and revered. The natural world is an example.

Relation-

To be connected to another (or to something) through intention and action which is inclusive of forms of communication and interaction. Often includes ethics of care such as respect, devotion and love. Also, see pg. 25, *I-Thou* definition by Wulff.

Religion-

The variety of traditions and teachings which have historically been understood under the term “religion” and reference the intersection of the divine and the human.

Religiousness-

Human impulse and action intended to address the intersection of the divine and the human. To draw near to what is considered divine. Also referred to as religious impulse.

Transcendence-

A state of being beyond or rising above the usual limits of human perception and experience. Experienced as positive.

Transcendent-

Something which is beyond ordinary perception or material existence. Perceived as being above or beyond the human realm. Understood as positive.

Introduction

Human - Transcendent relation

American philosopher and psychologist William James once famously defined religion as personal, experiential and relational. His construct included the “feelings, acts, and experiences” of individuals in “their solitude” who “stood” in some kind of relation with whatever they defined as a higher power.¹ James saw this personal and private relation to the divine as potentially healing in an ultimate sense. James’ definition of religion has been problematic for scholars both secular and religious for over 100 years related to the concept of ‘individual’ religion. Yet the study of religious experience requires treatment of the personal inner life of the individual and over the last century James has been the great champion and apologist for an inner life of religious impulse regardless of religious affiliation.

The focus of this dissertation will be to extend the insights, ideas and concerns of William James to a new area of literature which provides evidence for James’ perspective on religion as personal, experiential and relational. This new area of inquiry looks at the language used by religious poets expressing their relation with the divine and the poetry of transcendence which seems to flow from and in turn fuel that relation. James did not broadly include religious poetry in the accounts of religious experiences in the *Varieties of Religious Experience* (hereafter *Varieties*) published in 1901/02 yet he often referred to poetry in the *Varieties* and other writings to illustrate its visceral qualities and its potential for opening doorways into mystical types of experience. Further, James personally read poetry throughout his life, and his letters demonstrate poetry’s healing power during bouts of serious depression as a young man.² James approached the study of religious experiences, in one respect, for their healing potential and healing was a concern woven throughout his writings. Here a connection can be

¹ William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (New York: Barnes and Noble Classics, 2004), p. 39. (Hereafter *VRE*).

² Robert Richardson, *William James: In the Maelstrom of American Modernism* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 2006), pp. 87-92, 298.

seen between the healing potential of religious experience in James' thought and the healing effects of poetry in James' personal experience. James spoke and wrote of a macro type of healing potential through relation to a greater power that could relieve existential dread and thoughts of suicide.³ He likewise was concerned with the micro or personal issues of healing particular to individuals, which he himself had experienced and had subsequently found relief from through scriptural recitation.⁴ The theme of healing from a sense of human-divine separation is likewise evident in the poetry of religious experience. While the focus of this dissertation is with the human-divine relation and the poetry of religious experience expressing such relation, the undercurrent of concern in this research involves the healing and wholeness that James was interested in and which the poets speak of.

The assumption of this dissertation is that poetic expression of human-divine relation and the love and healing effects of such relation can be considered religious experiences. While there is vast literature of religious poetry across traditions telling of personal religious experiences, this type of poetry has not been researched adequately as a genre of religious experience. The poets in this study as well as other poets across time and place provide a wide array of religious experiences in their expressive and confessional verse. The treatment of the poets will not be placed necessarily in the context of James' ideas about mysticism although all have been referred to as mystic poets. As religion scholar Jeremy Carrette writes, "Poetry constitutes the ground of mystical experience, but it also touches the greatest emotion."⁵ James himself defines the great mystic achievement as "the overcoming of all the usual barriers between the individual and the Absolute," which these poets record.⁶ This research, however, will not address the nature nor definition of mysticism. This being said, James' four marks of mysticism as Ineffability, Noetic Value, Transiency and Passivity⁷ outlined in the *Varieties* will be mentioned as they appear in the poems. This will be done to illumine

³ William James, 'Is Life Worth Living?' in *The Will to Believe and Other Essays in Popular Philosophy*, (New York: Dover Publications, Inc., 1956), p. 51. (Hereafter *ILWL* and *WTB*).

⁴ Richardson, p.118.

⁵ Jeremy Carrette, *William James's Hidden Religious Imagination: A Universe of Relations* (New York: Routledge, 2013), p. 178.

⁶ James, *VRE*, p.362.

⁷ James, *VRE*, p.329.

James' ideas about religious experience as they appear in the poetry while avoiding a divergent argument into James' mysticism which is beyond the scope of this inquiry.

The poets who will be placed in the context of James are 13th century Sufi master and Persian poet Jalal al-Din Rumi of current day Konya, Turkey, 14th century Kashmiri Saivite and renouncer Lal Ded, 15th century Hindu bhakti poet Kabir and 16th century Hindu bhakti poet Mirabai both of northern India. These poets were chosen for several important reasons. First, they provide ample accounts in poetry of the kind of personal, relational and transcendent religious experiences James was interested in. Second, is their ongoing popularity in English translation which has grown over the last 100 years and in the case of Rumi has become a phenomenon in the U.S. over the past 25 years. Third, these poets express an inner realization of the divine within which may illustrate James' concept of the "MORE." James' idea of the *MORE* as a higher part of the self provides a framework for understanding accounts where individuals reference traversing a line from the small self to the large Self. These poets speak of a boundary around the self and a longing to move beyond this boundary where they encounter the presence of the divine. James saw this as a field of consciousness with a center and a margin. In experiences of a "wide field" slipping into the extra-marginal we, "get glimpses of relations which we divine rather than see."⁸ These experiences of what James called the *MORE* are especially evident in Lal Ded and Kabir who tell of an interior realization and relation with the divine as the Self.

An aim of this dissertation is to ask a number of questions about the usefulness of James in religious studies and if a nuanced approach to his insights might not enrich contemporary scholarship. Is there something that James said about a religious impulse in humans toward relation with the unseen which might be demonstrated in the popularity of ecstatic poets expressing such relation? James saw a craving in humans for, "...acquiescence and communion with the total soul of things," experienced as a "...craving of the heart to believe that behind nature there is a spirit..."⁹ Is it useful to

⁸ James, *VRE*, pp. 206,207.

⁹ James, *ILWL in WTB*, p. 40.

study, as James did, human religious inclination outside of traditional religious contexts for what might be revealed regarding personal healing, meaning and fruitful engagement with life? Does James' view of religion as personal, relational and experiential which can accommodate both secular and religious contexts have contemporary relevance? Further, is the autonomy and authority which James affords individuals through his words "*whatever they may consider the divine*" a benefit for broadening the application of James' ideas outside traditional religion?¹⁰ And finally are there benefits broadly from research and elucidation of similarities across religious and non-religious contexts which potentially illumine shared human experiences while not denying different influences on such experience?

The layout of this dissertation will initially include biographical information on James and a brief overview of his ideas. James' ways of describing relation and naming the greater-than-human other will be introduced. This will be followed by a treatment of the concept of relation beyond James. His term "standing in relation" will provide the visual for a discussion of the variety of ways humans approach relation to what is greater-than human. Included will be perspectives on human relationality from a humanist philosopher, from concepts of Animism, from nature poets, religious poets, and the Psalmist. Themes and metaphors of nature as divine or as a relational "Other" can be seen as a constant in many of these varieties of human to non-human relations. Insights from Martin Buber's linguistics of relation in *I and Thou* will begin the discussion. Concluding the section will be accounts of everyday people found in the Religious Experience Research Center (RERC) archive at the University of Wales Trinity Saint David.

From this understanding of relationality there will follow a historical overview of religious practices intended to create communication with what is perceived as a greater power or divine being. These religious practices include the use of patterned language and poetry to communicate with the divine. Further, the aspect of "presence" in poetry will be discussed as it emerges through language and sound. Performance aspects of

¹⁰ James, *VRE*, p. 39.

poetry in ritual and communal contexts will be included as well as consideration of Richard Schechner's performance theory. Through the application of Schechner's Performance Binary or braid a focus will be brought to the religious functions of poetry which continue contemporarily. The section will conclude with a discussion of a recent performance of religious poetry in a secular setting at the Lincoln Center in New York City in November 2017 as well as a contemporary example of religious poetry used to invoke divine intervention in human affairs.

Following the section on the uses of specialized language and poetry in religious and ritual settings will be an introduction of the poets Rumi, Lal Ded, Kabir and Mirabai and their poetry. The poets will be discussed as creating and expressing human-divine relation through language. While all four poets address the divine as other than themselves and as within themselves, there will be some distinction drawn among the four. Rumi and Mirabai often express a longing for a divine beloved who is other than themselves while Lal Ded and Kabir regularly express a realization of the divine within. While these inner/outer categories are not exact and all four poets tell of outer seeking and inner realization there are differing tendencies in language that illumine the variety of human-divine relation expressed by the poets. James' concept of the *MORE* can be seen in the poets' expression of inner realization.

Following the poets will be an examination of how people who hear or read poetry of religious experience respond to it. This section on the response to the poets' language of relation, transcendence and healing highlights the broader appeal and recognition by individuals outside original contexts. Two specific types of response will be considered which are evident in literature and can be roughly divided into responses from within the poets' religious, linguistic and cultural context and responses of those outside those contexts. Responses from within the poets' tradition include the participatory nature of bhakti and the historic "Contributory lineage" of Lal Ded.¹¹ This contributory lineage is evident as well in the body of literature attributed to Kabir and Mirabai.

¹¹ Ranjit Hoskote, *I, Lalla: The Poems of Lal Ded* (New Delhi: Penguin Books, 2011), p.xxxiii. (Hoskote coins this term to describe the authorship of Lal Ded's body of work).

Responses from outside the poets' context will include the scholars and poets who translate these poets into English and the popular reception of these translations especially in the U.S. Translation is included as a kind of response to ecstatic-relational poetry because some translators tell of personal responses to the poets. Focus will be brought to the differing approaches and goals of scholar translators and poet translators with particular attention focused on emotion and feeling in poetic language. The tensions between accuracy and musicality, between the meaning of words and the experience of language will be considered for their impact on the reader/listener. The translators will be treated as participating in a kind of cross cultural, cross linguistic and cross historic contributory lineage. This chapter will close with a discussion of poet and re-interpreter Coleman Barks who tells of personal transformation in response to working with Rumi's poetry.

Underscoring this section is the aspect of having an experience in response to poetry. James wrote of the essential experiential quality of being moved by great poetry and the differing goals of translation can be viewed from the perspective of impacting the reader's/listener's experience. In the case where a translator acknowledges their own feeling response to a poem, their experience can be understood as an additional layer of experience informing the translated work. This added layer of experience potentially heightens the impact of the poem on the reader/listener. Of interest here is how experience is transmitted through poetic language and if translator experience might be a contributing factor in the huge popularity of Rumi.

The conclusion will suggest that the contemporary popular reception of relational-transcendent poetry in translation, especially Rumi, demonstrates the usefulness of James' ideas in current scholarship. The phenomenal popular appeal of Rumi may support James' ideas about the human impulse toward wholeness through relation with the unseen. As Jeremy Carrette has noted, "the metaphysics of our relational nature is

rarely contemplated,” yet seeing life in a “relational universe is to break isolation, to embrace the other, to undermine control and to envision becoming different.”¹²

¹² Carrette, p. 182.

Chapter 1

William James

The importance of American philosopher and psychologist William James to the study of religious experiences and the psychology of religion is hard to overstate. His groundbreaking Gifford lectures on natural religion delivered in 1901/ 1902 later published as the *Varieties of Religious Experience* in 1902 has held the attention of scholars and lay readers for over a century. The *Varieties* laid the foundation for the modern field of comparative religion and the academic study of religious experience which continues to engage contemporary scholars. The *Varieties* was accessible to a wide reading audience, was immediately popular, and influential, as well as being inclusive of the interests of both scientists and religious believers. One hundred and sixteen years after its publication scholars continue to critique and expand upon James' thought and argue for renewed interest in and application of James' ideas in the contemporary study of religion.

William James' interest in engaging psychologically and philosophically with the topic of religious experience is clearly linked to his formative years in a family infused with the religious ideas and pursuits of his father Henry James senior. William James was born in 1842 in New York City and educated by his father and tutors in the U.S. as well as Europe. Although raised outside of traditional religion James was exposed from an early age to the ideas of his father who wrote extensively on religious and spiritual questions. Henry Sr. was a friend and admirer of Ralph Waldo Emerson and the James family was situated in the culture of New England Transcendentalism. Henry James Sr. was known for his eccentricity and this was evidenced in the constant upheaval of the James family as Henry Sr. regularly moved them between Europe and the US in search of an ever better education and tutors.¹³ This vacillating lifestyle seemed to affect William as a young man as he struggled with a career decision which Louis Menand

¹³ Richardson, p. 19.

claims took fifteen years to settle.¹⁴ First declaring painting as his occupation in 1860 at the age of eighteen, he later accompanied zoologist Louis Agassiz on a scientific expedition to Brazil in 1865 and his interests shifted to science. James eventually received a medical degree from Harvard in 1869 and after deciding against a medical career he went on to teach physiology and anatomy at Harvard, later adding courses in psychology. James' interest in the psychological study of individuals was demonstrated early when he established Harvard's psychology lab, the first of its kind in the U.S. and possibly the world.¹⁵ Harvard would remain William James' teaching and writing home for the rest of his life. In 1890 he produced in two volumes his "monumental" *Principles of Psychology* considered the height of knowledge at that time and as David Wulff writes, "destined to become one of the great classics of the Western intellectual tradition."¹⁶ The publication of the *Principles* however marked the end of James' preoccupation with psychology as his interests turned to philosophy.¹⁷ The next 20 years of his life were richly productive of essays, lectures and books demonstrating his deepening thought on consciousness, experience, and religious and philosophical questions. James' 1901/02 Gifford Lectures later published in book form as *The Varieties of Religious Experience* demonstrated an evolution in his thinking throughout the 1890's about human religiousness which would continue in his writings until his death in 1910 at the age of 68. After his death his brother, the famous novelist Henry James wrote to H.G. Wells, "He did surely shed light to man, and gave, of his own great spirit and beautiful genius, with splendid generosity."¹⁸

¹⁴ Louis Menand, *The Metaphysical Club: A Story of Ideas in America* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2001), p. 75.

¹⁵ Taves, A. 'James, William', in L. Jones, M. Eliade and C. J. Adams, eds. *Encyclopedia of Religion*. [2nd ed] (Detroit: Macmillan, 2005).

¹⁶ David M. Wulff, *Psychology of Religion: Classic and Contemporary Views* (New York: John Wiley and Sons, 1991), p. 473.

¹⁷ Wulff, p. 473.

¹⁸ Richardson, p. 521.

The Varieties of Religious Experience

William James' genius and ability to shed light was demonstrated nowhere more so than in his masterwork *The Varieties of Religious Experience*. *The Varieties* is considered the greatest classic in the psychology of religion.¹⁹ James is credited with establishing the term and broadening the concept "religious experience" as a specific area of inquiry in the study of religion.²⁰ Wayne Proudfoot writes that *Varieties* has been influential over the last century shaping ideas about religious experience and mysticism for both a broad reading public and for the academic study of religion.²¹ The uniqueness of James lay in his foundational premise that the significance of religion is found in individual religious experience. He boldly defined religion as "...*the feelings, acts and experiences of individual[s]...in their solitude so far as they apprehend themselves to stand in relation to whatever they may consider divine.*"²² He clearly stated that he would ignore, "The institutional branch [of religion] entirely...ecclesiastical organization...systematic theology...and ideas about the gods themselves" in his pursuit to treat, "personal religion pure and simple."²³ James maintained that a true study of religion should start with the religious experiences of individuals, the effects of those experiences on the people who have them and the implications of such for philosophy.²⁴ In the *Varieties*, James provided first-person accounts of religious experiences which he argued provided the best insight into human religious impulse and its effects. His intention was to separate first-person accounts from "second-hand religious life" that he defined as the rote following of traditions and doctrines created by others.²⁵ James' first-person accounts provided evidence for his thesis that the significance of religion lies in individual experiences. He intentionally mixed classic accounts of religious experience with accounts contemporary to his time. He felt that extreme examples further illumined the phenomenon and was particularly interested in what he called

⁷ Lynn Bridgers, *Contemporary Varieties of Religious Experience: James' Classic Study in Light of Resiliency, Temperament, and Trauma* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2005), pg.6.

²⁰ Taves, A., 'Religious Experience', *Encyclopedia of Religion* [2nd ed].

²¹ Wayne Proudfoot, 'Introduction' in *VRE*, p. xiii.

²² James, *VRE* p. 39.

²³ James, *VRE* p. 37.

²⁴ Proudfoot in *VRE*, p. xvi.

²⁵ Proudfoot in *VRE*, p. xiii.

“pattern setters” and “geniuses” in the religious line.²⁶ James contrasted religious personality types as the “once-born” healthy minded who are naturally optimistic and the “sick soul” who suffers from “the burden of the consciousness of evil,” and is in need of a second birth.²⁷

Scholars have long noted James’ identification with the sick souls and point to the case of the terrifying twilight vision of the epileptic in the *Varieties* as being James’ own experience.²⁸ This troubling event followed by months of fear and melancholia were understood by James as having “...a religious bearing,” which he recovered from by clinging to scriptural passages such as “the eternal God is my refuge’.”²⁹ James articulated that this type of mental and emotional suffering represented the “...real core of the religious problem: Help! Help!”³⁰ James’ cases in the *Varieties* revolved around this core religious problem and how it was resolved in individual religious experiences. By the time he concluded his study he’d determined that all religions “appear to meet” in a “certain uniform deliverance” which consists of an uneasiness and its solution. This solution was the essential function of religion for James and provided a means of healing through “...making a proper connection with the higher powers.”³¹

James understood the connection to the higher powers as existing within human consciousness, suggesting that this connection was between one’s “lower being” and a higher reality, a ‘*MORE*,’ unique from one’s self yet continuous with one’s being.³² For James this state of consciousness is mystical and he argued that personal religious experiences are grounded in unusual or mystical states of consciousness.³³ James maintained that he personally was “completely shut out” of mystical experiences yet his own record of a night experience wandering alone in the Adirondack mountains of New York in 1898 demonstrates his access to unusual states of consciousness and an experience of connection with nature. James wrote that on this night he got into, “a state

²⁶ James, *VRE*, p. 19.

²⁷ James, *VRE*, p. 124.

²⁸ Richardson, pp. 117,118.

²⁹ Richardson, p. 118.

³⁰ James, *VRE*, p. 147.

³¹ James, *VRE*, p. 435.

³² James, *VRE*, p. 436.

³³ James, *VRE*, p. 328.

of spiritual alertness of the most vital description.”³⁴ Later in a letter to his wife, Alice, he penned, “...it seemed as if the gods of all the nature-mythologies were holding an indescribable meeting in my breast with the moral gods of the inner life.”³⁵ James’ own experience in fact could have easily been included in the chapter on mysticism in the *Varieties*. In that chapter he contended that, “Certain aspects of nature seem to have a peculiar power of awakening such mystical moods,” going on to write, “Most of the striking cases which I have collected have occurred out of doors.”³⁶ Several pages later James turns to a passage by poet Walt Whitman to illumine “a classical expression of this sporadic type of mystical experience” in nature.³⁷ Robert Richardson in his biography of James writes that this night experience in 1898, “...seems to have been a triggering, originating, or catalyzing moment for the *Varieties of Religious Experience*, a moment of certain articulate knowledge that real religion is religious feeling, and it can be experienced by anyone...”³⁸

The importance to James of the role of feeling in unusual states of consciousness is echoed in his understanding of his own experience of altered consciousness in the Adirondack Mountains. He wrote afterwards, “I understand now what a poet is - one who can feel the immense complexity of influences... and make partial tracks in them for verbal statement.”³⁹ Throughout the *Varieties* and in his earlier writings he utilized poetry and its effects to illumine his ideas on the role of feeling and emotion in experience. In his essay “*What is an Emotion?*” published in 1884 he wrote, “In listening to poetry, drama or heroic narrative, we have the cutaneous shiver which like a wave flows over us and a heart swelling that surprises us.”⁴⁰ James experienced and understood the visceral aspects of poetry and its unexpected emotional power. He assumed that his readers in his time would understand his thoughts on emotion by referring them to the experience of poems. As Religious Studies scholar Ann Taves

³⁴ Richardson, p. 374.

³⁵ Richardson, p. 375.

³⁶ James, *VRE*, p. 340.

³⁷ James, *VRE*, p. 342.

³⁸ Richardson, p. 375.

³⁹ Richardson, p. 375.

⁴⁰ W. James, ‘What is an Emotion’, 1884. <http://mind.oxfordjournals.org/> [Accessed: 8th March 2015].

points out James did not feel there were specific religious emotions; only the emotions of ordinary feeling associated with religious concepts.⁴¹ James would repeatedly use poetry to illustrate his thoughts on emotion and feeling, on mystical experiences in nature and to illustrate the power of poetry to initiate openings into unusual states of consciousness.

James and Poetry

In the *Varieties* chapter on Mysticism, James uses poetry to illustrate openings within consciousness which he will later elaborate on as openings to the *MORE*. James illustrated the first level of mystical consciousness with reference to the “strangely moving power of passages in certain poems” as “irrational doorways.”⁴² He continues, “Lyric poetry and music are alive and significant only in proportion as they fetch these vague vistas of *a life continuous with our own* (italics mine) ...We are alive or dead to the eternal inner message of the arts as we have kept or lost this mystical susceptibility.”⁴³ James demonstrates his understanding of the mystical elements in poetry, the capacity of poetry to elicit shifts in consciousness and the possibility that poetry will initiate an experience of a *MORE* which is continuous with oneself.

James had a lifelong relationship with poetry and experienced first-hand its healing effects. As early as 16 he praised Longfellow’s *Psalm of Life* to a friend, defending Longfellow and writing that the poem was “as useful a production as any I know.”⁴⁴ Personally James turned to poetry, especially to Wordsworth, to lift his spirits during bouts with melancholy. During James’ mid-twenties while living in Germany and reportedly in a permanent depression he recorded in his diary his experience of “...a sort of inward serenity and joy from reading Goethe” and “Schiller’s famous essay

⁴¹ Ann Taves, *Religious Experience Reconsidered: A Building-Block Approach to the Study of Religion and Other Special Things* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009), p.16.

⁴² James, *VRE*, p. 331.

⁴³ James, *VRE*, p. 331.

⁴⁴ Leary, D. ‘Authentic Tidings: What Wordsworth Gave to William James’, *William James Studies*, Vol. 13, No. 1, Spring, 2017, pp.1-26.[Online] <http://williamjamesstudies.org/> [Accessed: 10th March 2018].

'Naive and sentimental poetry'.⁴⁵ James read the Persian poet Omar Khayyam as early as 1869 and was emotionally affected by extracts from *The Rubaiyat*. He shared his enthusiasm with his cousin Minnie Temple and his brother Harry calling the quatrains, "mighty things," and urging his brother to read them.⁴⁶ James was most profoundly influenced however by the English poet William Wordsworth whose verse was a source of consolation throughout his life. David Leary writes that the poetry of Wordsworth, "...contributed to James's recovery from a particularly bad period in the early 1870s," when James was in his late 20s and early 30s.⁴⁷ Beyond the healing power of Wordsworth's verse, David Leary contends that Wordsworth's impact on James' ideas about "the human mind and its place in nature" has not been adequately studied.⁴⁸ Robert Richardson writes of James mentioning that Charles Darwin had given up reading poetry over a course of years and then unable to return to it regretted he'd let it go. As Richardson notes, this was not the case with James who "actively read poetry all his life."⁴⁹

James used lines of poetry throughout the *Varieties* and referred to poets often so it is interesting that he did not include a fuller investigation of the religious mystic poets with whom he must have been familiar. Carl Ernst writes that throughout the 19th century scholarly debates were ongoing regarding the interpretation of poets such as Hafiz and Rumi.⁵⁰ In fact James' godfather Ralph Waldo Emerson worked extensively on translating the Persian poet Hafiz from the German edition by Hammer-Purgstall⁵¹ with publications in 1847, 1851 and 1858.⁵² In James' brief treatment of Hindu and Sufi accounts of mystical experience in the *Varieties* he laments the "absence of strictly personal confessions" outside the Christian tradition saying this is "the chief difficulty for the purely literary student who would like to become acquainted with the inwardness of

⁴⁵ Richardson, p. 91.

⁴⁶ Richardson, p. 109.

⁴⁷ Leary, p. 3.

⁴⁸ Leary, p. 4.

⁴⁹ Richardson, p. 87.

⁵⁰ Carl Ernst, *Sufism: An Introduction to the Mystical Tradition of Islam* (Boston: Shambhala, 2011), p.147.

⁵¹ Franklin D. Lewis, *Rumi, Past and Present, East and West: The Life, Teaching and Poetry of Jalal al-Din Rumi* (London: Oneworld Publications, 2000), p. 570.

⁵² Yohannan, J.D., 'Emerson, Ralph Waldo' in *Encyclopaedia Iranica*. Available at: <http://www.iranicaonline.org/articles/emerson> [Accessed:21st January 2018].

religions other than the Christian.”⁵³ Poets actually provide abundant literature on the inwardness of religious life in a variety of religious traditions however James may have viewed such poetry as the work of a gifted individual rather than as personal confession. James’ attempt at a scientific study of religion may have precluded the use of poetry as a reliable source of the type of personal accounts he was looking for.

Scholars critique the *Varieties* for its focus on the individual to the exclusion of social, institutional and historic contexts which give rise to religious experiences. Wayne Proudfoot writes that while James is fully aware of the importance of history his refusal to include a historic context sets apart and diminishes *Varieties* in the contemporary study of religion.⁵⁴ While scholars note serious weaknesses undermining James’ arguments and conclusions they also continue to esteem his ideas recommending we, “...take seriously the central conclusions of his work and carry it forward.”⁵⁵ Religious studies scholars, Jeremy Carrette and Ann Taves among others, cite lack of appreciation and underutilization of James’ ideas. Carrette argues that James’ understanding of the “centrality of the sensory world” in contrast to “conceptual thought” is “one of the most underappreciated aspects of James’ understanding of religion.”⁵⁶ While the *Varieties* has been continuously in print since its first publication in 1902 and is James’ most well-known work, Richardson comments that James “is too religious for unbelievers and not religious enough for the believers.”⁵⁷ Recent scholarship by Carrette however breaks down this old divide forwarding that “religion” for James is a “positive marker of the ‘unseen’” and that rather than referring to any tradition it “functions to represent the poetic sense of a transcendent life and mystery yet to be understood.”⁵⁸ For Michel Ferrari, the *Varieties* simply put, “deserves to be read and reread.”⁵⁹

⁵³ James, *VRE*, p. 348.

⁵⁴ Proudfoot in *VRE*, p. xxvii.

⁵⁵ Michel Ferrari, ed., *The Varieties of Religious Experience: Centenary Essays* (Exeter: Imprint Academic, 2002), p. 55.

⁵⁶ Carrette, p. 52.

⁵⁷ Richardson, p. 406.

⁵⁸ Carrette, p. 176.

⁵⁹ Ferrari, p. 1.

The reading and rereading of the *Varieties* demonstrates that there are errors, omissions and universal generalizations which were specific to James' time. Rather than discounting James as a result, we can see from a 21st century perspective the pervasive influence of culture and history. Situating James in his historic context replete with cultural, gender and protestant bias allows us to see what James did not see and invites a testing of his ideas in new contexts. With the benefit of postmodern thought and interdisciplinary methodology the essential ideas of James can be worked with and mined for their ongoing value. While not extrapolating him from his context we can nevertheless draw on his insights for contemporary study in new areas of research.

Poetry as New Context for Extending James' Insights

Poetry may be an ideal context in which to test some of James' ideas. Poetry is highly experiential both in the writing of it and in the receiving of it. The language of poetry includes the feeling life and hopes to evoke a feeling response. Poets provide ample accounts of religious experiences in a variety of settings and illumine James' belief that "Feeling is the deeper source of religion."⁶⁰ Poets express being in relation with some transcendent element and yet this element is also understood, like James' *MORE*, as being continuous with their own lives.

Lal Ded, Rumi, Kabir and Mirabai were individual voices of religious experience and transcendence; what James would have called pattern setters and religious geniuses. The tension between the individual and the collective which has been problematic in James' work must be addressed in relation to the poets. While these poets come to us as individual voices it must be pointed out that they were integral members of and informed by religious communal settings in Islamic Sufi, Hindu bhakti and Kashmiri Saivite collectives. It would be impossible to separate the influence of the collective religious context from the individual as all were embedded in their religious traditions. While Lal Ded is somewhat unique among the four as a lone wandering mendicant, she

⁶⁰ James, *VRE*, p. 372.

nevertheless was understood to have been first fully initiated in Kashmiri Saivism.⁶¹ These four poets as well as almost all other religious poets prior to modernity confound any contemporary notion of a divide between personal religious experience and communal religious commitments. However, while these poets were grounded in religious community it is evident from their poetry that their experiences of the divine are voiced as personal and unique to the individual. As translator Ranjit Hoskote writes in the case of Lal Ded, “she transmits the teachings that are the fruit of her experience.”⁶²

These poets express the kind of personal relation with the divine which James saw as the core of religion as well as its healing potential. These poets and others express in verse intense emotional states of human longing, love, and devotion to the unseen as an ongoing and unfolding relationship. Their poetic expression of love for the divine is but one form on a spectrum of relationality which includes a range of ways that humans create relation to the unseen or non-human. Some of the ways humans engage with the non-human and create relation will be discussed in the next chapter titled “Varieties of Standing in Relation.” This discussion hopes to lay groundwork for the argument about the human impulse to be in relation to what is greater than or beyond human. The discussion also seeks to broaden William James’ ideas about human to greater than human relation and how this relation supports healing experiences regardless of the absence of traditional religious contexts or teachings regarding relation to the divine.

⁶¹ Hoskote, p. xvii.

⁶² Hoskote, p. xxi.

Chapter 2

Varieties of “Standing in Relation”-

Human to Other-than-Human Relation

A motivation fueling this research is to determine the validity of James’ claims about a personal inner impulse toward relation with a greater than human Other and the various ways in which this relation is expressed. James was focused throughout much of his writing on ultimate concerns and the ways that these concerns were resolved. He regularly hinged his arguments on some form of relation as the remedy for ultimate questions which could not be addressed through rational means. In an 1895 Harvard address on the topic of suicide titled *Is Life Worth Living?*, he wrote of “getting into healthy ultimate relations with the universe,” and that this relation to the unseen world is the significance of our lives.⁶³ A year later in an 1896 lecture titled *The Will to Believe*, he discussed the concept of “complete organic unity” as being “self-relation, realized when a thing is its own other.”⁶⁴ Five years later in the *Varieties* lectures he brought the concept of relation into greater focus by defining religion as an individual, in solitude “standing in relation,” to a divine Other.⁶⁵ James not only framed his study by grounding it in relation but concluded *The Varieties* with the argument he’d sounded in his earlier writings that “harmonious relation with [the] higher universe is our true end.”⁶⁶ This harmonious relation was also named by James as “union” and he elaborated on this concept in the *Varieties* chapter on mysticism calling it the “great mystic achievement” when “the usual barriers between the individual and the Absolute” are overcome.⁶⁷ For James the “everlasting and triumphant mystical tradition” which he saw evidence of across cultural and religious traditions was a state of and awareness of oneness, “the unity of man with God.”⁶⁸ In James’ later writings, particularly his 1909 essay, “A Suggestion about Mysticism,” the idea of relations again emerges in the context of “A

⁶³ James, *ILWL in WTB*, pp 44, 51.

⁶⁴ James, *WTB*, p.15.

⁶⁵ James, *VRE*, p.39.

⁶⁶ James, *VRE*, p. 418.

⁶⁷ James, *VRE*, p. 362.

⁶⁸ James, *VRE*, pp. 362, 363.

fall of the threshold” of ordinary consciousness.⁶⁹ James describes the mystical moment as an experience of “relations” between the center of consciousness and matters usually beyond conscious perception which are suddenly revealed. James calls this a “perception of relation,” a “unification,” and writes that “the sense of relation will be greatly enhanced” when the present and the “remote quite out of its reach” coalesce.⁷⁰ James, in earlier years, was known to have been passionately distraught about his relation to the cosmos which he revealed in personal letters.⁷¹ There is a sense that James own experience fueled his thinking about relation and added a layer of passionate subjectivity to the *Varieties*.

In Religion scholar Jeremy Carrette’s recent work, *William James’s Hidden Religious Imagination: A Universe of Relations*, he notes that scholarship on James which fails to begin with his definition of religion, “misses the central relational quality implicit within James’s use of the idea of religion.”⁷² While Carrette’s study is an uncovering of James’s multifaceted relational thinking, he later reiterates that the heart of religion for James is, “noticing and imagining relations.”⁷³ While this dissertation is informed by Carrette’s insights there is a narrowed use of the term “relation” in this research which focuses on James’ ideas about the human/divine relation. The action of imagining relations in the context of humans approaching the divine is apparent in the life of believers as described by Ann Taves and Anthropologist T. H. Luhrmann. Taves notes, “The relationship of believers to what they [take] to be primal truth [is] not an intellectual one, but rather a direct engagement with something that [seems] real, i.e. [seems] to be objectively present.”⁷⁴ Luhrmann echoes this in her study of evangelical Christians and their relationship to God writing that in prayer, “one has to learn to use the imagination to experience God as present, and then to treat what has been imagined as more than

⁶⁹ Richard Woods, ed., *Understanding Mysticism* (New York: Image Books, 1980), p. 215.

⁷⁰ Woods, pp. 216, 220.

⁷¹ Richardson, p.173.

⁷² Carrette, p. 12.

⁷³ Carrette, p.184.

⁷⁴ Ann Taves, *Fits, Trances and Visions: Experiencing Religion and Explaining Experience from Wesley to James* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999), p. 276.

'mere' imagination."⁷⁵ Taves writes that James was interested in the significance of the human-divine relationship, what it achieved, and how it achieved such belief and self-adjustment. She furthers that for James religion is able to accomplish what it does based on, "the experienced quality of the relationship as a direct engagement, rooted in the subconscious and non-rational."⁷⁶

This type of "direct engagement" relationship between humans and the divine or other-than-human can be understood as existing in a variety of human contexts both religious and non-religious. These relations can be organized on a spectrum of relationality from atheistic to mono-theistic. A visual diagram of this spectrum is located in appendices 1 and includes certain qualities noted for comparison which were of interest to this researcher. This diagram is not intended as an exhaustive survey but rather as a demonstration of non-religious and religious types of human relatedness to what is considered Other than human. James can be seen as having the most expansive view of what can be considered as divine in the human experience of such relation. The following discussion will include most of these varieties of relation with the exception of T.H. Luhrmann's study of evangelical Christians. The relational expression of the four poets will be treated separately in chapter four and the Psalmist will be discussed at the conclusion of chapter three. Martin Buber's linguistic philosophy of relation will introduce the discussion and set the tone for the varieties of relation which follow.

Possibly the most revolutionary theory of human relation was detailed in Martin Buber's linguistic theory of *I and Thou*, originally published as *Ich und Du* in 1923.⁷⁷ Buber begins by describing what he calls the primary word combinations of "*I-Thou*" and "*I-It*" which "intimate relations" and when spoken "bring about existence."⁷⁸ When primary words are spoken the speaker "enters the word and takes [a] stand in it."⁷⁹ The primary word of *I-It* designates separation and as Buber argues is our experience of the material

⁷⁵ T. M. Luhrmann, *When God Talks Back: Understanding the American Evangelical Relationship with God* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2012), p. 157.

⁷⁶ Taves, *Fits, Trances*, p. 276.

⁷⁷ Silberstein, L. J. 'Martin Buber' in *The Encyclopedia of Religion* [2nd ed.].

⁷⁸ Martin Buber, *I and Thou* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1958), p. 3.

⁷⁹ Buber, p. 4.

world. However, when the word *Thou* is spoken the speaker “takes [a] stand in relation.”⁸⁰ Buber writes, “All real living is meeting,” and the *I-Thou* relational approach is direct and mutual.⁸¹ David Wulff defines the *I-Thou* relation as, “A relation of genuine and mutual encounter that engages a person’s whole being and opens it to a reciprocal influence from the other, whether a person, an aspect of nature, or a spiritual being.”⁸² The relational approach of *I-Thou* is thus not confined to relations between humans but to all forms of being as Buber writes, “...look! Round about you beings live their life, and to whatever point you turn you come upon being.”⁸³ When humans meet these various kinds of beings from a stance of reciprocal relation the *Thou* arises and becomes present. Buber enlarges the *I-Thou* relation writing that “love is between *I* and *Thou*...Love is responsibility of an *I* for a *Thou*.”⁸⁴ He elaborates that while every *Thou* is fated to reenter the world of things there is the ongoing possibility of relating to and re-experiencing the world as *Thou*. He writes, “The *It* is the eternal chrysalis, the *Thou* the eternal butterfly.”⁸⁵ Buber uses a tree to illustrate the usual understanding of the tree as an object and thus as removed from us. He goes on however to demonstrate that in the act of considering the tree one can become “bound up in relation to it,” which is achieved in his words through “will and grace.”⁸⁶ There is a sense that will as intentionality and grace as mystery are required for such relation. Will and grace thus point to the reciprocal nature of the *I-Thou* relation. The *I* intends relation with the tree and approaches it as a *Thou*. Within the mystery of such meeting and love *Thou* arises and is experienced as presence.

The human capacity to approach the natural world relationally can be seen in a variety of contexts and cultures both historically and contemporarily. One such contemporary example is in the ideas of British philosopher and humanist Richard Norman who argues for the basic and universal human need of relation with the non-human world. In his article *The Varieties of Non-Religious Experience* he outlines his thesis with five

⁸⁰ Buber, p. 4.

⁸¹ Buber, p. 11.

⁸² Wulff, p. G-13.

⁸³ Buber, p. 15.

⁸⁴ Buber, p. 15.

⁸⁵ Buber, p. 17.

⁸⁶ Buber, p. 7.

types of experiences which are integral to a meaningful life and from which atheists are not debarred. Norman demonstrates that these five experiences, of moral 'ought,' of beauty, of meaning conferred by stories, of otherness and transcendence, and of vulnerability and fragility do not require a religious belief in god in order to access them.⁸⁷ In his discussion of otherness and transcendence he argues that transcendence is found in the experience of the non-human. As he writes, "We need a relationship to 'the Other.'⁸⁸ Further, we need relationship to the nonhuman world in order to understand our humanity. Through our relationship with the nonhuman we are given the possibility of transcendent experiences. These experiences may be nourished specifically by our awareness of "other living things...having a life of their own, alien, separate and mysterious."⁸⁹ This mysteriousness fuels the possibility of wonder and receptivity to the unknown.

Norman turns to poet William Wordsworth and Book I of *The Prelude* to illustrate a powerful encounter with the non-animate aspects of nature. Wordsworth's experience of a 'huge cliff' over a moonlit lake evoked "unknown modes of being," the "huge and mighty forms that do not live like living men."⁹⁰ This cliff, writes Wordsworth, "Like a living thing, strode after me...moved slowly through my mind by day and were the trouble of my dreams."⁹¹ Norman concludes that precisely what "sustains and nourishes" us is the "non-human separateness of nature," the experience of "something alien and indifferent," a mystery that he contends is captured more accurately in an atheistic context than in the theistic.⁹² Norman's understanding of human relationship with the natural world shares some similarity with animism, the pragmatic relational approach to nature evident in Native American and other indigenous traditions.

⁸⁷ R. Norman, 'The Varieties of Non-Religious Experience', *Ratio*, XIX, 4 December, 2006, pp. 474-494.

⁸⁸ Norman, p. 486.

⁸⁹ Norman, p. 486.

⁹⁰ William Wordsworth, *The Prelude* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, Ltd., 1971), p. 56.

⁹¹ Wordsworth, p. 56.

⁹² Norman, p. 488.

The concept of animism was first introduced in 1871 in *Primitive Culture* by the acknowledged father of Anthropology, Sir Edward Tylor.⁹³ While Tylor's use of the term "primitive animism" has been problematic,⁹⁴ his articulation of a "relational personhood concept and a relational perception of the environment,"⁹⁵ continues to inform the term.

Renowned Religious Studies scholar Joseph Epes Brown wrote that in Native American religious traditions, "...all forms and aspects of creation are experienced as living and animate."⁹⁶ Similar to Wordsworth's perception of animacy in the rock cliff, Brown noted, "Even 'inanimate' rocks are thought to be mysteriously possessed of life," in Native American experience.⁹⁷ Brown detailed a relational approach to the natural world expressed as reverence for the environment based on a sense of interrelatedness. Further, he noted, humans connect with, "the Great Mysterious by entering into relationship with its innumerable forms and dimensions."⁹⁸ From the circle of human relationships this relational approach extends out to nonhuman forms, the environment, all the elements, and eventually embraces the entire universe. Within the Lakota culture specifically it is understood that a "vertical dimension of the sacred connects all beings in relationship."⁹⁹ In fact this is given voice in the most commonly spoken prayer of the Lakota "'all my relatives' or 'I am related to all that is'."¹⁰⁰ Brown traced this sense of relation to the thousands of years in which people lived in close proximity to the natural world where direct observation was necessary for survival. This close interaction between people and the environment around them was, "translated into a spiritual landscape" in which "relatedness is rooted in the perception of a shared spiritual reality that transcends physical differences."¹⁰¹

⁹³ Graham Harvey, ed, *Indigenous Religions A Companion*, (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, PLC, 2000), pp. 39, 40.

⁹⁴ Harvey, p. 11.

⁹⁵ N. Bird-David, "'Animism' Revisited: Personhood, Environment and Relational Epistemology', *Current Anthropology*, Vol. 40, No. S1, Special Issue, February, 1999, pp. S67-S91.

⁹⁶ Joseph Epes Brown with Emily Cousins, *Teaching Spirits: Understanding Native American Religious Traditions* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), p. 84.

⁹⁷ Brown, p. 84.

⁹⁸ Brown, p. 84.

⁹⁹ Brown, p. 92.

¹⁰⁰ Brown, p. 89.

¹⁰¹ Brown, p. 87.

Animism is defined by British Anthropologist Tim Ingold as a way of being “*in*” the world, a condition of, “heightened sensitivity and responsiveness...to an environment always in flux.”¹⁰² Ingold argues that animacy includes a reciprocal quality of relation in which a variety of beings and entities are continually bringing each other into existence. Animacy is thus a “relational constitution of being” which is open to the world, dynamic, and potentially transformative.¹⁰³ This relational constitution moves through the world leaving a trail of relation.¹⁰⁴ People are “known and recognised” then by the trail of relations they leave behind.¹⁰⁵ This reciprocal quality of relation which brings beings into existence and leaves a trail can easily be seen in the context of Buber ideas of reciprocity, bringing *Thou* into existence and an ongoing relational movement through the world of things.

Another type of reciprocal relationship between humans and the natural world can be seen in the poetry of nature poets from all parts of the world. One contemporary example of this ongoing poetic tradition can be seen in the American poet Mary Oliver whose keen observation of and devotion to the natural world results in a relation which fosters spiritual awareness and experiences of transcendence. For Oliver, attention is the beginning of devotion. In her poem *The Summer Day* she says,

I don't know exactly what a prayer is.
I do know how to pay attention, how to fall down
Into the grass, how to kneel down in the grass,
How to be idle and blessed, how to stroll through the fields
Which is what I have been doing all day.¹⁰⁶

Writer and book critic Ruth Franklin notes that Oliver uses nature, “as a spring board to the sacred, which is the beating heart of her work.”¹⁰⁷ Oliver enters a space in the natural world which links observation to prayer and contemplation resulting in relational exchanges with trees, flowers, deer, sea birds and grasshoppers.

¹⁰² T. Ingold, ‘Rethinking the Animate, Reanimating Thought’, *Ethos: Journal of Anthropology*, 71:1, 2006, 9-20. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/00141840600603111> [Retrieved 23 July 2015].

¹⁰³ Ingold, p. 12.

¹⁰⁴ Ingold, pp. 10-14.

¹⁰⁵ Ingold, p. 14.

¹⁰⁶ Mary Oliver, *New and Selected Poems: Volume 1* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1992), p. 94.

¹⁰⁷ R. Franklin, ‘The Art of Paying Attention’, *The New Yorker*. 27, Nov. p. 71, 2017.

Around me the trees stir in their leaves
And call out, "Stay awhile."
The light flows from their branches...¹⁰⁸

Who made the grasshopper?
This grasshopper, I mean –
The one who has flung herself out of the grass
The one who is eating sugar out of my hand...¹⁰⁹

God, once he is in your heart,
Is everywhere -
So even here
Among the weeds
And the brisk trees.¹¹⁰

Oliver's ongoing relational openness toward the non-human results in poems permeated with wonder, with love, and with experiences of unity with nature. She gives instructions on how to live life, "Pay attention. Be astonished. Tell about it."¹¹¹ Tim Ingold asserts that astonishment is the result of, "openness to the world" which is at the very foundation of an, "animic way of being."¹¹² With openness however comes vulnerability as Ingold notes. This vulnerability for Norman is one of five essential elements of a meaningful life. In the experience of vulnerability we see, "what is really important...such as the enduring beauty of the natural world, and the importance of our relationships to others."¹¹³

Oliver's poetry demonstrates various openings of relation with the Other and can be seen as exhibiting both religious and nonreligious themes. In addition to her ongoing and unfolding relation with nature she reveals traces of relational monotheism in her occasional references to prayer and God. Her poetry can be seen as a kind of bridge able to accommodate both atheists and theists in an approach to the Other. The trajectories in Oliver's poetry echo the open trajectories of William James' ideas about

¹⁰⁸ Mary Oliver, *Thirst: Poems by Mary Oliver* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2006), p. 4.

¹⁰⁹ Oliver, *New and Selected*, p. 94.

¹¹⁰ Oliver, *Thirst*, p. 29.

¹¹¹ Read A Little Poetry 'Sometimes by Mary Oliver' September 10 2014.

<https://readalittlepoetry.wordpress.com/2014/09/10/sometimes-by-mary-oliver/> [Retrieved: 1st May 2018]

¹¹² Ingold, p. 18.

¹¹³ Norman, p. 492.

how humans can define the human-transcendent relation. While space does not permit further elaboration on the similarities between Oliver and James it must be noted that they share the influence of New England Transcendental thought and free verse poetry. Oliver is firmly situated in the lineage of American free-verse which began with Walt Whitman, who was influenced by the transcendentalists, who were influenced by the English romantic poets and specifically William Wordsworth. These same poets and thinkers were powerfully formative on James's thought as well. Any discussion of similarities between Oliver and James would therefore need to reference these common influences.

In the spirit of James' method of collecting accounts, the Religious Experience Research Center (RERC) was utilized to determine how common it might be that everyday people spoke of being in relation to the unseen. This investigation was undertaken early as a possible secondary focus to the poets in testing James' ideas about personal relation as the core of religious feeling. The results of this preliminary search are contained in the appendices which include three spreadsheets (appendix 3, 4, 5), each with a slightly different approach. Appendix 2 provides a brief description of the rationale behind the research design. Appendix 3 looked for religious experiences similar to the poets and includes precursors and a sense of presence. Appendix 4 focused on relation and appendix 5 looked for experiences including poetry.

After reading through many accounts which resulted from relational search terms it became apparent that the task of surveying the database would be daunting and the outcome might not move the research question forward. Most of the accounts which are not included in the spreadsheet indicated individuals telling of their commitment to the idea of a relationship with God rather than to the practice or experiences of such relation. People spoke of the benefits of such a relation and an overall sense that a decision had been made often at some difficult point in life which provided solace and assurance. In this way the accounts affirm the ideas of James about the positive life aspects of such relation. Most shared a protestant background even if the writer was not actively involved in a protestant community. While a sense of peace and happiness

were reported there was less evidence of feeling tones which are prominent in the poets. The poets often express feeling separate from the divine with a powerful longing for this presence which is now absent. In the RERC accounts there seemed to be no sense of separation between human and divine or no experience of separation from God. The poets, on the other hand, regularly lament this separation which appears to fuel their need and longing to create some contact or bridge. Language, or in the poet's case poetic expression, may provide such a bridge. This preliminary finding in the RERC which contrasts with the poets has interesting implications about the influence of felt separation as a factor fueling religious experiences. Secondly, the impact of doctrines which resolve the human-divine separation once and for all, such as Christian redemption, would be an interesting follow up for their impact on human longing to resolve separation. Further research into ideas and doctrines of human-divine separation in Islam, Sufism, Hinduism and Kashmiri Saivism would also be needed.

The idea that language, specifically specialized forms of language, can create a bridge to the divine will be addressed in the next chapter which discusses the historic use of patterned language to communicate with and relate to the unseen in ritual and religious contexts. The historic focus will then shift to contemporary considerations and discussion of performance theory as it applies to contemporary examples.

Chapter 3

The Historic Interconnection of the Poetic and the Religious- Communicating with and Relating to the Divine

The intimate relationship between poetic expression and religious practice can be viewed through a number of uniquely powerful lenses. One lens is the historic interdependent and intertwined nature of poetry and religion going back to earliest times. A second lens which undergirds the historic tie includes assumptions long held that poetry is given to individuals through divine intervention and inspiration. A third lens highlights similarities in the functions and operation of both religion and poetry in human experience. In his article, *Religion and Poetry*, Kevin Hart writes of the dual argument both that all poetry is religious and that poetry excludes religion. Arguments that affirm the religious impulse in poetry cite its early origins in celebrations of fertility rites, "...and that although later poetry may distance itself from its religious origin, it never quite escapes it: religious motifs - inspiration, rebirth, the divided border between life and death - get reworked in secular poetry."¹¹⁴ These motifs demonstrate the concerns which poetry and religion both attempt to address. The discussion below will utilize these three lens' as a view into the interwoven history of religion and poetry as well as including treatment of language as means of communication with and establishing relation with the unseen. This section will further utilize performance theory as a tool for determining when poetry in performance meets the criteria of ritual. The discussion of will include a current time example of a large production of religious poetry in a secular performance context in the U.S. The chapter will conclude with the ideas of Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht about the presence producing functions of poetry.

The long history of interdependence between poetry and religion has its roots in their shared origins in the earliest ritual and religious practices as well as the earliest recorded religious writings. Ancient liturgical hymns and narrative epics employed verse to praise or beseech the divine and to tell large-scale stories of divine activity. The

¹¹⁴ Hart, K. 'Poetry and Religion', in R. Greene and S. Cushman, eds, *The Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics* [4th ed] (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2012).

earliest known author of either gender in world literature was the Sumerian high priestess and poet Enheduanna (ca. 2300 BCE) whose hymns composed to the moon god and goddess of ancient Sumer, Nanna and Inanna, were found on cuneiform inscribed tablets.¹¹⁵ Poetic inscription from *The Hymn to Inanna* designate Inanna as a divine being.

My Lady, you are the guardian
of all greatness.
Your hand holds the seven powers:
You lift the powers of being,
You have hung them over your fingers,
You have gathered the many powers,
You have clasp them now
Like necklaces onto your breast.¹¹⁶

The oldest religious epic may be the beautiful and heroic Hindu narrative the *Ramayana*. This poem of 50,000 lines contained in seven books is dated to the middle of the first millennium BCE.¹¹⁷ The *Ramayana*, attributed to poet-seer Valmiki, has been celebrated as the first poem, by the first poet. Valmiki was able to fuse the “edifying,” the “emotive,” and the “inspirational” into, “a new medium of expression, the poetic.”¹¹⁸ The longest known poem, also found in Hinduism, is the monumental religious epic, the *Mahabharata*, with its oral roots likely in the Vedas from the 8th c. BCE. Kevin Hart writes that the Vedas are, “...the most archaic texts of Hinduism which range from incantations and charms to sacred hymns,” regarded by Hindus as, “revealed texts,” and “inspired poems.”¹¹⁹

In Jerome Rothenberg’s poetry anthology, *Technicians of the Sacred*, he traces primitive and archaic poetry which was used for naming and describing origins, used in death rites, and in the context of visions and spells in Africa, the Americas, Asia and Oceania. These archaic poets were seers, shamans, priests and priestesses

¹¹⁵ Jane Hirshfield, *Women in Praise of the Sacred: 43 Centuries of Spiritual Poetry by Women* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 1994), p 1.

¹¹⁶ Hirschfield, p. 4.

¹¹⁷ Goldman, R.P. ‘Ramayana Poetry’, in *Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics* [4th ed].

¹¹⁸ Goldman, ‘Ramayana Poetry’.

¹¹⁹ Hart, ‘Poetry and Religion’.

participating in music, dance and embodied activities of ritual events. Rothenberg defines archaic poetry as “pre-literate,” when poems were, “carried by the voice,” and initially composed, “...to be spoken, chanted, or more accurately, sung,” only afterwards being written down.¹²⁰ Frank Burch Brown writes that poetry associated with religious practice and ritual is meant, “...to be sung or chanted, taking the form of hymns, invocations and ritual incantations,” noting the intimate connection between poetry and music in western antiquity.¹²¹ George Steiner in *Real Presences* forwards that at the outset of all cultures, “the poet and the singer” are the same.¹²² The idea of poetry as song is elaborated contemporarily by Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht who insists, “...poems have a ‘volume’ – a dimension, that is, that demands our voice, that needs to be ‘sung.’”¹²³ In this he addresses the musicality and the embodied requirements of the poetic form.

Poetry as song is evident in the Hebrew Psalms (“sacred song,” “hymn”) originating in the ancient Near East. Psalmists of ancient Israel borrowed “images, phrases and ...whole sequences of lines” from surrounding cultures to ascribe to YHWH the power attributed to other gods.¹²⁴ While the psalms are a mix of genres of various situations, up to two thirds involve praise or supplication directed specifically to a deity. Robert Alter contends that the ritual use of the psalms in liturgical performances continues to be relevant due to their dual nature of being both personal and collective, both praise and supplication.¹²⁵ The historic use of song for ritual purposes in Christianity is noted by Kevin Hart who writes that the early liturgical functions of hymns in ancient cults was later absorbed by Christianity which is evidenced in the Eastern liturgy of the 6th century.¹²⁶

¹²⁰ Jerome Rothenberg, *Technicians of the Sacred: A Range of Poetries from Africa, America, Asia and Oceania* (Garden City: Double Day and Co., Inc., 1968), p. xxii.

¹²¹ Burch Brown, F. ‘Poetry: Poetry and Religion’, in *The Encyclopedia of Religion* [2nd ed].

¹²² George Steiner, *Real Presences* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989), p. 195.

¹²³ Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht, *The Production of Presence: What Meaning Cannot Convey* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2004), p. 107.

¹²⁴ Alter, R. and Greenstein, E.L. ‘Psalm’. *The Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics* [4th ed].

¹²⁵ Alter, ‘Psalm’.

¹²⁶ Hart, ‘Poetry and Religion’.

An element demonstrating the aptness of poetry as carrier of religious ideas and activity rests specifically in the belief and felt experience that, “power resides in sound,” thus patterns of sound can serve as conduits of divine intervention.¹²⁷ Charm, which is derived from the Latin “carmen” meaning song or lyric poem, is a specialized language form used in ritual contexts with the intent of evoking and transmitting power. Ancient incantations (charms and spells) which were spoken or chanted show a distinct connection with prayer rather than magic through the use of operative as opposed to indicative verbs. Robert O. Evans points out that the operative verb form “may it happen” rather than the indicative “it will happen” reveals the prayer like qualities of incantation.¹²⁸ Poetry which is “...strongly influenced by thick sound patterns of alliteration, assonance, internal rhyme and word repetition,” resembles the language of charms.¹²⁹ Love poetry using words to attract and satire using words to harm or repel can both be understood as rooted in the language of charms.

Rumi’s poetic structure can be seen as demonstrating elements of charm which utilize sound patterns of internal rhyme and word repetition in order to evoke the presence of the divine. Rumi’s mystical love poetry in the original Persian includes regular syllabic patterns, a “predilection for repetitions and long anaphoras,”¹³⁰ “song like” rhythm and dense internal rhyme.¹³¹ H.U. Gumbrecht’s ideas that “...sound repetition entails a conjuring and presence-producing function,” relates directly to repetitive structures in religious poetry which address an unseen presence.¹³² Rumi repeatedly expresses longing for this presence and as Schimmel demonstrates, does so regularly through repetition:

Come, come my beloved, my beloved,
Enter, enter into my work, into my work!
You are, you are my rose garden, my rose garden;

¹²⁷ Welsh, A. ‘Charm’ in *The Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics* [4th ed].

¹²⁸ Evan, Robert O. ‘Incantation’ in *The Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics* [4th ed].

¹²⁹ Welsh, ‘Charm’,

¹³⁰ Annemarie Schimmel, *I am Wind, You are Fire: The Life and Work of Rumi* (Boston: Shambhala Publications, Inc., 1992), p. 39.

¹³¹ Lewis, *Rumi Past and Present*, pp. 330-334.

¹³² Gumbrecht, H. U. ‘Presence’ in *The Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics* [4th ed].

Speak, speak my secrets, my secrets.¹³³

While this poem in translation demonstrates some of the repetitive function, it has been noted by translators that Rumi's dense internal rhyme structure is impossible to replicate in English.

A historic connection between religion and poetry can also be seen in the long held notion that divine inspiration is the source of poetic language. Karen Armstrong in *Tongues of Fire* uses the story of Pentecost in the biblical book of Acts to illumine the belief that, "...direct contact with God [resulted] in ecstatic inspiration."¹³⁴ In Armstrong's study of poetry and religious experience she notes that the immediate outcome of Pentecost was, "...a new form of language," which suggested that, "The Spirit of God...seemed involved with language."¹³⁵ Up until the Renaissance western ideas about the creation of poetry held that divine inspiration, literally a, "...breathing in," was a poem's beginning.¹³⁶ Ecstatic poetry has specifically carried religious overtones and the poetic rapture of the poet was equated with possession by the divine.¹³⁷ Plato's argument that poetry was "wholly given" and thus is not an art gives voice to assumptions of divine inspiration and poetic madness linking poetry with divine intervention.¹³⁸

Beyond the historic interwoven aspects of poetry and religion forged by the power of language, poetry and religious practice hold in common other significant characteristics, functions and purposes. A few of these include the necessary utilization of the imagination, a fundamental concern with the largest truths of human existence, experiences of transcendence, and attempts to offer resolution for human suffering. Poetry and religious practice are often concerned with love and a heightened sense of

¹³³ Schimmel, p. 40.

¹³⁴ Karen Armstrong, *Tongues of Fire: An Anthology of Religious and Poetic Experience* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, Ltd., 1985), p. 21.

¹³⁵ Armstrong, p. 35.

¹³⁶ Brogan. T.V.F. 'Poetic Madness', in *The Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics* [4th ed].

¹³⁷ D. J. Moores, *The Ecstatic Poetic Tradition: A Critical Study from the Ancients Through Rumi, Wordsworth, Whitman, Dickenson and Tagore* (Jefferson: McFarland and Company, Inc., 2014) p. 29.

¹³⁸ Brogan, 'Poetic Madness'.

love's reality. As with religious ritual, poetry acts on the whole person as an embodied experiencing being. Both poetry and religion partake of the non-rational and their message can be hard to fathom in a purely literal sense. This characteristic again highlights the effectiveness of poetry as a carrier for religious ideas. In Karen Armstrong's discussion of the connection between poetry and mysticism she notes that mystics of all religions, with the exception of Judaism, choose to express their experience in poetry because, "poetry forces language out of the everyday mode to explore aspects of life that defy a purely rational interpretation."¹³⁹ The inadequacy of a purely mental approach to poetry or to religious ideas is demonstrated by how one may easily miss the feeling state of experiencing which is the transformative moment in both poetry and religious life.

Current time examples suggest a continued close association between poetry and religious ideas in a variety of cultural contexts. Contemporarily in India the large number of Hindus who can recite devotional verses composed in their own dialect demonstrate the use of such songs and poems as a kind of scripture for specific communities.¹⁴⁰ Lal Ded's sayings in the form of songs, proverbs and prayers continue to circulate broadly in contemporary Kashmiri popular culture.¹⁴¹ Further, the popular reception of Kabir, Mirabai and especially Rumi in English translation in 21st century America demonstrates that the coupling of religious ideas and poetic forms appeals to many individuals. In the following section the argument that poetry can serve religious types of concerns and needs in a secular context will be elaborated through a discussion of performance and the utilization of performance theory through the work of Richard Schechner.

¹³⁹ Armstrong, p. 17.

¹⁴⁰ Willard G. Oxtoby and Alan F. Segal, eds. *A concise Introduction to World Religions* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), p. 293.

¹⁴¹ Hoskote, *I, Lalla*, p. xi.

Religious and Ritual Functions of Poetry

Historically poetry has been primarily an oral performance art utilized in communal settings supporting ritual activities. Poetry is an embodied art form in performance drawing on the tone, pitch and modulation of the voice, the regulation of breath, and bodily gestures which enact and dramatize words, phrases and scenes. The auditory reception by engaged listeners continues the embodied experience collectively with the felt effects of rhyme, rhythm, and repetition heightening listener response. Lyric poetry has usually been performed in religious and ritual contexts in the form of hymns and in conjunction with music and dance where participants sing their devotion, praise and supplication to a divine being. Poetry in performance in such settings transmits religious ideas, stories of the activities of the gods and in the case of the four poets in this study describes transcendent experience. Rumi, Lal Ded, Kabir and Mirabai use the language of lyric love poetry to express their religious devotion with vivid imagery and metaphor which, as with poetry in general, "...departs from both common sense and plain speech."¹⁴² Of significance is how the poetic language, the embodied performance, the collective participation and the aesthetic qualities act on the whole person while simultaneously empowering a ritual event. This complex of experience collectively and individually through the performance of poetry is articulated by Frank Burch Brown who forwards, "...the medium of poetry is never merely words in the abstract. Rather, poetry depends on imagination and a kind of embodiment." He continues by comparing poetry with ritual and the arts asserting, "...the meaning of poetry registers on the whole self, appealing to head and heart, mind and body."¹⁴³

Richard Schechner, a performance studies scholar, elucidates the ritual and aesthetic elements of performance which relate directly to the spoken poetry of Rumi, Lal Ded, Kabir and Mirabai. Clarification of the term "performance" is needed as there are common meanings and discipline specific meanings which differ; likely contributing to confusion in the discussion of oral poetry in a religious studies context. The traditional

¹⁴² Burch Brown, 'Poetry: Poetry and Religion'.

¹⁴³ Burch Brown, 'Poetry: Poetry and Religion'.

usage of the term “performance” in relation to poetry is oral delivery of verse, usually either oral traditional poetry where songs are both composed and performed orally or oral delivery of textual poetry.¹⁴⁴ Oral performance thus stands in contrast to an individual silently reading a poem on the page. This section is primarily concerned with Schechner’s ideas of “performance” which operate from a contemporary understanding of the term as ritual action. Because the poets in this study composed their songs in a performance context of religious activity Schechner’s ideas can help illumine the ritual elements embedded in their poetry. Catherine Bell notes the “basic ambiguity” of the term in her article *Performance in Critical Terms for Religious Studies*, noting its various meanings including, “...the enactment of a script or score.”¹⁴⁵ She elaborates that contemporarily the term “performance” is used primarily to focus on, “...qualities of ritual action,” the “doing itself” of ritual.¹⁴⁶ When considering the delivery of poetry historically in religious and ritual settings it is difficult to separate these two definitions of performance. For the poets in this study as well as other religious poets, composition and oral expression were the “doing itself” in a collective ritual environment.

The oral traditional poetry of Rumi, Lal Ded, Kabir and Mirabai were not performed in isolation from other expressive arts but were routinely performed in concert with dance and music in both Sufi and bhakti contexts in the 13th to 16th centuries. Music served to heighten the experience of the poetry being performed in Sufi circles, and bhakti poems were set to music and sung in gatherings of devotees. The singing of bhakti poem-hymns often accompanied performance arts such as dance, dance-drama and folk theater which was utilized by congregations.¹⁴⁷ Music and dance were integral in the *sama* ceremony in Sufi lodge gatherings of Rumi’s time as well as the practice of *zehr* which consisted of meditative chant.¹⁴⁸ The contemporary performances of the Sufi Mevlevi also known as Whirling Dervishes are historically grounded in Rumi who is

¹⁴⁴ Beissinger, M. H., ‘Oral Poetry’, in *The Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics* [4th ed].

¹⁴⁵ Catherine Bell, ‘Performance’, in *Critical Terms for Religious Studies*, ed. By Mark C. Taylor (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), p. 205.

¹⁴⁶ Bell, p. 206.

¹⁴⁷ Dharwadker, V., ‘India, Poetry of’, in *The Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics* [4th ed].

¹⁴⁸ Lewis, p. 28.

understood to have circled meditatively while spontaneously composing his ecstatic verse.

Performance Theory

Richard Schechner’s work on performance and ritual provides valuable historical context tracing the interwoven nature of performance from Paleolithic times, writing that every continent contains cave and rock shelters attesting to, “...the ancient, worldwide and persistent presence of human ritual performing arts.”¹⁴⁹ He goes on to reference archaeological and anthropological evidence which argues for the coexistence of religion and performance since the earliest human cultures. Of particular interest to this study is Schechner’s “Efficacy-Entertainment Dyad” which demonstrates the ritual and the aesthetic dimensions of performance. In this dyad, efficacy (indicative of accomplishing something) is paired with ritual while entertainment is paired with the aesthetics of performance. In other writings Schechner utilized the term “Efficacy-Entertainment Braid.”¹⁵⁰ The Braid is reproduced here:

<u><i>Efficacy-Ritual</i></u>	<u><i>Entertainment-Aesthetic</i></u>
Human and nonhuman audience	Human Audience
Audience participates	Audience observes
Audience believes	Audience appreciates
Serving the divine	servicing the market
Eternal present	Historical time
Revealed truths	Invented fictions
Transformation possible	Transformation unlikely
Trance possession	Self-awareness
Non Representational roles	Character roles
Virtuosity downplayed	Virtuosity valued
Collective creativity	Individual creativity

¹⁴⁹ Schechner, R. ‘Performance and Ritual’, in *The Encyclopedia of Religion* [2nd ed].

¹⁵⁰ Richard Schechner, *Performance Theory* (New York: Routledge, 1977), p. 112.

Schechner designates the term “performance” to encompass the entire binary continuum of the efficacy/ritual – entertainment/aesthetic dyad or braid. Although in opposition, elements of efficacy and entertainment are evident in all performance.¹⁵² Performance, Schechner writes, originates in a multitude of impulses including, “to make things happen and to entertain;...to be transformed into another and to celebrate being oneself;...to bring into a special place a transcendent Other who exists then-and-now and later-and-now;... to focus on a select group sharing a secret language and to broadcast to the largest possible audience of strangers...”¹⁵³ Schechner clarifies that designating a performance as ritual or as aesthetic event is dependent upon the degree to which it exhibits efficacy or entertainment with one of these being dominant.¹⁵⁴ The differing context of the same performance also influences its effect as efficacy or entertainment. Schechner demonstrates this in his example of the Mevlevi Sufi’s meditative whirling performance for a secular audience at the Brooklyn Academy in the U.S.¹⁵⁵ Conversely, he writes that while performances such as the Mass have important aesthetic qualities it is not an event of aesthetic appreciation but of “passionate affirmation” in which the congregation participates.¹⁵⁶

When Schechner’s framework is applied to the poetry of Rumi, Lal Ded, Kabir and Mirabai the poems demonstrate almost exclusively the characteristics of efficacy and ritual. While this is not surprising given the religious/ritual contexts in which the poems were created, spoken, and sung it does raise interesting questions about how these poems may continue to function contemporarily. Utilizing the dyad to assess where the translated poems fall on the efficacy-aesthetic continuum demonstrates still a predominance of efficacy-ritual characteristics in contrast to elements of entertainment-

¹⁵¹ Schechner, ‘Performance and Ritual’.

¹⁵² Schechner, *Performance Theory*, p. 156.

¹⁵³ Schechner, *Performance Theory*, pp. 156,157.

¹⁵⁴ Schechner, R. ‘From Ritual to Theatre and Back: The Structure/Process of the Efficacy-Entertainment Dyad’, *Educational Theatre Journal*, Vol. 26, No. 4, Dec., 1974, pp. 455-481.

<http://www.jstor.org/stable/3206608> [Accessed: 11th May 2018].

¹⁵⁵ Schechner, *Performance Theory*, p. 159.

¹⁵⁶ Schechner, *From Ritual to Theatre*, p. 473.

aesthetic. Beyond the ritual functions of the poems in original performance there remain elements of efficacy-ritual in the ideas and values expressed in the language of the poems which are carried forward in translation.

All of the elements of Efficacy-Ritual are either expressed directly in the language of the poems of Rumi, Lal Ded, Kabir and Mirabai or were embedded in their cultural/religious settings and are generally referenced in the preface and introductions of the better translations. Through reading or hearing the poems contemporary individuals would experience the ritual elements embedded in the poetry such as: Human and nonhuman audience, Serving the divine, Eternal present, Revealed truths, Transformation possible, Trance possession, and Nonrepresentational roles. Through reading the introductions to the translated poems individuals would be introduced to at least some of the historic, cultural and religious factors indicative of the original ritual settings such as: Audience participates, Audience believes, Virtuosity downplayed, Collective creativity and Criticism discouraged. Taken together the poems may continue to function along the lines of efficacy and ritual although they are read or heard in secular contexts by individuals outside of Islamic and Hindu contexts, outside communal and oral settings, and read in another language. It can be argued that the original ritual context and function of the poems influence and flavor the poetry contemporarily read on the page in translation by individuals centuries removed from the original performance. The central religious references and message within the poems remains evident and is heightened by the aesthetic and embodied experience of the language.

An argument could easily be forwarded that the aesthetic-entertainment qualities of the poems account for their continued popularity. However, while the imagery, emotional intensity and language are striking and beautiful features of the poems when the traits of Schechner's Efficacy-Entertainment dyad are applied there is a demonstration of Efficacy-Ritual characteristics over aesthetic-entertainment qualities. In the words of translator Coleman Barks, the beauty of Rumi's poems is not enough. The poems are meant to bring the reader into an experience of "presence" or "presences" which are understood as transformational moments. As with the participants of the Mass, Barks

can be understood as participating in a passionate affirmation of Rumi's way of saying his religious experience.

While Schechner states that his use of the term "ritual" applies to both sacred and secular performance his dyad demonstrates a sacred or religious schema in the qualities of Efficacy and a recognizably secular schema in Entertainment. Rather than treating poems as secular or religious simply based on the overt subject matter of the poem the performance binary can be utilized to determine if a poem functions predominantly as ritual or predominantly as entertainment. Poets such as William Wordsworth, Walt Whitman, and Emily Dickinson do not overtly address religion in their poems yet their poetry demonstrates Efficacy-ritual elements such as Human and nonhuman audience, Serving the divine, Eternal present, Revealed truths, Transformation as possible and Nonrepresentational roles. That these elements are evident in both religious and non-religious poetry returns us to the ancient uses of poetry in the intersection of the human and divine. Drawing a distinction between the function and the form of a poem with reference to the Performance Binary provides one approach to the ongoing debate of, "...all poetry is religious," versus "...poetry excludes religion."¹⁵⁷ Rather than focusing on language alone, a focus can be brought to how the poem functions.

It is acknowledged here that this utilization of Schechner's Performance Binary is used out of context in its application to poems read in translation rather than heard in a performance context. However, the poetry of all four poets does affect something in the readers who are drawn to the poets' language and experience. This contemporary congregation extends beyond the poets immediate context of time, tradition, and culture. A recognition and passionate affirmation may well be present in contemporary readers which further research would be required to confirm.

¹⁵⁷ Hart, 'Poetry and Religion'.

Contemporary Secular Performance of Religious Poetry- Talking to God in Troubled Times

A contemporary example of the performance of religious poetry outside of religious context is *The Psalms Experience* at the Lincoln Center in New York City during November 2017. This program consisted of a twelve concert series, performed by four international choirs, covering all 150 psalms which were set to music by composers spanning over 1,000 years.¹⁵⁸ Contemporary composers were commissioned to write musical scores for a number of the psalms. One such composer, Pulitzer Prize recipient David Lange, said that the psalms, "...were meant to be sung."¹⁵⁹ Lange goes on to say that what he loves about the psalms is that they are a "...sort of catalogue of all the ways you can have a conversation with God..." that the psalms demonstrate "...every way you could imagine talking to God."¹⁶⁰ The Lincoln Center's director of programming, Jane Moss, says the psalms are for "challenging times" and include, "all sorts of human complaints to God," including, "*where are you* in these challenging times?"¹⁶¹ While Moss does not express her own religious belief or context she assumes that others will understand why such poetry directed to the divine would resonate with an American audience after the tumultuous year of 2016.

The Lincoln Center which is a secular performance hall introduces the *Psalms Experience* in specifically religious terms; "Out of the depths I cry to you! For nearly 3,000 years, humans have reached out to the divine through the psalms, the Hebrew Bible's book of hymns revealing the gratitude, fear and longing of the human heart."¹⁶² While the *Psalms Experience* clearly fits the aesthetic-entertainment model as described by Schechner this performance focuses on the efficacy of ritual language

¹⁵⁸ J. Barone, 'Hear 9 New Psalm Settings for Challenging Times'. *The New York Times*. 31 October: pp. C6, 2017. [Online]. Available at: <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/10/31/arts/music/psalms-white-light-festival-lincoln-center.html> [Accessed: 16th December 2017].

¹⁵⁹ J. Lunden, 'Ancient Psalms Speak to Modern Audiences' 8th November 2017. VOA. <https://www.voanews.com/a/festival-of-psalms/4103590.html> [Accessed: 16th December 2017].

¹⁶⁰ J. Lunden.

¹⁶¹ J. Lunden.

¹⁶² Lincoln Center, 'White Light Conversation: Introducing *The Psalms Experience*', 1 November 2017. <http://www.lincolncenter.org/white-light-festival/psalms> [Accessed: 9th December 2017].

directed toward a divine source of power and consolation. In the Lincoln Center event, the strands of Schechner's braid are hard to separate. In his delineation, "ritual is an event upon which its participants depend; versus theatre [entertainment] is an event which depends on its participants,"¹⁶³ we may see a leaning toward this being a ritual event. The organizers expressed that this performance represented a reaching out to God in troubled times which was specific to a population, a culture and a time with a shared/communal need. This performance could be seen as well as a passionate affirmation of such reaching out to the divine and as Barbara Myerhoff and others have noted ritual performances come into play, "...during crisis and times of distress" providing some measure of distance and control.¹⁶⁴

In a lecture given on the eve of the concert series the moderator, John Schaefer, suggests that after thousands of years the Psalms continue to resonate with people seemingly regardless of whether they are religious or not.¹⁶⁵ Respected Hebrew scholar and translator of the psalms Robert Alter highlights the intense relationship to God expressed by the psalmist forwarding that the psalms were the model for lyric poetry. In a seeming reference to the ancient ideas about the power of poetry to invoke divine intervention in human affairs, Alter tells of the continuous reciting of the psalms after the attacks on the World Trade Center on September 11, 2001. He suggests that behind this practice may be a "magical conception of the psalms."¹⁶⁶ Alter's comments highlight the long history of poetry as specialized language capable of invoking a sense of divine nearness and as Myerhoff argued such ritualized language provides a sense of human control. In ritual acts that call on divine intervention while providing a sense of control we may see the complimentary workings of language which both seeks an external power and in the process creates a sense that this power is present.

¹⁶³ Schechner, *From Ritual to Theatre*, p.473.

¹⁶⁴ Richard Schechner and Willa Appel, eds., *By Means of Performance: Intercultural Studies of Theatre and Ritual* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), p, 249.

¹⁶⁵ Lincoln Center.

¹⁶⁶ Lincoln Center.

Poetry Evoking Presence

The power of poetry to evoke a sense of presence is elaborated in Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht's thought and writings on the aesthetic experience and poetic necessity of presence. He writes, "Poetry can make things 'present'... suggesting that whatever has this quality can be touched and touches the reader."¹⁶⁷ Gumbrecht notes that specific to poetry, the feeling of "presence" has long been familiar to and expected by readers while receiving little attention by literary critics. He forwards that the "indestructible, unavoidable and much overlooked presence of poetry comes from the same energy that pre-modern cultures drew on" when crafting the prosodic language of charms and prayers.¹⁶⁸ In *The Production of Presence* he argues that, "presence effects of rhyme and alliteration, of verse and stanza" evoke a sense of something which is, "...in front of us, in reach of, and tangible for our bodies."¹⁶⁹ He describes presence as, "...a bodily reaction, a sudden feeling of immediacy with things that have been remote, even a desire to touch the world."¹⁷⁰ In a similar vein, William James described mystical experience as the coalescing of the present with the "remote quite out of...reach," resulting in a "sense of relation."¹⁷¹ A sense of presence is often reported in religious experiences although not necessarily as a result of language. James referenced this in the *Varieties* writing that in human consciousness there is, "a sense of reality, a feeling of objective presence, a perception of what we may call 'something there'."¹⁷² G. William Barnard interprets James as saying that "religious perceptions and feelings indicate that 'the divine is actually present.'"¹⁷³

Gumbrecht defines mysticism as a physical experience of feeling the presence of 'something there' while simultaneously having a perception that no real object is present. This experience was described in 1923 by Rudolph Otto in his classic *The Idea*

¹⁶⁷ Gumbrecht, H.U. 'Presence'.

¹⁶⁸ Gumbrecht, H.U. 'Presence'.

¹⁶⁹ Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht, *The Production of Presence*, p. 18.

¹⁷⁰ Gumbrecht, H.U. 'Presence'.

¹⁷¹ Woods, *Understanding Mysticism*, p. 216.

¹⁷² James, *VRE*, p.61.

¹⁷³ Barnard in Ferrari, p. 57.

of the Holy as the “numinous” which is “felt as objective and outside the self.”¹⁷⁴ This sense perception of presence, acting on the body and strongly influenced by language demonstrates the effective use of poetry for the purposes of communicating with and relating to an unseen power. Again quoting translator Coleman Barks, Rumi’s poetry, “is meant to lead the listener into an experience, into a *presence* or *presences*.”¹⁷⁵

The longing for nearness to a divine presence expressed in poetic language in ritual contexts is abundant in the poetry of Rumi, Lal Ded, Kabir and Mirabai. The following section presents a study of their poetry which highlights commonalities and differences in their language of seeking the divine and relation to the divine, imagined as both an external presence and experienced as an internal reality.

¹⁷⁴ Rudolf Otto, *The Idea of the Holy: An inquiry into the non-rational factor in the idea of the divine and its relation to the rational* (London: Oxford University Press, 1923; repr. 1976), p. 11.

¹⁷⁵ Coleman Barks, *Rumi: The Big Red Book: The Great Masterpiece Celebrating Mystical Love and Friendship* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 2010), p. 9.

Chapter 4

Poets “Standing in Relation” to the Divine - Poetic Expression of Relation

Rumi, Lal Ded, Kabir and Mirabai tell in poetry their experiences of seeking relation with the divine and the effects of such experience. From within religious communities they expressed a personally framed relation. Yet this personal conception of relation was certainly informed by their communal religious context. In turn their unique expression nurtured devotion to and love for the divine within their religious communities which continues contemporarily.¹⁷⁶ The personal and direct relation with the divine evident in the poems and the types of healing experiences which result provide the kind of accounts William James was interested in studying. Their poems tell of intense emotional and visionary states of devotion, longing and love, suffering and surrender, beauty, illumination, and in some poems experiences of union. Such expression warrants a closer examination of their poems within the context of James’ ideas about relation to the divine, religious experience and the experience of what he called the *MORE*.¹⁷⁷

In the following section the poets will be introduced in a framework which loosely pairs them by how they address the divine as either separate from the self or as within the self. Imposing this structure highlights the variety of ways one can be in relation to the divine which in James’ view was determined through experience. While all four poets speak of an external presence and an internal realization Rumi and Mirabai more often address an externally imagined divine while Lal Ded and Kabir predominantly express an internal realization of the Self as divine. Rumi and Mirabai often express more emotional forms of devotion, love and longing while Lal Ded and Kabir tell of a search for the divine that results in spiritual knowledge. Organizing the poets in this way helps not only to highlight James’ openness and broad concept of relation to the divine but

¹⁷⁶ Martin, N. M. ‘Mirabai Comes to America: The Translation and Transformation of a Saint’, *The Journal of Hindu Studies*, 2010, 3, 12-35.

¹⁷⁷ James, *VRE*, p. 436.

allows for treatment of James' concept of the *MORE*. James described consciousness of the *MORE* as a process by which a divided self struggles, finds resolution in surrender of the lower self, followed by a new personal center. There is an exterior "helping power" and a sense of union with it which becomes the new center of the self. James describes relation to this external power as something one can "keep in working touch with."¹⁷⁸ In poetry, the four poets demonstrate how they "keep in working touch with" this external power and internal realization. A variety of translations are included by both poets and scholars. The poems of Kabir are drawn from the western Kabir text which is the oldest among three attributed to him and is the most intimate and devotional (*bhakti*) in nature.¹⁷⁹ The poets will be discussed chronologically within their pairing, thus ordered Rumi then Mirabai and Lal Ded then Kabir.

Rumi and Mirabai – Relation to a Transcendent Other

Medieval poets Jalal al-din Rumi of current day Konya, Turkey and Mirabai of northern India express emotional forms of love and devotion toward a divine being transcendent of human life and addressed as the beloved. For Rumi, the divine was imagined as Shams i Tabriz his deceased friend and master. Rumi addressed his poetry to the deceased Shams as well as to what Coleman Barks calls "the mystery of Allah."¹⁸⁰ For Mirabai, the divine was the amorous form of Vishnu as Lord Krishna often referred to as "The Dark One," and Lord Giridhara "The One who Lifts Mountains."¹⁸¹ Through emotional forms of religious devotion and love both Rumi and Mirabai stood in relation to the unseen and transcended the boundaries separating human and divine. Love and longing fuel the seeking after the beloved and is expressed with such depth of feeling that a listener might for a moment forget that it is addressed to a divine transcendent presence. Longing is an especially prominent emotional force in the poetry of both Rumi and Mirabai. Poet and translator Jane Hirshfield sees longing as both the absence and

¹⁷⁸ James, *VRE*, p. 436.

¹⁷⁹ John Stratton Hawley, *Three Bhakti Voices: Mirabai, Surda, and Kabir in Their Time and Ours* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2005), p. 269.

¹⁸⁰ Coleman Barks, *Rumi: Soul Fury: Rumi and Shams Tabriz on Friendship* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 2014), p. 5.

¹⁸¹ Hirshfield, p.131.

the presence of the beloved writing, "... the passion of mystical union once experience but now missed [is] a longing so strong that it becomes in itself the sign of the Beloved's presence."¹⁸² A. J. Alston writes of Mira borrowing, "clichés of Indian love-poetry," used as instruments, "to express a deep and personally felt emotion."¹⁸³ Yet their poems also tell of bewilderment and awe experiencing the unexplainable and unsayable mystery of presence. Rumi translator and poet Coleman Barks sees Rumi's short poems as circling, "around the delight, and the impossibility, of saying this blessed inwardness, the friendship."¹⁸⁴ In the language of the heart and rich with emotion their poetry tells of relation with the divine that navigates separation, longing, and grief, as well as joy in the experienced return of the beloved.

Jalal al-Din Rumi

Known as the greatest of the Persian mystical poets Jalal al-Din Rumi of thirteenth century Konya Turkey has exerted a profound influence across boundaries of religion, culture and history. He is the author of the largest body of lyric poetry in Persian literature,¹⁸⁵ marking the high point of mystical verse in Islam¹⁸⁶ and is referred to as "one of the most profound mystical teachers and poets in human history."¹⁸⁷ Rumi's output totals almost 40,000 lyrical verses in the *Divani-Shams-i Tabriz* and 25,000 didactic style verses in his long mystical epic the *Masnavi*. Rumi (Jalal al-Din Mohammad al-Balghi al-Rumi) was born near Balkh in current day Afghanistan in approximately 1207 during a time of social and political upheaval. Given the name Mohammad at birth he was called by his family Jalal al-Din meaning "The Splendor of the Faith."¹⁸⁸ Rumi's journey in childhood with his family from Balkh through Iran and Syria to eventual settlement in Konya Anatolia in 1220 was due to the threat of invading Mongol warriors as Genghis Khan expanded his empire westward. Rumi's father Baha

¹⁸² Hirshfield, p. 131.

¹⁸³ A.J. Alston, *The Devotional Poems of Mirabai* (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass Publishers Private Limited, 1980), p. 19.

¹⁸⁴ Barks, *Soul Fury*, p. 3.

¹⁸⁵ Ernst, *Sufism*, p.166.

¹⁸⁶ Schimmel, A. 'Jalal al-din Rumi' in *Encyclopedia of Religion* [2nd ed].

¹⁸⁷ Moores, *The Ecstatic Poetic Tradition*, p. 69.

¹⁸⁸ Lewis, p. 9.

al-din Valad, a known mystical theologian and teacher, was welcomed by the ruling Seljuk authorities in the recently Islamicized frontier region of Anatolia.¹⁸⁹ Rumi married sometime before 1226 and following in the tradition of his father became thoroughly versed in Islamic religious sciences, philosophical theology, and mystical interpretation. After the death of his father in 1231 Rumi assumed his father's teaching position.¹⁹⁰ Upon this background and training came the central event and turning point which transformed Rumi's life. In October of 1244 he met the wandering dervish Shams al-Din of Tabriz, reportedly a wild and intense man. Legends surround the meeting with miraculous events and tell of Rumi's relinquishment of scholarly study for experiential knowing. What is known from biographical sources is that Rumi and Shams were inseparable for two years spending weeks and sometimes months together in mystical conversation known as *sobbet*.¹⁹¹

It is believed that the profound relationship between Rumi and Shams eventually aroused jealousy among Rumi's students and family. Shams was either driven away or chose to leave and after briefly returning he disappeared altogether. Legend says Shams was murdered by a group of Rumi's students and family members due to ongoing jealousy and scandal. In the grief of separation Rumi began a practice of turning to music while speaking spontaneous poetry in perfect rhyme and meter which was written down by his students.

Rumi's ongoing relation of love with the transcendent Shams, whose name means "the sun," is credited as the source of his creative outpouring. As translator Coleman Barks writes Rumi's spontaneous poetry can be, "...overheard as a conversation with Shams of Tabriz."¹⁹² Shams' divinity was established in their initial meeting, in whose face Rumi saw God.¹⁹³

¹⁸⁹ Lewis, p. 11.

¹⁹⁰ Awn, P. J. 'Sufism', in *Encyclopedia of Religion* [2nd ed].

¹⁹¹ Barks, *Big Red Book*, p. 2.

¹⁹² Coleman Barks, *Rumi: The Glance: Songs of Soul Meeting* (New York: Penguin Compass, 1999), p.xiv.

¹⁹³ Ineke Bockting, Jennifer Kilgore-Caradec and Cathy Parc, eds, *Poetry & Religion: Figures of the Sacred* (Bern: Peter Lang AG, International Academic Publishers, 2013), p. 26.

“That God whom I have worshipped all my life,
today I saw him in human form.”¹⁹⁴

In later verse Rumi affirmed:

You are the light which told Moses:
“I am God I am God I am God I am”¹⁹⁵

The following poem demonstrates Rumi’s verse directed toward Shams. Imminent Rumi scholar Franklin Lewis dates this poem to the time of Shams’ disappearance and notes Rumi’s use of imagery from the story in the Koran of Mohammad’s flight from Mecca to a cave with his sole companion Abu Bakr.

I have this friend
I have this cave
I am gutted by love
You are that friend
You are that cave
 My lord, don’t cast me off
You are Noah you are numen
You are conqueror you are conquest
You are the breast laid open
 I stand at the door of mysteries
You are light
You are a festival
You are fortune, God-confirmed
You’re the bird of Mount Sinai
 I the wounded captive in your beak

A drop you are
The sea you are
Grace you are
Wrath you are
Sugar, poison you are you are
 Do not afflict me any longer!
You are the solar sign
The house of Venus

¹⁹⁴ Hazrat Inayat Khan and Coleman Barks, *The Hand of Poetry: Five Mystic Poets of Persia* (New Lebanon: Omega, 1993), p. 66.

¹⁹⁵ Lewis, p. 167.

The paradise of hope
 Let me in, my Friend
You are daylight
You are fasting
You are the wages of our begging
You are water you are jug
 Let this lover drink!¹⁹⁶

Rumi continued his loving, ecstatic, often bewildered relation with the divine presence he had experienced in Shams. Yet in the following poems Shams is absent, conceived of as a transcendent being whom Rumi nevertheless experiences with intimacy.

In your light I learn how to love
in your beauty, how to make poems.

You dance inside my chest,
Where no one sees you,

But sometimes I do, and that
Sight becomes this art.¹⁹⁷

I will never look for somewhere else to live,
no longer shy about how I love.
My eyes open. You are everywhere.¹⁹⁸

Love is the ever present emotional force in Rumi's poetry and his continual teaching. His repeated return to the theme of love is central to Sufism with Sufi masters often known as "masters of the heart."¹⁹⁹

"Gamble everything for love,
if you're a true human being.
If not, leave
this gathering.
Half-heartedness doesn't reach into majesty..."²⁰⁰

¹⁹⁶ Lewis, p.340.

¹⁹⁷ Coleman Barks, *Rumi: Birdsong* (Athens: Maypop, 1993), p. 41.

¹⁹⁸ Barks, *Big Red Book*, p. 416.

¹⁹⁹ Ernst, p. 29.

²⁰⁰ Barks, *Birdsong*. p. 45.

“Someone who does not run
toward the allure of Love
walks a road where nothing lives...”²⁰¹

Be fair. Admit that love has in it
all the righteousness we need...²⁰²

Rumi juxtaposes the experience of love with rational thought, clearly arguing in favor of nonrational states of loving. In this Rumi mirrors William James whose interest in religious impulse favored experience over concepts. Rumi suggests that love, the nonrational, and poetry are linked, together holding the promise of the experiences he seeks.

...Love opens my chest,
and thought returns to its confines.

Patience and rational considerations leave.
Only passion stays, whimpering and feverish...

...Love is the reality,
and poetry is the drum that calls us to that...²⁰³

Love lit a fire in my chest, and anything
That wasn't love left: intellectual
Subtlety, philosophy
books, school.

All I want now
To do or hear
Is poetry.²⁰⁴

As with the other poets in this study Rumi speaks of the grief of separation from the divine and navigates a world of absence which he often resolves by the end of a poem. The feeling of loss and separation from the “source” described in the poem about the reed flute are presented as universal experiences which listeners and readers can

²⁰¹ Barks, *Birdsong*, p. 31.

²⁰² Barks, *Birdsong*, p. 21.

²⁰³ Barks, *Big Red Book*, p. 25.

²⁰⁴ Barks, *Birdsong*, p. 20.

relate to. Rumi, however, reconciles this loss toward the end of the poem by referencing the emotional power of the music of the flute to move one toward intimacy. The reed flute sounds a haunting song of longing for the reed bed just as Rumi sings in poetry of his longing to be reunited with the divine.

Listen to the story told by the reed,
of being separated.

Since I was cut from the reed bed,
I have made this crying sound.

Anyone apart from someone he loves
understands what I say.

Anyone pulled from a source
longs to go back...

...The reed is hurt and salve
combining. Intimacy and longing

for intimacy, one song. A disastrous surrender
and a fine love, together...²⁰⁵

Rumi uses metaphors of the natural world throughout his poetry which include symbols common in Persian Sufi poetry; the rose symbolizing love, the nightingale longing, wine representing the intoxication of mystical love.²⁰⁶ Rumi regularly used the imagery of dawn as the return of the divine in the form of Shams as the sun. Rumi's many poems referencing the mystical experience of dawn and the appearance of the sun in terms of love and worship reveal Shams as a cosmic being. Rumi sees his loving adoration for the divine in all of nature which shares in his praise of Shams.

Not alone I keep singing
Shamsuddin and Shamsuddin
But the nightingale in gardens
sings, the partridge on the hills²⁰⁷

²⁰⁵ Coleman Barks, *The Essential Rumi* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 1995), p. 18.

²⁰⁶ Ernst, pp. 157, 158.

²⁰⁷ Schimmel, *Wind/Fire*, p. 19.

The first morning air brings
the presence that angels
in amazement watch.
Tears and a breathing silence together.
Then the morning itself, growing stronger, calls out,
"Who's loving who, of these two?"²⁰⁸

Come, dissolver of sugar, dissolve me,
if this is the time. Do it gently with a touch,
of a hand, or a look. Every morning I wait at dawn.
That's when it's happened before...²⁰⁹

Rumi's intent is to live in intimate relation with the transcendent and he returns to this theme throughout his verse.

Burning with longing-fire,
wanting to sleep with my head on your doorsill,
my living is composed only
of this trying to be in your presence.²¹⁰

Rumi tells of suffering from a sense of separation yet affirms the return of the experience of the beloved. William James referred to this as the transiency of mystical experiences. All of the poets express transitory experiences of the divine. They seem also to demonstrate in poetry James' thought that recurrences of experience carry a sense of "continuous development in what is felt as inner richness and importance."²¹¹

A bough with blossoms bears fruit.
The hawk descends with purpose.

Your image comes and goes here
Inside me. When will you stay?²¹²

When you come back inside my chest,
No, matter how far I've wandered off,

²⁰⁸ Barks, *Birdsong*. p. 61.

²⁰⁹ Coleman Barks and Michael Green, *The Illuminated Rumi* (New York: Broadway Books, 1997), p. 119.

²¹⁰ Barks, *Big Red Book*, p.420.

²¹¹ James, *VRE*, p. 329.

²¹² Barks, *Birdsong*, p. 51.

I look around and see the way.
At the end of my life, with just one breath
left, if you come then, I'll sit up and sing.²¹³

Lo, I am with you always,
you promised that,
and when I realized it was true,
my soul flared up.

Any unhappiness comes from forgetting.
Remember, and be back close
with the Friend.²¹⁴

Rumi's attempt to express in poetry his mystical experience of love and relation to the transcendent often results in the invoking of silence at the end of his poems. Islamic Studies scholar Carl Ernst notes that over a thousand of Rumi's poems conclude with "impassioned cries for silence."²¹⁵ Similar to William James' concept of ineffability, Ernst writes that this rhetorical device is used to demonstrate "the inexpressibility of the encounter with truth."²¹⁶ The subtle difference here is that ineffability is experienced while inexpressibility could simply be a concept Rumi is trying to teach. Approaching Rumi's silence through a Jamesian lens provides a secondary possibility for understanding the text, the possibility of silence as experience rather than silence as concept.

...A fire has risen above my tombstone hat.
I don't want learning, or dignity, or respectability.

I want this music and this dawn
and the warmth of your cheek against mine.

The grief armies assemble,
but I'm not going with them.

This is how it always is
when I finish a poem.

²¹³ Barks, *Birdsong*, p. 54.

²¹⁴ Barks, *Birdsong*. P. 49.

²¹⁵ Ernst, p. 167.

²¹⁶ Ernst, p. 167.

A Great Silence overcomes me,
and I wonder why I ever thought
to use language.²¹⁷

...Inside this globe the soul roars like thunder.
And now Silence, my strict tutor.
I won't try to talk about Shams.
Language cannot touch that Presence.²¹⁸

...a Voice came to my ear,
"If you become this, you will be *That!*"
Then Silence,
and now more Silence.
A mouth is not for talking
A mouth is for tasting this Sweetness.²¹⁹

The relation to Shams as a divine presence continues to be, as he was in life, Rumi's master and teacher. He is imagined as a divine Other who instructs Rumi toward consciousness of the divinity which is within him.

Yesterday at dawn, my friend said, *How long
will this unconsciousness go on?
You fill yourself with the sharp pain of Love,
rather than its fulfillment.*
I said, "But I can't get to you!
You are the whole dark night,
and I am a single candle.
My life is upside down
because of You!"
The Friend replied, *I am your deepest being.
Quit talking about wanting Me!...*²²⁰

The closing poem below is just one in which Rumi expresses an experience of radical identification and unity with all things, suggesting that divinity is everywhere once Rumi has experienced it within himself.

²¹⁷ Coleman Barks, *Rumi: Like This* (Athens: Maypop, 1990), p. 11.

²¹⁸ Barks, *Like This*, p. 12.

²¹⁹ Barks, *Like This*, p. 13.

²²⁰ Barks, *Like This*, p. 22.

I am dust particles in sunlight
I am the round sun.

To the bits of dust I say, *Stay*.
To the sun, *keep moving*.

I am morning mist,
and the breathing of evening.

I am wind in the top of a grove,
and surf on the cliff.

Mast, rudder, helmsman and keel,
I am also the coral reef they founder on.

I am a tree with a trained parrot in its branches.
Silence, thought and voice.

The musical air coming through a flute,
a spark off a stone, a flickering in metal.

Both candle and the moth
crazy around it.

Rose and the nightingale
lost in the fragrance.

I am all orders of being,
the circling galaxy,

the evolutionary intelligence,
the lift and the falling away.

What is and what isn't. You
who know Jelaluddin, you the one in all,

say who I am.
Say I am you.²²¹

²²¹ Barks, *Illuminated Rumi*, p. 108.

Mirabai

Most famous of the women bhakti saints Mirabai of sixteenth century northern India is known for her intense devotion to God as Visnu in the amorous form of Krishna, for her perseverance under persecution, and as a heroic figure for the low-caste. Her songs of passionate love for the Dark One have been memorized and sung by millions for almost 500 years.²²² Mirabai's poems have been preserved and disseminated through oral tradition with no early written collection of her songs. Mirabai scholar Nancy Martin notes that Mira was never formally included in any branch of devotional Hinduism most likely due to her independent behavior.²²³ Little can be said with certainty about the details of her life. Most information comes from her autobiographical poems, poetic works of later devotees, historical events and legend.²²⁴ Martin writes that the dates and details of her life should be treated as speculative, "...shaped significantly by the values and assumptions of the tellers," noting that high-caste male historians have claimed her definitive biography with few historical facts.²²⁵ However the legends surrounding Mirabai are decidedly not of a high-caste nature as she is seen as a companion and champion of outcasts, going against the grain of societal norms for women, suffering as a result yet ultimately "surviving and thriving."²²⁶

What is commonly believed is that Mirabai was born in 1498 in Rajasthan western India to a minor royal family. She was raised in the palace of her grandfather who was an especially devout man. As was customary in royal families Mira would have been educated in literature, music and the scriptures.²²⁷ Her spiritual life appears to have developed from an early age with a specific devotion to Krishna.²²⁸ Legend tells that at the age of eighteen she was married to the crown prince of Mewar. Yet shortly before the marriage she insisted on being wed to a small statue of Krishna seeing him as her

²²² Robert Bly and Jane Hirshfield, *Mirabai: Ecstatic Poems* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2004), p. xiii.

²²³ Martin, 'Mirabai' in *Encyclopedia of Religion* [2nd ed].

²²⁴ V. K. Sethi, *Mira: The Divine Lover* (Punjab: Radha Soami Satsang Beas, 1979), pg. 3.

²²⁵ Martin, 'Mirabai', in *Encyclopedia of Religion* [2nd ed].

²²⁶ Martin, 'Mirabai comes to America'.

²²⁷ Hirshfield, *Women in Praise*, p. 131.

²²⁸ Martin, 'Mirabai', in *Encyclopedia of Religion* [2nd ed].

true husband.²²⁹ The beyond human divinity of Krishna did not prevent Mirabai enacting the most profound ritual of relationship when she wed herself to him. Scholarship varies on how Mira became an outcast of the royal family, turning her back on convention, royalty and riches to become an ecstatic devotee of Krishna wandering much of north India on foot.²³⁰ One legend tells of Mira's refusal to honor her husband by throwing herself on his funeral pyre. Another reports her habit of frequenting temples of the low-caste. Mira's unconventional behavior is said to have aroused the wrath of her in-laws who reputedly twice tried to kill her.²³¹ Vignettes within the bhakti tradition tell of Mira's closer intimate connection to a "ragtag company of devotees" than to her own family.²³²

Mirabai addresses her devotion "*bhakti*" to the divine as Krishna who is the amorous form of Visnu. Often Mira addresses herself to Lord Giridhara, a manifestation of Krishna who miraculously lifted a mountain.²³³ Other names for the divine emerge in translations as Rama, The Braj prince, Hari, The Dark One, and the Lotus-eyed One. Mirabai's poetry tells of ongoing relation with the divine most often in the form of seeking her lord, suffering separation, and at times experiencing a realization of the divine's presence. Her devotion affirms the centrality of love in the human-divine relation and the centrality of that relation above all else.

"My love for thee has set in deeply
O courtly Son of Nand.
Having heard the music of Thy flute
I have forgotten family and home..."²³⁴

I give my heart without fear to the beloved.
As polish goes into gold
I have gone into him..."²³⁵

²²⁹ Bly and Hirshfield, *Mirabai*, p. xi.

²³⁰ Daniel Ladinsky, *Love Poems from God: Twelve Sacred Voices from the East and West* (New York: Penguin Group (USA) Inc., 2002), p. 241.

²³¹ Hirshfield, *Women in Praise*, p. 131.

²³² Hawley, p. 129.

²³³ Hirshfield, *Women in Praise*, p. 131.

²³⁴ Alston, p. 77.

²³⁵ Bly and Hirshfield, p.9.

“Beloved, I have dyed myself with the dye of thy love...
My beloved lives within my heart
and with him I am day and night...
I drink of the wine of love and intoxicated
I go about day and night...”²³⁶

The overwhelming theme throughout Mirabai’s relational poetry however is the absence of the divine, a lamenting kind of search and what John Stratton Hawley calls “The basic experience ...of abandonment.”²³⁷

My dark one has gone to an alien land.
He’s left me behind,
He’s never returned,
He’s never sent me a single word,
So I’ve stripped off my ornaments,
Jewels and adornments,
Cut the hair from my head,
And put on holy garments,
All on his account,
Seeking him in all four directions.
Mira: unless she meets the Dark One, her Lord,
She doesn’t even want to live.²³⁸

Life without you
is like a pond without a lotus,
or a night without the moon.
I pass the nights in deep distress,
the pain of absence eats my heart...²³⁹

Mira identifies her suffering as bodily experienced with repeated references to the body’s involvement in her relation to the divine. Here, her distress is grounded in the human body of one who is in relation with the transcendent. Mira includes the senses of the body, metaphors of the body and the physical experience of pain as she describes her longing for the experience of the divine presence.

²³⁶ Alston, p. 123.

²³⁷ Hawley, p. 119.

²³⁸ Hawley, p. 121.

²³⁹ Alston, p. 75.

“Without thy sight
sorrow attends my eyes.
When I fancy I hear thy words,
my heart trembles.
Sweet is thy voice.
To whom can I explain my sufferings?
I am being mangled in the jaws
of the circular saw of “pain of absence”...”²⁴⁰

O my companion
Shyam shot an arrow that has pierced me through.
The fire of longing is burning in my heart
and my whole body is in torment.
No one but myself and my beloved
knows my pain...”²⁴¹

Mirabai affirms the experience of the Holy One within herself yet later experienced as gone. William James' thought regarding the transiency of mystical experiences is here brought to mind. Her poems suggest that love is the active principle uniting the human and the divine. As a Rumi poem expressed, “Gamble everything for love.” Mira continues to make the gamble that her devoted love will draw her lord to her.

Where did you go, Holy One, after you left my body?
Your flame jumped to the wick, and then you
disappeared and left the lamp alone.²⁴²

...what I have now is separation
It hurts through the night and
through the day...
Mirabai says: Hari, you keep stealing
away. You know
once lovers come together, they should
not be kept apart.²⁴³

...he has left me. The night passes
while I count stars.

²⁴⁰ Alston, p. 76.

²⁴¹ Alston, p. 97.

²⁴² Bly and Hirshfield, p. 29.

²⁴³ Bly and Hirshfield, p. 25.

When will the hour arrive?
This sorrow must end. Mira says:
Lifter of Mountains,
return.²⁴⁴

While the experience of separation and grief are ongoing, her poems also tell that such suffering is a path moving one closer to God.

“O Shyam, I saw a raincloud bursting
and burst into tears myself.
The clouds massed black and yellow
and it rained for two hours on end.
Wherever I look there is water, water...”²⁴⁵

...I gaze down the road with yearning.
My eyes will not obey my commands
and emit a constant flow of tears.
What can I do?
I am at a perfect loss...”²⁴⁶

Mira affirms that a love which grieves and opens the heart facilitates the experience of nearness to God. Jane Hirshfield writes that Mirabai’s intense longing “becomes in itself the sign of the beloved’s presence.”²⁴⁷ This idea about simultaneous absence and presence, suffering and solace, is also referenced by Rumi. For Rumi the reed flute is “hurt and salve combining. Intimacy and longing for intimacy, one song.”²⁴⁸ Mira sings:

Listen my friend, this road is the heart opening,
kissing his feet, resistance broken, tears all night...
Mirabai says, “The heat of midnight tears will bring you to God.”²⁴⁹

The relational metaphor of marriage is used to express Mira’s state of belonging to her lord. Even as she experiences the absence of the divine nothing can ultimately sever

²⁴⁴ Bly and Hirshfield, p. 24.

²⁴⁵ Alston, p. 68.

²⁴⁶ Alston, p. 84.

²⁴⁷ Hirshfield, *Women in Praise*, p. 131.

²⁴⁸ Barks, *Essential Rumi*, p. 18.

²⁴⁹ Hirshfield, *Women in Praise*, p. 141.

her from this state of intimate relation and belonging. In contrast to her helplessness in a state of separation she uses bold language to express her action of claiming the divine and of asserting their inviolable union.

My friend, I went to the market and bought the Dark One...
What I paid was my social body, my town body, my family body, and
all my inherited jewels.
Mirabai says: The Dark One is my husband now.
Be with me when I lie down; you promised me this in an earlier life.²⁵⁰

John Stratton Hawley sees Mira's metaphor of marriage as a "striking vision of how a woman might establish a relation with Krishna," as this is in contrast to the illicit liaison with Krishna traditionally presented in the *gopis* of Braj.²⁵¹ While the following poem is set as a dream her closing line is a bold affirmation of her claim to the divine.

Sister, I had a dream that I wed
The Lord of those who live in need:
Five hundred sixty thousand people came
and the Lord of Braj was the groom.
In dream we set up the wedding arch;
in dream he grasped my hand;
in dream he led me around the wedding fire
and I became unshakably his bride.

Mira's been granted her mountain-lifting Lord:
from living past lives, a prize.²⁵²

Mirabai uses a metaphor of the natural world in the form of rain and the rainy season to describe the arrival and return of the divine. Rain serves as an apt metaphor as its coming and going is unknown and beyond human control. Rain as a source of life contributes to its metaphoric power. Her dependence on the return of the divine for joy well mirrors the human experience of dependence on rain and the joy of its return after a long dry season.

²⁵⁰ Hirshfield, *Women in Praise*, p. 142.

²⁵¹ Hawley, pp. 126,127.

²⁵² Hawley, pp. 125,126.

Here are the clouds of the rainy season,
the rainy season so dear to the heart.
My heart overflows with delight...
as I have heard that Hari will come.²⁵³

Come to my house, my Shyam,
for the rainy season fills me with emotion.
The clouds have collected from all quarters
and the thunder is roaring...²⁵⁴

Shri Krishna has entered my heart
and clouds have filled the sky.
Cloud banks mount as the east wind blows
frogs croak, the cuckoo sings
and the cry of the peacock is heard...²⁵⁵

It is raining outside and my beloved is with me in my cottage.
Light showers are falling and my cup is full to the brim.
It is a union after age-long separation, and I am afraid of losing
my beloved any moment.
Says Mira, My Lord, you have satisfied my great thirst for love and have
accepted me,
oh my husband of former births.²⁵⁶

It is interesting to note the differences between the imagery of rain in Mirabai and sun in Rumi and how well their poetic symbols carry their experience of the divine presence. Rumi expresses much less angst about a sense of separation and uses a symbol from nature which can be counted on for regular return. Each day the beloved rises in Rumi's consciousness. Mira on the other hand experiences more suffering due to separation. Her use of rain and the rainy season well suit her experience of long dry spells with uncertainty about when her lord will return.

In the next section the songs of fourteenth century Kashmiri poet Lal Ded and fifteenth century bhakti poet Kabir of north India will be examined in the framework of interior

²⁵³ Alston, p. 94.

²⁵⁴ Alston, p. 94.

²⁵⁵ Alston, p. 92.

²⁵⁶ Moores, p. 123.

relation to the divine which is consistently perceived as within the self.

Lal Ded and Kabir - Inner Relation with a Transcendent Self

While both Lal Ded and Kabir touch on an initial search for a transcendent “other” and suffering from a sense of separation similar to bhakti poet Mirabai, the core of their songs express a realization that the transcendent divine is within. Their poetry can be seen in light of James’ ideas about the existence of a *MORE* which is continuous with our own lives. While it is risky to assume similarity across the contexts of William James and Lal Ded and Kabir, their songs provide a way of understanding James’ ideas about this element within consciousness. James argued that in religious experiences an individual becomes aware that the higher or better part of themselves is, “...conterminous and continuous with a *MORE* of the same quality, which is operative in the universe outside of him, and which he can keep in working touch with...”²⁵⁷ James places this consciousness in the context of a, “harmonious working relation” between “our own higher self” and “that *MORE* of the same quality” which has also been described as a sense of union.²⁵⁸ Without necessarily taking up James’ argument about the conscious or subconscious location of the *MORE* we can nevertheless examine in poetry this element of dynamic relation within the individual.

While Mirabai and Rumi express the experience of finding the beloved within themselves the consistency of Lal Ded’s and Kabir’s return to the experience stands out as a unique form of inner relation. In fact, their direct address to the listener about finding the divine within themselves appears to use poetry as a vehicle for teaching spiritual truths.

²⁵⁷ James, *VRE*, p. 436.

²⁵⁸ James, *VRE*, p. 437.

Lal Ded (also Lalla)

Lal Ded also known as Lalla, Lal Diddi and Lalleswari of fourteenth century Kashmir has been a powerful influence over seven centuries shaping the religious life of Kashmir through her songs, poems, and sayings. There are a total of 258 “vakhs” or utterances attributed to her which have circulated continuously in the Kashmiri culture from the fourteenth century to the present. While no early manuscripts of her work exist she is, “...arguably Kashmir’s best known spiritual and literary figure.”²⁵⁹ What is known of Lal Ded has been communicated orally through legend with no written references to her until the eighteenth century.²⁶⁰

Lal Ded is believed to have been born into a Brahmin family and married at a young age after which she was treated cruelly by her husband and mother-in-law. According to translator Ranjit Hoskote her early life can be seen as an, “...archetypal narrative of a misunderstood young woman with spiritual aspirations,” eventually renouncing home and family for the spiritual path of Shiva-worship.²⁶¹ This narrative is also evident in the legends surrounding Mirabai. After completing discipleship and initiation in the demanding spiritual disciplines and devotional practices of Kashmiri Saivite mysticism, Lal Ded took up the life of a classical wandering mendicant. It is believed she began to compose her songs at this point in her life “singing and dancing her passionate mystical experience.”²⁶²

As a renouncer of social convention without the protection of a guru Lal Ded met with humiliations and difficulty which ultimately contributed to her stature as a questor and teacher in the Kashmiri imagination.²⁶³ She founded no school or movement and had no followers yet as an isolated dissident she has exerted a profound and ongoing influence on the religious life of Kashmir through her songs. Lal Ded appears to have been

²⁵⁹ Hoskote, p. x.

²⁶⁰ Coleman Barks, *Naked Song: Lalla* (Varanasi: Pilgrims Publishing, 2004), p. 3.

²⁶¹ Hoskote, pp. xvi, xvii.

²⁶² Hirshfield, *Women in Praise*, p. 118.

²⁶³ Hoskote, p. xvii.

acquainted with the ideas and practices of the Sufi's and is a foundational figure of the Rishi order of Kashmiri Sufism begun in the late nineteenth century.²⁶⁴ Similar to Kabir in the following section, both Hindus and Sufis claim Lal Ded as being grounded in their respective religious traditions although both poets are understood to have been outsiders with respect to orthodox religious affiliation and practice.

Ranjit Hoskote writes that although Lal Ded shared some characteristics in common with bhakti poets she was not, "...chiefly preoccupied with a brimming-over of devotional expression" in her approach to the divine.²⁶⁵ Rather her songs demonstrate Lal Ded's primary interest in a radical transformation of consciousness in which she is identified with the divine. In consonance with Kashmiri Saiva doctrine that the world presents traps for those unaware of their true nature, Lal Ded composes verse which tell of transcending these traps.²⁶⁶ As a disciple in the Shiva-worship tradition of oneness between God and the phenomenal world, she returns again and again to her experience of illumination that she and the divine are one.²⁶⁷ Translator Coleman Barks forwards, "Always it's a dissolving self into the absolute that she celebrates."²⁶⁸ Conversely though, Lal Ded employs imagery of being intact yet physically embodied by the divine as the following poems illustrate.

The Lord has spread the subtle net of himself
across the world.
See how he gets under your skin,
inside your bones...²⁶⁹

Don't flail about like a man wearing a blindfold.
Believe me, He's in here.
Come in and see for yourself.
You'll stop hunting for him all over.²⁷⁰

²⁶⁴ Hoskote, p. xxiv.

²⁶⁵ Hoskote, p. xxviii.

²⁶⁶ Hoskote, p. xxi.

²⁶⁷ Hirshfield, *Women in Praise*, p.118.

²⁶⁸ Barks, *Lalla*, p. 1.

²⁶⁹ Hoskote, p. xxi.

²⁷⁰ Hoskote, p. 44.

Lal Ded's songs have a back and forth quality where she claims both that there is no need to search for the divine who is within yet urges the uninitiated to begin their search for one she references in relational terms as the friend.

Drifter, on your feet, get moving!
You still have time, go look for the Friend.
Make yourself wings, take wing and fly.
You still have time, go look for the Friend.²⁷¹

Amidst the language of oneness and unity there are songs which express relational language to something other. These are songs of being a lover of the divine before experiencing transcendent states of identity.

When the dirt was wiped away from the mind's mirror,
people knew me for a lover of God.
When I saw him there so close to me,
He was all, I was nothing.²⁷²

I gave myself to him body and soul.
became a bell that the clear note of Him rang through.
Thoughts fixed on Him, I flew through the sky
and unlocked the mysteries of heaven and hell.²⁷³

Whatever your name, Shiva, Vishnu
The genius who inspired Scherazade,
Savior of the Jains, the pure Buddha,
Lotus-born God, I am sick. The world
Is my disease, and you are the cure,
You, you, you, you, you, you, you.²⁷⁴

The path to realization of unity with the divine is framed in metaphors of relentless searching. Lal Ded uses imagery suggesting the exhaustion of human effort and the limits of such effort.

Love-mad, I, Lalla, started out,

²⁷¹ Hoskote, p. 19.

²⁷² Hoskote, p. 48.

²⁷³ Hoskote, p. 114.

²⁷⁴ Barks, *Lalla*, p. 29.

spent days and nights on the trail...²⁷⁵

I burnt up the landscape with footprints, looked for
Him everywhere...²⁷⁶

I wearied myself searching for the Friend
with efforts beyond my strength.

I came to the door and saw how powerfully
the locks were bolted...²⁷⁷

Paradoxically Lal Ded tells that when she stops searching she is found exactly where she is. Her earlier assumptions of human- divine separation inherent in her search are transcended. She references both the work of meditation and non-doing in her realization. In rich imagery she expresses the reward of her spiritual efforts to find the "Truthful one," and her experience of being found.

"I trapped my breath in the bellows of my throat:
A lamp blazed up inside: showed me who I really was.
I crossed the darkness holding fast to that lamp,
scattering its light-seeds around me as I went."²⁷⁸
I was passionate,
filled with longing,
I searched far and wide.
But the day that the Truthful one found me,
I was at home.²⁷⁹

Lalla, you've wandered so many places
Trying to find your husband!

Now at last, inside the walls
Of this body-house, in the heart shrine,
You discover where he lives.²⁸⁰

²⁷⁵ Hoskote, p. 15.

²⁷⁶ Hoskote, p. 4.

²⁷⁷ Barks, *Lalla*, p. 36.

²⁷⁸ Hoskote, p. 54.

²⁷⁹ Hirshfield, *Women in Praise*, p.120.

²⁸⁰ Barks, *Lalla*, p. 83.

Self inside self, You are nothing but me.
Self inside self, I am only You.

What we are together
will never die.

The why and how of this?
What does it matter?"²⁸¹

I searched for my Self
until I grew weary,

but no one, I know now,
reaches the hidden knowledge
by means of effort.

Then, absorbed in "Thou art This,"
I found the place of wine.

There all the jars are filled,
but no one is left to drink.²⁸²

Lal Ded tells of a fluid and alternating sense of identity which is aware of separation from the divine and also aware of being the divine. The playful language in some of her songs highlights her confidence, her intimacy, and her empowerment. As Hoskote writes, Lal Ded, "...is no recluse or pining bride of God." Rather, she is very direct and informal, at times "disconcertingly familiar" with the divine.²⁸³

Wrapped up in Yourself, You hid from me.
All day I looked for You
and when I found You
hiding inside me,
I ran wild, playing now me, now You.²⁸⁴

At the end of a crazy-moon night
The love of God rose.

²⁸¹ Barks, *Lalla*, p. 27.

²⁸² Hirshfield, *Women in Praise*, p. 125.

²⁸³ Hoskote, p. lxi.

²⁸⁴ Hoskote, p. 17.

“I said “it’s me, Lalla.”

The Beloved woke.
We became That,
and the lake is crystal-clear.²⁸⁵

Lal Ded teaches through her many poems about the path of experiencing God as well as the resulting knowledge she gains. In William James’ writing on mystical experience he argued that noetic quality is a state of knowledge experienced by the mystic.²⁸⁶ In the following poem Lal Ded speaks from this state of knowledge. Here she affirms the transforming power of love while on the path of relation and realization of the divine.

“On the way to God the difficulties
feel like being ground by a millstone,
like night coming at noon, like
lightening through the clouds.

But don’t worry!
What must come, comes.
Face everything with love,
As your mind dissolves in God.”²⁸⁷

Kabir

Kabir, the great Hindu poet of the fifteenth century and earliest author of the bhakti movement has had, in John Stratton Hawley’s words, “enormous impact on the life of his times.”²⁸⁸ He was the son of Muslim weavers, born near Benares to parents recently converted to Islam. As with Lal Ded very little is known about his life outside of what his poems tell and what hagiographies and legend have created. He is considered the first and greatest poet in the Hindi language and is still the most often quoted poet in contemporary Hindi culture. Yet Vinay Dharwadker contends that Kabir “...remains an enigma - a shadowy presence behind the poetry...a form of imagination constantly

²⁸⁵ Hirshfield, *Women in Praise*, p.127.

²⁸⁶ James, *VRE*, p. 329.

²⁸⁷ Hirshfield, *Women in Praise*, p. 126.

²⁸⁸ Hawley, p. 268.

eluding our grasp.”²⁸⁹ In Rabindranath Tagore’s 1914 translation, *One Hundred Poems of Kabir*, Evelyn Underhill forwarded that no reliance can be placed on the “contradictory legends” surrounding him.²⁹⁰ Translator and scholar Arvind Mehrotra writes that, “if the historic Kabir is elusive, the authentic Kabir text is even more so,” as no manuscript of his poems from his lifetime is known to exist.²⁹¹ Further, the textual history of the poetry attributed to Kabir is, as Dharwadker notes “...one of the most complex to be associated with a single author in world literature.”²⁹²

What is known is that similar to many of the bhakti saints of north India Kabir’s parents, as weavers, were low-caste. Scholars speculate that caste was a likely motivation behind his parents’ conversion to Islam. Kabir, “whose name is a Qur’anic title of Allah meaning ‘great,’”²⁹³ was influenced by both Hindus and Muslims although critical of both religious systems. He is rumored to have been a disciple of the famous Hindu ascetic Ramananda as a young man although originally rejected by the holy man due to being Muslim.²⁹⁴

Kabir is known as the most outspoken of the bhakti poets with the bhakti ethic of disregard and often opposition to orthodox religious teachings and caste hierarchies.²⁹⁵ As A.K. Ramanujan tells, with the emergence of bhakti movements, “a new kind of persona or person [came] into fashion...: a person who flouts properties, refuses the education of a poet, insists that anyone can be a poet - for it is the Lord who sings through one.”²⁹⁶ In this new persona, “...poet and saint are one,” yet this is no world

²⁸⁹ Vinay Dharwadker, *Kabir: The Weaver’s Songs* (New Delhi: Penguin Books India (P) Ltd., 2003), pp. ix-xii.

²⁹⁰ Rabindranath Tagore, *Songs of Kabir* (Mineola: Dover Publications, Inc., 2004; repr from *One Hundred Poems of Kabir*, The India Society, London, 1914), p. viii.

²⁹¹ Arvind Krishna Mehrotra, *Songs of Kabir* (New York: New York Review of Books, 2011), p. xxiv.

²⁹² Dharwadker, p. 32.

²⁹³ Mehrotra, p. xix

²⁹⁴ Robert Bly, *The Kabir Book: Forty-Four of the Ecstatic Poems of Kabir* (Boston: Beacon Press Books, 1971), p. 61.

²⁹⁵ Mehrotra, pp. xxi, xxiii.

²⁹⁶ A.K. Ramanujan, *Hymns for the Drowning: Poems for Visnu by Nammalvar* (Haryana: Penguin Group, 1981), pp. 164-165.

renouncing saint.²⁹⁷ Kabir's poetry attests to this and reveals him to have been a rebel, a religious reformer and revolutionary questioning the divisions between Hinduism and Islam, men and women, high caste and low caste. Wendy Doniger writes that Kabir's, "...very existence made nonsense of the line between Muslims and Hindus," and he imagined himself erasing such lines through his poems.²⁹⁸ Yet Doniger clarifies that spiritual liberation rather than social or political liberation was his goal and Kabir clearly demonstrates this central concern throughout his poetry.²⁹⁹

Kabir's path to spiritual liberation is a path of devotion and self-knowledge expressed as inwardness and designated as "interior religion."³⁰⁰ Beyond the outer world reformer and revolutionary Kabir's poems reveal an inner world of experience and transcendence which he often expresses in the bhakti style of love and passion for the divine. Kabir hears an inner music which leads him to contemplate love.

The flute of interior time is played whether we hear it or not.
What we mean by "love" is its sound coming in.
When love hits the farthest edge of excess, it reaches a wisdom.
And the fragrance of that knowledge! It penetrates our thick bodies...³⁰¹

Kabir sings of an interior relation with the divine which he describes through metaphors of physicality rather than signifiers of the ethereal. Thus, he grounds the divine in bodily "this world" experience.

...Kabir says: Student, tell me, what is God?
He is the breath inside the breath."³⁰²

If you want the truth, I will tell you the truth:
Friend, listen: the God whom I love is inside.³⁰³

²⁹⁷ Ramanujan, p. 165.

²⁹⁸ Mehrotra, p. viii.

²⁹⁹ Mehrotra, p. x.

³⁰⁰ Vaudeville, C. 'Kabir', Encyclopedia of Religion [2nd ed].

³⁰¹ Bly, p. 21.

³⁰² Bly, p. 33.

³⁰³ Bly, p. 6.

..the darkness of love envelopes the body and mind
...drink the sweet honey that steepes the petals of the lotus of the heart
Receive the waves in your body.
Oh brother behold!
The Lord is in this vessel of my body.³⁰⁴

The Guest is inside you and also inside me;
...Let your arrogance go, and look around inside³⁰⁵

Even as Kabir proclaims his inner experience of God he also expresses separation from the divine as do Rumi, Mira and Lal Ded. This rendition by Robert Bly uses romantic imagery in the expression of human longing for the divine

My body and my mind are in depression because you are not with me
How much I love you and want you in my house...
...I am restless indoors and outdoors.
The bride wants her lover as much as a thirsty man wants water.
...how restless Kabir is all the time!
How much he wants to see the Guest.³⁰⁶

Kabir does not dwell on separation nor does he describe the type of ardent seeking characteristic of Mirabai, Lal Ded and sometimes Rumi. He affirms rather, the power of longing, in ways similar to Mirabai, as the energy that brings the divine close.

Kabir says this:
When the guest is being searched for
it is the intensity of the longing for the guest
that does all the work.
Look at me, and you will see a slave of that intensity.³⁰⁷

More often Kabir focuses on the arrival of the divine which he describes with the emotional response of tears and relief similar to Rumi and also evident in Mirabai. In the following poem Kabir expresses the emotional state of his heart when the divine relation is not present.

³⁰⁴ Tagore, p. 19.

³⁰⁵ Bly, p. 57.

³⁰⁶ Bly, p. 20.

³⁰⁷ Bly, p. 24.

“When I am parted from my beloved, my heart is full of misery: I have no comfort in the day, I have no sleep in the night. To whom shall I tell my sorrow?

The night is dark, the hours slip by. Because my Lord is absent, I start up and tremble with fear.

Kabir says: Listen, my friend! There is no other satisfaction, save in the encounter with the Beloved.”³⁰⁸

In the following poem he describes his emotional state in the return of the transcendent. In this poem Kabir uses his real world occupation as a weaver for the central metaphor in the poem. Conversely, unlike his real world, he casts himself as a woman.

“The woman who is separated from her lover
spins at the spinning wheel...

The wheel of ecstatic love turns around in the sky...
This woman weaves threads that are subtle,
and the intensity of her praise makes them fine.

Kabir says: I am that woman.
I am weaving the linen of night and day.

When my Lover comes and I feel his feet,
the gift I will have for him is tears.”³⁰⁹

Kabir uses terms such as “the Guest,” “my Lord,” and “the Beloved” to describe his experience of relation to the divine within himself. In imagery similar to Rumi, Kabir sees himself as a host for the divine presence. Kabir translator Robert Bly uses the phrase “Secret One within” as a metaphor for the divine while Lal Ded refers to the “Secret Self.” In these descriptives we can imagine James’ “*MORE*” both as within the individual and as James saw as “operative in the universe outside.”³¹⁰

“There is a Secret One inside us;
The planets in all the galaxies

³⁰⁸ Tagore, p. 36.

³⁰⁹ Bly, p 50.

³¹⁰ James, *VRE*, p. 436.

Pass through his hands like beads.”³¹¹

Kabir speaks with authority when he affirms that the divine he experiences within himself is also in everyone else. Like Rumi, Kabir’s knowledge sees beyond the limits of reason and he urges his listeners to experience the divine within themselves and thus experience the love which permeates the world.

“The Lord is in me, the Lord is in you, as life is in every seed. O servant!
Put false pride away, and seek for him within you.
A million suns are ablaze with light,
a sea of blue spreads in the sky,
the fever of life is stilled, and all stains are washed away when I sit in the
midst of that world.
Hark to the unstruck bells and drums! Take your delight in love!

...One love it is that pervades the whole world, few there are that know it
fully.
They are blind who hope to see it by the light of reason, that reason
which is the cause of separation--
The house of reason is very far away!
How blessed is Kabir, that amidst this great joy he sings within his own
vessel.
It is the music of the meeting of soul with soul;
It is the music of the forgetting of sorrows;
It is the music that transcends all coming in and all going forth.”³¹²

The love which Kabir sings is a love experienced in relation with the divine which is transcendent of human life yet found within human consciousness. While James provides a starting point in his definition of religion as an individual standing in relation to their sense of the divine, the poets take it further into a relation that begins and ends in the intensity of love.

“It is time to put up a love-swing!
Tie the body and then tie the mind so that they
swing between the arms of the Secret One
you love...”³¹³

³¹¹ Bly, p. 29.

³¹² Tagore, pp. 64,65.

The worshipper is utterly inebriated...
He drinks from the cup of the in breathings and the out breathings of love.”³¹⁴

Kabir expresses this love which wants nothing but the joy of the divine presence and the experience of this presence within one’s self.

There is a land not governed by sadness and doubt, where the
fear of death is unknown.
Spring forests bloom there and the wind is sweet with the flower
He-Is-Myself.
The bee of the heart dives into it and wants no other joy.”³¹⁵

³¹³ Bly, p. 36.

³¹⁴ Tagore, p. 14.

³¹⁵ Stephen Mitchell, *The Enlightened Heart: An Anthology of Sacred Poetry* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 1989), p. 75.

Chapter 5

Responses to the Poetry of Transcendent Relation

The responses to poetry addressed in this section are introduced first through James' thought. He described responding to poetry as being a type of mystical experience. In 1884, well before writing about the mystical qualities of poetry in the *Varieties* he described the visceral response to poetry saying, "In listening to poetry, drama or heroic narrative, we have a cutaneous shiver which like a wave flows over us and a heart swelling that surprises us."³¹⁶ Eighteen years later he would return to the experience of hearing poetry in his *Varieties* lecture on the topic of mysticism. James outlined four graduated steps in states of consciousness which he felt comprised types of mystical experience. His first level included experiencing a sense of deeper significance and illustrated this by referencing the effects one may feel from hearing poetry. He suggests, "Most of us can remember the strangely moving power of certain passages of poems read when we were young..." which served as, "...irrational doorways...through which...the wildness and the pang of life, stole into our hearts and thrilled them."³¹⁷ James makes two assumptions in his argument about experiential responses to poetry. First, which should be seen in the context of his time period, is that this is a common experience to most people. Second, that "irrational doorways" of mystical participation with poetry open easily to children. James suggests that with age and the subsequent increase of rational thinking these doorways to experience close and the once powerful poems become merely words with "polished surfaces."³¹⁸

James' assumptions about the power of poetry to elicit an experiential response is a helpful starting point for the discussion of how people across time, cultural and religious contexts have responded to and interacted with the poetry of religious experience. As noted earlier Gumbrecht argues that poetry can make things 'present,' and can touch the reader. Rumi's foremost interpreter in American free verse, Coleman Barks, hopes

³¹⁶ James, 'What is an Emotion?'

³¹⁷ James, *VRE*, p. 331.

³¹⁸ James, *VRE*, p. 331.

to accomplish this through translation stating that what he most wants, "...is for Rumi to become vitally present for readers."³¹⁹

The following discussion will treat responses to religious ecstatic poetry in three sections beginning with the "contributory lineage" of Lal Ded, Kabir and Mirabai,³²⁰ followed by a treatment of translation and the varying responses of translator, and finally, a discussion of the overwhelming popular response to English translations of Rumi contemporarily in the U.S. Nancy Martin calls the experiential response to Mirabai's songs in the context of bhakti practice "transformative participation."³²¹ It is this sense of response, participation and transformation which is of interest in the research into the effect of religious poetry on listeners and readers.

The "Contributory Lineage" of Lal Ded, Kabir and Mirabai

Lal Ded, Kabir and Mirabai are arguably the most important, most loved and most recited poet-saints within their traditions.³²² Their expression of love, relation, and union with the divine in poetic form has inspired and instructed individuals for over 500 years. Hoskote writes that Lal Ded embodies not only a Kashmir identity but possibly, "the Kashmiri identity," with her sayings in constant circulation in Kashmiri culture.³²³ Kabir's form of *padas* (Sanskrit poems) continue to be created and added to his "open-ended ...corpus,"³²⁴ and Mirabai's popularity has seemingly increased rather than decreased over the five centuries since her lifetime crossing, "...linguistic, regional and religious boundaries..."³²⁵ Some context on the bhakti tradition will enable better understanding of the influence of these poets and the living aspect of their songs.

³¹⁹ Coleman Barks, *The Soul of Rumi: A new Collection of Ecstatic Poems* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, Inc., 2001), p. 14.

³²⁰ Hoskote, p.xxxiii.

³²¹ Martin, 'Mirabai comes to America'.

³²² Dharwadker, pp. ix, 1.

³²³ Hoskote, p. xiii.

³²⁴ Mehrotra, p. xxxi.

³²⁵ Martin, 'Mirabai Comes to America'.

The Sanskrit term *bhakti*, usually translated as “devotion” or “path of devotion” has been referred to as, “A great and many sided shift ... in Hindu culture and sensibility,” which occurred from the sixth to ninth century.³²⁶ The verbal root of the noun *bhakti* is “*braj*” meaning alternately, “‘to share in’ or ‘to belong to,’ as well as ‘to worship.’”³²⁷ Bhakti includes intense emotional states of love for Visnu and the manifestations of Visnu and is focused on direct communion with the devotee’s chosen manifestation of this deity. Bhakti is theistic, personal, and expresses, “...the divine-human relationship as experienced from the human side.”³²⁸ *Bhakti*, as a movement, is egalitarian and defined within various communities which accommodate dualistic and non-dualistic perspectives as well as monistic and pluralistic frameworks.³²⁹ The poet-saints’ religious experiences are treated as accessible to other devotees and the diction of the poems, being colloquial, makes them accessible to the common person.³³⁰

Lal Ded predates Kabir and Mirabai leading some scholars to treat her as a forerunner of the bhakti movement in northern India to which Kabir and Mirabai belong. However Hoskote argues against this assumption forwarding that although Lal Ded shares some features in common with bhakti spirituality her poetry expresses the transcendent insight of the self united with the divine rather than the devotional self embracing the divine.³³¹ While Lal Ded followed the spiritual disciplines of Kashmiri Saivite mysticism some features she shares with the bhakti popular movement include the use of common everyday language, opposition to religious hierarchy and orthodox practice, and a sense of direct communion with the divine.³³²

Ranjit Hoskote after twenty years of researching and translating Lal Ded’s poetry suggests “a radical break with the established convention of treating Lal Ded as a single

³²⁶ Ramanujan, p. 103.

³²⁷ Carman, John B. ‘Bhakti’, *Encyclopedia of Religion* [2nd ed].

³²⁸ Carman, ‘Bhakti’.

³²⁹ Carman, ‘Bhakti’.

³³⁰ Barks, *Lalla*, p. 4.

³³¹ Hoskote, p. xxvii.

³³² Hoskote, p. xxvii.

personality,” reflecting the experiences of one exceptional individual.³³³ While affirming that the poems are “deeply anchored in personal experience,” Hoskote argues that the poetry attributed to Lal Ded has been produced over multiple centuries through what he calls a “contributory lineage,”³³⁴ operating within various devotional communities in Kashmir and India.³³⁵ He sees this lineage as, “a sequence of assemblies” made up of individuals of varied religious affiliation, representing both genders, from different social and age groups, “including both literate and unlettered.”³³⁶ He writes, “These assemblies functioned as a living archive...re-crafting, amplifying and adding to Lal Ded’s poems.”³³⁷ Hoskote points out that while Kashmiri Pandits and Muslim scholars claim Lal Ded as their own and argue issues of authenticity and style, “...no clear explanation is provided for the enormous variety of registers, tonalities, rhythms and gradations of vocabulary,” evidenced within her poetry.³³⁸ Hoskote further elaborates that Brahmin and Sufi sages began to engage in dialogue in the 14th century, during Lal Ded’s lifetime, contributing to a vibrant confluence of the two traditions. Hoskote’s contention that Sanskrit phraseology and Sufi inflection may have been added centuries after Lal Ded’s death provides further support for the participatory nature of authorship producing the Lal Ded corpus.

The experiential nature and accessibility of Lal Ded’s songs is highlighted by translator Coleman Barks. He writes that what he loves about Lal Ded’s poems is how they feel close to experience.³³⁹ Hoskote elaborates on the theme of experience by affirming that, “Lal Ded’s poetry is deeply anchored in the personal experiences of an individual who actually lived and suffered, gloried in theophany, and crafted a remarkable life in hostile circumstances.”³⁴⁰ Hoskote sees the collective authors as working in consonance with the historical Lal Ded and what he sees as, “...the core truth of her experienced

³³³ Hoskote, p. xxxiii.

³³⁴ Hoskote, p. xxxiii.

³³⁵ Hoskote, p. xxxiii.

³³⁶ Hoskote, p. xxxiii.

³³⁷ Hoskote, p. xxxiv.

³³⁸ Hoskote, p. xxxi.

³³⁹ Barks, *Lalla*, p. 9.

³⁴⁰ Hoskote, p. xxxiii.

revelation.”³⁴¹ This experienced revelation was then expressed through a popular imagination with subsequent generations revising phraseology.³⁴²

Parallel to the collective authorship of Lal Ded’s songs is the multi authored nature of the poetry of Kabir. Dharwadker in his work, *Kabir: The Songs of the Weaver*, writes that Kabir’s body of poetry is, “...one of the most complex to be associated with a single author in world literature,”³⁴³ and that there is no historical individual who can bring a “coherent design” to the whole.³⁴⁴ Dharwadker cites Kabir scholars of the 19th and 20th centuries who are in agreement that the text of Kabir is not, “...the work of a single person in the 15th century, and that its size and internal variation make it impossible to interpret cohesively.”³⁴⁵ Dharwadker introduces the term “community of authors” to account for the, “disjointed, multimodal, multilingual and functionally open” characteristics of the Kabir text.³⁴⁶ He notes the regionalized character of Kabir’s poetry which covers an expansive and culturally diverse area. The collective authorship and open nature of the Kabir corpus over a 500 year period suggests that a vast number of individuals had the potential opportunity to compose poems in his name. Dharwadker refers to Kabir as, “...a community of poets and a bundle of poetic effects”³⁴⁷ which contrasts with the notion of an individual poet-saint who expresses the experiences of one religious genius.

In Arvind Krishna Mehrotra’s 2011 translation of Kabir poems he uses the term “collective creation” to describe the authoring of poetry attributed to Kabir, writing that in certain areas the tradition is still very much alive.³⁴⁸ Mehrotra forwards that of the thousands of poems attributed to Kabir, not even one can be attributed to him with certainty; that Kabir “is a collective voice” paradoxically too individual to be mistaken for

³⁴¹ Hoskote, p. xxxiv.

³⁴² Hoskote, p. xxxi.

³⁴³ Dharwadker, p. 32.

³⁴⁴ Dharwadker, p. 59.

³⁴⁵ Dharwadker, p. 59.

³⁴⁶ Dharwadker, p. 60.

³⁴⁷ Dharwadker, p. 60.

³⁴⁸ Mehrotra, p. xxxi.

anyone else.³⁴⁹ Kabir's poetry is, according to Mehrotra, "...provisional and fluid, a working draft, whose lines and images could be shifted around, or substituted by others, or deleted entirely," by the singer.³⁵⁰ The fluid and provisional nature of Kabir's poetry leaves an opening for the expression of many other individuals whose contributions would have been derived from their own experiences in consonance with Kabir.

Similar to the open and collective structure of Kabir's poetry are the songs of Mirabai who lived roughly 50 years after Kabir. Martin writes that of the songs attributed to Mirabai there is no way to distinguish the works of the sixteenth century saint, "from those composed by others in her name and style."³⁵¹ Translator Daniel Ladinsky who has reworked several of Mirabai's poems writes that of the several thousand songs attributed to her possibly only a few hundred are her own.³⁵² Martin maintains that in Indian contexts the traditions surrounding Mirabai are creative and participatory, "...continuing to generate new poems and songs composed in her name."³⁵³ Martin refers to these contributed works by others as participation in the, "lila" or divine play of the poet's life.³⁵⁴ She refers to the "generative" and creative processes which surround the Hindu saint leading to, "...the creation of hundreds, even thousands, of songs attributed to her..."³⁵⁵ This individual response has been possible historically through the collective, participatory and embodied nature of poetry in performance. The response to Mirabai's songs has been, "...the embrace by subsequent generations of devotees who have recorded, performed and expanded the tradition."³⁵⁶ Beyond simply being embraced by following generations of individuals and collectives, these contributors perform, sing and compose with, "...overwhelming abundance and ongoing creative participation."³⁵⁷

³⁴⁹ Mehrotra, p. xxiii.

³⁵⁰ Mehrotra, p. xxxi.

³⁵¹ Martin, 'Mirabai', *Encyclopedia of Religion* [2nd ed].

³⁵² Ladinsky, p. 241.

³⁵³ Martin, 'Mirabai Comes to America'.

³⁵⁴ Martin, 'Mirabai Comes to America'.

³⁵⁵ Martin, 'Mirabai Comes to America'.

³⁵⁶ Nancy M. Martin, 'North Indian Hindi Devotional Literature', in *The Blackwell Companion to Hinduism*, ed. by Gavin Flood (Malden: Blackwell Publishing, Ltd., 2003), pp. 182-198 (p. 183).

³⁵⁷ Martin in Flood, p. 195.

Mira's songs have survived, as translator A.J. Alston writes, "...in the mouths of itinerant singers who learned them, sang them, sometimes altered them and added to them, and passed them on,"³⁵⁸ in much the same way that Kabir's body of work developed. There emerges then a chain of ongoing response among bhakti devotees who nurture a contributory and participatory lineage of authorship. Martin elaborates on the intended goal of the performative nature of bhakti saying that the lives and songs of the saints, "...guide others on the bhakti path and ideally cultivate and elicit the expressed and all-encompassing love for God in those who hear and perform them."³⁵⁹

The participatory and contributory nature of the songs, poems and stories of bhakti saints provides a lens for the study of how religious experiences may be nurtured in others who respond to the saints' experience and language. Martin highlights the necessity of imagination in those who join in the performance aspects of the tradition. Possibly it is through imagination and participation that a devotee steps into an experience of love and relation with the divine expressed by the poet. While imagination may serve as the doorway the intention of the performance is to elicit a response in the listener, to experience what Alston identifies as Mira's, "...deep and *personally felt* emotion," which resulted from her devotion to God.³⁶⁰

In contexts outside of bhakti it is widely understood that the mark of a good poem is its ability to elicit a response from the listener. James framed this response as a poem's ability to elicit a sense of continuity between our own lives and wild grandeur in the poem. Yet the uniqueness of bhakti poetry is in its intent specifically to evoke a response of deeper devotion to and passionate love for the divine. James' idea of poetry eliciting a sense of a life "continuous with our own" is illustrative for understanding the participatory response and multi authored nature of religious devotional poetry where individual yet distinct lives form a continuous connection. James would name these poets as "pattern setters" or "'geniuses' in the religious line,"

³⁵⁸ Alston, p.27.

³⁵⁹ Martin in Flood, p. 183.

³⁶⁰ Alston, p. 19.

for whom, "...religion exists not as a dull habit but as an acute fever..." and possessing unusual abilities for "exalted emotional sensibility."³⁶¹ Lal Ded, Kabir and Mirabai easily fit the description of pattern-setters and religious geniuses, however the contributory lineage uncovered by scholarship sheds an interesting light on James' assumptions.

The nature of multiple authorship in the poems causes us to question James' singling out of individual's possessing "exalted emotional sensibility" unknown to the average person. The contributory lineage highlights the way in which responses to the poetry of religious experience may result in the composition of one's own prayer of longing. In the context of ongoing participation in the authorship of devotional poetry the response appears to be the recognition of feeling and experience resulting in further poems being written. Investigating the contributory lineage as a response of many individuals over centuries provides evidence that these poems touch on the feelings, inclinations and experiences of many people rather than the experiences of a few. The contributory element of authorship enriches rather than diminishes the poet's body of work and provides evidence for the more common occurrence of religious experience expressed in song and verse. Within the mystery of authorship exists the many anonymous voices telling the story of human longing for nearness to and relation with the divine.

The reception of these religious ecstatic poems across barriers of culture, religion, language, and time may indicate a response of recognition which is shared by a variety of listeners and readers beyond original contexts. Building on the idea of poets inviting transformative participation we now turn to the subject of translation as a second type of response to the poets. The translation of poems and songs attributed to Lal Ded, Kabir and Mirabai, and the poems of Rumi demonstrate a kind of cross cultural, cross historic and cross linguistic contributory lineage. Poets and specialists who translate these poems then participate in a centuries old tradition, expanding and breathing new life into the poetry. The response to new translations of these poet-saints into English has been highly positive as demonstrated in the widespread popularity of the poets with new

³⁶¹ James, *VRE*, p. 19.

readers. This contemporary reception is not unlike the historic reception of widespread popularity over hundreds of years in their original contexts.

Translation and the Response of the Translator

This section will address the translation of the poets expressing relation to and realization of the divine. Translation will be viewed primarily through the lens of differing values and motivations between language specialists and poets. The tone of translated poems varies widely by the translator, the culture and country of the translator and the time period of the translations. Songs and poems are noticeably influenced by the translator's purposes and values in attempting translation at all. Language specialists tend to focus on accuracy, meaning and context while poets strive for musicality, imagery and the experiential feeling of a poem. The translation of poetry can be understood as having two levels of interpretation; the first is translation from one language into another, the second is translation from ordinary language into the specialized language of poetry. The rendering of a poem from one language into what is poetic in another language, including different contexts of culture, religion, and history requires a creative skill which may concern a language specialist focused on accuracy. Complicating the translation of religious poetry is the aspect of the personal and how to accurately translate another's spiritual experience.

As will be manifest in the following discussion there is little agreement surrounding the creative necessity when translating poetry. There is even less consideration given to the translator's own religious or spiritual proclivities and how the translators experience influences not only the feel of the poem but an interpretation of a poem's potential message. From the previous section on the contributory lineage we see that the dynamic surrounding the devotional poets was creative and participatory among individuals with similar spiritual commitments. Elements of creation, participation and personal spiritual orientation will be noted in this discussion specifically in the American poets and translators Robert Bly and Coleman Barks. Barks and Bly are the primary

poet translators responsible for the contemporary popular appeal of the four poets with U.S. audiences through Barks' versions of Rumi and Lal Ded and Bly's versions of Kabir and Mirabai. The response of Barks and Bly to these four poets along with the many other translators and poets who have produced translations can be understood as participating in an ongoing cross cultural, cross historic and cross linguistic contributory lineage.

The difficulty inherent in translating poems was summed up by American Poet Laureate and Pulitzer Prize winner, Robert Frost, who famously quipped, "Poetry is what is lost in translation."³⁶² Frost is not the only poet to weigh in on the "impossible" task of translating poems.³⁶³ Poets and linguistic specialists diverge on the importance of accuracy to original text and the creative pursuit to recreate the essence and moving qualities of a poem for readers in other languages. Eighteenth century English poet and translator of Homer, Alexander Pope, said "Where poetry is concerned, fidelity to meaning alone is a kind of betrayal."³⁶⁴ Novelist and critic Vladimir Nabokov, disagrees however forwarding that, "The clumsiest literal translation is a thousand times more useful than the prettiest paraphrase."³⁶⁵ Translators usually aspire to one of three guiding principles including accuracy of meaning, prosodic accuracy, or a creative rendering. Of these approaches there is no correct or "pure" method, only the choices individuals make.³⁶⁶ The various pursuits of these contrasting principles lead not only to differently structured poems in English but to a divergence of values driving the translations. The experiential effects of a poem may not be of importance when focus is placed on accuracy and meaning. However, for poets the experiential quality of a poem is essential. Accurate translation by language specialists is always necessary. Also necessary is the poetic language which James called a "strangely moving power," which is capable of eliciting an emotional response. How these two necessities are

³⁶² Cavanagh, C. and Lorman, Y. 'Translation', *Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics* [4th ed].

³⁶³ Cavanagh and Lorman.

³⁶⁴ Cavanagh and Lorman.

³⁶⁵ Cavanagh and Lorman.

³⁶⁶ Cavanagh and Lorman.

accomplished in translation and the relative importance of each is the subject of ongoing debate.

In the case of religious poetry which often expresses the unusual and the illogical, strict adherence to meaning may diminish the startling and immediately felt impact of the poem. Cavanagh and Lorman explain, "Poetic language transforms the very notion of literal meaning by activating semantic possibilities in places we do not ordinarily think to look for them. If one goal of poetic language is to shake the reader loose from the fetters of literal mindedness, then a literal rendering of a poetic text...runs the risk of violating more than just the spirit in its fidelity to the letter."³⁶⁷ Ramanujan in his masterful translation of the Tamil poems of Nammalvar, *Hymns for the Drowning*, writes, "To translate is to 'carry across'; 'metaphor' has the same root-meaning. Translations are transpositions," and some aspects of the original, "...cannot be transposed at all."³⁶⁸ Hawley in his 2005 study *Three Bhakti Voices* metaphorically argues, "Translations are rivers - their sources often hidden, their destinations potentially oceanic," and as such translations have, "...a true claim to history."³⁶⁹ This true claim to history applies also to the contributory lineage in Lal Ded, Kabir, and Mirabai whose sources are hidden and whose destinations have arguably been oceanic.

Historically, Kabir was the first of these poets to be introduced to popular audiences in English translation through Rabindranath Tagore's 1914 publication *One Hundred Poems of Kabir* with an introduction by Evelyn Underhill. Tagore's Kabir has been widely read and continuously in print since its first publication. Tagore drew from the 1910-1911 Kshitimohan Sen Bengali-script version of Kabir which emphasized aspects of love. The Sen edition then became the source for several European and Asian Kabir translations.³⁷⁰ Tagore's Kabir also served as the basis for later renditions, most notably Robert Bly's hugely popular *The Kabir Book: Forty-Four of the Ecstatic Poems of Kabir*

³⁶⁷ Cavanagh and Lorman.

³⁶⁸ Ramanujan, p. xvi.

³⁶⁹ Hawley, p. 267.

³⁷⁰ Mehrotra, pp. xxvi-xxviii.

published in 1971.³⁷¹ While Hawley credits Bly's renditions with making Kabir a household name he notes that only one of Bly's forty-four poems can be traced to the early Kabir manuscripts. Interestingly, this singular Bly version of the early manuscript poem tells of human-divine relation.

“Why should we two ever want to part?
Just as the leaf of the water rhubarb lives floating on the water,
We live as the great one and the little one.

As the owl opens his eyes all night to the moon,
We live as the great one and the little one.

This love between us goes back to the first humans;
It cannot be annihilated.

Here is Kabir's idea: as the river gives itself into the ocean
What is inside me moves inside you.”³⁷²

Hawley notes that this one original poem of Kabir amidst forty-four is not the fault of Bly nor even of the Sen>Tagore>Bly lineage but demonstrates that assumptions of authenticity may be in error. Hawley goes on to ask what is meant by “authentic” and questions how much this designation matters.³⁷³ In the context of the contributory lineage, questions of authenticity prove impossible to answer and Bly becomes one more singer-performer who adds his Kabir to “the common store.”³⁷⁴

Kabir's poetry in the original language is made up of three texts which are distinctly recognizable. The manuscript Tagore worked from and considered the oldest is the “Western” manuscript, originating in 1582 in west-central India with a marked devotional and theistic tone. Kabir's Banarsi or “Eastern” manuscript originated near his home in Benares containing language which is rough, confrontational and irreligious. The youngest collection, the Kabir Panth or Bijak, is dated from around 1805 and believed to

³⁷¹ Mehrotra, p. xxv.

³⁷² Bly, *Kabir Book*, p. 7.

³⁷³ Hawley, p. 271.

³⁷⁴ Hawley, p. 278.

have been collected by a less literate population of ascetics and householders.³⁷⁵ A fourth collection, the Sikh manuscript *Goindval Pothis*, from the early 1570's preserved Kabir's poems alongside the poems of the Sikh guru's.³⁷⁶ Hawley writes that Kabir's "complex history of written and oral transmission" spans nearly four centuries from his death in 1518 to Tagore's English edition in 1914.³⁷⁷

The songs of Lal Ded present another complex history of oral and written transmission. The 258 songs, poems and prayers attributed to her, "...bear the imprint of ongoing linguistic and cultural change ... with hints of Sufi and Sikh usage."³⁷⁸ Lal Ded was constructed differently by the Hindu and Muslim communities of Kashmir and like Kabir is claimed by both traditions. The first English translation of Lal Ded was published as *The Wise Sayings of Lal Ded* in 1920 by Grierson and Barnett.³⁷⁹ Grierson worked from a manuscript created by a colleague who recorded the words of an aging Kashmiri storyteller reciting from memory. These orally transmitted poems from about 1914 were compared by Grierson with two Kashmiri manuscripts referred to as Stein A and Stein B belonging to the Oxford India Institute. Further reference material was provided by the 1885 *Dictionary of Kashmiri Proverbs and Sayings*.³⁸⁰ Lal Ded's songs were translated again between 1921-1933 by Pandit Ananda Koul, in 1924 by Sir Richard Carnac Temple, and in 1973 by Professor Jayalal Kaul. American poet Coleman Barks published a free verse reworking in 1992 and Jaishree Kak produced in 1999 and 2007 a translation with scholarly exegesis.³⁸¹ The most recent publication in 2011 is Ranjit Hoskote's *I, Lalla*, a collection of 146 verses translated directly from the Kashmiri and rendered as he says, "...freshly into English."³⁸²

³⁷⁵ Dharwadker, pp.33-41.

³⁷⁶ Hawley, pp. 269-270.

³⁷⁷ Hawley, p. 268.

³⁷⁸ Ranjit Hoskote, 'The Poems of Lal Ded', Jun 11, 2001. SPEAKINGTREE.IN <https://www.speakingtree.in/article/The-Poems-Of-Lal-Ded> [Accessed: 2 February 2017].

³⁷⁹ Hoskote, p. xiv.

³⁸⁰ Hoskote, p. xiv.

³⁸¹ Hoskote, pp. xiv-xv.

³⁸² Hoskote, p. xv.

During the 20th century the poems of Mirabai were translated into English by Indian authors in India in the years 1934, 1964, 1969 and 1975 yet Mira remained mostly unknown to American readers.³⁸³ In 1980 Oxford Indologist A. J. Alston published the first extensive academic translation of Mira's poems into English. In Alston's over 200 poems he tried to follow the original text as closely as possible. Unique to his translation are the many poems which use the approaching rainy season as a metaphor for the arrival of beloved. The first Mirabai poems to be, "...truly translated into American English and cultural idioms..." was through American poet Robert Bly in 1980. In her article *Mirabai Comes to America*, Martin highlights her concern with the "...cultural transformation and appropriation" of Mirabai by translators seeking to appeal to a certain audience particularly a contemporary American audience.³⁸⁴ Martin argues that anthologers and translators make specific choices from the large number of translated Mirabai poems to craft Mirabai into a particular sort of saint with a particular message. The rebellious, self-determined and passionate Mirabai of Bly is thought by Martin to resonate with, "...American audiences of a certain ilk," and it is Bly's translations which continue to be the reference point for other American anthologers and writers. Martin argues that the poems are, "...as much Bly as they are Mirabai..."³⁸⁵ In comparing Alston's careful adherence to original text and Bly's free verse renderings, Martin finds that while Alston's poem is dramatic, the same poem by Bly seems to, "...jump off the page."³⁸⁶

Concerns about cultural transformation and appropriation through translation are nowhere more illustrated than in the English translations of Rumi by American poet Coleman Barks. Rumi in English versions may best demonstrate the wide differences and argument between language scholars and poets likely due to Rumi's huge popular following in the U.S. In Franklin D. Lewis' definitive scholarly biography of Rumi in 2000, *Rumi Past and Present, East and West: The Life, Teachings, and Poetry of Jalal al-Din Rumi*, he comprehensively outlines the history of Rumi translations. Although this

³⁸³ Martin, 'Mirabai Comes to America'.

³⁸⁴ Martin, 'Mirabai Comes to America'.

³⁸⁵ Martin, 'Mirabai Comes to America'.

³⁸⁶ Martin, 'Mirabai Comes to America'.

history takes up 51 pages of dense detail Lewis concludes that it is not exhaustive.³⁸⁷ He outlines the first translations beginning with British Philologist Sir William Jones's English version in 1791 followed by Hammer-Purgstall's German translation in 1818 and Assaf Halet Tchelebi's French edition in 1894.³⁸⁸ Lewis then delves into greater detail on the English translations from the 19th century to the present. Interestingly, Lewis begins the history of Rumi translations in English in the 19th century with Ralph Waldo Emerson, William James' godfather. Emerson had translated a number of other Persian poets from German into English, including some lines of Rumi which were published in 1882 after Emerson's death.³⁸⁹ Emerson is credited with shaping, "...an American interest in non-European thought and poetry" as well as, preparing the way for the poetic innovations of visionary poets Walt Whitman and Emily Dickinson.³⁹⁰ While space does not permit a fuller investigation of this influence on James it hints at the kind of personal experiences which may have influenced his ideas about poetry, mysticism and religious experience. As noted earlier James was drawn to and moved by the quatrains in *The Rubaiyat of Omar Khayyam* and due to his love of poetry it is likely that he read Emerson's Hafiz. James was living in the midst of this poetic reshaping in America and was positively affected by reading Whitman's free verse which he referred to throughout the *Varieties*.³⁹¹

Of lasting importance are the early twentieth century translations of Rumi by British Orientalists and Cambridge scholars Reynold A. Nicholson and his student and successor, A. J. Arberry. As Lewis notes, most modern translators of Rumi's poetry are indebted to Arberry and Nicholson for the accuracy of their translations. Lewis then proceeds to translations of Rumi in modern times and recounts the story of Robert Bly introducing Coleman Barks to Arberry and Nicholson's scholarly translations in 1976. Bly reportedly said to Barks, "These poems need to be released from their cages."³⁹² In the context of the bhakti tradition of participation and transformation it is interesting to

³⁸⁷ Lewis, p. 615.

³⁸⁸ Lewis, pp. 565, 566.

³⁸⁹ Lewis, p. 594.

³⁹⁰ Lewis, p. 570.

³⁹¹ Richardson, *James* p. 166.

³⁹² Lewis, p. 589.

note Coleman Barks' comment that Rumi's poems "transformed his life."³⁹³ Barks has been credited by Lewis and others as what D.J. Moores identifies as the, "...immediate catalyst of Rumi's success..." in contemporary times³⁹⁴ and is, not surprisingly, the poet translator most thoroughly critiqued by Lewis.

As a Persian language scholar, Rumi historian, and expert on Persian literature, Lewis expresses concern with Barks' poetic renderings of Rumi derived from translations by Nicholson and Arberry and contemporary linguist John Moyne. Lewis cites Barks' "terminological misconceptions," and distortions created by Barks and Moyne which a comparison "with more faithful translations will show."³⁹⁵ Lewis notes that Barks approaches Rumi with a, "...disciples' devotional attitude..." and along with Bly present Rumi as a kind of guru, "...calmly dispensing words of wisdom capable of resolving, panacea like, all our ontological ailments."³⁹⁶ Here it should be noted that the highly influential German Orientalist and scholar of Sufism, and Rumi in particular, Annemarie Schimmel was also deeply influenced by Rumi and approached Sufi texts "from the perspective of a believer and an academic."³⁹⁷ However Schimmel, as an expert in Persian, and in the history and traditions of Islam and Sufism, did not remove Rumi from his contextual setting. This is precisely Lewis' concern with a particular presentation of Rumi as sage and the removal of his poems, "...out of their cultural and Islamic context into the inspirational discourse of non-parochial spirituality, all of which makes for a Rumi who shares the social assumptions of a modern American audience."³⁹⁸ Charges of "universalizing" Rumi have been leveled at Coleman Barks by other critics as well, yet D.J. Moores writes, "...the 'fault' lies with the poet himself, for Rumi's spirituality contains ideas that transcend the doctrines of Islam even loosely defined."³⁹⁹ Barks admits to emphasizing the universal aspect in Rumi and readily acknowledges that his,

³⁹³ Lewis, p. 589.

³⁹⁴ Moores, p. 70.

³⁹⁵ Lewis, pp. 590-591.

³⁹⁶ Lewis, pp. 591-592.

³⁹⁷ Lewis, p. 539.

³⁹⁸ Lewis, p. 592.

³⁹⁹ Moores, p. 70.

“...collaborative versions of Rumi have no status in the scholarly world.”⁴⁰⁰ While Lewis does concede that the sales figures of Barks’ Rumi provide, “...incontrovertible proof...” of Barks’ poetic accomplishment, “...at making poems in a modern American idiom that appeals to a wide audience,” he nevertheless discounts Barks’ renditions based on issues of accuracy.⁴⁰¹ Barks notes that Rumi’s dense internal rhyming structure in the original Farsi is impossible to replicate in English and calls what he does, “collaborative translation, interpretation, the making of versions or imitations.”⁴⁰²

In Arvind Krishna Mehrotra’s work on Kabir he notes that there are two distinct translation practices, those of scholars and those of improvisers. Citing Dharwadker, scholars closely follow printed text with roughly one verse in English equaling one verse in the original. However, Mehrotra forwards that the translations of Kabir best known by the reading public are those of an older translation practice which, “...responds to and illuminates the performative improvisatory tradition out of which the songs arose and by which they have been transmitted.”⁴⁰³ Carl Ernst forwards that the act of translation is a kind of interpretation that can redefine texts in new and unexpected ways. He contends that Sufi poetry is, “...a highly complex and deliberately composed” form of literature with, “...elaborate rules of rhyme and meter, and complicated codes of symbolic interpretation that presuppose an intimate acquaintance with the subject.”⁴⁰⁴ The goal of accuracy pursued by linguists often produces a poem which may be more reserved in tone than those rendered by a poet attempting to express the inner feeling of the poem. One of the primary goals of poetry is that the poem opens in some way, often viscerally, from the first line to the all-important last line. This goal may not be facilitated in a verse by verse literal translation. In Franklin Lewis’ treatment of Bly and Barks’ versions of Rumi he commends their ability to present Rumi poems as “structural wholes” rather than as discrete lines which has been the usual translation practice in the Persian

⁴⁰⁰ Coleman Barks, *Rumi: Bridge to the Soul: Journeys into the Music and Silence of the Heart* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 2007), p. 13.

⁴⁰¹ Lewis, p. 590.

⁴⁰² Barks, *Soul of Rumi*, pp. 13,14.

⁴⁰³ Mehrotra, p. xxv.

⁴⁰⁴ Ernst, p. 149.

critical tradition.⁴⁰⁵ Further, Ernst lauds Barks' "literary effort" as a "welcome change of pace" in light of the "dry and pedantic style of early scholarly translations of Persian Sufi poetry..."⁴⁰⁶

In the translation of Lal Ded, Ranjit Hoskote worked directly from the original Kashmiri as well as using the works of previous translators. Coleman Barks however, in his translations of Lal Ded identifies himself as a second translator working from the 1920's English of Grierson and Barnett and the 1924 work of Sir Richard Carnac Temple.⁴⁰⁷ Barks' intent is the reworking of a previous era of English poetic language into poetic renderings in a free verse style for a contemporary American audience. Hoskote writes that his intent also is to "...strip away a century of ornate Victorian-inflected renderings," and further to move past translations which focus on the "spirit of Lalla" rather than her words.⁴⁰⁸ Barks on the other hand emphasizes the spirit of Lal Ded who he says is, "...beyond religious categories, a living combination who cannot be described in those terms."⁴⁰⁹ Here as with Rumi, Barks emphasizes a universal element in Lal Ded's songs.

A.J. Alston in his translation of Mirabai's poems forwards that any contemporary collection will be the result of an editor pruning, "...extraneous material..." and arranging the poems in whatever order seems fitting to that individual.⁴¹⁰ A favorable review by L. M. Joshi commends Alston as, "...the first Western Indologist to offer a faithful but readable English translation..." describing the poems as, "...sober and entirely gratifying."⁴¹¹ Robert Bly in his collaborative collection with American poet Jane Hirshfield introduces Mirabai as "...outrageous in ten or fifteen ways," abandoning her family, her social role as a married woman and the Hindu religious establishment.⁴¹² Bly praises Mira's genius, her intensity and how she takes Krishna for her own, "Without

⁴⁰⁵ Lewis, p. 592.

⁴⁰⁶ Ernst, p. 171.

⁴⁰⁷ Barks, *Lalla*, p. 11.

⁴⁰⁸ Hoskote, pp. lxviii, lxix.

⁴⁰⁹ Barks, *Lalla*, p. 1.

⁴¹⁰ Alston, p. 27.

⁴¹¹ Alston, *Excerpts from Reviews*, back cover.

⁴¹² Bly and Hirshfield, p.ix.

permission from anyone...”⁴¹³ It would be difficult to describe a Bly translation of Mirabai as “sober.” As Hawley notes, Bly “honors the meeting of mind and body and celebrates the intense emotions that connect them.”⁴¹⁴ While Alston’s Mirabai may be sober, Bly’s Mirabai is inebriated with love.

In the differences which exist between linguistically oriented translations and poetic renderings one can see the element of creative practice used by poets translating a poem into a poem. Inherent in translation is the need for a poem to speak to an audience with a different cultural, historic, linguistic and religious frame of reference. There is a need to express the feeling in the poem and the depth of the poets’ experience in a rhythmic cadence of musicality however subtle. There may be an expectation that the poem will build to the last line and provide an unexpected opening or illumination. Frequently, mystic poets express being near some edge of consciousness which the average individual may not have experienced and the translators own access to such experiences will impact the interpretation.

An area of difference less obvious between literary and poetic interpretation involves the assumption of experience as a motivation behind the original poetic expression. Carl Ernst writes that Sufi poetry may be read contemporarily as personal mystical experiences yet he notes that literary critics warn their students against this “biographical fallacy, ” rather to focus on the “real subject of the poetry” which is, “...the experience the poem creates in the reader.”⁴¹⁵ Ernst rightly highlights the experiential necessity of a poem and the response it evokes, however it might be difficult for literary critics to prove that poems expressing deep emotion and transcendent states are not drawn from the poet’s experience. While caution with assigning experience is necessary the blanket application of biographical fallacy closes down important avenues of study. Specifically, the study of how one person’s experience affects another or many others across boundaries which would normally prevent transmission and perception. Forwarding that poems which appear experiential are actually not, works to distance

⁴¹³ Bly and Hirshfield, pp. ix, xi.

⁴¹⁴ Hawley, p. 276.

⁴¹⁵ Ernst, p. 161.

and isolate us from the poet, the person we can relate to behind the poem. This may reduce the poem's potential to illicit a sense of a life continuous with our own which James knew was a powerfully experienced element in hearing poetry. Adherence to biographical fallacy is further problematic as it spans, in the case of Rumi, a 700 year historic contextual difference which should act as a brake on what we can assume about art and experience from our post enlightenment perspective. Of additional importance in the consideration of experience infusing a poem would be to consider the translator's own experience as also enriching the feeling tones and aliveness in the poem. Because creative work often has transcendent moments of experience it would be important to recognize that translated poems potentially have layers of human experience impacting the reader. Coleman Barks as a poet assumes that Rumi is writing from experience. Sounding very like William James, he states, "Rumi's impulse was toward experience rather than any language or doctrine about it," our lives are the text, "...rather than any book."⁴¹⁶

Mehrotra in translating Kabir, and Barks in translating Rumi both speak of the provisional and fluid in these two poets. Mehrotra writes that an anonymous medieval singer would not approach a lyrical poem or *pada* as something unalterably fixed to be, "...slavishly followed while singing, but something that was provisional and fluid, a working draft, whose lines and images could be shifted around, or substituted by others, or deleted entirely."⁴¹⁷ Interestingly, Bly and Barks have been referred to as medieval singers in contemporary times who have found an audience that responds to their songs. Hawley refers to *The Transcendental Bly* who resonates with the devotional and intimate "Western" Kabir who is swayed by love's intensity.⁴¹⁸ Regarding the provisional and fluid Barks contends that Rumi's poems are not, "...discrete entities but a fluid, continuously self-revising, self-interrupting *medium*. They are not so much *about* anything as spoken from *within* something."⁴¹⁹ Barks's "within" can be understood as an experienced state. Ernst likewise draws attention to the fluid nature of Rumi's language

⁴¹⁶ Barks, *Soul of Rumi*, p. 9.

⁴¹⁷ Mehrotra, p. xxxi.

⁴¹⁸ Hawley, p. 269.

⁴¹⁹ Barks, *Essential Rumi*, p. v.

writing, "...he freely played with Persian poetry as no one else has done," and calls this "...poetry in process..." in contrast to poetry which carries a sense of fixed finality similar to scripture.⁴²⁰

The free verse translations of Rumi, Lal Ded, Kabir and Mirabai by Bly and Barks have made the poets accessible to a contemporary audience of common people. The response of this audience in the U.S. has been overwhelming popular appeal. Barks writes, "Rumi's poetry belongs to everyone,"⁴²¹ and dedicated his 2010 volume *Rumi: The Big Red Book* to "...all those who love what Rumi and Shams love."⁴²² This democratization of access regardless of barriers such as education, religious affiliation, nationality or socio-economic status is evidenced as well in the egalitarian ethic of bhakti where participation is open to all. Barks' claim of Rumi's impulse toward experience, specifically the experience of love, rather than doctrine is likewise demonstrated in bhakti which favors religious experiences of "personal relationships between individuals and God," rather than ritual action by priests.⁴²³ Sounding again like James, Barks writes, "I avoid God-words, not altogether, but wherever I can, because they seem to take away the freshness of experience and put it inside a specific system."⁴²⁴

The approach of Barks may be best evidenced in his quote, "Translation, when and if it ever happens, tries to get out of the way and let the taste of these great presences through. They're called True Human Beings in the Sufi tradition. They have been, and are, here with us."⁴²⁵ While it is a point of dispute if Barks is actually getting out of the way, he suggests in the following lines of Rumi that he has had his own experience of these presences in the process of translation.

⁴²⁰ Ernst, p. 170.

⁴²¹ Barks, *Soul of Rumi*, p. 9.

⁴²² Barks, *Big Red Book*, dedication page.

⁴²³ Martin in Flood, p.184.

⁴²⁴ Barks, *Soul of Rumi*, p. 9.

⁴²⁵ Khan and Barks, *Hand of Poetry*, pp. xii-xiii.

“Listen to the presences inside poems.
Let them take you where they will.”

Rumi – Translator Experience and Popular Response

Rumi's popularity in the west is recognized as a phenomenon with sales of English translations reaching 250,000 volumes in 1994 alone. This is in comparison with Pulitzer Prize winning poets whose success is marked by the sale of 10,000 volumes.⁴²⁶ In 1997 the *Christian Science Monitor* named Rumi as the best-selling poet in America.⁴²⁷ Ten years later on the 800th anniversary of the poet's birth, UNESCO designated 2007 as the year of Rumi.⁴²⁸ Barks has produced 22 volumes of Rumi in English over a 33 year period and has sold “more than 2 million copies worldwide.”⁴²⁹ Interestingly, his versions of Rumi “have been translated into 23 languages.”⁴³⁰

Coleman Barks as the primary popularizer of Rumi's poetry with western audiences writes that “Rumi translations have no business cresting in a wave of over half a million,” that the sales of Rumi translations are like, “selling picnic tickets to an unmarked minefield.”⁴³¹ Barks writes of being mystified by Rumi's popularity, saying that these are neither “feel-good” poems nor about “New Age tantric energy exchange.”⁴³² He furthers, “This is giving your life to the one within that you know as *Lord*, which is a totally private matter. No one except you can judge how that is going. But if you're not doing it, Rumi says, you are wasting your time here.”⁴³³ Barks informs us of his own spiritual and religious proclivity by crediting his study and discipleship with Sri Lankan Sufi master Bawa Muhaiyaddeen as enabling him to understand what Rumi's poems

⁴²⁶ Moores, p. 69.

⁴²⁷ Lewis, p.1.

⁴²⁸ Moores, p. 85.

⁴²⁹ Jane Ciabattari, ‘Why is Rumi the bestselling poet in the US?’ 2014.

<http://www.bbc.com/culture/story/20140414-americas-best-selling-poet> [Accessed 10 October 2016].

⁴³⁰ Ciabattari

⁴³¹ Coleman Barks, *Rumi: The Book of Love: Poems of Ecstasy and Longing* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 2003), p. xv.

⁴³² Barks, *Book of Love*, p. xv.

⁴³³ Barks, *Book of Love*, p. xv.

were talking about. Without this spiritual and religious guidance he would not have had what he calls an "...understanding of, or feeling for, Rumi's poetry..."⁴³⁴ Of importance in the case of Coleman Barks as interpreter of Rumi is his own specifically emotional and spiritual response which may contribute to the experiential and powerfully felt qualities in his translations. Barks demonstrates a proclivity toward emotional forms of spirituality both in his work as a translator and from his own personal experience. He shares responding to a conversion altar call in his teens at a Billy Graham crusade where he "...gave his heart to Jesus."⁴³⁵ While Barks now imagines an, "...open air sanctuary without buildings, doctrines, or clergy,"⁴³⁶ he can be seen as an expression of America's earlier revival history where pleas for an emotional response and coming into a personal commitment to and relation with God appealed to a wide segment of the population. Revivals in 19th century America and Billy Graham crusades in the 20th, although different in structure from Sufi circles and bhakti gatherings nevertheless share some similar values of an emotional response to and sense of relation with the divine in communal settings. Here the protestant idea of personal commitment to God reveals a similarity with bhakti personal devotion although these two are culturally specific. Of note in these examples is the interplay between the personal and the communal aspect of religious life, each supporting and enriching the other which James did not address.

Although the Rumi phenomenon has been criticized by language specialists and those concerned with Rumi's Islamic context, something of importance may be revealed by the great number of books sold which tell in poem after poem how one stands in personal relation to the divine and is transformed. As Ernst noted, the subject of poetry may be the experience it engenders in the reader and for Coleman Barks the experience of a Rumi poem engenders the religious impulse to give your life to one you understand as being *Lord*. In this sense Barks demonstrates an understanding of the power of poetry to function along religious lines. The experience of a Rumi poem for

⁴³⁴ Barks, *Illuminated Rumi*, p. 82.

⁴³⁵ Barks, *Soul of Rumi*, p. 164.

⁴³⁶ Barks, *Soul of Rumi*, p. 164.

Barks is an entrance into relation as he writes, “When we enter these poems, we enter a conversation in progress on the deepest human level.”⁴³⁷

The contrasting definition of what religion is, which James initiated in 1901, is evident in a recent article on the erasure of Islam from contemporary translations of Rumi. Rozina Ali writes “Barks sees religion as secondary to the essence of Rumi,” then quotes Barks, “We’re all in this together and I’m trying to open my heart, and Rumi’s poetry helps with that.”⁴³⁸ We notice that for Barks as for James, religion is a personal matter of the heart and in a Jamesian world religion is actually primary for Barks. Religiousness as heart based and relational infuses Rumi’s poetry in English springing both from Rumi and from Barks. The phenomenal popularity of such intensified religious emotion and relation to “the one within that you know as *Lord*, which is a totally private matter,”⁴³⁹ is what this research seeks to understand.

⁴³⁷ Barks, *Big Red Book*, pp. 9,10.

⁴³⁸ The New Yorker, *The Erasure of Islam from the Poetry of Rumi*, Rozina Ali, January 5, 2017, p. 5. <https://www.newyorker.com/books/page-turner/the-erasure-of-islam-from-the-poetry-of-rumi> Retrieved [22nd January 2018].

⁴³⁹ Barks, *Book of Love*, p. xv.

Concluding Thoughts

This research has been an attempt to look more closely at the intersection of the divine and the human in ecstatic poetry and what can be learned by investigating the contemporary popularity of such relational-transcendent poets. The ideas of William James that religion is personal, relational and experiential have been brought into an exchange with these poets for further insight into both transcendent poetry and James' arguments.

Of interest was the pairing of ideas from the east (poets) with ideas from the west (James). Further was a wish to include both male and female poets as gender seemed not to play an obvious role in their expression. Lal Ded and Mirabai are bold and agentive while Rumi and Kabir express vulnerability and surrender. Yet as has been shown, translators have a powerful impact on the resulting poems and it would be problematic to make comparisons based on poetic translations.

Beginning with a survey of human forms of relationship, we see that human relatedness to what is non-human or unseen has been natural for humans. Norman has argued that human relation to the non-human is needful for a meaningful life and nature can serve as this relational Other. Carrette affirms James' vision of the world saying "James valorizes the relational world by seeing the world as relational."⁴⁴⁰ In James overarching concept of relation we are given a lens through which we can understand the human impulse toward mystery, love and wholeness which exists outside of religious contexts.

The relationship of humans to a greater unseen power is facilitated through language. Communication acts as a bridge and supports relation through specialized forms of language. Poetry and patterned language have been used since ancient times in ritual settings to commune with and draw the divine into human affairs. This transaction with the unseen through language transmits power and empowers ritual events. Patterned

⁴⁴⁰ J. Carrette, 'William James on Love: The Varieties, Intimacy and the Divine', 2013. YouTube: Harvard Divinity School, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pBgLUZGzgyo> [Accessed 17 February 2018].

forms of sound which are indicative of poetry have a presence producing function as illuminated by Gumbrecht. He argues that presence is a bodily experience of immediacy which puts one in “a spatial relationship to the world and its objects.”⁴⁴¹ Prayer can be understood as another specialized form of communication which supports human relation with the unseen in communal and private contexts. A contemporary example of language used to create human-divine relation is demonstrated in Luhrmann’s study of American Evangelical Christians. Prayer represents the widespread use of language to bridge the human-divine separation and as Luhrmann reports, eighty-eight percent of Americans claim that they pray when asked in research surveys.⁴⁴² This high number, at least in the U.S., indicates the continuing use of language as bridge to the unseen.

By looking to performance theory we find in Schechner’s Efficacy-Entertainment braid a framework for determining the presence of ritual elements in poetry. Because Rumi, Lal Ded, Kabir and Mirabai composed verse orally in a performance setting, Schechner’s braid can be used to highlight how their poetry functions along the lines of ritual. The characteristics of efficacy/ ritual continue to be prominent elements in their poetry even in translation which suggests that the appeal of the poems is not simply for entertainment/aesthetic purposes. While the application of performance theory is being stretched here to include how poetry is experienced privately by readers in other languages, the braid is useful in delineating between ritual and entertainment. Elements such as human and nonhuman audience, serving the divine, eternal present, revealed truths, transformation possible, non-representational roles and virtuosity downplayed reveal aspects of ritual which are organic in the poems. The Psalms Experience is a contemporary example of sacred poetry in a secular performance space with the intention, as voiced by the center director, of calling out to God in troubled times. As one composer shared, the Psalms represent all of the ways you can talk to God. Further as Alter noted, the repetition of the Psalms after 9/11 suggests a magical conception of the psalms used specifically to address the intersection of the human and the divine.

⁴⁴¹ Gumbrecht, *Production of Presence*, p. xiii.

⁴⁴² Luhrmann, p. 47.

The poetry of Rumi, Lal Ded, Kabir and Mirabai provide abundant examples of individuals standing in relation to the divine. They express with profound emotion and beauty their longing to be near a divine or unseen being. While each is situated in a communal setting their songs tell of a personal form of love with images of intimacy. This relation is imaged as both with an external other and as an internal relation of self to Self experienced as identification with the divine. While James did not refer to these poets it can be well documented that he was familiar with their way of expressing relation. These poets and others across cultural and religious differences, tell of a unity of being which James imagined and described as the *MORE*. Lal Ded and Kabir tell of identification with the divine with Lal Ded demonstrating the non-dual teachings of Kashmiri Saivism. Rumi and Mirabai, however, provide verse expressing intense longing for one who is Other. The contributory lineage that has developed around Lal Ded, Kabir and Mirabai demonstrates that many unknown individuals voiced relation with the divine poetically. This finding suggests the more common occurrence of poetic expression of relation and less singularity of such phenomena.

In researching these poets, it became clear that religious experiences cannot be understood without reference to religious, cultural, and historic contexts. The initial intent was to follow James and treat the inward life of personal relatedness as this was a core ingredient of religion for him and is exhibited in the poets. However, it became obvious that their unique collective religious contexts shaped their expression. This result demonstrated directly the criticism of James due to lack of context and is as well a shortcoming of this research which only briefly treated the poets' religious settings. Paradoxically though these poets and the contributory voices they inspired spoke of transcending known contexts. If the religious settings of these poets had been investigated, it may have shown that transcending what is known was a teaching and a goal of their particular traditions. While James sought to understand emotional giftedness and exceptionalism in individual religious experiences we have the benefit of sensitivity to the importance of context and can utilize his ideas with context in mind.

Investigating the translation of these poets into English demonstrates the distinct differences in translation practices between language scholars seeking accuracy to the original and poets seeking the experience of the poem. In the case of Coleman Barks' renditions of Rumi, the experiential participation of the translator impacts the experiential quality of the translated poem. The translator's own proclivity toward emotional forms of religiosity further enhance the emotional power of the poem as evidenced in Barks' Rumi. The translators own experience of the poetry contributes another layer of experience affecting the resulting verse. Bly's Mirabai and Kabir and Barks' Lal Ded and Rumi all contain an intensity of feeling which is uniquely indicative of Bly and Barks in late twentieth century American poetry. As Hawley suggested, these two poet-translators may be contemporary examples of medieval troubadours who have found an audience for their improvisational songs.

So who is this contemporary audience responding to love songs written for the divine? Are they simply individuals suffering in a depression epidemic in America, exhibiting a fascination with the exotic "other," participating in a discourse on the 'orient' "produced in the West for the West," while practicing a form of spiritual consumerism specific to the U.S.?⁴⁴³ These and other elements of cultural appropriation and misappropriation are likely factors contributing to the explosive success of Rumi. Yet an alternative narrative emerges through a historic and cultural lens. Did Barks tap into a particularly American characteristic of response to a religious message expressed in emotional language and set in James' personal and relational context? Barks may function as a contemporary type of revivalist drawing on a specifically American history of religious emotional response, relation to the divine, and experience. Some of this history can be found in Ann Taves' *Fits, Trances and Visions: Experiencing Religion and Explaining Experience from Wesley to James*. Barks himself embodies this history through an experience at a Billy Graham crusade.

⁴⁴³ E. Furlanetto, 'The "Rumi Phenomenon" Between Orientalism and Cosmopolitanism: The Case of Elif Shafak's "The Forty Rules of Love"', *European Journal of English Studies*, Vol. 17, 2013-Issue 2, pp 201-213. [Published online: 15th Aug 2013]. <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/13825577.2013.797210?needAccess=true&journalCode=naje20> [Accessed: 3rd March 2016].

Barks may further be translating for a population which James seemed to intuit over one hundred years ago. As Charles Taylor suggests in *Varieties of Religion Today*, by the time of the Romantic period in the late eighteenth to nineteenth centuries a historic shift toward feeling and emotion in religious life was already underway. Taylor sees "...the new expressivist understanding of spirituality,"⁴⁴⁴ in consonance with Schleiermacher's ideas in 1799 of exploring a "powerful feeling of dependence on something greater," which should be given "reign and voice in oneself."⁴⁴⁵ He argues, the "present expressive outlook" originated in this shift and has entered deeply into the culture.⁴⁴⁶ In this historic and cultural context enriched by the Romantic poets, by Emerson's transcendentalism, by the 19th century fascination with Persian poetry, and a history of emotional revivals bringing one into relation with God it is no surprise that Rumi's expression of dependence on and relation to a greater power which is enriched by Barks should find appeal in America. Emerson may be seen not only as paving the way for American free verse and introducing English readers to Persian poetry but also as an influence on the ideas and experience of his god-son William. It seems clear that as inheritors of James's cultural, historic and intellectual influences Americans would resonate with the experiential qualities in the poetry of these four religious poets. The phenomenal success of Rumi can be understood as a unique yet not unlikely emergence of the "intimations and intuitions"⁴⁴⁷ of James in a receptive American audience.

A powerful aspect of James' relevance continues to be in how he defined a private self longing for and in search of relation to a transcendent Other, however that is defined by the individual. For James' the divided self in search of healing was motivation enough to seek out relation to something greater. Such relation requires the feeling life and the imagination. As Carrette notes, God is created in part through our imagination.⁴⁴⁸ The poets provide an experiential catechism in how one might imagine this relation. Through

⁴⁴⁴ Charles Taylor, *Varieties of Religion Today: William James Revisited* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2002), p. 98.

⁴⁴⁵ Taylor, p. 100.

⁴⁴⁶ Taylor, p. 100.

⁴⁴⁷ Taylor, p. 116.

⁴⁴⁸ Carrette, 'William James on Love'.

the specialized language of poetry infused with longing and beauty they create a bridge across a divide that cannot be bridged. In the language of relation and love they move toward what is separate and evoke what is not separate.

Rumi cries out,

“...I can't get to You!
You are the whole dark night,
And I am a single candle...
The Friend replied, *I am your deepest being...*”⁴⁴⁹

Rumi' begins where James began in the *Varieties* with concern for the divided self. Rumi arrives where James also arrives in his conclusion to the *Varieties* referring to the “positive content of religious experience” in which a person is conscious that they are “continuous with a wider self through which saving experiences come.”⁴⁵⁰ James sought to understand this wider self and how one might come into working relation with it. In the expression of Rumi, Lal Ded, Kabir and Mirabai we see the poetics of standing in relation as well as the saving experiences that come. We see also the need to continue the study of this wider self in a contemporary world.

⁴⁴⁹ Barks, *Like This*, p. 22.

⁴⁵⁰ James, *VRE*, p. 441.

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Appendix 1

Spectrum of Relationality

Human relation to Other

Atheist	Animist	Nature Poets (Oliver)	James	4 Ecstatic Poets	Hebrew Psalmist	Evangelical Christian
Nature- as greater than human Other	Nature	Nature	Plural Divine (self defined) Nature/Universe Divine Other The <i>More</i> /Self	Plural Divine Nature- Metaphors Divine Other Self as divine	Mono Divine Nature- Metaphors Divine Other Self non-divine	Mono Divine Nature- non-divine Divine Other Self non-Divine

Appendix 2

Religious Experience Research Center (RERC) - preliminary research design.

Appendix 3 demonstrates a first attempt to locate accounts of everyday people in the RERC database which might be comparable to the four poets in this study. Terms were selected for descriptive qualities similar to the expression of the poets or that described their state. Additionally, the hope was to document the precursor to the experience and if there was an experience of presence or a power. Demographics of interest were noted if given. Numbers under column headings indicate the number of times a term was used in the account as repetition signaled the importance of that element in the experience. Some terms were kept in later searches included in Appendix 4 and Appendix 5 as there was an interest in clusters of terms. This general approach to religious experiences yielded findings which were too broad and proved difficult to work with.

Appendix 4 focused on relation to the unseen or God. Here the interest was in accounts which talked about a personal sense of being in relation and if this had any bearing on having religious or unusual experiences.

Appendix 5 includes accounts where poetry is mentioned.

Some accounts show up in two or all three spreadsheets if they fit the criteria. The result of reading hundreds of accounts using the chosen search terms yielded just a small sample. There were many accounts talking about doctrines of relation to the divine or mentioning poetry as inspiring but fewer that actually told of experiences. It soon became clear that I would not be able to adequately treat the RERC accounts within the scope of this research. These sheets are included to demonstrate an early avenue of inquiry.

Appendix 3

RERC Accounts (includes Precursor and Presence)



Microsoft Excel
97-2003 Worksheet

Appendix 4

RERC Accounts (Relation)



Microsoft Excel
97-2003 Worksheet

Appendix 5

RERC Accounts (Poetry/Poems)



Microsoft Excel
97-2003 Worksheet