

The Hermeneutics of Religious Pilgrimage:
The Creativity and Constraint of Writing the Self in Transit

by

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B.A. (Hood College) 2008

Portfolio

Submitted in partial satisfaction of the requirements

for the degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

In

HUMANITIES

in the

GRADUATE SCHOOL

of

HOOD COLLEGE

November 2018

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Introduction

When I was a child in the northern Maine foster care system, I sought refuge in books, art, and God. The wilderness of northern Maine was an ideal environment for the imaginative wonder of childhood and creative expression. I sought God because I needed to transcend my painful reality and to find the possibilities that existed beyond my environment at the time. Throughout my life, I have returned to creative expression as a method of encountering the Divine and this is the root of all my success, persistence, and resilience. My seeking culminated in personally hiking the entire Camino de Santiago pilgrimage in my mid-twenties following the loss of my adopted mother to cancer. The Camino de Santiago pilgrimage was something she wanted to do during her lifetime but was unable to accomplish before she fell ill. I completed this pilgrimage for the both of us and it was a profoundly difficult and incredible journey. I was intent on engaging the pilgrimage fully by walking the entire length and staying at the simple church hostels along the way. During this pilgrimage I wrote stories of creative fiction and attended mass and local ceremonies where music was present. As I will posit in my portfolio, creative expression serves as a method for connecting with the Divine and, when such expressions exist within a journey narrative, as a pilgrimage toward the Divine. I hope to convey what I have learned during my studies and in my personal pilgrimage about the resilient nature of the pilgrim who seeks God directly through the creative vehicles accessible to them.

The following portfolio will illustrate that, although certain aspects of the mystical experience may be beyond linguistic expression given the limits of human capabilities and translation, there are methods to convey certain truths that claim to transcend the human

experience. One of these methods of communication lies in the metaphorical world of creative hermeneutical expression. When text is used to seek sacred meaning through a sacred story, the textual experience for reader, writer, singer, and musician is one of pilgrimage. The individual finds transformational meanings both in the story itself and through engaging the story in the ritual act of certain creative expression, such as writing, reading, and music. During this process, the seeker engages the text as a means to undergo a journey away from the profane and toward God. Though these textual journeys occur largely within the internal landscape of the self, the act of pilgrimage is no less real for the individual undergoing this journey.

Engaging in the act of reading, writing, or musical expression outside of church-sanctioned ritual can be regarded within orthodox religion as unrestrained secular activity outside of the domain of traditional religious discourse. However, these unrestrained and creative acts can be as much a spiritual practice as any formal sanctioned ritual. According to Professor Catherine Bell, a ritual is an action that creates and perpetuates worldview and identity¹. Bell explores the dimensions of ritual through usages of practice theory. This theoretical framework emphasizes the performance quality of ritual. In other words, to truly understand what ritual is, attention must be paid to the liminal experience of ritual action and the dialectic that occurs between symbol and ritual, experience and identity. When analyzing phenomena that constructs, maintains, and perpetuates social reality, norms, and identity, such as language, a focus on the practices and experiences that give it power further exposes the contours of ritual. The work of anthropologist Victor Turner investigates the impact and role of ritual on the participant, focusing particular attention on the importance of liminality during the process. For Turner, ritual acts are sites for the generation and construction of meaning and potentialities rather than

¹ Bell, Catherine. Pp. 21.

mere reproductive and reflexive behaviors. In this assertion, Turner moves away from “conventional anthropological approaches that regarded ritual both as a technology of traditional, relatively static societies, a mechanism for their reproduction, and a means for ...[facilitating]... the legitimacy of dominant orders.”² It is in this liminal and suspended state of potentiality Turner describes that encounters with the Divine most easily occur.

The linguist, Robert Smith noted in the 1800s that religion and subsequent mystical experiences are not rooted in speculative myths but are in fact “made up of a series of acts and observations.” These acts are rituals that function through symbolic interactions. According to Smith, ritual is the foundation for religious and spiritual experience. Hermeneutical ritual, which occurs through symbolic interactions, allows both reader and writer to co-create a journey narrative akin to a living pilgrimage. Symbolic interaction and metaphor allows us to point at, experience, and know what cannot necessarily be revealed through direct speech, reason, and empirical data. Beyond the material and tactile, we come closer to each other and to the Divine through moments of ritual, i.e. bodily experience and creative journeys, such as those found in the writing, reading, and musical adaptation of literature. These creative rituals serve as a site for pilgrimage, in which the self is in a transformative state and beyond the boundaries and constraints natural to the rational human condition.

The pilgrim undergoing the ritual of pilgrimage, literally or metaphorically, internally or externally, enters a state of transcendental subjectivity. The liminal nature of expressive ritual cultivates a position freed of the cultural constraints that typically plague the human condition within profane existence. It is within this liminal framework that comparative and contrasting

² Kapferer, Bruce. Pp.11.

realities exist. Kierkegaard said that we live forward, but we can think only backward.³ In seeking Divine truth, this is particularly relevant and underlines the tension inherent in striving for transcendental understanding. Individual understanding is relative to the human condition and also to the presuppositions of the interpreter. In other words, we do not come to any experience or text with a blank slate. We interpret through our contextual perceptions derived from beliefs, culture, and historical specificity. Pilgrims engaging in a journey toward Divine truth through textual and bodily mediums are propelled by a desire for transcendence from the constraints inherent in language, their individual lives, and the tragedies of the human drama natural to existence separate from God.

The act of pilgrimage through expressive art consists of complete engagement with the totality of an individual's attention and allows the pilgrim a closer encounter with the Divine, transcending any environmental limitation. The ability for the pilgrim to transcend material constraints in the liminal state during the act of pilgrimage results in a sense of satisfaction derived from exploring the uncomfortable and difficult terrain between the ineffable and understanding. In the act of pilgrimage, the pilgrim journeys deeper into the self, exploring the pain and limitations of the human condition, and it is through the self and a greater understanding of profane existence, that the pilgrim navigates toward encountering the Divine. Through bodily hardship and psychological difficulty derived in part due to the uncomfortable nature of these lived paradoxical states of constraint and transcendence, the pilgrim moves through an internal landscape of greater comprehension and, in contrast, a state of being more conducive to experiencing encounters with Divine reality. In the end, the pilgrim is left with a

³ Hannay, Alastair. Pp. 17.

greater sense of peace within the constraints of daily life having experienced a limited and temporary transcendental encounter.

On the margins of modern religious discourse, particularly relevant to Judeo-Christian mysticism, is the accepted theory that the exact nature of God is beyond human comprehension. In the Kabbalah, all attempts to rationally understand the transcendental and transcribe it directly merely reveal the garment that is profane existence thus exposing the futile nature of directly describing God. The transcendental cannot exist so concretely. Rather, Divine reality and the nature of God are ineffable. The paradox of an ineffable God is that even the term ineffable is imbued with meaning and rational parameters. It is a human construct and its meaning is a human one. But, what is meant by ineffability, more often than not, is less a description of what God is and more so a description of what God is not. Divine reality is not easily transcribed using rational human concepts. Language is inherently stronger the clearer and more unequivocal its meanings are; however, the inevitable truth of rational language is that it reduces transcendental reality to the level of rational human discourse and renders the absolute a human invention.

The ineffable nature of the Divine depicts God as a reality to be encountered rather than a reality to be defined. It is in the experience of holy ritual that an individual encounters God, and the states of knowledge inherent in those experiences are representations of encounters with God rather than depictions of the specificity of the transcendental. The ineffable quality of the Divine points to direct experience of God and the portrayal of those experiences as a more accurate method of knowing Divine reality than through one dimensional human discourse.

French Theologian Jean-Luc Marion described the ineffability of God thusly: “We cross out the name of God . . . in order to show ourselves that this unthinkablelessness saturates our

thought right from the beginning, and forever.”⁴ In his work, Marion tackles the question of how human perception affects our ability to know God. What does it mean for the conceptualization of God to remain within the constraints of a “being” and how does this translate through our religious experiences? Marion was primarily concerned with what occurs when reducing God to what can be measured by the human gaze, as an object, icon, and idol. So it is that true understanding of the Divine rests not in the absolute knowledge or rational portrayal of an external and objective God but in the expanded and magnified space of the ineffable. Acts of creative and ritualistic expression exist perpetually within an infinite horizon of unrestrained bodily experience. This infinite horizon is a liminal space by which the ineffable may reveal itself without the pretense of absolute knowledge resulting in the reduction of the Divine to the act of idolatry. Though Marion writes that God is encountered and understood through the act of love, I posit in the following portfolio that God is encountered and understood through the experience of holy ritual, such as the personal pilgrimage undertaken in the creative reading, writing, and musical adaptation of literature. Though these acts of creative ritual are often unrestrained and less formal than rituals that occur within a Church setting, the experience of these ritual acts can result in an internal pilgrimage toward encounters with the Divine.

The internal pilgrimage experience, which occurs during the creative hermeneutical ritual, subverts the rational reduction of the Divine. In doing so, the liminal space that results cultivates a distance between the individual, their historical specificity, the human condition and the experience of God. In these ritual acts, the material and the sacred coexist, and any encounter with the Divine occurs while also preserving the essential nature and difference of the sacred from the material.

⁴ Marion, Jean-Luc. Pp. 23.

In this context, pilgrimage experience encapsulates similarities such as those found in traditional rites of passage. Given this, one is able to deduce certain universal truths inherent to the act of pilgrimage. The journey of the pilgrim is meant to encourage the participant to literally and/or metaphorically transcend their normal day-to-day life and temporarily enter another state and place. The goal of leaving behind the mundane for an altered state of being brought forth through a sacred journey is to leave behind the profane and to encounter the Divine. In other words, “Religious pilgrimage . . . at its most fundamental level is the holy movement of the faithful to the holy places of the faith.”⁵ The Divine is encountered in the liminal space between holy movement and holy place. In Buddhist practices, the Sanskrit word for pilgrimage *pabbajja* literally translates to ‘a going forth,’ and a withdrawing from the world characterized as a rite of passage.⁶ In my paper “On the Way to Santiago de Compostela,” I explore the implications of the internal and external processes, which occur within an individual during the act of modern pilgrimage robustly.

Utilizing the anthropological theories of Victor Turner, my paper describes what is occurring in modern theology in the context of Turner’s depictions of social drama inherent to ritual, particularly to pilgrimage. Turner describes social drama as a phased transformational process that occurs during ritual and is resolved through the social interactions and dynamics of the ritual itself. Within the ritual act, between the beginning and the conclusion of the social drama, knowledge and rational thought exist in flux, suspended in a liminal space. The outcome of a social drama cannot be predetermined. The undefined possibilities this ambivalence cultivates is a liminal one in which reality or meaning exist betwixt and between definition and without the constraints inherent to the semantic world.

⁵ Taylor, Robin. Pp.262.

⁶ Turner, Victor. Pp.204.

Similarly, modern theology finds itself in an ambivalent conflicted place caught between restrained theological practice and modern sentiment for unrestrained personal encounters with the Divine as displayed by the increasing popularity of physical pilgrimages today. Interestingly, as post-modern thought progresses, pilgrimage is gaining new heights in popularity and the theological implications of Turner's observations have a renewed importance today.⁷ Whereas pilgrimage was once an arcane ritual from medieval history, we find ourselves in a similar theological place, called to similar actions once again. In this paper, I submit that pilgrimage is the ideal vehicle for embodied theological practice. A closer examination of the classical Christian pilgrimage, the Camino de Santiago, reveals that, in many ways, the church is capable of defining theology as a living practice experienced as a sacred journey more than a concrete destination.

The Camino de Santiago, translated as the 'Way to St. James,' is an arduous physical feat that requires a lengthy quest on the part of the pilgrim. There are no other Church-recognized methods of completing this religious pilgrimage other than to trek the entire way on foot. "On the Way to Santiago de Compostela" addresses the need for alternative, informal, and self-determined modes of theological practice within the modern world centered in bodily and creative expression. These are rituals that are less about establishing order and more about maintaining a fixed sense of reality. These are rituals that cultivate a shared experience through which a modern pilgrim may practice and apply the art of thinking theologically.

The expressive arts and pilgrimage are rituals with a complicated history and relationship to orthodox religion. Artists and the creative process that occurs when engaging in art, often does not exist within the boundaries and constraints of tradition. Opera is one particular expressive art

⁷ Frey, Nancy. Pp. 15.

that can set aside the tradition of monastic silence and strict attention to piety with a focus instead on unrestrained lamenting of the tragedy inherent to the human condition when isolated from the Divine. Opera can fully and robustly investigate the depths and contours of profane existence, exploring the coexistent nature of daily sin and personal suffering. Simultaneously, through the experience of an operatic performance, similar to other expressive arts, transcendence is possible for the individual engaged in the ritual. Within these rituals, there exists a tension between the pain of human constraint within the profane world and the ecstasy of desire for transcendence and encounters with the Divine. In my paper “Opera's Theological Stirrings and Spiritual Idealism” I define operatic lament as its own mode of ritual that offers an elevated space beyond normal human constraints where the ineffable and transcendental are temporarily encountered and thereby experientially understood.

Often perceived as an abstract and elitist art form, opera is seldom viewed for its modern accessible narratives, which are steeped in the complexity of the human drama. In tackling the everyday drama of human life extensively, opera serves to not only elevate daily life but also as an avenue for lamenting the sinful reality of profane existence. The famous classical operatic work *Don Giovanni* by Mozart is a perfect case study of this phenomenon.⁸ The story of *Don Giovanni* is one of common sin, lust, and conquest. Mozart's opera is based on the legends of Don Juan, an unabashed womanizer whose claim to fame is the carnal knowledge of over 640 women. Don Juan leaves a trail of brokenhearted women behind him, including a woman named Donna Elvira whose outrage compels her to seek vengeance and justice. Lost in the quest for vengeance among a sea of wrongs, Elvira finally comes to a place of sincere lamenting, disconnected from God and from the very love for which she so desperately hungered. In the

⁸ Suna-Koro, Kristine. Pp.79.

midst of her operatic aria, grief and pain that can no longer remain contained in one person fills the stage, bringing the immediate environment into a direct encounter with Donna Elvira's suffering. During this process, Elvira sings "When I think of my torment, I dream for revenge in my heart," yet . . . "when I look at him, my heart trembles."⁹ Throughout the opera, Elvira is caught in the struggle of knowing, experiencing, and processing the pain of profane existence. Her resolution in the end is to join a convent. The ability to lament as demonstrated in operatic drama, providing speech and voice for the silent truths of human suffering, allows the participant agency and the tools to reconnect with the fragmented self by transcending the immediate.

As a ritual act similar to prayer, writing, chant, meditation, and physical pilgrimage, opera can serve to lament the pain of profane existence separate from the Divine, worship the sacred, express and embody the desire for Divine connection, and transform all those engaged as witness or participant. "Opera's Theological Stirrings and Spiritual Idealism" explores the rituals applicable to the performance of opera, the nature of the expressive arts in the development of Christian religion today, and the qualities of music and text that embody the same liminal possibilities as pilgrimage.

Finally, my paper "Language as Symbol: Poetic Language as Symbol and Ritual within the Zohar" explores the hermeneutical experience of reading sacred text. As a work of literature, this 13th century text of the Kabbalah tradition is littered with layers of metaphorical writing meant to cultivate a transcendental experience with the goal of transforming the consciousness of the reader. Furthermore, a deeper analysis of the use of language within mysticism in general reveals the written word to contain discrete symbolic weight that is often taken for normative. In other words, the language and the stories within the Zohar appear as accessible and tangible

⁹ Ibid. Pp.81

concepts, however, the meaning of the imagery and symbolism is not revealed immediately to the reader but rather revealed by the transformative experience of engaging the text through arduous study.

Symbols that function through language in the form of metaphor, prose, and even discrete structural form portray certain realities that transcend immediate definition and offer a means for the reader to transform consciousness by creating a jarring experience. In “Metaphor, Transformation, and Transcendence” anthropologist Ellen Haskell critiques traditional views of language within Kabbalah tradition.¹⁰ A traditional view of the Zohar narrative highlights its text and imagery as interpretative code for reading scripture. This view of language may certainly have merit, but to Haskell it is not the only function that language and mystical writing serve. The function and purpose of language within the Kabbalah is to transform consciousness. The activity and ritual of reading and writing mystical text, such as the Zohar, requires involvement from both the reader and writer, as these actions are primarily performative actions. The Zohar, as spiritual and narrative journey, requires that all involved in the story participate in this transformative pilgrimage whether as reader or as writer.

In the Zohar, literary symbolism is an active agent in the journey toward a closer connection to God. The function of the Zohar’s literary symbolism within the study of the Kabbalah is as an interpretive tool in the journey toward encountering the Divine. The Zohar is a clear guide and useful case study of the role mystical imagery plays in creative hermeneutics beyond the ontological. In my paper “Language as Symbol: Poetic Language as Symbol and Ritual within the Zohar,” I explore the value of a textual pilgrimage and investigate the literary images present in the Zohar within the context of a sacred journey. In Jewish mysticism it is the

¹⁰ Haskell, Ellen. pp. 335-362

transformational process of the textual pilgrimage that allows the Kabbalist to transcend the profane and encounter the Divine.

In summary, the following three papers explore the pilgrimage inherent in the hermeneutical experience. Pilgrimage is explored through physical encounters with history on the Camino de Santiago, metaphorical encounters with the Divine within the Zohar, and the operative journey inward revealing the depths of human suffering and the constraints of seeking the Divine within material reality. Pilgrims engaging in a journey toward Divine truth through textual and bodily mediums are propelled by a desire for transcendence from the constraints inherent in language, the context of their individual lives, and the tragedy of the human drama within profane existence. The act of pilgrimage through the expressive arts engages the totality of an individual's consciousness and the resulting transcendental experience allows the pilgrim a sense of connection with the Divine. The pilgrim obtains a greater sense of satisfaction derived from exploring the uncomfortable and difficult terrain between the ineffable and understanding.

In the act of pilgrimage, the participant journeys deeper into the self, exploring the pain and limitations of the human condition. Through this exploration of the self and a greater understanding of profane existence, the pilgrim navigates toward connection with the Divine. Through bodily hardship and psychological difficulty, derived in part due to the uncomfortable nature of these lived paradoxical states, the pilgrim moves through an internal landscape of greater comprehension and, in contrast, a state of being more conducive to experiencing encounters with Divine reality. In the end, the pilgrim is left with a greater sense of peace within the constraints of daily life, having experienced a limited and temporary transcendental encounter

Opera's Theological Stirrings and Spiritual Idealism: Music as Ritual in Judeo-Christian Practice

“Our idea of God tells us more about ourselves than about Him.” –Thomas Merton

The creative and expressive arts contain a methodology for understanding and worshipping the Divine that is an alternative to traditional thought and practice. Despite an uncomfortable historical relationship between the Christian Church and the ambiguous world of the expressive arts, opera as its own mode of ritual offers an elevated space beyond concrete perception where the intangible can be understood experientially. Furthermore, as a ritual act such as prayer, writing, chant, and meditation, opera can serve as: 1) lamentation of the pain inherent in profane existence separate from God, 2) as worship of the sacred, 3) as yearning for Divine connection, and 4) as ultimately transformative for all involved. Operatic music that contains narratives focused on lamenting the profane or worshipping the sacred can access the depth of emotion and attention required for devotional and ritual experience.

Devotional and ritual experience cannot be reduced to a simple intellectual exercise but must also invoke a passionate or altered state of consciousness that brings the sacred into the profane as well as sublimates the ego. Opera that focuses on contemporary drama within profane existence can serve as an accessible method of lamentation and ritual practice. Ultimately, music is its own mode of communication, with its own meanings and constructs that contain discrete symbolic weight, like that of poetic language.

History of Art and Music within the Judeo-Christian Church.

Religious scholars, mythologists, theologians, and artists have written extensively about the dialectic revealed in the processes of expressive art, particularly the unrestrained art of music. Renown writer and humanist Dorothy Sayers describes the Church as never having “made up her mind about the arts . . . she has, of course, from time to time puritanically denounced the arts as irreligious and mischievous, or tried to exploit the arts as a means to the teaching of religion and morals,” but these ideas, writes Sayers, are degrading to art itself and to the complexity of worship.”¹¹ The traditional method of dealing with art within theology has been either to subjugate art to religion or to separate the two forces and to moderate communication between art and religion.

Once such example of the tension that can exist between the practice of art and orthodox religious practice is displayed in the life of the highly respected Trappist-Catholic monk, writer, and poet Thomas Merton. As required by his order, Merton disavowed the lavish lifestyles of many religious leaders in the Catholic Church, opting for an austere lifestyle complemented by a disciplined vow of silence. During his time at the Trappist monastery, Merton attained special permission to write. Typically at these monasteries, writing as well as individual hobbies, are limited in order to minimize distractions from monastic life. Merton described his writing as a method of worshipping the Divine as he used his given gifts for holy work. Having such talent for the craft, Merton was given uncommon permission to write regularly. The body of work that Merton wrote and published is renowned for its spiritual realism, honesty, and myriad expressions of the Divine. Merton’s actions and words resulted in his popular label as a "poet, writer, activist, and contemplative" and also as a "reformer of monastic life . . . [and] a bridge

¹¹ Sayers, Dorothy. Pp.4.

between Western and Eastern religious thought.”¹²

Similar to Thomas Merton, the Greek Orpheus is canonized as the first real poet of the contemporary literate world and was considered a figure of reform and inspiration. The fifth century in Greece was a time riddled with “enormous strife and revolutionary change.”¹³ This time of transition between the oral period of Homeric epic and the sophist period of ordered gestalt was mediated successfully by the hybridity of the Orphic character. The Orphic character’s lyre and poetic presence spans the modalities between primordial chaos and ordered rationale thought, thus fulfilling the fundamental job of the myth by “binding the potential energy inherent in the continuing gap between phenomenon and meaning.”¹⁴

The origins of contemporary aesthetics are in large part due to an historical inheritance of Greek culture. One of the most influential and famous thinkers of ancient Greece is Plato, who readily discussed the role of art in society and its relationship to religion. For numerous reasons, including a belief in the possibility of some art containing inherent evil which could “attribute evil and disgusting behavior to the gods, or . . . inculcate bad and vulgar passions or anti-social behavior in the audience,” Plato encouraged censorship for the spiritual good of society.”¹⁵ Furthermore, Plato’s critiques expanded beyond the subject matter of art and included the art form as well. In his Third Book of the *Republic* Plato criticizes what he calls the mimetic nature of art. In his theory of Mimesis, Plato concludes that all art is an imitation of life and it is ‘idea’ that contains the ultimate reality. For Plato, art is inherently dishonest by nature of imitation. Finally, Plato advocates for censorship of art determined by what does and does not deserve to be represented or imitated. For Plato, the only allowable art is that which represents or depicts

¹² Mott, Michael. Pp.12.

¹³ McGahey, Robert. Pp. 10.

¹⁴ Ibid. Pp. 2.

¹⁵ Sayers, Dorothy. Pp.6.

what he defines as worthy subjects, such as “noble actions of wise men.”¹⁶ Plato argues that there is no room for moral ambiguity in censoring art and in his tenth Book Plato makes the case that all mimetic art is “is only a pale reflection or bad imitation of the heavenly realities.”¹⁷

Sayers argues that such a conflict between religion and art need not exist at all. According to Sayers, the conflict Plato highlighted is a false conflict. To edify art by promoting what ‘acceptable art’ is allowed to say, do, or be, as well as defining how an artist must behave is not a method of revealing the power of the Divine, explains Sayers. Rather, such censorship allows art to exert a heftier amount of power that might otherwise not exist if the full spectrum of diverse thought and emotion were embraced. The common fear, of images as idols, is also false, explains Sayers. The fear in Judeo-Christian doctrine of our collective tendency to seek and mistake Divine reality with false idols cannot be answered through censorship, argues Sayers. By labeling art as right or wrong, sacred or profane, acceptable and unacceptable, we create a false idol within ourselves. The problem, according to Sayers, is within ourselves when we mistake images as expressive of the *true nature* of art, which can only be, in the Christian aesthetic, as a composition of Divine reality.

In his essay *Religion and the Mission of the Artist*, Denis de Rougemont further explores the role of artist as composer rather than creator. Like Sayers, Rougemont questions labeling *Art* with a capital letter instead of with a lower case letter, such as ‘art.’ In his view, this engenders a certain status rather like religion.¹⁸ Rather, Rougemont views art as a “serviceable term” in service to the Divine and as composition of that which is already created by God the Creator. In the Judeo-Christian worldview, everything in existence has one Creator. God is the static and

¹⁶ Ibid. Pp.7.

¹⁷ Ibid. Pp. 10.

¹⁸ Rougemont, Denis. Pp.59.

central force upon which all things move. This depiction of art as composition rather than creation, clarifies the question of function for Sayers.

The natural course of art and the artist, Rougemont argues, is as ritual in the act of worship. The emphasis, Rougemont states, should not be on limiting or controlling art but on encouraging the making and celebrating of art as much as possible. The desire to seek within art a function of some sort, or even to analyze its function as entertainment or gratifying in some manner, is a problem to Rougemont. Furthermore, Rougemont questions the attitude of societies that desire to find purpose and function for art within day-to-day life as though any social function would be more than “absolutely superficial” to the actual reality of true unencumbered art. Societies that seek such a thing have “lost the sense of the sacred” writes Rougemont, and in order to bring back the sacred “the need for art ...should be awakened.”¹⁹

A Call for a New Understanding of Opera’s Place in Art and Religious Practice.

Often perceived by the average person as an art form for the elite, the accessible narratives of opera are unrecognized in popular culture as a method of transcending the everyday hardship of profane existence. Dr. Kristine Suna-Koro, professor of Theology at Xavier University, explores this alternative perspective of opera’s function in an article for *Theology Today*. In “The Ecstasy of Lament” she chronicles a possible “innovative avenue for lament over tragic and sinful human reality” and assigns opera as such an avenue of worship through

¹⁹ Ibid. Pp.62.

musical lament.²⁰ Seeking to satisfy more than traditional theological assumptions that often value monastic silence and restrained expression as superior methods of worship, the author explores the possibility of ecstatic praise turned inward through personal lament, which cultivates authenticity within the ritual act.

Music that tempers the passions, a Platonian concept from a world which embraces the idea over the emotion, “... receive[s] the highest approval of theologians from the first century to the present . . . [and] has tended to be simple and restrained.”²¹ Suna-Koro’s assertions counter the popular contemporary theologian and writer, Frank Burch Brown, whose published works depict the function of art and music as solely “handmaids of theology,” which seek to “please the intellect” in order to worship correctly.²² In contrast, opera “is all about excitement, passions, and ecstasy” according to Suna-Koro.²³ Professor Gary Tomlinson, a well-known musicologist at Yale University, asserts that throughout history, including before and after the cultural shift of the Enlightenment era, opera “has been a chief staging ground ... for a belief in the existence of two worlds, one accessible to the senses the other not.”²⁴

Yet, the fact remains that often opera focuses specifically on the mortal world and the vacuous nature of profane existence. Murder, mystery, despair, affairs, incest, pain, and hardship are typical plot twists found in operatic narratives. In *Rachel’s cry: Prayer of Lament and Rebirth of Hope* by Kathleen Billman Daniel Migliore, the uncomfortable truth of profane existence is elucidated through an examination of the nature of lament. The word “lament” encourages thoughts and images of catastrophe and traumatic events over which one exhibits the

²⁰ Suna-Koro, Kristine. Pp.66.

²¹ Ibid. Pp.66.

²² Ibid. Pp.67.

²³ Ibid Pp.68.

²⁴ Tomlinson, Gary. Pp.4.

behaviors of lamenting, however it can also express lesser persistent struggles that plague profane existence daily. Operatic performers and audiences participate in lamenting over a variety of struggles from emptiness and loss of meaning to betrayal or death. Although restrained monastic behaviors are one path of worship that has been widely embraced historically, avoiding lamentation altogether ignores the lived trials and tribulations that cultivate grace and faith.

The paradox of operatic lament is that it is able to fulfill three seemingly disparate functions at once. At once, the listener and participant are exposed to the pain, hardship, and even the transient joy of day to day living, and both are also simultaneously relieved of such suffering as the music transforms and elevates the human condition beyond the profane and a little nearer to the sacred. In “Body and Voice in Melodrama and Opera,” Peter Brooks explains how the aria “speaks the name of desire directly” and thus embodies a total “hystericization of voice” without restraint, rules, regulation, or even cumbersome ego.²⁵ If the world were to lose the uncomfortable and unrestrained “lament” then we lose the understanding of what is at the core of profane existence and as such, we lose the ability to seek the Divine, to know the Divine, and to possess deep transformational faith. Furthermore, Alexander Shapiro explains in ‘Drama of an Infinitely Superior Nature’ that the famous German composer, Richard Wagner, was noted as giving art the essential role of redeemer. Through art, what is artificial is easily revealed and man is able to inspire growth and grow himself. Wagner boldly stated that it is the chief mission of art to redeem the essence of religion when the structure of religion becomes artificial itself and depends too much on intellectual exercise.

The expressive arts certainly have their place within the world of worship. Even in contemporary church services, music and expression, although often tempered, is a commonly

²⁵ Peter Brooks, Pp. 122.

used method of worship. Beyond the function of worship, can music and opera that struggles with the realities of profane existence, serve as a sacred ritual? Professor Catherine Bell explores the contours of theory in regards to 'ritual' in her book *Ritual: Perspectives and Dimensions*. Bell defines ritual as an action that creates and perpetuates worldview and identity. Her personal exploration of the theoretical utilizes practice theory, which emphasizes the performance quality of ritual. As part of actively engaging in the performance of a ritual, the ritual act subsequently and simultaneously shapes the reality and worldview of the participant. This view of ritual takes the power back from the external social order, which forced ritual can perpetuate, and places it into the hands of the participant who is actively engaging in the construction of his own subjective reality.

To Bell, conceptual understanding of ritual is not enough because ritual requires full engagement through activity and action for comprehension. Therefore, to truly understand what ritual is, attention must be paid to the experiential quality of ritual action and the dialectic that occurs between symbol and ritual, experience and identity. When analyzing structures that maintain reality and norms, such as language, focus on the practices and experience that give them power (i.e. rituals) further expose the contours of ritual itself and allows us to grasp what is fully being expressed in these actions. Bell utilizes practice theory, which expands on functional structuralism, a classical theoretical position that posits social phenomena as product of functionality. Practice theory instead investigates the affect of individual actions on the construction of reality in all its forms: historical, psychological, cultural, and religious. Through this theoretical position, Bell exposes a relationship between the cultures of a group involved in ritualistic activity and the reality or social structure of which they are a part.²⁶ Ritual, then, is the

²⁶ Catherine Bell. Pp.3.

driving force behind cultural reality in that it creates and perpetuates identity and worldview, particularly the more physical the ritual action such as the bodily actions required for performance and music.

Like the language of ritual texts, such as the Kabbalah and the Bible, operatic narratives serve the primary function of transforming the consciousness of both performer and listener. Both the observer and performer are thereby actively engaging in the ritual of artistic composition. Symbols that function within language and music through metaphor and prose portray certain abstract realities that transcend immediate definition and transform artist and audience through jarring experiences. One could theorize that the audience is a participant in the ritual as well as the artist and this mutual participation is what makes communication of the inexpressible between observer and performer expressible.

In “Metaphor, Transformation, and Transcendence,” anthropologist Ellen Haskell describes active communication through language or musical composition, as a “reciprocal interaction.”²⁷ Communication carries a power to “construct and transform self- identity within a particular culture, Haskell explains. Furthermore, Haskell asserts that certain narratives, musical and textual, invite the observer to pay attention to the physical and to “act rather than think.”²⁸ For the expressive arts, these required actions of the participant vary depending on the art form. For opera, the observer is required to listen deeply, an act not commonly required in contemporary society. Certain explicit physical actions are conventionally expected of observers that reinforce and encourage their listening, such as clapping at the right moments, sitting still, and facing the performers during the entirety of the performance. Opera often requires a

²⁷ Ellen Haskell. Pp. 341.

²⁸ Ibid. Pp.338.

continual awareness of the present, in which judgment must be suspended while the ritual is occurring. It is clear through an investigation into the dynamics and nuances of ritual, that opera certainly meets the requirements to be considered a ritual experience. If opera successfully serves as a ritual experience, what are the elements that comprise such an experience?

The Phenomenology of Music

In *On Hearing the Music in the Sound: Scruton on Musical Expression*, Paul Boghossian writes about the common struggle of philosophers who wrestle with the limitations of language in conveying certain meanings and experiences that seem beyond the capacity of language to describe. Boghossian calls this conundrum seemingly impossible but also necessary, “for how could a mere series of sounds, however lovely, express a state of mind?”²⁹ Yet, impossible as it seems, this is what music does for the artist and audience. The language Boghossian uses in his essay include the basic depictions of space and time: “tones can be high or low, they can move, as in melody; and a melody itself can be passed from one instrument to another.”³⁰

One of the symbols conveying meaning within the language of music is tone. Tone, according to the English philosopher, Roger Scruton, is heard according to the order of action: “one tone does not merely cause its successor, it creates the conditions under which its successor . . .” responds.³¹ This view of the symbolic weight of musical communication comes from a theoretical position that views music not as representation of communication but

²⁹ Paul Boghossian. Pp.49.

³⁰ Ibid. Pp.49.

³¹ Ibid. Pp.51.

rather as expression. Scruton supposes that there need not be an explanation for how or why music has expressive ability. Furthermore, it is a primary and innate characteristic of music itself, “an immovable fact” that renders music incapable of formal methods of inquiry³². Music is more than sound and physical phenomenon such as movement and vibration, but also exists as a secondary object which does not intend to be perceived but must be perceived in order to exist. What music does intend is a tone and within this tone, there are symbols such as: “pitch, rhythm, harmony, and melody.”³³ The various complexities of tone are metaphorical, which explains what it is the perceiver hears when sound is emitted. In this particular understanding of music, it is quite like poetry in that its nature is metaphorical and not literal. Music, as a ritual act, must be experienced for the participant and artist to mutually engage the process and for communication to occur. Boghossian takes this position as well and encourages the formally-minded scholar that ambiguity such as metaphor as “a concept applied in experience” need not be feared.³⁴

In rejecting the formalistic tendency against ambiguity in the expressive arts and embracing the ordered world of mathematics, Theorist Konstantin V. Zenkin, defines music as “the expression of the life of numbers.”³⁵ In his essay, *On the Religious Foundations of A.F. Losev’s Philosophy of Music*, Zenkin continues the work of a long line of historical thinkers and musicians who have equated music with mathematics, including Plato, Leibniz, Novalis, and Debussy. Through this lens, music is a method to give form to the formless, which Losev asserts, is the only matter music deals with: the formless. Losev requests faith in the Gregory Palamas doctrine from the reader. This doctrine posits that all art is a part of the Divine (composition of

³² Ibid. Pp. 51.

³³ Ibid. Pp. 52.

³⁴ Ibid. Pp. 52.

³⁵ Konstantin Zenkin. Pp.161.

his creation) and should not be confused with the Divine himself. In this theoretical paradigm, music serves as a bridge between the formed and unformed, the sacred and the profane. Thus, the artist is the composer but not the creator.

Conclusion

Through the use of symbolic interactions, operatic music serves as a tool for lamenting profane existence. In exploring the depth of the human condition, the operatic craft allows the participants, viewers and artists alike, to move through their struggles and transcend their environment through ecstatic feeling. The trials and tribulations contained within operatic drama reflect the very struggles that allow grace, faith, and spiritual growth to flourish. Despite a history of tension between unrestrained art forms and orthodox religion, censorship enables the very idolatry the Church seeks to curb by elevating the status of the artist to creator rather than composer and also denies the public accessible and relatable narratives. Art as composition and as ritual experience serves religious practice by bringing forth the sacred into the profane and providing a transformative space for the individual seeking connection with the Divine.

Language as Symbol:
Poetic Language as Symbol and Ritual within the Zohar

"Poetry is a part of the structure of reality." -Wallace Stevens

As a work of literature, the Zohar, a 13th century text of the Kabbalah tradition, is a narrative littered with layers of metaphorical writing. The symbolic writing within the Zohar portray certain sacred concepts that transcend immediate definition and offer a means for the reader to transform their consciousness. I hope to illustrate through an analysis of the Zohar that literary symbolism is an active agent in the journey toward a closer connection to God. The function of the Zohar's literary symbolism within the study of the Kabbalah is as an interpretive tool in the journey toward encountering the Divine. As exemplified in the ritual act of reading the Zohar, the public nature of language as a shared conceptual experience, and the culture of which it is a part, reinforces individual belief as well as alters the subjective nature of individual identity.³⁶

Written originally in Aramaic, the metaphorical narrative of the Zohar is laden with dialogue, poetic imagery, and scriptural references to the Torah. The philosopher Gershom Scholem posits that there is purity to the holy language of the Zohar that projects a sense of legitimacy and Divine authority to the mystical linguistics that make up this epic.³⁷ Understanding that the original Zohar appears in Aramaic is essential to understanding the text itself, for when the Hero, Rabbi Shim'on bar Yohai, proclaims that every single word written reveals Divine truths, it is in Aramaic he is speaking and

³⁶ Keane, Webb. Pp. 48.

³⁷ Scholem, Gershom. pp. 25

it is Aramaic words that he is referencing. Aramaic is an ancient religious language as is Sanskrit. Both languages evolved from an oral tradition that focused on sound energy as the birth of world and the tool through which creation occurs ³⁸. In addition, both translate into English with difficulty because of their non-efficient nature and depth, meant to express multiple messages within one unit of expression. Scholem transports his analysis of linguistical purity to Gnostic teachings and the direct connection between the power of Aramaic and the power of the Kabbalahistic text. The teachings of the text absorb and reflect the power and purity of the language used.

Professor Gershom Scholem defines mysticism through a contextual approach that is different from the school of thought of William James or Mircea Eliade, which holds mystical experience as a 'universal phenomena' equally applicable across cultures and religions.³⁹ However, Scholem would posit that it is necessary to view Jewish mysticism as part of the culture and context of its origin. In agreement with Professor Scholem, mysticism in this paper is defined by the parameters as defined by the Zohar itself. Within the Zohar, mystical experience is primarily defined by action and performance. The platform for action is the stories of the companion's journey on "the way" and the nocturnal delight known as night study. A few common traits described by the writer Jess Hollenbeck portray certain aspects of the Zohar that are similar to accounts of other mystical texts. These commonalities found across the spectrum of mystical text include: an altered state derived from engaging the text; the goal of transforming individual consciousness; the goal of attaining redemptive knowledge; heightened emotional states obtained during the reading of texts; an experience of enlightenment or awakening during the reading of

³⁸ Arya Usharbudh, Pandit. Pp. 14

³⁹ Eshed-Hellner, Melila, pp. 21

the text; a silencing of thoughts or increased concentration when reading the text; and a decentering or jarring experience.⁴⁰

Although it is necessary within Kabbalah to protect mystical truths through concealment, the Zohar actually stands apart from other Kabbalistic texts by offering a way to attain this information through appropriate and ritualistic means. Through the erotic love imagery the text stresses the importance of revealing information in an appropriate manner and refers to inappropriate revelation as "premature exposure"⁴¹. In its exposure of a means to attain reunion with the Divine, the reader and writer are able to join the characters in their mystical experiences detailed by Hollenbeck. In the act of participating in the journey through reading, a holy ritual occurs. According to Professor Catherine Bell, a *ritual* is an action that creates and perpetuates worldview and identity⁴². Bell explores the dimensions of ritual through the use of practice theory. This theoretical framework emphasizes the performance quality of ritual. Yet, more than a performance or expression, ritual is an influence in shaping reality for the individual and group. This view of ritual takes the power from the external social order, which forced ritual can perpetuate, and places it into the hands of the participant who is actively engaging in the construction of his own subjective reality.

The linguist Robert Smith noted in the 1800s that religion and subsequent mystical experiences are not rooted in speculative myths but are in fact "made up of a series of acts

⁴⁰ Ibid. pp. 21

⁴¹ Ibid. pp. 163.

and observations.”⁴³ These acts are rituals that function through symbolic interactions. For Robert Smith, myth is a changeable reality while "rituals are fixed" and therefore the foundation for religious and spiritual experience⁴⁴. Within this ritual context, symbol is the method of communication throughout ritual activity. By creating an abstract narrative work, the symbolic text moves the reader beyond self and identity. Reading and writing thereby becomes a mystical experience through which transcendental truths to expose themselves to the participant. Therefore, communication within the experiential remains true to the form and is part of the mystical experience itself. These symbolic interactions are conveyed throughout the Zohar in two ways, the structure of the text and also literary symbolism. Symbol then takes on two distinctions within throughout the experience, structural and literary. These symbols serve primarily as agents of interaction.

In "Metaphor, Transformation, and Transcendence," anthropologist Ellen Haskell critiques traditional views of language within Kabbalah tradition.⁴⁵ A traditional view of the Zohar narrative highlights its text and imagery as interpretative code for reading scripture. The Sefirot is the symbol and method in Kabbalah for how the Creator, Ein Sof, reveals itself to the individual and continually recreates the world. The Sefirot is a series of ten complex symbols that include various gendered, emotional, and psychical images about the flow of Divine energy. This flow constitutes all of material life as well as its source, the unknowable creator force known as Ein Sof, which translate as ‘Without End’. Haskell describes the imagery of the Zohar as more than a reflective function on

⁴³ Bell, p4

⁴⁴ Owen, pp. 24

⁴⁵ Haskell, Ellen pp. 335.

the nature of the Divine, but also as literary symbolism "actively shaping religious experience" in the present moment.⁴⁶ The purpose of these literary symbols are to produce a contemplative, and ultimately transformative, spirituality within the reader. Haskell does not altogether resist the interpretation of sefirotic symbols as code. Rather, she merely ascertains that symbols serve a larger function within the journey of the individual engaging mystical text. In discussing these perspectives, Haskell points to Professor Moshe Ide's interpretation of the function of the ten sefirot as code for interpreting text and the use of scripture as a forum for engaging the dynamics of the sefirot.

Ide supports Haskell's assertion that a "Kabbalistic symbol invite[s] one to act rather than to think" and so the unique symbolic vehicle (the sefirot) through which the reading of the Zohar is carried out enhances the performative rather than contemplative qualities of the text.⁴⁷ In the end, Ide moves away from over defining the text as code in favor of a shifting meaning into the sphere of human action and highlighting the performative quality of symbolism in the Zohar. These performative qualities are grounded in the transformative nature of symbols and their capabilities to create an "altered perception of reality" for the participant.⁴⁸ In the end, Ide moves slightly away from over defining the text as a code in favor of a shift to the sphere of human action that highlights the performative quality of symbolism in the Zohar. These performative qualities are grounded in the transformative nature of symbols and their capabilities to create an "altered perception of reality" for the participant.⁴⁹

⁴⁶ Ibid. pp. 136

⁴⁷ Ibid. 340

⁴⁸ Ibid. 341

⁴⁹ Ibid. 341

Symbolic language within a narrative often describes 'reciprocal interaction' through which imagery and literature function as more than a method of description.⁵⁰ Language carries power to "construct and transform" self-identity within a particular culture. This psychological insight on the power of language, pioneered by Jacques Lacan and Judith Butler, suggests how it is possible that the linguistic symbols within the Zohar are purposeful as a means to manifest intimate engagement with the text. According to anthropologist Webb Keane, religious practices choose from the entire spectrum of linguistical possibility depending on the purpose or function of the ritual occurring.⁵¹

Keane focuses on revealing what the writer or speaker is attempting to provoke in the participants, alluding to awareness on the part of the reader or writer as to the power of linguistics. In investigating the ritual act of prayer, Keane analyzes the form and structure of prayer. Prayer text is a clear example of the interactive nature of religious writing in that its primary purpose is to manifest interaction between the reader, the writer, and supernatural forces. The nature of prayer itself is metapragmatic. By nature it refers to and describes the very actions that are currently taking place. Prayer exists continually in the present moment as directive for the actions being carried out as spoken.⁵² Keane continues by further explaining how language itself is a form of action particularly within religious and mystical text through deconstructing roles and interactions. In engaging textual narrative, the roles are described by Keane as: the *principal* who is responsible for the creation of words, such as Ein Sof; the *author* who is the originator or composer of form; the *animator* who narrates the morals and lessons

⁵⁰ Ibid. pp. 341

⁵¹ Keane, pp. 47

⁵² Ibid. pp. 51

revealed throughout the journey, such as, Rabbi Shim On bar Yohai; and the addressee, *target*, *and over hearer* of the text which include secondary characters and the reader of the text. The Sages within the story serve an explicit secondary role when they are revealed as students, as much a fool as anyone, due to their attachment to material reality. This repetitive lesson throughout the Zohar reinforces the ineffable nature of the Divine. The reader's conceptual understanding of the structure of reality is expanded beyond the wisdom of a Sage by revealing the unknowable nature of Divine truth.

In the thematic context of awakening throughout the Zohar, symbols are used to anthropomorphize and conceptualize mystical experience such as the repetitive imagery of 'sight' and 'light.' This repetition calls attention to the importance of paying attention to the meaning and use of sight reflected inward.⁵³ These symbolic interactions within the text include the mystic who is able to "turns darkness into light" automatically by remaining in an awakened state.⁵⁴ This usage of light and sight also reflects the Jewish Kabbalistic attachment to the issue of concealment versus revelation. According to the Zohar, the awakened will be revealed, as they will shine with light. The closer one is to encountering the Divine through engaging the Zohar, the more the light of the Divine radiates from the student. To become awakened, one must take part in ritualistic hermeneutical practices that are highlighted within the text itself.

Within the Zohar, intensive reading of the Torah is highlighted as a key method for transcending the profane and experiencing the Divine. In other words, engaging in the narrative is a method of involving the reader in order to produce certain action that will

⁵³ Eshed-Hellner, pp. 15

⁵⁴ Ibid. Pp. 16.

result in an awakening. Awakening occurs in the narrative through stories of love and arousal between the pilgrim journeying toward the Divine and the Beloved. The story of a sacred love affair describing the Divine as the Beloved conveys the transitory nature of the awakened state within the material or earthly plane. Therefore, the light imagery remains necessary as a guiding force throughout the cyclical stories conveying increasing wisdom and movement toward God on behalf of the pilgrim. This cyclical love affair conveys that for each day that follows the night, or for each moment of awakening, there will be a night that comes again, or a return to the material realm. The lover will only ever be able to attain glimpses of the Beloved. In the Kabbalah faith, these cyclical experiences occur within the pilgrim until the disciple is able to ascend and transcend the human condition fully. The rest of us, while within material reality, may only attain glimpses of the Divine for mystical truths cannot exist for a suspended length of time within the profane realm.

The expectation for the reader to pay absolute attention to the text and to look deeply within the self while reading the Zohar is made explicit throughout the text. The overarching assumptions lessons are not spelled out for the reader but are interwoven throughout the stories and it is only through the repeated ritual act of reading and rereading the text that lessons and truths appear. The necessity of reading closely and deeply sharpens the reader's senses and serves to shift the mind toward a more abstract and welcoming space. The mental shift within the reader occurs through repetitively engaging poetic verse and imagery. The Zohar is not a linear and declarative text like that of Torah, rather, the Zohar expands on concepts from the Torah by placing them in a more abstract context. The mystery itself is part of the revealing and concealing process that defines the "soul-syntax" and manifests in a

transformation of consciousness and worldview.⁵⁵ What the writer of mystical text must wrestle with is how to convey truths that are secrets by nature and can be revealed only through a process. This process is meant to protect information from outside influences and is also a means to ensure an actual understanding of what is being conveyed through internal transformation within the reader. The text reflects the concealed nature of the transcendental truths in the layered messages conveyed through symbolic interactions within the story.⁵⁶

The figure of Rabbi Shim'on bar Yohai is compared within the Zohar to figures like Moses and Rabbi Akiva, both are enlightened Jewish leaders who encountered the Divine outside the parameters of ritual practice and pilgrimage. Rabbi Shim'on bar Yohai is a different sort of hero in that his awakened state is very much a result of intentional action and his character within the narrative is well aware of his own hermeneutical efforts. This awareness of self is positively painted within Kabbalah as the opposite of self imposed ignorance of self. The Zohar encourages intentional approaches to encountering the Divine through hermeneutical action and the journey of the narrative.⁵⁷ Accordingly, the most essential ritualistic activity within the epic journey of the Rabbi and his companions is the rituals of nocturnal delight. Nocturnal delight within the Zohar is described as the study and reading of the Torah each night. The expected nightly reading of Torah scripture begins with rituals of cleansing through washing of hands prior to engaging the text. According to the Zohar, this devotional practice of cleaning and reading must be done at night, as night is the best time for poetry, song, and abstract thinking. Furthermore, the Zohar depicts the moon as a soft feminine presence that allows for the poet mystic to engage in a love affair with the

⁵⁵ Eshed-Hellner pp. 18

⁵⁶ Ibid. pp. 158

Divine through submitting oneself fully and merging with the Beloved in a way similar to the way one merges with a lover. This connection to Shekhinah, the feminine part of the ten part Sefirot and the receptive aspect of Ein Sof can be understood only in a contextual manner rather than in the universal way that Carl Jung or Eliade might theorize. The historical and psychological perspectives of Eliade and Jungian archetypes might convey Shekhinah through universal meaning beyond the context of Judaism.⁵⁸

Although the Zohar attempts to convey Judaic truths in a manner that is more applicable to a wider audience than other, more complex Kabbalistic text, the truths conveyed are from what is considered the source of all truth, the Torah. Within the Zohar and all Kabbalistic text, the Torah remains the source and the key to enlightenment and awakening. Therefore, to understand the symbolism of the Zohar and Shekhinah within this symbolic system, one must remain within the context of its creation.⁵⁹ One must understand Shekhinah as an eternal Jewish symbol whose sons, the students of Kabbalah, are described as mystic poets. This feminine quality and creative force is an aspect of an unknowable singular God that is essentially beyond gender. What does it mean to be a son of Skekhinah and a mystic poet as described in Kabbalah? How is it possible for the writer of mystical experience to also be a participant in mystical experience?

The poet mystic, through his entry into an elusive and abstract state, is able to contemplate and express words that other humans are not able to mouth. The poetic mystic embodies the yearning and receptive feminine aspect of Ein Sof by showing truth in an indirect symbolic manner. According to the Kabbalah tradition, this indirect manner of creative expression is essential to the mystical experience because Divine truth must be

⁵⁷ Ibid. pp. 116

⁵⁸ Ibid. pp. 143

courted from underneath the garment of the material world. This courting is revealed through the use of poetic imagery and metaphoric narrative in the Zohar. By maintaining the tension between concealment and revelation of Divine truth, the poet mystic maintains the order established within the mystical experience itself as a contained individualistic experience earned a process of ritual engagement.⁶⁰ The writer as mystic poet, similar to the companions on their journey in the Zohar, consummates the philosophic through "the spirit perfecting itself in the act of creation" rather than through logical thought or reason⁶¹. Poet mystics struggle in their attempt to purify language and image in order to reveal transcendental truths. As articulated by Mark Burrows in "Raiding the Inarticulate," the hope for the writer and reader of mystical text is to move beyond the unbearable nature of profane existence and become active agents in the construction of reality toward the Divine.

Burrows views poets as living on the margin of the inarticulate, between silence, sound and expression. According to Burrows, the attempt to express truth through human language is both a struggle and a dedicated loving relationship. The tension described by Burrows in this struggle is similar to the relationship the student has with the Divine when studying the Zohar. In both texts, words are described as tools that can serve to further obscure truth just as much as it can reveal it. Burrows views the transcendental as expressible within speech and writing when the poetic language used causes the reader to experience a yearning for connection to the Divine. The poet Wallace Stevens further expresses this yearning for connection to the Divine when describes yearning as a need " . . .

⁵⁹ Scholem, Gerschom, pp. 8.

⁶⁰ Eshed-Hellner, pp. 188

⁶¹ Burrows, Mark. Pp. 173

to find the real, to be stripped of every fiction except one, the fiction of an absolute. . .”⁶²

Burrows posits the inverse of the mystic poet engaging the Zohar by boldly theorizing that it is the poet who must always be a mystic because the "the deepest spiritual posture is that of waiting in the desolations, silences, and absences of the heart” as does the poet.⁶³ Finally, Burrows theorizes that mystic poets aim to encounter the Divine in order to offer a healing presence to the world by uniting the material with the sacred.

The Zoharic narrative is a symbolic and poetic text in that it is almost entirely devoid of primary meaning with the exception of quotes pertaining to the Torah. Throughout the Zohar, the journey serves as one unified symbol, and the power of this symbolic text is in its ability to "direct the reader to the meanings hidden in itself.”⁶⁴ There is no passive truth here to be decoded but rather a living ritual and experience that is engaging the writer and reader of this mystical text continually. Other texts within the Kabbalah tradition tend to highly value secrecy. The Zohar, while coding knowledge within the rich symbolism of narrative, is a more accessible form of text that serves as definitive tool for understanding Kabbalah traditions, including mystical conversion and encounters with the Divine. The mystical conversion occurs when the participant's quality of being is elevated by the ritual act of engaging sacred text. The mystic poet advances toward union with the Divine when the poet has cultivated a state of being that is receptive to truths of the Torah as depicted by the Zohar.

⁶² Ibid. pp.176

⁶³ Ibid. pp. 177

⁶⁴ Eshed-Hellner, pp. 190

Applied Theology: On the Way to Santiago de Compostela

*"Give me my Scallop shell of quiet,
My staffe of Faith to walke upon,
My scrip of Joy, Immortall diet,
My bottle of salvation:
My Gowne of Glore, hopes true gage,
And thus Ile take my pilgrimage.
- Sir Walter Raleigh ⁶⁵*

A derivative of the Latin word *peligrinus*, which means wayfarer, pilgrimage can be expressed simply as "the journey of a person who travels to a shrine or holy place."⁶⁶ The person who embarks on such a journey is a pilgrim whose Latin roots *per agrum* suggest a crossing of space, boundaries, and earth. Modern pilgrimage is a complex phenomenon, made all the more complicated by the sheer volume of pilgrimage choices history allows us. In Western Europe alone there are over six thousand recognized historical pilgrimage routes.⁶⁷ Furthermore, there are now many methods to complete a pilgrimage as some modern pilgrimages can be accessed by bike or bus as well as by foot. Modern motivations for completing a pilgrimage are just as diverse as the various kinds of pilgrimage now available to the pilgrim today. Two of the more common rationales are, 1) the ascetic, in which one leaves behind the material world permanently to become an eternal pilgrim till death, and 2) the penitential, in which one seeks to be forgiven of sin and transform the self.⁶⁸ Amongst the cultures of the world, pilgrimage in the form of vision quests and sacred journeys have been around since the beginnings of society and religion. To seek to understand the act of pilgrimage is neither an easy nor a simple endeavor. By selecting the

⁶⁵ Cousineau, pp. 61.

⁶⁶ Ibid. pp. 13.

⁶⁷ Ibid. pp. 94.

⁶⁸ Ibid. pp. 72.

popular Camino de Santiago pilgrimage as a case study, I hope to determine the internal and external processes that occur during the ritual act of pilgrimage as well as the meaning and impact of pilgrimage for the individual and for the Church.

Professor Charles Winqvist utilizes the theories of Victor Turner's comparative symbology to explore the meaning of theology in the world today. Winqvist seeks to understand what the individual is doing when he or she is thinking theologically, noting that the specificity of the thought need not matter but it is the process, which has persisted throughout history, which must be explored.⁶⁹ The product of this process for Winqvist is the religious texts that result from the process of seeking understanding. These religious texts are utilized to mold a sacred framework from which to see the world. The text, either oral or written, is created by the lingustical act of speech by which we determine that the matter of making meaning is a communal one. Winqvist explains that since there are no private languages, meaning, which is dependent on thought and language for form, is a public affair coded and defined by a shared domain, structurally and historically.⁷⁰ Furthermore, beyond the shared communal space that language and meaning occupy, is the impossible nature of the theological pursuit for the ultimate truths, the meaning of meaning within the human condition. Any meaning, which can be thought, determined, fixed, identified or expressed through language will always be a displacement from that which we are seeking to understand.

In "Theology and Religious Studies: Their Difference and the Difference It Makes," theorist Schubert Ogden explains, "to be human at all is both to live by faith and to seek

⁶⁹ Winqvist, pp. 295.

⁷⁰ Ibid. pp. 297.

understanding.”⁷¹ We cannot live, it seems, unless by faith that life is worth living.

Furthermore, Ogden asserts that the human animal inherently requires a free life, one of consent, which is led by the individual through principles, which are normative for its time and place. Implied within these norms is the sense of validity and faith cultural norms require for society and the individual to function. In this way, not only is the individual life one of faith in a deeper meaning, but also the entirety of our common experience as a species is grounded in faith. This faith is rooted in the notion that our lives are somehow justified and meaningful through the collective experience of which we are a part. In this context, faith upholds cultural connection and religion is the vehicle through which faith is outwardly made explicit and experienced.

Ogden defines religion as separate from faith through the act of expression. Religion is distinguished as the expression of faith through symbolic interaction contained within "beliefs, rites, and forms of social organization that together provide a particular answer to the question of the ultimate meaning of our life.”⁷² The search for meaning seems to be an innate, one beginning with the basic premise which intelligent life accepts when choosing to live: that life is worth living and has meaning. The desire to understand the meaning of life and the expressions of our daily faith in life can become codified through the institution of religion by collective experience. However, religious ritual, which embodies the transformative identity of theology, specifically pilgrimage, requires inward exploration in addition to faith. Pilgrimage, as theology in practice, requires an exploration of the meaning of meaning itself. The goal is to seek a closer relationship to the sacred by way of understanding what is occurring within these expressions of faith and subsequent

⁷¹ Ogden, pp. 7.

⁷² Ibid. pp. 9.

interactions.

Anthropologist Victor Turner defines theological thinking as a rite of passage in the ongoing social drama it is a part of, in which one seeks to uncover the meaning of meaning by removing the garment of the material world through ritual action. With the rise of postmodern thought and a secular world, theological thinking has become a symbolic process largely regulated to the margins of public discourse.⁷³ Yet, even in the margins of popular discourse, theological thought remains a symbolic process, positioning modern theology within a theory of practice. The application of theological thinking, as such, remains as important in the world today as it has throughout all of history despite the rise of secularism and postmodern thought. Although theological thinking is of great importance in the world today, modern theology remains in a liminal stage between the past and the present.

Liminality, according to Turner, is the ambivalent space of possibility that occurs in the midst of a social drama or ritual action. A social drama is defined as having four phases: "a breach of normal relations, mounting crisis, adjustive and redressive actions, and the reintegration with the group or legitimization of a separation from the group."⁷⁴ Between the rising of a social drama and its ending, a state of ambiguity exists in which possible outcomes coexist and meaning fluctuates. Theology, which is anchored in meaning and the pursuit of meaning, loses itself within this liminal space as long as it remains fixed to traditional concepts or methods. Typically traditional theology has specific boundaries and parameters for ritual action that can result in a static sense of reality. The fixed state of a particular religion cannot govern nor control the liminal stages of ritual or social drama. Similarly, the evolution of public thought has undergone a transition from the literal one-dimensional

⁷³ Winqvist, pp. 302.

⁷⁴ Ibid. pp. 298

worldview to a broader secular worldview. There is less of a place for an absolute and predetermined worldview in current public discourse than ever before.

The broad exploratory nature of modern theological thinking and the liminal state exposed by the tension between religion and secular autonomous thought positions theological thought within an ambivalent marginal space. Despite this gradual movement from the center of public discourse to the margins, a theological theory of practice, which is comfortable within ambiguity, remains more relevant and necessary than ever. The emergence of the secular worldview is comparable to the emergence of the enlightenment in terms of societal evolution. The movement of religion to the margins of social discourse renders all of theological thinking in a continual liminal state in which any statistic and fixed language points more towards what is absent in our attempts at expressing the ineffable.⁷⁵ How then does theology move forward? Winquist turns to the Philosopher Vincent Descombes for answers.

Philosopher Vincent Descombes theorized that all speech is primarily metaphorical. Of particular importance to theology, Descombes posited "meaning can reference itself only as a metaphorical achievement."⁷⁶ Furthermore, Descombes noted that human translation of meaningful experiences, including encounters with the Divine through ritual action, are limited as "the meaning of language is not the meaning of experience . . . it is the meaning that experience can receive in a discourse which articulates it according to a certain code."⁷⁷ What kind of discourse can confront both the complexity of modern theological thought and the ongoing demand of the secular world for a dialectical theological experience? Perhaps

⁷⁵ Ibid. pp. 303.

⁷⁶ Ibid. pp. 304.

⁷⁷ Ibid. pp. 304.

the discourses that can best articulate theological thought within a secular world exists within liminal modes expression. Liminal modes of creative and sacred expression consist primarily of ritual and artistic experiences that physically and mentally engage the individual within their environment.

In recent years, the number of individuals partaking in pilgrimage as a mode of travel and theological experience has grown significantly. In "Meaningful Pain and Suffering and the Narrative Construction of Pilgrimage Experience on the Camino De Santiago" theologian Elo Luik explains that since the 1980's the Camino de Santiago has grown to be "the largest Christian pilgrimage in the world."⁷⁸ The 500-mile Christian pilgrimage to Santiago offers the pilgrim who completes the trek by foot plenary absolution (the forgiveness of sin). This pilgrimage was made popular during the Crusades around the 12th century. Since the height of its popularity, the number of pilgrims trekking to Santiago had decreased significantly. In the last few decades, pilgrimage has been on the rise resulting in a renewal of popularity for The Way of St. James.⁷⁹ Some romantic thinkers have been known to call Santiago the "Jerusalem of Spain" because a land steeped in religious history and theology surrounds it.⁸⁰ The legend of Saint James began around the 9th century at a time when the Christian world was set against the empire of the Moors. Most versions of the myth surrounding the burial of Saint James posit that the Apostle is buried on the northern Spanish seaside.

One of the more popular accounts of this myth comes from the Archbishop of Compostela during the 11th century. Archbishop Diego Gelmirez wrote of the transporting of St. James' body, following his death, from Palestine to northern Spain. According to this

⁷⁸ Luik, pp. 25.

⁷⁹ Howes, pp. 130.

⁸⁰ Ibid. 134.

legend, St. James was beheaded at the command of Herod eleven years following the death of Christ. Afterwards, the disciples relocated the body of St. James to Joppa where a ship awaited them. Upon arrival to the coast of northern Spain in the Galicia region, the disciples took the body ashore where they soon found a Celtic (Pagan) monument by a cave.⁸¹ There are many legends about religious sites already established in the area of Santiago by pagan groups but there is no evidence that determines whether or not the disciples knew of these sites at the time. Subsequently, the local Celts who settled in the northern mountains of Galicia were converted to Christianity. Two of the disciples remained behind to guard the tomb and the others travelled throughout Spain preaching the Gospel.⁸² As a result of this popular legend, the pilgrimage to Santiago began as a method to visit the Grave of St. James and continued to evolve. Since the creation of the gravesite, there are numerous myths about miracles that are said to have happened along The Way to St. James. Today the Catholic Church offers the absolution of all sins for the pilgrim who completes this pilgrimage on foot upon arrival to the grave of St. James in Santiago.

Pilgrimage, like theological thinking in our modern world, exists in a permanent state of liminality. In a sense, the pilgrimage site exists as the practice of theology or applied theology. The discourse of a pilgrimage is primarily one of bodily experience. In "The Body as the Ground of Religion, Science, and Self" Judith Kovach describes the body as both a religious subject and scientific object.⁸³ In her essay, Kovach calls for a merger of cognitive science and comparative religion, explaining that in order for cognitive science to remain fully empirical, it must re-embody subjectivity through a non-reductionist material

⁸¹ Ibid. Pp. 134.

⁸² Ibid. Pp. 136.

⁸³ Kovach. Pp. 941.

approach. Kovach begins exploring pilgrimage through the theories on ritual by Catherine Bell. Throughout her career, Professor Bell has defined religion as set of beliefs that the individual embodies through ritual experience. From ritual as embodied practice, Kovach analyzes the theories of Hoyt Alverson. According to Alverson, reflexivity (one's physical reaction to the world around us) is the root of all personal meaning. Alverson explains that as a result of this simple fact, "the notion of representing the world as it actually is incoherent."⁸⁴ Rather, Alverson posits that we know and reflect our own experience of the world. Descartes is well known for having explored this phenomenon in his work *Discourse*. For Descartes, all thought is derived from our immediate experience beyond the common notion of objective understanding, such as feeling. To feel is to think. Mind and body, therefore, are as much a subjective experience as an objective one.

Through the theories of George Lakoff and the work of Victor Turner, the cognitive content of embodied experience is clarified further. Thought and language is as much a product of our bodily experiences as they are a means of understanding and coding them. Our sense of self as object in a world of objects is "neither conceptual nor perceptual but . . . constituting the mere awareness of our unitary bodily physicality."⁸⁵ Essentially, an individual's sense of meaning and understanding is directly related to their physical movements and relative experiences within their environments. These findings on the physical nature of embodied experience provide an excellent foundation for phenomenological work.

In his writings, Elo Luik focuses on the immediate experiences of the body when on pilgrimage to Santiago. According to Luik, the attention of the mind when in the midst of

⁸⁴ Ibid. pp. 943.

⁸⁵ Ibid. pp. 949.

ritual activity is centralized on personal bodily experiences more often than when distracted by the chaos of daily life. Luik writes of his study on the meaningful pain, which provides the pilgrim a sense of penance and situates their attention toward the present, experienced by pilgrims along the Camino de Santiago from data gathered in case studies of individual pilgrims. For the pilgrims in Luik's study, the pre-existing narrative framework of the individual pilgrimage, which each pilgrim brought with them upon arrival, greatly affected the experience of pain along the pilgrimage. If the pilgrim expected a more arduous journey and were motivated by religious factors, they were more likely to find meaning in their pain and hardship.⁸⁶ In his paper, Luik argues that by expecting transformation upon the outset of a pilgrimage, an individual's suffering is given meaning, which anchors the pilgrim to a historical dialectic of sacrifice. Penitence, whether official or individual, must be earned

Modern pilgrims, Luik found, are more often than not concerned with personal reflection and meaning then with institutionalized absolution from the church. The trend towards a more inclusive pilgrimage has occurred over time, resulting from cultural demand for a more secular religious experience. Pilgrims from all faiths and backgrounds have become so prevalent on the Camino de Santiago that the Catholic Church has created a separate 'personal' category for those who complete the trek but belong to a separate religion or are motivated by secular reasoning.⁸⁷ Luik found that while pilgrims could begin the trek to Santiago with certain religious beliefs or without any, they might change along the way because pilgrimage "is not about stasis and being but about movement and becoming."⁸⁸ In this way, pilgrimage offers an ideal space for applied theology. The

⁸⁶ Elo Luik, Pp. 23.

⁸⁷ Ibid. pp. 26.

⁸⁸ Ibid. pp. 26.

pilgrim's body is the ritual site of the ongoing pilgrimage. Additionally, the pilgrim exists in a continual liminal space of exploration, in which an array of possible narratives and endings can occur without a predetermined script.

In the space of possibility, between the beginning of a pilgrimage and the destination, is an arena through which religious meaning can be recovered, reconfigured, co-opted, or let go. This arena is beyond the reach of any official institution or social structure. It is also, as Victor Turner points out, inherently anti-structural and communal. Walking on a shared path toward a common goal often results in a shared bodily experience and phenomenological engagement. This shared experience, whether in semi-solitude or within a group, is a "very rich yet non-confrontational way of being with other people."⁸⁹ Engaging with others along a pilgrimage route means that, while a community is created, the individual remains autonomous within that community. In this way, pilgrimage is a site for assembly and gathering rather than a merger of people into a one-dimensional unit.

Within the narratives encountered on The Way, Luik reports of two common themes: narratives of transformation and narratives of suffering for the individual. Meaning could only be determined if both physical realities were embodied while on the trek. Both suffering and transformation were seen to affect the other. A sort of self-ascribed penitential journey occurs before the pilgrim reaches the goal, the shrine site, where the Church has promised official forgiveness of sin. The physical act of walking 500 hundred miles through mountains, valleys, and cities, while exposed to the elements orients individual attention toward the continual present moment. Suffering, which accumulates over the long arduous trek, demands the absolute attention of the pilgrim and requires that the pilgrim choose to transcend the normal script of avoiding injury. The pilgrim instead earns to embrace hardship and the ritual actions required to

do so, such as the daily washing and dressing of wounds and blisters. In a very organic way the individual body is transformed. On average, Luik noted that the pilgrim trekking to Santiago walked at least twenty-five kilometers per day while carrying about ten percent of their body weight.⁹⁰ The journey of the pilgrim may occur along the geography of the French border and the Northern coast of Spain, but the actual pilgrimage site is within the physical body of the pilgrim. A saying among pilgrims on the way notes "no bus can take you to the real Santiago, you can only walk."⁹¹ Though the Catholic Church regularly offers a mass for all pilgrims when reaching the grave of St. James, the church recognizes a specific importance for the Camino de Santiago apart from other pilgrimages. For this pilgrimage in particular, it is the more so than the arrival, which is important. This is why the Church offers forgiveness of sins to pilgrims who walk the entire way to Santiago for religious purposes and not for pilgrims who choose to use a bike or bus. The journey to Santiago is an official, Church-supported narrative, which is made clear through the vast amount of Christian writings that discuss the pilgrimage and the miracles that have occurred along the route to Saint James's grave on the Galician coast.

In "Holy Movement and Holy Place: Christian Pilgrimage and the Hajj," Robin M. Taylor delves deeply into the meaning behind the body as a pilgrimage site. Taylor describes the phenomenon of embodied meaning as such: pilgrimage fuses the "concepts of holy place and holy movement to inform the faithful of 'where they are' and 'where they are going' within the sacred traditions of religion."⁹² In her essay, Taylor determines meaning through an ambiguous dialectic between religious scripts, specifically between Christianity

⁸⁹ Ibid. pp. 27.

⁹⁰ Ibid. pp. 30

⁹¹ Ibid. pp. 31

⁹² Taylor, pp. 262

and Islam. By evoking religious pluralism in her comparative theological writings, Taylor accesses a narrative, which more accurately reflects the liminal space of pilgrimage and current theological discourse. Sacred space, as exemplified in the essay, is a matter of geography and the body. John Paul the II wrote of sacred space as a place where the body is able to encounter the Divine in a way that is more intense than could be experienced in a normal or common situation, such as found during pilgrimage.⁹³ Pilgrimage, as Victor Turner expresses in *Process, Performance and Pilgrimage*, is a way of comprehending through bodily experience what we could only point at with language. The voyage of the pilgrim is "to a far place in order to understand a familiar place better."⁹⁴ The Reverend Scott O'Brien writes about identifying as a 'post-modern pilgrim' seeking a method for embodied theological thought. According to O'Brien, holiness within the Christian faith "cannot be restricted to a particular time or place."⁹⁵ Pilgrimage for O'Brien is about a returning to the holiness, a reverting back to the simplicity of attentive embodied theological experience. This returning validates religion for O'Brien and cultivates a reflective faith.

The narrative of a pilgrimage is one of attentive, repetitive, enduring ritual. On The Way to Santiago, the pilgrim will endure walking a minimum of 500 miles from St. Jean, France to the city of Santiago, Spain. Over the weeks, in rain or under the hot Spanish sun, the pilgrim will move steadily and slowly toward their goal. Each day the pilgrim will rise, dress, and walk before reaching modest pilgrims hostel established by the local church. Throughout the course of this journey, the rituals required for continued walking will often be the same but the days will change and each day will bring newer revelations. Unlike

⁹³ Ibid. pp. 264

⁹⁴ Howes, pp. 136

⁹⁵ Luik, Pp. 36.

sacramental worship that "situates the individual as a member of a hierarchically organized institution," pilgrimage offers the participant an autonomous experience in a communal setting.⁹⁶ Within this context, unrestrained theological thinking occurs and the pilgrims established relationship to religious ritual is not a contractual one but an accessible and engaging liminal experience.⁹⁷

⁹⁶ O'Brien, Pp. 39.

⁹⁷ Ibid. Pp. 45.

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