

THE USE OF POETRY AS A PEDAGOGICAL STRATEGY IN RELIGION EDUCATION TO ENGENDER A SENSE OF WONDER, CONTEMPLATION AND INSIGHT¹

A word that is increasingly used in the context of Australian Catholic religious education is "formation". It appears to have come into prominence following the Pope's comments, in February 1999, on the less-than-buoyant state of the Australian church as it entered the new millennium. Amongst their published statement in response to this Papal report, the Australian Catholic Bishops (ACBC), under the heading of *Education and Evangelization*, used the word formation repeatedly (ACBC, 1998). It appears as a type of unifying theme in all their listed areas of concern. It moves without elaboration nor modification through the areas of "Preparation for the Priesthood", where it is discussed under the sub-heading of "Formation", to "Tertiary Education" under the sub-heading "Formational Purpose" and finally to "Education in Catholic Schools" where it appears under the sub-heading "Formation of Lay Teachers". In this latter statement concerning Catholic schools mention is made of the religious formation of school students and that "all staff both Catholic and non-Catholic, should support [such] . . . religious formation . . . [along with] the educational goals of the school".

This recent emphasis on a type of stand-alone "religious formation" with its accompanying notion of moulding student's thinking is an approach that tends to dismiss wider educational factors as irrelevant. These factors include the unique generational qualities of school students, the socio-cultural world in which they live, and innovative educational practice. The danger with this type of approach, if it has a hidden coercive agenda, is that students, who have been encouraged in other subjects to be active and independent learners, will not be interested, nor care to participate, in what this approach has to offer. Historically, it is an emphasis that marks a distinct shift from approximately ten years ago when the encyclical *The Religious Dimension of Education in a Catholic School* was published. This encyclical presents the balanced notion of "integral formation" and states, categorically, that the aim of the school is "knowledge" and clarifies its position with the following remarks (Congregation for Catholic Education, 1990, # 69):

A school has as its purpose the student's integral formation. Religious instruction, therefore, should be integrated into the objectives and criteria which characterize a modern school . . . it should seek appropriate interdisciplinary

links with other course material so that there is coordination between human learning and religious awareness. Like other course work, it should promote culture, and it should make use of the best educational methods available to schools today (#70).

In this paper I will present a case for the integration of poetry into the religious education or religion studies program for upper secondary students as a pedagogical strategy in spiritual awareness to engender a sense of wonder, contemplation, and insight in the curriculum. I have chosen poetry for this strategy for several reasons: for one, poems are a creative, culturally-engaging art form, a form of spiritual expression, which allows teachers to avoid talking about spiritual awareness in the abstract; secondly, unlike other artistic mediums such as sculpture or dance and so forth, poems can be presented in the classroom exactly as they left the pen of the poet; and thirdly, most students have some familiarity with the expressive qualities of words.

As a diverse and at times conflicting body of writing surrounds the topic of spirituality and spiritual development it is incumbent on writers in this area to define exactly what they mean by these terms. For the purpose of this paper, I wish to avoid the term spirituality, and certainly spiritual development, altogether and work with the more general term spirit. And, importantly, because I'm concerned with poetry, to define spirit as a kind of awareness experience that can be intuitively felt through reading certain poems that capture a moment of epiphany. Not all poems are concerned with this type of subject matter, for poems are as diverse as human experience itself; and not all poets are able to convey the power of an epiphanic moment in their poems.

An Epiphanic Moment

The Polish poet Czeslaw Milosz in his work, *A Book of Luminous Things*, describes an epiphany as:

an unveiling of reality. What in Greek was called *epiphaneia* meant the appearance, the arrival of a divinity among mortals or its recognition under a familiar shape of man or woman. Epiphany thus interrupts the everyday flow of time and enters as one privileged

moment when we intuitively grasp a deeper, more essential reality hidden in things or persons (Milosz, 1966, p. 3).

And it is in poems of an epiphanic nature, that “unveil reality”, that a sense of wonder, contemplation and insight can begin to be engendered in readers. It is also through this type of artistic experience that sacred art and much of religious liturgy can be ‘entered into’ (and not simply seen as illustrative devices), for these forms of religious expression are essentially epiphanic.

In choosing to teach about spirit as an awareness experience that can come from reading poetry, teachers can supplement the use of conceptual imagery – such as “spirit is the ground or depth of our being” – with a felt experience. For some students this type of imagery can give the unfortunate impression that spirit is an aloof and passive, quasi-mystical “object” and that the goal of spirituality is to enter into a type of therapeutic mental connection with this “object”. However, some conceptual definitions of spirit can be helpful as initial guides to understanding. For instance, Meister Eckhart’s who defines spirit as “something in the soul which is uncreated and uncreatable” (Smith, 1976, p. 87) and, more recently, that of the director of the World Community of Christian Meditation, the Benedictine monk Laurence Freeman who describes spirit in more mystical terms that highlight its all-pervasive nature:

Spirit, however, is neither abstract nor merely interior. Teilhard de Chardin calls it ‘matter incandescent’. It is nonspatial, nontemporal, polymorphous. It is as much within as outside, as much, male as female. To be here and everywhere at the same time is like being nowhere always. . . .

Space and time – even our most valued spiritual or mental ‘experiences’ – are metaphors for spirit, forms of the formless. They are invested with spirit and become significant only when we perceive this (Freeman, 2000, pp. 175-176).

The crucial dimension that I wish to add to both Eckhart and Freeman’s definition is that spirit is essentially creative and it shows its presence, so to speak, in what are called epiphanic moments. If poets can aesthetically capture such moments in their writing then their poems stand not only as records of such events occurring but also as potential opportunities for readers to experience, vicariously, epiphanic moments for themselves. Through the actions of the poet the formless spirit

is given poetic form and then offered to the reader. For the reader, the poetic form becomes the medium through which, or the site at which, this original moment is reenacted.

The world’s great and time-honoured poetry is first and foremost epiphanic and gives accessible expression in each particular age and culture to such perennial, spiritual values as truth, love, purity, and beauty. In this regard poetry is inherently sacred. According to Fabre d’Olivet, the word “poetry” does not simply mean “making” as is commonly interpreted from its Greek, but goes back to the Phoenician language where it is derived from two roots: the first meaning “mouth, voice, language, discourse; and [the second] a superior being, a principle being, figuratively God” (Fabre d’Olivet, 1995, p. 14). But, as Freeman remarks, such epiphanic moments, or “valued spiritual experiences” as he calls them – which reading poetry affords – depends on the reader’s ability to “perceive” them. And this, in turn, depends upon an understanding of what constitutes a poetic experience, which is now what I wish to explore using some contemporary poems by way of illustration.

Poetic Experience and Intentionality

Consider *The Gift* by the Irish poet Brendan Kennelly:

It came slowly.
Afraid of insufficient self-content
Or some inherent weakness in itself
Small and hesitant
Like children at the top of stairs
It came through shops, rooms, temples,
Streets, places that were badly lit.
It was a gift that took me unawares
And I accepted it.
(Kennelly, 1990, p. 15)

How does a reader approach such a naïve, nearly Haiku-like poem such as this? How is it to be read? One useful idea that provides an insight into the nature of poetic experience is the idea of intentionality, which underpins the new educational practice of constructionism. According to Michael Crotty:

The root stem of [intentionality] is the Latin *tendere*, which means ‘to tend’ – in the sense of ‘moving towards’ or ‘directing oneself to’. Here in-tending is not about choosing or planning but *reaching out into* (just as ‘ex-tending’ is about *reaching out from*) . . . (Crotty, 1998, p. 44)

Later, Crotty further adds:

Experiences do not constitute a sphere of subjective reality separate from, and in contrast to, the objective realm of the external world . . .

In the way of thinking to which intentionality introduces us, such a dichotomy between the subjective and the objective is untenable. Subject and object, distinguishable as they are, are always united. It is this insight that is captured in the term 'intentionality' (p. 45).

In this light, intentionality provides a way of knowing, an epistemology, which, like all epistemologies, decides the relationship between the knower and the known and ultimately determines a way of living in the world. For, as Parker Palmer points out, epistemologies are not "bloodless abstractions; the way we know has powerful implication for the way we live" (Palmer, 1987). In the form of poetic epistemology, which I'm outlining, the act of knowing is the act of intentionality, and what is known, in the form of an awareness experience, is the presence of spirit. Furthermore, this form of epistemology provides a means for people to feel connected with each other and with their environment and to grow potentially into a caring, spiritual community.

Too often as a culture we have downplayed the importance of this kind of knowledge and relegated it to the margins as unproductive. Yet successful and indeed productive communities are built on this kind of shared spiritual knowledge, otherwise they don't last. In contrast, the present mainstream and dominating epistemologies, those operating out of psychological subjectivism or empirical objectivism can leave individuals feeling isolated.

In poetry, the act of intentionality is a creative act and gives birth to, or constructs, the poem. It could be argued that poems thus created, using Crotty's words, are: "subject and object distinguishable" yet "united". Epiphanic poems, in particular, are perfect examples of intentionality in practice; they illustrate its case. What epiphanic poems reveal is neither the psychological world of the poet – that would be subjectivism – nor the outer world of external things – that would be objectivism – but rather a glimpse, in Milosz's words, of "a deeper, more essential reality hidden in things or persons". This glimpse is discovered in an act of deeply penetrative intentionality and provides a type of spiritual, experiential knowledge, as opposed to a conceptual knowledge, for which poets have always been the custodians.

In the example of *The Gift*, Kennelly is able to reach-out-into a moment – an epiphanic moment –

where he is personally called by spirit and his poem is emblematic of that occurrence. It is a poem about a poet answering the spiritual call to be a poet. It is a poem, in other words, about vocation, of spirit calling him, "unawares", to be responsive to what he has been chosen to do in life, to which he freely answers at the conclusion of his poem– yes: "And I accepted it". Kennelly's soft image of small children at the top of stairs is not just an objective image that he has plucked out of his mind, but it comes out of his deep responsiveness to the epiphanic moment, and it re-presents the true character of that moment. Because of its integrity, this resonating poetic image allows the reader to be like the poet and to reach-out-into and be touched by Kennelly's original experience. When this occurs it can be described as an awareness experience, and felt proof of spirit's presence.

Another epiphanic poem of a more impersonal spiritual encounter is by the Australian poet Kevin Hart, entitled, *Facing the Pacific at Night*:

Driving east, in the darkness between two
stars
Or between two thoughts, you reach the
greatest ocean,
That cold expanse the rain can never net,

And driving east, you are a child again –
The web of names is brushed aside from
things.
The ocean's name is quietly washed away

Revealing the thing itself, an energy,
An elemental life flashing in starlight.
No word can shrink it down to fit the
mind,

It is already there between two thoughts,
The darkness in which you travel and
arrive,
The nameless one, the surname of all
things.

The ocean slowly rocks from side to side,
A child itself, asleep in its bed of rocks,
No parent there to wake it from a dream,

To draw the ancient gods between the
stars.
You stand upon the cliff, no longer cold,
And you are weightless, back from the
thrust

And rush of birth when beards of blood
are grown;
Of outside time, as though you had just
died
To birth and death, no name to hide
behind,

No name to splay the world or burn it whole.

The ocean quietly moves within your ear
And flashes in your eyes: the silent place

Outside the world we know is here and now,

Between two thoughts, a child that does not grow,

A silence undressing words, a nameless love.

(Hart, 1995, p. 116)

This is an epiphanic experience on a grand scale, which Hart captures in all its sublimity. Where Kennelly's epiphanic experience is like a whisper, Hart's experience is like some dark-sounding that exposes a mythic abyss where before even life has begun to stir. In many ways, it is reminiscent of Lao Tzu's profound opening lines in the *Tao Te Ching*, the sacred text of Taoism, in which the Tao, the divine spiritual presence, is symbolised as an infinite expanse of water:

The tao that can be told
is not the eternal Tao.

The name that can be named
is not the eternal Name.

The unnameable is the eternally real.
Naming is the origin
of all particular things.

Free from desire, you realize the mystery.
Caught in desire, you see only
manifestation . . .

(Novak, 1995, pp. 146-147)

Hart's lines are drawn from the same contemplative well as the *Tao Te Ching*. "Contemplative" in the sense outlined by the American poet Denise Levertov: "To contemplate comes from *'templum*, temple, a place, a space for observation, marked out by the augur.' It means not simply to observe, to regard, but to do these things in the presence of a god" (Levertov, 1973, p. 8). Hart's style of contemplation is characterised by an act of negation. For instance, in his poem, it is expressed as a negation of naming, "The ocean's name is quietly washed away", or a negation of thinking, "It is already there, between two thoughts, / The darkness in which you travel and arrive". What is left is an experience of wonder that pierces through all of one's seeming securities of naming and thinking into the pure, intentionally-perceived space of spirit. For the reader who can dwell in these words with the same contemplative focus as they were written, then as with *The Gift*, an awareness experience is engendered which gives a

felt proof, a certain kind of knowledge of a spiritual presence. This presence is more than the play of words on a page, which some post-modern literary theorists insist is what's happening, but rather represents the play of spirit in human life, which can be mysteriously captured in poetry and art in general, and indeed this is one of the central reasons why poetry and art exist.

One final poem that I wish to explore is by the American poet May Sarton, *We Sat Smoking at a Table . . .* (1935):

We sat smoking at a table by the river
And then suddenly in the silence someone
said,

'Look at the sunlight on the apple tree
there shiver:

I shall remember that long after I am
dead.'

Together we all turned to see how the tree
shook,

How it sparkled and seemed spun out of
green and gold,

And we thought that hour, that light and
our long mutual look

Might warm us each someday when we
were cold.

And I thought of your face that sweeps
over me like light,

Like the sun on the apple making a lovely
show,

So one seeing it marvelled the other night,
Turned to me saying, 'What is it in your
heart? You glow.' –

Not guessing that on my face he saw the
singular

Reflection of your grace like fire on snow
And loved you there.

(Sarton, 1995, p. 3)

What is a remarkable feature of this poem is that the poet is describing an incident in which the luminous beauty of her own face heralds an epiphanic moment for someone else: "So one seeing it marveled the other night, / Turned to me saying, 'What is it in your heart? You glow.' – / Not guessing that on my face he saw the singular / Reflection of your grace like fire on snow – / And loved you there". This could be described as an epiphanic moment of charismatic presence, of human radiance, of a transfer of spirit specifically through another person. According to John O'Donohue, "A charismatic presence is one that inspires people . . . In some ways", he adds, "the luminosity in the person is an aura that tangibly reaches out and affects others" (O'Donohue, 2000, p. 94). This is a description close to Milosz's definition of epiphany given earlier thus suggesting

their similarity. And here again, as with the other examples, Sarton's poem of this epiphanic moment discloses a presence of spirit that is perceived as an awareness experience, as a kind of experiential knowledge, in the consciousness of the reader.

Conclusion

Too often the word spirit is ignored and the word spirituality, as something we do, takes its place. This doing is usually expressed as a self-centred search for the meaning of life. But a search for the meaning of life has to start with the awareness of life itself and what lies at the heart of being alive. What is the meaning of the cosmos, of trees, and nature; what's the meaning of love, of being courageous? To arrive at a conceptual answer to these questions is to conjointly arrive at the realisation that every possible answer is limited (and even then plagued with uncertainty) and always bordered by an infinite unknown. Nevertheless, philosophers and theologians continue to do battle with these questions and well they should. But there is another kind of knowledge, a more primal knowledge, which, as I've defined it, is an awareness experience, an experiential knowledge, which deals with the wonder of life and being alive, and may express its findings in poetry.

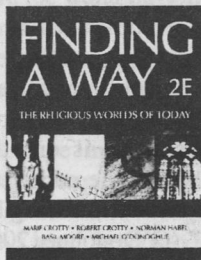
Teachers owe it to students to present the life that is inherent in every subject they teach. This is a foundational principle of good education. In using epiphanic poetry in religion education classes, teachers are able to engender in students a sense of wonder, contemplation and insight and it is hoped an awareness of the spiritual dimension not only in life, but also in that which permeates religious traditions and sustains their life.

¹ The term "religion education" incorporates both the objective studies of religion approaches and the enfaithing religious education approaches.

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FINDING A WAY: THE RELIGIOUS WORLDS OF TODAY (2nd ed.)

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