

*“I learn by going where I have to go”
Initiatory Turnings in Poetry, Philosophy,
and Religion*

(presented as the Annual Poetics Lecture of the Helena
[MT] Festival of the Book, Holter Museum of Art,
October 2006)

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For man has closed himself up, till he sees all things
thro’ narrow chinks of his cavern.

Blake

There are times we are so lost, so darkened, that we risk even forgetting we have forgotten. George Oppen writes: “How have we forgotten / That which is clear, we / Dwindle, but that I have forgotten / Tortures me.”¹ Where then to turn.

Theodore Roethke’s “The Waking” is a poem whose oscillating words seem to call the author who composes them to a clearing at once outward and inward. Perhaps, as poets from Mallarmé through Geoffrey Hill have taught, well-sounded words turn out to know more than we know, to see more than we see, inviting us to follow them as Ferdinand follows Ariel’s song:

I wake to sleep, and take my waking slow.
I feel my fate in what I cannot fear.

I learn by going where I have to go.

We think by feeling. What is there to know?
I hear my being dance from ear to ear.
I wake to sleep, and take my waking slow.

Of those so close beside me, which are you?
God bless the Ground! I shall walk softly there,
And learn by going where I have to go.

Light takes the Tree; but who can tell us how?
The lowly worm climbs up a winding stair;
I wake to sleep, and take my waking slow.

Great Nature has another thing to do
To you and me; so take the lively air,
And, lovely, learn by going where to go.

This shaking keeps me steady. I should know.
What falls away is always. And is near.
I wake to sleep, and take my waking slow.
I learn by going where I have to go.²

This subtle villanelle moves like an initiation, a spiritual exercise, or a morning prayer recited over the course of a year. Roethke, so often lost and disoriented in life, in this poem composes a space of wonder that is a space of patience, balanced between inward poise

and outward presence. It is a space to which this poem would take us with all the sureness of touch with which “light takes the tree” and the speaker “takes his waking slow.” The poem is deeply marked by Wordsworthian pastoral. Wonder and poise—and the widening of being they bring—are the substance of the meditation. “Come forth into the light of things,” a voice says in a poem of Wordsworth’s, and this seems to be the sort of light invoked in Roethke’s poem as well. The paradoxical first refrain—“I wake to sleep, and take my waking slow”—quietly alludes to the death toward which a life lived in the open of freedom unfolds. At the same time it recalls the romantic fascination with a border between sleeping and waking, or a border where sleeping, traditionally a figure for spiritual death, becomes a figure for heightened life and vision. Yet it is not the ecstatic Keatsian version of this condition, evoked in “Ode to a Nightingale,” but the serene Wordsworthian version, evoked in “Tintern Abbey,” that Roethke’s poem recalls. In “Tintern Abbey” Wordsworth speaks of

that blessed mood
 In which the burthen of the mystery,
 In which the heavy and the weary weight
 Of all this unintelligible world
 Is lightened:—that serene and blessed mood,
 In which the affections gently lead us on,
 Until, the breath of this corporeal frame,

And even the motion of our human blood
 Almost suspended, we are laid asleep
 In body, and become a living soul:
 While with an eye made quiet by the power
 Of harmony, and the deep power of joy,
 We see into the life of things.

The speaker of Roethke’s poem perhaps remains more bodily present than the trance-like speaker of this passage, yet Wordsworth’s vision nevertheless haunts Roethke’s. These are both poems that search for a spiritual independence anchored in a luminous connection to things. This is the condition in which Heraclitus’ ambiguous assertion that “character is fate” becomes not something fearful (as in the case of Oedipus) but something affirmative (as in the case of Wordsworth himself), permitting one “to feel one’s fate in what he cannot fear,” to dwell in the transient without any irritable reaching after fact and reason. Confidence then comes and turns to glide. The second refrain—“I learn by going where I have to go”—is a variation on the romantic and in particular Wordsworthian theme of an organic journey of life where it is the spirit of the journey itself, not the destination, that matters.

The poem traces an expanding movement of participatory attention. In the first two stanzas the speaker describes his awakening to the whole, to the

“fate” toward which he begins to move without fear and the “being” he hears “dance from ear to ear.” This is Roethke’s lyrical version of what the ancient stoics called “the discipline of desire,” or *amor fati*, the affirmation of one’s participation in the whole. Yet in these stanzas it is as if the speaker were alone in the world. In the next two stanzas his attention moves outward, toward those at his side, first in an address to an unspecified “you,” then in a blessing of the Ground and the Air, the descending light and the climbing worm. This is perhaps Roethke’s eccentric version of what the ancient stoics called “the discipline of action,” a clarified relation with others. The calm wonder of the opening stanzas unfolds into a renewed sympathy with all that lives, as though vital attention were a ground of generosity. In the fifth stanza, the third movement of the poem, the speaker affirms the power of Nature as teacher and force, the riddling source of both his formative journey in freedom and his fateful approach to approaching death. The speaker and the reader alike, “you and me,” are told to “take the lively air,” as in the previous stanza “light takes the tree,” as throughout the poem the speaker “takes his waking slow.” Which path to take, we often ask, unsure finally whether it is we who take the path or the path that takes us. Spirit and air rhyme in this place of wonder.

The final stanza describes both this state of being and the very activity of composing this echoing poem.

It clearly evokes the speaker’s intuition of a calm that steadies him as he touches it, a presence that abides as he walks with it in the open. At the same time it refers to the composed oscillations of this villanelle itself, the refrain lines and the first two lines of the stanza coming together in a fiction of form that embraces the whole of this spiritual exercise. This is Roethke’s deft version of what the ancient stoics called “the discipline of assent,” a reflective measuring of the soundness of what one is saying. “This shaking keeps me steady. I should know.” The shaking or oscillating movement of this poem holds the speaker in the space of poise it composes. He “should know” because, after all, he is the poet writing it into being, invoking it, though presumably this wry statement means, too, that he should make an effort to embody it as wisdom in a life outside the poem that is otherwise all too unsteady: if the poem is a spiritual exercise, not just a well-made object in a book, then both author and reader are meant to draw its shape of spirit into their lives beyond the poem. “What falls away is always. And is near.” In life, we’re likely to say, this is untrue, since in life what falls away is lost, is never, is far, however intently we attempt to retain it in memory. In a metrical and rhyming poem, however, and particularly in a villanelle, this affirmation is literally true. The recurring iambic beat, the recurring iambic pentameter line, the two recurring rhymes on “slow” and “fear” (each becoming a half-rhyme in the middle

of the poem, then a full rhyme again at the end), the frequent internal rhymes and alliterations, and the recurring refrain lines: all these “figures of sound” at once fall away and stay near, recede into the past and return in the unfolding present of the poem. God bless the Ear. “What falls away is always. And is near.” It is as though the poem were exploring a power of recovery at work in the very echoing of patterned language. And the magic this spell would cast, no doubt, lies in the suggestion that this sort of composition in art could become a composition in life, an actual forming of composure, a spiritual practice available from day to day, even in those passages of life far from this place of patient openness. So the last two lines of the poem, placing the refrains side by side, evoke at one and the same time a fiction of spiritual orientation and a fiction of poetic practice. “I wake to sleep, and take my waking slow”: I awaken to the mystery of the whole, including the certainty of my coming death, in a condition of wonder that involves embracing the gift of what is transiently there, while at the same time I awaken to the mystery of poetry, the play of words forming patterns, with all the attention to sound this art requires. “I learn by going where I have to go”: life is a sequence of guesses and errors that guide the spirit supple enough to weave them into a deepened awareness, as a poem is a sequence of words that move in part as guesses guided by sound, shaped by the lively

ear that learns by going where it has to go. Patience and poise, care and wonder, are the way of a grounded levitation in life as in poetry. And why would anyone believe this? The poem is a spiritual exercise showing that any such passage is a question of faith and practice. In the life of faith we learn by going where we have to go. “Pay attention to how you listen,” Jesus tells his disciples, for “the measure you give will be the measure you get” (Luke 8.18).³

To listen far is to see and walk otherwise. The roots of lyric, Northrop Frye writes, are *riddle* (or image, figure, metaphor, disclosive shift of perspective) and *charm* (or echo, spell, rhythm, disclosive play of sound). Roethke’s “The Waking” sounds these sources to their depths. All is spaciousness in this region where riddle, spell, and experience inhabit one another. Roethke has composed what Rilke in the first of his *Sonnets to Orpheus* calls a “temple deep inside [our] hearing.” According to Rilke’s vision of the amplitude of transient life disclosed in words, it is through the inwardness of hearing that the outward rising of a tree is felt in all its presence. “The tune is space,” and we are “ourselves in the tune as if in space,” Wallace Stevens writes in “The Man with the Blue Guitar,” presenting a figure of sounded outwardness exactly complementary to Rilke’s figure of sounded inwardness. It is a passage into this space of “the unimpeded and the interpenetrating” that Roethke voices in “The

Waking.” The poem is a spiritual exercise, an initiation, a meditative sounding, a going into the world while going through a field of words. We go on faith. We learn by going, and talking, where we have to go.⁴

“The poem in itself is a ceremony of initiation,” Charles Tomlinson says in a short essay written to accompany his poem “Swimming Chenango Lake,” and this well describes the way his own poems turn acts of attention into ceremonies of discovery.⁵ He suggests, too, that “living as we do in an age of demolition,” we tend to be impatient with ceremony and so impatient with lyric poems. One might recall in this respect Robert Frost’s deceptively simple “Directive,” an initiatory poem that on one level ironically suggests that the ceremonial movement of so many modern lyric poems is little more than the play of a child, an elegiac anachronism, a pastoral nostalgia for something long vanished from our hurried high-tech society. At the same time, however, “Directive” affirms Tomlinson’s perspective, suggesting that if this movement so common in the lyric is in one sense merely nostalgic play, it is in another sense a zone in which discoveries do take place, shaped by the ancient turnings characteristic of poetry: the patterning of sound in echoes at once recurring and surprising, and the turning of meaning through semantic indirections. For these turnings of language are expressions of turnings of the spirit. Going beyond his own irony, Frost hints that

in poetry, as in religion or philosophy, the turning at stake will have a power proportionate to the quality of attention, spirit, and faith that is brought to it. That is what Jesus teaches his disciples in the passage in Mark to which Frost’s poem alludes (a passage I’ll return to below). The motion of discovery would seem to require a faith, however precarious at times, that one is moving toward a source of value—a source of which, at the outset, one has only a premonition. “The person who gets close enough to poetry,” Frost writes elsewhere, “is going to know more about the word *belief* than anybody else knows, even in religion nowadays.”⁶

A traditional initiation involves both an outward discovery of a transformative source and an inward discovery of an otherwise dormant dimension of the self. This twofold discovery, further, typically demands a purgative movement through all that imprisons or undoes us: demands, then, a genuine engagement with our finitude, error, guilt, and mortality. Why has this sort of initiatory search had such a distinctive place in the tradition of the modern lyric? Surely it is not *specific* to the lyric—it is found in other cultural forms as well. Yet it does have a particularly prominent place in the lyric. There would seem to be at least three reasons for this.⁷

First, this initiatory movement is vital to the way romantic, modernist, and contemporary poetics work as practices of resistance akin in their stance to

existentialist orientations in modern philosophy. It is a commonplace, but an important one, that modern poetries have sought to evade and surpass the abstract flattening of thought so pervasive in modern society. Romantic poets, working with processual theories of knowing and creating, invent the sort of exploratory poetry that Robert Langbaum calls simply “the poetry of experience.” Poems in this mode embody energies of response and imagination without which our ideas become but dull abstractions directing a life of spiritless repetition. Modernist and contemporary poems, with their many tactics of dislocation, at once retain and transform this mode, inventing poems that demand of the reader a step-by-step participation in their compositional processes: it is the searching itself, as much as any particular proposition or conclusion, that is taken to be the life of thought. Designed to resist the reification of language and subjectivity, these poems are meant to be undertaken, undergone, from the inside.⁸

Second, as I will try to suggest in the rest of this essay, this initiatory movement involves a secular rearticulation of patterns of initiation developed in ancient religious and philosophic traditions. The lyric would seem to have affinities with these traditions—affinities all the clearer, I think, if one bears in mind that short lyrics like those I’ve cited in this essay may themselves be emblems of all those longer, more ambitious, more capacious “quest” poems in modern

culture. An initiation or a spiritual exercise is perhaps a compressed version of a quest.

Third, it is my sense that older patterns of initiation travel into modern poetry in part because there is a parallel between the mode of attention to a presence or a promise that any initiatory movement enacts and the mode of attention to the patterning of language that is a defining feature of the lyric. In other words, this movement, in a range of poems, may involve not only an initiation into a domain of the world and a dimension of the self but also an initiation into the texture of language. The movement of searching in this sort of poem (as, finally, in any accomplished poem) involves an exploratory sounding of words themselves. Indeed there is a vital paradox at play in any initiatory movement. In such a movement we are drawn toward a source of value or horizon of promise. Yet along the way we have only premonitions to guide us. And these premonitions are at least as dependent on our *words*—anticipatory guesses occasionally taking the form of riddles—as they are on the *sources* or *horizons* these words are meant to disclose. Deepstep come shining, as C. D. Wright says, invoking the very light and depth she goes toward on faith. We learn by talking where we have to go. It is as though words called us to the realities they disclosed.

Wisdom, the search for the good life, Diotima says, begins in our love for a beautiful body and,

moving along a ladder of love accompanied by a ladder of beautiful speeches, ends in a love of beauty itself: a longing for wholeness, Aristophanes says; a longing for the whole, Socrates says; a longing—Rimbaud, Mallarmé, Roethke say—for where words are taking us.⁹

Is philosophy, too, a kind of initiation? Perhaps. And yet we know, or think we know, that philosophy ever since Plato has defined itself in opposition to the sort of riddling, humming, guessing, troping movement of discovery at work in a poem like “The Waking.” Plato’s attack on poetry in the *Republic*, of course, is directed primarily at epic and tragedy, not at lyric or romance, yet poetry in modern culture has been as ambitious in its own way as epic and tragedy in Plato’s world, so it is worth recalling the criticisms of poetry that Plato makes in this dialogue. He claims, first, that poets compose lies, stories that are untrue. He claims, second, that these powerful stories stir wayward passions in their audience, leading unwary individuals away from both psychic virtue and civic responsibility. Third, he complains that poets present their thought, not in their own voice or person, but through masks or characters behind which they remain hidden. And, finally, he asserts that poets are not concerned to provide grounds or arguments for what they say, whereas philosophers are committed to this task. These are all serious challenges to the work

of poetry. They are also, implicitly, serious challenges to the work of any philosophy that would assume them as defining tasks. In my brief discussion here I wish only to bring out the extent to which Plato, whatever his polemics, conceives of philosophy itself as a kind of initiation, a journey of the searching soul, a transformative conversation in which guessing and going on faith turn out to be of great importance.¹⁰

The greatest of Plato’s middle dialogues—the *Phaedo*, the *Symposium*, the *Republic*, and the *Phaedrus*—are initiatory journeys. At once ironic and dialectical, skeptical and visionary, these dialogues are lyrical manifestoes for philosophy, radiant invitations to the philosophic way of life as the highest way of seeking to live the good life. They can be characterized, further, as philosophic versions of what in literary history we know as romance. They all trace a path of erotic and psychic transformation whereby a self can find its way beyond the cave or prison of darkened perception, conventional opinion, and severe political conflict. Plato’s cave of shadows is the cave of both a psyche and a city driven by chaotic struggles for money, power, prestige, and sex (Plato is a puritan, no doubt, though a subtle puritan, wise in the mysteries of eros). We become what we behold, Blake teaches, and Plato, like Blake, wants to change the horizon of our care. His philosophic romance, as many commentators have noted, involves in part a “rationalizing” transposition

of the ascetic, spiritual, and occasionally ecstatic paths of the Pythagorean, Orphic, Bacchic, and Eleusinian religious movements of his time. The path of transcendence is now to be pursued, not simply through ascetic practices, meditative techniques, or secret rituals, but through a full unfolding of the life of thought in concepts, critical questionings, dialectical surpassings. Conceptual lucidity is to accompany spiritual longing. Each of these middle dialogues provides a different account of the sort of inner turning of the soul required for the philosophic way of life. The search for wisdom is variously shown to begin in the meditation on death, in the erotic love of beauty, in the divine enthusiasm stirred by erotic awakening, and in the disillusioned recognition that those things one has taken to be truths and realities are in fact only shadows. This philosophic turning from a concern with shadows to a concern with true forms of being, as Charles Kahn has shown, demands not only a cognitive turning, though that is of course essential, but also an erotic turning, a transformation of the soul's otherwise unruly appetites and affects. The turning is at once affective, cognitive, and ethical. These dialogues, drawing the reader into small communities of conversational quest, speculatively unfold, as it were, Socrates' claim that "the unexamined life is not worth living," sounding to the depths just this question of existential worth, responding to our fear that our lives might be incoherent, or pointless,

or hopelessly opaque. Yet, again, this invitation to the romance of philosophy is far more ambiguous than one might initially gather on the basis of Plato's attacks on poetry throughout the *Republic*.¹¹

There is not space here to discuss these dialogues in detail. But I'd like at least to take a brief walk through the *Republic*. This dialogue is an exploration of the question of justice; as it unfolds, it turns into an exploration of the soul, the state, the education of the philosopher, the nature of knowledge, and the light of the good, among many other things. The dialogue opens with Socrates' objection to Thrasymachus' "relativist" claim that justice is simply an expression of power, a norm established by those who have the power to shape the ethical and political codes of a given state. Then Glaucon and Adeimantus change the direction of the discussion, raising the question of appearance and reality, showing that this old question, far from being a metaphysical fable invented to plague empiricists, in fact emerges out of the everyday decisions and judgments we make all the time in our relations with others. Why, they ask, should one want not merely *to appear* just but in fact *to be* just? Wouldn't most people, driven by self-interest, be content simply to *seem* just to others? Why would *being* just, in truth, be a good that one should desire for oneself? Socrates refuses to back down: he insists that anytime the soul commits an injustice, in however

disguised a way, it does damage above all to itself: and a full account of the nature of the soul, he claims, will show why this is so. Yet, he then argues, it is easier to see what justice is on a large scale, that of the city, than on a small scale, that of the individual. So he suggests that they all begin by clarifying the nature of the just state before seeking to clarify the nature of the just individual (368e–369a). This leads to the famous account of a state composed of three classes (philosophers, soldiers, and ordinary farmers and craftsmen), each of which classes is correlated with a specific part of the tripartite soul (the rational part, the spirited part, and the desiring part), and with a virtue specific to that part (wisdom, courage, temperance). Justice is said to be the condition of harmony among these different classes or parts. Yet of course this is not an egalitarian harmony. The harmony of justice can be achieved only to the extent that the philosophers govern the other classes, that the virtue of wisdom guides the other virtues, that reason is the unwavering ruler of both state and soul. The education of the philosopher thus becomes a fundamental question.

How is wisdom to be found? This is the question explored in the long discussion of the education of the philosopher that culminates in the analogy of the cave. According to this always relevant story, philosophy, or the love of wisdom, begins in disillusionment, in the recognition that what we have believed to be

truth is in fact a play of illusions to which our desire and thought have been chained. The breaking free of illusions is the first task. Further, as I've already noted, this radical turning of the inner eye of the soul from shadows to true forms, and ultimately to the light of the good, demands a transformation of the entire person. It is this transformation that allows the philosopher to approach, and at least to glimpse, the light of the good, without which glimpse, we are told, a just and wise life is impossible. While the last three books of the dialogue take up important issues—including a typological hierarchy of political regimes and a concluding myth of reincarnation—there is a sense in which the extraordinary searching movement of the dialogue reaches its center with this discussion of dialectical ascent at the end of Book VII. It is with these first seven books in mind that I wish to underline the initiatory and indeed poetic quality of the search for the good life in this dialogue.¹²

In Book IV Socrates acknowledges that the analogy between the city and the soul elaborated throughout the dialogue is an analogy that must initially be taken on faith (435b–e). Yet he assures his companions that the soundness of this analogy can be clarified at a later stage in the dialogue: the structure of the soul is a mystery that can be clearly approached only through the method of dialectic. Later, in Books VI and VII, after many detours, Socrates says that, in

order truly to understand this analogy, one must attain knowledge of the good (504). This knowledge is the *telos* of the education of the philosopher and the practice of dialectic. Yet at the same time Socrates emphasizes that knowledge of the *good itself* exceeds any discursive account (505a, 506e). He thus develops, in place of this *missing account* of the good, three *analogies* of the good: first, the analogy of the two suns (according to which the intelligible light of the good, which allows us to see what is thought, is akin to the sensible light of the sun, which allows us to see the world); second, the analogy of the divided line (according to which *nous*, or genuine insight, exceeds *dianoia*, or discursive thinking); and, third, the analogy of the cave (according to which the philosopher, in a movement through critical disillusion and dialectical ascent, journeys from the dark of mere opinion to the truth seen in the light of the good). Socrates carefully works through these analogies and then poignantly asks: “that there is something *like* this to see—must we not insist on that?” (533a). In a slightly earlier passage he calls his myth of the cave a “surmise” (517cd). This is a nice irony. We are asked to take on faith an analogy that, we are told, will later be conceptually redeemed: later, however, the provisional analogy is clarified through an unfolding of three further analogies. The whole dialogue turns out to be shaped around a subtle play of interconnected analogies. There is thus an *élan* of guess, a turning of trope, at

work in the dialectical quest for truth. This *élan of guess* is linked to both *eros* and the *love of beauty* in the *Symposium*, and to both *eros* and *divine madness* in the *Phaedrus*. Socrates teaches that we learn by going where we have to go. This “going” is at once a longing and a talking: at once a turning of the soul and a following of words in conversation.

This does not mean that Plato returns to a “sophistic” or, as we would say today, a Nietzschean, Foucauldian, or constructivist perspective. Yet it would seem that Plato is not teaching, either, exactly the sort of rationalist foundationalism that he is generally thought to be teaching. Rather, as Stanley Rosen has argued, he maintains a “blurred picture” between a notion of philosophy as mathematical truth (or exact correspondence) and a notion of philosophy as poetic construction (or ungrounded story). Our words neither *simply* represent what is already there, nor *simply* impose what we take to be real upon some broad blank X. Plato suggests, rather, that there are realities to which our words are meant to respond, realities to which our souls turn, but that these can be approached only through the *élan* of guess carefully accompanied by the movement of reflection and discursive elaboration. It is this oscillating border that Plato dwells upon in this dialogue as in his other middle dialogues.¹³

The philosophic initiation undertaken in the *Republic* might be read as a parable about the sort of

initiatory movement at work in a poem like Roethke's "The Waking" or in countless other lyrics that read like initiations or spiritual exercises. Initiatory movements in the lyric enact, in a concentrated way, this dwelling on an oscillating border between an experience of the world and an experience of language. Do not initiatory movements in philosophy—albeit with a decisive emphasis on discursive analysis and elaboration—dwell on this border as well? Are not poets and philosophers alike searching for wisdom, an insight into things that really are, moving along a border between guessing and finding, turning in words and coming upon a world? It may be that we remain wholly alive only insofar as we and our words are always returning to this border. "Without invention," Williams writes in *Paterson*, "the small foot-prints / of the mice under the overhanging / tufts of the bunch-grass will not / appear." Williams, it has been noted, thus recalls at once the contemporary meaning of "invent," to make or construct, and the ancient root of "invent," to come upon or discover. This is the border to which lyric and philosophic initiations awaken us time and again.¹⁴

Roethke, like Rilke, teaches through riddle and spell. Plato, like Hegel, teaches through surmise and expansive conceptualization. Jesus, like the prophets, teaches through parable and vision, through ethical call and command, and, above all, through sheer presence,

charismatic example. Jesus renews the prophetic tradition, so we must begin by taking a step back in time.

The great biblical prophets, in trying to make sense of the crisis of Israel and Judah between the eighth and sixth centuries BCE, recall and reshape the national myth of Exodus. As they see matters, the community is again falling into exile, ruin, a broken spirit; again the people have lost their way; again they are in desperate need of a Moses-like force and a radical turning of the spirit. The concern of the prophets is to illuminate the national crisis and find a crossing through it. Their teaching, taken in a broad sense, includes two major strands.

First, the prophets denounce social injustice, in particular the callous disregard of the unfortunate inseparable from religious and ethical practices grown hypocritical, empty of both inward spirit and outward commitment. They tirelessly call the nation as a whole and each individual to repent, to return to the ways of justice and care commanded by God, to gather themselves anew out of the dispersion of their lives. "Turn, then, and live," as Ezekiel starkly puts it (18.32). Both Abraham Heschel and Martin Buber have emphasized that *teshuvah*, the Hebrew word translated as *repentance*, means above all *returning*: repentance, according to the prophetic teaching, involves not a guilty introspection but a decisive turning around of one's spirit, a radical renewal, for which reason Ezekiel speaks

of the “new heart” and “new spirit” at once demanded by and emerging through this turning (11.19). Only through this turning can a “heart of stone” be turned into a “heart of flesh” (11.19). Yet, too, this ethical teaching is ethical in the broadest sense, for it involves a renewed life lived in relation to a redemptive horizon promising a total transformation of the person, of society, and ultimately of nature itself.¹⁵

The prophets’ ethical teaching, thus, is interwoven with the other major strand of their teaching: a vision of the dialectic of suffering and meaning in an individual or a collective life. On the most archaic level—one that if taken literally can only seem childish to the modern reader—this is simply the teaching that the suffering of the peoples of Israel and Judah is a punishment that their God has imposed on them for disobedience: the pain will cease once they have changed their ways. On a mythopoetic level—one that would powerfully shape all later Jewish, Christian, and secular thought in western culture—this is the visionary teaching that the experience of suffering is potentially a purgatorial passage, a furnace-like burning away of the opaque, which leads to expanded insight, deepened sense of purpose, difficult clarification of spirit, ultimate redemption of self and community. All the visions of a joyous return of Israel to a restored Jerusalem, all the proto-apocalyptic visions of a total transformation of self and society and nature, form an essential pole of

this visionary perspective: for, from this perspective, the suffering turns out to be an educational process within a longer journey whose promised end is redemption. This raises a question that returns wherever a secularized form of this vision returns in modern thought (from, say, Wordsworth to Proust, or from Hegel to Gadamer): is this a descriptive or a prescriptive account of human experience? Clearly it is the latter. For we know that in fact suffering often makes people not wiser and kinder but duller and meaner. Yet this prophetic vision calls each person and the community to a purgatorial passage, a task of assuming the burden of suffering in a spirit of freedom: the demand is to turn the suffering into a deepened spiritual bearing, one open to metamorphic horizons undiscovered in the blinded world of the half-hearted and the stone-hearted.

This is the vision on which Jesus draws several centuries later. Influenced by the apocalyptic currents of late Second Temple Judaism, closer to the Pharasaic movement than is usually acknowledged, he revives the prophetic theme of a radical turning or *metanoia*, the Greek word typically translated as *repentance* in the gospels, meaning above all a *spiritual metamorphosis* or a *turning of the spirit*. Jesus calls the lost and the darkened to an ethical renewal and a crossing toward a coming spiritual kingdom.¹⁶

Jesus, of course, is many things: an exorcist; a healer; a miracle-worker; an apocalyptic teacher of

both the imminent end of history and the emergent kingdom of God; and a courageous martyr who dies for his willingness to live out the implications of his teaching. My concern at this point is not with the Jesus of early Christian communities. It is with the Jesus who speaks as a powerful if eccentric Jewish prophet.

Jesus clearly voices anew the prophetic call for a re-awakening of ethical life through both a spiritual realization and a concrete actualization of ethical principles: this double-concern is perhaps the distinguishing mark of this whole line of teaching. It is fair to say that Jesus places less emphasis than the prophets on the question of social justice, and more emphasis than the prophets on the question of inward renewal, though this is a question of emphasis, not of opposition. Jesus, of course, is wholly concerned to reaffirm the prophetic teaching of love of one's neighbor. And, like the earlier prophets, he discerns a close, corrosive link between the callous heart of stone that has no concern for others and the hollowed-out spiritual life that, in his comparison, is like a white-washed tomb concealing bones and filth. Lovelessness and moralism (or, as Blake puts it, the stance of accusation) go hand in hand. Jesus calls his followers to a totally different life: a concentration on a spiritual kingdom they are to turn toward as though they might live into being its coming reality: a reality where love and vision go hand in hand.

This call to reorient one's life in relation to the promise of eschatological redemption is the second dimension of Jesus' teaching that recalls the earlier prophetic teaching. While Jesus speaks of an end-time of severe suffering to come, he does not, prior to his trial and death, speak out of a sheer crisis of suffering here and now, at least not in the way that Jeremiah and Ezekiel do. He teaches a bearing that involves a different sort of transformative passage through suffering: he calls those he encounters to a radiant unmooredness, an abandonment of all the routines and forms of security they have known, a kind of extravagant trust in spiritual amplitude alone, untied, open to what Ernst Bloch calls the reality of the not yet.¹⁷

It is often through parables that Jesus evokes this coming kingdom and the sort of spiritual commitment it requires. Indeed these parables take one far into both dimensions of his prophetic teaching. The first parable that he tells in the Gospel of Mark, the parable of the sower, is in fact a parable about the point of his teaching in parables (Mark 4.1–20). He says: "Listen! A sower went out to sow. And as he sowed, some seed fell on the path, and the birds came and ate it up. Other seed fell on rocky ground, where it did not have much soil, and it sprang up quickly, since it had no depth of soil. And when the sun rose, it was scorched; and since it had no root, it withered away. Other seed fell among thorns, and the thorns grew up and choked it, and it

yielded no grain. Other seed fell into good soil and brought forth grain, growing up and increasing and yielding thirty and sixty and a hundredfold. [. . .] Let anyone with ears to hear listen!” His puzzled disciples ask him what this means. He does spell it out for them in explicit terms: it is, he says, a parable about the various ways people receive, or fail to receive, the seed-like words of the coming kingdom: the words of the kingdom grow in those who truly embrace them as the seeds of the kingdom itself, like wild mustard, grow in reality.¹⁸ At the same time, deepening the parable, Jesus makes a general and apparently scandalous statement about the purpose of this sort of indirect teaching (this is the passage to which Frost alludes in “Directive”): “He said to them, ‘To you has been given the secret of the kingdom of God, but for those outside, everything comes in parables; in order that “they may indeed look, but not perceive, and may indeed listen, but not understand; so that they may not turn again and be forgiven.” And he said to them, ‘Do you not understand this parable? Then how will you understand all the parables?’” (4.10–13). Is Jesus suggesting that his teaching—like that of so many ancient religious teachers—involves a division between “exoteric” and “esoteric” levels, the former for the uninitiated, the latter for the initiated alone? Perhaps so, at least in a sense, though the question then becomes just what “initiation” might mean in this case. The words immediately

following his explication of the parable suggest that what is at stake is not an initiation by secret instruction but an initiation by response, trust, faith, crossing of spirit: “He said to them, ‘Is a lamp brought in to be put under the bushel basket, or under the bed, and not on the lampstand? For there is nothing hidden, except to be disclosed; nor is anything secret, except to come to light. Let anyone with ears to hear listen!’ And he said to them, ‘Pay attention to what you hear; the measure you give will be the measure you get” (4.21–24). It’s clear he’s not talking about property. The hidden will be disclosed, the secret will be revealed, to those who genuinely listen, to those who in listening genuinely give. What are they to give? Imagination? Spirit? Integrity? Commitment? Northrop Frye writes: “Jesus sometimes speaks of his central doctrine of a spiritual kingdom as a mystery, a secret imparted to his disciples, with those outside the initiated group being put off with parables. It seems clear, however, that the real distinction between initiated and uninitiated is between those who think of achieving the spiritual kingdom as a way of life and those who understand it merely as a doctrine.” We learn by living, by living out, where we have to go.¹⁹

This preparatory parable of parables in the gospels, then, suggests that *participation* in the mystery of “words of power” is a condition of any *illumination* of those words: the energy and openness of spirit given

corresponds to the energy and clarification of spirit given back. Intuitive leap is a pulse of intelligence, expectation a dimension of discovery, passionate openness a moment of freedom. But is this not to risk (whether in a secular or a religious domain) the nightmare of superstition, priestcraft, dogmatism, and fanaticism to which the whole tradition of the enlightenment is opposed? It needn't be so. First, as Frye makes clear, the basic issue is whether one lives in coherence with the words one adopts and speaks, or whether one says one thing and does another. Presumably this is a teaching we can all take to heart: if I talk about a virtue, or a vision, while making no effort to live it, then, this riddle-maker teaches, I not only live an incoherent life but I don't quite know what I'm talking about.²⁰

Further, as Iris Murdoch has argued in a different context, we enter into friendship and romance in much the way we enter into "words of power" or powerful works of art that move us, namely, with wonder and intuition and a large measure of searching faith: this movement of desire and imagination is inseparable from the transformative insights that come to be discovered in these unpredictable relationships. Anselm's famous prayer prefacing his "ontological proof" includes the words: "For I do not seek to understand that I may believe, but I believe in order to understand." Murdoch writes: "*Credo ut intelligam* (I

believe in order to understand) is not just an apologist's paradox, but an idea with which we are familiar in personal relationships, in art, in theoretical studies. I have faith (important place for this concept) in a person or idea in order to understand him or it, I intuitively know and grasp more than I can yet explain. [. . .] Faith (loving belief) and knowledge often have an intimate relation which is not easy to analyse in terms of what is prior to what."²¹

Jesus evokes an initiatory crossing of a sort that illuminates, outside any particular religious context, the élan of faith in any substantive adventure of life. "The measure you give will be the measure you get." Blake read the prophetic books and the gospels as among our greatest parables of poetic faith, of faith in creative power and premonition. We learn by going where we have to go. Going where we have to go, turning through crisis or disillusion, drawn by eros and guess, we begin to see. In *The Gospel of Thomas* Jesus, asked by his disciples when the kingdom is going to come, says: "It is not by being waited for that it is going to come. They are not going to say, here it is, or, there it is. Rather, the kingdom is spread out over the earth, only people do not see it."²²

What would an initiatory lyric sound like if understood as a door to a way of life? Perhaps it would become a long poem, a life-long initiatory quest. "What distinguishes poetry from automatic speech,"

Mandelstam writes, “is that it rouses us and shakes us into wakefulness in the middle of a word. Then it turns out that the word is much longer than we thought, and we remember that to speak means to be forever on the road.” Robert Duncan adds: “surely, everywhere, from every poem, choreographies extend into actual space.”²³

I will now try to bring this all together in a speckled egg of a conclusion. In a late essay Hans Georg Gadamer speaks of “three words” that have shaped our cultural tradition: the word of questioning (philosophy), the word of legend (literature), and the word of promise and reconciliation (religion). The latter, he says, is a word that those of us without religious faith know in the experience of forgiveness, a grace that permits a rebeginning. These words or genres, while distinct from one another, also inhabit one another.²⁴

No doubt they inhabit one another in many ways. Yet perhaps they have often crossed through one another, shaped one another in all their differences, because in some of their fundamental expressions they have all involved a *turning of the spirit*. Philosophy involves a turning from closed-up unfreedom amid shadows to freedom in the open air of speculative thought, unforgettably evoked in Plato’s story of the cave. Religion in the prophetic tradition, interpreting damaged thought and vision as outcomes of a damaged heart and a dispersed will, involves a

turning from a lost and callous heart to the call of a transcendent source, a call of care and transformative promise. Literature, it is true, may be even more difficult than philosophy and religion to characterize in such sweeping terms without falling into absurdity. Yet perhaps Nietzsche’s polemics get at something essential. The early Nietzsche, in *The Birth of Tragedy*, dismisses Socrates as a “theoretical optimist,” a thinker confident that reflection alone will carry us out of our broken condition, and he sets against this philosophic faith the power of tragic literature to reveal to us the sheer bleakness—though also the creative energy—of our ultimately pointless existence. Nietzsche would have us see that, from Sophocles to Shakespeare, we encounter a tragic wisdom that resonantly resists the comic plots and horizons of idealist philosophy, prophetic religion, and the politics of progress. Here, he argues, we are turned from the illusion of an orderly cosmos or a meaningful history to the truth of an abyssal ruin in things. (In the long tradition of initiatory lyrics, this might correspond, not to a poem like “The Waking,” but to all those poems that undertake meditative soundings of death.) Yet this is not the only voice in Nietzsche. All his thought is profoundly shaped by the romantic attempt to translate into secular terms the prophetic passage from despair to hope, from a blocked and damaged life to a renovated life in freedom and the open, a passage that

only a sweep of creative power can bring about. This is the passage from desperate nihilism to visionary affirmation presented in *Zarathustra*. And, even as early as *The Birth of Tragedy*, Nietzsche describes tragic art itself as a creative overcoming of this sort, a joyous affirmation that, dialectically, at once discloses the vertigo of nothing and surpasses the nihilist despair stirred by this disclosure. Is this a tragic or a comic story? Is it Dionysian, prophetic, or, in some strange way, both at once? The turning of romantic and post-romantic art is often a turning from despair to vision, from a blank death-in-life to a discovery of horizons of promise in the face of nothing.

In all “three words” that Gadamer calls to mind, then, the deepest story may be the story of a *turning of the spirit*. Always, these words say, we begin by recognizing that we have lost our way, that we are in a cave, shackled by illusions, dispersed in attachments to pointless idols, eroded by our persistent inertia and despair. Beauty, autumn, a word “eye-deep in air,” the good, “the light of things,” even the sheer wonder of sheer nothing that Whitman felt in the murmur of the sea, come to startle us awake. “I wake to sleep, and take my waking slow.” Our vocation is to walk otherwise, to turn, or, as a poet would say, to trope: to turn our words, and ourselves, through surprising guesses, toward unfamiliar widenings. Deepstep come shining. Take us from this cave. And so philosophy, religion, and poetry

often display an initiatory quality. They are, at their most resonant, exemplary passages of finding a way to begin again, to turn again in life and language. In the words of the first of Blake’s *Songs of Experience*:

Hear the voice of the Bard
Who Present, Past, & Future sees
Whose ears have heard,
The Holy Word,
That walk’d among the ancient trees.

Calling the lapsed Soul
And weeping in the evening dew:
That might controll,
The starry pole;
And fallen fallen light renew!

O Earth O Earth return!
Arise from out the dewy grass;
Night is worn,
And the morn
Rises from the slumberous mass.

Turn away no more:
Why wilt thou turn away
The starry floor
The watry shore
Is giv’n thee till the break of day.²⁵

Notes

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1. Oppen, *New Collected Poems*, 152.
2. Roethke, *The Collected Poems*, 104.
3. This sort of spiritual exercise seems to be one of the things Yeats has in mind when he speaks of the “ceremony” of art. My passing references to ancient stoicism in these pages are drawn from Hadot, *The Inner Citadel*, a study of Marcus Aurelius’ thought.
4. Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism*, 278–81; Rilke, *Ahead of All Parting*, 410–11; Stevens, *The Palm at the End of the Mind*, 135–36; “the unimpeded and the interpenetrating” are words of D. T. Suzuki’s cited in Cage, *Silence*, 46 (Cage in fact speaks of “unimpededness” and “interpenetration”). Rilke himself evokes a sounded outwardness in the first sonnet of Part II of the *Sonnets to Orpheus* (*Ahead of All Parting*,

462–63)—and of course one could well say that this outward space is already evoked in the first sonnet of Part I.

5. Tomlinson, *The Poem as Initiation*, and “Swimming Chenango Lake” in *Collected Poems*, 155.
6. Frost, “Education by Poetry” in *Selected Prose*, 44, and “Directive” in *The Complete Poems*, 520–21.
7. Even a quick historical sketch should serve to suggest the prominence of this type of movement in the modern lyric. At the origins of modern vernacular poetries, troubadours and, in their wake, Renaissance poets of courtly love develop a poetry of displaced prayer that has important parallels with older movements of spiritual search. Later, seventeenth-century devotional poets, as Louis Martz has shown in *The Poetry of Meditation*, shape many of their poems around the threefold movement of Loyola’s spiritual exercises: a passage from an estrangement from God, through an analysis of the causes of this estrangement in the fallen self, to a restored dialogue with God. This pattern is later reinvented

in the romantic and post-romantic “crisis poem,” as M. H. Abrams and Harold Bloom have characterized it, a widespread type of modern poem shaped around a similar threefold movement, though now articulated in secular terms, usually involving a crisis of poetic vocation, and often concluding without any third phase of recovery (other than that implicit in the writing of the poem itself). Further, over the last century a number of poets—including, notably, Montale, Vallejo, and Celan—have revived a poetry of fractured prayer, marked by an apostrophic movement that guides an “I” lost in a place of ruin toward a redemptive “you” sought through this invocatory movement. One could call to mind, as well, a range of other initiatory practices in modern poetry, including, say, those evoked in Keats’ odes, Whitman’s “Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking,” Rimbaud’s voyages into light and the whole in the riddling “charms” of 1872, Mallarmé’s sonnets exploring his encounter with nihilism, Stevens’ clairvoyant late passages into a bare autumn or winter of things, H.D.’s meditative unfoldings of

disclosive words in *Trilogy*, Bishop's intent seashore meditations in *A Cold Spring*, Heaney's purgatorial passages in *Station Island* and *Seeing Things*, or Valente's compressed soundings of death in his last sequences. One could easily extend this list in every direction.

8. For fine discussions of this whole issue, see Abrams, *Natural Supernaturalism* and "The Greater Romantic Lyric"; Langbaum, *The Poetry of Experience*; Altieri, *Painterly Abstraction in Modernist American Poetry* and *Self and Sensibility in Contemporary American Poetry*; Steiner, "On Difficulty"; Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*; Poirier, *The Renewal of Literature*; and Bernstein, "The Causality of Fate: On Modernity and Modernism." I discuss this question in greater detail (and provide exact references) in *The Extravagant*, 25–33.

9. Plato, *The Symposium*. On the romantic exploratory lyric as a version of quest, see Langbaum, *The Poetry of Experience*, and Abrams, *Natural Supernaturalism*. This is closely linked to the whole question of *authenticity* in modern poetry: from the romantic emphasis on *voice* through the modernist emphasis on

style or *technique*. Pound's well-known words are emblematic: "I believe in an 'absolute rhythm', a rhythm, that is, in poetry which corresponds exactly to the emotion or shade of emotion to be expressed. A man's rhythm must be interpretative, it will be, therefore, in the end, his own, uncounterfeiting, uncounterfeitable. [. . .] I believe in technique as the test of a man's sincerity; in law when it is ascertainable; in the trampling down of every convention that impedes or obscures the determination of the law, or the precise rendering of the impulse" (*Literary Essays*, 9). Or, in more general terms, the shaping of the lyric as a kind of initiation or spiritual exercise brings with it three important features of modern poetry: the emphasis on the *searching itself* as the substance of imaginative life; the emphasis on the value of *authenticity* or *genuineness* in this searching movement at both the subjective level (the quality of thought and feeling) and the linguistic level (the quality of patterned sound); and, with the gradual erosion of the transcendent in an increasingly secular culture, the tendency to find in the patterned sound of the poem a space of widening irreducible to conceptual

schematization, a widening figured by Rilke as a *temple inside our hearing* and by Stevens as a *tune in space* that we inhabit. At stake in this last tendency is a recasting of one of the oldest features of lyric language: the incantatory power of words.

10. Plato, *The Republic*, II-III (376d–403c) and X (595a–608b). The irony involved in the third of these criticisms—that dramatic poets fail to speak in their own person—is vast. For of course the exact same charge can be lodged at the Plato of the very dialogue in which the charge is lodged at the poets. The characters and speeches in the dialogue are orchestrated by an author who never himself appears on stage, never himself speaks in his own voice. Why is this irony made so curiously obvious? Perhaps it is a hint that we are to look for subtler ironies at work in Plato's other criticisms of poetry, or in his broader account of what he calls the "ancient quarrel" between philosophy and poetry.

11. Dodds, *The Greeks and the Irrational*, 207–35; Morgan, *Platonic Piety* and "Plato and Greek Religion"; Kahn, *Plato and the Socratic Dialogue*, especially 258–91.

I'm particularly indebted to Kahn's splendid exploration of the quasi-religious nature of Plato's philosophic journey. My characterization of the conversational quest undertaken in these dialogues draws heavily on Howland, *The Republic: The Odyssey of Philosophy*, 34–35 and 54–55. For illuminating explorations of the ancient practice of philosophy as a way of life, see Hadot, *Qu'est-ce que la philosophie antique?* and *Exercices spirituels et philosophie antique*.

12. In describing the radical transformation of the entire person demanded by this turning, I follow the account in Kahn, *Plato and the Socratic Dialogue*, 258–91.

13. Rosen, *The Limits of Analysis*, especially 128 and 149–89, and, on the cave as an allegory not of the city, as is usually claimed, but of the psyche, *Plato's Republic*, 268–75. Rosen suggestively characterizes this interplay of the mathematical and the poetic as an interplay of what Pascal calls *l'esprit de géométrie* and *l'esprit de finesse*. One could recall in this context, too, the famous passage in Plato's *Letter VII* concerning the spark of insight that flashes up only once the long

labor of the dialectical journey has taken place: "it is only when all these things, names and definitions, visual and other sensations, are rubbed together and subjected to tests in which questions and answers are exchanged in good faith and without malice that finally, when human capacity is stretched to its limit, a spark of understanding and intelligence flashes out and illuminates the subject at issue" (*Phaedrus and Letters VII and VIII*, 140). My suggestion is that, in the journey undertaken in *The Republic*, a kindred spark, or what I have called an *élan* of guess, or what Socrates himself calls a practice of "surmise," not only arrives at the end but also guides the journey *all along the way*. Philosophy, Plato teaches, begins in the imprecise pictures and contradictory opinions of everyday life: the philosopher, questioning these and stepping beyond them in order to arrive at gradually clarified definitions gathered in a broader synthetic account, moves toward the truth. Yet Plato also teaches that the way in which one picks up these opinions, the *finesse* or *élan* of guess with which one turns them around or recasts them to set a philosophic conversation in

motion, will have much to do with the way one comes to journey beyond them in the conversation as a whole. Gadamer, following Hegel, has given this teaching a central and illuminating place in his hermeneutic philosophy. One must, as the poets have always taught, listen to where our words have come from and where they are going. "Writing," José Angel Valente says, "involves an attention of all the senses to what the words are perhaps going to say" (*Obra Poética*, Vol. 2, 12).

14. Williams, *Paterson*, 50. On "invention" in Williams, I'm sorry to say, I've not been able to locate a source, though I'm sure I read this long ago in some study of Williams. The late Gillian Rose, in her philosophic memoir *Love's Work*, writes: "This ill-will towards philosophy [she is describing a contemporary tendency] misunderstands the authority of reason, which is not the mirror of the dogma of superstition, but risk. Reason, the critical criterion, is for ever without ground. [. . .] I bring the charge that reason's claim remains unrealised from that transcendent ground on which we all wager, suspended in the air" (127, 159).

15. Heschel, *Between God and Man*, 70, and Buber, *The Prophetic Faith*, 96–154. I draw here also on Heschel, *The Prophets*, 119–20. According to the prophets, Heschel says, “our basic malady is callousness.”

16. On *metanoia* as “spiritual metamorphosis,” see Frye, *The Great Code*, 130. For a suggestive account of Jesus as a Jewish holy man, see Vermes, *The Religion of Jesus the Jew*.

17. See Bloch, *The Principle of Hope*. The open to which Jesus calls his disciples is beautifully evoked in his words encouraging us to abandon our usual anxiety: “Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat, or about your body, what you will wear. For life is more than food, and the body more than clothing. Consider the ravens: they neither sow nor reap, they have neither storehouse nor barn, and yet God feeds them. Of how much more value are you than the birds! And can any of you by worrying add a single hour to your span of life? If then you are not able to do so small a thing as that, why do you worry about the rest? Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow: they neither toil nor spin; yet I tell you, even Solomon in all

his glory was not clothed like one of these. But if God so clothes the grass of the field, which is alive today and tomorrow is thrown into the oven, how much more will he clothe you—you of little faith! And do not keep striving for what you are to eat and drink, and do not keep worrying. For it is the nations of the world that strive after all these things, and your Father knows that you need them. Instead, strive for the kingdom, and these things will be given to you as well” (Luke 12.22–31). This is the spiritual open to which Sylvie calls Ruth in Marilynne Robinson’s *Housekeeping*, less a realist novel than an extraordinary visionary parable.

18. He says: “The sower sows the word. These are the ones on the path when the word is sown: when they hear, Satan immediately comes and takes away the word that is sown in them. And these are the ones sown on rocky ground: when they hear the word, they immediately receive it with joy. But they have no root, and endure only for a while; then, when trouble or persecution arises on account of the word, immediately they fall away. And others are those sown among the

thorns: these are the ones who hear the word, but the cares of the world, and the lure of wealth, and the desire for other things come in and choke the word, and it yields nothing. And these are the ones sown on the good soil: they hear the word and accept it and bear fruit, thirty and sixty and a hundredfold” (Mark 4.13–20). Only a few words later the unfolding of the kingdom itself is evoked as a mysterious process of growth from seeds: “The kingdom of God is as if someone would scatter seed on the ground, and would sleep and rise night and day, and the seed would sprout and grow, he does not know how. The earth produces of itself, first the stalk, then the head, then the full grain in the head. But when the grain is ripe, at once he goes in with his sickle, because the harvest has come. [. . .] With what can we compare the kingdom of God, or what parable will we use for it? It is like a mustard seed, which, when sown upon the ground, is the smallest of all the seeds on earth; yet when it is sown it grows up and becomes the greatest of all shrubs, and puts forth large branches, so that the birds of the air can make nests in its shade” (Mark 4.26–32). The inward and the outward

approach each other on an oscillating border.

19. Frye, *The Great Code*, 129–30.

Elsewhere in this book, too, Frye casts light on the difference between professed faith and lived faith: “There seem to be two levels of faith, the level of professed faith—what we say we believe, think we believe, believe we believe—and the level of what our actions show that we believe. Professed belief is essentially a statement of loyalty or adherence to a specific community. To profess a faith identifies us as Unitarians or Trotskyists or Taoists or Shiite Muslims or whatever. Beyond this is the principle that all one’s positive acts express one’s real beliefs. In very highly integrated people the professed and the actual belief would be much the same thing, and the fact that they are usually not quite the same thing is not necessarily a sign of hypocrisy, merely of human weakness or the inadequacy of theory” (229). For other fine accounts of Jesus’ teaching in parables, see Vermes, *The Religion of Jesus the Jew*, and Sheehan, *The First Coming*.

20. This “Socratic” element in the teaching of Jesus might be understood

as a substantial qualification of Paul’s “anti-Socratic” thought in the Letter to the Romans: “For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I do” (Romans 7.19). We all know what Paul means. But if this insight is then isolated from a larger sense of vocation, it risks becoming a word of complacency, an excuse for bad faith. It is possible to hold these two perspectives in mind at once.

21. Murdoch, *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals*, 393. Murdoch’s discussion here could be set alongside Frost’s discussion of four types of belief that he “knows more about from having lived with poetry”: the belief in the self whose dormant powers are coming to be, the belief in another person with whom one enters into a relationship that is coming to be, the belief in a work of art whose pattern and meaning are coming to be, and the belief in a God whose promises are coming to be (“Education by Poetry” in *Selected Prose*, 44–46). All of these sorts of belief, he says, involve going on intuition, going on searching faith, and, of course, going without any assurance that the going will come out well.

22. Layton, *The Gnostic Scriptures*, 399.

Cf.: “Once Jesus was asked by the Pharisees when the kingdom of God was coming, and he answered, The kingdom of God is not coming with things that can be observed; nor will they say, look, here it is, or, there it is. For, in fact, the kingdom of God is among [within] you” (Luke 17.20–21).

23. Mandelstam, “Conversation about Dante” in *Complete Critical Prose*, 259; Duncan, “Preface” to *Bending the Bow*, vi.

24. Gadamer, “Culture and the Word” in *In Praise of Theory*, 12–15.

25. Ronald Johnson: “What we wanted // was both words and worlds / you could put your foot through. To be // eye-deep in air, // and the inside of all things / clear // to the horizon. Clear // to the core” (“Stereopticon [for Lorine Niedecker]” in *Eyes & Objects*, unpaginated). Seamus Heaney: “All afternoon, heat wavered on the steps / And the air we stood up to our eyes in wavered / Like the zigzag hieroglyph for life itself” (“Seeing Things” in *Seeing Things*, 19). Mark Edmundson writes: “Wittgenstein [. . .] thought that people came to philosophy, to serious thinking about their lives, out

of confusion. The prelude to philosophy was a simple admission: 'I have lost my way.' The same can be true for serious literary study" (*Why Read?*, 33). Plato and Blake teach this as well. One could put it this way. We come to awareness of ourselves, first of all, as lost, disoriented, badly off balance. How did this happen to me, we say, how did I come to be here, living like this, dying like this, losing myself like this, and, not least importantly, talking like this, mis-talking like this? Then we try to begin again. Thus the abiding relevance of Plato's great allegory of the cave: the movement toward wisdom begins in disillusion. Thus the abiding relevance of the prophetic cry: why have you turned away from, when will you turn back to, what matters? Thus the abiding relevance of Blake's renewed prophetic voice: "O Earth O Earth return!" In *Where Shall Wisdom Be Found?* Harold Bloom writes: "After half a century of teaching poetry, I have come to believe that I must urge my better students to possess great poems by memory. Choose a poem that *finds* you, as Coleridge says, and read it deeply and often, out loud to yourself and to others. Internalizing the poems of Shakespeare, Milton,

Whitman will teach you to think more comprehensively than Plato can. We cannot all become philosophers, but we can follow the poets in their ancient quarrel with philosophy, which may be a way of life but whose study is death. I do not think that poetry offers a way of life (except for a handful like Shelley and Hart Crane); it is too large, too Homeric for that. At the gates of death, I have recited poems to myself, but not searched for an interlocutor to engage in dialectic" (66). There is much wisdom in this, particularly in the suggestions, first, that an internalization of the words of poetry brings a power of insight in itself, and second, that poetry or literature is finally more comprehensive than philosophy. I have nevertheless tried to suggest here at least some parallels between the initiatory movements of poetry, philosophy, and religion.

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