

Learning from the Heart: A Poet's Reflection of the Sutras

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The moments when I have felt most connected to a Higher Power, to God, is when I read a poem that brings me to a moment of wonder. It is just a fleeting glimpse, a microsecond, but it is what keeps me reading and writing poetry to understand my relationship with God. As I studied Patañjali's sutras, I recognized in that wisdom some insights for my connection to poetry and as I reflected more deeply, I had a sense that distinct threads of my life were beginning to come together—my intuitions that seemingly come out of the blue, my Christian heritage, poetry, and now yoga. For this paper, I am going to begin weaving these threads together by focusing on the relationship I see between poetry and the sutras. I am interested in how poetry is a steppingstone toward freedom, but also how the power of language can be seductive and limiting.

My relationship to poetry begins in the lyrical moment with a flash of connection. It is a witnessing of a phenomenon in the material world or an imagined moment in a poem. The lyric is not explanation. It is “where the self does not exist—what exists are moments of emptied, utterly open attention and address.”¹ We let go of our conscious narrative, the one that tells the story of the self, a construct of who we wish or fear to be, a consciousness shaped by cultural influences that attach us to the human world.

Poet Patrick Friesen says that every lyric gesture is a song of longing, a longing for wholeness and integrity, a homecoming even if we have never been home before.² They are moments of insight that we long to hold, to stitch into a “pattern that looks human.”³ The voice of Bernard in Virginia Woolf's novel, *The Waves*, asks: “But how describe the world seen without a self? There are no words. Blue, red—even they distract, even they hide with thickness instead of letting the light through.”⁴

We are social creatures who use language to connect to others, and yet we have these moments of lyric brilliance when we feel the world as a whole, every part connected. Then we are overwhelmed because it is beyond description. Lyric brings us “the order of the world, unmediated by human language, [it] is not rational, causal, or systematic. It is, rather, resonant. . . . Characteristic of such recognition is its atemporality—the glimpse it affords that time is unreal⁵. Nevertheless, even as

¹ Lyric, Narrative, Memory, Jan Zwicky, pg. 94

² Memory River, Patrick Friesen

³ Lyric, Narrative, Memory, Jan Zwicky pg. 94

⁴ *The Waves*, Virginia Woolf, pg. 221

⁵ Lyric, Narrative, Memory, Jan Zwicky pg. 100

we rely on language to glimpse wonder, it tethers us to the material world.

I imagine resonance like the music of the spheres, an ancient philosophical concept that envisions mathematical relationships expressing tones of energy. Pythagoras considered that the sun, moon, and planets emit their own unique hum and Earth reflects the tenor of celestial sounds. It places us in the midst of harmonious energy and when we but for a moment hear that music, we become part of the song.

But it is fleeting—here and gone—and I am left with the feeling of having witnessed something. But what? The moment I begin a narrative of explanation, the sensation is gone. My attachment to making sense through language even while I search for the moments beyond language leave me confused, longing for something I cannot name. How do I begin to understand what I cannot say?

1:42: However, this does not happen spontaneously. It is gradual. *Initially, because of our past experiences and ideas, our understanding of the object is distorted. Everything that has been heard, read, or felt may interfere with our perception.*⁶

Zwicky's essay reminds me that the project of understanding ourselves in the world is continually undone. The preoccupation we have for imagining the self is not something we can avoid. "At its best and most luminous, it is a species of . . . domestic awareness: an attempt to live fully in the irresolvable tension between a lyric desire for wholeness and the capacity for tool-use, whose exercise makes the experience of wholeness impossible."⁷ As mortal beings, we easily lose that communion with the world for which, as creatures of language, we will always long.

So why don't I just give up? Because there is something for which my soul seeks and it is that feeling of being completely at one that I find in the lyric moment. But how do I school my perception to understand?

1:43: *When the direction of the mind toward the object is sustained, the ideas and memories of the past gradually recede. The mind becomes crystal clear and one with the object. At this moment there is no feeling of oneself. This is pure perception.*

1:46: Can the mind arrive at a state of Yoga unilaterally? *All of these processes of directing the mind involve an object of inquiry.* They also involve preparation, gradual progression, and sustained interest. For without this interest, there will be distraction. Without preparation there can be no foundation. And without gradual progression, the human system may react and rebel.

1:47: *Then the individual begins to truly know himself.*

⁶ All sutras referenced are from The Heart of Yoga, R.K.V. Desikachar

⁷ Lyric, Narrative, Memory, Jan Zwicky pg. 94

Preparation, gradual progression, sustained interest. Not something that can happen quickly. If poetry brings me to the lyric moment, then can sustained study of the lyric bring me closer to the Perceiver, to *ātman*? Yet language is a tool, one of human beings' fundamental technologies. And so if tool-use is what takes us away from wholeness as Zwicky argues, then how can I direct my mind toward the object, that lyric moment that shows me I am part of all?

The poets and philosophers have some idea about this: "Metaphor is a species of understanding, a form of what Wittgenstein called 'seeing as'."⁸ Metaphoric thinking can help us understand differently and more deeply. Metaphor teaches us how to use language as a steppingstone—go from here to there, recognize that this is that. Or that is this. Perhaps metaphor is a pathway that can take me closer to the mystery of the lyric moment.

Charles Simic writes: "My poems (in the beginning) are like a table on which one places interesting things one has found on one's walks: a pebble, a rusty nail, a strangely shaped root, the corner of a torn photograph, etc. . . . where after months of looking at them and thinking about them daily, certain surprising relationships, which hint at meanings, begin to appear."⁹ This is how one can find the lyric moment witnessing what is there, really seeing, letting go of the context. But the moment I sense that connection, I feel compelled to represent the experience in language and then to share.

Recent neuroscientific discoveries interest philosophers and literary theorists who explore the phenomenological qualities of consciousness. For instance, theorist and novelist, David Lodge is fascinated by how writers are committed to exploring the nature of consciousness through the minds of characters, or how they represent life through the qualia of poetry. Lodge describes qualia as the "specific nature of our subjective experience of the world"¹⁰ Imagine freshly ground coffee, the taste of ripe pineapple, the sound of water running. We each have our own particular experience of these sensations. How can I possibly share with you my response to the red leaves of the maple outside my dining room window? Will you be able to feel the particular tingle I sense in the pit of my belly when the morning sun lights the tree like a torch? Lodge suggests that it is through lyric poetry that one comes closest to sharing this experience. But at least with a maple tree or a cup of coffee, metaphor can come very close to the wordless sensation we feel, but can metaphor do the same to help us connect to the Perceiver?¹¹

⁸ What is Lyric Philosophy?, Jan Zwicky, pg. 10

⁹ Ibid. pg. 10

¹⁰ David Lodge, *Consciousness and the Novel*, pg. 8

¹¹ Parts of this paragraph are from another paper I have written: *Serendipity, Poetry and Inquiry*

3:34: *Samyama on the heart will definitely reveal the qualities of the mind.* It is only when we are quiet and calm that this is possible. We cannot see the color of the water in a lake if the lake is turbulent. [Ah, a metaphor.]

As the house of a person
in age sometimes grows cluttered
with what is
too loved or too heavy to part with,
the heart may grow cluttered,
And still the house will be emptied,
and still the heart.

As the thoughts of a person
in age sometimes grow sparer,
like a great cleanness come into a room,
the soul may grow sparer;
one sparrow song carves it completely.
And still the room is full,
and still the heart.¹²

These opening stanzas from Jane Hirshfield's poem, *Standing Deer*, are about non-attachment, letting go of the clutter that was too loved or too heavy and only then can we be filled with wonder, supported, connected, and whole. (The lake is calm.) I need these metaphors in this poem to get me closer to that feeling—a steppingstone and then a leap of faith.

3:17: Patañjali takes up the process of communication for *samyama*. Different symbols and languages exist for relating to other people. These symbols and languages are affected by use, abuse, and misinterpretations. Languages serve to explain something that was experienced, is being experienced, or may be experienced. An object is an entity unto itself. Our ability to see an object is based on our interests and our potential. Our memories and imaginations can influence our comprehensions. Therefore, there is ample scope for us to communicate improperly, however hard we try. *Samyama on the interactions between language, ideas, and object is to examine the individual features of the objects, the means of describing them, and the ideas and their cultural influences in minds of the describers. Through this, one can find the most accurate and effective way of communication regardless of linguistic, cultural, and other barriers.*

Charles Simic remarks that "Metaphor is part of the not-knowing aspect of art, and yet I am firmly convinced that it is the supreme way of searching for truth. How can this be?"¹³

¹² *Standing Deer*, Jane Hirshfield, stanzas 1-2, pg. 18

¹³ Cited in *What is Lyric Philosophy?*, Jan Zwicky, pg. 12

Empty and filled,
like the curling half-light of morning,
in which everything is still possible and so why not.

Filled and empty,
like the curling half-light of evening,
in which everything now is finished and so why not.¹⁴

I linger with these stanzas from Hirshfield's poem. As I read and reread them, I feel my body responding. Pondering her metaphors, I start to feel the sensation of a threshold, a liminal space between empty and filled. The language takes me to feeling and if I let myself just feel, there is a sense of knowing more, a sense of coming close. But how easily it slips away.

Beloved, what can be, what was,
will be taken from us.
I have disappointed.
I am sorry. I knew no better.¹⁵

Zwicky writes about how metaphor is a perception of deep connectedness that can override the distinctness of individuals but does not erase it. "The distinctness of things remains the foundation of their resonant connection."¹⁶ I am a wave upon the ocean—still myself and yet inextricably part of the whole ocean.¹⁷

1.17: Then the object is gradually understood fully. At first it is at a more superficial level. In time, comprehension becomes deeper. And finally it is total. There is pure joy in reaching such a depth of understanding. For then the individual is so much at one with the object that he is oblivious to his surroundings.

3:3: Soon the individual is so much involved in the object that nothing except its comprehension is evident. It is as if the individual has lost his own identity. This is the complete integration with the object of understanding. [Samadhi]

The root seeks water.
Tenderness only breaks open the earth.
This morning, out the window,
the deer stood like a blessing, then vanished.¹⁸

¹⁴ Standing Deer, Jane Hirshfield, stanzas 3-4, pg. 18

¹⁵ Standing Deer, Jane Hirshfield, stanza 5, pg. 18

¹⁶ What is Lyric Philosophy?, Jan Zwicky pg. 17

¹⁷ With thanks to Perri van Rossem for her metaphor of the ocean.

¹⁸ Standing Deer, Jane Hirshfield, stanza 6, pg. 18

As I wrote this paper, each metaphor juxtaposed with a sutra brought me to interesting places. I felt connected, I felt that I knew, I felt that I was close to the Perceiver. There were moments where I almost “had it” but then it was gone. But perhaps that is the difficulty—the “having.” Maybe the wisdom here is just that moment of feeling and then waiting without narration, returning to the feeling and meditating, seeing what arises.

And yet, I am so reluctant to let go of the narrative and to invite language, especially metaphor, to bring me to feeling. I am attached to the pleasure of language and struggle to let go of the carriage that brings me towards *atman*. I know it is the challenge of non-attachment and as clever and engaging as I find poetic language, I need to learn to do the preparation, let it take me there and then let it go.

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