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A Study of Mysticism : Neo Paganism, Buddhism And Christianity

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Abstract

"Mysticism" is an inexact term that covers a broad range of religious and quasi-religious phenomena. Loosely conceived, mysticism refers to the knowledge or experience gained by an individual that purports to effect a direct relationship to absolute reality or the divine. In Practice, mystical knowledge or experience is said to erase the boundaries that maintain a limited conception of the self, and, by so doing. To give rise to a pervading sense of unity, ecstasy, or love. Mysticism as so defined can be found within monotheistic and polytheistic religions and in nontheistic Buddhism; it also appears in less well-defined religious movements, such as the tantric sects of Hinduism and Buddhism, the gnostic sects of early Judaism and Christianity, and the occult sects in European culture beginning in the Renaissance. To highlight the importance of mysticism for twentieth-century American poetry, this article will explore the relations of the poetry to three forms of mystical practice: neo-paganism, Buddhism, and Christian mysticism. In terms of its impact upon the poetry, the most prevalent of the three forms is neo-paganism, which comprises a number of non-Christian occult movements, such as Hermeticism, alchemy, Theosophy, and primitivism. Buddhism gained a surprisingly strong foothold in American poetry of the second half of the country – particularly the schools of Zen Tibetan Buddhism. The most prominent of Christian mysticism have been the incarnational, which can open into nature mysticism, and the *via negativa*, which approaches the ineffable by stripping away all limited conceptions of the divine and the self.

Keywords : Neo-paganism, Buddhism and Christian Mysticism

The twentieth-century American poet who most knowingly and effectively set himself up as master of a poetic cult was Ezra Pound. Through his close association in London (where he lived from 1908-21) with the Irish poet W.B. Yeats and a number of the other occultists – G. R. S. Mead, A. R. Orage, and Allen Upward – Pound became convinced of the need to fold into the worldwide poetic lineage he was assembling a historical series of occult movements.

This intertwining of poets with pagan and neo-pagan figures made it possible for him to claim that each of the poems he admired was in some way an embodiment of a mystical doctrine or illumination. Likewise, from the London occultists Pound seems to have acquired, at least in part, the oracular, even pontifical, style that dominates his poetry and his prose. Pound's pronouncements on aesthetic, social, and economic issues in his epic poem, the *Cantos,* and in his prose are delivered as though from the mouth of a "master," whose direct access to knowledge (gnosis) guarantees their authority. As a result of this immersion in mysticism Pound acquired a threefold influence upon later poets. First, he became the exemplar of the poet-as-guru, offering a mystical doctrine that ties poetry to other realms, including politics, economics, religion, nature, and the erotic. Second, he assembled a tradition of "illuminated" writers who partake of the "Spirit of Romance," such as Ovid, Apuleius, the Troubadours, Guido Cavalcanti, and Dante (Pound 1968), who also become touch-stones for later poets. Not only did the specific poets that Pound lauded become objects of study for later poets, but he also bequeathed to them the habit of assembling such a tradition. Third, he demonstrated how to write a modern poetry in which the mystical and the factual intersect – a tendency in American writing that began with Emerson, Thoreau, and Whitman and has flourished during the twentieth century.

Mystical tendencies were in full flower as the modern arts developed at the beginning of the twentieth century, contributing, for example, to such seminal twentieth-century breakthroughs as abstraction in painting, sculpture, and cinema (Tuchman 1986: 17–61). The occult movements that sprung up at this time (and then returned periodically throughout the century) advocated two interlocking sorts of investigations aimed at uncovering hidden truths: the rediscovery of "ancient wisdom" and the conduct of modern experiments in expanding the senses – through meditation, contemplation, trance, divination, magic, drugs, and so forth. The ancient wisdom was exhumed from classical pagan and "primitive" sources, while the experiments carried on by psychic pioneers in the modern era laid "claim to knowledge of a scientific nature which is inaccessible to the accepted methods of positive, objective scientific research" (G. R. S. Mead, quoted in Tryphonopoulos 1992 : 25). The ultimate object and source of these two mutually reinforcing forms of knowledge was the divine, but at a more instrumental level the two derived their authority from opposing entities: tradition and science. The occult tradition consists of texts and artifacts strung out in a long and loosely connected history and begins in classical Greece and the Hellenistic Era.

For Pound, the Eleusinian Mysteries of Athens, the most renowned religious mysteries of the classical world, represent one of the two basic poles of culture – which he sees as residing "Between KUNG and ELEUSIS" (*Canto* 52; Pound 1970: 258), that is, between the ethical order, exemplified for him by Confucius, and the spiritual order, exemplified by the Athenian Mystery cults. The myth behind the rites of Eleusis is that of Demeter, the Earth Mother or Grain Mother (Ceres in Latin), and her daughter Persephone, or Kore (Proserpine), who is carried off to the underworld by Hades (Dis or Pluto). In her disconsolate wandering in search of her daughter, Demeter finds her way to Eleusis, outside Athens, where she has a temple built and then retreats inside it – with devastating consequences for the fertility of the natural world, including human beings. Demeter petitions Zeus and ultimately wins the release of Persephone, but because the girl has eaten some pomegranate seeds she must return to Hades for part of every year. With Persephone set free, Demeter restores fertility and reveals the rites of the Mysteries. Scholars have remained uncertain to this day about the actual content of the rites, but we know that there were two major rituals at Eleusis, one of initiation and purification, the other or revelation and mystical union (Ferguson 1982: 52-4).

In "Persephone's Ezra, "Guy Davenport (1981) argues that Pound's career from beginning to end takes guidance from Persephone, the goddess of springtime clarity, beauty, and purity, who appears in his writing in many different forms but always signifying a direct knowledge of the nature and beauty of living things. The speaker of "The Tree," the poem that Pound places at the inception of his poetic career (it opens *Personae*, his collected shorter poems), says that he "stood still and was a tree amid the wood" and that he learned "the truth of things unseen before" (Pound 1926: 3) – in other words, knowledge granted in the Eleusinian mysteries. During the mysteries, the gods were thought to have provided initiates with an expanded state of consciousness that gave them a sense of identification with nature and especially with natural fertility. As a result of this kind of identification, the speaker of the poem says, "..... I have been a tree amid the wood / And many a new understood / That was rank folly to my head before" (ibid.). The figure of Persephone as the embodiment of a neo-pagan connection to the gods and nature recurs many times throughout the *Cantos.* In *Canto I,* for instance, Pound recounts the moment of the *Odyssey* when Odysseus, seeking counsel on how to get home, slaughtered sheep as a sacrifice and "Poured ointment, cried to the gods,/ To Pluto the strong, and praised Proserpine" (Pound 1970: 4); in

Canto XLVII, Pound's Odysseus is advised, "First must thou go the road/to hell/And to the bower of Ceres' daughter Proserpine" (p. 236). In the quest for a way through the chaos of the modern world, Pound takes Persephone as a signpost of the release from hell and of the promise of regeneration through natural / divine forces.

Olson makes a good figure for a transition to the subject of Buddhism because his two most famous essays, "Projective Verse" (Olson 1997: 239–49) and "Human Universe" (pp. 155–66), express a philosophy that has many affinities to Buddhism, especially to Zen as it was being received in the 1940s and the 1950s through the writings of D.T. Suzuki. In "Projective Verse," there are several aesthetic points that align with Zen values: the focus, as in meditation, upon breath as a central component of poetic composition; the admonition that the poet move from one perception to the next without stopping to cogitate ("in any given poem always, always, one perception must must must MOVE, INSTANTER, ON ANOTHER!" [p. 240]); and the proposal of a new aesthetic of "objectism," which is "the getting rid of the lyrical interference of the individual as ego, of the 'subject' and his soul, that peculiar presumption by which western man has interposed himself between what he is a creature of nature ..... and those other creations of nature which we may, with no derogation, call objects" (p.247). In "Human Universe," Olson likewise decries self-centeredness, idealism, and any thought process that creates or depends upon an isolated self or ego, urging a recognition that "the skin itself, the meeting edge of man and external reality, is where all that matters does happen, that man and external reality are so involved with one another that, for man's purposes, they had better be taken as one" (p. 161); he also participates in the Buddhist emphasis on radiant awareness in the here and now by asserting that active alertness is the highest form of human endeavor: "If there is any absolute, it is never more than this one, you, this instant, in action" (P. 157).

Making these statements about the proper disposition needed for writing poetry and the proper relationship of the individual toward the world. Olson joins the Buddhists in taking a resolutely counter-cultural stance on core American values. If American culture bases in many of its deals upon the furtherance of individual self-interest-standing the person who can "take charge" and promoting the "pursuit of happiness" and the American Dream of getting ahead – Buddhism stresses letting-be nonattachment, the cessation of desire, and the illusory nature of the "self." The one value that American culture and Buddhism share in common is freedom, although Buddhism gives a much more radical interpretation of it than lack of

governmental control and the ability to do as one pleases: Buddhism seeks freedom from suffering and desire and the mental freedom that comes with enlightenment. American poets have been drawn to Buddhism, it seems, by its opposition to so many of the values with which they were raised, and in surprising numbers they have pursued its complex and demanding philosophy. An anthology of contemporary American poetry influenced by Buddhism, *Beneath a Single Moon* (1991), edited by Kent Johnson and Craig Paulenich, prints work by 45 poets, including Olga Broumas, John Cage, Diane di Prima, Allen Ginsberg, Susan Griffin, Sam Hamill, Michael Heller, Robert Kelly, Jackson Mac Low, George Quasha, Leslie Scalapino, Andrew Schelling, Armand Schwerner, Gary Snyder, Lucien Stryk, Nathaniel Tarn, Anne Waldman, And Philip Whalen. Although this in an extremely diverse group of poets, Synder, in his Introduction to the anthology, maintains that their poetry shares a set of qualities: "They are unsentimental, not overly abstract, on the way toward selflessness, not particularly self-indulgent, wholehearted, nonutopian, fluid (that is, able to shift shape), on the dry side, kindhearted, unembarrassed, free of spiritual rhetoric and pretense of magic, and deeply concerned with the questions of knowing" (Johnson and Paulenich 1991 : 8).

Of the poets listed above, the three most prominently associated with Buddhism are Cage, Ginsberg, and Snyder. For all three, Buddhism has been a shaping element, both aesthetic and philosophical, for much or all of their mature work. Snyder gives a succinct list of the central tenets of Buddhism: "The marks of the Buddhist teachings are impermanence, no-self the inevitability of suffering, interconnectedness, emptiness, the vastness of mind, and the provision of a way to realization" (Johnson and Paulenich 1991: 7). If most mystical philosophies and practices seek to unite the self with the divine, Buddhism turns mysticism inside out by asserting that there is no self no divine. For Buddhists, the absolute is a void and all forms that exist, including the "self," are inherently empty and without permanence. In a world characterized by impermanence and shackled with suffering due to desire (for unreal objects and states), the proper way to act is to let things happen, rather than to try to direct them, and to cultivate an attentive desireless stillness and silence.

For John Cage, who divides his life into the periods before and after meeting the Zen scholar D.T. Suzuki, the cultivation of silence and nonintervention constitute not only a spiritual but also an ethical, an aesthetic, and even political principle. Cage's first and most influential book of writings, *Silence* (1961), discusses the implications of attending to silence

for a new understanding of music. Interspersed with Zen and Zen-like stories, a number of which are gathered into his famous 1959 musical composition *Indeterminacy, Silence* includes poem-lectures with Zen inspired topics, such as "Lecture on Nothing," "Lecture on Something," and "Where Are we Going? and What Are We Doing?" These poem-lectures, like much of Cage's music, are composed using chance operations (Often involving the *I Ching*, the ancient Chinese book of divination), in order to circumvent the controlling function of the ego. Not only does Cage rely upon change, but he often writes indeterminate works in order to make each performance unique and to sharpen the attention of both the performers and the audience. This attitude of welcoming the unforeseen and sharpening attention reaches its culmination in Cage's most renowned piece, *4'33"*, during which a pianist plays no notes and signals the succession of three movements by opening and shutting and shutting the keyboard. What the audience hears is the ambient sound both inside and outside the concert hall, which Cage refuses to separate from the concept of "music." Subsequent poets have taken Cage's example in two directions. Jackson Mac Low has composed a vast output of poetry using change operations and indeterminate means for the past half-century, with Buddhist texts and poetic forms prominent among the materials from which he works. David Antin has turned the poem-lecture composed by chance into the spontaneous talk-poem delivered without notes to a unique audience; like Cage, he draws attention to the crucial importance of the present moment and he debunks the American faith that "experts" can solve the problems of individual and social life.

Beat writers of the 1950s and 1960s, such as Allen Ginsberg, Jack Kerouac, Diane di Prima, and Philip Whalen, took Buddhism as a central preoccupation and saw Gary Snyder as its American ideal. In his 1959 novel *Dharma Bums*, Kerouac enshrines Japhy Ryder (Snyder) as an ascetic, studious, free loving, anarchist, ecstatic mountain climber. Snyder's pursuit of Zen took him on extended stays to Japan, where he learned Japanese and studied Buddhism under several roshis in traditional monasteries. No matter how traditional Snyder's Zen training, his poetry always presents Buddhism as a natural human birthright, at home as much in the American West as in Asia. In an early poem, "Hunting," he rhapsodizes about the birth of a baby, "Baby, baby, noble baby / Noble – hearted baby," and then switches gears abruptly:

One hand up, one hand down

"I alone am the honored one"

Birth of the Buddha.

And the whole world-system trembled. (Snyder 1966 : 73)

The third form of mysticism may be least exotic and therefore the least countercultural of the three types we are exploring, but in the work of American poets Christian mysticism often combines with other forms, making for a poetry much less orthodox than might at first appear. T.S. Eliot, for instance, who strove in much of his poetry and prose to present an orthodox Christian face, engaged the occult tradition in *The Waste Land,* as was mentioned above, and maintained a lifelong dialogue with the Indic traditions of Buddhism and Hinduism, which he first studied in detail as a graduate student in philosophy at Harvard. His Most mystical poem, *Four Quartets,* ends with the following lines:

And all shall be well and

All manner of thing shall be well

When the tongues of flame are in-folded

Into the crowned knot of fire

And the fire and the rose are one. (Eliot 1971 : 145)

These lines combine words of pious acceptance by the English mystic Julian of Norwich (in the first two lines) and the central symbol of Dante's *Paradiso,* the rose, with the Indic image of fire at the crown of the head, which symbolizes enlightenment, and the tongues of flame that descended on Jesus's disciples of Pentecost. During the course of the poem the fire and the rose draw many other meanings toward them, but in each of the poem's central images there is a conversation taking place between Western and Eastern mystical traditions (Kearns 1987).

The most characteristic form of Christian mysticism in Eliot's work is the *via negativa,* which itself has affinities to the Hindu philosophy of Vedanta. In both spiritual undertakings, all the attributes that have been assigned to the divine are discarded one by one (Vedanta; *neti neti,* "not this, not this"), so that what remains is the unbounded Absolute. As opposed to occultism, which sees language as having a magical potency, the *via negativa* finds all words to be inadequate and all images to be delusory. The *via nagativa* is not an easy path, for it involves the virtual unmaking of the personality. At a certain stage, the mystics speak about a "dark night of the soul" in which everything is thrown into question and the soul seems completely lost. The most famous exponent of the *via negativa* is the poet-saint John of the Cross, for whom Eliot had a lifelong affection. In "East Coker," the

second of the *Four Quarters*, Eliot writes, "I said to my soul, be still, and let the dark come upon you / which shall be the darkness of God" (Eliot 1971 : 126), and then shortly afterward be paraphrases from St. John of the Cross's *Ascent of Mount Carmel* (Hay 1982: 174–5)

To arrive where you are, to get from where you are not,
You must go by a way wherein there is no ecstasy.
In order to arrive at what you do not know
You must go by a way which is the way of ignorance.
In order to posses what you do not possess
You must go by the way of dispossession.
In order to arrive at what you are not
You must go through the way in which you are not.

(Eliot 1971: 127)

This is a classical exposition of the *via negativa,* for which paradox is the most natural figure of speech. In order to transcend the individual self, this philosophy counsels a stripping away of everything that undergirds the limited ego. The process is a frequently painful self-annihilating one, whose purpose is to break down the barriers between the ego and the divine so that a merging can finally take place. A more recent poet, Fanny Howe, sees this breakdown as occurring most effectively in relation to other people. In this way, she joins post-modern and liberation theologies in locating the mystical *via negativa* in the realm of ethics. Howe and other contemporary Catholic theologins draw inspiration particularly from women thinkers on the cusp between Judaism and Christianity, such as Simone Well and Edith Stein, and owe their greatest theoretical debt to the Jewish philosopher Emmanuel Levinas, who contends that our ethical obligation to the Other is prior to Being itself. For Levinas, this insistence upon the inescapability of the Other (both other people and the otherness of the divine) grows out of his reaction to the Holocaust. In Howe's poetry, fiction, and prose meditations, her self-abnegating devotion to otherness derives also from the liberation theology of Gustavo Gutierrez and from her own experiences of racism in an interracial marriage. A committed Roman Catholic, Howe explores not only her own sense of the mystery of the Other but also Christianity's open relations to its "others," such as Judaism and Hinduism. Denise Levertov carries within her personal heritage this interface of the Jewish and Christian: one of her paternal ancestors was Schneur Zalman, who founded a still-flourishing sect of Hasidism called Habad, and one of her maternal ancestors was a

Welsh preacher named Angel Jones of Mold. Her father crossed over from Hasidic Judaism to Christianity and became an Anglican priest, but he passed on the Hasidic heritage to his daughter and continued to pursue Jewish-Christian dialogue. The Hasidic delight in uncovering the sparks of the divine in the ordinary world dovetails for Levertov with the sense of immanence or sacramentality that informs her incarnational form of mysticism: "Hasidism has given me since childhood a sense of marvels, of wonder . . . The Hasidim were a lot like the Franciscans [:] in both movements there was a recognition and joy in the physical world. And a sense of wonder at creation, and I think I've always felt something like that" (Gelpi 1993 : 262). In her 1961 poem "Matins" she addresses this "Marvelous Truth," asking it to "confront us / at every turn," to

dwell
in our crowded hearts
our steaming bathrooms, kitchens full of
things to be done, the
ordinary streets.

Thrust close your smile
that we know you, terrible joy. (Levertov 1983 : 62)

Although Christian faith lies mostly implicit at this early stage of her career in the title of the poem, "Matins," and the phrase "terrible joy" that seems to refer to Jesus's incarnation as the source of the "Marvelous Truth," a deeply committed religious orientation becomes more and more pronounced over the course of Levertov's career.

Like Levertov, the other American poets who draw on Christian mysticism join the poets who explore Buddhasim and neo-paganism in one particularly salient stance: because they all find the dominant values of American culture, whether Protestant or secular, to be too restrictive, they cross cultural boundaries in search of spiritual and ethical nourishment. For many poets eager to test the full range of human experience, tribal or prehistoric cultures also exert a powerful magnetism. This can be felt, for instance, in the ethnopoetics movement that includes writers such as Jerome Rothenberg, David Antin, Gary Snyder, Dennis Tedlock, and Nathaniel Tarn, or in the archeologically inspired poetry of Charles Olson, Robert Kelly, Armand Schwerner, Clayton Eshleman, Gustaf Sobin, Nathaniel Mackey, or Anne Carson. The paradox of mysticism is that by turning inside to explore hidden depths the poets have

been led outside and across socially constructed boundaries of religion, nation, race, and time. American poetry informed by mysticism offers moments of attentive cross-cultural dialogue, something for which the contemporary world evinces a glaring need.

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