Poetry, Prophecy, and Theological Revelation

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Summary and Keywords

In the history and prehistory of human societies, poets, prophets, and seers (the word vates can cover all three) have often been virtually indistinguishable from one another. From time immemorial, their respective activities overlap and interpenetrate to such an extent that prophets (or mantics or seers) and poets have been closely associated and tend to completely coalesce in many of their functions and modalities. The Sanskrit word kavi (like its Latin cognate vates) embraces both. A certain strand of ideology running through the Bible (at least as interpreted by classical rabbinic texts) aims to drive a wedge between God-inspired prophecy and humanly created poems. Nevertheless, the Hebrew word nabi for “prophet” means “bubbling forth, as from a fountain,” so the vocabulary of the Hebrew Bible, too, is naturally apt to suggest the creative fecundity of verbal imagination. In fact, Amos, Isaiah, Elisha, and Ezekiel frequently produce parables, proverbs, and even love songs.

In primordial cultures, with only minimal social stratification and differentiation of roles, long before any specific mantles as either prophet or poet can be identified and donned, a figure like that of the shaman or even the wizard (Merlin, for example) is often emblematic of a certain undecidability between religious revelation or spiritual experience and creative imagination and invention. Of course, in modern cultures, with their highly differentiated social roles, theological revelation and poetry are typically seen as distinct and often even as opposed to each other in crucial respects. Yet the two still need to be understood together as reciprocal and symbiotic in their origins, aims, and purposes. Throughout subsequent history, the deepest intents of literary and religious practices remain inseparable from each other in their myriad manifestations within our cultural traditions and institutions; they thus stand to be illumined by such a juxtaposition. Poetry and prophecy together comprise the common matrix of some of the oldest and most fundamental modes of expression of humanity across cultures.

Keywords: revelation, creativity, poetry, poets, prophecy, theology, literature, secular, scripture, myth

Revelation of the Divine in Poetry

Poetry, both sacred and profane, very often demands to be understood as called forth by some higher agency than that of the poets themselves: God or divinities such as the Muses are held to summon certain mortals to serve as instruments of their communications. Poetic expression, for its part, often turns in the direction of claiming to reveal truth concerning divine things—or at least meaning of a religious order concerning worldly and human beings seen in the light of divine revelation. Many poets, both ancient and modern, claim—and are taken—to be intimates of the gods. Poetry is thus interpreted as a channel of divine vision reaching beyond the
Texts explicitly claiming to deliver divine revelations have generally been highly and even consummately poetic texts. The prophetic oracles of Isaiah, or the verses of a Qur’anic surah, or the Vedic śruti (literally, “what is heard”), or certain Buddhist sutras, along with the sacred scriptures of many other religions, serve as emblematic. Conversely, the highest and most sublime products of poets very often lay claim to transmitting some kind of divine revelation. This is true of epic works of Homer, Virgil, Dante, Milton, and Klopstock in Western tradition but also of the Mahabharata as source text of Indian religion and in less strict, more playful ways even of the mythologies and religious histories of the Puranas. Much of the devotional (bhakti) poetry of India or the mystic (sufi) poetry of Persia, furthermore, tends to exceed the cadre of creative compositions by individual artistic talents. These works often aspire to achieve a more authoritative status as specimens of revelation characteristic of canonical, scriptural texts in a specifically religious sense. The conjunction in such works of two registers of meaning and expression that in principle belong to different categories and even to disparate spheres of reality—the human and the divine—is a widespread and provocative phenomenon and forms an intriguing conundrum for critical reflection. We need to learn to shift our focus flexibly back and forth from religious revelation to poetic creation, and from poetic invention to theological disclosure, in pondering the inextricable interdependency of these different discursive modes and spiritual practices in our own—as well as in other—histories and cultures.

Poetic form is indisputably a crucial aspect of many different types of theological revelation. Revelation of divinity in religions is typically communicated in highly metaphorical and often puzzlingly enigmatic language. It is frequently ensconced also in myth or imaginative narrative and is embellished with ornamental rhetoric, with lyrical flourishes and emotional transports. Religiously revelatory texts employ or incorporate a great variety of literary genres. In the Bible, not only proverbs and psalms and songs but also the drama of Job, the lamentations of Jeremiah, and the philosophical meditations of Ecclesiastes rank among the greatest of literary masterpieces. Moreover, some of the most sublime poetry ever written is cast into the form of prophetic oracles in the book of Isaiah. The founding texts of Muslim and Indian religions, the Qur’an and the Vedas, are likewise among the most admired of the respective cultures’ poetic masterpieces. The same must be said of the Book of Changes (Yijing), the Book of Tao (Laozi), and the Zhuangzi at the sources of Chinese religious traditions.

Thus, not only the form but also the very inspiration of primary source texts of religious revelation has to be understood in a sense that is ambiguously poetic and religious: “inspiration” straddles both religious and aesthetic semantic registers. Poetry is itself an indispensable source and an essential aspect of religious revelation in several of its most important manifestations in the Bible and in other books making a claim to proffer religious revelation. The divine is revealed in and through the power and event of the poetic word: religious revelation proves to be an inextricably linguistic event. The self-revelation of divinity is understood as being consubstantial with a theologically revealed Word. And such a Word is necessarily understood in and through the workings of poetic language. This language of revelation cannot be any merely human language that already exists and could be simply employed, just as also for other, profane purposes. The poetic and creative word functions not just as a subservient vehicle but is intrinsic to and constitutive of the revelation itself.¹

The following reflections consider the synergism between poetic expression and religious revelation by moving across the history of culture in two mutually contrapuntal directions. On the one hand, poetry has its origins in sacred rites and is best understood as originally a form of religious practice and expression. Through a process of secularization, songs and stories and other imaginative types of composition are detached from their originally religious contexts such as festivals, where they are employed in ritual performance; they come to be recited in profane settings and are transmitted as autonomous works—thus as objects of aesthetic value and appreciation. This is clearly the case with the mythopoetic works of Greece and with the Vedic myths and rituals of India: poetry emerges as an art from originally cultic employments.

On the other hand, in modern times, particularly in the wake of Dante, poets deliberately reverse this process: they aim to turn poetic creation back into a form of ritual expression and divine revelation—or at least of supranormal perception and preternatural, visionary awareness. They do so increasingly from the midst of the secularized cultures of the modern world. Self-consciously creative poets have often produced and purified their creations in imitation—or in the image—of the purportedly divine revelations handed down through the founding texts of the civilizations within which they lived and worked.²

Origins of Poetry in Cultic Ritual: Poetry as Language of the Gods
Poetic form, as it takes shape in rhythm, with its hypnotic cadences, and rhyme or parallel verse structure, belongs to the earliest testimonies of human expression in most cultures. Poetry is often recognized as the matrix of prose. But poetry itself is generally traceable to sacred origins in cult practices of music and dance. The smallest unit of poetic expression is the “foot” of a verse, and like the word “versus” itself, which at its roots means “turning” (from Latin vertere, to turn), the poetic “foot” evokes the step of a dance. Prosody, as the artistic linguistic form that distinguishes itself from everyday speech, seems thus by the suggestions inhering in its very vocabulary to have its origins in the movements of dance. Friedrich Nietzsche, in *The Birth of Tragedy out of the Spirit of Music* (*Die Geburt der Tragödie aus dem Geiste der Musik*, 1872), discerned the origins of ancient poetic tragedy as hidden in the choral performances of ritual music and dance executed in conjunction with the festivals of the god Dionysius. Although the book cost him his reputation as a Greek and Roman philologist, and eventually his university chair as well, the need to understand poetry and literature in terms of cultic origins has only grown stronger since his time. Nietzsche’s intuitions have been corroborated by and have long supplied suggestive material for archeologically based theories and research.

The oracle at Delphi, with its “pythia” or priestess of Apollo, as well as the sibyls at various sites like Cumae (near Naples) in the ancient world, delivered their prophecies typically in hexameter verses. Christian writers adopted these sources of oracular revelation as pagan precedents for the prophetic revelations of the Bible. They were baptized particularly by the Christian poets Lactantius (240–320) and Prudentius (348–ca. 413). Such infusions of prophetic Hellenism into Christianity were mediated also by the hymnographers Ephrem the Syrian (ca. 306–373) and Gregory of Nanzianzus (ca. 329–290), the most accomplished of Greek Patristic rhetoricians. Even Saint Augustine, all his theological rigor notwithstanding, paid homage to such pagan oracles as able to speak truly about divinity independently of the tradition of biblical revelation. Together with Virgil, who was widely acknowledged in medieval tradition as having prophesied, in his Fourth Eclogue, the birth of Christ, the Savior of the world, the sibyls exerted a major influence on the reception by early Christianity of poetic prophecy from pagan sources. The Christian *cento* composed by Faltona Proba (4th century) assembles fragments from Virgil in such a way as to make them retell the biblical narrative from Creation to Flood, followed by the gospel story. Ancient poetry thus became a sort of parallel prophecy anticipating biblical revelation. Medieval dream vision, as found in *Pearl*, *Piers Plowman*, and Chaucer, continued to develop within the frame of this hybrid (classical and Christian) inspiration for otherworldly or apocalyptic revelations.

Poetic literature, however, has yet another immemorial background in magical charms and enchantments. *Carmen* or “song” derives etymologically from a common root with “charm.” “Enchantment,” too, is derived from poetic singing—*chanter* in French, *canere* in Latin. Poetry, accordingly, is to be understood as originally a sort of musical charming or word-magic. Even when it no longer is believed to effect cures or curses physically at a distance by the laws of magical thinking, lyrical verse in poetry may still be thought to retain power over spirits. This belief is in itself powerful and influences human beings in their actions and their way of framing their world. Lyrical verse’s optatives and apostrophes still work their beneficent effects just by pretending to induce things in the outer world to comply with human wishes, making them conform at least to the intentional representations of an inner world. Lyrical forms still retain, moreover, in vestigial guise, their original character as magical formulas used with an intention to symbolically transfigure and thereby to transmute the real. Tellingly, even the child magician’s “hocus-pocus” derives from the rite of transubstantiation of the Holy Eucharist in the canon of the Mass, with its formulaic words: *Hoc est corpus meum*.

Magic, as a means of access to the spirit world, often uses nonsense forms of speech and phrases that playfully transgress the norms of everyday communication—just as poetic language still does in the inventions of the most linguistically sophisticated of adults. Even in post-Romantic, highly disenchanted times, poetry persists in fancifully representing itself as (re)making the world through acts of linguistic magic and verbal conjuring. Programmatic instances can be observed in works of Eduard Mörike and Rainer Maria Rilke.

In their most remote origins, poetic compositions were integral to cultic practices of singing and dance. They were dedicated to gods and offered in prayer, typically as appeasement or in pleading for some kind of favor. Festivals—for example, the Pythian games held in honor of Apollo every eight years under Mount Parnassus and celebrating the victors in athletic contests—were ways of seeking to establish the fellowship of the gods. The poetry composed for and performed on these occasions was liable to be heard even as secretly speaking in the gods’ own voices. Poetry is language marked as different from ordinary speech. The strange effects of sound in poetic language seem to have a sense that is not that of everyday speech and rather makes sense in another way than that to which we are accustomed. Poetry is meaningful not by reference to the things that are before us in the sensible world but by evocations of things unseen or seen in their higher meanings. Poetry makes it possible to think and feel in correspondence with indeterminacies and infinites created and opened up the negative employment of words.

Metaphor, too, can work as a way of suggesting a kind of secret language beneath the ordinary, conventional senses of words, a language that corresponds to the original natures of things and expresses their intrinsic essences. Through many centuries of exegesis by patristic and medieval interpreters, this is the kind of language attributed to Orpheus and even to Adam in the Garden before the Fall. The forgotten root meanings of words are revived in and through their metaphorical use. They become more transparent to their etymological
They are foundational for another major axis of prophetic poetry passing through Friedrich Hölderlin and Novalis, whose explicitly theoretical formulations in his essays, are inexhaustibly rich and suggestive. Center on Dante, Milton, and Blake, Klopstock's epic poetic work, (1724–1803) is seminal. Although often forgotten in Anglo-Saxon approaches to poetic prophecy, which tend to come late in the history of Christian thought (for example, with Aquinas), which in its early phases speaks rather primarily about predicting the future. It is rather about seeing deeply into the overall meaning of history and the cosmos so as to be able to convey their truth in a way that is total and as such tantamount to a type of "divine" revelation. The foregoing observations have treated primarily the lyrical features and phonetic, sonic resources of poetry as an exceptional sort of marked language, but poetry has further prophetic powers of revelation specifically in its comprehensive form as epic narrative that combines discursive modes such as myth with typological history.

Prophecy as Inspired Poetic Interpretation of History

The term “revelation” has been used here in a broad sense reaching beyond the narrow confines of so-called "revealed religions" and embracing philosophical and artistic phenomenologies of revealment. The term itself comes late in the history of Christian thought (for example, with Aquinas), which in its early phases speaks rather in terms of "disclosure" (διακολαίψ) and "illumination." As such, revelation concerns disclosure of an extraordinary or unseen dimension of reality through the uncommon language of poetry. Similarly, it is important to understand the word "prophecy" (προφητεία) somewhat differently than in its most common acceptance. Prophecy, in a central strand of Western literary tradition (coinciding to a degree with epic tradition), is not primarily about predicting the future. It is rather about seeing deeply into the overall meaning of history and the cosmos so as to be able to convey their truth in a way that is total and as such tantamount to a type of "divine" revelation. The foregoing observations have treated primarily the lyrical features and phonetic, sonic resources of poetry as an exceptional sort of marked language, but poetry has further prophetic powers of revelation specifically in its comprehensive form as epic narrative that combines discursive modes such as myth with typological history.

Virgil, working principally from his Homeric models, discovers or invents a new type of prophecy that consists in seeing into the providential meaning of history. In so doing, he comes uncannily close to biblical typology. His hero, Aeneas, like Moses, is the prototype of a savior: he prefigures Augustus Caesar, just as Moses prefigures Jesus, in the different worlds and societies addressed by the Aeneid and the Gospels respectively. Dante, in any event, sees in Virgil’s (retrospective) prophetic history of Rome, especially as unfolded by Anchises to Aeneas in book VI of the Aeneid, something that is the equivalent of or at least close to scriptural typology, and he transmits this form to his own heirs—to modern epic-prophetic poets such as Milton and Blake. This revelation to Aeneas takes place as the culmination of a katabasis or journey to the underworld based on Odysseus’s nekua, in which the protagonist encounters the souls of the dead and particularly the soul of the prophet Tiresias, who (purportedly) teaches him the way of his longed-for return home.

In this sense, Orpheus, as archetype of the poet, symbolizes poetry’s originally prophetic vocation, for he journeys down into the underworld and learns the secrets of the world of the dead. In seeking his lost love, Eurydice, he is also garnering a kind of forbidden knowledge. It is so forbidden, in fact, that he cannot know it with his conscious mind. Symbolically, he is not allowed to look Eurydice—in effect, his Beatrice (or beatifier)—in the face until she has come out of the underworld and emerged from behind the veil of revelation of the afterlife so as to appear once again in the ordinary daylight of the terrestrial world. The fact that Orpheus disobeys this imperative and attempts to glimpse Eurydice while still in the afterlife causes him to lose his love forever. Prophecy, as revelation of another world, one ordinarily inaccessible and forbidden to mortal sight, is the express aim of poets following in the line of Orpheus, many of them, like Dante or Tasso or Milton, with at least more apparent success. They claim successfully to reveal the truth of the other world to their readers and thereby to justify the ways of God to men.

In this lineage, bringing together biblical with classical epic tradition, the work of Friedrich Gottlieb Klopstock (1724–1803) is seminal. Although often forgotten in Anglo-Saxon approaches to poetic prophecy, which tend to center on Dante, Milton, and Blake, Klopstock’s epic poetic work, Der Messias, together with his five religious odes or hymns and his explicitly theoretical formulations in his essays, are inexhaustibly rich and suggestive. They are foundational for another major axis of prophetic poetry passing through Friedrich Hölderlin and Novalis.
Friedrich Hölderlin (1770–1843), Klopstock explores, in detailed aesthetic reflections, the ways in which poetry can become the vehicle of theological revelation. The phenomenology of the negative experience of incommensurability, of not being adequate to the experience of God, the experience God’s difference from us, figures prominently in Klopstock’s understanding of the aesthetics of the sublime as what alone enables us authentically to encounter God and to communicate something of this ineffable experience.

For Klopstock, philosophical reasoning about God is far too subject to the illusion that God is like us and can be understood by our own intellectual powers and principles. The prophet, more than the philosopher, is predisposed through ecstasy in the presence of the mysterium tremendum to experience the radical difference of the divine from the human subject: this experience is what moves prophecy beyond any rational power of control over itself. In actual life as opposed to philosophical reflection, the soul comes much closer to authentic connection with the divine through the liveliness (Lebendigkeit) of its perceptions and its dynamic being-moved (Bewegtheit). And this is possible particularly in the register of aesthetic experience and expression. Nevertheless, it is especially the limits of expression, with the dumb marvel of astonishment (Staunen), that bears witness to our infinite, bottomless inferiority (“allerliefsten Unterwerfung”) with respect to the divine with which we can connect only by grace.

Klopstock understands art as the highest expression of life and as the best way for us to think about God (“beste Art über Gott zu denken”). He emphasizes how our language is too weak and deficient (“die Sprache zu wenige und schwache Worte dazu haben würde”) to express what the whole soul feels in its brush with divine power. This negative experience of helplessness to express nevertheless overflows in feelings of love, rapture, blessedness, and unshakable faith and trust. Like Dante in his Paradiso, with its all-pervasive ineffability topos, Klopstock, most intensively in his lyrical odes, employs the apophatic expression of human and linguistic impotence as a method of elevating the soul to the vision of God.

In the work of Friedrich Hölderlin (1770–1843), such theoretical reflection on poetry becomes even more integral to the poetry itself and eventually subverts the poetry, rendering it no longer possible. The self-reflexivity of the Enlightenment subject, as the highest pinnacle of knowledge (reflected in the Kantian transcendental unity of apperception), emerges as in principle the ground for prophetic revelation. The pure intellectual intuition (“die intellektuelle Anschauung”) à la Spinoza that affords knowledge of the Whole and that was given up as lost by Hegel in his pursuit of totally conceptual knowledge cannot be realized theoretically or morally since it presupposes absolute, prereflexive unity. Such unity is not compatible with the subject–object structure of conceptual knowing and goal-directed acting. But it can be won back, according to Hölderlin, through mythic representation in poetry. This happens aesthetically through the course of history by progressive intuition of the beautiful: Beauty represents the infinite whole of Being.

Nevertheless, even in this perspective, based on Greek classicism, the difference between the human and the holy tears a rift in Hölderlin’s outlook. Hölderlin’s elected alter ego Empedocles is constrained to suicide in order to atone for his prophetic guilt (prophetische Schuld) incurred in his revelatory speaking out. This pre-Socratic philosopher was famous in antiquity for having sprung into the volcano on Mount Etna. In Hölderlin’s imagining, Empedocles speaks the Unspeakable, betrays the godly, and must therefore annihilate himself. His sacrilege condemns him to suicide—and therewith dumbness (Verstummen).

Hölderlin accordingly pursues the vocation of poetry to become prophetic revelation to the limits of its possibilities and even into loss and dispersal. The aporiae of any attempt to represent the divine results in a renunciation of the prophetic pretensions of the poet and in an admission of the inevitably fictive nature of poetry. Poetry that pretends to be mediating the self-revelation of the divine turns out to be self-deceptive: the prophet, more than the philosopher, is destined to be impotent as a method of elevating the soul to the vision of God. In actual life as opposed to philosophical reflection, the soul comes much closer to authentic connection with the divine through the liveliness (Lebendigkeit) of its perceptions and its dynamic being-moved (Bewegtheit). And this is possible particularly in the register of aesthetic experience and expression. Hölderlin’s vocation to prophetic revelation as the vocation of poetry is set in exquisitely excruciating detail the steps and stages of this movement of poetry. It moves from the potential of realizing Enlightenment ideals concretely in universal spiritual community (prefigured by the disciples gathered around Christ) to portraying poetry’s being capable only of tragedy and of expressing the shipwreck of human aspirations to fullness of meaning through the self-unfolding of Absolute Spirit. Nonetheless, even in times of dearth (“dürftiger Zeit”), poetry still serves as a hermeneutic method for interpreting the letter of Holy Scripture. Although the realization of religious revelation in the creative poetic word proves to be only fragmentary and illusory, there is still here a vocation for “German song” (“Deutsches Gesang”) in the interpretation of the already existing record (the Bible) of the incarnation of God in Jesus.

Hölderlin thus attempts dialectically to turn the loss of the physical presence of God in Christ among his disciples into a positive and productive form of amanesis. Saint John, who on the island of Patmos remembers in visionary modalities Jesus’s life on earth and his “going away,” wrestles with the paradoxical nearness and yet ungraspable nature of the divine (“Nah ist / Und schwer zu fassen der Gott”). From its opening lines, “Patmos” is a hymn about the loss of this presence among us of the holy: in the end, Hölderlin’s masterpiece retreats to a position of only following up the “traces” of divinity that can still be discerned and that are disseminated through words. As in Jesus’s parable of the sower (which the hymn invokes), only this dispersion itself conveys any
Hölderlin’s transcendental philosophical reflection on poetry as revelation—and the impasse he encounters—is pursued to a different result by his Romantic successors. The dialectical self-negation of poetry as prophecy, in which Hölderlin’s aspirations met with defeat, is given a more affirmative and triumphant spin in the Romantic era, notably by Novalis (1772–1801) and by Friedrich Schlegel (1772–1829). For them, although there is no direct or adequate language for expressing the transcendent, still, indirectly, language used in formally innovative and creative ways can effectively symbolize and communicate something that transcends representation.

**Romantic Overreaching—Toward Modern Secularization of Prophetic Poetry**

Poets in many traditions, both ancient and modern, make claims to theological revelation. Poetic tradition at its origins is often indistinguishable from forms of religion and revelation. Poets from Dante to Milton and Blake, who are writing as self-conscious authors affirming their own creativity, propound their works seriously and imperiously as a form of true theological revelation. The topos of poetry as prophetic revelation remains still operative even in very self-consciously and militantly modern poets—from Arthur Rimbaud to Alan Ginsberg—where the rapture and ecstasy of poetic madness replaces religious motives of devotion and yet still asserts itself as true revelation of the depth of the human condition and of the enigma of the universe. Poetry becomes the privileged locus of a kind of “return of the gods” in secularized guises. In these terms, the traditional topic of the relations between poetry and prophecy becomes a crucible for examining the most fundamental questions of our own postmodern, supposedly postmetaphysical era. This era has shown itself in undeniable respects to be, at the same time, “postsecular.” The inspiration of the Muses is transmuted into elusive, indistinct murmurs half apprehended in the interstices between nature and culture, between sound and sense, between bodily sensation and linguistic signification, between memory and forgetting. Such are the “Nachtgeräusche” (“Night Sounds,” 1881/82) registered by Conrad Meyers. In its most secularized forms, the voice of the Muses comes to be heard in the promptings of the unconscious and in the miracles of telecommunications throughout much of the ensuing 20th century, notably in Rainer Maria Rilke, Hugo von Hofmannsthal, and Bertolt Brecht.

There are, however, also explicit thematic employments of an address from divinity that can be traced in its development along a central axis from Klopstock to Hölderlin and beyond to Romantic poets. Klopstock prepares the way for a distinctively modern lineage of prophetic poets by configuring the lyric subject’s feelings and thoughts, its transports, prayers, and visions, as representatives of God, or as theological revelations. This is fundamentally the strategy discovered already by Dante, especially in his *Paradiso* (see, for example, XXXIII.58–63). The declaration of the ineffability of his theme becomes (negatively) the only authentic form of expression of the direct experience of the divine vision. Klopstock extends the vocation of the prophetic poet chiefly affirmed in his epic *Der Messiah* in the direction of a lyrical vocation that prefigures more closely the destiny of poetry as revelation in the later modern period. In his odes, notably “The Vision of God” (“Das Anschauen Gottes”), this lyrical vein opens a dimension of inner, subjective experience as the ground of revelation that is exploited already to the full by Romantic prophetic poets.

Following Hölderlin’s abortive quest, Novalis sounds deeply in relation to the idealist philosophy of Fichte and Schelling the philosophical grounds of prophetic imagination in subjective reflection. Philosophical reflection is necessary in order to point out the unsurpassable limits of reflection and of all possibility of self-knowledge. In providing knowledge of our unsurpassable unknowing, philosophical reflection becomes itself a “methodical prophetism” (“methodische Prophetismus,” II, 531, Nr. 60): it participates in the process of revelation of the Ground of thought and consciousness and life and all things. In this capacity, “Philosophizing is the ground of all other revelations” (“Philosophieren ist der Grund aller andern Offenbarungen,” II, 529, Nr. 22). But only poetry is able to express this (un)ground because it can indirectly represent the unrepresentable, the absolutely unknown and nameless, the holy Nothing (“Undarstellbar, absolute Unbekannte, Namenlose, heilige Nichts”). Poetry can express the feeling of absolute dependence, of loss and incompleteness, that enables a self-affection of a higher “I” and divine Ground. It can be imagined only as a regulative ideal operative in striving after never realizable unity. History is turned into myth by art, and prophecy, too, is absorbed into an aesthetic vision and task laden with social and religious commitments.

An ineffaceable sense of the Difference between a divine reality of perfection and plenitude (“Vollkommenheit”) and the human experience of lack and inadequacy underlies Novalis’s idea and the romantic paradigm of prophetic poetry. The lyrical “I” is constituted only negatively: it is the “no-longer” of a historical ground of revelation in the incarnate presence (the past life of Christ) and the “not-yet” of a hoped-for union of harmony and wholeness (in an eschatological Kingdom come). The difference of the divine and human remains inscribed even into its overcoming through translation of metaphysical concepts into feeling and subjective experience in inspiration and imagination of the lyrical “I.”

The English romantics, too, first among them William Blake, are deeply invested in understanding poetry as a
transcendent, theological revelation—against all neo-classical predecessors and counterparts (for example, Nicolas Boileau in his *Ars poétique*, 1776), who place the emphasis rather on learning the poet’s craft. However, English Romantic poets generally appeal to the human imagination as the source of a creative shaping power from which the whole universe as humanly experienced arises. Percy Shelley emphasizes the godly power of imagination to unify the inner and the outer worlds by its synthetic capacity of creating harmony—even though such religious language is for him only metaphorical expression.

The same is most often true also of French Romanticism, which has its own affair with prophetic inspiration stimulated very often by narcotics used to induce ecstatic experience. Drug use figures as a prominent method from Charles Baudelaire, with his *Paradis artificiels* (1860), to Rimbaud’s secret employment of hashish in his “derangement of all the senses,” to Henri Michaux’s *Misérable miracle: La mescaline* (1955). Such artificial paradises are sometimes anti-religious and in any case signal a certain decadence or at least dissolution of prophetic inspiration.

A long critical tradition of sometimes-contemptuous rejection of claims to prophetic knowledge has often questioned the legitimacy of the very idea of religious revelation. Modern philosophers from Francis Bacon, Thomas Hobbes, and Michel de Montaigne to Hegel, Karl Popper, and Arthur Danto have mounted devastating critiques. However, as Werner Frick suggests, it may be precisely the loss in modern times of prophecy’s credibility in its original function as integral to the religious cult (“in ihrer ursprünglich kultisch gebundenen Version diskreditierte”) that has freed it for its most audacious exploits in creative literary applications (“durch diese Depotenzierung für ‘poetische’ Verwendungen frei und verfügbar geworden”).

Literary transmogrifications of prophetic revelation can be seen as redefining rather than as undermining it—sometimes even with considerable gains in lucidity and aesthetic expressive charm.

Romantics like Shelley and Blake are reviving prophecy in secular terms of human power and potential—the all-creating, all-fashioning powers of imagination. These powers were theorized also contemporaneously and influentially by Samuel Taylor Coleridge. Blake polemizes against the alienation of divine creativity into a transcendent divinity dwelling apart from “the Eternals,” among whom “Human Imagination” is the unifying bond. Shelley prophecies by “the incantation of this verse,” which conjures the West Wind into a divinity granting him through its poetic afflatus his creative power. French Romantics including Alfonse de Lamartine (*La vie de Mohamet, Histoire de la Turquie*, vol. 1, 1854) and Victor Hugo (“L’an neuf de l’hégire,” *La légende des siècles*) revived the fascination with Mohammed in conjunction with the new prophetic powers claimed by poetry and its uncontrollable force of imaginative creation. Walt Whitman carries such a romantic understanding of prophetic poetry forward to the New World and recasts it with a democratic ethos.

The Self-Reflexive Structure of Poetic-Prophetic Revelation and Its Transcendence

The figure of the prophetic in poetry culminates in modern times by running up against its limits in total self-reflexiveness. This is the destination of cultural evolution in general as outlined by Hegel, and it is worked out in application to various fields of culture, eminently literature, by Hegel’s German idealist contemporaries and by certain of his successors in the Romantic Age. However, the structure of self-reflexion has burst asunder dramatically in late modernity, with the ever-more-undeniable failure of the modern project of a fully self-reflective and purely secular society. In postmodern times, reflection is not able to complete itself and close the circle of reflexivity. Still, the resulting open-ended orientation to infinity, in what can be termed postsecular culture, has to be understood in its continuity with the ambitions and aspirations from which it breaks away. In a negative sense, this incompleteness perhaps even manages to fulfill self-reflection in spite of itself—as unending process.

One of the truly remarkable developments concerning prophetic poetry in modern times, at any rate, is that theoretical reflection on poetry as theological revelation becomes integral to this revelation itself. This is clearly the case already with Hölderlin. Accordingly, Bernadette Malinowski treats his poetry under the rubric of *sich offenbarenden Dichtung*), marking a radicalization of Klopstock’s project of poetic prophecy through an intensification of its self-reflexive penchant. Hölderlin shares with Hegel a philosophical vocation that manifests itself, in his case, through his poetical and, inseparably, literary-critical activity and thought. Nevertheless, prophecy, in its orientation toward a dimension of divine transcendence in the register of the religious, remains always mindful of the incommensurable and unrepresentable Difference of the divine and ineffable with respect to human faculties of thought and language.

We have followed the unfolding of this trajectory particularly from Klopstock. He puts into a modern (Kantian) frame of subjectivity and self-reflection the classical Greek and Roman—and also, inseparably, Judeo-Christian—heritage that Dante mediates: it stretches from the Bible and ancient epic, especially Homer and Virgil, to Milton and Blake and English Romanticism and its sequels even in America—from Whitman to Ginsberg. Another offshoot of this composite tradition as a mainstream lineage of prophetic poetry could be traced to Ireland—especially to William Butler Yeats and to James Joyce’s apotheosis of Christian epic tradition in *Ulysses* issuing in the final apocalypse of *Finnegans Wake*.20
To recapitulate, we have seen how Klopstock first developed consciousness of aesthetic form in its relative autonomy as crucial to theological and specifically prophetic revelation. He began explicitly and reflectively to appreciate literary form as harboring a religiously revelatory potential. Hölderlin accentuates this reflection on art and subjectivity itself as intrinsic to, and indeed a generating source of, revelation, displacing the accent from the religious contents of revelation to the artistic form of prophetic discourse. He thereby highlights the self-reflective features of poetry and of the revelation in poetic language as self-revelation. In Hölderlin, reflection on revelation in poetry, in the style of Klopstock, becomes self-reflection through intellectual intuition. Such pre-reflexive intuition is a priori, that is, prior to all judgment as Ur-Teilung (literally “originary dividing”) of pure Being, the Being which is experienced as still one in intellectual intuition. Hölderlin thereby converts intellectual intuition from an ontological principle to an aesthetic mode of experience. Having discerned this possibility particularly for German poetry (“Deutsches Gesang”), Hölderlin nevertheless remains skeptical and disenchanted. However, the Romantics following him exploit this potential to the full.

Poetic theorists such as Novalis radicalize the self-critical method in this European tradition to the point of turning it into an exercise in infinite self-criticism. But this represents a seemingly unsurpassable limit. Where can prophetic poetry go from here? The suggestion of Whitman, finally, is that the radical, democratic equality of all with all, even in seeming to contradict the transcendence of the One, is itself the means of transcending all limits between beings.

I do not call one greater and one smaller,
That which fills its period and place is equal to any.
(Song of Myself, section 44)²¹

Rather than transcending in the direction of the absolutely other, the Other as One, the democratic gospel of universal equality frees beings in all directions to be just what they are and potentially to be in relation to all others without any limitation.

Whitman’s visionary poetry conceives of America as a radical rupture with previous world history as a whole. And yet the categories of eschatology and salvation history that he deploys in his prophetic declarations carry forward the characteristic literary forms generated by this very history. Whitman even includes reenactment of the crucifixion and resurrection of Christ in his self-understanding of his own prophetic calling. Yet he appropriates these figures as mythic archetypes for the cultural-historical projection of his own lyrical-biographical self as self-consciously sacred in its own infinite self-unfolding.

Whitman’s autoeroticism, for instance, in the masturbatory scene in section 5 of Song of Myself turns into a primordial sacred rite of cosmic mysticism. It is framed by and issues in, moreover, a political messianism that envisages America as the culmination of an evolutionary process that coincides with a biblically derived salvation history. Whitman’s prophetic word, in this manner, moves beyond the aesthetic realm and steps out beyond the bindings of the poetic text to become an agent effective in history, a leading participant in shaping the future.

For Whitman, not unlike Herder and Hamann, for whom poetry is the mother tongue of the human race (“Muttersprache des menschlichen Geschlects”), the Bible is the model of a poetry that is the authentic voice of the people.²² Crucifixion and resurrection become here quintessentially self-reflective moments: “That I could look with a separate look on my own crucifixion and bloody crowning” (Song of Myself, section 38). They entail reflection on the poet’s resurrection in and as a textual body and even in and as the reader.

Whitman’s final poem, “So long!,” which appears as the envoi of Leaves of Grass, effects a future-oriented opening of his oeuvre to a new or further creative phase in the hands and body of the reader, whose breath and pulse are felt as the poet’s own (line 59). The address to the reader is crucial to the prophetic-poetic tradition that can be reconstructed around Dante at the historical center of this mode of poetry as it stretches from the Bible to James Joyce.²³ Whitman oversteps the boundaries of the book, offering the best of himself in love to whoever will have him, cajoling:

Camerado, this is no book,
Who touches this touches a man
(Is it night? Are we here together alone?)
It is I you hold and who holds you,
I spring from the pages into your arms—decease calls me forth.

In transcending the frame of the literary altogether and uniting (even fusing) with his reader in projected face-to-face encounter, Whitman represents the spirit of prophetic poetry fully incarnate in a secularized modern age.²⁴

In the prefaces (both 1855 and 1876) to Leaves of Grass and in “Democratic Vistas” (1871), Whitman takes over the traditional vocabulary of prophetic poetry in order to outline a realized eschatology of the Kingdom of God on earth in America as the restoration of the paradise that was lost through the old world’s invertebrate forms of enslavement and hegemony. In these theoretical discussions, but most of all in his poetry, Whitman forges a future-oriented religion of “democracy.” This Shibboleth is held to be synonymous with “America” and is based on an unlimited optimism with regard to human progress and perfectibility. In some respects, Whitman...
Throughout its tradition, prophecy had been premised on a discrepancy between the world as it is and the world as it ought to be. This tension is constitutive of the call to receptiveness vis-à-vis a summons to the realization of divinity: such is the burden of any prophet’s mission and message. In the prophet’s vision, the world as it ought to be is already real and even more real than the world as it is actually or apparently—for this ought-to-be world is the undistorted image of the higher reality of the divine. Only human failings and fallings prevent the real from being manifest as it truly is. This imperative of belief in a metaphysical reality that is not empirically evident characterizes the prophetic faith. An ethical and exclusively humanistic worldview, on the other hand, takes the empirically real physical world and social universe as the sole reality that human beings have to shape and mold in accordance with the standards of an imaginable ideal. This outlook, which is so natural to an American pragmatist mentality, has much influence on Whitman, too. But so does the religious aspect of prophetism, which attributes the power for making a better world and for lifting the actual world into the full realization of its potential not ultimately to human initiative but to divine grace and prevenient. The narcissistic autoeroticism of Song of Myself is in the end overcome through self-abandonment to the Other. This takes place through sexual violation and finally even through the death of the lyric self. Self-transcendence is accomplished through a prophetic speech act that is carried forward by the reader into the ever-open future.

In Whitman, the transcendent dimension of divine action and of a metaphysical other world are affirmed, yet only together and along with the immanent presence of divinity operating in the temporal reality of human beings, particularly in the life of their bodies. An orientation to the future as the direction of concretely achievable transcendence, moreover, takes on an absoluteness and sufficiency of its own. This is thus a fully secularized or worldly incarnate type of prophetic vision. It is conflated with a visionary politics of the nation in Whitman—of America as the “nation of nations” realizing the dreams of humanity as a whole. Thus the all-important Difference of transcendent divinity that was the premise of the prophetic-poetic tradition is not denied, but it is completely conflated with a total immanence that in merely logical terms contradicts it. This constitutes a significant turn and reconfiguration of the figure of poetic prophetism. But it is also understandable as an inevitable outgrowth and destination of this religious-poetic genre in the emerging modern world. Whitman’s reenactment of the vocation of the prophet can even be understood as pointing prophetically in the direction of the explosion of lyric subjectivity that was to come about in our own ultramodern times.

Review of the Literature

The relations between poetry and prophecy have long been the subject of diverse investigations extending beyond the disciplines of literature and religion and beyond the historical-geographical compass of Western tradition and its founding civilizations, particularly the Hebrew and the Hellenic. Anthropologists and linguists have studied phenomena of mantic, magic, and shamanic practices in depth and have brought to focus particularly the connections between spiritual experience and its linguistic expressions across cultures. In a collection honoring Nora Chadwick (author of a ground-breaking work Poetry and Prophecy, 1942) and indebted to the linguistic anthropologist of poetry Paul Friedrich, John Leavitt presents an “Anthropology of Inspiration” comprising ethno-poetic studies of the exceptional poetic-linguistic manifestations proper to such forms of ecstatic transport. He brings together Mayan divination, Siberian shamanism, Central Himalayan ritual discourse, and demonic possession as understood by Awad ‘Ali Bedouins and places them into relation with the reworking of Isaiah’s prophetic calling by Alexander Pushkin (1799–1837). Pushkin’s poem “The Prophet” in particular incorporates doctrinal elements of Dante and Milton along with the imagery of Blake and language like that of Shelley and Keats. The broad topic of language marked as spiritually powerful and efficacious (and therefore as poetic and at the same time prophetic) thus shows itself to belong to world cultures including but reaching well beyond the classical Western traditions.

Leavitt’s 1997 collection is a continuation and further widening of the purview of prophetic poetics initiated already in 1991 by a volume of essays edited by James Kugel. Kugel identifies the 18th-century biblical scholar Robert Lowth’s De sacra poesi hebraeorum prelectiones (1753) as establishing the paradigm of poetry as prophecy—and of prophecy as poetry—with its thesis that the two had “one common name, one common origin, one common author, the Holy Spirit” (quoted by Kugel). Lowth’s ideas guided the imagination of English Romantic poets a generation later, especially thanks to Johann Gottfried Herder’s timely response in his Spirit of Hebrew Poetry (Geiste der Ebräischen Poesie, 1782–83), which exerted decisive influence also on Goethe and German Romanticism.25

Prophecy was discovered outside the Bible and as a universal form of thought and existence by Abraham Heschel, in Die Prophetie (1936) and in Prophetic Inspiration After the Prophets: Maimonides and Other Medieval Authorities (1996), as well as by André Neher in parts I and III of his classic L’essence du prophetisme (1955). Neher’s work guided Maurice Blanchot’s literary interpretation of the prophetic word in “La parole prophétique” (in Le livre à venir, 1959) as a word from “the Outside” (le Dehors). This is an “incessant word” of
Prophetic claims and tones continue to be asserted in the 20th-century avant-garde manifestos of Futurism figures of modern lyric tradition. The ambitious poetry, by its nature, reaches into the register of the religious, in which all things are tied together in a cosmic framework.

Khalil Gibran (most pertinently in the vein of Silesius Angelus and John of the Cross. Many others in varying degrees, from Rabindranath Tagore to the American Indian Navajo creation myth, take away the minds of the poets, and uses them as his ministers, as he also uses diviners and holy prophets, in order that we who hear them may know them to be speaking not of themselves, who utter these priceless words in a state of unconsciousness, but that God himself is the speaker, and that through them he is conversing with us."

This precious morsel of imagination is the germ of a vast genealogical tree of subsequent tradition.

Among the many notable contemporary attempts to write a history of significant branches of this sprawling outgrowth of religious imagination are Heinz Schlaffer’s series of books on different aspects of poetry and religion. Bernadette Malinowski develops specific segments of this history in magisterial detail. Some of the most fertile grounds for what we might call the “poetics of religious revelation” can be found, furthermore, in Asian religious and literary traditions. They are currently being explored in earnest in East–West intercultural dialogue by William de Bary and Anthony Yu, among others.

Primary Sources

The primary sources of religious revelation are quite generally poetic texts. In monotheistic religions, these include, eminently, the Bible and the Qur’an. But typically the source texts of other world religions, too, are irreducibly poetic in nature. This is clearly the case, for example, with the Yijing (Book of Changes), the Laozi (Book of Tao), the Vedas and Upanishads and the Baghavad Gita, the Buddhist Lotus Sutra, and many others such as the Amitabha Infinite Life Sutra and the Shurangama Sutra. Poetic form is equally crucial to the great variety of mythopoetic and ritualistic works, for example, national epics such as the West African Bayajidda or the American Indian Navajo creation myth Diné Bahne’. Literally “The Story of the People.” Such works form the unifying basis and furnish universal icons for aboriginal cultures across the globe. Any number of folk epics rely and exploit poetry in order to forge the original image and identity of a people in the image of some divinity and a cosmic framework.

Moving in the opposite direction, many works by individual creative poets must also be considered as primary sources for awaking spiritual awareness and cultivating religious sensibilities. In addition to epic poets like Bernard Sylvestris (Cosmographia), Alain de Lille (Anticaudianus), Dante, and Milton, who make religious revelation explicitly their business, there are also many modern scions of spiritual seeing in lyrical verse in the vein of Silesius Angelus and John of the Cross. Many others in varying degrees, from Rabindranath Tagore to Khalil Gibran (most pertinently in The Prophet, 1923), also touch the register of the prophetic. The most ambitious poetry, by its nature, reaches into the register of the religious, in which all things are tied together (religare) into a unified vision. This dimension is powerfully present, even if often in inverted or negative forms, in the poètes maudits (accursed poets), particularly Baudelaire, Verlaine, and Rimbaud, among the founding figures of modern lyric tradition.

Prophetic claims and tones continue to be asserted in the 20th-century avant-garde manifestos of Futurism.
(Marinetti) and Dadaism (Hugo Ball) and in Stefan George’s modernist religion of art (as declared in his manifesto-like “Der Dichter in Zeiten der Wirren”). There are unmistakable prophetic gestures and vestiges even in the conservative religious modernism of T. S. Eliot (whose *Waste Land* is presented as the vision of the prophet Tiresias), as well as in Hugo von Hofmannsthal’s attempt to create a spiritual nation through writing (“Das Schrifturn als geistiger Raum der Nation,” 1927). Many completely secular writers such as Mark Twain or Thomas Mann have been recognized for their powerfully prophetic voices. Modern poets including Pablo Neruda (“Canto General”), Ernesto Cardenal (“Apocalypse”), and Alan Ginsberg (“Howl”), in their very different ways, are extending the lineage of prophetic poetry from Walt Whitman into our own times.

**Further Reading**


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Notes:

(1.) I pursue this production of religious revelation by poetic means and outline its epistemological presuppositions in The Revelation of Imagination.

(2.) In Secular Scriptures: Modern Theological Poetics in the Wake of Dante, I discuss Rimbaud and Baudelaire, among other founders of modern poetic tradition, as inventing visionary and seer modes as essentially secularized forms of religious revelation.

(3.) See, further, Kugel, Poetry and Prophecy, 15–20.

(4.) Heinz Schlaffer, Geistersprache: Zweck und Mittel der Lyrik, 141–146, discusses more fully the phenomena mentioned in these paragraphs, and for those in the next, see his Geistersprache, 61–67.

(5.) This constitutive difference is challenged by Wordsworth in the Preface to his Lyrical Ballads. However, it is widely accepted before Romanticism and even after, for example, by the Russian formalists, with their emphasis on literary language as “defamiliarizing.” The latter theory actually acknowledges both the likeness and the difference of poetic language with respect to ordinary language. Harold Bloom’s “The Breaking of Form,” in Deconstruction and Criticism, ed. Harold Bloom, Paul de Man, Jacques Derrida, Geoffrey Hartman, and J. Hillis Miller (New York: Continuum, 1979), 1–31, offers pertinent reflection on “poetic form” as I use it.


(7.) Cyril O’Regan probes and elaborates this topic in Gnostic Apocalypse: Jacob Boehme’s Haunted Narrative (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2002) and in a number of related studies.

(8.) Klopstock, “Von der besten Art über Gott zu denken” in Sämtliche Werke (Leipzig, Germany: Georg Joachim Göschen, 1816), vol. 11, p. 214

(9.) Ibid.


22. See Whitman’s essay “The Bible as Poetry” (1883); and Johann Georg Hamann’s “Aesthetica in nuce,” in *Schriften zur Sprache,* ed. J. Simon (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1967), 105; and see commentary by Malinowski, 401–403.


27. Plato’s *Ion,* translation by Benjamin Jowett available at The Internet Classics Archive.


29. Bernadette Malinowski, *Das Heilige sei mein Wort*: Paradigmen prophetischer Dichtung von Klopstock bis Whitman. See also Rolf Bachen, *Dichtung als verborgene Theologie. Ein dichtungstheoretischer Topos vom*
Revelation and Bible Prophecy—A Comparison of Eschatological Views: Dispensationalism and Preterism. Major Keywords: Heaven, Hell, Christ’s Second Coming, End Times, Rapture, Revelation, Prophecy, Eschatology, Dispensationalism, Preterism, Apologetics. Search for Keywords, Phrases, or Bible Verses in this Book (e.g., “place of the dead” or “life of Joseph” or “Matthew 24:15”) using the PDF “find” or “search” feature on your computer. This question [imminence] is much more than just a theological, ivory tower debate. There is a great deal at stake depending on which view is biblical. Think about it.


(31.) See essays collected in Wojcik and Frontain, eds., Poetic Prophecy in Western Literature.

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