TO DWELL POETICALLY ON THE EARTH : THE INTERACTION OF ECOLOGY, PHILOSOPHY AND POETRY

Richard Cameron, M. Div., M.A.
Director, Language Center, Assumption University

A fundamental flaw in the deepest ontological core of Western culture has spread a disease over the face of the earth that now threatens the human community with its own destruction. Humanity has not respected the natural environment which provides the sustenance for its existence and our planet now stands on the edge of extinction. The authentic gifts of science, reason and technology have been perverted by an elemental hubris, a desire for mastery and control, and this perversion has not only eroded the spiritual heart of Western culture, it promises to do the same for the great spiritualities of Asia.

Over seven hundred years ago the following prophetic words were spoken by the remarkable Christian Medieval mystic, scientist and poet, Hildegard of Bingen:

Now in the people that were meant to be green there is no more life of any kind. There is only shrivelled barrenness. The winds are burdened by the awful stink of evil, selfish goings on. Thunderstorms menace. The air belches out the filthy uncleanliness of the peoples. The earth should not be injured! The earth must not be destroyed!

As often as the elements of the world are violated by ill-treatment, so God will cleanse them. God will cleanse them through the sufferings and hardships of humankind. All of creation God gives to humankind to use. But if this privilege is misused, then God's justice permits creation to punish humanity. (1)

Seven centuries have passed and her words have not been heeded. Creation theologian, Matthew Fox, who is attempting to restore to Western Christianity its own buried and long-forgotten cosmic and creation spirituality, has remarked that "The killing of

Mother Earth in our time is the number one ethical, spiritual and human issue of our planet." (2)

In this paper I wish to explore the spiritual root of this Western disease of technocracy, especially as it impinges upon the material and spiritual well-being of Asia. But I would also like to explore the nature of a solution for Western culture from which the East can benefit, namely a recovery by the West of an authentic contemplative vision of life, a mystical and poetic sense of the sacredness of the Cosmos. It is this primordial vision which the West has almost entirely lost and which the East is now in danger of losing.

In the first part of this paper, I will call upon the witness of a number of thinkers from both East and West to help clarify the nature of our present danger. In the second part of the paper I will examine the thought of the twentieth century Western philosopher, Martin Heidegger, because he is one of the representative thinkers in the West today who are attempting to recover for Western culture a more contemplative mode of thinking. Heidegger offered a searching critique of Western technology, which he saw as the logical outcome of Western metaphysics. And he assigned a pre-eminent role to the poet in aiding the West in the recovery of its own 'Eastern' vision, so that humanity may once again "dwell poetically on the earth" and hear the voice of the gods and see the light of heaven.

As Heidegger remarks:

Thinking only begins at the point where we have come to know that Reason glorified for centuries, is the most bostinate adversary of thinking. (3)

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During the past decade the urgent warnings of many scientists have heightened our awareness of the magnitude of the ecological crisis. An eloquent testimony of the devastation being wrought by our present industrial system is offered by geologist/theologian Thomas Berry:

In the seventeenth century the Western world decided, "We'll do it with technology, with science. We'll do it by taking control of the natural world, we'll make the natural world yield up its abundance for our use; we're going to create wonderworld." But we don't get Wonderworld, we get Waste-world. We're trashing the wonderful ever-renewing natural systems in order to produce junk!... The industrial world is just too devastating to endure.

I'm trying to get religious people to appreciate the order of magnitude of the change that is taking place. I find consistently that people underestimate what's happening because what's happening now has no historical parallel, no biological parallel, for the changes that the industrial system has brought about on the planet. We're changing the chemistry of the planet on the scale of hundreds of millions of years. We're changing the biosystems of the planet on a similar scale. We're even changing the geology of the planet. And we wonder why religious people are so insensitive to this, why they are so accepting about it. They really have not the slightest idea what's happening. (4)

Of course it is this Western model of development which the nations of Asia are adopting so quickly and uncritically, with destructive consequences for their own ecologies and traditional cultures. But as the Vietnamese Buddhist thinker To Thi Anh remarks, "(The East) has not yet gone

through the test of rationalism and technology. But it is far less fitted to cope with the system of technics, alien to all its values and achievements, than was the West when it met the same challenge." (5)

Furthermore, the present model of development cannot succeed for the Third World, not only because it is poisoning the earth, but also because it is so dependant upon limited resources which are being rapidly depleted. The United States alone comprises only 6% of the world's population but consumes over 50% of the world's yearly consumption of non-renewable resources. This pattern of consumption cannot continue and the system upon which it is based needs to be radically revised. In the words of the American author Kirkpatrick Sale, writing in the ecology issue of the American journal, "The Nation";

Nothing less than a drastic overhaul of this civilization and an abandonment of its ingrained gods - progress, growth, exploitation, technology, materialism, humanism and power - will do anything substantial to halt our path to environmental destruction. (6)

A chilling account of the consequences of capitalist development in the Third World is offered by Luciana Castellina, writing from the perspective of the "Greens" political movement in Europe:

Ecological disaster, the direct consequence of this model of development, now also presents the most immediate obstacle to its continuation. Costs which have always existed are now entering for the first time directly into capital's calculations. Meanwhile, the facts bear eloquent witness to the truth (already sensed) that it will not be possible, even physically, to extend developed capitalism's mode of production and consumption, at any rate in its present form, into significant new areas of the world.

For it is in the Third World that the problem now actually poses itself in the most drastic terms, as the introduction of this model (in forms, moreover much more ruthless than those which accompanied the growth of capitalism in what we now term the advanced nations) brings in its train processes of catastrophic devastation. Deforestation, desertification, soil erosion, chaotic urbanization - these are only the most visible aspects of wholesale ecological destruction and regression to social barbarism. At the present rate, the earth's forests, whose surface shrinks every year by an area the size of Hungary, will in a few decades have become too small to allow the production of enough oxygen for human survival. If for the time being we still breathe, this is already thanks to the Third World's remaining wooded areas. Of course, there is no trade in oxygen; the market takes no account of it, and it has no exchange value. It is therefore thought 'normal' for the Third World to export its wealth of oxygen and 'normal' for the industrialized world to play a parasitic part.

Forests, however, can be sold: by selling them in the form of timber, we destroy the capital, oxygen, that they produce. What can the future hold in store if we remain committed to a belief that global inequality is to be overcome by exporting this model of development, with its burden of modern industrial and agricultural poisons, to the entire world? Henceforth, we must also see the ecological aspect of the growing inter-dependence which characterizes the modern world, for the damage done by the present model is one more perverse aspect of

the 'North's' exploitation of the 'South'. [7]

The tragedy of deforestation in the Third World has taken a further step, as reported by "The Bangkok Post" in its June 30th edition. Logging companies in Thailand, presumably the same ones who have engaged in the decimation of the forests of Burma, have recently entered into an agreement with the Khmer Rouge to begin the destruction of the rain forests of Cambodia.

And from Thailand itself comes the voice of one of its leading Buddhist social critics, Sulak Suvaraksa:

Although Siam was never fully colonised in a political sense, intellectually she has never regained independence since imperialism made its mark. This is in fact the worst form of subjugation: to ape Western Civilization and culture without a proper understanding of its implications. Blind admiration for Western science and technology as if it were value free is indeed the worst mistake. Coupled with the loss of self-respect and critical awareness of one's own spiritual and cultural heritage, this leaves most Asian elites of the once Buddhist lands in a spiritual crisis. [8]

While the present model of development threatens to erode the traditional spiritualities of Asia, Western Christianity is now seeking to regain contact with its own mystical and contemplative traditions, sadly neglected for centuries. This very neglect of Christianity's own tradition of cosmic spirituality is seen as a major contributory cause of our present ecological crisis. For the roots of this crisis can be traced in part to a profound fault within traditional Christian theology itself in so far as it viewed the earth as the exclusive property of humanity to be disposed of solely for humanity's use and enjoyment. Nature was valued only for its contributions to human material welfare or as a stepping stone to reach a Transcendent maker, but not for its own beauty and mystery.

Edward C. Whitmont, a highly respected Jungian analyst, writing about the rising interest in the West in the ancient, cosmic Goddess religions, offers this assessment of the effects of traditional Christian theology's treatment of nature:

For centuries traditional Christian theology forged an absolute gulf between humanity and nature. Pagan worship of the divinity within nature was rejected. Humanity was seen as the center of creation. All nature was subservient. Exploitation of the environment was sanctioned... These attitudes have directly contributed to our current ecological crisis... We have in a sense secularized our religion. Having voided the sacred from nature, we have turned to new gods; technology, production of goods, greater physical well-being. Consequently, our environment is poisoned, resources become exhausted, ecological cycles are disrupted, demonic powers of the machine threaten us. Truly, however, our insensitivity to the living pulse of nature is the greatest menace. [9]

One of Asia's most distinguished Christian theologians, Aloysius Pieris, S.J., confirms this diagnosis in even more critical terms:

I believe that at some point in history the light that rose from the East was allowed to set for good in the West, and with that, the sacramental approach toward cosmic reality began to degenerate into an "instrumental theory of nature."...Technocracy as it operates today is a hideous monument

to the antignostic bias that official Christianity nurtured for centuries, an insane disorder that, true to its anti-Eastern origins, is now drying up the very springs of Eastern religiosity there. Its effects spell such disaster in all parts of the world that the responsibility to restore the East-West dialectics in our cultures is at once urgent and universal. (10)

The restoration of "the East-West dialectics" entails for the West a recovery of its own neglected "Eastern" orientation, that sense of the sacredness of the cosmos and of the invisible solidarity of all living beings. It is this sense of sacredness that has been demolished by the Western scientific world, and it is highly appropriate that in recent years scientists have been leading the way to a recovery of this cosmic sense. As Albert Einstein remarked, "The most important function of art and science is to awaken the cosmic religious feeling and keep it alive." (11) The West is seeking to regain a sense of intuitive wisdom and cosmic mystery which it has allowed to wither at the root because of its preference for a one-sided emphasis upon rational mastery and control.

Fritjof Capra, one of the leading interpreters of the paradigm shift currently underway in Western Culture, offers this analysis:

In our civilization we have modified our environment to such an extent during this cultural evolution that we have lost touch with our biological and ecological base more than any other culture and any other civilization in the past. This separation manifests itself in a striking disparity between the development of intellectual power, scientific knowledge, and technological skills, on the one hand, and of wisdom, spirituality and ethics on the other. Scientific and technological knowledge has grown enormously since the Greeks embarked on the scientific venture in the sixth century B.C. But during these twenty-five centuries there has been hardly any progress in the conduct of social affairs. The spirituality and moral standards of Lao Tzu and Buddha who also lived in the sixth century B.C. were clearly not inferior to ours. (12)

This lack of spiritual balance has led directly to a model of development that has not only created a materialistic consumer culture with thousands of artificial needs. It has also led to the destruction of the very environmental resources upon which the entire system depends for its continued existence. Perhaps there is a certain ironic justice in this. Only the vision of impending collapse will compel humanity to re-examine the foundations of technocratic culture and rediscover the contemplative vision of the sacredness and unity of all living beings. It is in the service of this vision that the authentic gifts of science and technology should be put to use and not for the sake of a humanity that is seeking its security in power and possessions because it has cut itself off from its deepest spiritual roots and from its cosmic awareness of the ultimate Ground of Being.

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Since the beginning of the Romantic movement in the eighteenth century, numerous thinkers and poets have warned of the profound split in the being of the Western person, because of the dissociation between reason and the whole person and the enveloping mystery of Being. The German philosopher Martin Heidegger shaped his entire philosophic project in terms of aiding

the West in a recovery of this primordial experience of Being, which he believed had been lost when reason as a distinct human faculty emerged out of the unconscious 2500 years ago in the thought of Plato.

Heidegger is especially relevant to the thought of this paper because he has offered a radical critique of Western technology which he views as the logical terminus of Western metaphysical thought. When reason was exalted into an absolute, the human subject became isolated in its consciousness from the rest of nature and the experience of unity between subject and object was lost. The end result was that the human subject could only find its meaning through its mastery over objects, a mastery that has become ever more aggressive and destructive as an expression of a fundamental will to power. Significantly, Heidegger assigns to the poet the highest role in rescuing Western culture from its one-sided rationalism and its "forgetting of Being".

Heidegger does not believe that the characteristic aggressiveness of modern technology was a fixed reality of Western thought beginning with the Greeks. There were counterbalancing tendencies both within Greek thought and within Western Christian culture which helped to maintain a precarious harmony between humanity and nature. Not until the Enlightenment and the thought of Descartes would the full implications of Plato's rationalism be brought to complete expression with the birth of modern science. But the seeds of our disorder were present in our beginnings.

For Heidegger the nature of this disorder lies in the "forgetting of Being", the loss of a primordial experience of unity beyond and prior to the subject – object distinction, and the Western tradition itself has begun with this loss. Because this tradition has now reached a spiritual dead end, it is imperative that we attempt a radical renewal of the tradition by fetching back "from the oblivion of the past" the primordial experience of Being.

Of course when we speak of "Being" and "The Ground of Being" we are on very mysterious territory and are skirting the edges of mysticism. Not a few commentators on Heidegger's thought, William Barrett among them, have noted the affinities of Heidegger's reflections on Being with the mysterious ***Tao*** of Chinese philosophy, the generative Source of everything that exists. Heidegger himself, in speaking of the Zen Buddhist scholar, D.T. Suzuki, has remarked, "If I understand him, this is what I have been trying to say in all my writings." (13)

A comment by the transpersonal psychologist, Frances Vaughan, on the Ground of Being will explicate this point:

According to the perennial philosophy, human beings are part of a wholeness that constitutes the fabric of the universe, the ground of being. This integral wholeness does not exist as a separate entity, yet everything exists within it. This wholeness is called by different names in different languages and different religious traditions. In this context I will use the term the Absolute to refer to this ultimate wholeness... the underlying unity or basic nature of existence, the universe of matter and energy and everything within it. (14)

In pointing to the loss of this experience of wholeness within Western culture and its need of a recovery of the experience of Being, Heidegger has become one of the

most significant indicators of the 'turn to the East' that is currently underway within Western culture. For Heidegger's thought is founded on an intuitive tradition that bridges Romanticism in the West with Asian mysticism and spirituality.

However, Heidegger remains firmly grounded in the Western philosophical tradition and he believes that the first Greek thinkers, the pre-Socratics, were in possession of this primal, intuitive experience of Being, prior to the emergence of the faculty of reason in the thought of Plato. The pre-Socratics were poets and mystics who were in touch with an enveloping ground of Being and who gave voice to the deepest wisdom of the community. It is to them we must turn for inspiration in the recovery for Western culture of the primordial understanding of Being.

William Barrett, the American philosopher, describes the pre-Socratics in these terms:

These earliest philosophers among the Greeks were seers, poets, almost shamans - as well as the first thinkers. Mythological and intuitive elements permeate their thinking even where we see the first historical efforts toward conceptualization; they traffic with the old gods even while in the process of coining new significance for them; and everywhere in the fragments of these pre-Socratic Greeks is the sign of a revelation greater than themselves which they are unveiling for the rest of mankind. (15)

Nonetheless, within the pre-Socratic experience the faculty of reason had not yet emerged as a distinct human faculty. It was the vocation and genius of Plato that achieved the triumph of reason over the poetic and the mythic. Almost singlehandedly he detached reason from the religious and poetic intuitions of nature and endowed it with a unique identity of its own. By fully isolating and distinguishing reason from feeling and intuition within the human person Plato set the course for the subsequent development of Western civilization and its differentiation from the civilizations of the Orient. Reason had emerged from the waters of the unconscious and the end result was Western science. By the time of Aristotle, the wise leader of the community was no longer the poet or the seer, but the rational philosopher and the theoretical scientist.

Without question this was a momentous event for human civilization and a necessary stage in the evolution of consciousness. It endowed the human community with an enormous confidence in its powers to comprehend and master the natural environment, and the events of nature were no longer viewed as reflections of the whims of the gods.

However, in the words of Thoreau, "You never gain something but that you lose something." The emergence of the faculty of reason allowed the Greeks to detach the objects of their observations as clear and distinct forms separate from their encompassing ground. In this manner the objects could emerge into the light of human consciousness and be dealt with and observed in a clear and detached manner. But the vast environing ground of Being was lost and forgotten, and it is this loss which Heidegger refers to as the "Fall of Being". Henceforth in the history of Western thought, the human community became bound to individual beings, objects, and the mystery of Being itself receded into oblivion. The result was a powerful sense of mastery over objects and a

loss of the sense of being rooted in a mystery greater than the self. Of course, the Christian religion would provide Western culture with a transcendent sense of mystery and revelation. But with the decline of religion in the seventeenth century and the rise of modern science, the split in Western consciousness would reach its extreme limit, giving rise to the Romantic Movement as an attempt to recover the experience of the whole.

The American philosopher Robert Pirsig, in his entertaining bestseller, ***Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance,*** offers this assessment:

> ***And now he began to see for the first time the unbelievable magnitude of what man, when he gained power to understand and rule the world in terms of dialectic truths, had lost. He had built empires of scientific capability to manipulate the phenomena of nature into enormous manifestations of his own dreams of power and wealth - but for this he had exchanged an empire of understanding of equal magnitude: an understanding of what it is to be a part of the world, and not an enemy of it.*** (16)

Together with the loss of the pre-Socratic awareness of Being, the Greeks affected a fundamental alteration in the understanding of truth. For the pre-Socratics truth had been marked by the quality of ***a-letheia,*** or ***unhiddenness.*** It emerged out of the primordial mystery of Being before which the human person had to maintain a posture of reverential receptivity. Truth was primarily intuitive and never exhausted the infinite depths of Being. But Plato in his famous allegory of the cave subjected Truth to the dominance of reason. Truth came to be identified with the correctness of an intellectual judgement about things, and this meaning of truth was established as the primary one. Of course it is this understanding of truth as residing in the human intellect as it judges about things which gave rise to the development of science. But by subjecting other kinds of truth to an inferior and even malevolent status, Plato established the fundamental split between the cultures of East and West. The great Eastern civilizations located truth in an intuitive realm that transcended reason and only by breaking out of the restrictive bonds of reason could the human subject achieve that 'truthful' and intuitive apprehension of the cosmic Whole of which it was a part.

The American philosopher F.S.C. Northrop. in his classic study ***The Meeting of East and West,*** offers this diagnosis:

> ***In Plato's philosophy there are two "ground principles," as his famous lecture On the Good specifically stated: one, the rational mathematical, formal principle; the other, the intuitive, immediately apprehended, emotional, aesthetic principle termed "the indeterminate dyad," or the potentially differentiable aesthetic continuum...***
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> ***Failing to make an important distinction, Plato went on quite arbitrarily to brand the aesthetic, emotional female principle as evil and the male rational principle as good. Consequentially, it is to this rational factor, termed God the Father, that the Divine is restricted in the orthodox Christian religion of the West...and it is with this female, compassionate, aesthetic component that the good and the divine in the philosophy and religion of the Orient are identified... Restricting trustworthy knowledge and the idea of the good and the divine to the unseen theoretic component... had the***

effect also of making the cultures of East and West incompatible. [17]

Northrop's "intuitively apprehended aesthetic continuum" refers to Asia's intuitive awareness of a unifying mystery within the forms of nature, an apprehension of a cosmic mystery imminent within nature. Nonetheless, this intuition points to an Absolute mystery which ***relativizes*** the forms of nature while at the same time uniting them into a cosmic whole. It is this contemplative awareness of the mystery of the Whole which the West needs to recover.

As previously mentioned, it is also Heidegger's view that the decisive step away from the original experience of Being occurred when Plato brought the conception of truth, or ***aletheia,*** "under the yoke of the Idea." Truth came to be understood solely in terms of the "unveilment" or "revealing" of Being and what became lost was the pre-Socratic sense that Being was an inexaustable mystery which reason could never completely comprehend. Something of infinite depth always remained concealed in the very process of the revealment of Being. But with Plato "the fundamental interplay of concealing and revealing becomes.. a one-sided revealment." [18]

While the Asian civilizations did not follow this same process and did not affect a detachment of being from Being, but preserved a reverence for the mysterious Ground that transcended reason, these cultures did not affirm the unique value of human reason and the consequent dignity of the human person. The end result has been a certain diminution of the human person and the material world and the place of moral responsibility in the cultures of Asia. Furthermore, the lack of a developed sense of critical rationality has also burdened the spiritualities of Asia with a multitude of uncritical mythic identifications and superstitious practices which have beclouded the integral purity of these great religious traditions. For those of us who live within the cultures of Asia and who treasure its most authentic spiritual riches, this is a very real and pressing problem.

The point of these generalizations is that each of the civilizations has its own shadow and it would be facile to view the historical parting of East and West as an error on the part of the West which could have been avoided with ***the exercise of*** a little more wisdom on the part of Plato and Aristotle. Had the Greeks not detached objects from their ground we would not have the Western intellect with its authentic gifts of science and rationality.

Nonetheless, there are certain comments which can be made about the contributions of Plato and Aristotle to the subsequent development of Western civilization. When one reads through the great Platonic myths, one is struck by the supernatural aura surrounding the exaltation of reason. It is seen as the divine part of human nature, separating the human subject from its more unruly animal passions and intuitions. Plato gives an extraordinary emphasis to reason and above all to a realm of eternal truths that are accessible to reason alone. Undoubtedly, Plato was aware of the momentousness of this emergence of reason and the fragility of the discovery which could be overwhelmed at any moment by a reassertion of the old myths. And yet the particular quality and energy of Plato's emphasis is disturbing. It is as if a finite human faculty has been reified and absolutized as a defense against a profound spiritual insecurity, a fear of mortality

and change and time. Perhaps this desperate quality within the genius of Plato was necessary to push the faculty of reason into the clear light of consciousness as a distinct human faculty. But there is a ruthlessness about the manner in which Plato reduces other abiters of truth, the poets and artists, to the status of charlatans dealing in untruth and non-being. Of course Plato began his career intending to become a tragic poet, but his later attitudes reflect an internal conflict and disharmony within the psychic depths of this foundational genius of Western civilization.

When we come to Aristotle, the reification of reason takes another step. He does not have a lofty realm of Eternal Ideas accessible to reason alone. But he does have an unbounded faith in the intelligibility of Being and in the powers of human reason to encompass and comprehend the ultimate reasons for the existence of the cosmos. Reason may not be divine, but it is certainly infinite and the highest part of human nature. The human person's true self is the rational self, an assertion contrary to the deepest convictions of Asian spirituality. It is Heidegger's contention, of course, that it is precisely these assertions which have resulted in the characteristic aggressiveness of Western metaphysics and technology. If real Being is only that which can be perfectly comprehended by reason, then this implies that Being has the characteristics of mathematical rationality and can be precisely calculated. Being becomes dependent upon reason and subordinated to the goals and purposes of the human subject. In the process, however, the real mystery of Being becomes lost to view and the person concentrates upon the manipulation and mastery of individual objects.[19]

The destruction of the rain forests and the depletion of natural resources are not simply the result of greed and materialism. They also reflect a subtle hubris, a masculine will to power over nature and the feminine. The unconscious assumption is that the human technician is the creator of Being itself and that nothing exists which has not been conceived and designed by the human subject for its own benefit and consumption. The vision of wholeness put forward by the poets and seers contradicts this conception of the human subject as the being who controls Being, and, as a result, ever since the time of Plato and Aristotle the life of the artist has been seen as inferior to that of the theoretical thinker and scientist. For Heidegger the recovery of wholeness for Western culture requires a reversal of this scale of values.

The Greeks themselves were close enough to the original experience of Being so that they did not experience the sharp division between humanity and nature which characterizes modern science. The medieval Christian world as well experienced a harmony between the human and the natural world under the guise of the Creator. Science only became possible when God had been removed from the world so that nature could be studied in isolation. This ultimate displacement occurred with the Enlightenment and the thought of the French philsopher Rene Descartes, who carried the Platonizing tendencies of Western metaphysics to their extreme limits. The subject becomes conscious of itself as cut off from the world of objects while gaining increasing power to manipulate them.

Descartes' epistemological model of clear and distinct ideas was enormously helpful to the development of modern science. But

he intruded the human subject more deeply into the heart of the philsophic process itself and isolated the human consciousness even more radically from nature. The isolated human ego became more distinctly separate from and over and above nature, engaged in the aggressive search for the ultimate knowledge of all of nature's mysteries.

Heidegger's entire philosophical project can be seen as an attempt to overcome Descartes and return humanity to an awareness of the priority of a primordial ground prior to all subject/object distinctions. The relationship of the human subject to the world within a preconceptual understanding of Being Heidegger termed ***Dasein,*** or Being-in-the-World. The Irish philsopher James Gallagher offers this comparison of the Cartesian ***cogito*** and Heidegger's ***Dasein:***

The world of Cartesian certainty, of clearness and distinctness, has come about by defining the essence of man as an isolated realm of pure consciousness and by making the objects which the subject encounters representations of the world. With this, man no longer is within the world but encounters it only through the gap between the subject and the object; thus his world becomes something of a picture rather than a reality which is directly encountered...

For Heidegger, Dasein is "always already in-the-world" and is characterized by a specific situatedness which is a product of its past history, present circumstances and its necessarily future-oriented concern with its own possibility... Dasein's relationship to the world, characterized by understanding, does not take a detached and indifferent theoretical view of that world but, rather involves an interested existence within it. (20)

The human subject in its enmeshment in the world stands in the open space in which both subject and object are united and experiences the contemplative dimension of truth in face of the mystery of Being. Heidegger wished to rid modern science and technology of the pretense of being the only voice of Being and to compel recognition of this more basic apprehension of Being from which all intellectual truth is ultimately derived. Heidegger's thought is not antithetical to science, but only to the presumption of science to speak the only valid and intelligible language. But one of the consequences of this presumption has been the creation of modern technology with its aggressive and domineering spirit, as distinguished from the original ***techne*** of the Greeks. The technological spirit of the Greeks was more contemplative and responsive to nature, viewing the human subject as a being within nature rather than over nature. But with modern technology we have reached the logical end of the history of Western metaphysics. And the essential fact of this terminus for Heidegger is the displacement of a genuine experience of Being by an unbridled will to power.

Another significant thinker of the West, whose thought parallels that of Heidegger, was the renowned contemplative monk and poet Thomas Merton, who died accidentally in Bangkok in 1968. Merton also offered a searching critique of technocratic culture and Cartesian philosophy, both of which he felt had almost destroyed the natural disposition to contemplation of people in the West. Speaking of the split in Western consciousness, Merton explained that this was due to the

...invincible illusion of the isolated ego-self, setting itself up in opposition to love,

demanding that its own desire be accepted as the law of the universe, and hence suffering from the fact that by its desire it is fractured in itself and cut off from the loving wisdom in which it should be grounded. (21)

Merton contrasted two approaches to consciousness, the Cartesian approach which has dominated Western thought since Descartes and the unitive approach which characterizes both the great spiritualities of Asia and the Christian contemplative tradition. In the Cartesian mode the thinking self-aware subject is preoccupied with the ego-self and sees itself as a subject over against objects in the world. The result is a flight from the mystery of Being into verbalism and rationlization. In the contemplative mode, Being is perceived ontologically beyond all subject-object distinctions; one transcends the ego and realizes an immediate experience of undifferentiated Being. The former approach results in separateness and the latter experiences unity. The former conceives of God or the Absolute as yet another object; the former experiences the mystery of Being beyond conceptualization.

It is because the Cartesian approach to reality has left the West spiritually exhausted that so many people have turned to Asian spiritual alternatives, particularly Zen, which is characterized by an austere directness and simplicity in its approach to reality. Speaking of the appeal of Zen, Merton says:

The taste for Zen in the West is in part a healthy reaction of people exasperated with the heritage of four centuries of Cartesianism: the reification of concepts, idolization of the reflexive consciousness, flight from being into verbalism, mathematics and rationalization. Descartes made a fetish out of the mirror in which the self finds itself. Zen shatters it. (22)

Of course Merton's intention in turning to Zen and the East was to discover a source of revitalization for the Christian contemplative tradition itself which he felt had been neglected and allowed to wither under the onslaught of Cartesianism and technocratic culture. Merton called the West to recover an immediate intuitive experience of

...a ground of openness, an infinite generosity which communicates itself to everything that is...It is this Ground of Being in whom all persons find themselves truly reborn when they have emptied all contents of ego consciousness to become a void in which the full radiation of the infinite reality is manifested. (23)

While Merton had sought to revitalize the contemplative tradition for the West, Heidegger had wished to effect a new beginning for the philosophical tradition, a return to the humility of the pre-Socratics who had stood before the mystery of Being conscious of receiving a revelation greater than themselves. The insights of the contemplative meet the reflections of the philosopher in Heidegger's later essays, particularly those that deal with language and poetry. In these later essays Heidegger comes to the edge of mysticism and strains the bounds of language, attempting to express the inexpressible. As Walter Biemel says:

In Heidegger's latest essays there is an increasing emphasis on a new hermeneutic that is not an interpretation of the poet's understanding of Being or of ours but is rather an uninterpretive transmission of

the mission of Being. Language becomes more and more a mysterious "bringing of message and tiding," a silent hearkening to the ineffable voice of Being, and a "making manifest of that which is wholly Other." Since we speak in "another language" in transmitting this Message that uses us as messengers, the message can no longer be translated into the language of metaphysics... Only silent submission to the self-granting mystery remains open to us. [24]

In place of the traditional role of the philosopher who interprets reality for us in a rational manner, Heidegger in his later essays assumed the more evocative role of the poet who communicates through mysterious language the ***experience*** of the holy within Being itself. This role is in some sense given to the poet by Being itself as a holy vocation and it must be received as a gift in openness and humility. We have come very close to "the infinite generosity" of Thomas Merton, a Ground of Being which communicates in silence to the human subject once the ego has been stilled so that the ineffable Voice can be heard. In the mysterious language of the final essays, the philosopher has become the poet standing before the face of the Holy.

The manner in which Being is communicated to the poet is, according to Heidegger, like a stream in which the mystery addresses itself to the poet without sound and yet it can be heard as "a silent form of saying," a streaming which brings everything into existence. The origin of this stream is in "a place of silence" and the poet must listen in humility to what "the stream of Saying silently says." The poet must bring the silent voice of Being into the dimension of human language, so that poetry becomes "the act of instituting Being verbally." [25]

In contrast to the aggressive spirit of the rational technician infatuated with the illusion of controlling and defining Being, the poet remains passive and receptive before a self-giving Mystery, communicating through words and images the wonder and the beauty of "the silent spring of Saying", and thereby bringing "the voiceless Saying to sounding".

It might seem easier simply to say that the poet communicates a sense of wonder and awe at the mystery and sacredness of the cosmos and thereby transmits a sense of the holy to the rest of humanity. But Heidegger is at pains to emphasize that the poet stands before the face of a self-revealing Mystery and that the healing which the poet can bring to the human family is not simply another achievement of the human subject. It is a gift which must be received in the full awareness of our finititude and need. The poet can only receive what Being sends and though all of us are grounded in the gift of Being, in a culture which has repressed this awareness, it is the responsibility of the poet to respond to the silent revelations of Being and bring this mystery into the dimension of human language.

Philosopher, poet and contemplative meet in that mystery which Thomas Merton has described as "the loving wisdom and infinite generosity of the radiant Ground of Being". We are now awaiting a new beginning for humanity, whereby it may learn to "dwell poetically upon the earth", under the light of this radiant Ground.

But how do we effect this new beginning? How do we communicate to the massess the insights of the few in "our needy time" who have gone after the face of the holy?

On this decisive point, the interconnection between the role of the poet and the new poetic dwelling that would respect the holy in the cosmos, Heidegger is as silent as the rest of us. All he can say is that the appearance of the poet in our time announces the beginning of a new stage for humanity, and the ending of that stage of Western history that began with Plato.

Speaking of the ecology movement in our time; California nature poet William Everson confirms Heidegger's intuitions about a new beginning for humanity:

Take the environmental movement - a direct manifestation of the reappearnce of cyclical time. It it opposed by the whole force of triumphant linearism: the corporations, the developers, the trade unions, the military industrial complex. The whole triumphant technology is marshalled against it, but its secret, almost feminine impulse is irrepressible. The world of linear time is passing away, and a new cyclicalism is burgeoning...

This is why I do not share the hysteria of certain politically motivated environmentalists. Certainly the battle is not yet won. Certainly grave perils confront us in the onward march of a seemingly irresistible technology. But deep down within the collective unconscious the corner has been turned, and nothing can now stop it. Everywhere people are responding to a new vibration, a new growth, a new greening. (26)

This new movement reflects a reawakening of the sense of mystery and wonder, so long denied in the Age of Objectivity. The current interest in ecology is one sign of this re-birth of a sense of the sacred cosmos, which is why the poetic dimension is essential to the environmental movement. As Everson explains:

What I am suggesting is that the ecological awakening will not be complete unless the poetic element presides over its consummation. This is because a merely utilitarian or merely operative approach to ecology can never complete or resolve the need that the current interest in it attests to. Because no matter how skillfully you employ the mastery of environment in the uses of environment, as long as your attitude does not transcend the merely operative, the merely utilitarian, you will be constructing only another kind of edifice, man's triumph rather than nature's triumph. And until the triumph of nature transcends, or rather explodes, into the celebration of God, then nature can only remain man's slave. (27)

In a wooded hillside near the northern city of Chiang Mai in Thailand a group of thinkers from East and West gathered last June to discuss the world's worsening environment in light of the ancient spiritualities. During the course of the discussion, the role of poets and artists was touched upon, as persons who are closer to nature than anyone else, who move through the universe with a sense of wonder and who possess an original thinking toward nature that is nourished by love. But the question was raised whether these people can be effective. The reporter in "The Bangkok Post" responds:

Can women, poets, villagers and folk artists save the environment? Putting the focus on ordinary people to change their ways doesn't seem fair. After all, as Governor Pairat said, it's the big-time exploiters who are causing all the havoc-and getting away with it-not the little people.

But what if... the only way to save the environment is by redefining our place in

the world, then only the quiet and gentle elements of society can put our thoughts and actions on the correct course. These "people on the fringe" carry our culture forward in mysterious ways. [28]

Part of the focus of this paper has been upon these "quiet and gentle elements" in our midst who are preparing for a new beginning and for the spiritual healing of our culture. The ecology movement itself is reacting to a profound spiritual crisis at the heart of technocratic culture and the poet and the mystic are pointing to a solution that is essentially religious.

The split in consciousness that burdens us everywhere should be viewed in religious terms as an alienation from a deep ontological ground that is profoundly sacred. The intuitive apprehension of this ground and unity is at the heart of Eastern spirituality in its purest forms as well as at the center of the contemplative Christian tradition of the West. This intuitive, feminine wisdom should be the life-giving spring of our regeneration, calling us to experience a contemplative mystery that unites all beings. The contemplative surrender to this inner mystery demands a letting-go of our rationalist control over the world. This does not mean a denial of the proper function of science and technology, but a profound detachment from the hubris and imbalance which have characterized our scientism ever since we elevated in into an absolute. Power and control have been manipulated as a means of protecting ourselves from the sight of our own mortality. It is the poet and the contemplative's vocation to witness to the living mystery that exists on the other side of the void that we fear to face. The contemplation of this mystery must give us the courage to loose the bonds of the ego, surrender the illusion of absolute self-sufficiency and enter into a communion with nature at a deeper level of consciousness.

As one of the instruments of our healing, the figure of the poet can be viewed as both shaman and prophet, as the articulator of both spiritual insight and critical social judgement, and there is an inherent relationship between these two roles. The poet, together with the contemplative and the mystic, reaches beyond the surface of things to a deep ontological ground and articulates this experience through his or her images. But it is the inherent sacredness of this underlying mystery and the experience of apprehending it that gives rise to the poet's critical social conscience. The poet brings an experience of transcendence to bear upon the temporal and against which the temporal must be measured, especially when this transcendence has been denied by an ego that is self-isolated and obsessed with its mastery of objects and abstractions. The poet's prophetic function springs from his or her affirmation of the sacredness of life, an underlying mystery of Radiant and Infinite Being. The recovery of our awareness of this radiance will mark the time of our new beginning when humanity may once again "dwell poetically upon the earth."

* * *

It is the neglect of the world of the imagination, of "art" in the deepest and widest sense, in favor of a world of reason dominated by "science" that has caused the imbalance of Western civilization. Man cannot live without myth; reason cannot live without the imagination. It creates a desert, without and within. It becomes the sword of destruction, bringing death wherever it goes, dividing man from nature, the individual

from society, woman from man and man and woman from God. This is what the triumph of reason has done, and now we have to go back and recover the myth, return to the source, rediscover our roots, restore Wholeness to man and creation. The myth has to be reborn.(29)

The Marriage of East and West
by Bede Griffiths

END – NOTES

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4) quoted by Anuradha Vittachi: ***Earth Conference One: Sharing A Vision for Our Planet*** (Boston: Shambala, 1989), p. 55.

5) To Thi Anh, ***Eastern and Western Cultural Values: Conflict or Harmony?*** (Manila: East Asian Pastoral Institute, 1975), p. 131.

6) Kirkpatrick Sale, "The Trouble with Earth Day" in "The Nation" (New York, April 30, 1990), pp. 594-598.

7) Luciana Castellina, "Why 'Red' Must Be 'Green' Too" in ***Socialism on the Treshold of the Twenty-first Century*** (London: Verso, 1985), pp. 5-6.

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12) Fritjof Capra: ***The Turning Point*** (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1982), pp. 25-26.

13) quoted by Philip Kapleau: ***The Three Pillars of Zen*** (Boston: Beacon Press, 1967), p. 3.

14) Frances Vaughn, ***The Inward Arc: Healing and Wholeness in Psychotherapy and Spirituality*** (Boston: Shambala, 1985), p. 4.

15) William Barrett, ***Irrational Man*** (New York: Doubleday, 1958), p. 5. I am indebted to William Barrett's Chapter on Heidegger for much of the discussion which follows.

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17) F.S.C. Northrop, ***The Meeting of East and West*** (New York: Macmillan, 1966), pp. 58, 62, 450.

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19) For Heidegger's views on technology I am indebted to Harold Alderman's analysis in ''Heidegger's Critique of Science and Technology'' in ***Heidegger and Modern Philosophy,*** edited by Michael Murray (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1978), pp. 35-50.

20) James Gallagher, ***The Ontological Contexts for the Ethical Elements in "Being and Time" and "Being and Nothingness"*** (Ann Arbor: University Microfilms International, 1984), pp. 30-31.

21) Thomas Merton, ***Zen and the Birds of Appetite*** (New York: New Directions, 1969), p. 84.

22) Thomas Merton, ***Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*** (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1966), p. 285.

23) Thomas Merton, ***Zen and the Birds of Appetite,*** pp. 26, 27.

24) Walter Biemal, Ibid., pp. 97-98.

25) I am indebted to Werner Marx for this analysis of Heidegger's conception of the poet in Marx's article, ''The World in Another Beginning: Poetic Dwelling and the Role of the Poet'' in ***On Heidegger and Language,*** edited by Joseph Kockelmans, Ibid., pp. 235-260.

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28) ''The Bangkok Post'' June 14, 1990.

29) Bede Griffiths, ***The Marriage of East and West*** (Springfield, Illinois: Templegate, 1982), p. 171.