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## Introduction to *"And Have You Changed Your Life?": The Challenge of Listening to the Spiritual in Contemporary Poetry*

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# I

## INTRODUCTION

"AND HAVE YOU CHANGED YOUR LIFE?"

THE CHALLENGE OF LISTENING TO THE  
SPIRITUAL IN CONTEMPORARY POETRY

*John Pustejovsky & Anne Pasero*

**T**he papers collected in this volume respond to a simple question: Is there contemporary poetry that, without relying on the language of religious belief, speaks from a "spiritual self," and engages another in a spiritually recognizable way?

"To be open to the spirit," writes theologian Richard McBrien, "is to accept explicitly who we are and who we are called to become, and to direct our lives accordingly."<sup>11</sup> Ronald Rolheiser asserts that one can not be genuinely spiritual without also being engaged in some practical way with some religious community.<sup>22</sup>

Yet the realities of life in Western society—especially in Europe—since the end of World War II would appear clearly arrayed against the spiritual life as characterized above. Destruction, displacement, political turmoil and repression, and economic hardship were realities faced by tens of millions. Declining church attendance, a growing impetus toward materialism the continuing breakdown of social solidarity, the abandonment of inherited values all came to strongly characterize life in the West. "We lack," wrote Czeslaw Milosz to Thomas Merton, "an image of the world ordered by religion ..."<sup>33</sup> Such realities suggest that a search for what is "genuinely spiritual" in the lives of 20th century Europeans might indeed be a difficult one.

These papers were presented at the conference *Poetry and Spirituality: And have you changed your life?* held in April, 2013, at Marquette University, sponsored by a grant from the Edward D. Simmons Religious Commitment Fund. The conferees had agreed to take up the question, Can one listen one's way to the spiritual self that might emerge in a poem? They pursue the question in poetry written in an age and in societies which are to all appearances an uncomfortable place for religion: Where the abuse of language through ideology, interest-group politics, and unceasing advertising seem to have altered a basic trust in words; and where the devaluing of the individual (the corrosion of the 'whole person') grows steadily more intense. Quite simply, we wondered if poetry can engage spiritually without referencing religious belief, and with no use of religious language.

All of us started from a premise rooted in our own experience as readers of poetry: That poetry does, on occasion, become a gift of the spirit, urging us to candor and humility with ourselves, seeking the honest self in another. Such experience as readers has helped us discover the voices of some who remain loyal to their experience—to their experience in its entirety, with loss, contradiction, isolation—and who speak with their whole selves the possibility of solidarity, intelligibility, and wholeness. We found that we could share with others some works in which the poet "gathers" herself into one who speaks truthfully of self, of the other, who can let the other be who it is, and thus live in right relation to it. Even without characterizing purely religious poetry, we see this as a legitimate—though more expansive—view of what is spiritual.

There is a challenge in trying to read this way, but it has the potential to make the encounter of poetry one of the whole self with another, in a place that is before politics (Merton), and in a way that may indeed foster a life of honesty and purpose. Our title, drawn from Mary Oliver's poem "Swan," echoes the challenge spoken a century ago by Rilke:

And did you see it, finally, just under the clouds—  
 a white cross streaming across the sky, its feet  
 like black leaves, its wings like the stretching light of the river?  
 And did you feel it, in your heart, how it pertained to everything?  
 And have you too finally figured out what beauty is for?  
 And have you changed your life? <sup>44</sup>

Our intent is to focus on poetry that is spiritual in all senses of the word, and to suggest that name —for perhaps the first time —to newly described moments of human experience.

### NOTES

1. *Catholicism*. 2. Minneapolis: Winston Press, 1980: 1057.
2. *The Holy Longing: The Search for a Christian Spirituality*. New York: Doubleday, 1999: 68.
3. *Striving Towards Being : The Letters of Thomas Merton and Czeslaw Milosz*, ed. Robert Faggen. New York : Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1997: 61.
4. Mary Oliver. *Swan. Poems and Prose Poems*. Boston: Beacon Press, 2010: 15. Compare to Rainer Maria Rilke "Archaischer Torso Apollos" of 1908: "... denn da ist keine Stelle, / die dich nicht sieht: Du mußt dein Leben ändern." *Neue Gedichte. Der Neuen Gedichte anderer Teil*. Frankfurt: Insel, 1977: 83.