

# The Practice and Path of Ecstatic Poetry: Toward a New Model for the Facilitation of Ecstatic Verse

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*ABSTRACT:* The purpose of this article is to discuss the transformative power of ecstatic poetry by identifying it as a distinct subgenre of poetic writing that has the potential to evoke mystical experience. Ecstatic poetry, it is proposed, can be utilized as a transpersonal practice that affords both readers and practitioners the ability to connect with their essence, the experience of which can be profound, eudaimonic, and can ultimately result in realization and/or self-transcendence. Ecstatic poetry is presented as a visionary art that occupies a key place within the visionary art paradigm. After offering a brief history of ecstatic verse, this work concludes with the presentation of a new model for the evocation and facilitation of ecstatic poetry writing.

*Keywords:* ecstatic poetry, visionary art, mystical experience, ecstatic learning model

There is much about ecstatic poetry that distinguishes it from other types of poetic writing. This article posits that ecstatic poetry stands as a distinct subgenre that possesses unique attributes, most notably the power to evoke mystical experience and/or self-transcendence (Barnstone, 1983; Moores, 2011, 2014). This article will discuss this transpersonal faculty of ecstatic poetry, including a brief history of ecstatic writing, and will attempt to place ecstatic poetry in the visionary art paradigm. This work is not a critical study of ecstatic writers as seems to be more typical of scholarly examinations of poetry (Halpern, 1994; Lewis, 2009; Sparr, 2012) but instead seeks to identify and explore the characteristics of ecstatic poetry that distinguish it as a transformative practice. Finally, a new model for the facilitation and evocation of ecstatic poetry writing will be presented.

Ecstatic poetry is a mystical force that has the potential to create deep, meaningful, and lasting personal and spiritual transformation (Barnstone, 1983; Halpern, 1994; Moores, 2011, 2014; Sparr, 2012). It is the goal of this article to bring this perspective more fully into both common and academic discourse.

## What is Ecstatic Poetry?

Before embarking on a quest to engage its power, this piece will first endeavor to cultivate a deeper understanding of ecstatic poetry as a distinct form of poetic expression. To accomplish this, ecstatic poetry will be examined through two lenses: the academic and the mystical. This section will culminate with the proposal of a new description of ecstatic poetry based on research and experiences with learners in workshop settings.

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## The Academic

A primary impetus for this present work is to fill a void in the academic literature regarding ecstatic poetry. Any exploration of the subject will yield a grand body of poems and poets, but in fact, very little has been written about ecstatic poetry in any arena, academic or otherwise. Aside from the occasional survey of ecstatic elements found within the work of various historical poets (Ahearn, 1982; Lewis, 2009; Tsur, 2010), the literature is lacking when it comes to notions of ecstatic poetry. Even in the visionary art community—a place in which one might expect to find discussion about poetry as a gateway to the transcendent—authors and artists seem to be focusing primarily on other forms of expression, specifically visual arts such as painting and digital design (Bruvel, 2011; Grey, 2012; Sachs, 2006; Solkinson, 2014).

It is prudent to note at this juncture that the literature does contain a small number of reductionist perspectives on ecstatic poetry, all of them antiquated by the passage of time and a greater cultural acceptance of mysticism and transpersonal perspectives. For instance, Mordell (1921) asserts “We are not concerned here with the idea of ecstasy as a state that is supposed to give us glimpses of the deity . . . on the contrary, ecstasy is nothing more than accumulated ordinary emotions” (p. 20). Of poetry that contains mystical or transcendent elements, Mordell (1921) maintains “very little of it has literary value” (p. 21). This present work refutes these ideas and others like them as obsolete. The ecstatic experience is actually rooted in the mystical/spiritual traditions of virtually all world cultures throughout history (Moores, 2014; Sparr, 2012). Opposing those perspectives that would characterize ecstatic experiences as mundane or unremarkable, Barnstone (1983) holds “the way of ecstasy is very simple. Its movement from the passive ordinary into the extraordinary takes on the form of awakening” (p. 216).

One exception to the scarcity of ecstatic poetic perspectives in academic literature is the work of D.J. Moores. Moores (2011, 2014) has curated a thorough body of research that not only illuminates the history of ecstatic verse but also makes grand strides in identifying the characteristics of ecstatic poetry that make it so distinct. Moores (2014) is careful, though, of the impulse to define a concept so rooted in mysticism and subjectivity, stating “The term *description*, rather than definition, is probably better served because the latter will always be susceptible to criticism on various grounds, whereas the former will . . . allow for a greater range of configurations” (p. 14). It is with this same reverence for the subtlety and power of this subject matter that this present work approaches its discussions of ecstatic poetry.

Etymologically, Moores (2014) ascertains that the word ecstatic is derived from the Greek *ekstasis*, “which means to stand (*stasis*) outside (*ek*) oneself, or something like self-transcendence” (p. 3). Plato (ca. 380 B.C.E./1999) attributes the following lines to Socrates, who points directly to this notion of ekstasis: “For the poet is an airy thing, a winged and holy thing; and he cannot make poetry until he becomes inspired and goes out of his senses and no mind is left in him” (p. 18). Moores (2014) goes on to share that there are three universally recognized characteristics of

ekstasis that, while not exclusive to it, are present within the experience of both reading and writing ecstatic poetry:

(1) the climax of *any* form of positive affect, the results of which are (2) radical self-transcendence and (3) transformative effects that significantly enhance one's sense of *eudaimonia*, another ancient Greek work that many scholars currently use to designate human well-being. (p. 3)

It is here that a fuller understanding of the ecstatic poetic experience is beginning to coalesce. Barnstone (1983) and Moores (2014) have identified certain fundamental themes such as an awakening from ordinary to extraordinary, self-transcendence, personal transformation, and an enhanced sense of well-being, or *eudaimonia*. Moores (2014) goes on to hold that the opposite of ekstasis is “enstasis, or to remain fixed within oneself” (p. 15). He subsequently identifies a crucial distinction: that enstasis is characterized as a fixation or a stagnation, while ekstasis is experienced as liberating and transformative. A practice that is just as much a spiritual journey as it is an artistic endeavor, Moores and others (Ahearn, 1982; Barnstone, 1983; Grey, 2008; Halpern, 1994) agree that ecstatic poetry has the power to move a practitioner's consciousness from enstasis to ekstasis—from a state of lesser health to a state of deeper realization, well-being, and/or wholeness. In a later discussion, Moores (2014) identifies this shift as a high point of human psychospiritual development: “The ecstatic experience is the catalyst that can trigger an alchemical transformation from either a less-than-desirable or even decent life into a full one. Ecstasy . . . is the apotheosis of human well-being” (p. 220).

Moores's (2014) examination climaxes in his explicit, 20-point typology meant to offer a definitive categorization and description for ecstatic poetry. Arising from his exhaustive research into the realm of ecstatic verse, Moores (2014) asserts that ecstatic poetry contains distinguishing characteristics such as “peak experiences, spiritual illuminations, and ecstasies”; “intensive positive affect, such as bliss, overpowering joy, intense happiness, awe, rapture, love, and the like”; “a turning away, in healthy and constructive ways, from the negative through psychologically mature defense mechanisms”; and “a holistic incorporation of sundered aspects of the psyche; a wholeness overcoming fragmentation” (pp. 66-67). Unquestionably, the core themes of the ecstatic poetic experience are present throughout this typology. It is a prudent stopping place in any sound academic exploration of ecstatic poetry. This present work's examination of scholarly perspectives regarding ecstatic poetry will also conclude here, as attention shifts to more sacred realms.

## **The Mystical**

A central claim of this piece is that ecstatic poetry possesses the ability, for both reader and writer/practitioner, to bring about various states that are typically associated with religious or mystical experience (Barnstone, 1983; Halpern, 1994; Moores, 2011, 2014; Sparr, 2012). The work of Grof (2012) confirms the objective existence of mystical experience, stating “Modern consciousness research has . . .

validated the main metaphysical assumptions of the mystical world view” (p. 159). Thus, if the previous section’s attempt was to address the *yang* of ecstatic poetry with claims that can be supported with rigor and resolve, this present discussion will seek balance by attempting to characterize its *yin*: its softness, its relationship to the divine. This section will open by defining religious experience and will then identify other, comparable phenomena that are related to, or can be aroused by, the ecstatic poetic experience.

*Religious experience* is a term popularized by the widely published lectures of William James (1902/1936) but likely has its roots in the work of earlier philosophers such as Kant and Wesley (Sharf, 2000). Religious experience, as defined by Sharf (2000), is a “transitory but potentially transformative state of consciousness in which a subject purports to come into immediate contact with the divine, the sacred, the holy” (p. 268). Though much could be debated about the differences between the two, this present work holds the terms *religious experience* and *mystical experience* as interchangeable, in accordance with Sharf’s assertion that they are used as such throughout the academic literature. In his lectures, James (1902/1936) also exchanges his use of these two terms liberally, slightly favoring *mystical experience* when expounding upon concepts that are more transcendent in nature.

James’s lectures have been widely adopted by mainstream philosophy and psychology as seminal material on religious/mystical experience (Fadiman & Frager, 2002). Within his discussions, the transformative nature of religious experience is illuminated and one is able to draw direct lines to the same capacities found in the ecstatic poetic experience. For example, James (1902/1936) asserts that mystical experiences “are states of insight into depths of truth unplumbed by the discursive intellect. They are illuminations, revelations full of significance” (p. 371). Parallels to the work of Moores (2014) are apparent here, bringing to mind his typological characteristics of ecstatic poetry, particularly “spiritual illuminations, moments of growth and clarity, epiphanies, and conscious expansion” (p. 66). Also of note is James’s account of the longevity and lasting nature of mystical experiences. He notes “Mystical states . . . are never merely interruptive. Some memory of their content always remains, and a profound sense of their importance. They modify the inner life of the subject” (James, 1902/1936, p. 372). This present work affirms that the experience of ecstatic poetry, like any religious/mystical experience, is inherently revelatory in nature and therefore has the ability to profoundly modify the reader or practitioner’s inner life (Barnstone, 1983; Grey, 2008; Halpern, 1994; Moores, 2011, 2014).

This discussion will now turn toward a number of phenomena that are comparable to mystical experience and thereby the ecstatic poetic experience, beginning with a classic example.

Aside from his eminent hierarchy of needs, pioneer of contemporary Western psychology Abraham Maslow is perhaps best known for his concept of *peak experiences*, which authors Fadiman and Frager (2002) characterize as “especially joyous and exciting moments that are often inspired by intense feelings of love, exposure to great art or music, or the overwhelming beauty of nature” (p. 440). In

contrast, this present work claims that the experience of ecstasy as achieved through ecstatic poetry or other means is, in many cases, longer lasting and more profound than is implied by Maslow's notion of peak experience. Says Moores (2011), "Ecstasy bites deeply into the soul, sometimes leaving those who experience its joys forever transformed, forever unable to return to their previous lives" (p. 3). This more permanent shift is more closely related to Maslow's concept of *plateau experiences*, which, as opposed to peak experiences, "involve a fundamental change in attitude, a change that affects one's entire point of view and creates a new appreciation and intensified awareness of the world" (Fadiman & Frager, 2002, p. 440). This present work asserts that the ecstatic poetic experience possesses the power to arouse plateau experiences and thereby create long-lasting eudaimonia and psychospiritual change (Ahearn, 1982; Moores, 2011, 2014). As Barnstone (1983) notes, ecstasy is "the movement from one physical and spiritual condition to another . . . It is a change of world" (p. 22).

A group of related experiences from various spiritual traditions points toward this idea of an enduring eudaimonic shift. Zen Buddhists call this moment *satori*, "that moment of seeing into one's own nature, when all the old blinders fall away" (Welwood, 2000, p. 193). *Samadhi* is a term given in Hinduism and other eastern traditions that represents a union or a oneness with an object of meditation, the experience of which is said to be a state of absorption, ultimate well-being, and/or ecstasy (Zaehner, 1997). The notion of "witness consciousness" or what some traditions call the "observing I" is a state attainable through meditation practices that Goleman (1988) describes as "a liberating sense of distance from the continuing rumblings of the mind" (p. 96). This idea that mystical experience intrinsically cultivates distance and disidentification from the limits of conditioned personality is how many scholars (Barnstone, 1983; Moores, 2011, 2014; Sparr, 2012) define ekstasis.

One final item of note is the Sufi model of *fana* and *baqa*, a subject of special relevance to any dialogue about ecstatic poetry. Arabic terms literally translated as "annihilation" and "permanent life in God" respectively, this model expresses a chief understanding of the ecstatic's life: that human beings innately strive to connect to the divine, and that by doing so, they are permanently transformed and able to return to their lives with deeper realization (Fadiman & Frager, 2002). Writes Schimmel (1975), "after the ecstatic intoxication man becomes once more aware of himself in the 'life in God,' when all his attributes, transformed and spiritualized, are restored to him" (p. 59). Many Sufi teachers throughout history—including but not limited to the well-known Persian poet Mawlana Jalal al-Din Rumi—wrote so extensively about this instinctive drive toward unity with the divine that many scholars hold *fana* and *baqa* as a self-contained model of psychospiritual transformation, with a specific presence in Sufi ecstatic writing (Fadiman & Frager, 2002; Khan, 2017). Khan (2017) notes that a great deal of Rumi's body of work "indicates a return to the world, having become 'glorified' like 'gold' through *fana*" (p. 63). This twofold notion of stepping outside oneself in order to access deeper spiritual connection is at the heart of ekstasis and the ecstatic poetic perspective. Notes Schimmel (1975) of the concept of *fana*, "it annihilates man completely . . . taking him out of himself" (p. 58). Perhaps no truer words can be spoken regarding the mysticism and power of ecstatic poetry itself.

## **The Revolutionary**

So far, this work has examined and described the characteristics of ecstatic poetry through two primary lenses. The intention in so doing was to bring together the scholarly and the mystical in an effort to more aptly identify this unique form of poetic expression. This introductory discussion has established the dual nature of the ecstatic poetic experience: it is an art form that can be grounded in traditional academic study and it simultaneously possesses powerful transpersonal properties (Barnstone, 1983; Moores, 2011, 2014; Sparr, 2012).

But what is ecstatic poetry? This present work seeks to present its own perspective, steeped in these dimensions of scholarship and mysticism, in order to offer a functional and succinct description. The intention is to capture the totality of the ecstatic poetic experience in a singular declaration that can be used in both lay and educational settings alike. To that end, this work presents the following description statement: ecstatic poetry is a visionary practice that seeks to connect both poet and reader to their innate longing for their essence. The following discussion will unpack this statement, offering support from both contemporary and classical thinkers, beginning at the end with the concept of essence.

### *Essence*

The drive to connect to something grander than ourselves is perhaps the most innate and universal of human experiences (Zaehner, 1997). Moreover, humanity has affixed countless labels to the object of this desire: ka, soul, Source, nafs, psychē, Christ consciousness, spirit, nephesh, Ātman. It is at the core of nearly all religious and spiritual pursuits and has contributed in no small measure to the birth of psychology, philosophy, anthropology, and other fundamental human institutions (Grey, 1998; Kornfield, 2008). Undoubtedly, we are all searching for something to which we might affix our deepest personal and spiritual significance.

But what is this something and how does the practice of ecstatic poetry offer us a unique ability to experience it? Throughout the development of this new description statement for ecstatic poetry, a primary inclination was to use the word “God.” However, it quickly became important to avoid using this word altogether, specifically because the primary audience for this work is in the West where it is too ideologically charged to be received as intended. Additionally, there is a fair amount of controversy surrounding the theistic content of well-known ecstatic poets such as Rumi and Hafiz being divorced from its original context by various contemporary translators (Khan, 2017; Schimmel, 1975). While honoring these debates as valid and appropriate for all appreciators of ecstatic poetry to consider, this present work seeks to present original and accessible perspectives in ecstatic poetry and therefore rejects the use of theistic terms.

After some years spent experimenting with different terms through research, writing, and workshop settings, an appropriate descriptor eventually revealed itself. The word “essence” was chosen to denote specifically what the practitioner or reader seeks to contact by engaging in the ecstatic poetic experience. This is the

heart of the matter; a term given that well expresses this apex experience of ecstatic poetry. It is the ineffable ingredient within each of us; the intrinsic, albeit elusive, source of our own divinity.

It is finally relevant to note that, although the description of ecstatic poetry being discussed in this and subsequent sections in no way professes that ecstatic poetry should take the place of therapy, the experience of contacting and/or connecting with one's essence is by its very nature profound, healing, and transformative (Barnstone, 1983; Grey, 1998; Halpern, 1994; Moores, 2011, 2014). This paradigm asserts that contacting essence through ecstatic poetry practice can be equated to the experience of ekstasis, the positive effects of which have already been discussed. Indisputably, both ekstasis and connecting with essence are mystical experiences, as Moores (2014) writes,

the results of which represent myriad eudaimonic implications: therapeutic removal of neuroses; reorientation away from self-centeredness towards altruistic concern for others; enhancement of creativity; an intensified sense of meaning and purpose; a feeling of psychic integration (wholeness); . . . among many others. (p. 220)

It is a transcendent experience indeed to contact one's essence through the vehicle of ecstatic poetry. A later section will discuss specific methods geared toward optimizing the occurrence and depth of essence experiences by means of ecstatic poetry practice.

### ***Longing***

We long to connect with our essence (Grey, 1998; Schimmel, 1975; Wilber, 2000). If essence is the *what* of the ecstatic poetic experience, surely longing is the *why*. Gibran (as cited in Sheban, 1966) describes that the force of human longing can be channeled toward insight and transformation, stating "In the will of man, there is a power of longing which turns the mist in ourselves into sun" (p. 46). This present paradigm seeks to develop this notion even further. Here, it is being asserted that longing is a drive, a motivator, an energizing force that can, with the application of intention, become a personal, psychological, and spiritual propulsion system. Although there are countless mediums through which one might engage their longings, this work holds that ecstatic poetry is particularly effective in connecting the reader and practitioner to the mystical essence within them (Barnstone, 1983; Moores, 2011, 2014).

This description statement also posits that longing is innate, that it is a fundamental human drive not unlike the drives for sex, independence, or acceptance (Fadiman & Frager, 2002). An example from Buddhism illustrates this almost instinctual quality of human longing. The First Noble Truth of Buddhism is expressed by the Sanskrit word *dukkha*, which Rahula (1959) notes "is interpreted to mean that life according to Buddhism is nothing more than suffering and pain" (p. 16). However, he asserts that this interpretation is incomplete and that by adopting a superficial definition for such a fundamental aspect of Buddhist doctrine, "many people have been misled

into regarding Buddhism as pessimistic” (Rahula, 1959, p. 16). Buddhist psychologist Epstein (1995) emphasizes that the concept of *dukkha* is more accurately translated as *pervasive unsatisfactoriness*. Noting the troubling, restless nature of longing—and identifying longing as a motivator for change—he states “We are all touched by a gnawing sense of imperfection, insubstantiality, uncertainty, or unrest, and we all long for a magical resolution of that dis-ease” (Epstein, 1995, p. 46). Pervasive unsatisfactoriness is simply longing by another name, identified by one of oldest spiritual traditions in the history of our species. The point of *dukkha*, and thereby the rest of Buddhist doctrine, is not that human lives are to be spent in suffering and little else. To the contrary, Buddhism is a path of hope—hope that our longings, even if they initially feel confusing, distressing, or even painful—can catalyze and energize a journey toward realization and peace (Kornfield, 2008; Rahula, 1959; Snelling, 1991; Welwood, 2000). The very same perspective is held by the description of ecstatic poetry being discussed in this section.

The power of longing can be viewed as an engine that drives psychospiritual transformation, its trajectory inexorably toward essence. But what of the notion of connection itself? Where does it come from and how is it experienced?

### ***Connection***

In his lectures, James (1902/1936) states, “we make connection with religious mysticism pure and simple. . . . The phenomenon in one shape or another is not uncommon” (p. 384). Here, James holds that the experience of connecting with the mystical is not only possible, but perhaps not as rare as one might think. This present work posits that connection with essence manifests when longing is married with intention; it is not the catalyst but the act itself of experiencing contact with the divine.

This potential to connect to essence through ecstatic poetry reading or writing is exemplified within much of Sufi ecstatic verse. The notions of *fana* and *baqa* return to mind, terms that signify the human journey of transformation through connection with the divine. Sufis hold that “God is closer to man than his jugular vein . . . and is, at the same time, the Lord and Creator of the universe, immanent and transcendent” (Schimmel, 1975, p. 25). Human beings innately reach toward the divine, and simultaneously, the divine is always there. When the right conditions are present, access to this sacred stream of connection becomes available (Grey, 1998; Wilber, 2000).

Connection to essence is a golden thread, a river ever flowing between common experience and the realm of the transcendent. However, achieving this connection does not always feel simple. It is a bit of a paradox that something so endlessly available takes time and training to access consistently. This description statement proposes that the occurrence, duration, and intensity of essence experiences can be strengthened by the introduction of gentle and intentional practice.



## ***Practice***

A distinct characteristic of connection with essence is that it does not often happen without some type of effort. Surely there are accounts of saints and sages receiving seemingly spontaneous guidance from some otherworldly source (Grey, 1998; Zaehner, 1997), but one might argue that even great luminaries of the past received their inspirations because they were optimally positioned to receive them. They were spiritual practitioners, and so they were open and receptive enough to function as conduits for the divine. So it can be, consistently and predictably, for the ecstatic poet—all it takes is a little practice. A later section will explore specific practices and exercises that have been created for precisely this aim.

Mary Oliver (1994) wastes no time: “Before we can be poets, we must practice” (p. 13). It may be quite plain to most of us that spending consistent time doing anything—a sport, a craft, an academic pursuit, an art—will yield at least some measure of accomplishment or satisfaction with the chosen endeavor. The same can surely be said of ecstatic poetry practice. However, this work intends to set its subject matter apart from more traditional perspectives on the benefits of practice. Instead of seeking achievement for achievement’s sake or engaging in repetitious behavior in order to pursue a goal, it is suggested here that the ecstatic poet is holding a gentle intention to contact their own essence. To that end, ecstatic poetry is just as much a journey of the soul as it is an effort of pen and paper. It can, and indeed should, be viewed and approached as a spiritual practice as much as a writing or literary endeavor.

Marrying spirituality with writing practice, Goldberg (1986/2005) asserts that both have the ability to “help you penetrate your life and become sane” (p. 3). In unison with her Zen lineage, Goldberg further promotes transpersonal values in writing practice such as surrender, trusting intuition and first thoughts, and working toward transcending what she calls the *internal censor*, the conditioned inner mechanism that condemns writing practice as inadequate. A later section will detail specific ways in which the poet practitioner can work with their internal censor (here identified as the *inner censor*) in order to unobstruct access to deeper wells of creativity and insight.

An innate longing that energizes the search for connection to essence, supported by the intention of a practitioner—these are the building blocks of a new and enlivened understanding of ecstatic poetry as set forth in this present work. However, one final ingredient remains: the critical understanding that ecstatic poetry is visionary art.

## ***Visionary Art***

Visionary art is a term given for all forms of artistic expression that encourage or are produced by mystical experiences, altered states of consciousness, imaginal spaces, psychedelic realizations, and other related transpersonal states (Grey, 1998, 2012). The movement claims an incredibly wide array of art and artists as visionary—from ancient expressions of the sacred as seen in cave paintings,

African ritual masks, and Egyptian and Greek Sphinxes, to William Blake's channeling of disincarnate entities into his paintings, to the psychedelic poster art of the 1960s (Grey, 2012). Present day, the visionary art movement is represented by a vibrant community of artists worldwide, the most noteworthy of whom is pioneer Alex Grey (1998), who Wilber claims "might be the most significant artist alive" (p. xiii). The importance of Grey's contributions to the field, including his own paintings and writings on the nature of visionary art, cannot be overstated. Says Grey (1998) of the inseparable connection between art and the transcendent: "A world without art would leave us bereft of a language of beauty; we would lose access to one of the primary ways that spirit reaches people" (p. 56).

Although it would be incorrect to say that no mention of poetry is ever made in the visionary art dialogue, this work asserts that there is a significant and puzzling absence of ecstatic poetry throughout the visionary art movement, including writings and theory, internet presence, published articles, texts, and art communities. There appears to be a favoritism or preference in visionary art circles toward certain mediums, especially visual arts such as painting and digital design (Ascott & Shanken, 2003; Bruvel, 2011; Grey, 2012; Rubin, 2010; Sachs, 2006; Solkinson, 2014). Indeed, a world-class school for visionary art exists in Vienna, Austria but teaches only one subject: painting (The Vienna Academy of Visionary Art, 2012). This present work seeks to rectify this conundrum by injecting ecstatic poetry into the climate of visionary art in a manner that is both clear and enduring.

Grey (1998) notes that mystical experiences are intrinsic to either creating or beholding visionary art, and that these experiences "serve to remind us of the sacredness of life and create a picture of our transformative and spiritual potential" (p. 29). Speaking from the ecstatic poetic perspective, Moores (2014) agrees, noting "as a deep, affective event that catalyzes consciousness transformation, the ecstatic experience ... is a means by which people in cultures past and present have achieved eudaimonia" (p. 19). As a camp that embraces art that both depicts and amplifies humanity's connection to the divine (Grey, 1998, 2012; Sachs, 2006; Solkinson, 2014), the visionary art movement does itself a disservice by largely ignoring the ecstatic poetic discussion. Ecstatic poetry is visionary art. The statement is plain, its implications grand, profound, revolutionary.

### **History of Ecstatic Verse**

According to Moores (2014), "in nearly all cultures (ancient and modern), it [ecstatic verse] serves as a kind of social cement and functions to bind together members of a given society by reinforcing their values and preserving their collective history" (p. 30). This section will briefly detail the appearance of ecstatic writing across time and world cultures. It is in no way intended to be an exhaustive exploration of the topic, but rather a distillation that seeks to illuminate the prevalence of ecstatic writing and writers throughout history.

Human beings began expressing ecstasy through verse as early as the birth of oral poetry, which predates written records by millennia (Moores, 2014). These

prehistoric ecstatic expressions took the form of “songs, hymns, and lyrics that served to express and induce (among others) eudaimonic emotions and states of being” (Moores, 2014, p. 30) and are known to have been part of the culture of Indo-European tribes who occupied Eastern Europe and Central Asia between 6000 and 4500 B.C.E. Those who recited and carried on these oral traditions were the originators of ecstatic poetry.

With the emergence of written language, as one might predict, expressions of ecstatic states can be found prevalently across cultures (Moores, 2014). For instance, the Rigveda, one of the root texts of Hinduism, was written by poet-priests called rishis who are said to have written their Sanskrit hymns “while in a strange state of madness” (Moores, 2014, p. 30). Moores asserts that Hindu verse has contained ecstatic elements from its beginnings, since its root is in the spiritual lives and practices of its people. Many early texts and literary practices of Buddhism share this same relationship to ecstatic verse. Buddhist writer-practitioners that have been capturing the penetrating immediacy of Buddhist practice for centuries, from the Theravada *Tripitaka* and the Mahayana *Sutras* to the immense body of verse written by the Tibetan sage Milarepa. Of particular interest is the Zen practice of haiku, which is a poetic form that attempts to capture a subject’s *suchness*, a quality only accessible once the poet “gets out of his or her own way by transcending the logical ordering of the mind” (Moores, 2014, p. 40). This capacity to get out of one’s own way is intimately connected to the practice of ecstatic poetry and will be explored in a later section of this work.

Early Greek ecstatic writing includes Orphic hymns and the Dionysian dithyramb (Ahearn, 1982), a combination of ecstatic singing and group dance which is not only recognized as a progenitor to modern theater but began as a “physical celebration of the ecstatic principle” (Moores, 2014, p. 43). Classic Roman writers such as Plotinus and Longinus are well-known for writing verse that “related ecstatic states to the condition of the poet and poetry” (Sparr, 2012, p. 388). Among the most lauded early Christian ecstatic works are those by Hildegard of Bingen and Juan De la Cruz, whose *Dark Night of the Soul* characterizes a journey through darkness and despair into higher states of realization (Moores, 2014).

Ecstatic poetry can be found within medieval Celtic traditions; early bardic texts suggest that seer-poets were not unlike shamans, completing psychedelic vision quests as part of their poetic training (Moores, 2014). The Sufi tradition is dense with ecstatic perspectives and poets, and as previously addressed, gave rise to many well-known ecstatic writers such as Rumi and Hafiz. Further, an important case in the history of ecstatic verse comes from the Nahuatl poets of pre-Columbian Mexico. Anthropologists have ascertained that the peoples of this region had no significant contact with other cultures in which ecstatic verse was being written. However, despite their seclusion, the writings of the Nahuatl poet-kings “had a truly ecstatic function in serving as a means to teach a doctrine of self-transformation” (Moores, 2014, p. 59). The appearance of ecstatic writing in a culture so insulated from the rest of the world strongly suggests a universal human drive toward experiencing and communicating ecstatic states. A final inclusion of note comes from the more recent movements of romanticism, transcendentalism, and beat poetry. Though separated by both time and culture, these distinct artistic

movements are what Moores (2014) refers to as “Dionysian eruptions,” each bound to the other in their expressions of transcendent states, appreciation of beauty, and acknowledgement of mysticism.

### **Teaching Ecstatic Poetry: The Ecstatic Learning Model**

This article began by identifying and describing the characteristics of ecstatic poetry that distinguish it as a unique form of poetic expression. Both recent and classic research were presented and key concepts such as ekstasis and eudaimonia were introduced. A new description statement was offered and examined, followed by an argument in support of ecstatic poetry’s inclusion in visionary art culture. Finally, a history of ecstatic verse was presented. The final section of this piece will offer an exploration and overview of a new framework for ecstatic poetry education that is being called the Ecstatic Learning Model, or ELM.

### **Claims of the Ecstatic Learning Model**

This section seeks to summarize a new model for the facilitation and evocation of ecstatic poetry writing, a teaching model that has been designed, developed, and implemented by the author in workshop and retreat settings for over a decade. The ideas presented here have been crafted intentionally by the author and have evolved, as well as refined and tested, over time through periods of study and collaboration with learners, teachers, and scholars. The claims of the Ecstatic Learning Model (ELM) are as follows: (a) the ecstatic poet is a visionary artist, (b) all poet-practitioners are a part of a Creative Field and possess the capacity to access it by means of intention and practice, (c) evoking an essence experience through ecstatic poetry writing is possible, teachable, and can be cultivated as a part of the poet’s artistic journey, and (d) the process of ecstatic poetry writing can be profound, healing, and transformative, and can result in deepened insight, self-transcendence, and/or eudaimonia.

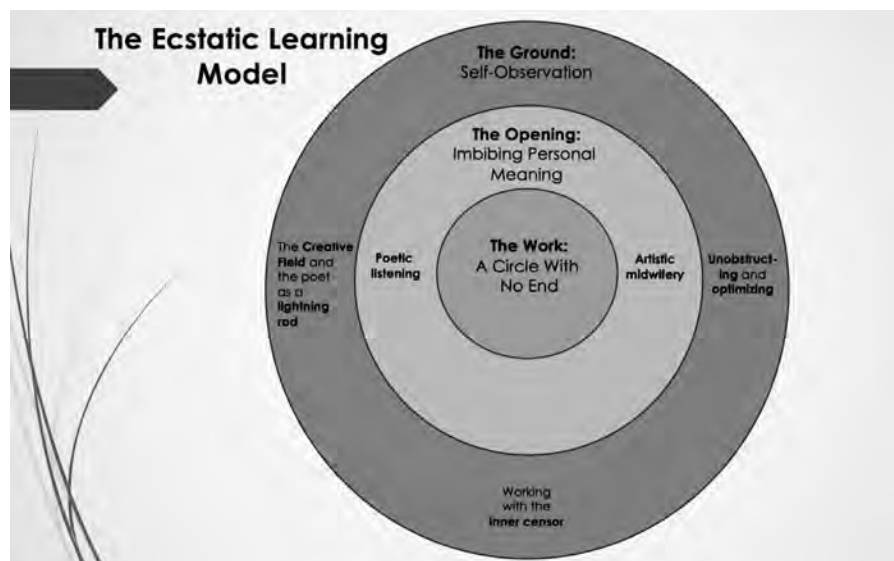
The ELM is comprised of three levels that can be visualized as three concentric circles, deepening into one another as the learner’s journey progresses (see Figure 1). These levels are *The Ground*, *The Opening*, and *The Work*. Pertinent to note is that the levels of the ELM are permeable. This framework does not espouse a fixed, linear progression but instead offers both theoretical and experiential support as learners deepen into their essence. For instance, a movement into *The Opening* in no way indicates that the material from *The Ground* is no longer relevant or that it cannot be returned to for inspiration or support. This discussion will explore these three levels, beginning with the foundational understandings of the ELM in its outermost level.

### **The Ground: Self-Observation**

When poets enter a workshop setting to develop themselves as ecstatic writers, they are first immersed in concepts from this present framework that offer them

**Figure 1**

*The Ecstatic Learning Model (ELM)*



grounding in the practice of ecstatic poetry. By utilizing specific exercises and key discussion points, students are invited to enter into a space of self-observation, which this model posits is the foundation for achieving connection to essence through poetry writing. The term “self-observation” here refers to a specific activity in which the practitioner employs meditative techniques in order to witness internal phenomena with deeper clarity and curiosity. This capacity is found within Buddhist practitioners and has been cultivated by many meditative traditions throughout history (Goleman, 1988; Welwood, 2000). This present section will discuss the level of The Ground and its focus on self-observation, including its core concepts and practices.

One of the principal assertions of the ELM is that all beings are participants in, and have access to, a ubiquitous force known as the *Creative Field*. The Creative Field goes by many names: the muse, Creative Spirit, inspiration, Divine Voice, and others (Barnstone, 1983; Grey, 1998). This model holds that the Creative Field is a collective consciousness that can be accessed and employed in the service of visionary art. An initial activity conducted in workshop settings has become known as “The Lightning Rod Analogy,” a discussion-based exercise in which the Creative Field is compared to the natural forces that give rise to lightning storms and the ecstatic poet themselves to a lightning rod. Grey (1998) elucidates this concept, stating “The artist’s soul is a psychic antenna tuned to the needs of the world soul” (p. 18). Of particular importance in this dialogue is an assertion that lightning is a primordial force—lightning will occur whether human beings attempt to harness it or not—but that a lightning rod is not a naturally occurring instrument. The ecstatic poet learns that they must exert intention and practice, not unlike how a lightning rod must first be forged from ore and later strategically placed, in order

to find themselves in an optimal position for receiving the flow of the Creative Field. The ELM holds that establishing this context at an early stage in an ecstatic poet's learning supports the quality and depth of self-observation.

As mentioned previously, this activity of self-observation is comparable to the lucidity found in various meditative states. However, as practitioners discover when embarking upon nearly any spiritual journey, obstructions and challenges will always arise—most often associated with their own neurosis or conditioning (Snelling, 1991; Welwood, 2000; Wilber, 2000). Therefore, if they are to effectively engage in self-observation that serves to unobstruct the natural flow of the Creative Field, the first task of the poet-practitioner is to get out of their own way. The level of The Ground contains exercises pointed at facilitating this vital inner work, focusing especially on what the ELM identifies as the *inner censor*, the primary obstacle to authentic and meaningful self-observation. The remainder of this section will discuss the inner censor and a group of key experiential exercises that have been developed to support learners on their journey toward getting out of their own way.

Poet-practitioners encounter their inner censor as conditioned self-talk that holds their writing in scrutiny and judgment. Goldberg (1986/2005) makes a distinction between the inner censor and inner creator, noting that the censor is a voice that endeavors to stifle the activities of the inner creator. In psychospiritual terms, the inner censor is the voice of ego, which is, as described by Welwood (2000), “the habitual activity of grasping onto separate images and concepts of oneself, an activity that separates us from our true nature” (pp. 300-301). Therefore, if the true nature of the ecstatic poet is a state of clarity in which self-observation can give rise to experiences of essence, the inner censor is the veil that obscures that possibility.

Before each exercise presented in workshop settings, a brief guided meditation for grounding is offered. Students are reminded that the only real rule of the exercises is to let go of the voice of the inner censor each time it arises and to do so with as much gentleness and self-love as feels authentic; the point is not to create something that the poet might judge as beautiful but instead to simply be open to the experience of nonjudgmentalness. The first exercise presented invites participants to write a stream of consciousness for 90 seconds and then to compose a poem from that raw material. A second exercise prompts participants to work with five images or icons that are most relevant to them; students write down their five images and then create a short poem based on what the images evoke for them. Going deeper, a third exercise presents a number of writing prompts, after which the participants craft a short poem based on their experience with the prompts. A final exercise invites synchronicity by requesting that students pull a tarot card at random and fashion their own ecstatic poem based on the imagery or emotion that the card evoked. The crux of each of the exercises presented at the level of The Ground is not the activity itself but the action of repeatedly identifying the voice of the inner censor and gently cutting it off, not unlike how a meditator might handle discursive thought during formal meditation practice (Goleman, 1988). In this way, these experientials are training in getting out of our own way, couched in the practice of ecstatic writing.

The act of intentionally not controlling, of willfully surrendering the instinctual urge to judge, is a step away from ego and a step toward transformation (Kornfield, 2008; Welwood, 2000). It is quite literally an intentional ekstasis—the poet is rehearsing separating themselves from stagnation and conditioning. This model posits that after some practice with the material presented in the level of The Ground, the learner will find the practice of self-observation more natural and access to the Creative Field increasingly less obstructed.

The keystone understanding of the level of The Ground is expressed by the following statement: We are practicing with getting out of our own way so that we might find ourselves in an optimal position to receive the flow of the Creative Field. Its two key concepts are *unobstructing* (conditioned blocks to the Creative Field) and *optimizing* (capacity for self-observation) such that the poet finds themselves in a more favorable position for the lightning of ecstatic art to strike.

### **The Opening: Imbibing Personal Meaning**

What is the fruit of self-observation? The ELM proposes that, as access to the Creative Field increases, the ecstatic poet is able to imbibe from their practice a sense of deep personal meaning that they can then channel into their writing. Writes Grey (1998), “Finding that fountain of creation, an art spirit, is the artist’s task. Artists must remain open to the tumultuous ocean of potential inspiration . . . to provide tangible evidence of inner discovery to the outer world” (p. 80). Inner discovery takes place—oftentimes spontaneously—when the practitioner endeavors to optimize their access to the Creative Field by getting out of their own way. What is discovered is unique to each individual, but its common denominator is personal meaning.

The second level of the Ecstatic Learning Model is called The Opening. It can be viewed as an opportunity to deepen into the practice of ecstatic writing. Poet-learners enter into this sphere when they have gathered enough raw material from their self-observation that they feel ready to express personal meaning in verse. The first two levels of the ELM, The Ground and The Opening, can be compared to the work of a potter or ceramicist. The potter does not begin their creative process with completed products; they must first prepare raw material which is then molded and sculpted before its final refining process in the kiln. The level of The Ground, then, is comparable to the gathering and preparation of raw material while The Opening is the process of working with that material to give it form.

There are two primary concepts in this level with corresponding practices associated with each. The first of these is called poetic listening. Poetic listening is a transpersonal practice in every sense; it draws from meditative and spiritual practices to evoke the poet’s capacity to imbibe personal meaning from inner and outer phenomena. The concept of poetic listening is captured by Cocteau (as cited in Davis & Murphy, 2010), who famously noted “The poet doesn’t invent, he listens” (p. xi). Poetic listening contains an element of non-action; instead of striving to invent or fabricate an experience, the poet trains in listening deeply to allow their inner world to guide them toward personal meaning. To teach poetic

listening, learners are led in specific meditations and active imagination exercises, the latter making use of a Jungian concept which Fadiman and Frager (2002) identify as a “conscious effort to . . . relax our usual ego controls without allowing the unconscious to take over completely” (p. 102). For instance, one experiential activity invites learners to find a space in nature and meditate there, focusing on the sounds and sensations of their environment while simultaneously holding a gentle curiosity about how inner phenomena are influenced by outer experiences. All poetic listening exercises end with space for poetry writing, which is viewed in this paradigm as the container of personal meaning given form.

Intimately entwined with poetic listening is the concept of artistic midwifery. This notion affirms that visionary artists are midwives for their connection to essence and that art is an expression of the essence experience itself; art is the outstretched arms that catch what is born. Therefore, an ecstatic poem is the form, the evidence that Grey (1998) mentions, of inner discovery. In the context of artistic midwifery and the ELM, an ecstatic poem is what is born when personal meaning is expressed in verse; it is a tangible depiction of the poet’s connection to their essence. In workshop settings, facilitation of artistic midwifery begins long before the concept is introduced. Whenever a learner is imbibing personal meaning—whether by means of predesigned experientials or otherwise—they are practicing artistic midwifery. Specific exercises geared toward focusing on this concept are presented during later stages of an ecstatic poetry workshop, inviting poet-practitioners to experience their essences by means of contemplation, time in nature, collaboration with fellow learners, and writing to express their insights.

The keystone understanding of *The Opening* is expressed by the following statement: We are midwives for our connection to essence; our art is what we use to catch what is born. Its key concepts are *poetic listening* and *artistic midwifery*, both of which are held by the ELM as tools that the poet can learn to wield in the service of connecting to essence and cultivating meaningful, transformative ecstatic verse.

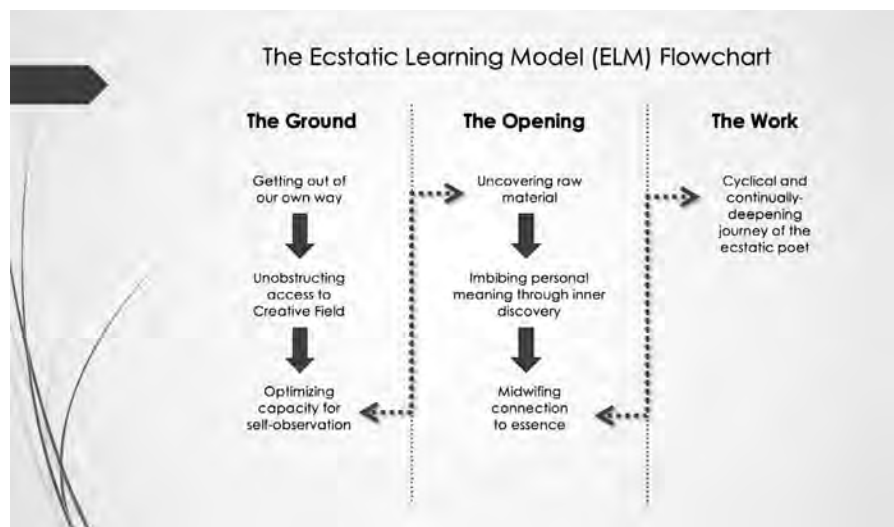
### **The Work: A Circle with No End**

When the poet-practitioner learns that getting out of their own way can aid them in unobstructing their access to the Creative Field, this feat allows them to more easily optimize their capacity for self-observation. They find themselves more readily able to unearth the raw material of personal meaning—the seed of connection to essence from which ecstatic poetry can emerge. The Ecstatic Learning Model posits and seeks to cultivate this precise progression for the path of the ecstatic poet while maintaining that the process of connecting to essence through poetry practice is continual (see Figure 2). Neither the beginning nor the end of the creative journey is determinate (Grey, 1998).

The third level of the Ecstatic Learning Model is known as *The Work*. This final feature of the ELM is not a level at all, nor is it to be held as a singular destination. Instead, it is a representation of the cyclical journey embarked upon by the ecstatic poet and/or visionary artist (see Figure 3). *The Work* is divided into four separate

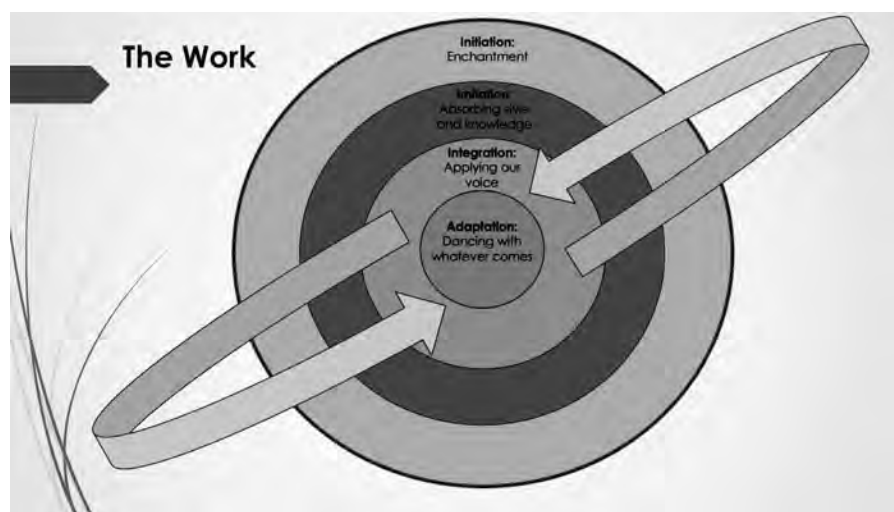


**Figure 2**  
*The Ecstatic Learning Model Flowchart*



dimensions, each of which affirm that the artistic process is mutual amongst practitioners; it is an expression of kinship shared by all those who seek to imbue their art with the mystical. These four dimensions represent a set of permeable and intermingling guideposts that the ecstatic poet can reference as they move through their creation process. It is purposeful that these dimensions start again at the beginning with a sense of enchantment, as the intention of *The Work* is to support each artistic endeavor—from the conception of a new work on an already-

**Figure 3**  
*The Work*



established path to a greater shift from a nonartistic life into a life of making art—as one great circle of creation.

The outermost dimension of The Work points toward an experience of exhilaration as the artist begins a new project or artistic path. This is the dimension of *initiation*: the first steps in the direction of creation and connection to essence. For a while when creating a new work, many artists may find themselves mimicking or emulating some outside source or inspiration—even if that source is their own work from a previous stage of their artistic evolution (Grey, 1998). This is represented in the dimension of *imitation*. *Integration* begins when the artist, through intention and effort, begins to deepen into their own voice, to give their artistic vision its own unique identity and shape. *Adaptation* is the aikido principle of *mujushin* embodied by the visionary artist, a term that Gleason (1995) identifies as “the mind of no abode or stopping place” (p. 15). Adaptation is a concept that encourages flexibility and acceptance. The intention of this dimension is to empower learners to dance with their experience of creating art regardless of what arises—even frustrations and roadblocks are viewed as necessary facets of the creative process.

The level of The Work is presented toward the end of an ecstatic poetry workshop, after more in-depth immersion in the experiential work of The Ground and The Opening. It serves as a reminder for students as they leave the workshop space that their journeys can always, and in fact will always, begin anew. The ELM asserts that the artistic process is a circle with no end, no stopping place. The keystone understanding of The Work is expressed by the following statement: Our artistic journey is cyclical and can deepen through continued practice.

### Conclusion

In a culminating discussion on the transformative power of ecstatic poetry, Moores (2014) states, “The gratification of the need for ecstatic experience is a kind of ‘single, ultimate value,’ as Maslow called the drive towards self-actualization. The good life is thus not complete without ecstasy” (p. 219). This article has endeavored to present ecstatic poetry thus, as a visionary art that can be wielded as a force for profound good, both within individual lives and in the world at large. Ecstatic poetry is also teachable, and when married with intention and practice can come alive in a poet-practitioner’s life as an unending journey of transformative creation.

Grey (1998) notes “Religion and art that emphasize ecstasy and mystical experience will always fulfill profound human needs, bringing people back to the source of infinite love and ultimate reality” (p. 66). So it is and so may it be with the practice and path of ecstatic poetry.

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