The Sacramental Poetry of Susan McCaslin

by Neil Querengesser

Samuel Johnson was dismissive of much religious poetry, contending that "[c]ontemplative piety, or the intercourse between God and the human soul, cannot be poetical. Man admitted to implore the Mercy of his Creator, and plead the merits of his Redeemer, is already in a higher state than poetry can confer.... Omnipotence cannot be exalted; Infinity cannot be amplified; Perfection cannot be improved..." (53). While many believers might not question Johnson's central premise that figurative language and metrics cannot in themselves bring us to a closer relationship with God, most Christian poets, and their readers, would likely deny a lack of spiritual value in the reading and writing of Christian poetry. Indeed, in a postmodern age that has seriously called into question the authenticity of all literary language, let alone language devoted to the type of poetry many scholars would see most charitably as a quaint form of nostalgia for a bygone age and belief, what Johnson refers to as "pious verse" can be, in its better forms, particularly significant. The best writers of devotional and spiritual poetry, aware of such challenges to their work, have in fact created some powerful meditations on the nature of spiritual experience.

One important Canadian poet, Susan McCaslin, has published several books containing some brilliant spiritual and devotional poetry. In such works as *Veil/Unveil* (1997), *The Altering Eye* (2000), *At the Mercy Seat* (2004), and *Lifting the Stone* (2007), she expresses, through lucid yet subtly complex imagery and syntax, her "longing for union with a vast and mysterious realm that gives meaning and purpose to ordinary existence" (*Matter* 13). In doing so, she enters not only into "an underground stream or subcurrent of Canadian poetry addressing such experience" (13), but also into an enduring, predominantly Christian, tradition of spiritually oriented lyrics and meditations. McCaslin's poetry confronts both canonical and marginalized elements of this tradition, in her engagement with such figures as Thomas Merton, Teresa of Avila, William Blake, and John Donne, even as it seeks its ultimate end, a more profound vision of and relationship with God, in lines ranging from the superficially whimsical to the deeply reverent.

An essential aspect of McCaslin's poetics in this regard is what may be called the sacramental quality of her verse. Regina Mara Schwartz contends that sacramental poetry "does not contain what it expresses [but] rather…points to a meaning greater than and beyond itself" (6), suggesting the possibility of using language to guide the reader to challenging gaps across which matters of the spirit may be apprehended. While McCaslin's poetry can often be understood and appreciated on the literal and metaphorical levels, it also participates to some extent in what Northrop Frye has identified as "the purity of simple speech, the parable or aphorism that begins to speak only after we have heard it and feel that we have exhausted its explicit meaning. From that explicit meaning it begins to ripple out into the remotest mysteries of what it expresses and clarifies but does not 'say'" (*Double Vision* 83). Or as David Jasper expresses the concept in his study of Coleridge, "the human and the non-human world meet at the point of visionary consciousness, and by the imaginative act of the poet, the finite is opened momentarily onto the infinite" (40; qtd. in Ferretter 153).

While such assertions pose some difficult problems of referentiality in a predominantly poststructuralist age, in that they appear to beg the question of a transcendental signified, of any meaning beyond the pleasures of limitless freeplay, it is possible, at the very least, to read poetry such as McCaslin's *as if* it did point beyond itself and, ideally, to make a convincing argument that it ultimately does. Such an argument may be developed within the context of and in opposition to Jacques Derrida's distinction between the "two interpretations of interpretation" (292). Derrida argues that "the one [interpretation] seeks to decipher…a truth or an origin which escapes play and the order of the sign" while the other interpretation, "which is no longer turned toward the origin, affirms play and tries to pass beyond man and humanism…[beyond] the reassuring foundation, the origin and the end of play" (292). Derrida's contention that these two interpretations of interpretation are "absolutely irreconcilable" (293) is contingent upon the presupposition of a world view based on ontotheology and enlightenment metaphysics (which Derrida questionably seems to claim to include "[humankind's] entire history" (292)) on the one hand, and postmodern freeplay on the other. But as some philosophers and theologians have recently pointed out (Ferretter 6; passim), ontotheology is only one historical episode in a much more encompassing theological tradition. Luke Ferretter argues in his insightful monograph, *Towards a Christian Literary Theory*, that "Derrida's 'two interpretations of interpretation,' that of the rabbi on the one hand, who seeks a text's final signifieds, and that of the poet on the other, who delights in the play of signifiers, are

both at work in the revelation that Judaeo-Christian tradition discerns in the Bible, which on the [one] hand reveals the truth of God and the presence of Christ, but at the same time reveals God precisely as absent and unknown" (151). As St. Thomas Aquinas aptly put the matter several centuries ago, "[Life] pre-exists in [God] in a more eminent way than can be understood or signified.... We cannot know the essence of God in this life, as He really is in Himself; but we know Him accordingly as He is represented in the perfections of creatures; and thus the names imposed by us signify Him in that manner only" (Ia 13 2 ad 2). Thus, according to Ferretter, "Deconstruction...teaches theology nothing radically new, but insists with a new rigor on what it already knew, that its positive statements must be qualified with an acknowledgement of the incapacity of position as such finally and certainly to represent God" (19).

An implicit awareness of this double bind appears to distinguish much of McCaslin's sacramental poetics. One aspect of this can be seen in her animal and nature poems. In "Psalm of the Open Secret" she desires the words of the "Holy One" to verbalize the non-verbal natural world by "sound[ing] in the crevasses of [her] speech" (*Lifting* 35). Similarly, in "Wilderness/Poetry" a ridge of pine trees "stands witness to itself / in bright caesuras // where we fall into language" (*Mercy Seat* 106). In poems such as these, the poet's awareness of the limitations of her language in the natural world "points," to reiterate Schwartz's words, "to a meaning greater than and beyond itself." In another category, many of her lyrics confront and transform specific biblical texts; for example, in "Lift Up Your Heads, O Gates And Be Lifted Up, You Everlasting Doors," the gates and doors of Psalm 24 are metamorphosed beyond personification into "guardians of vital speech" (*Veil* 25). A third important group consists of "conversations" with or meditations on visionary poets. In "The Teresa Poems," for example, McCaslin excerpts quotations from the *Life* of St. Teresa of Avila, using them as points of departure for her own meditations on spirit and language, saying to Teresa:

> Your inward Determiner
> set your dial on high
>
> with rhetoric so contradictory,
> metaphors so layered, subversive,
>
> you taught without teaching
> superiored with superioring....
> (*Altering* 19-20)

The contradictory rhetoric and subversion characteristic of Teresa certainly also find their way into much of McCaslin's verse, particularly in "Water Corona," perhaps her most exemplary and complex sacramental text.

"Water Corona," a "meditation / on water in her myriad transformations" (81), is formally a crown of sonnets, or sonnet corona, comprising seven sonnets connected through the repetition of the last line of each at the beginning of the next, except for the final sonnet, the last line of which repeats the initial line of the first sonnet, drawing the sequence to a circular conclusion. The central subject of "Water Corona" is the transformation of water, from its origins to its potential and unnamed future. The course of this transformation involves subtly complex connections between the corona's physical and spiritual imagery, at times creating an apparently irresolvable tension between the two. The analysis that follows will emphasize first the physical references, then the spiritual, and finally the essential connections between the two.

The meditation begins with a contemplation of "the pure springs of dreams." Water, created female, has its origins in a "dense heart / bursting from the original fireball" (76), nurtured by its earth-mother and in turn "enacting its birth in our bodies" (77), giving and sustaining all life. Human beings, however, eventually turn against their source, pronouncing "[it] 'other,' marked for our use," despoiling it with "dams" (78) and subjecting this "humble…washer of our feet, and of our souls" (80), through its abuse, to many "slow crucifixions" (79). Hearts numbed by "snow's white compact," humanity risks extinction through "private greed for public / gift" unless it chooses "to bend to water's ways" (80-81). The crown's concluding sentence presents a vivid promise of the results of such bending:

> Becoming tributaries to water, we
> might serve what eye cannot fathom,
> mysterious in her mingling with earth,
> air, fire—Thales' Elemental Queen,
> hydrosphere hymned in this meditation
> on water in her myriad transformations.
> (81)

The corona's most obvious theme, then, has to do with the essential connection between water and biological life. When humankind pollutes, poisons, and in other ways disturbs the hydrosphere, it imperils its own survival. However, the final lines present an interesting challenge, particularly to the Christian reader, as they beckon him or her to the service of

"Thales' Elemental Queen" a reference to the pre-Socratic philosopher Thales of Miletus (fl. 6th century BCE), who understood water (the "Elemental Queen") to be the essence of all creation. On the one hand, these lines can be read, without too much inconvenience for the modern reader, as an aptly imaginative but ultimately benign metaphor, a personification of water superficially taken no more seriously for contemporary life than most classical images. On the other hand, like the "dawning of the Age of Aquarius" and pyramid power, the lines could be perceived by some readers as a new-age rallying call. But another reading is possible, moving beyond both of these alternatives, and involving an understanding of how Thales himself may have conceived what was to him the *sine qua non* of life. In his introduction to Thales' philosophy, Reginald Allen writes: "If Thales claimed that the source of all things is water, his question must presumably have been, What is the source of all things?" (1); Allen then continues,

> Thales' question, understood through its answer, assumes that at least two things are true: that all things have a source, and that the source of all things is one thing. The universe is bound to a single principle, the primordial water, by a single relation, that of derivation. Nature is one whole, with unchanging ways of its own, to be accounted for in terms of a unitary principle of explanation. (Allen 1-2)

That unitary principle, for Thales, necessitated his conceiving of water as a transcendental signified, to use the relevant poststructuralist term. Allen says that, for Thales, water was a sign that embodied both the classical element and its (apparent) life-giving properties: "Thales, no doubt, thought that [water] *is* life, thought that, in the living liquid, there was no distinction between life and its liquidity" (Allen 2). For the Christian, however, the unitary principle is not water but Christ, the Logos by which the universe was brought into being (John 1:1-5). Both Thales' philosophy and Christian theology, then, require transcendental—and irreconcilable—signifieds; while water may signify Christ typologically, for the Christian the two are far from identical. However aesthetically inspiring McCaslin's final lines may be, or however well they may serve as a slogan to "go green," they throw out a rather substantial and ironic roadblock to the Christian if taken literally in their challenge to render tribute and service to the "hydrosphere" (81), to what he or she understands as the created rather than to the Creator, in contrast to Thales who quite possibly conflated the two. In one important way the strength of these lines lies in their imagery's hyperbole that indeed challenges the modern reader to bring a new aware-

ness of and respect for this compound essential for the sustenance of physical life.

The form of the sonnet corona, however, is circular; the mouth of its first line, like an ouroboros, devours the tail of its concluding line, inviting the reader again to the beginning and opening up as many potential re-readings as there are transformations of water. A second reading of the corona will now privilege its several images of and allusions to Christ and the spiritual, as well as its unmistakable connections to John Donne's famous sonnet crown, "La Corona," prefatory to his Holy Sonnets.

Donne's corona is designated as a "crown of prayer and praise," or panegyric, to Christ; after the introductory untitled sonnet, the titles of each one signify an important transformative event in His story: Annunciation, Nativity, Temple, Crucifying, Resurrection, and Ascension. The sonnets in McCaslin's "Water Corona" parallel Donne's in that they similarly follow the history of water from its elemental origins to a vision of its—and humankind's—future. Although her sonnets are not titled, each one clearly echoes the theme of its counterpart in Donne's corona. Thus, where Donne begins with a prayerful invocation to his creator, McCaslin begins with an announcement of the meditative purpose of her corona. The second poem in Donne's corona, Annunciation, in which the poet marvels at "*Immensity cloistered in* [the Virgin's] *dear womb*" (306) has its counterpart in McCaslin's lines heralding the origin of water in a "dense heart / bursting from the original fireball" (76). Similarly, the lines in Donne's Nativity, where the saviour "leaves his well-beloved imprisonment…now into our world to come" (307) are alluded to in McCaslin's depiction of water in her third poem as it enacts its "birth in our bodies" (77), and so forth. At times, McCaslin's imagery and diction closely parallel Donne's, for example, in the final line of her fifth sonnet, "though one living drop could save the world" (79) and the final line of Donne's fifth sonnet, "*Moist, with one drop of Thy Blood, my dry soul*" (308). Both of these lines also hark back to the despairing words of Marlow's Doctor Faustus in his damnation scene: "One drop could save my soul, half a drop. Ah my Christ—" (87), further complicating and enriching the allusiveness.

The primary difference between the two sequences, as we have seen, is that the subject matter of Donne's corona is Christ; McCaslin's is, apparently, water. The contrast is non-trivial, lying at the heart of the next stage of this analysis. Donne evinces a trust in the subject of his poetry, or to put it in poststructuralist terms, a faith in his transcendental signified that gives meaning and coherence to the rest of the corona's signs. McCaslin's sequence is more problematic in this respect. With all its structural and for-

mal connections to Donne's corona, it often inverts his subject matter, gendering her subject in the feminine, and developing it with references to Greek philosophy and mythology as well as to chemistry and astrophysics, a condition that may seem to offer scant opportunity for a deeply spiritual Christian meditation. However, a second reading will reveal an abundance of biblical references and allusions that resist the overtly physical imagery, creating a site of stress, perhaps even a fissure, in the text and offering an opportunity for reading through this strained spiritual/material binary to something beyond both.

To read the first sonnet in McCaslin's corona with emphasis on its physical imagery involves focussing on such words and phrases as "hydrated," "parched," and "fill a glass brim-full" (75). One cannot "meditate on water in her many transformations" if one is too thirsty, since this activity is apparently "a privilege of the hydrated" (75). Corporal needs must first be fulfilled before any other desires may be met. One of the primary contrasts in this sonnet appears to be between those who are hydrated and those who are parched. The "cells" of the latter, we are told, "who pant for water's deepest ministry…cry for…flow that embraces the human / and more than human worlds" (75). Here the imagery appears to move beyond the merely physical with its allusion to the first verse of Psalm 42, "As the hart panteth after the water brooks, so panteth my soul after thee, O God" (KJV), as well as Christ's reference to "living water" in John 4. But McCaslin's lines do not signify analogously either the Old or New Testament tropes. The imagery in the psalm's simile reflects the psalmist's confident recognition in his soul's thirst for God, and the "living water" metaphor of the gospel is grounded for the faithful in an implicit trust in the essence of the One who utters those words. In McCaslin's lines, the "flow that embraces the human / and more than human worlds" is not a direct linking of both the (mortal) human and the spiritual. The "more than human" world may indeed have spiritual significance, but it may just as likely signify the biosphere, of which it is an essential component, and certainly more than human. Its "deepest ministry" then, is physical, sustaining human and all other life, but it also points toward the spiritual without necessarily signifying it. Thus the first sonnet concludes with the act of enjoying a drink of what—ultimately—"is not limitless balm" (75). The final image simultaneously conjures and forbids the possibility of limitless balm.

The second sonnet is replete with signifiers pointing in multiple directions even as they begin to suggest the spiritual. Shadowing Donne's Annunciation sonnet, its theme is the origin of water, first in the creation of its two elements, hydrogen and oxygen, through the big bang and later

supernovae, and then in its eventual manifestation on earth. The physics of this process are cradled in domestic terms, as in the question "How is it a galaxy of fiery arms / nourished such bonding?", an image that points simultaneously to the spiral shape of a galaxy, the chemical bonding of hydrogen and oxygen atoms, and the mother-infant bonding suggested by the word "nourished" and the Latin root of "galaxy," meaning "milk." The maternal imagery continues in the lines "Gaia, dressed in dripping firmaments, / announced your arrival, wrapped you / in a receiving blanket of blue silk" where the signifiers also point to classical mythology. The phrase "dripping firmaments" thus signifies both the water falling from the heavens and the fertilizing drops of blood of Uranus (the sky) upon Gaia (the earth), the entire image complex of the mighty classical gods then encompassed in a thoroughly maternal and thoroughly domestic image of a blue receiving blanket. Yet the lines "Who married / your molecules in a streaming bed / and sang their epithalamion to the stars?" point both to William Blake's question to his tyger and to God's question to Job as to who laid the cosmic cornerstone "when the morning stars sang together, and all the sons of God shouted for joy?" (38:6-7). In so doing, they embody something more than mere water: their very poetry points toward an unexpressed spiritual answer, an answer that may also be supported by seeing in the maternal descriptions above a dim reflection of the Madonna and Child.

Spiritually suggestive phrases occur throughout the remaining sonnets, perhaps unobtrusively at first, but becoming more pronounced upon subsequent readings. While readers may initially privilege the corona's many references to the physical, the spiritual connotations cannot be suppressed and appear to grow ever more forceful. For example, in the third sonnet, when the poet says in an apostrophe to water that "you enacted your birth in our bodies… // lifting us up and dipping us down / in the rivers of your voice" (77), the physical imagery is apparent enough, but the sacramental allusions to holy baptism are also unmistakable. In the fifth sonnet we find an even more pronounced spiritual reference, in the final line, previously mentioned: "…one living drop could save the world" (79). With its aforementioned connections to Marlowe and Donne, and also to Luke 16:24 ("And [Dives] cried and said, Father Abraham, have mercy on me, and send Lazarus, that he may dip the tip of his finger in water, and cool my tongue; for I am tormented in this flame"), it is one of the most powerful in the corona, in terms of its directly spiritual suggestiveness, where the physical imagery gives way to the spiritual. For it is clear that one drop of elemental water is literally not enough to "save the world." Even figura-

tively, assuming an extreme use of litotes, one cannot finally envision the sense. However, understanding "living drop" to conflate simultaneously both blood and water, one may perhaps see across the referential gap its ultimate signification, in a spiritual sense, recalling the "living water" Christ speaks of in John 4:10 and his explanation of its powers a few verses later: "But whosoever drinketh of the water that I shall give him shall never thirst; but the water that I shall give him shall be in him a well of water springing up into everlasting life" (John 4:14).

The connections between the physical and the spiritual are most pronounced in the final two sonnets. Sonnet six contains the lines

> Nothing is more humble than water
> brother, sister, seeking the lowest place
> washer of our feet, and of our souls,
> those reservoirs, containing us,
> shaping our bodies' fluid estate.
>
> (80)

Privileging the physical in a reading of this passage, one can see the figurative language being used to reinforce water's natural properties: it runs downhill, is a universal solvent, and is an essential component of all living bodies. However, the passage is complicated not only by the obvious reference to souls but to numerous biblical allusions which, more fully apprehended, make a merely physical understanding of the passage almost impossible. Thus, the clause "Nothing is more humble than water" recalls several references to Christ's humility, particularly Philippians 2:8: "And being found in fashion as a man, he humbled himself, and became obedient unto death, even the death of the cross." The line "brother, sister, seeking the lowest place" alludes to Luke 14:10: "But when thou art bidden, go and sit down in the lowest room." The line "washer of our feet, and of our souls" strongly recalls the story of Jesus washing the apostles' feet in John 13. And the figuring of "souls" as "those reservoirs, containing us" mingles both the physical and spiritual once its allusion to 1 Corinthians 6:19 is understood: "What? know ye not that your body is the temple of the Holy Ghost which is in you, which ye have of God, and ye are not your own?"

The seventh sonnet, as previously mentioned, concludes with an image of the hydrosphere personified as Thales' Elemental Queen. Yet this strongly pagan reference is preceded by at least three significant biblical allusions beginning with the words "'Let justice flow like water,' says the prophet" (81), a direct reference to Amos 5:24 ("But let judgment run

down as waters, and righteousness as a mighty stream"). The following lines

> When polar icecaps melt, climates climax, and floods ransack the world,
> who will choose—now—this day—
> to bend to water's ways?
>
> (81)

not only signify a direct threat to humankind's physical well-being should it choose to continue ignoring this most important component of its existence, but also incorporate many spiritual words and images from Joshua's famous speech in his eponymous book: "And if it seem evil unto you to serve the LORD, choose you this day whom ye will serve; whether the gods which your fathers served that were on the other side of the flood, or the gods of the Amorites, in whose land ye dwell: but as for me and my house, we will serve the LORD" (Josh. 24:15). Finally, perhaps the most challenging lines of the entire poem—

> Becoming tributaries to water, we
> might serve what eye cannot fathom,
> mysterious in her mingling with earth,
> air, fire—Thales' Elemental Queen…
>
> (81)

—hover with a high imagistic tension between the pagan and the Christian in their subtle but definite reworking of 1 Corinthians 2:9: "But as it is written, Eye hath not seen, nor ear heard, neither have entered into the heart of man, the things which God hath prepared for them that love him." Such tension cannot be resolved, nor is it desirable that it should be. Rather, it constitutes the central force and focus of the corona. Unable to affirm either the material message or the traditional spiritual signification, the reader is turned toward the gap, across which may lie a new vision, a signification beyond the words of the poem, dependent on faith, not a blind faith, but one fully intellectually engaged with both the possibilities and the limitations of language.

In *Towards a Christian Poetics* Michael Edwards, in reference to Pascal, says "The fallen world, and ourselves as part of that world, neither reveal God evidently nor evidently disprove him—they point to him as being not there…. In the sign constituted by the universe, God is present by his absence" (4). Or as Hans Kung has put it, "Pascal, who saw through the ambivalence of human reason, could ground his certainty not on a

'cogito e[r]go sum'...but on a 'credo ergo sum'..." (12). Such paradox and ambiguity are at the heart of McCaslin's poetry, held taut between the two poles of theology and literature, or, to put it another way, between Derrida's two interpretations of interpretation. David Jasper has commented that on the one hand, "poetry may be tempted to assume some of the functions of religion" and thus "harden its imaginative texture and limit its range," but on the other hand, it is "the precision and definition of theology and the language of belief which provides for poetry a means of exploration" (17). Sacramental poetry such as McCaslin's has something significant to say to the open-minded and enquiring reader about divine nature in its very refusal to name it directly. Jasper has commented that while it is true, as Samuel Johnson has said, that "perfection cannot be improved...God's very uniqueness and infinity demand the language of metaphor and riddling allusion by which poetry may lead to an intensification, a transfiguration even, of our imperfect apprehension of what is perfect" (19). By meditating on this corona in its "myriad transformations" and not insisting on pinning down its meaning but being open to the possibility of insight through faith, one may come to understand the full value of water as a sacramental element and signifier; its ultimate transformation may be into the inexpressible, in minds and hearts, as it points across silent interstices toward that which may be named—but which in this life may be apprehended only through a glass darkly—as Christ.

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