

Nectar in a Sieve

*Edited by Patrick Laude and Barry McDonald,
Music of the Sky, An Anthology of Spiritual Poetry,
World Wisdom Books, 2004
Reviewed by John Herlihy*

“It is in vain to hang them, they cannot die.” (A gypsy saying)

Think of the romantic poets and Robert Burns comes to mind, whose love is “like a red, red rose that’s newly sprung in June”. Born of a flight of imaginative fancy, these dreamy images find their basis in sensuous facts, at a safe distance from the deep well of a latent and far more profound human experience. Sacred poetry, on the other hand, draws upon a supra-sensual wealth of symbolic images that abound in nature, allowing the sun, moon and stars—and the world of nature they drench their light upon—to send messages of extraordinary beauty and depth to the sensibility of the poet who stands and waits to become the transmitter of their rich, subtle mystery. As a medium of a deeper and more revelatory communication from the Divine to the human, the verses of spiritual poetry give expression to the eternity out of which they are born. In this sense, the poets themselves become a part of the eternity they drew upon; they cannot die.

Indeed, they still live within this collection and continue to inspire people with a spiritual message that spans the generations and transcends time. People who pick up this newly published anthology of spiritual poetry and peruse its contents will be opening the door of their heart to an unexpected awakening. There is a poet in every one of us by virtue of the human capacity not only to respond to the symbolic language that poetry draws upon, but to feel the sudden inrush of some experience vaster than ourselves coming as though from another world and a higher self. As the compendium and conduit of a hidden message

cast within beautiful linguistic forms and echoing the natural cadences of rhythm and rhyme whose harmonies trace their origin back to God, *Music of the Sky* lends wings to the reader and transports them farther and higher than they could ever imagine on their own.

This rare collection gathers together under one celestial ceiling a diverse variety of soul songs, giving birth to a fearless, soaring progeny that reflects the beauty of the poet's soul across a broad spectrum of spiritual traditions. The mysterious tone of the koto¹ echoes an unearthly sound "from within my own breast"; our trifling human fears are "among the lilies fading"; my heart, taking any and every form, becomes "a pasture of gazelles" and a "pilgrim's Kaaba"; we have within us the "singing flute that came from the sea"; we learn to die "in time", while Time will die "in eternity". Only in the ethereal realms of such mystical poetry can we become as Bedouin tent-makers in some desert clime where the body is "a tent" and the soul "a sultan from the eternal world". The poet sings intuitively and wildly, turning the evanescence of misty clouds into flowers of the mind and heart. Why shouldn't thoughts and impressions that are strange and beautiful and true to the poet resonate their harmonies within the soul of the reader so they too can participate in the sublime messages of nature? In compensation, perhaps nature's peace will shine its mercy down upon all mortals and flow into their aspiring souls as sunshine flows into trees.

The editors of this rare collection of poetic wisdom have gathered together a treasure trove of spiritual insight into a compilation of poems that reflect the outpourings of an open soul, poems for the ages that transcend their own boundaries as cool water flowing over the brim with their unique spiritual messages. The poems appear out of nowhere like a field of wild lilies, joyous and unruly, shouting insights into our sullen modern minds like magical incantations from another age for anyone and everyone to listen to and behold. The title itself is evocative of a higher order of consciousness and experience, linking the implicit music of verse with the harmonies and rhythms evidenced through the universe, while the image of the sky recalls the broad sweep of the Infinite contained within that plate of empyrean blue. The externalization of such

¹ A kind of zither that has been used as one of the main chamber instruments of Japanese traditional music style.

sublime thought through sound and word images can then become internalized as an inner harmony within the firmament of the human soul and spirit.

Barry McDonald, an accomplished poet in his own right, opens the volume with some enlightening comments that underscore the importance of rhythm and meter in capturing the true import of prosodic verse. He puts these familiar poetic devices into perspective by tracing their origin back in time to the origin of the universe through a single, primordial ur-word. According to the Quran, it was through a primordial sound that God created the universe when He uttered the revelatory sound-word KUN (“be”), FA YAKOWN (and it becomes”), this being the original Logos that initiated the outpouring of the creation, what modern scientists today call the “initial singularity”.

As the by-product of myriad sounds, harmony represents the beauty and unity that lie at the heart of the living creation as well as the heart of the living poem. Like the beating of the human heart, sound words associated with prosodic rhythms become the heartbeat of the poem. “If God is the fundamental unity allowing for all living things to exist in harmony, then, translated into the language of poetry, God is what makes all things rhyme.”² From there, it is a small step to realize that the high energy and vibration generated through the “ordering principles” of spiritual poetry actually strike a tone within humans that set them ringing, bringing about the subtle realization of having been a living bell all one’s life “and never knew it until that moment when I had been lifted and struck.”³

Patrick Laude introduces the poems within this anthology with a combination of erudition and style. He lends background and perspective for this genre of traditional poetry, which may be less familiar to the average, modern-day reader. He calls poetry “the essence of language”; poets themselves he names “the keepers of the symbolic richness of words.” In addition to being a “means of communication” as well as a “form of self-expression”, he highlights the role of spiritual poetry in particular as being “the way for transcendent Reality to manifest itself in and through words, images and music (p.6).” As such, he calls it “fundamentally

² *Music of the Sky* (Bloomington, Ind.: World Wisdom Books, 2004), p. xiv.

³ Anne Dillard, *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek* (New York: Harper & Row, 1974), p. 34

polysemic", implying that there is a vertical dimension to the verse that intersects the strictly horizontal form of communication like a sword blade from Heaven.

Poetry has something to say that cannot truly be put into words, similar to the verses of revelation which contain levels of knowledge that cannot be contained by the form of the words alone; there is always hidden meaning belonging to some higher plane that will actually reveal itself on an individual basis to the receptive soul. As such, it is less subjective and more objective in the sense that the words and images of the poem convey a meaning that finds its source in the Divine Reality. In this sense, poetic recitation produces an uncanny emotion within the individual that Patrick Laude calls "an objective emotion"; an emotion insofar as a spiritual sentiment moves the heart and 'objective' insofar as the emotion is grounded in a divine archetype amounting to the "true nature" of a given phenomenon. He concludes his introductory remarks by noting that *Music of the Sky* is a modest *vade mecum*, which my dictionary tells me is "a useful thing that one constantly carries about;" but which my intuition suggests is like nectar passing through a sieve.

Succinct and summative are the traditional symbols evoked in spiritual poetry that shake the cords of the heart and shatter the foundation of the soul, especially modernite souls of today made complacent and dull by the false promises that underpin the modern world. When a poet such as Rumi cries "We are the flute, our music is all thine; we are the mountains echoing only Thee", we come to understand that we are not ourselves. There are elements in nature such as the wind whispering thru the pines or the echo of a distant flute that have qualities that remind us of the best of ourselves and have the power to transport us to other worlds by the very suggestion of their sounds. When we learn that "poor Yunus fills the earth and sky, and under every stone hides a Moses," it reminds the unwary reader that we may be more than we make ourselves out to be, that there is a living presence within us that makes us what we are, that there is greatness awaiting discovery.

The images abound, unrelenting and incisive, that for sheer splendor create a diversity of forms that unite under no true difference. What is the world but "moonlight reflected in dewdrops"; who is standing there "divinely dignified" but the solitary pine tree; the desires of a human life are reflected in the sockets of "his earthly lanthorn" and all life's glory

“unto ashes must”. Rain “whispers of reality” to an unheard ear; fog arrives “like a spring dream” and departs “like the morning clouds” and there is no way for us to own these things. Nature calls us to remembrance, sweetly and insistently, and then leaves us on our own with our own feeble perception.

The collection contains a number of hidden perspectives built into its framework, like secret chambers comprising a sublime edifice, including the traditional, historical and human points of view. As a traditional document, these poems convey a perennial quality that transcends the boundaries of individual spiritual traditions. The source material for these poems serve the same function as the source material for the religions, highlighting beauty and truth as timeless signposts along the way of return to the Divinity and echoing sweet sentiments of devotion and love as they flow out of the mind and heart of the poet. The uplifting quality of these sacred sentiments rises above the parochial nature of individual religious traditions, mirroring the spirit of universality that lies behind the various spiritual traditions.

As a historical link to the past, these poems span many centuries and a diverse range of personalities like a grand, mythic bridge. The reader has access to a broad range of spiritual emotions that cut across time frames and geographic cultures, creating a timeless quality to the material that transcends the strictly human norm. Like ghostly votive lamps illuminating the history of soul searching, these poems reflect the sense and sensibility of many different poets and their individual attempts to cast all the knowledge and love of the Divinity into a single metric flow that captures the essence of a feeling that is basically intuitive and often inexpressible. Here between two covers resides the likes of a Tagore and a Rumi. Every page becomes a subtle and unique taste of various poetic genres that offer their own rarefied and heightened experience. One page reveals a Bengali hymn, another becomes an encounter with a Zen prayer. There are song offerings and Red Indian chants, fragments, sermons and ritual orations. We see the “sun at midnight” and hear the “words of Lalla”. Unexpectedly, we come upon a few poignant verses from an African Prayer Book.

As a purely human document, these are songs of the heart because they attempt to express the ineffable sentiments that emerge from some secret niche within the human being where the kingdom of God resides

"within you". As an individual expression of the poet's most heart-felt yearning, it becomes the human kingdom with the power not only to imagine, but also to feel the knowledge of God as a living presence. A poet lies secreted within every one of us by virtue of the human capacity not only to see the inner reality, but also to internalize the inner meaning of that reality through symbolic language. In addition to the physical form of the book, we also have a piece of the heavens, come down to us in the form of heart songs of the poets and spiritual masters of a former time, revisited during these post-modern times as votive candles in the deepening dusk of the present era. In a sense, these poems open the heart to a rude awakening of what we have become, conveying a nostalgia for higher consciousness and a sense of loss of the Presence that people once enjoyed during more traditional times.

The mystic poet is a person with the power to quicken the heart because his own heart has awakened to a higher zone of pure feeling. He traverses whole realms of experience of which other people only dream. Many of the poems in this collection are extraordinarily short, concise as a Japanese koan and sharp as a knife-blade. Indeed, who can say that a poem need be long when in fact there was once a time when every word was itself a kind of poem. The poets gathered here are sacred image-makers one and all. In cloaking depth emotions in symbolic imagery, they come one step nearer to perceiving something more than any other person who has passed the same way. They look out into the world of nature and see that between human nature and earthly nature there is one interlocking thread binding them as a single unity. In highlighting the archetypal meaning of the symbol, the poet does not give entrance into a land of hidden meaning; instead, the sacred symbols of nature and the meaning they contain enter us, lending of their mystery and grace to become the persons we once were in principle and are still meant to be in fact. They are poems written from one heart to another with no intermediaries or boundaries, creating a place where people can roam freely by virtue of their participation in the landscape of the poem itself.

On our own, we do not sufficiently address ourselves to the clues and signals that life has to offer, not only in terms of life's implicit mystery, but also in terms of its hidden disclosure. Our work and our efforts, our politics and our prejudices, our false morality and our pseudo truths, our shallow imaginations and our empty satisfactions will all go unsung

across the generations because they are unworthy of our true attentions and unfit as the stuff of our heart’s desire.

Images of the old master sitting, “a rock, in Zen” and the desire to witness “in huts and on journeys the great day that dawns” are specters of the eternal because they contain an eternal ethos that lives forever as truth and comes down into the realm of the earthly as a sweet remembrance of a higher order. According to one sublime poem, we are but “lattices” in the niche of time “through which the One Light shines.” Few men and women ever perceive these things on their own; they rely on the largeness of the poet’s mind that sees the archetypes of a grand order reflected in the symbolic images of nature and humankind. We cannot escape the world; not many people want to these days. But we can take leave of the world for a few moments through the rarefied perceptions conveyed by these seed-words of the soul, representing an outpouring from the sacred ground of one heart, followed by an inpouring into the sacred ground of another soul.

The magnificent beauty of the creation complements the sublime miracle of consciousness. Within Nature, the voice of thunder peels across the firmament, the sound of the wind whispers through the pine trees, the dawn mist creeps silently through the valley, night and day chronicle the procession of time. The features of the Divinity outlined within the phenomenal world are etched upon the mind of the true poet as mental icons that convey a meaning that can never be fully expressed in words. Whenever snow falls or birds fly, whenever the river flows into the sea, whenever the seasons change or twilight descends into darkness, the poet captures these images in seed-words of beauty and light as a remembrance of an omni-present order of Reality that lifts us up and takes us away, out into the open sky, where the vision of the one Reality has freedom to roam and the sound of the eternal music can send forth its celestial harmonies until they come down to earth once again and find their way into human ears.