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**"Intimations of Higher Matters":
Anagogical Closure in Walter McDonald's
*Burning the Fence***

William Jolliff

In *Poetic Closure: A Study of How Poems End* Barbara Herrnstein Smith writes, "Whereas the weak closure of much modern poetry can be understood partly as the result of the prevalence of formal and thematic structures that offer minimal resources for closure, the reverse is also likely: the prevalence of free verse, for example, probably reflects in part the impulse to anti-closure" (243). Though published thirty years ago, Smith's claim seems as accurate today as it was then, and it applies equally well to more recent poetry. One need not discount the vigor and productivity of the New Formalists to maintain that most poetry currently being published is of a kind that offers little structural support for creating satisfying closure. And so we are not surprised, then, to see Smith's assessment, or prophecy, manifesting itself on the pulpy landscape of several hundred journals. Far more surprising, given such a state of affairs, is the fact that one frequently reads contemporary free-verse poems that *do* achieve satisfying closure of one kind or another—not the watchcase click of a too obvious craft but the sense of integrity and completeness that, to echo Smith again, "makes stasis, or the absence of further continuation, the most probable succeeding event" (34).

A likely question, then, given the relative paucity of resources that free verse offers to achieve closure, is how poets do it.¹ Needless to say, this question will not receive a full answer here. I will attempt to make a modest beginning, though, by demonstrating one way in which a contemporary poet, Walter McDonald, achieves closure in one of his collections titled *Burning the Fence*.

The book opens with "Morning in Texas." Set initially in the narrator's grade-school classroom, this poem seems at first to center on the reactions of his classmate, Juan Hernandez, who, hearing an explosion in the town, "jumped straight up / burst the desk top /

shouted My papa oh / my papa's dead!" Juan's premonition proves correct. And though, as the speaker's mother assures him later, it was "just a coincidence / Juan couldn't have known," the fear and, we may imagine, the mysterious cause of that fear persist for the narrator—"All night I lay there / starting to explode, / feeling my spirit crouched, / ready to burst"—until his long night ends with the reassuring final line, "Dawn came." That is, the line is reassuring until we read the second half, a one-word fragment: "Comes" (3). Apparently the second part of a compound predicate, the verb supplies an emphatic pause—a technique common enough in conversational syntax. Yet that single word suggests the necessity of our second level of understanding the poem. Isolated, it becomes a kind of "transformational line ending" (Myers and Simms 165-66), though in this case the semantic change does not take place because of the demands of an additional line but because the term's isolation gives it emphasis and creates some ambiguity. The tense change may be explicated to mean, "And dawn still comes," implying that "the fear is still with me as an adult, even as I write this poem, and it is still alleviated only by the dawn." But to stop with that reading seems unnecessarily rigid. The absence of a clearly defined syntactic purpose created by isolation of the fragment "Comes" allows us liberty, or makes us bold enough, to generalize the fear still further. When we do so, the line seems to allow that, as a principle, dawn *continues to relieve* our recurring fears, fears that are an incessant strain of our existence, of the human condition. As I hope to demonstrate, McDonald repeatedly closes his poems in a manner that encourages this kind of interpretation, and since the phenomenon occurs repeatedly it seems appropriate to give it a name.

A likely source for the needed term is Jack Myers and Michael Simms's *Longman Dictionary of Poetic Terms*, the handbook that seems most conversant with what goes on in poetry workshops today. In their nomenclature what McDonald is using would seem to be an "Eastern ending"—that is, an ending in which the closure "continues to develop quietly and to complete itself after the actual printed ending of the poem has been read" (92). Their usage, derived from the fact that many Asian poems work this way, seems accurate to our purposes as far as it goes. But, while it may be roughly correct, there are certainly many different reasons that an ending might continue to "develop" and "complete itself," and my thesis is that McDonald is creating a particular kind of closural effect.

As it happens, the most thorough study of closure is still that of Smith. She devotes a lengthy chapter to "Special Terminal Features," much of which pertains to our discussion here. In that section she details several ways that closure is gained, techniques that may be

used alone or in combination to strengthen closure. But it is Smith's prefatory insight that speaks most clearly to the phenomenon we see occurring in McDonald's poems: "The devices of closure often achieve their characteristic effect by imparting to a poem's conclusion a certain quality that is experienced by the reader as striking *validity*, a quality that leaves him with the feeling that what has just been said has the 'conclusiveness,' the settled finality, of apparently self-evident truth" (152). Two pages later she clarifies her focus on "that particular experience of validity which, when it occurs at the conclusion of a poem, strengthens or secures the readers' sense of finality and stability. In general, it appears that the conditions which contribute to the sense of truth are also those which create closure" (154).

These statements describe accurately, though not fully, what is going on in McDonald's "Morning in Texas": that dawn comes and continues to come strikes us as valid; the affirmation is true. But neither here nor in the forty pages that follow does Smith suggest a more particular "terminal feature" that addresses what we have observed in McDonald's work. Nevertheless, based on her trajectory, I suggest that the "special terminal feature" McDonald is using be called *anagogical closure*. I offer the phrase with some trepidation, realizing that I may be accused of one of the more frustrating post-modern sins: that of reintroducing a traditional rhetorical term only after having reconceptualized the meaning sufficiently to suit my strengths and confuse all comers. What I have tried to do, on the contrary, having experienced strongly in several of McDonald's poems the qualities that, according to Gabrielle Luser Rico, are "the basis of aesthetic activity"—"consciousness of a unified whole and consciousness of intense pleasure" (54)—is to identify the prevalence and highlight the closural significance of anagogical suggestion, understood quite traditionally.

In "The Banquet" Dante suggests that a piece of writing "ought to be expounded chiefly in four senses":

The first is called literal, and this is the sense which does not go beyond the strict limits of the letter; the second is called allegorical, and this is disguised under the cloak of such stories, and is a truth hidden under a beautiful fiction. . . . The third sense is called moral; and this sense is that for which teachers ought as they go through writings intently to watch for their own profit and that of their hearers. . . . The fourth sense is called anagogical, that is, above the senses; and this occurs when a writing is spiritually expounded which even in the literal sense by the things signified likewise gives *intimation of higher matters* belonging to the eternal glory; as can be seen in that song of the prophet which says that, when the people of Israel went out of Egypt, Judea was made holy and free. And

although it be plain that this is true according to the letter, that which is spiritually understood is not less true, namely, that when the soul issues forth from sin she is made holy and free as mistress of herself. (my emphasis)

McDonald's "Morning in Texas" does just this. His anagogical closure carries us from an understanding of one little boy's bedtime apprehension to a fear that characterizes human existence. The poem's closure "gives intimation of higher matters."

Indeed, anagogical closure is common, if not dominant, throughout *Burning the Fence*. In "University Library" the first eight lines are a straightforward description of that building, but the final six focusing on graduate males use language rich in sexual suggestion:

Deep in the stacks in fourth floor
carrels, graduate males massage
slide rules backwards and forwards
mastering bodies of knowledge
by degrees and dreaming beyond facts
of the inscrutable design of young wives. (6)

So clear is the comparison of the imagined wives to the graduate work being done that one is tempted simply to say that the sestet has a controlling metaphor. What forces our reading beyond the explanation of metaphor is, once again, the last line, in particular the phrase "inscrutable design." For these young engineers' work, we assume, if we drive the cars they design over the bridges they build, is not "inscrutable." They are, after all, "mastering" their crafts. But they are dreaming of what they cannot fully understand: the mysteries of the closest human relationships. The passage works on us as metaphor until that final line leads us beyond metaphor, reminding us of a truth higher than gross weights and stress factors. Human analysis ends, and the mystery begins, right there in the library. McDonald's phrase "inscrutable design," in Dante's words, "gives intimation of higher matters belonging to the eternal glory."

"Tornado Alley" similarly directs readers to the anagogical level. Like "University Library," this piece is divided into an octave and sestet, but here no metaphor prepares the reader for anagogical closure. In the first thirteen lines the poet presents an apparently matter-of-fact account of a family going down to the basement to review their storm preparations. The images are metaphorically rich, but the figures seem to find completion in their most immediate significance: "Spiders dark as funnel clouds swirl themselves down / and swivel into cracks. Lawn chairs webbed with dust / lean on the walls." It is only the final line, "We search the sky. There's time," that suggests a significance greater than the ordinary prepara-

rations imply (13). The final emphatic sentence, "There's time," reassures us, we assume, that there will be time to complete this task before the first tornado comes. Clear enough, yet some ambiguity settles in. For in fact the speaker is reassuring us concerning a fear that has never been developed in the poem. So our first response, "I am assured," is quickly followed by our second: "But wait a minute. I don't recall being worried." There is, it would seem, no impending calamity, no storm warning, that heightens the poem's tension. So just *what is there time for?* Again we must assume, given our strongly felt sense of closure, our "consciousness of a unified whole and consciousness of intense pleasure," that this ending does fulfill some other need that we readers have been feeling. Some other disaster must be coming. But what? Since no additional particulars present in the poem offer themselves, we turn then to the fear that most typically characterizes our human condition, the fear of death, which is certainly one of the "higher matters belonging to the eternal glory" if we excuse a certain lack of blessed assurance or define "glory" broadly enough. Having been invited to a higher level of meaning, we are allowed not simply to reread the poem as enriched by a controlling metaphor but to identify more closely throughout with the fear implied by the poem—in particular, the very human attempts to stave off the inevitable.

Once one begins to think anagogically, these endings in *Burning the Fence* become one of our reading expectations, and one that is frequently fulfilled. In "First Solo" a new pilot is being warned about some of the dangers of landing, dangers based not on weather or enemy fire but on mental or psychological struggles that could betray him. When the poem ends with "Give everything you have to the runway. / You will have all night to dream," we read the poem almost immediately as anagogical (21). Here it certainly does not hurt that McDonald is drawing upon the traditional metaphorical language of sleep and death, which in itself enhances closure, and the final line fulfills our expectation by suggesting things eternal. The rhetoric of flight in "Going Home" plays similarly upon us. In this narrative an aircraft hits such turbulence that even the flight attendants "smile grimly, their knuckles white / as they distribute the napkins." Crisis over, the poem ends: "When we descend, the clouds thin out / and there it sprawls, / the rock on which we live / and where we all return" (47). One of course can read the final two lines simply as an allusion to traditional funeral rites or even more simply as double entendre. But since by this time we have begun to read McDonald for an anagogical meaning, that tends to be our preferred interpretive move: literally we do return to earth with every landing, and anagogically we do return, dust to dust, the way of all flesh.

In the poem that supplies the collection's title, the quasi-personified fence does its best to resist burning, or at least to resist showing its fire. The flames "waver within cracks"; the posts "hold in their flames." The fence, we learn, is "unwilling to stop being fence" (57). Read as anagogical closure, what is portrayed is the resistance of the temporal and material to accede to its limitations. The personification hinted throughout makes the application of the effect to the reader a short step indeed, and suddenly we are reflecting the "higher matter" of our own mortality so difficult to admit. "Measuring Time" confronts a similar struggle. In this poem the speaker is recounting a progression of deaths: family members, friends, comrades. That done, he states that "the hands go around, around" (29). Given the title, the image of the clock is clear, and just as importantly the repetition echoes and suggests a continuity similar to that we perceived in "Morning in Texas." The hands will keep on turning not only for friends but for the speaker as well. "I" measure the time, and the time is coming around.

Anagogical expectation comes into play once again in "World War I Soldiers." The poem is the narrator's reflection on an old photograph of the town regiment of Louisville, Kentucky, going off to war, and he scrutinizes the photo for good reason: "I search the faces for father. / My eyes rake each platoon, return to one man / in the second rank." He assumes that this is his father, or at least ponders that idea, and asks: "If he had died / in Flanders, who would have seen / this man I see, / who would've cared?" These lines would be enough of an ending for any good poet: they suggest the eternal smallness, the diminishing temporality, of what are perceived in the present as great and heroic acts. But the poem does not conclude there. Instead, McDonald goes on to write, "I stare at the others. / Each one marches alone," curious lines since, after all, the men are marching more or less together; the fact that we have been told previously that "they aren't even nearly / in step" foreshadows but does not prepare us for the grave significance of the final line (24). The emotional import of the poem has been the fact of our human aloneness, and that idea is beautifully iterated by the restatement of their unpracticed marching—a statement that we immediately perceive as an anagogical truth: they are not only alone in their marching pattern, but all humans are ultimately alone too. Though hardly "glorious," this is an "intimation of a higher matter," a more spiritual idea, if you will, than human limitation and temporality.

The clearest instance of anagogical closure, however, may be in the uncharacteristically green "Evolution." In an image that recalls Theodore Roethke, "Wisteria tendrils / bounce about in the wind" as we consider "the speed of sunlight / lasering the leaves." We share the narrator's wonder until confronted with the "vegetable intelli-

gence.” The light knows “somehow where to go” (51). Having been invited and conditioned throughout the collection for at least some religious awareness, the intelligence of the light, like the work of the plant, takes on a heavenly significance: higher matters are intimated. Thus the poet celebrates the intelligence that sustains life and light.

As I evaluate my readings of these texts, it seems even to me that my claims are suspect, that they place more in the poem than is “really” there. And, of course, it is possible that I do see visions of death behind every dark night, that I assume a herd of elephants behind each mundane clap of thunder, or that, more seriously, I may be overreading the poems in a way that devalues their more literal excellence. That is a potential problem with such readings, a problem to which centuries of allegorical, moral, and anagogical readings of the Bible may attest. But given the risk what continues to push my conservative reading tendencies in this direction is the fact that what I am calling McDonald’s anagogical practice seems, in the context of the volume, readily distinguishable from the types of endings most easily mistaken for anagoges: those that depend upon double entendre and those that I will call, for the sake of consistency, “literal” endings—final lines whose primary claim to closure and aesthetic gratification is essentially non-figurative.

A few brief examples may help clarify these distinctions. In “Claiming Kin” McDonald tells the story of Uncle Edward who, after a rough and rugged life, ends up sad in his old age, calls the speaker’s mother on the telephone, and “weeps for his boys,” asking “How / can I make it up? / *There / there*, she says, / not knowing how” (23). The beauty of this ending is that the mother’s words, as well as the speaker’s description of those words, can have several complementary meanings. They may very literally mean that she does not know what to tell her brother to do; they may mean that she does not know what to do about Edward; or they may mean, since she is the speaker’s mother and since Edward’s is such a common complaint, that she does not “know how” with her own children either. A more subtle closing, yet still classifiable as a double entendre, is found in “First Blood.” There the speaker recounts a childhood experience in which he and his friend watch a small plane crash. A lovelorn pilot was apparently buzzing a former girlfriend. The poem ends flatly: “Each of us / took a piece of the plane. / Mine had some blood on it” (17). What makes this ending work is that the statement, flat and powerful, is no doubt literally true, but the doubling suggests that such boyhood fascinations as watching a plane crash are bought at a high price. That the ten-year-old did not perceive this second aspect, while the narrator and reader do, makes the double entendre a satisfying irony with which to close.

Successful literal endings also abound in *Burning the Fence*. “Plowing through Ashes,” for example, a lyric that recounts hunting through harvested sorghum fields, burning the stubble, preparing the field again, and planting, ends with these lines: “And in May / he [the speaker’s father] rigged the tractor up, / lowered four worn plows / into the ground / and planted grain” (5). There are many good qualities about these lines. They affirm, reassuringly, the cyclic nature of agrarian practice, and the ashes image has sufficient resonance in archetype and religious tradition to make it satisfyingly suggestive. But the closure does not, it seems to me, offer “intimation of higher matters belonging to the eternal glory.” In another poem, “Cabin,” McDonald portrays a couple pondering where to build. After recounting the many advantages of a particular site, McDonald ends with their vision of the future: “And in spring we’ll dust, / shake blankets fresh outside, / and beat the rugs” (7). This closure works because it describes not only a literal fact about what will need to be done, but also because it resonates with the healthy pleasures of cleaning and the more ironic pleasures of beating a rug—an act at once wholesome and blissfully violent, especially after a long winter cooped up together in the new cabin. It is a fine ending, true to the human condition, but it seems different in kind from the anagogical closure that has been detailed.

Now would be a fine time to claim that the closure used in this collection is typical of McDonald’s work or that anagogical closure has become even more prevalent and important as his writing has progressed. Apparently closer to the truth, however, based on my reading of the dozen or so volumes McDonald has published since *Burning the Fence*, is that, while he has not abandoned the technique, he does use it less often.² Why that is the case is a question that must be addressed in a future essay after a more thorough study of his canon. In a similar vein, given the intrinsically religious nature of readings open to anagogical interpretation, it would be worthwhile to see what role this kind of closure has played in the creation of what critics have called McDonald’s “hardscrabble sublime.”³ But that topic too must be deferred to a future study.

In preparing this essay, I have often had in mind Robert Frost who, having claimed that “Every poem is a new metaphor inside or it is nothing,” adds: “And there is a sense in which all poems are the same old metaphor always” (786). Frost, of course, was free to claim saint’s privilege and not elaborate on that proclamation. What he may have been sensing, I think, is that, while poetry is indeed metaphor, considered teleologically it directs us beyond metaphor to a place where all things run together—to what such faithful practitioners of the anagogical as Flannery O’Connor might call “the Divine life and our participation in it” (Grimes 13). A more extensive study

might find that many contemporary poets, particularly people of faith, use methods of closure that succeed because they lend themselves to anagogical interpretation. Once we become comfortable with the concept, we realize that it is one of the things that poets and readers of poetry have always sensed, more or less, when they allow themselves to use good sense. For many readers of this journal, the “intimation of higher matters” is part of what brought us to poetry in the first place. We expect poets to help us see the divinity in the details and to remind us that as readers we too participate in a divine design.

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NOTES

¹Even given the tremendous amount of energy spent on theory in recent years, much work remains to be done concerning how poems in free verse work. One of the most extensive studies that touches on this subject is Bahti's *Ends of the Lyric: Directions and Consequence in Western Poetry*, which argues for chiasmus as the figure that has given essential structure to lyric poems. Golding's “Openness, Closure, and Recent American Poetry” is also insightful concerning “open form,” particularly in relation to Language poetry and New Formalism. Applied studies in this area are common, most “how to” books on writing poetry having a section on last lines. More thorough than such discussions, partly at least because of its heavy use of Smith, is Glaser's “Entrances and Exits: Three Key Positions in the Poem.”

²My preliminary work indicates that during the 1980s anagogical endings were most prevalent in McDonald's work (particularly *Witching on Hardscrabble*, *The Flying Dutchman*, and *Rafting the Brazos*) and that during the 1990s (especially *Where Skies Are Not Cloudy* and *Counting Survivors*) the phenomenon is relatively rare. If that is the case, it is all the more interesting that “The Waltz We Were Born For,” the final poem in his new collection titled *Blessings the Body Gave*, ends with what seems to me a stunning anagoge. This topic, however, demands more study, not only of McDonald's growing canon but also of contemporary poetics generally.

³In a 1986 interview Woods mentioned the closeness between the sublime and the gruesome in McDonald's literary landscape. Eleven years later Hobbs referred to the “hardscrabble sublime” that McDonald's poems celebrate. I find the religious suggestion of the term to be at home in the same ideational space that anagogical closure seems to inhabit.

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