

Fall 2007

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Recommended Citation

Originally published in *Midwest Quarterly* 46(1), autumn 2007, 25-41 <http://www.pittstate.edu/info/midwestq/index.dot>

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That “Awful Rowing Toward God”: Anxiety in the Early Poems of Walt McDonald

WILLIAM JOLLIFF

THE LANGUAGE OF personal religious faith has never been more prominent in American public discourse than it is today. For good or ill, we feel the need to know the religious beliefs of our presidents and police chiefs, our favorite musicians and baseball stars. And most of them, it seems, are willing to make their personal belief a part of their public persona—regardless of how it pertains, or does not pertain, to their work. In such a context, it seems comparatively reasonable to probe the religious convictions of creative writers, especially those whose beliefs are likely to figure significantly in their compositions. Even then, such inquiry is likely to lead down some unexpected pathways.

In a recent interview with Darryl Tippens, former Texas Poet Laureate Walt McDonald makes several intriguing claims about his life as a poet and his Christian faith. Early in the interview he states, “The foundation of all my work is Christ; not one poem would have come without that rock. . .,” and then he adds, “I wonder if I was wrong not to make that apparent somehow from the start. It never occurred to me to explain two decades ago that everything I wrote was an aspect of my ‘awful rowing toward God,’ to borrow Anne Sexton’s phrase” (Tippens, 174). Such a religious faith—and such an orthodox phrasing of it—may have surprised readers who have followed the poet’s work from its beginning. Though his publishing career has spanned over three decades, twenty books, and 2300 journal publications, only recently have critics begun to recognize him as a poet of faith, and such attention has been limited to his more re-

cent work. The spirituality of his early books has gone largely unexplored.

In his introduction to *The Waltz He Was Born For*, a collection of critical studies of McDonald's work, poet and editor Andrew Hudgins sketches the growth of McDonald's religious thought, noting that he did not, at first reading, recognize that aspect of the poet's work, just as he did not "fully see the possibilities of salvation at the end of *The Waste Land* until [he] had read *Four Quartets*" (9). Hudgins limits his remarks, however, to McDonald's middle and recent poems, referring to only one piece from *Anything, Anything* (1980), then skipping ahead to *Witching on Hard Scrabble* (1985). Like most other critics with a spiritual focus, he largely overlooks the poet's first four books, and for good reason: the religious content of those early volumes is not apparent. While it may be tempting, then, to conclude that McDonald may have been responding to Tippens's questions somewhat off-handedly, the careful reader can't afford to do so. For in fact, any close study of his interviews demonstrates that when commenting on his work, McDonald responds with a craftsman's well-rehearsed care. So if we take the poet at his word, our necessary question becomes this: What shape *did* his religious expression assume in the early books?

Certainly not a conventional one. The poems offer little in the way of mystical experience, implications of transcendence, allusions to religious texts or practices, direct references to theological concepts, or, anything else that might prick the reader's religious sensibility. Simply put, seining McDonald's early books yields little in the way of traditional Christian themes and motives. An alternative perspective from which to consider McDonald's "awful rowing toward God," however, may yield a better catch. During McDonald's intellectual seedtime, Christian existentialism arose and dominated American academic and popular theology. If we look at his early work from this less traditional religious angle, we see what has escaped our initial readings: the psychological

groundwork for Christian faith, particularly as it shows itself in estrangement, anxiety, and awe.

Theologian John Macquarrie states in *Studies in Christian Existentialism* that man is “fragmentary and incomplete in himself” and suggests that the very question of God actually arises “from man’s estrangement from himself, and from his inability to bring into unity the poles of finitude and freedom which together constitute his being. These two poles must remain in perpetual and frustrating conflict if there is no positive relation between the Being out of which man has emerged as a finite center of existence. . . .” (5, 12). Recounting Heidegger, Macquarrie notes that there is a “fundamental feeling-state” which

yields a disclosure of a unique kind. This fundamental state [Heidegger] identifies with an ontological anxiety. Such anxiety, unlike other moods such as fear with which it is explicitly contrasted, is evoked not by any particular situation but by man’s total situation as a being thrown into existence, knowing neither his whence nor his whither, but simply that he is in the world. It discloses man to himself in his finitude, as limited possibility, and we may call it an “ontological” state of mind because it lights up man in his being. (37)

Macquarrie then suggests the similarity between Heidegger’s description of anxiety and theologian Paul Tillich’s concept of “ultimate concern” (37). In the latter’s Christian existentialism, however, the estrangement and anxiety humans suffer, while leading to the point of despair, do not force humans to remain at the point of despair. Quite the contrary, anxiety is subsequently linked to “specifically religious feeling-states, such as *awe*” (Macquarrie, 37; my emphasis).

In this positive light, Macquarrie recalls Tillich’s claim that “the most impressive way of introducing people into the meaning of religion [is] to begin with such affective experiences as anxiety. . . .” (Macquarrie, 41-42). “Anxiety in the face of death,” Macquarrie continues, “has the positive role of recalling man from the forgetting of Being, and awakening him to the wonder of Being.” This closely parallels Tillich’s idea of the “shock of non-being” which can be “the prelude

to the revelatory experience" (Macquarrie, 57). So from a Christian existentialist perspective, it seems that estrangement and anxiety may be considered in an affirming light: they become the "religious *a priori*" (264)—the *a priori to awe*.

And so it may be in McDonald's early work. Existentialist theology provides a language in which to consider that "awful rowing toward God" in his earliest and least transparently religious poems, particularly as we consider his first four books as the beginning of a spiritual progression. From such a perspective, what we might naturally *expect* to discover in the early work of a religious poet is estrangement and anxiety, even to the point of despair; followed, as the career continues, by the beginning of a turning away from that despair. Studied with this in mind—instead of with the characteristics of a traditional Christian poetry—such a progression is revealed as the dominant motive of the early books.

A re-reading of McDonald's first collection, *Caliban in Blue*, demonstrates why it was so graciously introduced by no less a poet and critic than Miller Williams, why it won the poetry award from the Texas Institute of Letters—and why it would not occur to most readers to consider McDonald a "Christian poet." Characteristics of traditional religious poetry are largely absent—as absent as one can imagine them being in any American poet, regardless of religious claims. A dutiful search yields only a few traditional characteristics worth mentioning, and even those are immediately subverted. Two stories from the Bible do appear: in "Holy Wars," the miracle birth of Abraham and Sarah's progeny is detailed, but the result noted is not the birth of a nation; instead, the poet emphasizes the engendering of centuries of murderous tension between the major world religions (40). "The Cave" is equally dark: it alludes to the story of Jesus casting out the demon Legion, through a character that identifies with the demon, and it does so in only an indistinct narrative context (42). Two other poems touch upon themes which may be considered vaguely religious—"The Party," which deals with

innocence, and “On Planting My First Tree Since Vietnam,” which finds a theme of hope—but such themes can hardly be considered uniquely or even particularly Christian (50, 26).

More abundant by far are poems which seem to argue *against* any traditional notion of spirituality. McDonald’s Caliban character, like Shakespeare’s in *The Tempest*, is a being tied far more closely to the earth than to the heavens. As a pilot, Caliban’s flights are expressed not in transcendent suggestion but in the earthiest of sexual metaphors; for example, “Caliban on Spinning” states, “[Y]ou can lead your plane / deeper and ease out, deeper and ease out / through several convulsions, each spin / richer than the last” (4); and in the title poem he continues: “Focused on cross hairs, / eyes glazing, hand triggers switches in / pulsing orgasm, savage release / pull out / and off we go again / thrusting deep into the martial lascivious blue / of uncle’s sky” (11). “Skies even here / belong to Setebos” is the lesson of “All My Sad Pilots,” and the emotional tenor throughout the volume confirms that claim, suggesting a darkly naturalistic world-view. And why not? As the speakers tell us, “Pilots always knew / man is matter, felt the secret / ooze past our hips / each take-off” (5). At times the naturalistic even slips toward the grotesque: “Rocket Hour” defends the sickly delight of those soldiers surrounding a comrade, bunkered down during an attack, who defecates in his clothes: “why not delight in / human waste / and play this fecal / game” (14). The Vietnam veteran speaker of “Interview With a Guy Named Fawkes, U.S. Army,” describes the potential for violence even of “women and kids in shack,” and sums up his position with the final line, “waste them all” (15).

Yet understood in the progression of Christian existentialism, the same poems can indicate a different spiritual trajectory. “Caliban Spinning” and “All My Sad Pilots,” for example, become poems that, while admitting that “man is matter” through their deadly metaphors, nevertheless resist or resent that limitation, expressing anxiety and voicing a frustrated

longing for something transcendent—hence the longing to fly, even to fly in dangerous arenas. Other poems, too, highlight what Tillich terms an “anxiety of death,” here instantiated most clearly as the fear of going to war. “Flight Orders,” which begins a series of poems on this topic, compares war to the “flat spin no / jet / can rudder out / of” (6). In “Faraway Places” a soldier watches his daughter feed ducks for what may be the last time (7). And “Night Before My Father Went To War” tells a similar tale from the child’s perspective, ending with these compelling lines: “Among the shivers of the night he turned to me / the *desolation* of his face” (8; emphasis mine). The next poem, “Embarkation,” taken in this context, becomes the story of a soldier-father at once enjoying watching his children, while at the same time “dreading dawn” (9), when he will be leaving, possibly never to see the sleeping boys again. In poem after poem, speakers come face-to-face with the certainty of death, feel the resultant anxiety, and suffer the existential desire to reach beyond that limitation.

Other poems too may be understood, theologically, in these two distinct ways. Apparently arguing strongly against a traditional Christian understanding—and with a particularly troubling cynicism—is the set of poems McDonald develops through literary allusions or grounds in literary figures. Through one such allusion, Shakespeare (or Prospero) is ironically undercut in the “Cam Ranh Bay Hospital Surgical Ward 2,” when among the “eyes pieces of guts and / gonads / legs and arms / all gone,” we’re told, “We are such / stuff as jackals feed / on. . . .” The poem continues with an ironic echo of Pete Seeger’s “Where Have All the Flowers Gone?”: “and our / long time grown / is gone / when will they ever learn / gone” (19). In “Lord Jim Upon His Body,” Joseph Conrad’s protagonist states his own disgust with his body, using a troubling metonymical figure: he addresses his penis, noting that his mate Jewel, who handles it, will feel how unclean it is when she feels him “humping her like a yellow cur” (36). Even such ironic attempts at secular transcendence as those

we associate with Ernest Hemingway come under the poet's dark scrutiny. "Belling the Mouse" alludes to several of Hemingway's heroes and concludes with this cynical couplet: "Courage is a rash, / I've had my shots" (39). Most significant, it would seem, may be the use of Conrad's Kurtz from *Heart of Darkness*. He concludes the poem that bears his name with a fatal couplet—resonating with Fawkes above—"Exterminate the brutes" (35). I could continue detailing the darkness of the poems, but the richness of the Conrad line suggests an explanation for why these speakers seem darkly anti-Christian. Like Kurtz, they face situations for which they are not prepared, situations that their childhood beliefs are unable to explain, and they are reacting with an angry atheistic cynicism born in futility.

Considered as the initiating step in an existentialist's progression in faith, however, many of the same poems can be read on a different trajectory. Keeping in mind what Tillich terms the "anxiety of meaninglessness," we can see that particular kind of dread forming the center of such poems as "Belling the Mouse" (39); what is projected at first as a wizened cynicism becomes in fact a lament for lost values. The speaker feels the void left when there is no longer something worth dying for, when courage—that most essential value in Hemingway's proto-existentialism and in Tillich's Christian expression—is perceived as a disease, a "rash." Similarly, what Tillich terms the "anxiety of condemnation" is at the core of "Lord Jim Upon His Body." There the speaker damns himself for owning a body that does things of which he does not approve but which he cannot apparently control—such as jumping ship, in the poem's epigraph, or using his body in cruel sexual ways, as the poem continues. Thus an existentialist understanding of spirituality—the anxiety of death, the anxiety of meaninglessness, and the anxiety of condemnation—persists as the dominant strain in this collection.

A study of *One Thing Leads To Another* (1978) reveals that much of *Caliban in Blue's* more obvious violence is falling away, as is the most darkly cynical tone. Yet only a few of the

characteristics of traditional Christian poetry appear, and those but briefly. The most obvious is that three poems are based on biblical narratives; how those narratives are used, though, is, once again, not typically religious. The patriarch Jacob, in "Wrestling With Angels," "shuts his eyes tight, tight, / and holds on." When blessed, he is able to "pull his new name Israel / over his head like a robe"—a line that may reflect the traditional blessing, but remains somehow ambiguous (20). Less ambiguous and still further from scriptural intent, "Uriah, The Night Before Battle" recounts the tale of the biblical figure made a cuckold by King David. It focuses on his reflection that there is "something foreign" in his wife Bathsheba's eyes, that she is "faintly foul / as though she had not bathed in weeks" (18). Along a similar ironic trajectory, "The Wife of Jonah Tries To Believe His Story" relates a narrative from McDonald's imaginative apocrypha of just how the wife tries to allay her doubts about her prophet husband's faithfulness; uncertainties persist, however, and they are multiplied by his new, fish-like ways of handling her body during sexual intercourse (19)—hardly the stuff of typical religious verse.

Somewhat more conventionally religious, one could argue that McDonald portrays persevering, even transcendent, affection in family relationships portrayed. Most notably in "Night Ward," a poem which echoes James Dickey's much anthologized "The Hospital Window," the speaker has left his father's hospital room. He recalls their fishing trips, particularly his father's desperation to redeem every possible moment; at last as the speaker thinks of his father's room, he "swim[s] up to him / and wave[s] again goodnight." Dickey's poem ends with just such a lifting toward heaven; McDonald's, though equally affectionate, concludes with a very final "goodnight." It is significant that the poet chooses to conclude a *potentially* transcendent poem with a naturalistic acceptance of loss. Still, love does find a place in the volume, not only in this father-son relationship, but in poems written from a parent's perspective. When McDonald's narrators

speaking about their children, the affection is clear. For example, the stress of parenting a runaway child—a pain only possible in the context of great love—is detailed in the two poems which immediately follow “Night Ward”: “Losing Blood” and “Reality” (22-23). Contextually, it is as if a single speaker has written about his relationship with his father, then turns to tell of his relationships with his sons. Similarly, “With Cindy at Vallecito,” a poem which the poet considers important enough to reprint in his next volume, reflects the loving relationship of a father and his daughter, and includes his hope for her affirmation: “I’m glad for her the fish is twice / the size of those her brothers caught / last night” (30). The volume’s final poem, “Adapting” (also reprinted in his next volume) may have the most convincingly Christian theme, however. For the first time, we encounter a poem that takes an epigraph from the Bible (“Can these bones live?”—Ezekiel 37:3) and develops a brief narrative of perseverance that parallels that epigraph in a non-ironic way: a tree, girdled by vandals in a dry West Texas town, tenaciously lives; and eighty greenhouses, “not counting commercial ones, / grow plants the plains cannot / support.” The final image is triumphant: “These plants with bones / for stalks survive the wind / and grow red fists of flowers” (31).

Were the tone of this poem the tone of the volume, we might see *One Thing Leads To Another* as the book in which McDonald’s “awful rowing toward God” becomes clear, but that is not the case. More ideologically dominant, in spite of the absence of Vietnam from most of the book, is something closer akin to the naturalism of *Caliban in Blue*—a focus which may, nevertheless, be understood as demonstrating Tillich’s anxiety of meaninglessness. In the title poem, for example, the speaker recounts a series of events and what he has learned from them. Being drunk and flying two hours later has taught him “not to worry.” Flying his drunken flight instructor home and being rewarded with a perfect score has taught him “to be wary / of success.” Being a civilian seven years has taught him “how little / difference anything makes.”

Ultimately, each event has taught him “how one thing leads to another”—the naturalistic antithesis to a more typically religious, causally coherent, world view, particularly with the poem’s final stroke: being orphaned has taught him, “what else, / how all things end.” What the poem portrays most clearly is a human’s reaction to a world in which the progression of cause and effect continues unmodified by grace. “[H]ow little / difference anything makes” is the lesson of the poem. The world-weary speaker knows how all things begin, that they are never what they seem, and, just as importantly, “how all things end” (9). The tone is fatalistic, deterministic—one can almost hear the echo of the preacher of Ecclesiastes in the poem’s background, lamenting the vanity of all earthly things.

“We Three” underlines again that anxiety of meaninglessness. In this poem, the speaker performs an act of charity: “A blind beggar with pinned-up / khaki for legs holds a spittoon. / I hesitate, drop in a buck, take / one of the pencils. Put it back” (13). For this act, he receives not thanks but the ridicule of the beggar and his two associates. As the poem continues, it becomes clear that the beggar’s accomplices, if not the beggar himself, are creations of the speaker’s imagination; the poem’s focus moves from without to within. The message is the apparent meaninglessness of any random act of kindness; even something as good or at least as harmless as an act of charity must become the stuff of self-doubt, of self-ridicule. “The Fan,” similarly, undercuts the human longing to find meaning in one’s actions—even after a hopeful opening: a “fan” approaches the poet to have a copy of his book autographed. For a moment, the speaker believes he has found one of “my people,” someone who connects deeply with what he writes. The fan then adds, “Got that / at a library / rummage sale. / On the back / the sticker reads / \$.10” (14). When the poet asks if the book was worth half a cup of coffee, the fan “stands there / grinning.” All is vanity, such poems suggest. Regardless of intentions, meaninglessness is the wall at the end of every alley.

McDonald's next volume, *Anything, Anything* (1980), begins to betray a break in the poet's naturalism: two of the most potentially religious poems from *One Thing Leads To Another* ("For Cindy at Vallecito" and "Adapting") are repeated, which seems indicate the poet's intention; but the crack in the sardonic armor is narrow. A search for religious or biblical themes most obviously yields "Goliath, Night Before Battle," but the kind of religious reflection one might anticipate is nowhere apparent. The story is the lament of a rejected warrior, "a bully, a freak," who is frustrated that his size keeps him from the pleasures his stature as a warrior might warrant: "At twelve . . . / I outgrew the largest whore in Canaan." Indeed, he attributes his violence to sexual frustration: "Mad with fisting myself off in the desert / I raged around bashing / the boldest lions and bandits." Still, a few references to Christian practice of a positive type absent from *Caliban in Blue* do occur: glossolalia is the vehicle of the metaphor in "Speaking in Tongues" (39); "A Brief History of Glass" features an allusion to Jesus's anointing by a woman in Matthew 26:7 (38); "When You Feel It Most" ends with a metaphor of several slightly convoluted biblical miracle stories; and "The Gravedigger's Song" opens with an epigraph from one of John Berryman's prayers: "*Make too me acceptable at the end of time*" (51).

Such affirmation does not, however, dominate the volume: in keeping with the pattern of *One Thing Leads To Another*, the end is never out of sight. Time, and what few moments of peace life offers, are relentless in their passing. "Ten O'Clock" finds a couple at rest in the fact that their daughter is home safe and unmolested; they silently "watch / each other's eyes" even as blocks away "two cars collide, / the crash so soft / and final" (13). A father plays "With Derek In The Dunes," and when the son waves, "from there it's like good-bye" (14). In "A Distant Relative," a personified Death comes to call and "[t]akes the head of the table" (18). The speaker waits, powerless, to see if he is staying, and Death replies that he must

. . . meet
somebody else tonight.
Is business good, you ask
and bite your tongue.
Your wife stares at you. About the same,
he says. It's steady work. (18)

Such fatalism is heightened in "Every Pilot Knows" (36). Though the situation suggests a metaphor for transcendence, a somewhat less vulgar version of Caliban instead returns to remind us, "There is a point / where you can go no higher"; "Each plane has a ceiling. / Pilots accept that fact." "What they maneuver in / is down below." The narrator is speaking didactically, it seems, to disincline any thoughts of heavenly extension. He ends abruptly: "Where the sky ends is earth"—and, we assume, certainly *not* heaven. As the boy narrator affirms in "You Can't Teach An Old Dog New Tricks," it does no one any good to say, "Dog . . . / don't die" (41). Clearly *Anything, Anything* continues many of the same themes and referential contexts of the earlier books. The anxiety of death is never far away. Of the thirty-nine poems in the collection, twenty mention or directly imply death, and death is often the central subject. Three sequential but otherwise unrelated poems all focus on some aspect of death. In "Mother, Father," the speaker's mother will not let go of the dead father's body, but holds on to the shoulder "like a poacher / seining deep waters" (48)—that is, trying to take something humans have no right to take. "Pennies for the Eyes" focuses on the eyes of the dead, the strangeness of lids that do not move (49). And "The Gravedigger's Song" is just that, a wide-ranging reflection of a gravedigger on his work. The anxiety of death is still the obsession of the poet, so how is it suggested that the worldview in his work is changing?

Even though death is at the center of the speakers' thinking, it is not as intransigently so as in the earlier work. In "A Distant Relative," mentioned above, the speaker does proceed with his life in the knowledge of death's inevitable return, but this is not presented as psychologically crippling

knowledge. In this poem and in several others, to embrace death is to embrace the human condition, and even to heighten awareness of the moment. The limitation thus awakens the speakers to new levels of appreciation of being, such that the book occasionally takes on an affirming tone, and it is peopled with characters who, though limited, have a certain nobility. "Ice Cream Man" not only opens with an epigraph from Ecclesiastes 9:10, but continues as a tribute to a slow-witted individual who nevertheless takes the biblical admonition—"Whatever thy hand findeth to do, do it with thy might . . ."—to heart (42). And most importantly, there is in this volume for the first time that sense of awe, Macquarrie's "religious a priori," which would come to characterize McDonald's later poems, and which existential theology posits as a result of courage in the face of anxiety. In "At The Football Stadium," the speaker's son is struck by the wonder of the moon through binoculars (5). "Big Thicket," in a manner that would come to characterize McDonald's mature work, leaves the speaker and his partner in awe at the richness of their world: "We wonder / how much two lives / can hold" (53). As mentioned above, the "Ice Cream Man" takes on a certain nobility—a human trait largely absent from the earlier volumes—as he "waves / goodbye, pumps half another block / one hand ringing, ringing the bell" (42). And in "Every Pilot Knows," while there is an implicit denial of transcendence, there is nevertheless the possibility of wondrous activity "down below," in the available atmosphere: "Chandelles, Immelmanns, / Cuban Eights . . . there, / they can do anything" (36). Similarly, the father in "Sons" knows that the time is coming where his son "won't sit on either knee," but "[f]or the time"—a line he repeats—they can be together, now, joyfully together (6). Even in poems like "Drying Up" that take as their dominant tone a strong sense of foreboding, the dry-land farmer, though knowing that "the Ogallala water table drops / three feet each season," persists faithfully in the fact that for now, "[t]he wells suck deep. / The water flows" (8). So unlike the dead-end angst of *Caliban in Blue* and the

determinism of *One Thing Leads To Another*, the tone of *Anything, Anything* begins to suggest an acceptance of human limitation and death, taking them in, and allowing the inevitability of the end to focus the speaker's attention on the now; in this way, despair, encountered with courage, becomes the religious a priori to awe, an awakening into "the wonder of being."

The last of McDonald's four early volumes is the chapbook *Working Against Time* (1981). In this collection, one can perceive the progress of a pilgrimage in a series of spiritually expansive moves. In a brief twenty pages, McDonald includes a reference to the Samson story and the prophecy of Isaiah ("Reading To Daughter," 6) albeit an ironic one; a mention of Quaker forbears ("Estacado," 18); a tribute to the speaker's father with the controlling metaphor of Christ's nail-pierced hands ("On Father's Hands," 16); and, in what may be McDonald's most accomplished Christian poem of this period, a word picture of "Michelangelo's / unfinished head / of a lost soul," in which the speaker notes "all the things we ignore, / the astonished stare / of the hopeless, / the face of the damned" ("Mirror Image," 13). The collection also includes poems that celebrate everyday grace; in "Weekends," for example, the speaker, struck by the beauty of the peaceful evening, ends with this image: "I drag my feet, the swing / stops. My hand / reaches for the dog" (19). The shift in this book is less in the poet's perception of the brevity of time and the finality of death than it is in his conclusions about those limitations. Death continues to be a defining presence, to be sure, but with a different effect than the despair suffered by *Caliban*. The type of anxiety-ridden moment which might previously have been perceived only as a dark exclamation of inevitable mortality has begun to be accepted, instead, as a shock into awareness that precipitates a moment of grace. *Working Against Time*, then, is appropriately named, for here the limitation of time in the face of death—not death itself—is the dominant existential motive. It is noteworthy too, as we see this as a pivotal book in the poet's

spiritual progression, that two of his primary topic areas that would characterize his mature work—his versions of family life and Texas—are the regions for that progression. This is largely a book about family life in Texas, and it is primarily in the context of this family that time becomes the motivator—the factor which causes the radical revaluation of the moment, the absolute that defines the human condition as limited, or, in existentialist terminology, as finite yet free. The book opens with a push along this trajectory: the naïve speaker crossing West Texas reflects, “Surely in all that space / is something worth seeing,” but he doesn’t see it. He spots a few wild animals and wonders how they live, reflecting that he would like to see how they survive, not today, but “some-day when we have more time” (1). The most overt example, though, is the comically ironic “Giving Time.” In that poem, the speaker’s wife is encouraging him to spend time with his children, and he wants to, but the house metaphorically starts to fall down when he quits attending to duty. The poem closes with the children in bed: they “got tired of waiting” (5). And the speaker is confronted with a sink to repair before he can rest, confirming that the situation will continue.

Most spiritually resonant in the collection, however, are those family poems in which the speaker, confronted with the passing of time, is at last able to celebrate fully the moment. “With Steve at Lake Raven,” for example, confirms a maturity of spiritual vision impossible for the persona of *Caliban in Blue*. This speaker lives in the awareness of death, to be sure: the poem opens with “The snakes this time of day would all be basking / on the bank. . . . Come in, the water’s fine,” but ends with a final image of one passing moment, successfully captured—a momentary stay against death:

. . . I swim there
and let myself sink under, bob back above the surface
and reach to touch his shining hair, sway with him
as the buoy sways, laugh with my son
and think no matter, we are together now. (20)

Such momentary stays may seem small enough evidence for a more traditional religious poetry, but they are the very stuff of the Christian existentialism that informs McDonald's work, subtly in these early books, then more transparently and powerfully as his very successful career has continued.

Increasingly it seems apparent that Walt McDonald will be one of the chosen few whose work outlives him. In a professional poetry scene split between two camps—the very respectable, who win the university press book contracts; and the slightly-less-respectable, who cast their poems into the proliferating sea of “little” literary journals—he has worked both angles, and won. With his sixteen collections on university presses and over 2300 poems in journals, whoever earns the right to compile the next generation of anthologies must necessarily include his work, and that work will be read, studied, and written about for years to come. When it is, the early poems will be foundational for the insight they provide on the evolution of the poet's work in all its psychological complexity. In an email message to me some five years ago, McDonald stated with his customary humility, “I don't disown those early works, but they were stumbling apprentice beginnings—like all of my work, including all I've done this month. But I think of 1983 as the start of my next work, the time I began to begin.” While critics will and should argue the quality of McDonald's early poems, my intention here has been to demonstrate that they, too, are significant pieces of that record of one man's spiritual progression which is the canon of his work. The writer of timeless religious verse did not spring fully grown from the head of Zeus in 1983; he was born from the anxiety of a semi-human named Caliban a decade before, born from an anxiety that was the a priori to awe. Indeed, McDonald's “awful rowing toward God” had progressed through the heart of a long storm that began with his earliest verse; and though the poet's seedtime did not produce his most lasting poems, it is nevertheless an important period of an important American writer.

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