

Poetry Review: An Appreciation of "Spawn" by Ronald J. Hansford

By: Roger Hansford

SPAWN

Nebulae adrift in the waters of space,
every gelatinous cell has its dark star.
Pulsing suns wriggle free, comets
cruise the ether of a stagnant pond.
Constellations in an aqueous sky,
water-dragons sprout miracle limbs.
Squat gods enter our parallel universe,
they proclaim the gospel of change.
Each shape denies a previous life;
we hear the oboe-call of revelation.

Hansford, R. J. (2006) in K. Green (Ed.)

Routemasters and Mushrooms: An Earlyworks Press Poetry Anthology.
Hastings: Earlyworks Press.

You could call it miraculous to move from science to religion in five stanzas, yet this is what R. J. Hansford achieves in this poem, with frogspawn in a garden pond as the starting point. The title is functional but also conjures the themes of creation which permeate the poem: creation of life and of literary works as fine as this. Immediately the poet portrays the pond as a watery microcosm: he sees the spawn as stars moving through space in his own universe. Central to each star is the black cell of life, an atomic nucleus from which the rest of the poem is unleashed.

In stanza two the poetic telescope is magnified, bringing the reader's eye in at galaxy level: we see each of the distant stars now as its own Sun or lifegiver. Just as rock particles break away to become orbiting comets, so each tadpole becomes mobile. Like a God we can see this activity here in every galaxy at once; from the poet's use of metaphor we may infer a link or similarity between the dynamic forces creating new beginnings both at cosmic and pond level. We can think of our human beginnings into a world stagnant before the pulsing of life.

As the tadpole young become more active in stanza three, they are observed making patterns with their movements and finger-sprouting limbs: constellations in this at-a-glance universe. While all growth is miraculous, the poet's mention of dragons introduces a sense of the unscientific. At this turning point of the poem we are led to consider the portentous qualities sometimes seen in constellations; growth here may be ominous like rain clouds in our own sky, though with the inherent paradox that - as part of the water cycle - clouds also support life.

The parallel universe in stanza four exists within transitions between the worlds of

water and air. It is a science buzzword used as slick metaphor for the double-meanings at work here. As the tadpoles metamorphose from pond-dwellers to inhabit our parallel universe, their previously metaphoric milieu of air and matter becomes reality for them. When they move closer to our world, their reedy croak - like an evangelising Gospel - calls us to wonder if we too could undergo transformation: into an immortal universe. At the irrefutable presence of the frog in stanza five (seeing *is* knowing in this poem, notwithstanding a strong sense of movement and the use of aural images for significance), we realise the extent of change the animal has undergone with its rebirth from waters (stanzas 3-4), as in human baptism. Like the Bible, the poem ends with Revelation, a prophetic book full of trumpet soundings and zoological images calling the reader to belief. How do we respond?

By the end of the poem, three main processes have taken place. Firstly, with the Sun's energy as catalyst, the frog has undergone its life cycle from egg to adult and transferred from water to air. Secondly, and metaphorically, the formation of the universe, with galaxies and planets, has taken place; fish have formed limbs and left the water, and humans have evolved. God is not mentioned as the catalyst for this process, and is denied when manifesting Himself in the frog, but the evolution in the poet's language from scientific to magical to theological semantics may trace a history of the growth of religion in humans. As the poem closes, humanity is on the cusp of metamorphosis to the parallel universe of immortality: this may happen only in the reader's imagination, or not at all in the poet's. Thirdly, also metaphorically, the poet is catalyst in the process of collecting and changing ideas, forming a structure, revising and recreating, and enjoying the revelation of his completed creation.