

REVIEW

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Spiritual Poetry: Michaela Sefler and Ebele Eko

MICHAELA Sefler is a mystical poet living in Montreal, Canada. She has two published compilations *Still True* and *A Fortress in My Heart*, and two collections published by PublishAmerica *Through the Ages* and *The Sun is Hot*. Ebele Ofoma Eko, professor of English at the University of Calabar in Nigeria and well known in the writing of inspirational poems, has three volumes of poetry: *Healing Streams*, *Wings of the Morning* and *Colour Him Love*. All three are testaments of her deep ruminations on the nature and quality of Christian love which tempers most human affairs to subliminal ecstasies.

Sefler's poetics are simultaneously ancient and modern, profoundly spiritual and grounded in daily realities. Thematically, all her collections address this quest for significance in one's life. Similarly Eko's poems are simple assertions of the presence of her lord and saviour from whom love, 'unadulterated love, the essence of all healing in the storms of life, flows to mortal man and woman. Sefler's verbiage in *Through the Ages* is inspired by ancient scripture, various forms of mysticism, and the ideals of Qabbala (specifically

those found in *The Book of Splendor* and *The Book of Formation*. She uses this language to express a desire for ultimate knowledge, transcendence, and unity. In addition, she expresses hope for a redeemer while alluding to biblical and mystical figures. By virtue of their varied spiritual nature, Sefler's poems have the potential to be meaningful and inspirational to individuals from a wide range of religious, moral, and ethical belief systems.

As one begins on a journey *Through the Ages* with the poetess, one feels as though on a search for spiritual understanding and unity in our modern world. At the end Sefler writes:

I hope to transcend over my broken state,
I hope to achieve Your perfect plan.
("A Broken Deliverance" 12)

These last lines of the poem clearly reflect Christian theology, as well as the belief in a plan created by God (reflected by the capitalized "Your"). The author, weighed down by the phenomenon of original sin, attempts to overcome this state and move with strength and compassion in a troubled world. Her accessible language invites the reader to come along on her journey.

Living, existing,
longing and wondering;
...
Rise above!
stand strong!
lift yourself!
strive to conquer.

("Existence" 19)

Through these poems, Sefler allows the reader to explore the possibilities associated with both a religious and a worldly sense of unified love. This love can only be achieved through a complex life process, a continual journey. As her poetry indicates, during this journey we all experience hardship and pain. However, these times must be overcome in order to reach this desired unification among peoples, the higher good. Her poetry pulls from the energy of those who have gone before, exemplified in the following excerpt:

Souls from long ago, that remain in our lives;
 illuminating our existence
 illuminating their love
 the world exists
 because of their plight.
 ("Felt the Touch" 14)

As a result of the love and sacrifices of those who have gone before, our lives are enriched and energized. Likewise, she calls us to overcome our fears and anxieties in order to contribute to a greater good, the future of mankind.

The dynamic between individual hardship and the collective good energizes the compilation throughout. Yet another unifying factor is the hopeful, future-driven nature of the poetry. As Sefler indicates, there are many parallels to be found between past, present, and future experiences of both suffering, and triumph. Sefler expresses the belief that the pain of the past should first be acknowledged, and then transcended to create a positive future. She makes clear the fact

that this journey is not possible without spiritual intervention and guidance. In "Transcending Souls" she writes that souls who transcend the boundaries of time provide this needed hope and direction:

Guiding us through the darkness,
guiding us into the light,
guiding us towards our blessings
guiding us through another night. (21)

With these words, Sefler invites the reader to continue his or her individual journey, strengthened by his or her own spiritual beliefs and the energy of these "transcending souls."

As is *Through the Ages*, so too is *The Sun is Hot* collection (published the same year 2005) borne primarily on themes of religious devotion. Michaela Sefler's poetry would therefore seek transcendence beyond race or creed in so far as they attempt a merger or fusion of ancient traditions in order to reveal, as has been said of Florice Tanner's memorable treatise on world religions, "that man's basic truth –the way to full consciousness at every level of his being– lies hidden in every world faith" (Intro). Thus many of Sefler's spiritual poetry feel good to read.

Although there are not many religious poetry of literary substance available these days, a kinship to Sefler's, in the deepest tradition of Christian devotion, is that of the Nigerian Ebele Eko in her *Healing Streams*, and *Wings of the Morning* two books of thirty-nine and fifty-seven verses published by Cross Continents and Word Family respectively.

In the ninth verse of her *Healing Streams* entitled "Peace" Ebele Eko writes of that intimate relation between the devotee and the Creator.

Your peace gives me strength
 In my daily work with You
 It is the source of all my joy
 The root of confidence
 Assurance sweet that You are near. (*Healing* 11)

This apostrophe reminds us of the persona in Sefler's:

I hope to transcend over my broken state,
 I hope to achieve Your perfect plan.
 ("A Broken Deliverance" 12)

One may very much commend the obvious confluence of vision in the works of both Canadian and African poetesses commonly inspired by divine and worshipful devotion. Moreover the sensitivities of both poets are of the finer and delicate. Such an impression long abides in our feelings despite their African or Canadian backgrounds leading to the assertion that poetry could indeed transcend barriers in ways that perchance elude other genres.

Yet with over a hundred and forty poems in *The Sun is Hot* and one hundred and fifty poems in *Through the Ages*, Sefler does not oblige, but can only hint, at the divine imperative that underlines her background in the art of writing poetry. However, Eko does state so plainly in her preface to *Wings of the Morning* collection, published in 1987, that "the Lord told me to write poems as testimonies of his

love." She addresses her lord so rapturously thus:

Your love fills me
All around
Your care so cushions
All my needs
Your beauty lights up
All my gloom
Surrounding me with
What you are ("Your Love" 26)

How equally reminiscent of Sefler's beautiful lines in *The Sun is Hot*:

I am like a rainbow in the sky,
scattered through the hopes of time,
like dust in the wind.
Asking for a steady hand
("Deflected" 46)

Both Sefler and Eko write in simple straightforward language bereaved of much stylization. For both, as for most pious preachments as far as religious poetry go, there are no convolutions of thought, of complex sequencing, but lines of straight heart-reaching insights on one person's love for God, the eternal, and of finding one's destiny in a world of apparent reality. Eko writes in often proselytising notes of this deity:

Incarnation means
Divinity and humanity
In the person of Christ

2000 years ago
That history was made
And nothing has been the same. ("Incarnation" 27)

"Jealous in His Love" evokes little but the terrors of Old Testament devotion to a jealous god and the sentiments of New Testament belief in a loving one.

He is the LORD
I am the apple of His eye
A part of His Bride, the Church
His life He gave to win my hand
I love Him too, I know

He is the LORD
and common sense forbids
That I other Lords should have
I am His little bride
Beloved unto death. (28)

In 'I missed your voice' (*The Sun*) Sefler sings of a similarly intimate affection and fidelity

I missed your voice
in the hearts of the young,
I missed your eyes
in the spectators and crowds.
I missed your face,
...
I missed your style,
in the evening crowds. (50)

Both poetesses often deck their lines in syntactic parallels making for the devotees' final moments of rapture and realization.

Sefer:

I remember your quest
I remember your dreams
I remember your endurance
I remember your fears
(“I can still remember” *The Sun* 48).

Eko:

His promises are nailed in flesh
His love flows in the Blood
His love, His faithfulness and peace
With what shall I compare?
(“Jealous In His Love” *Wings* 28)

But these are not artistically sustained as it does not seem to be the purpose of poets and poetesses of religious tendencies. Hacking out the message is the intent; its maudlin determinism over and above any stylistic deliberation is the peculiarity of religious poetry:

If you blame my name,
if you blame my promise,
if you don't let me go
I will pray to a higher ground;
A ground so lofty
and true
you won't even know

what came over you.
 ("Don't blame me" *The Sun* 102)

The public notice regarding *The Sun is Hot* collection does not escape remark: "At the specific preference of the author, PublishAmerica allowed this work to remain exactly as the author intended, verbatim, without editorial input", say the publishers. In Eko's *Healing Streams* no publication date is obliged. That and *Wings of the Morning* 1988 may have had very limited appeal. It is a problem not only with Sefler's or Eko's but most religion-devoted poetry: the lack of editorial quality as a result of sentimental, often rigid visioning that usually confines good works to only the audience that can subscribe to the faith and values of the doctrine and can therefore share in the sentiments and even the prized spiritual dimensions of the authors' experiences.

Works Cited

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