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Taming Eschatology: The Case of Silja Walter OSB

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Abstract

Taming Eschatology: The Case of Silja Walter OSB

This paper examines the eschatological themes in the series of poems, *The Dance of Obedience or the Straw Carpet*, written by the Benedictine nun Silja Walter (1919–2011) — Sr. Hedwig OSB from the Swiss monastery of Fahr. This series of poems is particularly representative for the poet's work as it combines her monastic experience with her personal poetic reading of the Bible in the spirit of *lectio divina*. These two sources give the analyzed poetry a particular theological quality, originally combining spiritual and dogmatic elements. Having presented the biographical and monastic context of the set in question, the authors show the form, connections and dynamism of the eschatological themes present in the discussed poetry. In conclusion, referring generally to the entirety of Walter's work, they show the anthropological value of her approach to eschatology, which, in accordance with the title of the article, can be defined as bringing eschatological themes closer to everyday existential experience. This effect is possible thanks to the original use of poetic language.

Keywords: Eschatology, Silja Walter, poetry, monasticism, Parousia

Abstrakt

Oswajanie eschatologii: przypadek Silji Walter OSB

Artykuł analizuje wątki eschatologiczne w cyklu poezji Silji Walter (1919–2011) — Sr. Hedwig OSB benedyktyńskiej mniszki ze szwajcarskiego klasztoru Fahr, *Taniec postuszeństwa albo słomiana mata*. Cykl ten jest szczególnie reprezentatywny dla twórczości poetki, gdyż łączy jej doświadczenie monastyczne z osobistą, poetycką lekturą Biblii, w duchu *lectio divina*. Te dwa źródła nadają analizowanej poezji szczególną jakość teologiczną, oryginalnie łączącą elementy duchowości z dogmatycznymi. Przedstawivszy kontekst biograficzny i monastyczny omawianego cyklu, autorzy ukazują formę, powiązania i dynamizm wątków eschatologicznych obecnych w omawianym cyklu. Podsumowanie, odnosząc się ogólnie do całokształtu twórczości Walter ukazuje walor antropologiczny jej podejścia do eschatologii, który, zgodnie z tytułem artykułu, można określić jako przybliżenie tematów eschatologicznych do codziennego doświadczenia egzystencjalnego. Przybliżenie to jest możliwe dzięki oryginalnemu zastosowaniu języka poetyckiego.

Słowa kluczowe: eschatologia, Silja Walter, poezja, monastycyzm, paruzja

In the most recent decades poetry has become more and more an important theological inspiration—and not only as *locus theologicus* but also as a stylistic guide. The bibliography explaining and exploring this phenomenon is increasing rapidly. One can have the impression that writing a relevant theology in our more and more secularized times requires at least a little poetic sensibility. As one author writes: “Poetic theology [...] suggests that the Christian faith, and consonant human flourishing, are to be shaped in part by embracing the play of light and love that is to be found in the wisdom of the surrounding culture—what sparks affection in its objects, patterns, and tales.”¹ And, further: “Poetic theology seeks to do a religious reading of these deep-seated cultural longings. For these longings, insofar as they reflect the goodness of the created order and God’s loving presence there, constitute a partial vision of God—indeed, for many people they are the only grounds for hope they know.”² Another author put it in a more drastic way: “Poetry—the pleasurable aesthetic—makes religion live to the imagination. And if it lives to the imagination, the battle for belief is more than half over.”³

Independently of various justifications of importance of poetry for theological discourse, this text is an attempt to approach a very difficult, yet, in present days, a highly relevant theme, in a new and, let us hope, effective way. The above-mentioned difficulty of time signed by the COVID-19 pandemic consists also in the fact, that such context makes any relevant theological discourse almost impossible. That is why the idea of turning to poetry arose. In the poems of Silja Walter we intend to analyze are a courageous proposal how to face constructively the critical experiences of our life in the real Christian, i.e., a positive eschatological context.

Formally speaking, at the beginning the paper will briefly present the biographical background to the poetry and eschatology of Silja Walter OSB, and the reasons for devoting this paper to her. Secondly, a brief outline of eschatological themes in the Rule of Saint Benedict will be

1 W. A. Dyrness, *Poetic Theology. God and the Poetics of Everyday Life*, Grand Rapids 2010, mobi Pos. 3439.

2 W. A. Dyrness, *Poetic Theology*, Pos. 3445.

3 P. Avis, *God and Creative imagination. Metaphor, Symbol and Metaphor in Religion and Theology*, New York 1999, p. 72.

discussed, as an immediate introduction to the main part of the paper, i.e., the discussion of eschatological themes in the set of Walter's poems *The Dance of Obedience*. A hermeneutic for a reading of selected poems from this text will be proposed, with particular attention to the eschatology explicit or implicit in the text. The conclusion will examine how classical theological discourse may be enriched by poetic language and, on the basis of S. Walter's example, the implications this has for eschatology itself.

1. The biographical context

In this article, we propose the figure of a Benedictine nun from German-speaking Switzerland who lived in the monastery of Fahr, and died 10 years ago: an artist and poet from a very young age, who offers us an extraordinary form of eschatology through her poetic work.

Silja's eschatology, thanks to the constant and incessant dialogue that stems from her deep and intimate relationship with God from a very young age, is an eschatology that can be defined as "natural" because she automatically and naturally sees, interprets and understands all reality through an eschatological lens: from the smallest thing in daily life to the most intellectual, everything is transfigured through God's eyes and everything leads to an encounter with Him.

In a diary of 1937, at the age of 18, as her search for God did not tolerate any compromise, she wrote:

I have understood very clearly and deeply that there is no alternative—that is how it is. My path is alive and with limpid clarity in front of me is God. God does not want to stand aside and come later, to wait until I get back and get on the right path. I cannot, I am young of course, and as long as I am young with the beauty of my youth I want to live Love, as one who loves his beloved... My growth must be oriented towards God, without any evasions or difficult obstacles.⁴

We can speak of a "double eschatological level": an inner, intimate eschatology and a more universal eschatology involving a vision on more

4 A diary entry, January 1937.

general, intellectual or technical-liturgical issues. The inner eschatology is present in a transversal way in every work, particularly in the early poems and in *The Dance of Obedience*. As far as the universal eschatological vision is concerned, it involves the philosophical discourse on the creation of the world, Barlach and the biblical and liturgical poems.

In the philosophical discourse on the creation of the world, which she carries out in a poem-dialogue with Paracelsus, it is clear how everything is the work of and is imbued with God from the beginning, just as man, a small particle of His creation, is immersed in this Creation and is destined to rejoin and return to his Creator. Thus in the poem:

Earth and Sky Unite

Leave me.

My will

Dwell in the source

Of all things!

I leap

into the foam

of the pre-world

into the primordial cell

of the cosmos.

And in the silvery vaults

in this work

the Creator plunged

over the waters, sleepily

I awoke.

Tell it to mankind, woman,
do you not hear the morning star
singing in you?

The burning glow sings to you
the strength in your blood
that which is in your
blood.

I am your centre

In the universe, in you, in Him
I man
star of the North
core of an apple.

Whatever
whether down in the sand
is over the rainbow
is bound to me.⁵

But it is still in the cycles of liturgical poems and in those to Ernst Barlach that the tones with which Silja expresses eschatology become stronger, the expressions become fiery, a blazing fire that marks the spirit with the help of Divine Spirit, the words are ignited and animated; all this contributes to creating an eschatology that shakes the senses: It teases them, tickles them, brings them to life, moves them and through this dynamism the sense of God's plan for her life is revealed to her a personal plan but one with a universal echo.

The Path of Israel

I can see that not I
but who walks are the forests
Not me
but the world and everything
that escapes
and goes round.

I will not ask, I will not ask
but I will be lifted
torn, consumed.
I will be dragged
through the forests
carried in the wind
of the Word of God.

5 All the poems used in this papers are translated by the authors, after the original texts collected in S. Walter, *Gesamtausgabe*, Bd. 8: *Lyrik*, Freiburg 2003.

Agnus Dei

My lamb
is in the city of gold
in my heart
He is my Lord
and we will look at
each other
like lambs
immolated and
sacrificed
for humanity.

We already find this abandonment to the impetuous wind of God, which shakes her inside as it leads her in a gentle dance, in her youthful poems, expressions of a soul intent on searching for God, which, as it searches for Him, first perceives Him, then feels Him ever closer, then an intimate presence and safe haven: it feels Him and recognizes Him in nature, in water, in the sun, defined as *corpus hostiae*. Nature is a means, a multiform medium for the relationship with God, for recognising Him, for seeing Him in all things. She was deprived of nature during her hospitalization for lung problems, but even there God found a way of finding her and manifesting Himself, in a very strong and metaphysical way: in the flesh and suffering of a young patient who was about to die, in the physical limitations to which a hospital bed forced her. But even there the manifestation of God was for her a further way of trying to understand how she, suffering from illness, and God could coexist in her life. Here the message becomes universal and the reflection extends to the incarnation of God in a suffering body.

But it is twenty years after entering the monastery that she finds this answer, which she expresses in the small book *Der Tanz des Gehörsams oder die Strohmate* [The Dance of Obedience or the Straw Carpet]. It is an explanation of how the feminine way to arrive at God is more that "of the experience of God" and not that of cold theological knowledge. An experience lived and conducted in an industrious silence made up of work, reading and prayer. Poetically she describes her path in particular as the three-colored carpet that the Lord weaves every day under her feet:

a carpet made of prayer, work and reading, three elements that together shape the boundaries of the reality in which she lives. It is her place of experiencing God's action. From Fahr's enclosure she can become every day red, yellow and blue and expand her heart, see the Lord in action (among the sister sisters, the scent of the herbs in the monastery garden, the sounds) while all this purifies her to the point of bringing her to be a colored thread and tight in God's sure grasp.

The Carpet

Gomer lingers all
day on a carpet of striped
straw carpet.
He lingers on those strips
for half an hour.

Or he does it for a few hours
On a carpet striped with red, yellow and blue stripes.

Under that carpet flows eternal life.
But Gomer does not know this yet
does not fully understand its
meaning.

She is spending
the time of her day
as a nun in an insulting way.
it has to be said
like a sheep
grazing unawares
on a striped meadow
red yellow and blue.

Way of Healing

Whoever lives the monastic
monastic day
is heartened

when Gomer lives it in silence
and with the same ardour
is uplifted.
The monastic day
is a road with red, blue and yellow stripes
is a road of salvation
in the sand of the desert.

Becoming a Carpet

At night, in a dream, Gomer is enveloped
by the carpet
and is joined by all the colors
together.
Red yellow blue
But in the morning, when she wakes up
it becomes a carpet again
with stripes of the same colors
It will be like this forever
and forever.
This erases me.
I have become a straw carpet
with stripes.

Dancer on a Rope

What Gomer walks on
Is only
a thin ribbon
in three colours
just another rope.
When you walk on the rope
there is nothing closer
but a great emptiness
and the feeling of being able to
a fatal fall.
A nun is a dancer on a rope
a tightrope walker

Who can ever bear how
are scared.

We deliberately quoted these poems to give the taste of both Walter's poetic sensibility and its evident but also personally elaborated eschatological background. From this perspective, we can examine more thoroughly the set of poems where this motive of the carpet appeared and marked the poetess' eschatology.

2. The Benedictine context

The collection of poems entitled *Der Tanz des Gehörsams oder die Strohmatten*, we mentioned above, is the personal description of the monastic way of the author. The short poems composing it have the character of small but very deeply felt impressions of an existential and spiritual character. Here, the poetry is a very subtle and efficient vehicle of particular and moving weave between theology and life. What can surprise, is the very explicit, even increasing, presence of eschatological motives. They constitute one of the main threads in narration of this set of poems. Such artistic decision is very much in line with Benedictine tradition. One of the tools of good works is the recommendation: Day by day remind yourself that you are going to die (*The Rule of Saint Benedict*, 4, 37).⁶ On the last, twelfth degree of humility one reads that the monk: "Whether he sits, walks or stands, his head must be bowed and his eyes cast down. Judging himself always guilty on account of his sins, he should consider that he is already at the fearful judgment (RB 7, 63–64)." Moreover, the particular awareness of the Last Judgment is recommended to the abbot:

Let the abbot always remember that at the fearful judgment of God, not only his teaching but also his disciples' obedience will come under scrutiny. The abbot must, therefore, be aware that the shepherd will bear the blame wherever the father of the household finds that the sheep have yielded no profit. Still, if he

⁶ *The Holy Rule of St. Benedict with commentary by Philip Lawrence OSB*, Chapter 4. The Tools for Good Works, <https://christdesert.org/prayer/rule-of-st-benedict/chapter-4-the-tools-for-good-works> (20.04.2021).

has faithfully shepherded a restive and disobedient flock, always striving to cure their unhealthy ways, it will be otherwise: the shepherd will be acquitted at the Lord's judgment. [...] The abbot must know that anyone undertaking the charge of souls must be ready to account for them. Whatever the number of brothers he has in his care, let him realize that on judgment day he will surely have to submit a reckoning to the Lord for all their souls—and indeed for his own as well. In this way, while always fearful of the future examination of the shepherd about the sheep entrusted to him and careful about the state of others' accounts, he becomes concerned also about his own, and while helping others to amend by his warnings, he achieves the amendment of his own faults.⁷

The monastic tradition has always been strongly eschatologically oriented but what Silja Walter OSB proposes is a new reading, or rather a new experience, of eschatology as an integral part of everyday, intimate life. It seems that only a feminine sensibility, sublimed and filtered by poetical talent, is able to provide this particular approach to and interpretation of eschatology. Let us analyze briefly this eschatological discourse of the poetess, trying to show its originality. However, one cannot ignore the fact that this reading is to be made in the monastic context, i.e. of *lectio divina*, the reading accompanied by meditation and followed by prayer and, perhaps, contemplation. In fact, the whole set of poems (of which we take a part were the eschatological themes appear), is a poetic *lectio divina* on the Book of Hosea. Although the poems are written principally in the third person of singular, it is clear that the poetess identifies herself with the main protagonist, the prostitute Gomer, the unfaithful wife of the prophet. This fact could be regarded as an introduction to an impressive process of taming eschatology, which we intend to describe, as an indication of its provocative character. A nun as a prostitute, a prostitute as a wife of the prophet, unfaithfulness as a model of human relationship to God. In these paradoxes the original God's plan is juxtaposed with fragile human reality. But there is hope of reconciliation— as our everyday life can be finally reconciled with God's sublime design concerning our future.

⁷ The Holy Rule of St. Benedict with commentary by Philip Lawrence OSB, Chapter 2. Qualities of the Abbot, <https://christdesert.org/prayer/rule-of-st-benedict/chapter-2-qualities-of-the-abbot> (20.04.2021).

3. Towards a personal reception of eschatology

Eschatology appears for the first time, and quite surprisingly, in the opening part of this set of poems, entitled *Vocation (Berufung)*: The Last Day arrives discreetly, under the mysterious, if not ambiguous, pronoun “it” (es). As we will see, this pronoun, introduced here for the first time quite shyly, gradually, in other poems, will become more prominent and more meaningful:

Once then

One day it will certainly
break out
then everything will burst
then of course
nothing can remain
not even this courtyard
not even the flower house
nothing
everything will be gone
then.

This rapid and decisive entrance of the turbulent eschatological event immediately “spills” over the whole reality surrounding the nun-poetess saturating it with a new existential quality:

Night

The tower and the mill
all the herb of the garden
the quince tree
and the goose house
will all burst
and be gone
when it breaks out
I just have to be
patient
Sure.

The lilies smell
so strong in the cell
at night.

In this poem, for the first time the reader can witness an attempt to tame the eschatological reality. Even if all the very concrete and familiar elements of environment in which the poetess lives as nun are to disappear, she wants to go beyond them. She has to be patient. Just to persevere, as St. Benedict recommends at the end of the Prologue to the Rule: “faithfully observing his teaching in the monastery until death, we shall through patience share in the sufferings of Christ that we may deserve also to share in his kingdom. Amen” (Prologue 50). However, called to this patience, the poetess remains very human, very sensual: touched and delighted by the intense scent of lilies; the depth of night deepens the beauty of the moment.

Delicacy is not far from fragility. Both indicate the limited nature of all things. So, they are somehow related to eschatology. The passage from the contemplation of delicacy and the sense of final, absolute fragility of everything resulting in a total decay, is immediate and, thus, quite surprising:

Everything Decays

But everything decays
from hanging
everything goes pale
and decays
what remains
is fear.
You can't enter anywhere
anymore.
anywhere
get in.

The personal and sensual opening, seasoned with patience, is over. Fear prevails and closes everything. What happens, is an objective transfer from personal perception of difficult reality to a new reality which escapes

perception. It is a turning point. Increasingly surreal images replace the simple lyrical look at reality. The metaphors and their sequence become more intense and involving. The poetess (and the reader) is kidnapped and “swept up” their whirl. Actually, it is rather the eschatological situation taking control of us. Instead of its being tamed by us, it starts to tame us:

When the Chickens

When the chickens
cackle
behind the dawn
then also cracks
the plaster
over the world.
The thick blanket of things
crumbles away
and Gomer looks under
the shell.

Personalising eschatology

You just have to give way, to let things happen — even if everything falls apart. If you wait for a while, the changed, destroyed reality will offer you a new perspectives: completely different, by no less personal. Indeed, they may be possibly even more intimate than before.

Humility is needed to enter:

In the Cell

Gomer crouches down
In the evening
in the cell
she kneels down
to see inside
Gomer sees through
a crack
into creation
since it speaks to her.

Humility is expressed in these poems by the very simple and clear gestures of crouching down and kneeling. Also relationship to reality is a matter of becoming humble. It is no longer confronted head on, but espied out of the poetess' own enclosure. This enclosure offers a new possibility of approaching a collapsed and decayed world. It is a micro-perspective, but tangible, moving: before turbulent, eschatological events one can only behave like a child — to look and touch in silence, amazed and exploring. It is only possible thanks to humility and obedience:

Are the Opaque Colours

Have the opaque colours
on the world
gone and crumbled away
Gomer itself is
Leached away
and the whitewash trickles
everywhere
at the slightest poke
with the knuckle of the finger
all the terrains are
silted up
and a single
boat does not dock any more —

Humble obedience is a key to her exploration of how to tame eschatology. In a certain sense, eschatology is a fruit of humility and obedience in these poems. The full acceptance of monastic life is the collapse of the world hitherto. At the same time, one can approach the catastrophes which may have eschatological character better, if her life is fully dedicated to God. In fact, this is essence of Walter's message and, simultaneously, the condition of taming eschatology: it is possible if you first dedicate your life intimately a God, entrusting Him with everything. Leaving everything to God helps face the real danger, or even the fact of any eschatological catastrophe. It is a particular and radical form of ascetical kenosis:

For theirs is the Kingdom of Heaven

There is not much
left of Gomer,
still just
a black outline.
a nun is still something
of which not much
remains
but her poor heart
and her feet dancing
the god-dance of obedience.

This withdrawal and abandonment, however, guarantee that the catastrophe, which brings decay and collapse, is not the last word. The transformative passage continues. The poetess proposes another surprise: all of sudden she starts writing about dancing. Actually, dance had always been her big passion, and from the beginning it is very clearly presented in her writings.⁸ The dance she describes is not only surprising but also overwhelming and total:

The Dance of the World

All the nations dance
together with their seas
armies and rockets
and all their sweet white
and black babies
and caravels
And all the cities of the world
By the canal the lilies
the poppy field
the tulip tree
and all the world
besides on earth
still turns

⁸ Conf. S. Walter, *Das dreifarbene Meer*, Freiburg 2016, p. 14–19.

dragged pushed
torn even when it does not want to
enter with Gomer into God's coming.

This is a new dynamism, a new configuration of the universe which also foresees a place for the poetess. Having resigned everything to entrust herself to God, she can be involved in bigger eschatological rhythms. In this way, eschatological catastrophe and its destructive consequences also become a space not only for taming, but also of collaboration. Unexpectedly, the losses receive the positive meaning, becoming a tool, an opportunity for a positive participation of the poetess in the eschatological event:

The Crack

What comes what comes
that now always trickles
and runs in
through all the cracks
of creation.
An obedient nun
has become a crack of creation
a crack
in the whirring, singing All.

The final metaphor Walter uses here is both very strong and theologically saturated. It grasps the whole powerful message of her eschatological experience: she “has become a crack of creation”, “a crack in the whirring, singing All.” This is something more than just participation. It is a concrete and amazing interaction in which one can sense some poetical, but existentially valid, intuitions of some modern philosophers writing about the flesh, the face of the world or the vibrancy of matter.⁹ And through this interaction the eschatology can be personalized and

⁹ Such images are present in the philosophy of Maurice Merleau-Ponty. There have been developed, among others, by G. A. Mazis, *Merleau-Ponty and the Face of the World: Silence, Ethics, Imagination and Poetic Ontology*, Albany (New York) 2016. Similar approach is present in J. Bennet, *Vibrant Matter, a political ecology of things*, Duke 2010.

embodied. It is clear in the poem *The Valley of God*, where the motive of personal prayer (associated very delicately with the straw mat, where she used to kneel down to pray), and her personal spiritual experience of monastic (expressed by three colours red, yellow, blue—related to prayer, reading and work):

The Valley of God

And there it trickles in,
the divine approach
into the Whole.
But Gomer's mat is
already very washed right out
from it
there is no longer red there
yellow blue
is all
where Gomer now goes
and kneels
a honey-flowing,
sweetly splashing over
valley of God.

4. Towards transformation

The interaction with All is more and more engaging. It enters the most private spheres of her spiritual life, making them astonishingly flourishing and fruitful. What was hitherto destroyed and ruined, now is transformed into “a honey-flowing, sweetly splashing.” The plasticity of images remains very suggestive. The switch from a catastrophically empty and ruined landscape into the flourishing valley is very powerful. The losses are returned with excess.

However the external signs, although visible and so sensual, are not the essence of the eschatological event. They are the signs which announce and introduce something far more important and deep: the coming. As we know from the Bible, the arrival of the Lord is the very theme and object of eschatology. It is His return and the beginning of

His definitive and final presence, where everything will be explained and sorted out:

It Does Come

That's why
Ah that's why
the trees sing no more
and all things are
as if split in two
by the coming
that is coming.
That is why.
But Gomer says nothing.
Thinking—
What's the point?
It comes.

And here there is another surprise. In this set of poems the accumulation of surprises is an important means of expression. In such a way the poetess creates a tension that not only keeps the reader attracted to the text but also involves him in the matter discussed. The tension of this set of poems, which constantly increases, is one of the most powerful means of poetic expression used by the poetess. The flow of eschatological experience, beginning from the moment of collapse, defeat and withdrawal, dashes forward, and crosses over to the other side, which is unexpectedly integrated and fruitful. So it enriches personal spirituality to spill over to the rest of everyday life and to individuals everywhere. The positive power of what seems to be originally catastrophic events is amazing. With the positive involvement of the poetess, it comforts and brightens even the most dreadful moment of day—like the heavy moment after lunch:

When Nothing is but Two O'clock

Gomer can pretend for a long time
as if nothing else were happening.
She sings chansons

to the guitar
and pours confetti
into Sister Radebert's shoes
What comes
comes.
If there is no more
than two o'clock in the
afternoon
and Sister Margaret
is only picking
the Lemon Balm
But it comes and breaks in
over everything.

Even if the poetess is very discreet and concise in her expression, in some of her verses the reader can sense that there is something mystical, shining through and penetrating every single tissue of reality. Interestingly, this internal and bright positivity has such a power that the three colours, hitherto referring to the monastic life of the poetess, are no more necessary. They are replaced by the monochromatic denominator black-and-white. One could interpret it as a final of internal light over an external, even very attractive, colourful reality:

The all-black-and-white
More may not be said
of this wonderful
almighty
all-pervading Coming,
penetrating Gomer and all,
no more.
It is the All
that comes
and it covers Gomer over
and it covers
over all.

Thanks to this mystical penetration, and to its mysterious power, everything regains its sense. It seems that nothing changed. There is no more trace after the catastrophe. Everything remains saturated by the essential dimension of eschatological event: the Coming. The effect is reinforced by the reference to the first poems in which she was describing the usual, coarse everydayness of monastic life. After the eschatological event, everything is internally transformed, albeit in subtle, merely visible ways:

Therefore

Therefore the ships sing
no more
and the world just stands
there still like that
what you only look at
just stands
still like that
the Amarillas
before the gate bars
also speak no more
everything already belongs to the coming
that comes
no longer to itself.

As mentioned above, this transformation is of an internal character. It is completely elaborated by the spiritual interaction between the poetesses and the Power which makes eschatology so close and liberating. The internal, powerful light makes interaction with the world more and more positive. The poetess is no more only a witness. Shyly, a possibility of passage appears. From under the ruins a new black-and-white reality emerges:

Black and White

Gomer stands in the door crack
now
between the world

and the silent
flood of God.
Between the night
and the day
everything is black and white
chequered now
what is only looked at.

In the Crack of the Door

Black and already rather slightly
threadbare
is all
on the side of the night
and white
in the growing radiance
Gomer can't help it
that she stands
in the door crack
and either way
sees.

The evolving, eschatological transformations we are following in the poems come in ever wider circles. Now the poetess' witness also becomes the object of transformation. She inaugurates the new mission. She agrees to help the light and to break the darkness. At the end, positivity is to prevail:

I Said Yes

But I said yes it will
break open
and flow
penetrate and bring
bliss
deep into the world
and still further
sweet, new, and embrace

who is unsuspecting.

This mission is concrete. It intensifies the poetess' return to normal, everyday life. Remaining in the enclosure and crossing the eschatological threshold between darkness and light, she comes closer to everybody. Empathy and compassion are the names of her new interaction with the world:

When he Comes from the Market

When he comes straight from the market
maybe with fillet of fish
and melons
it hits him
hugs him on the bridge
and says:
You are mine.

Love

In fact, as the successive poem makes clear, it is the matter of love. At this point, the whole transformation and all the processes leading to and related to it arrive at their full meaning. It is another turn which could seem surprising but, as a matter of fact, seeing theology as a single, integral whole (and the monastic theology has always been like this), such approach seems natural. In her eschatological experience Walter sees the final coming of the Lord as an integrating and liberating flow of love:

I Love

That's how it goes then
That's how it goes then
with people the world over
that's how it goes
now with all,
with the whole
from the depth of my heart

I said yes
when it breaks open
and all people
are now mine.

In this love, another impressive and eschatological interweaving takes place: intimacy and openness interact and stimulate one another. Is it not another aspect of the taming of eschatology? What has decayed and collapsed has opened new spaces and new relationships. This opening is not a definitive, singular act, but a process. It is another integration: the arrival of the Lord becomes the intimate experience of the poetess. Her heart has decided to embrace the external eschatological catastrophe and, as a result, has become a part of its transformation in which, finally, transcendence and immanence interlace:

Arrival

Wherever Gomer now
goes
she has the arrival
within her
in her
has arrived
my God
No longer has Gomer really
Anywhere to go.
Anymore.

Going out of one's hiding, attracted by love, expands intimacy, without however destroying it. It is a paradox of being inside's being out and of being home's being in movement: it is a sort of mystical experience, described in a discreet and sober way. In this moment, the poetess finds again the three colours of her monastic life in its previous normality, but now they receive a new dimension, being immersed in the integrated eschatological movement. Its drive remains and animates every single detail of everyday life— as, for instance, the work of spinning:

Man People and Creation

But it takes me out
it takes me
out
of whatever I am
that is what it draws out
the while I coil
and I am Man
People and
Creation
That's how it brings me home.
Three-coloured sea
sea of three colours
but diligently I turn
my little wheel thereto.

The world hitherto is definitively destroyed and, in consequence, renewed. But, faithful to a Benedictine approach to eschatology, expressed above all in the importance of vigilance and a readiness for death.¹⁰ The overall work of taming is split into many small moments, gestures and acts. It fills the whole day, becoming a state of a constant prayer, replacing the usual forms of it practised until now:

Destroyed

Gomer sees it
tears it all
into itself
turns and turns
on her hands
on her habit and scapular
in the morning
where one must meditate
behind the grille.
There Gomer forgets

¹⁰ Conf. *The Rule of Saint Benedict*, 4, 47.

to meditate.

This—again, discreetly—indicated a state of mind and soul which could be regarded as a new form of *hesychia*, the classical ideal of monastic ceaseless prayer, which monks originally took from the ancient Greek philosophical tradition.¹¹ The integration of eschatological reality, as the further consequence of its taming, is nothing more than the total orientation of one's existence towards God. It is something more than just conversion. The motive of love here finds its final perspective, so well-known from mystical writers as nuptial love. Here below, however, thanks to the poetical intuition of Walter, the idea of a spiritual wedding regains its freshness and dynamism:

God's Wedding

The burning wheel
In fact tears at Gomer
Now and now
And always now
along with the world
and the heaven
now
and the whole day ever
on
Into God's wedding.

Yes, finally and definitively love fulfils everything. It has a naturally eschatological character. However, it is not remote or future. It inevitably penetrates and saturates the whole present reality. It embraces the past as well, integrating it with the presence thanks to the sacramental wonder of the Eucharist. Final integration takes place in the last poem we would like to quote: exactly as it was foreseen and described on the

¹¹ There is an immense bibliography on this theme. The relationship between Greek philosophy and monastic understanding of *hesychia* is presented, for example, in L. Rossi, *I filosofi greci padre dell'escasmo*, Torino 2000, p. 303–337. The dynamic and positive character of mental prayer is discussed in K. Corrigan, *Evagrius and Gregory. Mind, Soul and Body in the 4th Century*, Oxfordshire 2019, p. 172, 183.

Book of Revelation: indeed the earth and heaven meet and integrate in their final transformation:

The Day is Gone

— there no man goes
so easily
only back down again
into the garden
where he has eaten
the sun
He won't go there
again just like that
into his day
his day has also gone away
along with the angels away
and everything
with all the gardens of the earth
and mint beds
away and torn into it
along with heaven
and all time.

One can sense here some resonances of the Book of Revelation (Rev 21:1). But what reality is the reader witnessing at the end of this set of poems? It does not seem that the world is over. The poetess remains a nun in her enclosure. However, something essential happened: a definite taming of eschatology. It is introduced for always into everyday life. Or, better, from now on, the everyday life is totally immersed in its relentless dynamism of love.

It is not possible to resume this personal experience of eschatology described by Silja Walter OSB in the poems we just analyzed. Its message should be read in a wider context of her other works. However, it is true that eschatology is a sort of axis in this message. Ulrike Wolitz, in her dissertation dedicated to theological baselines in Silja Walter's works notes the importance of these eschatological motives for understanding the integral vision of this poetess. She shows how much this theme is

reflected in her other works particularly *Der Fisch und Bar Abbas*, *Die Schleuse oder Abteien aus Glas*, *Ruf und Regel* or *Das Fenster in der Zelle*.

Conclusion

From the poems which have been analyzed above, three motifs in Walter's eschatology seem to prevail: the final catastrophe of the world, *Parousia* and final transforming salvation in Christ. They all create a continuum, being positively integrated thanks to their personal reception. This reception is a part of a deep spiritual experience, surely intensified by the poetic sensibility. The originality of Walter's eschatology lies in this strong weave between eschatology and spirituality and it was catalyzed both by monastic and poetic experience of the poetess. In this way the classical, somehow abstract eschatological concepts can gain a new, fresh meaning. She makes eschatology closer to people having an intense spiritual life, so that they can feel more at ease with it.

According to Wolitz, proposing the vision of "the new man" (*Der Neue Mensch*), Silja Walter mentions catastrophe explicitly next to creation.¹² This is a motif which increases successively through the poems which we have analyzed. Another motif, of return, appears immediately afterwards. It is not just "a return." It brings the solution (*Auslösung*) and in our poems it shimmers with multiple theological nuances. As a result, it is Christ's comeback to the Father (*christologisches Zurück zum Vater*)¹³ which leads to final union with God, where the monastery and the world, present, past and future are fully reconciled and integrated.¹⁴ It is exactly the new and original perspective for the poetess and her readers:

Instead of locking herself down in concepts and methodological constrictions, she will be driven by the poetry of prophetic power, to become more deeply aware of her "coherence" and sing her grille down in order to find "behind a thousand

¹² U. Wolitz, *Der Neue Mensch. Theologische Grundlinien im Werk Silja Walters*, Freiburg 1998, p. 207–208 (*Praktische Theologie im Dialog*, 17).

¹³ U. Wolitz, *Der Neue Mensch*, p. 208–210.

¹⁴ U. Wolitz, *Der Neue Mensch*, p. 210–215.

bars” the reality for which she, too, is ceaselessly searching, even though she lives believing in it.¹⁵

The last sentence of the diary that Silja Walter wrote in 2010, before dying, is “it is difficult for you and me to dance now:” dance, that mystical movement that now has the last word, has closed the circle of her life and with a leap forward has handed her over directly to God. The dance that with its movements and dizziness transformed her reflections into poetry. Has Silja really tamed eschatology? The answer to this question remains open, but the dance overflowing with light and lit by the fire of the Spirit made her a tireless seeker of God, who showed us without delay the way of her heart and her goal: to unite eternally in the dance of the One who is Love. “The overflowing dance floods with light every surface It descends from the boat on bridges and planks, And the dance becomes vertigo and the vertigo poetry — And the red sandals sink.”¹⁶

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¹⁵ „Sich in Begriffen und methodischen Engführungen einzusperren wird sie von der Dichtung prophetischer Kraft umhergetrieben, sich ihres »Zusammenhanges« tiefer bewußt werden und ihre Gitter niedersingen, um »hinter tausend Stäben« die Wirklichkeit zu finden, nach der auch sie, wiewohl sie darin glaubend lebt, unablässig sucht“ (U. Wolitz, *Der Neue Mensch*, p. 208–210).

¹⁶ S. Walter, *Gesamtausgabe*, Bd. 1: *Frühe Gedichte, Texte, Erzählungen und Spiele*, Freiburg 1999, p. 25.

Bernard Łukasz Sawicki OSB, Chiara Tacchinardi

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