



McClatchy, J.D. (b. 1945)

by Christopher Matthew Hennessy

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Poet J. D. McClatchy, Jr., a master of traditional poetic forms, most notably the sonnet and sonnet sequence, ranks as a significant voice in contemporary American letters. He is also a prolific anthologist, the editor of the prestigious *Yale Review*, and a noted librettist.

McClatchy has written openly about gay desire and love, among other topics, combining the intelligence of W.H. Auden and the linguistic virtuosity of James Merrill with a unique ability to mine his memories and experiences to create emotional honesty.

McClatchy has also made some cogent remarks on gay poetry and the slippery notion of a "gay sensibility" in literature. As editor of the anthology *Love Speaks Its Name: Gay and Lesbian Love Poems* (2001), he states: "Over the centuries, the homosexual temperament has seemed especially suited to engaging the themes of bafflement, secret joys, private perspectives, forbidden paradises, hypocritical conventions, and ecstatic occasions. In fact, it would be fair to claim that our gay and lesbian poets are the wisest inquirers after love."

McClatchy is the author of five original volumes of poetry. The most recent, *Hazmat* (2002) was a finalist for the Pulitzer Prize and won the Lambda Literary Award for poetry. The volume investigates the hazardous materials of life, self, and world. In addition, his selected poems, *Division of Spoils*, appeared in England in 2003. He is also author of two prose collections, *Twenty Questions (Posed by Poems)* (1998), a book of memoirs and critical essays, and *White Paper: On Contemporary American Poetry* (1989), another collection of essays that offers close readings of poets such as Elizabeth Bishop, Robert Lowell, Anthony Hecht, and Sylvia Plath.

Beginnings

Born Joseph Donald McClatchy in 1945 in Bryn Mawr, Pennsylvania, the son of observant Catholics, McClatchy was raised in a wealthy suburb of Philadelphia and attended all-male Jesuit schools, where he received his introduction to classical literature.

McClatchy's sequence of three sonnets "My Old Idols" (*Ten Commandments*, 1998) remembers his childhood and teenage years. In one section, the speaker recalls a favorite Latin teacher, Father Moan, who made him "quiver" when "He'd slap the pointer against his thigh." In another, he looks back at his ten-year-old self and an initiation into sex with his friend's older brother in an ice rink's restroom. He writes, "I fumbled with small talk, pretending to be shy. / Looking past me, he slowly unzipped his fly." Another section recalls McClatchy's teenage infatuation with opera legend Maria Callas.

McClatchy's family was not literary, but it was musical. Music was very much a part of the poet's childhood, and he often attended symphonies and orchestra performances. His love and expansive knowledge of music can be seen in poems such as "Night Piece" (*The Rest of the Way*, 1990), which comprises the two poems



J. D. McClatchy.
Video still, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9TUSsSMnBC4/>

"Ravel's Insomnia" and "Stravinsky's Dream." His early musical education is also evident in his keen ear for finding music in language. Not surprisingly, he has written several libretti for leading composers, including William Schuman (*A Question of Taste*, 1989), Francis Thorne (*Mario and the Magician*, 1994), Bruce Saylor (*Orpheus Descending*, 1994), and Tobias Picker (*Emmeline*, 1996).

McClatchy enrolled in Georgetown University in 1963 where he studied English, earning his A.B. summa cum laude. He went on to graduate studies in Renaissance literature at Yale in 1967. However, in his first year of graduate school and not exempt from the Vietnam War draft, McClatchy frantically sought a teaching position in order to escape the war. He ended up teaching at two small Philadelphia-area colleges.

For the next three years, McClatchy lived a life described, in a *Poets & Writers Magazine* profile, as socially and emotionally empty. As McClatchy explained, "I was afraid of being gay and what the consequences would be, so I just closed everything down, studied Old Norse, and took flying lessons."

McClatchy recounts this period in his life and his coming out in "My Fountain Pen," a memoir from *Twenty Questions*. In the essay, he describes a breakdown he experienced in 1973. "I could manage being gay, but not the added burden of disguising it," he explains.

Twenty Questions also includes McClatchy's musings about the loves of his life and how he has written about them: "Each of these men I have disguised in--or really, transformed into--poems in order to keep hold of them. Like some minor god in an old myth, I've changed them back into secrets."

It was in the first years of the 1970s that McClatchy began to read contemporary poetry for the first time in earnest, admiring especially Theodore Roethke and James Wright. During this time of intense reading he decided he wanted to be a poet. Eventually, he wrote his dissertation at Yale not on Renaissance literature, as he had planned initially, but on contemporary American confessional poetry. He received his Ph.D. in 1974.

Early Career

McClatchy more fully realized his new focus in life in 1975 when he began living with fellow gay poet Alfred Corn, who he claims helped him clarify his sense of "vocation" as a poet. The romantic relationship of the two poets lasted thirteen years, during which time McClatchy showed Corn everything he wrote.

During this period McClatchy published his first two books, *Scenes from Another Life* (1981) and *Stars Principal* (1986). Critics praised these volumes for their intelligence and technical and stylistic prowess. Of his early work, however, McClatchy later remarked that he had not yet found his voice, explaining "I never thought of taking the Proustian look backwards toward childhood's sweaty sheets and adolescence's nightsoil. I was trying instead for . . . for what? a weary sophistication? a haughty symbolist perch? the revolving disco ball of Stevensian abstraction?"

The *Rest of the Way* signaled a shift in his work. He began writing more openly about the details of his life, including failed romance and erotic temptation. While he has continued to write technically precise poems, McClatchy in this third book also began venturing off into more open lyrics.

In one such lyric, "Fog Tropes," McClatchy writes about a friend, the critic David Kalstone, dying of AIDS:

And here you are
Still, propped up in the half-light, my shadow,
My likeness, your hand wandering to the arm
Of the chair, as if your fingers might trace

The chalkdust of whole years erased.

Recent Work

Ten Commandments, McClatchy's fourth book, is made up of ten sections and is centered on the Bible's Decalogue. Critic William Logan remarked of *Ten Commandments*: "The book is torn between private confession and public accusation." While utilizing autobiographical details of McClatchy's life, the volume also contains imitations of Ovid and Horace and poems on Shakespeare's Iago and Roman Emperor Nero, among others.

Logan also discusses McClatchy's "frank homosexuality . . . [which] is not the point of the poems, it's their medium." McClatchy, in a *Lambda Book Report* interview, agrees with Logan's assessment, stating, "My sexuality itself is rarely the subject of my poems. Its consequences are." McClatchy adds, "The nature and formation of desires, the pleasures and anxieties of being gay--sure, these figure in my work. But I'm less interested in homosexuality as a subject than as a sensibility. Nowhere visible, but everywhere apparent."

Perhaps this use of homosexuality as the medium in which to express poetic feeling can be seen in lines like these from "The Dialogue of Desire and Guilt" in which the poet declares: "Everything's called / By a secret name... / Let me put my hand just inside the wound, / So warm and familiar. / The flesh is home."

Hazmat, McClatchy's fifth book, is perhaps his most dark and brooding volume. In the poem "Fado," for example, he offers a lover his contaminated heart:

Would you then stretch your hand
To take my scalding gift?
And would you kiss the blackened
Hypocrite?

It's yours, it's yours--this gift,
This grievance embedded in each,
Where time will never matter
And words can't reach.

Hazmat also contains brazenly forthright poems such as "Penis" and "Feces." The former contains this catalogue: "Hooded, lumpish, ropy, upcurving, / Anchovy or shark, the three-inch alley cat / Or blood-choked panther." "Feces" recalls the speaker's memory as a child of hiding his own excrement in an attic closet.

Concerns about Conflict in the Middle East

McClatchy's poem "Jihad" (*Hazmat*) speaks about "the nothing both sides fight over / In God's name, a last idolatry / Of boundaries." It is one of several poems that explore the Middle East and its conflicts, a subject that McClatchy has returned to over the years.

These poems include "Above Beirut" (*Stars Principal*), which addresses the violence in the area, and "Heads" and "Kilim" (both from *The Rest of the Way*). "Kilim" is a highly intricate and accomplished sonnet sequence, exploring the poet's view of the futility of the region's violence: "No art can stop the killings, / Nor any point of view make an abstraction / Of the child murdered because a boundary was crossed."

The poem "Heads" examines the horrifying conditions McClatchy found when he visited the West Bank in 1987.

Traditional Forms

McClatchy's work in traditional forms has earned him a reputation as an accomplished technician. His sonnet sequences are some of his strongest work and can be found throughout his books, from "Kilim" (*The Rest of the Way*) to "My Mammogram" (*Ten Commandments*) and "Cancer" (*Hazmat*).

McClatchy also has written accomplished poems in such unusual and demanding structural and metrical forms as sestinas, villanelles, canzones, haiku, trimeters, and poems in syllabics. Writing about his pantoum (a Malaysian form of quatrains in which the second and fourth lines are repeated as the first and third lines of the following quatrain) "The Method" (*Stars Principal*), McClatchy mentions his childhood love of poetry and puzzles. He remarks that "a preference for form is temperamental, a part of one's character before any formal steps are taken." In his case, he prefers "smudged" forms, in which the neurosis of repetition is slightly altered (as it is in "The Method").

Literary Friendships

Hazmat contains the long poem "Ouija," which is a tribute to the late poet James Merrill, one of McClatchy's closest friends and a poet who is often seen as a major influence on McClatchy's early writing. "Ouija" plays on the supernatural world Merrill invoked in his epic *The Changing Light at Sandover* (1982). McClatchy knew Merrill from 1972 until his death in 1995 and serves as his literary executor.

McClatchy's other literary friendships over the years have included Robert Penn Warren, Anne Sexton, Robert Lowell, John Hollander, and Richard Howard, as well as Corn. The first poets to whom he showed his work, besides Corn, were Merrill and Howard.

Conclusion

McClatchy's numerous honors include the Witter Bynner Award for Poetry awarded by the American Academy of Arts and Letters, and fellowships from the Guggenheim Foundation, the National Endowment for the Arts, and the Academy of American Poets. He has served as the chancellor of the Academy of American Poets. Now Professor of English at Yale and editor of *The Yale Review*, he has also taught at Princeton, Columbia, UCLA, Johns Hopkins, and other universities. He currently divides his time between a home in Stonington, Connecticut, and an apartment in New York City.

McClatchy is also one of the most prolific editors and anthologists working today, with nearly twenty volumes to his name, including *Poets in Painters: Essays on the Art of Painting by Twentieth-Century Poets* (1988); *Bright Pages: Yale Writers 1701-2001* (2001); *The Collected Poems of James Merrill*, co-edited with Stephen Yenser (2001), and *The Vintage Book of Contemporary American Poetry* (2003).

McClatchy's poetry has earned him praise as a writer of probing intellect and emotional acuity. In addition, he is a poet with deep insight into the nature of desire, especially the complexities of gay male desire.

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About the Author

Christopher Matthew Hennessy is the author of *Outside the Lines: Talking with Contemporary Gay Poets*, in which he interviews some of the most prominent poets writing today, including Frank Bidart, J.D. McClatchy, Alfred Corn, Carl Phillips, Mark Doty and Henri Cole. He has published interviews, reviews, author profiles, and poetry in national and international journals. Hennessy is associate editor of *The Gay and Lesbian Review-Worldwide*.