

“Be Like the Water!”
The Canticle of Sister Water: Francis and Amado Nervo

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"Be Like the Water:" An Introduction

“The Canticle of the Sun,” written by Francis of Assisi in the 13th Century, still resonates with men and women today. Throughout the centuries artists have heard the poetic voice of Francis singing the praise of creation. Nervo, a Mexican poet, is one of these artists. This paper will consider a specific work of Nervo, “La Hermana Agua,” not only for its own poetic significance, but also for the manner in which Franciscan elements are evidenced in its development. A brief consideration of the Canticle and its relationship to Nervo’s work introduces this study. Composed of nine poems, the work as a whole will be considered first. The manner in which Nervo identifies a different aspect of Water in each poem follows since each provides deeper insights into Nervo’s consideration of water. As elements of Franciscan thinking are evidenced they are considered. When Nervo draws his poem to conclusion, it is evident that Nervo, himself, has been drawn into the praise of creation through “Sister Water.”

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Spirituality in the Writings of Amado Nervo

Insights from other scholars provide an insight into Nervo that is helpful in understanding how Franciscan concepts came to be woven through his poem, “La Hermana Agua” (Sister Water). Amado Nervo is not readily associated with religious writings. His life in some ways betrayed his name “Amado” (the loved one), yet he is esteemed as a prolific writer of 19th and 20th century Mexico. Although acclaimed for insightful essays, pointed humor, philosophical prose and emotional and romantic poems, consideration of Nervo as a spiritual writer has often been disputed. Esther Turner Wellman acclaims that he “epitomized the spirit of Jesus and St. Francis” (288), while the Hispanic literature scholar Federico Onís speaks of the religiosity of Nervo’s work as having touches of Buddhism and Asian pantheism (Leguizamón 345). Umphrey, on the other hand, says that the pantheism supposedly displayed in the work of Nervo “differs little from that of Saint Francis, that saintly man of Assisi who held in the heart of Amado Nervo a place not much lower than that of Christ” (133). Gómez Gil seems to doubt the depth of conviction to which Nervo had grown in his spirituality when he comments: “Es asimismo un panteísta al expresar su poesía un ansia de explicarse y confundirse con la naturaleza” (431) (In his poetry’s expression of his anxiety to explain himself with nature, he is at the same time a pantheist).¹ González comments that Nervo displays a cosmic uncertainty, a spiritual unrest and pantheistic palpitation (152). Concha Meléndez, however, a well-known scholar of Latin American literature, acknowledges that the religiosity of Amado Nervo is “uno de los más bellos ejemplos de que la historia literaria puede darnos de progreso ascendente en lo intelectual y espiritual” (59) (one of the most beautiful examples that literary history can give us of the ascending progress in intellect and spirit).

In a brief discussion of Nervo’s poetry, I propose that his verse contains several Franciscan concepts particularly the poem “La Hermana Agua.” In this work of nine poems, Sister Water, views reality from a Franciscan perspective and reveals a journey either of the poet or of the poetic speaker toward attaining that perspective. The themes, images and approaches incorporated by Nervo reveal his attraction to Franciscan spirituality. As the poetic speaker is drawn to Water, he attributes human emotions to her various forms and gradually he is able to empathize with the sensitivity of creation and with her longing for human response and respect. In La Hermana Agua, Nervo shows the inextricable link of humanity with the cosmos. Awed by the versatility of water, the poetic speaker struggles to gain an understanding of the element Water and an appreciation of Francis’ spontaneous praise in his Canticle of Creation which used substantially fewer words than Nervo’s work. As one accompanies the poetic speaker on this journey one can be led to a deeper appreciation of God and God’s creation just as one is drawn to praise of God’s creation through Francis’ Canticle.

Insights into the Canticle

Before showing how Franciscan elements are present in Nervo's poetry, it is necessary to look at those concepts as they are evidenced in Francis' own love and appreciation of creation which is rooted in praise of the Creator. Franciscan spirituality differs from pantheism which proposes that "all laws, forms, manifestations, etc. of the universe are God" ("Pantheism" Webster's 1041). In Franciscan thought, the purpose of the sensible world is to serve as a mirror through which the human person is led back to Love/ God and is moved to praising him (Delio 36). There is acknowledgement of a creator God who delights in the world. By calling God parent, everything in creation becomes "brother" or "sister." Francis of Assisi experienced the elements in the cosmos as sacred and he entered into communion with God through the medium of created things and indeed in the very depths of created things (Leclerc xii). This religious experience is expressed in the beautiful "Canticle of Brother Sun," the "Canticle of Creation," attributed to Francis of Assisi. Very different from a pantheistic equating of God with the various created elements, the Canticle emerges from a relationship of fraternity with the elements of the cosmos. It reveals a spiritual quest in which the soul, while communing in a humble brotherly or sisterly way with creation, is reconciled both to itself and to the total reality. In this experience of universal bonding, the person experiences peace.

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In "La Hermana Agua," Sister Water, there are clear allusions to the Franciscan concepts of the Fatherhood/parenthood of God, solidarity with creation, humility, simplicity and peace. This poem does not ascribe to Nervo any level of the mysticism so evident in Francis of Assisi, nor does it credit Nervo's work with that type of mystical response. Rather, this discussion asserts that Nervo's nine-part poem is deliberately constructed to demonstrate the poetic speaker and perhaps the poet himself in a gradually intensifying spirituality. Eventually, in his assiduous exploration of Water, Nervo's detailed discoveries may offer quantitative explanations for Francis's mystical exclamations in the Canticle.

In the "Canticle," Francis refers to water rather succinctly: "Praise be yours, my Lord, through Sister Water, So useful, lowly, precious and pure" (Leclerc xvii). Francis praises God through the element that he calls "Sister" Water. He does not acclaim the many functions of water; rather, he speaks of her essence and calls her "useful, lowly, precious and pure." Francis praises God through Water simply because she is part of creation. He compliments Water through his characterization of her as "sister." He speaks of her usefulness, but avoids mentioning the destructive potential of water as a storm or a deluge; Nervo presents this potential of water in his poetry. Francis describes water as "lowly," corresponding to the Franciscan virtue of humility, and suggests the possibility that water can be found in obscure as well as in obvious places. A similarity can be seen here with Nervo's "Water that runs under the earth." Since the essence of water is to be unpretentious, Francis likewise describes water as "precious." He uses an adjective that he also applies to the moon and the stars: "Praise be yours my Lord, through Sister Moon and Stars, in the heavens you have made them, bright and precious and fair" (Leclerc xvii). Francis seems to view the usefulness and lowliness of Sister Water as external dispositions through which water acts; her preciousness and purity are the internal qualities which connect her to the person, to the soul and ultimately, to the Creator. By means of these four simple adjectives, Francis portrays the complete essence of water for which God should receive due praise. Francis's mention of elements as "sister" or "brother" primarily stemmed from the gender of the element's name in Italian, (such as *il sole*, *l'acqua*), and not from any attribute designated to the element. For Francis, an element praises God simply by being who it is.

An Introduction to "La Hermana Agua"

In 1901 when Amado Nervo created "La Hermana Agua" (Sister Water) he began with an epigraph quoted from the "Canticle of Brother Sun": *Laudato si mi Signore, per sor acqua...* San Francisco de Asís (Nervo 1380) (Praised be my Lord for Sister Water ...). From this initial identification with the Canticle, Nervo develops a three-paragraph prose introduction of his work addressed to the reader. In the first paragraph, the poetic speaker seems compelled to explore Water. He explains that this poem is a result of his encounter with an incessant trickle of water: "un hilo de agua que cae de una llave imperfecta: un hilo de agua, manso y diáfano, que gorjea toda la noche y todas las noches cerca de mi alcoba; que canta a mi soledad y en ella me acompaña; un hilo de agua: ¡qué

cosa tan sencilla!” (a fine stream of water that falls from an imperfect faucet: a thread of water, meek and diaphanous that gurgles all night and every night near my bedroom; that sings my solitude and accompanies me in the song; a thread of water. What a simple thing! (Nervo 1380).² There seems to be a clear parallel in this section of the poem with the four adjectives, “useful, lowly, precious and pure,” used by Francis of Assisi to describe Water.

The poetic speaker then describes the element as potentially useful because she trickles through a tap. He marvels that something so pervasive moves through an imperfect vessel, a faucet that is a “llave imperfecta” (an imperfect tap) (1380). The descriptions of the trickle of water as “manso” (“meek”) and “diáfano” (“diaphanous”) correspond respectively to St. Francis’s characteristics of water as “lowly” and “pure.” Finally, the speaker exclaims: “¡qué cosa tan sencilla!” (“what a simple thing!”), echoing the Franciscan value of simplicity. In the last sentence of the first paragraph, the poetic speaker concedes that the drops of water “me han enseñado más que los libros” (1380) (“have taught me more than books”). His opinion seems to resonate with Francis’ admonition “teach the friars to value books for their witness to God [...] for their edification and not for their elegance. He wished books to be few” (Leo 1131). Nervo repeats the phrase “un hilo de agua” (a thread of water) in characteristic musicality. In the melodious cadence of “toda la noche y todas las noches” (all night and every night), Nervo’s poetic prose reverberates sonorously while representing the water’s trickle as constant and persistent. The speaker finds in his search an affinity with the water that sings his solitude and accompanies him in it: “canta mi soledad y en ella me acompaña” (that sings my solitude and accompanies me in the song) (Nervo 1380).

In the second paragraph, Nervo elevates the dignity of water by referring to her as “el alma santa del Agua” (the blessed soul of Water) and offers her a proper name by assigning her a capital letter. One can detect an increasing respect for water by the poet’s treatment of the word. In the first paragraph, he refers to “agua” (water); in the second paragraph, water is spelled with a capital letter as “Agua.” Admiration for the element is further illustrated in the third paragraph when the element is given the title of “Sor Acqua,” (Sister Water) in correlation to the epigraph from the “Canticle” that introduces the entire work. By observing the “hilo de agua,” or thread of water, the poetic speaker begins to appreciate Water as “Sister.” The poetic speaker says that the soul of Water had spoken to him in the shadows and what she had said was “está escrito en páginas” (“written on pages”) (1380). With the intention of giving voice to the words of Sister Water, he says that what she has said to him can be summarized this way: be docile, be transparent: “... puede compendiarse así: ser dócil, ser cristalino.” (1380). In this regard, Nervo’s poetic speaker seems to echo the lesson of Francis of Assisi who saw life as the expression of humble gratitude for the tremendous gift of existence.

Not All is Similar in the Two Works

Before proceeding with obvious similarities, it is important to mention a fundamental difference between the “Canticle” and “La Hermana Agua.” Francis employs four adjectives to describe in totality the element that praises God; praise of God is his sole purpose in contrast to Nervo’s work. Nervo’s poetic speaker is searching for happiness through what he hears from nature; his purpose is to share that wisdom with his readers. Although both Francis and Nervo desire to praise God, Francis’s response is spontaneous while the praise of Nervo’s speaker is progressive. Francis does not speak about himself, whereas Nervo describes how he has received “el suave placer” or “the soft pleasure” of listening to Sister Water. That reward, or “galardón” will suffice until he rests in the graces of God. Some might criticize Nervo for needing nine poems to express what the mystic Francis could say

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in two verses. Yet, the ongoing search, learning and subsequent transformations experienced by the poetic speaker in “La Hermana Agua” offer a credible parallel to the search for happiness one can pursue through a relationship with creation. It is also important to remember that Francis sang the words of the Canticle as “Sister Death” approached; for him, it was a song of praise not an expression of the steps in his journey as it was for the poetic speaker in Nervo’s work.

The Nine Poems: “La Hermana Agua”

After the prose introduction, Nervo presents the series of poems that constitute “La Hermana Agua.” Through a variety of meter and rhyme patterns throughout the nine poems, Nervo sonorously portrays the waves

and currents of water. Seven forms of water are explored in the poem: “El agua que corre bajo la tierra”(Water that runs under the earth); “El agua que corre sobre la tierra” (The water that runs on the earth); “La Nieve,” (Snow); “El Hielo,” (Ice); El Granizo (Hail)”; and "El Vapor” (Mist or Haze). Nervo then attempts to reach a better understanding of Sister Water in the poems “Voces del agua” (The voices of Water) and “El Agua Multi-forme” (Multiform Water).

In sequencing the poems, Nervo first addresses the most familiar form of Sister Water – that of a liquid. In the third poem, Nervo considers Water as liquid and semi-solid, in the form of snow. In the two subsequent poems, Nervo turns his attention to perhaps a lesser appreciated state of water – that of a solid. The two following poems reflect on Water in the gaseous or more metaphysical state. Finally, the eighth and ninth poems of the series reunite the myriad aspects of Sister Water by articulating her polyphony and versatility of form.

First Poem: “Water Running under the Earth” Gives Praise

The first poem appropriately entitled “El agua que corre bajo la tierra” describes water that flows beneath the earth. Nervo captures Francis of Assisi’s description of Water as useful, lowly, precious and pure. A work of five stanzas of varying lengths, the verses have the sound of a limerick with a consonant rhyme as couplets. Water boasts of her activity as the poem begins in the first person “yo canto” (1) (I sing). The beginning verse displays both differences and similarities to St. Francis’s “Canticle.” In the “Canticle of Brother Sun” Sister Water praises simply because she is water. In Nervo’s poem, however, Sister Water speaks in the first of her many voices. Although she eventually directs her praise to God, her first word is in the first person: “yo” (“I.”).

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For most of the poem, water tells of her functionality. It is as if Water is attempting to teach the poetic speaker how to praise God; in doing so, it is necessary to explain all that she/Water is able to do. While her self-adulation seems to contradict lowliness, the element speaking in this poem does function unnoticed in the hidden parts of the earth. In this way, Nervo retrieves a sense of the humility, usefulness and lowliness of water by enabling her to express herself as a hidden agent “bajo la tierra,” (under the earth); the effects of her actions are evident. The poet then captures the essence of Water as “precious” by expounding on her potential for generating life: “Los gérmenes conocen mi beso...” (“The seeds know my kiss...” (7).

In stanza 1, Sister Water admits that she has been ignored despite the fact that her presence has made the plants grow (1 - 2). She speaks of “mi corriente oscura” (my obscure current) (4). At the end of the first stanza, she rejoices with the plants which rejoice in springtime, even though she believes that no one sees her or acknowledges her role in the possibility of growth. Water laments that nobody looks at her: “nadie me mira” (nobody looks at me) (4) but eventually in the final verse she muses philosophically that the fruitfulness of new life is nurtured in the obscurity which precedes it.

In the second stanza, Water continues to speak of her life-giving function through her connection to the seeds. She presents herself in a maternal light, as a mother kisses a child; yet, she laments because when the seeds have grown into flowers, they forget her. Nervo seems to attribute to Water the same maternal quality of nurturing seeds that Francis attributes to “Sister Mother Earth.” “Praised be you my Lord, through Sister Mother Earth, who sustains and governs us, and produces fruits with colorful flowers and leaves” (Ugolino 1499). At the end of stanza 2, however, water recuperates from her sadness and remembers that she exists to give praise to God: “¡Qué importa! Yo alabanzas digo a Dios con voz suave. La flor no sabe nada, pero el Señor sí sabe!” (Who cares! I give praise to God with a soft voice. The flower does not know anything, but the Lord knows!) (11-12). The verse clearly expresses the concept of Franciscan peace in which the creature rests in its assurance of being loved by the Creator.

Although the flower knows nothing of the sustenance it received from Sister Water, the water rests calmly in the assurance that God is aware that she nurtured the flower.

In stanza three, the verb “canto,” (“I sing”) recalls the spirit of Francis who used to tell his followers to sing the “Canticle of Brother Sun.” Here, Nervo seems to approximate the preciousness and purity of water that Francis mentions in the “Canticle.” Water recalls her experience with Moses at the Red Sea and she speaks about her great value in quenching thirst. Besides promoting life, Water acclaims that she is precious by enumerating her role in strategic occasions. She seems to revel in her transparency and boasts of her ability to reflect light, so much so that one who drinks her can commune with the stars: “el cielo que palpita en mi agua / y como en ese cielo brillan estrellas bellas / el hombre que me bebe comulga con estrellas” (the heavens that pulsate in my water / and how in this heavens the beautiful stars shine/ the man who drinks me communes with the stars) (22 -24). This transparent yet reflective quality of water recalls the purity of water in Francis' Canticle.

Water begins with the verb, “alabo” (“I praise”) and describes God as “good” in stanza four. She then speaks of the mysterious and hidden ways in which she creates jewel-like stalactites in the dark caverns. Water speaks of herself as necessary yet repeatedly insists in her own lowliness for she serves in hidden ways: “doy de beber al monstruo que tiene miedo al día” (I give drink to the monster that fears the day) (30). In the final two verses, the poetic speaker ends with the narration: “Así me dijo el Agua que discurre por los antros” (This is what the Water who rambles through the caverns told me) (31-32). The final verse then invokes praise to God. In this expression, however, the poet inverts the name of water and calls her “Agua hermana” (“Water Sister.”) By inverting these two words, Nervo puts emphasis on the word “hermana” (sister) which reinforces the strong Franciscan undertone of the poem. The poetic speaker echoes the Canticle by emphasizing his solidarity with the element and invoking her to join with him in offering praise: “Agua hermana, bendigamos a Dios!” (“Water Sister, let us bless God!”). This final verse resounds in a way similar but also different to “Praised be my Lord through Sister Water” in the “Canticle of Brother Sun.” The use of the plural verb “bendigamos” announces an action in which both the poetic speaker and Sister Water collaborate; in the “Canticle of Brother Sun,” the word laudato” (“praised”) is addressed directly to the Creator/God. It may be deduced that at this point in the poetic sequence, the poetic speaker has not yet arrived at the same deep spiritual insight that Francis had that could enable him to respond in the Canticle with such spontaneity.

Second Poem: “Water Running on the Earth” a Wanderer

The next poem in Nervo’s series is entitled “El agua que corre sobre la tierra” or “The water that runs on the earth.” This poetic discourse of water complements the preceding poem in which water described her actions in the first, third and fourth stanzas, respectively as “canto”, “canto” and “alabo” (I sing, I sing and I praise, respectively). In this poem, the element reverses the order of her actions as “alabo,” “alabo” and “canto.” It would appear that Nervo envisioned this second description of water’s form as the more observable reflection of the first description of water that is more hidden. The poem begins in the first person as water speaks about herself. Creation’s natural inclination to praise God is immediately acclaimed from the beginning of the poem when water declares that she praises heaven because it gave her gems in the depths and flowers along her edges: “Yo alabo al cielo porque me brindó en sus amores/ para mi fondo gemas, para mi margen flores” (I give praise to heaven because it gifted me in its loves/ gems for my depths and flowers on my borders) (1– 2).

In this poem, water is visible and active. In times of great storms, she adorns the depths with color: “adorno de arco-iris triunfales el abismo” (I adorn the abyss with triumphant rainbows) (6). Sister Water rocks and supports the keel of the boats who have stabbed through her surface: “en mi azul espalda que la quilla acuchilla, mezo, aduermo y soporto la audacia de la quilla” (... in my blue back that the keel stabs, I rock, quiet and support the audacity of the keel) (13-14). Water excuses herself from any potentially dangerous agency. Instead, she alludes to the destructiveness of water as the “designios de Dios” or “the designs of God” (18).

In stanza 2, water begins again praising the heavens and speaks of her wandering life: “mi vida errabunda” (my wandering life) (19). This self-descriptive wandering resonates with the Franciscan concept of itinerancy, of being a pilgrim in life. In this description of water, Nervo expresses some understanding of this Franciscan perspective. Water also offers other names by which she is known in the second stanza. She is the Niagara that thunders, the Nile that gives life, the maelstrom of fatality and the friendly gulf, the life giving sea and the punishing flood (20-22).

In verse 23 of this poem, water claims that her abilities are contradictory for she can give life and take life. In stanza three, however, water attributes her activity to her lord (“mi dueño”) for he commands and she follows. In using the word “lord,” Nervo borrows the same terminology for God as used in the “Canticle of Brother Sun.” In the depiction of water as dynamic, Nervo employs a series of images, actions, possibly destructive situations, energy and audacity which create an antithesis to the humility of water. Water, however, immediately acknowledges that all displays of her dynamism are simple expressions of obedience to the creator. She speaks of her humility as her obedience to the will of the Creator. The poem ends with Water singing as she runs. Nervo uses a polyptoton⁴, so that the verb “cantar” (“sing”) can be exhibited in a myriad of forms of “I sing, I am singing, and singing” in order to convey the sense of this continual singing: “**canto** cuando corro, y al despeñarme **canto**, y **cantando**, mi linfa tormentas o iris fragua, fiel al Señor...” (I sing when I run and as I go over the cliff, I sing and singing, my lymph torrents or iris forge, loyal to the Lord ...) (26-27). Just like the ongoing, wandering movement of the water, the discourse of Sister Water ends with the suggestion of continuity, through the inclusion of an ellipsis.

This second poem highlights the usefulness of Sister Water as an agent of activity. The verses abound in first-person verbs: “alabo/ I praise” (1; 19); “adorno/ I adorn” (6); “soy/ I am” (10; 20); “mezo / I rock,” “aduermo/ I calm,” and “soporto/ I support” (14); “tengo/ I have” (23); “despeño/ I console” (24) and “canto/ I sing” (25); y “corro / I run” (25). The final verse of the poem invokes praise of God, yet in this invocation, Nervo chooses to use the verb “loar,” (to praise) thus using a verb similar to the Italian *laudato* used in a verse from the “Canticle of Brother Sun” at the beginning of the work. By continuing to use the first person plural of “Loemos” (29), the poetic speakers persists - at this point - in focusing attention on the one(s) praising than on the One being praised.

Third Poem: Water as the Changing One Sings of God's Goodness

In the next poem, Nervo describes solid water and begins to demonstrate the mutability of Sister Water. In “La Nieve,” (Snow) the element Water addresses her own constantly changing nature: “Yo soy la movediza perenne...” (I am the constantly changing one) (1). In explaining, she reminds the reader that she is also vapor, dew and rain. Besides this versatility, God has also gifted her with whiteness. The Snow speaks of herself in this form as “enigmática y fría” (“enigmatic and cold”) (9) which, when stepped on, becomes “como la seda” or “like silk” (12). She proudly flaunts her coldness as the gift which has made her white and silken.

White purity, particularly in the whiteness of snow, is a clear theme in this poem. There is an emphasis on the purity of Snow’s form in its austerity and an emphasis on the color white (Dauster 427). This whiteness is reminiscent of the adjective of purity attributed to Sister Water in the “Canticle of Creation.” Nervo specifies the whiteness through precise terms, such as “albura” (egg white) (8-9) and “eucaristía” (Eucharist) (10). Nervo also uses the words “blanca/blanco/ blancura” (white/whiteness) seven times throughout the poem in order to stress the quality of whiteness or purity associated with Snow. Through a dexterous use of anaphora with the word “ya/ now,” the constancy and blanketing effect of the snow is conveyed through mellifluous versification.

In stanza 2, the snow describes her ability to change. Her responsibility is to clothe the world in whiteness, and although she rises as a grey mist from the lakes, she returns to the world as white snow. Once more, “whiteness” is emphasized. In this stanza, the action of the descent as snow and the ascent as vapor is mentioned. By the use of the anaphora in verses 14 and 15 with the word “subí” (I climbed), the action is portrayed as cyclical. At the end of the second stanza, the snow revels with delight in her whiteness or her purity: “¡Oh, qué bello es ser blanca!” (Oh, how beautiful it is to be white!) (16).

In stanza three, the snow muses about her whiteness/purity. Beginning with a rhetorical question, the snow then speaks of the sacrifices she has made. The concept of Franciscan humility may be interpreted in the attitude of the snow who says her whiteness/ purity was given her by God because she has been good. In this poem, the speaker is able to glean an appreciation of the purity of Snow in the form of Water which the uninformed observer may see only as “enigmática y fría” (problematic/cold). Although Snow attributes her purity to the Creator, she seems to take credit for her own goodness. Yet in this recognition of the innate goodness of the element, Nervo approximates the Franciscan concept of the innate goodness in all elements of creation as loving expressions of the perfect goodness of God. Alluding to the purity of whiteness, Snow then says that being white

is praying; therefore, she both prays and sings (26). Snow then offers the first challenge to the poet speaker/listener: “Sé tú como la Nieve que inmaculada llueve” (Be like the snow that rains immaculate) (31). The “yo” in the final verse is a poetic speaker who is now moved to proclaim his praise of God in concert with the element he now calls Sister Snow: “Let us praise God, Sister Snow” or “¡Alabemos a Dios, hermana Nieve!” (32).

Fourth Poem: Water as Ice both Brother and Sister

In the next poem of the series entitled “El Hielo” (Ice), Nervo continues to explore solid water. He delves into a deeper understanding of creation by presenting concepts of ice which differ from the familiar connotations. In personifying this element, Ice refers to himself in an androgynous manner. Ice is depicted as nostalgic for the days when he/she was water. Therefore, Ice speaks of herself in feminine terms as the restless and anxious one: “yo la inquietüela” (3) and “ansiosa” (12) and of her “blancas sábanas” (white sheets) (6); however, she also uses masculine terms such as “témpano azulado” (blue ice flow) (14).

Brother Ice also speaks of having “piadosas ondas” (pious waves) (2). This poem personifies Water in her most anguished state of being cold, dormant and motionless. Ice presents himself as Water in a less than favorable form. He does not try to change, but rather proceeds with a certain level of cheerfulness, at least enough to try and hide his anguish from the poetic speaker: “Tú ignoras esa angustia; mas yo no me rebelo” (You ignore that anguish, but I do not rebel) (11).

In verses 12 and 21, Ice synthesizes the lesson of the poem. First, he/she declares that she is “ansiosa de que en todo mi Dios sea loado” (anxious that God be praised in everything) (12). It is imperative to note that while Ice still considers itself water since it refers to itself in the feminine as “ansiosa” this verse also proclaims the basic premise of both “La Hermana Agua” and the “Canticle of Brother Sun”: to give praise to God. Further on, Ice says to the poetic speaker: “¿Ya ves cómo se acata la voluntad del cielo?” (Do you see how the will of heaven is done?) (21). The two previous verses summarize the poem and then lead the poetic speaker/listener to address the element as Brother and to respond: “¡Loemos a Dios, hermano Hielo!” (Let us praise God, Brother Ice!) (22). Here, the reader can see a closer intimacy of the poetic speaker with the created element. It is only in verse 32 of the preceding poem of Snow (“yo clamé”) (“I cried out!”) and verse 22 of this one about Ice (“yo recé”) (I prayed), that the poetic speaker/listener explicitly mentions that he is moved to cry out in prayer: “Loemos a Dios!” (Let us praise God).

Fifth Poem: Hail introduces Joy and Playfulness

“El Granizo” (Hail) is the next in the series of Nervo’s poems. In this poem, the tone of Hail differs significantly from the frozen form of Brother Ice. Nervo creates a new image of hail in which he assimilates the concepts of Franciscan joy and playfulness; he creates a voice for a frozen element that rejoices in his freedom and mischievousness. Hail delights in the sounds he can make. The poem opens with the onomatopoeia: “Tin tin, tin tin!” (1), and later on, “Tin tin!” (3). Hail becomes more enthusiastic when, in verse 9, he repeats “Tin tin, tin tin... ¡joye mis campanitas de límpido cristal!” (Hear my little bells of limpid crystal!). In this poem, Hail is childlike: he mentions the other forms of water and speaks proudly of his freedom of movement and sound: “La nieve es triste, al agua turbulenta; yo sin/ventura, soy un loco de atar, ¡tin tin, tin tin!” (Snow is sad, water turbulent; I without a fixed plan, am stark mad!) (11-12). In this characterization of Hail, the poem displays delicate musicality and sensitivity (Molina 177). Yet, both Ice and Hail are “sharp and clear, draw with plastic Parnassian rigidity” (Turner 49).

This poem is short, perhaps intending to express the youthfulness of the element who is more involved in playing than in speaking. In an unexpected way, Nervo has discovered in the unpleasantly perceived Hail an element which exemplifies Franciscan itinerancy, childlike trust, joy and satisfaction with one’s state in life and assurance of one’s beauty in the eyes of God. By portraying Hail as childlike, Nervo seems to imply that the element’s lack of attributing to

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God the source of his happiness and beauty is excused by the element's exuberant appreciation of life. Nervo remains consistent with the invocation of praise that Francis exclaimed in the "Canticle." In this last verse, however, as in "El Agua que corre bajo la tierra," (Water that runs under the earth) Nervo reverses the designation for Brother Hail, referring to him as "Granizo hermano" (Hail Brother). (17) However, in this instance, the inverted name seems to support the rhyme scheme of the poem rather than to suggest some particular symbolism.

Sixth Poem: Water as Steam Discovers Humility

The next two poems deal with Water in the gaseous form. This part of the series signals a new level of understanding on the part of Nervo/the poetic speaker who embarks on the more ethereal forms of Sister Water. The first of these two poems is entitled "El Vapor" (Steam). Nervo has moved into the more amorphous realm of water. In this poem and in the following one on mist, some metaphysical considerations are evident. This poem initiates an internalization of what the poet has portrayed and/or learned in the preceding poems of the series. Steam is portrayed as the soul of water (1). The poetic speaker has arrived at a new level of intimacy with creation for Steam now addresses him as "hermano mio" (my brother). This is the first time in this series of poems that the fraternal/sisterly title used in addressing the element Water is now directed back to the human speaker. This may be deliberately intended to portray the deepening sense of fraternity that the poetic speaker is developing with the element Water.

The element Steam delineates Water's features. He refers to the dew as the smile of water; the lake, her glances; the fountain, her thinking; the rain, her tears; the storm, her impatience; the rivers, her arms; her body, the level ground without the boundary of the seas; the waves, her breasts and her hair of golden liquid, the waterfalls (2-8).

Nervo demonstrates his poetic eloquence in the first stanza by use of asyndeton in his description of water's "body." The parallel construction of the phrases accelerates the reading of the stanza, just like a verbal torrent of water until the reader reaches the final word "cascada" (cascade) (8). In stanza 2, steam continues to describe himself as a soul or as the transcendent part of water. He boasts of his uniqueness for, unlike the liquid water, he, as a soul, always ascends (9). Steam describes himself as white bundles, the shimmering zone of fire, the divine castle of mother-of-pearl, the lace of an immense fan and the crater that shines (13-17). Finally, Steam attributes all transformations to the Creator in a phrase which is repeated: "Como el agua fue buena, su Dios la transfigura..." (since the water was good, her God transforms her...) (12, 18). The use of an ellipsis after the word "transfigura/transforms" may attempt to express that transformation is an ongoing process. This sense of ongoing transformation seems to recall Franciscan concepts of ongoing penitence and conversion.

At this point in the verse, it seems that his interaction with the spiritual aspects of water has moved the poetic speaker to respond. The anguish of the poetic "I" is apparent in stanza three when he asks Steam why God is always on the Steam's lips, but hides Himself from the poetic speaker's search. The inquiry of the poetic speaker/listener is a new step in the progression of the influence that Sister Water through all her forms is having on him. In this stanza, the poetic speaker/listener cries out of internal desperation to the element that has presented himself as so close to God.

In stanza 4, it becomes clearer that the speaker is a poet, possibly Nervo himself. The Steam informs the poet that he is looking for God in the wrong places because science demands infinite tests and proofs. After a pause in thought indicated by the ellipsis (26), Steam tells the poet to look into the dark places of his life and he will find God there. The second phrase of verse 28 summarizes the Christian concept of the presence of God: "tu Dios está en tí mismo" (your God is within you). In this stanza, Steam teaches that what is needed to find God is the virtue of humility. This explanation from the Steam resonates with a basic Christian and/or Franciscan virtue of *minoritas* or humility.

In the two remaining verses which are fragmented into thirds, it seems that there is nothing left for the Steam to say: "Ya está -- ¿Qué ves ahora? -- La faz del Infinito" (That is it! -- What do you see now? -- the face of the Infinite) (36). The Steam urges the poet speaker/listener/learner to see the face of God in creation. The poet/poetic speaker responds: "¡Loemos a Dios, Vapor hermano!" (Let us praise God, Steam Brother!). The final verse of the poem is the exhortation to give praise. The poetic speaker still uses the first person plural as he accompanies the element in offering praise to God. In this instance, Nervo also reverses the name of Brother Steam in order to

allow the verse to complete the rhyme with “arcano” (mysterious) at the end of verse 30. At this point in the series of poems, the poetic speaker/listener/learner demonstrates a growing intimacy with the element Water, and a deepening identification with the sacred lessons that are being taught.

Seventh Poem: Water as Mist

The final form of water that Nervo personifies is “La Bruma” (Mist or Haze). Although consistent with the preceding poems in its use of alexandrine verses, this poem differs from the six preceding ones in that it has no dialogue and is written in the third person. The poem has only one stanza of 14 verses. Since a certain degree of dematerialization is attributed to mist, perhaps the omission of dialogue was deliberately employed by Nervo to convey the absence of material substance inherent in this form of water. It is unclear whether the poetic speaker is the poet Nervo making observations about Mist or whether the Mist refers to itself in the third person. Since the first verse declares that the Mist is the dream of water (“La bruma es el ensueño del agua), this poem could be the poetic speaker’s thoughts on this element. The couplet of verses 1 and 2 is repeated as verses 11 and 12. Without material form, Mist may be incapable of speaking for herself since in verse 4 she speaks of “su empeño de inmateralizarse” or “her task of dematerializing.”. In her action of becoming less materialized, she becomes dreamlike.

This metaphysical account of mist testifies to the spirituality of an element beyond the concrete visible world. Nervo lavishly employs modernistic images of “ensueño/dream,” “fantasma/ phantasm,” “silueta/ silhouette,” and “esfuma/ wearing away”. The element Mist hints at the spiritualization of the world, although the concept of the “materia brutal”/“brutal matter” (6) seems contradictory to the Franciscan concept of the goodness of all things. At the end of the poem, however, the poetic speaker is moved to declare: “!Ensalcemos a Dios, oh Bruma hermana!” (Let us praise God, Oh Mist sister) (14). Nervo again takes the liberty of inverting the appellation of the Mist to order to maintain the melodic flow of his rhyme scheme. Although the last verse differs from the “Canticle” of Francis in the use of the verb “ensalzar” for “praise” instead of “loar,” the verse seems to convey that the poet has become so inspired by the forms of Sister Water that his response of praise is more spontaneous. Just as he did in the poems of Snow and of Ice, the poet acknowledges his response: “Y yo dije...” (And I said...) (14).

Eighth Poem: Water many Uses find Voice(s)

The final two poems in the series address the polyvalent nature of water. The first of the two is entitled “Las voces del agua” or “The Voices of Water.” The meaning of this poem is expressed through the dashes which precede the various statements. Each dash initiates a comment by another “voice” of Water. Through this fragmentation and punctuation, Nervo conveys the plethora of voices and reinforces the expression of the many voices of Water by varying the rhyme scheme in this poem as well. He departs from the rhyming pattern that he had set up in the first poem of the series so as to alert the reader to a difference in this poem and to the polyphony of voices which are speaking simultaneously to the poetic listener. In this poem the voices mention all the uses of Water which were not included in the other poems: one voice speaks of her drops that find their way into rocks, and another paints the watercolors; the poet then recalls the affinity between the mist and his thoughts; another voice speaks of her use in medicine. One voice speaks of the speed of her falling while another declares that in

The poem addresses the Franciscan virtue of humility or *minoritas* by showing that Water does not cling to a unique shape of her own but is happy to accommodate herself into many shapes...she assumes a form to correspond to a need.

times past she sang to the sirens. At the end of the poem, the voices, in unison, ask the poetic speaker to sing with them, since by the grace of heaven he knows them (16). Ultimately the poetic speaker responds: “Sí canto, hermanas Voces!” (Yes, I am singing, sister Voices!). In this poem, the poetic speaker seems to deviate from the spirit of Francis of Assisi, for he appears not so much moved to praise the Creator as he is awed by the solidarity and familiarity which he feels with the myriad forms of Water.

Ninth Poem: Multiform Water a Giver of Self

In the last poem of this series, “El Agua Multiforme” (Multiform Water), Water speaks about her many shapes. In this poem, Nervo returns to his familiar technique of rhyming couplets. The theme of the poem is declared in the beginning quote: “El agua toma siempre la forma de los vasos que la contienen...” (Water always takes the form of the glasses which contain her ...) (1-2). The poem addresses the Franciscan virtue of humility or *minoritas* by showing that Water does not cling to a unique shape of her own

but is happy to accommodate herself into many shapes. In verse 4, Water says: “yo soy la resignada por excelencia, hermano” (I am the resigned one par excellence, brother). Then she continues to point out how she assumes a form to correspond to a need. She says that today she is “torrente inquieto/ restless torrent” (6) and yesterday she was “agua tranquila/calm water” (6); today she is a round spherical glass (7) and yesterday she was barely cylindrical (8). She tells the poetic speaker that she is all of these – ice, stream, fog, steam – for all things demand that of her (10). But in verse 12, Water repeats in this poem what she said in the first poem: “... pero Dios sí lo sabe!” (... but God knows it!).

In stanza 3, the element Water asks the poetic speaker why he tortures himself when she asks him: “¿Qué quieres? ¿Qué sueñas? ¿Qué te aflige?” (What do you want? What do you dream of? What afflicts you?) (16). Then Water reminds the poetic speaker that she sings. The repetition of the word “canto/ I sing” conveys the insistent sonority of Water’s praise: “...En cambio, yo canto, canto, canto!” (Instead, I sing, sing, sing!) (18).

In the next two stanzas, Water tells the poetic speaker how to be happy: “sé como el agua” (Be like the water) (24). The phrase is repeated three more times, interspersed with convincing reasons: Water is full of heroism and oblation (25), she receives the grace of God in Baptism (26), and she is docile to the infinite law (27). Water is blessed in the fonts in churches (28), and is the rain that moves the umbrella (29). In essence, the Water tells the poetic speaker/listener to transform himself and to tell himself: “Qué se cumpla la santa ley de Dios!” (May the holy law of God be done!) (35). Water concludes by saying that if you do this, whatever form you have, you will reap benefits from it (37-44).

Nervo: Both Giver and Receiver

In the separate quatrain which concludes the discourse of Sister Water, Nervo gives not only an insight into his own journey, but also the impetus for beginning one’s own journey into the praise of creation. This small poem which expresses the internal struggle of the poetic speaker/poet ends with the same question that St. Francis asked at the beginning of his own mission: “Señor, ¿qué quieres que haga?” (Lord, what do you want me to do?).

The theme of Creation and calling the elements Brother or Sister are perhaps the most recognizable of Franciscan concepts in this work by Nervo for it is that same sense of Franciscan solidarity with creation that is expressed in the poems which Nervo entitled “La Hermana Agua” (Sister Water). Yet Nervo the poet differs from Francis the mystic who praises God spontaneously from his mystical awe of the totality of Water. Nervo, in an effort to appreciate Water, has to experience all of her components in order to achieve some level of awe. His reflection on this element of creation is so meticulous that he is able to offer fitting personifications of the observable forms of the element.

Cathy Login Jade comments that Nervo “rejects the compartmentalized vision of life achieved through established patterns of perception in favor of a poetic knowledge of the harmonious unity of existence” (131). With St. Francis as his inspiration, Amado Nervo was motivated to pursue God in his life. Esther Turner Wellman says that “from St. Francis, Nervo obtained his formula for action” (247). “La Hermana Agua” clearly reveals the psychology of Amado Nervo as close to the Franciscan truth (Molina 191). At first, Nervo could only see the most common form of water and was unaware of “the life within the form, the sacred mystery” (Tolle 81). Nervo seems to have found an answer to his quest in the Franciscan message of verses 30-32 in “El Agua Multiforme”: “¿Pretendes ser dichoso? Pues bien: sé como el agua; / lleva cantando el traje de que el Señor te viste, / y no estés triste nunca, que es pecado estar triste.”⁵

As Nervo allowed Water to “teach” him, he responded to her and the two participated “in the evolution of human and planetary consciousness” (Tolle 81) – and praise of God! Through poetry, Amado Nervo learned that Sister Water had much to teach. Her collaboration with the other elements in expressing her functionality, drew the poetic speaker into an ever widening cosmic circle of awe, interdependence and simple joy. Perhaps accompanying Nervo on his poetic journey may encourage us also to be alert to the lessons that creation holds out to us as she envelops us in her embracing presence.

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Endnotes

¹Translations are mine unless otherwise indicated.

² "... a fine stream of water that falls from my imperfect faucet; a thread of water, so meek and diaphanous, that gurgles all night and every night near my bedroom; who sings to my solitude and accompanies me in that song; a thread of water, what a simple thing!"

³ Numbers for the verses refer to the poems in Spanish in *Obras completas*, Tomo II.

⁴ Polyptoton is a rhetorical repetition within the same sentence of a word in a different case, inflection, or voice or of etymologically related words in different parts of speech. See, Web. 05October 2009. www.britannica.com/469083/polyptoton.

⁵ "Do you want to be happy? Well then, be like the water/ singing in the clothes that the Lord dresses you with/ and never be sad, for it is a sin to be sad."

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