

THE PHENOMENOLOGY OF WATER**Reflections on the Oneiric Draw of Hidden Streams****INGRID L STEFANOVIC**

Around the world, we are turning to the nature that we have hidden.

Trailer, *Lost Rivers* documentary

(Catbird Productions, 2012)

As we walk through our cities, we rarely pay heed to the fact that buried streams move underfoot. Yet the soil itself is saturated with water. Below the rigidity of the asphalt, hidden groundwater tables sustain our daily rituals of drinking from the tap. So often we take water and these waterways for granted.

But if you have ever stopped to wonder why certain streets meander in what appear to be arbitrary ways, you may be drawn to realize that these built landscapes have been shaped by underground water's flow. At such moments, one is reminded of these hidden sources and may become inspired to bring the water to the surface.

So, in the extraordinary example of the Cheonggyecheon Stream Restoration Project in Seoul, South Korea, an elevated freeway was demolished and the underground stream was "daylighted" in 2008 along a 3.6-mile long central corridor, increasing corridor biodiversity by over 600% and providing new pedestrian walkways beside the recovered, flowing waters. (Landscape Architecture Foundation, 2012)

Other initiatives around the world aim to promote awareness of underground waterways even if full physical "daylighting" is thwarted by economic constraints and lack of political will. Examples, at varying levels of success, include the River Tyburn in London, the Saw Mill River in New York and the Bova-Celato River in Bresica, Italy. In Canada, heritage maps of underground rivers have been developed in Guelph, Ontario, and in Vancouver, British Columbia, a rehabilitation initiative aims to enhance green space by restoring open sections of Still Creek and "daylighting" other sections in order to increase water quality, enhance adjacent streetscapes and advance environmental education. (Lees *et al.*, 2002)

In my own hometown of Toronto, "Lost River Walks" have been organized by local environmental groups, aiming to promote understanding of the former Aboriginal sacred gathering places and to "tell the fascinating story of the city when it was a place of deep ravines, babbling brooks and primordial forest." (Helen Mills, cited in Easton, 2009: 1)

What inspires these communities to bring underground water to the surface? Many streams are now part of the sewer infrastructure of cities, buried at a time when public health concerns arose from contaminated waterways. Why not let the remnants of these past waterways be?

Perhaps a phenomenology of water can begin to help us to answer these questions. In the following pages, I propose that a subtle, oneiric draw to hidden streams reflects a primordial ontological meaning and value of water, even as buried. I suggest that a place-based ethic of care may emerge as more than simply a matter of identifying cerebral, abstract values, reflecting instead a deeply embodied *ethos* and belonging to the natural world within which human dwelling is embedded.

The ancient Eastern thinker, Confucius was apparently asked: "Why is it that when a gentleman sees a great river, he always gazes at it?" He is said to have replied:

"Water, which extends everywhere and gives everything life without acting, is like virtue. Its stream...is like rightness. Its bubbling up, never running dry, is like the way (dao)." (Allan, 1997: p.23-4)

In Confucius' eyes, there is both an ontological as well as moral draw to the passage of waterways. Here, it is not simply a matter of visualizing the river's artistic beauty. Rather, the movement of water captures the dynamism and virtue of life itself, not only in the form of an analogy but in a much more embodied sense, as an incarnation of the very temporal roots of human becoming and goodness.

To be sure, "there is an art to looking at water," as there is an art to reflecting thoughtfully upon the meaning of one's finitude. (Allan, 1997: p. 23) How might one begin to artfully, poetically, engage with a stream, even if it is buried below the streets?

Perhaps we must recognize the originary draw of water itself as the giver of life. As phenomenologist Gaston Bachelard so thoughtfully notes: "Water...is a seed; it gives life an upward surge that never flags." (1983: p. 9) Perhaps recalling a hidden stream to the surface is itself a deep recollection of the beginnings of our liquid existence in the womb and an attempt to appropriate the mystery of creation itself. To "daylight" a hidden stream is to seek to illumine something meaningful about the very source of our being.

Even so, it is important to recall that the source of a natural spring reveals images of cyclical connections, as well as transience and broader forms of continuity. (Allan, 1997: p.13) The source of a hidden stream is itself more than a simple physical point of entry, connected as it is to a continuous historical embeddedness of memories of place, as well as to the broader, hydrological cycle that defines the landscape.

In fact, Chinese thought teaches that a waterway's source constantly replenishes itself, "like a reputation that may be passed down over the generations or, more metaphysically, it is like 'what passes,' time itself." (Allan, 1997: p. 36) Gaston Bachelard describes water as "truly the transitory element." (1983: p. 2) There is a temporal value to water that we instinctively understand as we are drawn to its presence. In this sense, the story of water must acknowledge that "in his inmost recesses, the human being shares the destiny of flowing water...A being dedicated to water is a being in flux." (Bachelard: 1983: p. 6) The flow of water reflects the streaming of time itself.

The German philosopher, Martin Heidegger once wrote: "Time is not a thing, thus nothing which is, and yet it remains constant in its passing away without being something temporal like the beings in time." (1972: p. 3) In a similar vein, phenomenologist Theodore Schwenk writes that "in regard to water's potential – whether in a falling raindrop, meandering stream, curling wave, tumbling cascade or swirling vortex – water adopts a host of forms, while always remaining the same." (1996: p. 235.) Water never disappears but surfaces in many different ways.

"Water is the mistress of liquid language," Bachelard tells us, "of language that softens rhythm and gives a uniform substance to differing rhythms." (1983: p. 187) Again, the ancient Chinese knew to read such a language of water, that language of fluidity. Water does not flow haphazardly and it was by recognizing how to use the natural movement of water wisely that ancient civilizations prospered. The earliest Chinese myths reflect the importance of assigning order and meaning as a condition of habitability in the world. Civilization could only advance when river channels were dug and river courses were directed by respecting the natural flow of waters and water systems. Such a sensibility was essential to advancing agricultural sustainability and the survival of human communities. (Allan, 1997: p. 39)

Goethean phenomenologists Mark Riegner and John Wilkes similarly point to this "precise and rhythmical" nature of water. (1998: p. 238.) Drawing upon Goethe's phenomenology of science, a group of thinkers have explored ways in which to enhance water's life-supporting capacity through better understanding the rhythms and "flowforms" of water that bring a sense of order to its cascading movement. The streaming of water is seen to reveal a number of characteristics: its "flow" discloses a relation to the riverbank; its "gliding" presence illumines "water flowing over and under itself"; its capacity for "shearing" changes the shape of stones and landscapes; its "turning" is an aligning with the current. (Müller and Rapp, 1977: p. 98-103) We intuitively know how water's movement is rich and bounteous, if only we attend to it.

To be sure, water also inevitably carries waste. "In its streaming, the river is source and sink at once." (Müller and Rapp, 1977: p. 95) Designs for water treatment, irrigation systems, aquaculture systems, desalination processes and even food processing activities have been developed that utilize the natural flow of water as it "opens itself to the harmonies and laws of the heavens." (Schwenk, 1996: p. 98.) We find ourselves drawn to the cleansing rhythms of water in waterfalls, streams, waves and flows, much as in our oneiric dreams, we are drawn to reflect upon time's seasonality and its own rhythmic measures of movement and duration. "Water becomes an image of the stream of time itself, permeated with the rhythms of the starry world." (Schwenk, 1996: p. 68)

Schedules, calendars and the frenzy of ontic commitments move to the background in these moments of reverie whereby we are drawn to gaze and dream, rather than theoretically construct, by watersides. "To contemplate water is to slip away, dissolve, and die" rather than to manipulate, fabricate, intellectualize and hurry on. (Bachelard, 1983: p. 47) It is to contemplate one's own vulnerability in the face of the passage of time, recognizing that to be human means that we are each not simply "an onlooker but a participant in nature's processes." (Bortoft, 1996: p. 108)

And so, while life-giving and cleansing in its flowforms, water also brings to presence the meaning of our finitude. As much as we have colonized the earth, the untraveled abyss of underground waters and the deepest oceans inspire wonder as much as dread. Philip Ball reminds us that we somewhat naively associate water simply with life and well-being. Yet, we must not forget how our myths often connect water with a journey unto death, reflecting a more complex awareness of water than simply as life-giving. The Styx is the medium to Hades, just as the Ganges is a vessel of the deceased. (Ball, 2001: 23.)

He who drowns at sea is subject to "an altogether more fathomless fate than those whose corporeal being is returned to the shallow earth." (Ball, 2001, p. 24.) The oneiric significance of deeply buried waters invites us, no less than with violent waters, to imagine the temporal vulnerability and finitude of being itself. "To disappear into deep water or to disappear toward a far horizon, to become a part of depth or infinity, such is the destiny of man (*sic*) that finds its image in the destiny of water." (Bachelard, 1983: p. 12) Just as I am pre-reflectively aware of the vulnerability of my temporality and finitude, even as they remain invisible to the naked eye, so too, like any deeply buried stream, I know when I attend to them, that both time and water define my being in this world.

In the end, perhaps the reason for a community's desire to recover and restore buried streams relates to a pre-reflective desire to recover the meaning of being human. It is to draw close the significance of water's life-giving essence; of the defining importance of its flow in a temporal world; and of the remembrance that it elicits of the vulnerability of human existence.

It is to remember that water and the activity of being human belong together more than simply in a biological sense but ontologically as well. And it is to recall that nurturing a genuine sense of place and an ethic of care in our cities cannot proceed in the absence of water as embodied in earthly existence itself.

References

- Allan, Sarah (1997) *The Way of Water and Sprouts of Virtue*, Albany: State University of New York Press,
 Bachelard, Gaston (1983) *Water and Dreams: An Essay on the Imagination of Matter*, Dallas, TX: Dallas Institute Publications,
 Ball, Philip, (2001) *Life's Matrix: A Biography of Water*, Berkeley, Los Angeles: University of California Press,
 Bortoft, Henri, (1996) *The Wholeness of Nature: Goethe's Way Toward a Science of Conscious Participation in Nature*, New York: Lindisfarne Press
 Easton, Megan, (2009) *River Rambler*, University of Toronto Magazine, March 16, 2009, posted online at <http://www.magazine.utoronto.ca/all-about-alumni/river-rambler/print/>. Accessed July 22, 2011.
 Landscape Architecture Foundation, (2012) *Cheonggyecheon Stream Restoration Project 2012*, accessed July 17, 2012 at <http://lafoundation.org/research/landscape-performance-series/case-studies/case-study/382/>.
 Lees + Associates, Karen Hurley & Associates, Hudema Consulting Group Limited, and Dayton & Knight Ltd, (2002) *Still Creek Rehabilitation and Enhancement Study*, City of Vancouver Community Services Planning Department, March 2002. Accessed online July 15, 2012 at <http://vancouver.ca/commsvcs/cityplans/stillcreek/>.
 Müller, Ernst-August, and Dietrich Rapp (1996) *Streaming: A Picture of the Etheric in Bockemuhl, J., Editor, Toward a Phenomenology of the Etheric World*, Spring Valley, NY: Anthroposophic Press Inc., x), pp. 91-129.
 Riegner, Mark and John Wilkes (1998), *Flowforms and the Language of Water*, in *Goethe's Way of Science: A Phenomenology of Nature*, David Seamon and Arthur Zajonc, editors, Albany: State University of New York Press, pp. 233-254.
 Rynor, Michah (2001) *Parking Spaces*, Taddle Creek Hot Topics at Public Meeting, in the University of Toronto Bulletin, Monday, June 11,
 Schwenk, Theodor (1996.) *Sensitive Chaos: The Creation of Flowing Forms in Water and Air*, translated by Olive Whicher and Johanna Wrigley, East Sussex: Rudolf Steiner Press



Ingrid Leman Stefanovic is a Professor of Philosophy and former Founding Director of the Centre for Environment at the University of Toronto. Her teaching and research center on how values and perceptions affect public policy, planning and environmental decision making. Recent books include *Safeguarding Our Common Future: Rethinking Sustainable Development* and *The Natural City: Re-envisioning the Built Environment*, co-edited with Stephen Scharper.



High Sea at Nice, France – Original Painting by Patrick Henry

