**Stephen Edgar's New Book**

Before writing a notice of Stephen Edgar’s latest collection of poems, *History of the Day*, I should declare an interest, not to say a fascination. When I read his collection before last,*Lost in the Foreground*, and concluded that he was setting a new mark of accomplishment for the Australian formalist poets, I made immediate plans to meet him, if only to check up on whether he was a normally configured human being, and not a cyborg toting a large extra memory box for his vocabulary and range of technical skills. He turned out to look like what he is: a classicist who makes a crust by correcting the textual errors of other people, and writes poems on the side. Our first lunch at the Oyster Bar on Sydney’s Circular Quay lasted until dusk, and we have been friends ever since. So the reader should allow for a possible bias. But the reader should first consider this:

Above the cenotaph, stuck to the sky

As though on long thin pins, the cut-out shapes

Of kites tug at the wind and won’t let go.

Placed arrestingly in a poem called “*Totenstadt*”, such an apparently elementary moment counts among the most basic building blocks of an Edgar stanza. Even the simplest registration raises a question of perception. You can see the kites, but you can also see how they might look as if they were stuck to the wind, and doing the tugging instead of being tugged. But a whole stanza can be a building block too, raising, on a larger scale, another question about perception. In “Dreaming at the Speed of Light”, the narrator is seeing the world from his viewpoint on a ray of light from Einstein.

The falling autumn leaves would stall

Above the lawn, their futile red

A stationary fire;

The dog erupting from the pond would spread

In hanging glints its diamanté shawl

Of shaken spray midair;

The blue arc of the wave would climb no higher,

A gauze of glare

And water that would neither break nor sprawl.

You might say that there are stretches of prose in Nicholson Baker’s *The Fermata* that give the same freeze-frame effect, but Baker didn’t do them in stanzaic form. And when we pull our own viewpoint back to see how Edgar’s stanza is put together, we find that there are only four rhyme-sounds holding the fluent progress on course as it switches between four different iambic meters, the whole thing seeming so spontaneous that it might have been a one-off. But then, when we pull back to see the whole poem, all four of its stanzas are built on exactly the same pattern. Edgar often composes in free forms as well – he is a master of the blank verse paragraph – but an unpredictably varied yet precisely matching strophic construction is his characteristic approach.

When I first read Edgar, and realised he was making up these elaborate stanzas and then replicating them throughout the poem as if to prove that his idea of formal freedom was all discipline and vice versa, I thought immediately of Richard Wilbur in that sumptuous post-WWII phase when he was producing the intricately articulated clarities of “Piazza di Spagna, Early Morning” and “A Baroque Wall Fountain in the Villa Sciarra”. But at our first epic lunch the second bottle of Cloudy Bay had barely been broached before Edgar revealed that, much as he admired Wilbur, for him Anthony Hecht had been the Man.

Either way, a foreign technical influence had been the right kind to suspect. If Edgar had read neither Wilbur nor Hecht, he might still have got the idea from Larkin, who was making up stanza forms quite early in his career; and of course Larkin got it from Hardy and the later Yeats. Edgar might quite possibly have concocted the whole approach if he had read nothing but Keats’s Odes. What is certain, however, is that there had been very little Australian poetry like it. If Edgar was getting his technical inspiration out of the air, it was out of the world’s air, and not just the air of his own country.

The point needs stressing because in Australia the idea is firmly entrenched that any self-imposed formal requirement must be an inhibition to expression. The idea got a long way in America, where to argue the contrary seemed undemocratic; and has caught on in Britain, where it is thought to be a useful instrument in wresting the control of creativity from a privileged class; but in Australia it has attained the status of an orthodoxy. On the whole, by those who edit the anthologies and staff the prize committees, an apprehensible form is thought to be a repressive hangover from the old imperialism; and all too many of the poets think the same. The view is aided by the unarguable fact that Les Murray (whom Edgar admires, as we all do) usually doesn’t write in apprehensible forms either.

But at least Murray knows what they are. It isn’t his fault that the ruling majority of people concerned with poetry in Australia think that free verse is a requirement of liberty, and anything constructed to a pattern must be leaving something essential out. Edgar’s steadily accumulating achievement has been of a quality too high to be buried by the attention of dunces, and he has attracted some excellent criticism. But it is still quite common for his work to be belittled as if there was something unAustralian about it.

Indeed there is. Though his work teems with specifically Australian details, much of it would be intelligible anywhere; and there is a lot more that is not tied to his country at all.  Two of the poems in *History of the Day*are about the bad old days of Lynch law in America, and one of them is among the best poems in the book. The poem is based on the notorious photograph taken at the lynching of Rubin Stacy in Fort Lauderdale, Florida, on 19 July 1935. As with so many of Edgar’s poems, it is hard to tear a piece loose, but try this:

And then you see her. At the left she stands,

Behind the awful focus of suspense,

Her hands crossed, mimicking his handcuffed hands,

On her frocked crotch, her naked face intense

And lit up with a half-embarrassed leer,

A girl of twelve, too unaware

To mask her downward grin…

But Edgar doesn’t need a non-Australian subject to be “international” in the sense that was once used so longingly. (There were commercials that called John Newcombe an “Australian International”.) There is a little poem called “All Rights Reserved” in which I would like to think I play a key role, because it is set in the Oyster Bar, and I am Edgar’s opposite number in the story he narrates. This time it was dinner: but the real subject, which goes right round the world, is the sky, which adjusts to the sinking sun

Almost as though it hears itself discussed,

And flourishes its menu, from gold dust

Through peach to lazuli…

This range of colours at each end of the day is likely to be the first attraction for a new reader of Edgar: dawns by Charles Conder link to twilights by Whistler, with whole vistas assembled out of textures and atmospherics. But there is nothing anachronistically *fin de siécle* about his palette, or not that *siécle* anyway: Edgar’s weather is the weather of modern scientific observation, and quite often registered in a vocabulary that sends you to the dictionary, although seldom without first making you catch your breath at its luxuriance.

It’s important to stress the enchantment of these subsidiary effects because this volume is a bit lighter on his primary effects than his previous one, *Other Summers*, which contained the sequence called “Consume My Heart Away”, whose constituent poems are generally held to be his most intense things so far. Actually I think this is a false trail, because there are magisterially personal poems, mainly to do with the lingering anguish caused by the death of his first love, scattered everywhere in his work; but there is no denying that a poem like “Man on the Moon” – which stands out even in the luminous cluster of “Consume My Heart Away” -- makes you wonder where he might go next if he ever decided again to give up some of his personal detachment.

He will never give up his control, which is of the essence in all his work; and he is unlikely to indulge in the confessional strain that Elizabeth Bishop was so right to find suspect in Robert Lowell, much though she admired him; but there can be no doubt that Edgar set a new standard for himself when he turned an interlude of heartbreak into a sequence of poems that cut unusually deep into his own equilibrium. So startling was the sequence that some of his critics have begun to use it as a stick with which to beat him, saying that the personal note put his earlier work in the shade.

But that view will not hold up, because his big stand-alone poems so often range as widely within his own psyche as can be imagined. The only possible objection to this collection would be that there are fewer of them than usual. But one of them is among his very best. Called “The Red Sea”, it is about three little girls playing with toy boats in the shallows of North West Bay, south of Hobart.  I only wish I had space to take it apart with something of the same diligence he expended on putting it together.  For *Poetry (Chicago)* I wrote a 4,000 word analysis of “Man on the Moon” and barely got started. (If I may be permitted a reference to my own work – but really it’s to his – the piece is on the magazine’s web archive and can be reached through the “Poetry Notebook” section on my own website.) The task here, however, is not to lay bare the ghost in the machine, but to say what quality of ghost it is, as the children bend to their game.

Hard to conceive that they should be

Precisely who they are and here,

Lost in the idle luxury of play.

And hard to credit that the self-same sea

That joins them in their idleness today,

Careless of latitude and hemisphere,

Blind with ubiquity,

Churns elsewhere with a white uproar,

Or wipes the Slave Coast clean of trees…

And so on, all around the globe, as the ocean threatens the idyll. A poem about how there can be no such thing as a local vision, no matter how particular and intense, it would alone be sufficient evidence that Stephen Edgar, in the fullness of his accomplishment, can be called an Australian poet only at the cost of slighting both adjective and noun. Even when his approach to a subject is oblique, you always get the sure sense that he is trying to light it up, and make you listen to the music of what he looks at. Models of plain speech even at their most eloquent, his poems are more sheerly beautiful from moment to moment than those of any other modern poet I can think of.

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