

REVIEW OF RUSSELL EDSON'S

The Clam Theater (Wesleyan U. Press) \$2.45.

The Childhood of an Equestrian (Harper & Row), \$3.95.

RUSSELL EDSON WAS WRITING PROSE POEMS LONG BEFORE THEY became the fashion in American poetry. His *The Very Thing that Happens* (soon to be re-issued by New Directions) came out in 1964, and poems from that collection first appeared in literary magazines as early as 1960. And people have had difficulty labeling his work poetry, or prose poems, or fables, primarily because there is an identifiable eccentricity and originality in his work; the poems, for the most part, have a tableistic sense about them, a narrative strain, a flat, almost mechanical and formal tone of voice, and a sense of humor which borders on the bizarre. But Edson's originality is not the primary source of interest in his work; what makes reading his poems a lasting and worthwhile pleasure is the eccentricity of his vision, his freedom in intermingling objective and subjective realities, his grotesque view of our civilization (or perhaps better put, his view of our grotesque civilization), and his wonderful sense of humor, his ability to discern the absurdity of tragedy in human experience. This humor provides a release from Edson's view of experience, which is essentially apocalyptic, mechanistic and isolatory.

The primary vehicles of this vision are reversals and transformations. Men become objects, objects take on human characteristics (the ability to speak, feel and make fools of themselves); men make love to, or become interchangeable with animals (although the animals often come out more human, more compassionate, less manipulative and cruel), most often farm or domesticated animals, dogs and cats, cows, mice, and frogs, pointing out the grotesque of the familiar. The effect of these reversals, of the poems filled with animism and mechanization or dehumanization, is to deflate man's distorted

self-image; what separates man from the animal world or even the world of inanimate objects is his self-consciousness, his "civilization," the world of artifice and manners, repression and authority. Take, for example, "The Automobile," which begins, "A man just married an automobile." The man's father tries to convince him that one should not marry an automobile because it is "something different."

"For instance, compare it to your mother. Do you see how it is different from your mother? Somehow it seems wider, doesn't it? And besides, your mother wears her hair differently.

You ought to try to find something in the world that looks like mother."

And a little later, in the same poem:

But you cannot procreate with an automobile, said father.

The son shows father an ignition key. See, here is a special penis which does with the automobile as the man with the woman; and the automobile gives birth to a place far from this place, dropping its puppy miles as it goes.

Does that make me a grandfather? said father.

Here we see not only the interchangeability of man and machine, but also some of the ramifications behind this interchangeability. We no longer desire what we want (love), we desire objects as substitutes for our desires (sublimation), and in the process become one with those machines ourselves. There are numbers of other examples where men make love to bird cages, cows, write with mice, etc., but all point to our own self-separation. Civilization, while bringing us the promise of elevation, has only delivered us into the hands of objects, reducing us to vehicles of use.

So many times in Edson's work we see that civilization is equated with artifice, and this artifice manifests itself in the world of manners and decorum, providing Edson with some of his most humorous (if not quite his most subtle) passages. In a piece where a man is trying to teach a moth not to belch, we read:

I see, said father, but it's very poor taste to belch; and I regard it as proof of very poor breeding, which now takes vent; and having cast this first veil off must move toward greater immodesties.

The moth belched again.

Mother, I won't be able to sleep if the moth continues

to belch, cried father.

There, there, said mother, I've heard you belch too.

Oh fine, that's a nice thing to bring up at a time like this, cried father.

But didn't you belch last Tuesday? said mother.

Here I'm trying to instruct the moth, and you undermine my authority by pointing up my digestive difficulties, cried father.

But you also farted, said mother.

Oh that was just a little aside which I thought you hadn't heard, said father.

The moth farted.

Now see what you've done! screamed father.

There are parallel episodes where a man and woman get into an argument over their love, or lack of love, for a bird cage (named Isadore, which is significant because few of Edson's human characters are given the dignity of a name) and threaten each other with kissing the bird cage and the bird, marrying the bird cage, and finally, having intercourse with the bird. At this point the grandfather intervenes because "that is not nice." In another episode a father and mother become obsessed with making their daughter mount a horse behind a barn so that she does not show her underpants, "which are worn to keep your excretory openings in decorous hiding, said her mother." Edson ridicules the absurdity of their propriety by ending the episode with the horse mounting the naked girl.

There are countless other episodes where Edson serves almost as a social satirist, and these poems are perhaps his most accessible. But perhaps more interesting, and more central to the concerns of his work as well, are the ramifications of consciousness in a "fallen" world: not only does Edson depict guilt and shame, but far more subtly, with issues reminiscent of Kosinski's *Steps*, he shows us that our desires are merely reflections of desires. There becomes an absolute separation of outer and inner worlds, the world of relation is cast aside for self-consciousness and loneliness.

What helps? roared the woman.

Nothing, save that which was before us, and shall continue after us; that cosmic Presence which us so made — But not even *It* lifts one star, or changes the order of one day

in our behalf — No, we are alone, and there is no help . . .
And so we set traps and keep guns, and make ourselves
secret, cried the old man.

from "Old Folks"

Outside you see that things run free. Outside some
things die. You would like to try, only this rotten egg of you
holds your spine against its shell.

Will you die even as you are about to break through?

Will you die having lost the desire to break through?

Is it important to desire?

from "The Emergence"

And from "Composing a Love Song":

We are having trouble controlling an umbrella, which
has come to life.

We turn to ourselves, looking out of mirrors, for ans-
wers. But our images only repeat our questions.

And in the title poem "The Clam Theater":

This is my theater. I sit in my head asleep. Theater in
a clam

Amidst the wet flesh of the head madmen build hats;
perhaps to lay cover over the broken mind; or to say the
head is gone, and all it is is a hat . . . Only hats hung on
the hooks of our necks

Edson sees that repression, or as he often calls it, boundaries,
play a part in this separation:

Well, father, it's a hard thing with boundaries, I said,
they have a way of dividing in and out; and just when you
are *in* they switch and put you *out*, to accomodate some-
thing else on the other side, which has made its side *in*.

from "An Investigation"

A man had a son who was an anvil. And then some-
times he was an automobile tire.

I do wish you would sit still, said the father.

Sometimes his son was a rock.

I realize you have quite lost boundary, where no excess
seems excessive, nor to where poverty roots hunger to need.
But you should allow time to embrace you to its bosom of
dust, that velvet sleep, then were you served even beyond
your need; and desire in slate was properly spilling from
its borders, said the father.

from "The Changeling"

Naturally the father is resistant to change, to process, to open-
ness; the world as hierarchy offers "its bosom of dust," but nothing

else. Parenthetically, it is Edson's expression of metamorphosis which offers the only hope for humanity, and even that hope is slim, transitory, and although I hesitate to say so because it challenges my own beliefs, even illusory. But more about that later.

So it is no wonder that in a world where we have lost a sense of what is important to us, where we try to create an order of artifice and repressiveness, that we mistake the dead for the living, the human for the non-human, and involuted fantasy for desire:

When her husband did not live any longer she said I
will get something that lives longer.

She got herself a room in town.

But she noticed the room was getting sick.

My room has got quite sick.

The doctor put his stethoscope to the wall: I think your
room is dead.

No, no, it is pretending to be because it has grown out
of love with me.

Do you notice the flowers in the wallpaper, do they
look dead to you?

“The Beginning of an Argument”

The entire process of time and space seems to have contrived a conspiracy to cause us pain and death, as Edson expresses in one of his most engaging poems:

On the other side of a mirror there's an inverse world,
where the insane go sane; where bones climb out of the
earth and recede to the first slime of love.

And in the evening the sun is just rising.

Lovers cry because they are a day younger, and soon
childhood robs them of their pleasure.

In such a world there is much sadness, which, of
course, is joy . . .

“Antimatter”

If there is any consolation it is in the world of metaphor, or transformation and art; there is no other way to explain away the humor in Edson's work, because it is not purely ironic, although it is often ironic. Take, for example, “The Breakfast That Came to Dinner”:

A sailor who was actually a bathtub merchant; or
should I say a baker who was actually a fur trapper
No, no, I shall say a lunch that was actually a delayed break-
fast, came to our house for dinner.

There is an obvious sense of play at work in these transformations, and these transformations occur freely in all the work. Yet the impact of transformation, of metaphor, of art itself, does not seriously challenge the ultimate despair of reality. It still exists in the world of pretending; the world of the familiar, the plain, the deadliness is the world that is real. From the same poem:

Find yourself a nice kitchen table in a good normal home. Arrive just at breakfast time. The birds at full song. Lay out your pretty things, your dowry of bathtubs and traps — Yes, lay out your pretty things, your grapefruit juice and toast; pretend you are a bride — Pretend the kitchen table is the bed of consummation.

And in "The Blank Book":

But don't these blank pages also present a dangerous invitation to rumors and malicious gossip? Who knows what anyone might write in his absent-mindedness? Who knows what chance might do with such a dangerous invitation? he said.

Perhaps we shall have to send ourselves away to some fictitious address, she said.

Is it because words keep falling out of our mouths, words that easily start rumors and malicious gossip? he said.

It is because somehow, we keep falling out of ourselves, like detached shadows; shaking as if we could get all the typos out of our lives, she said.

Well, at least, if this doesn't hurt reality, it does, in fact, give reality a well earned rest.

Edson's work is full of such resonances; but the image of the self alienated from oneself as well as others is central to his vision. Sometimes because we conceptualize perfection, other times because of our eccentricity, others because the social world creates absurd obstacles, still others because of our inability to love. There are other related concerns, naturally, the arbitrary objectification of the universe through science, the psychological impotence implied in the loss of limbs, the desire to manipulate and control instead of experience, but space limitations prevent me from going into all of them. Suffice to say that Edson's work, while difficult, even mysterious (although not in the unctuous way implied in the Harper & Row blurb), is incredibly rich and rewarding. And while not all

his poems jump off the page at you (there are occasional poems which suffer from being *solely* clever or cute, or are not organic enough to give life to the vision in the poem, or are controlled by an idea rather than allowing the idea to grow out of the poem), so many of his poems challenge us, make us laugh at ourselves, and most importantly, move us, that Russell Edson must be considered a major force in American poetry. It's long past time that Edson's underground following come to the surface, so we can give this poet the serious attention his work merits. Rather than labeling his work "genius," "surreal," or "mysterious," his work would be better served if we dealt with the fact that his unique combination of intelligence and wit, energy and irony, captures a sense of the reality we must face, whether we like it or not. So while Edson has not given reality its well-deserved rest, he has challenged it some, and if he has not yet gotten it to concede, he is giving it a marvelous contest.

— IRA SADOFF