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Russell Edson's *The Tunnel*: *Selected Poems*

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BOOK REVIEWS

Russell Edson. *The Tunnel: Selected Poems*. Field Poetry Series. Oberlin College Press. 1994. 229 pp. Paper: \$16.95

For the past thirty years, no one in American letters has been identified more than Russell Edson with that continuously shape-shifting form called, at various times, the new parable, the short-short, and the prose poem. This is not to say that Edson has proselytized the form, but that he has quietly yet persistently explored its possibilities. If the results of his explorations prove his importance in American literature, as *The Tunnel: Selected Poems* so definitively shows, they also identify him as an iconoclast of the first order.

The book contains a generous 171 poems chosen by the author from seven volumes published between 1964 and 1985. They are arranged chronologically, so one can, if one wants, seek patterns of thematic concern as well as technical growth, although, except for several elements to be discussed later, Edson's work has shown little change over the years, as if he had achieved maturity of vision and technique early on.

On the average, most of the poems run three-quarters of a page in length (roughly between 150 and 350 words), and, in their generally informal style, diction and overall structure, they most often resemble newspaper "items," what used to be called "fillers" or "boxes," which relate some arcane event or fragment of information along the lines of "man bites dog."

But at their wildest, those items cannot approach Edson's little narratives, since reading an Edson news item is like getting a report from the land of the psyche, or the Republic of Dreams, as if the newspaper for which he writes is printed for distribution on the other side of the moon. In his reports, a man marries an automobile ("The Automobile"), an old woman about to bury her dead mop finds that it's only fainted ("Charity"), a pet ape cannot convince his master that he is innocent of spilling coffee on himself ("Ape and Coffee"), and a dining room floats off into space ("The Abyss").

Edson, of course, is no reporter, yet his approach to language and to his dreamlike subjects often resembles a reporter's. The reader should keep this paradoxical situation in mind, since it is this reviewer's contention that Edson-as-iconoclast is primarily a breaker of forms: he subconsciously gravitates to genres and sub-genres (fairy tales, news items, etc.) whose conventions and structures set up expectations in the reader which the poet then destroys or satirizes.

Edson's short tales are rooted in riddles, conundrums, gnomic sayings, puzzles and enigmas. He belongs to a tradition that includes Kafka, Borges, Italo Calvino, Henri Michaux, the Sufi poets, the makers of Zen koans, the old testament prophets, and even Jesus. All of them used non-rational, short symbolic tales called parables, which are chiefly conveyed through paradox and metaphor, in order to give the incomprehensible at least a semblance of meaning.

Edson, like several of those mentioned above, is the writer as sleight-of-word trickster, the prestidigitator of the soul who pulls not rabbits but meanings out of the darkness inside the hat we call the universe. Magician, shaman, mystic, call him what you will—through his words he brings us back to primal definitions we have forgotten, so we can rediscover a wholeness of vision and sense of self we have lost in our pursuit of material comforts and consciousness-deadening technologies.

Not surprisingly, Edson's most recurrent themes concern the cycles of life, death and rebirth, the archetypal clash of the generations, and the relationships within the nuclear family—all made grotesque by their reflections in the fun-house mirrors of our times and his vision. An interesting addendum to these themes is Edson's poems on art and the artist, which progress from the daring seeker of "The Lighted Window," who chases the elusive window everywhere, through the prophetlike bringer of light of "The Intuitive Journey," who is "changing the past by changing the future," to the somber speaker of "The Sculptor," who knows that art is "less than life, yet more than death...."

Edson's universe is our dark side. Ferociously funny as they are frightening, his parables use psychology, philosophy and mythology in portraying the shadowy side of the human condition. The news items I talked about earlier are actually one of a dozen forms he employs or parodies. Others include, primarily, folk-and fairy-tales.

Edson's parables, as outlandish as they seem at first, offer a multitude of meanings and symbolic resonances. The already-mentioned "Ape and Coffee" provides a good example of Edson's method:

Some coffee had gotten on a man's ape. The man said, animal
did you get on my coffee?

No no, whistled the ape, the coffee got on me.

You're sure you didn't spill on my coffee? said the man.

Do I look like a liquid? peeped the ape.

Well you sure don't look human, said the man.

But that doesn't make me a fluid, twittered the ape.

Well I don't know what the hell you are, so just stop it, cried
the man.

I was just sitting here reading the newspaper when you
splashed the coffee all over me, piped the ape.

I don't care if you are a liquid, you just better stop splashing
on things, cried the man.

Do I look fluid to you? Take a good look, hooted the ape.

If you don't stop I'll put you in a cup, screamed the man.

I'm not a fluid, screeched the ape.

Stop it, stop it, screamed the man, you are frightening me.

The petty argument here between the ape and his master suggests the inability of the master to see anything from another perspective, and also suggests the I/Thou dichotomy that runs through so much of Edson's work. At the same time, the victimization of the ape by his master, another prevalent Edson theme, has both political overtones and deeper resonances relating to evolution, since man and ape have evolutionary connections. In addition, the dialogue between the two characters parodies logical argument, showing the difficulty of semantic and therefore philosophical discourse, and it follows the theater of the absurd tradition, found particularly in the plays of Ionesco, of demonstrating the meaningless of most conversation and the inability of people to communicate.

Edson achieves this resonance by populating his parables with archetypal human figures acting in the most commonplace situations, namely domestic scenes. Living rooms, bedrooms, kitchens, forests and meadows provide backdrops to his extraordinary happenings, and the players in these events are, for the

most part, nameless, identified as man, woman, mothers and daughters, fathers and sons, husbands and wives, old men and old women. All these members of the basic family unit play their roles in Edson's grotesque reflections of manners and metaphysics. At the same time, Edson's use of twentieth century machinery for a good deal of his images makes these folklike archetypes operate in a modern environment which is as immediate as it is unsettling, such as in "The Fight in the Meadow," where an aeroplane's propeller slices a charging bull into short-ribs.

Animals are also assigned archetypal characters, recalling their roles in fable. But many times Edson has them work against their fabulist identities, thereby breaking our cliched identification with them. He follows this practice with his human archetypes as well, once more upsetting the reader's expectations and assumptions. Such procedures continually surprise us by revealing a world we have never seen before, free of expectations and assumptions, and the inhibiting power of preconceived notions is a consistent target of Edson's poetry.

One of the delights in reading Edson's outrageous parables is the small touches that reside in each piece, the perfectly realized details and images. When an old woman can't tell herself from the porridge she eats, "her mind seems to float all over the room like a puff of dust slapped out of a pillow" ("The Old Woman's Breakfast"), and while canoeing upstairs, another Edson character encounters "several salmon passing us...like the slippered feet of someone falling down the stairs..." ("The Canoeing"). Many times these small touches keep the shorter pieces from being merely clever ideas.

Another way these small touches operate is by acting in opposition to Edson's supposed intentions. Many of the tales, for example, are dialogues between archetypal figures engaging in symbolic discourse. The atmosphere is heightened, the approach stylized, the story usually generic, certainly not realistic. Yet time and again Edson destroys his supposed intentions by making his archetypes react to occurrences within the tale as if they were ordinary people in everyday situations. In the fairytale "Old Folks," for example, an old woman continually asks her husband in a more and more panicky voice if they are "safe," thereby giving the old man—and Edson—the pretext for philosophizing on human destiny. But Edson undercuts this grandiloquent opportunity by having the old man, in a petty but very hu-

man manner, get exasperated at his wife's screaming.

Edson's use of the dialogue form is as integral to his method as the parable itself. Not only does he use dialogues in almost three quarters of his poems, but the subjects of his dialogues, as mundane as they may seem at first, many times parody the structure and language of philosophical debate and remind the reader of the dialogue's illustrious history as a genre, going back to its Platonic roots. Such a poem as "Of The Snake And The Horse," in both style and tone, is a good example of these parodic dialogues, as is "The Philosophers," with its comic testing of the I-think-therefore-I-am postulate.

Edson also uses many different styles of speech in his dialogues, demonstrating his excellent ear for spoken rhythms. In "One Two Three, One Two Three," a hilariously exaggerated parable built on a child's infantile desire to count and thereby order everything he experiences, the language of the child's parents is uneducated speech in diction, tense and syntax:

The old man said to his wife, will you make him stop
counting, because it's like having bugs crawling on
everything.

I can't, because he do it in his head where I can't make
him stop. He do it like in secret, said the old woman.

By the end of the poem, language, communication, and the family's relationships have broken down, and the father, who was annoyed by his son's incessant counting at the beginning, is being attacked by the boy in a parody of the Oedipal conflict.

In "The Changeling," another father-son poem, the heightened language has biblical nuances:

...But should you allow time to embrace you to its
bosom of dust, that velvet sleep, then were you served even
beyond your need...

and the poem ends,

But then his son became his father.
Behold, the son is become as one of us, said the father.
His son said, behold, the son is become as one of us.

Although most of Edson's pieces are narratives, and can therefore with validity bear identification as parables, a number are lyrical. The latter are usually based, as are many of the parables, on extending outrageous metaphors to their zanily logical conclusions, and fit the definition of conceits. The inventive initial comparisons, which are "premises" in the narratives, are among the most recognizable elements of Edson's art. This metaphorical approach can be seen at work in such pieces as "The Ox," where a man becomes the ox he metaphorically resembles in a manner reminiscent of Kafka's *The Metamorphosis*.

Surprisingly, little has been written about Edson's artistry—an artistry easily found in his mastery of language—and in the end, it is a writer's mastery of language that satisfies the reader most. True, Edson's grotesque visions and unexpected images are the most spectacularly evident part of his art—as well as an integral part of it—but they are brilliantly conveyed through "language." Readers tend to forget that it is not the enthralling idea "but how the idea" is put into words that creates the experience of literature for them. In this connection, Edson's mastery of language cannot be stressed enough, since "academic," and "purest" poets and literature professors question the validity of the prose poem as a literary form, seeing in it, possibly, a contradiction in terms. Considering the richness of the scene and idea evoked in Edson's short pieces, his work demonstrates a power of verbal compression few verse poets can emulate, and, of course, compression is one of a poet's most necessary technical prowesses—saying or implying the most in the least amount of words, using language at its most efficient level.

The verse poet is guided by line, a central pulse off of which he plays his various rhythms, whether he writes in closed-or free-verse. The prose poet has abandoned the line as the basis of his art, and has embraced the sentence in its place, replacing the stanza with the paragraph. As in the verse poem, the prose poem's rhythms can vary in intensity, can be songlike or spoken, pronounced or, dare the word be used, prosy.

Edson is a master of the sentence. His strategy calls for placing one sentence against another to achieve the complex rhythms which he develops within the constructs of his paragraphs. Much of the time, these paragraphs are straightforward in development. But just as the reader is lulled into syntactical expectations, Edson

adds a verbal flourish, a discordant phrase, or a deliberately awkward syntactical variation, so the reader is constantly reminded that nothing, even the structure of Edson's language, is to be taken for granted.

If this reviewer's preoccupation with linguistic matters seems farfetched, the extensive number of poems in *The Selected* from Edson's second volume, *What A Man Can See* (1969), justifies his concern. *What A Man Can See* is Edson's most verbally experimental book, and explores the basic concepts of grammar and usage. In poem after poem, Edson seems intent on destroying the sentence and then restructuring it, both syntactically and perceptually. At times he seems to be employing collage techniques or Burroughs' cut-up method, since he joins unrelated phrases and garbles syntax and tense, so that the resultant non-sequiturs not only abound but suggest unexpected meanings, as this fragment from "There Was" demonstrates. In the poem, Edson scrambles and then rearranges the words "man," "ceiling," "orange," "basket," "lobster," "house," "child," and "eats" in a number of variations, ending with

There was an eaten who was oranged by a child to
ceiling a please and a lobster that said basket when a house
was in a man.

Unlike the scientist dealing with matter identified by numbers, Edson is always aware that he is dealing with words that have established definitions and connotations, and so he is shifting the dimension of meaning in the reader's mind as he transposes sentence elements. In the end, Edson must have found such experimentation incompatible with his intentions, since he abandoned it after *What A Man Can See*, although, as noted earlier, there are unique verbal flourishes and unexpected usages throughout his work. Understand that in all these cases Edson is not concerned with perception in the epistemological sense, but in the more mundane area of learned responses, those limiting conceptions both of prejudices, clichés, and stereotypes—the unquestioning acceptance of social beliefs.

If Edson's verbal skills are evident in his compression, fine ear for spoken rhythms, various tones of voice, and precise use of figures of speech, it should always be remembered that he is saying the unsayable, putting into words for the first time his

fantastic situations and images. This is a different matter than the practices of "realistic" writers who try to describe the outside world in terms of verisimilitude.

The only misgivings this reviewer has about *The Selected Poems* is that it stops with a selection from *The Wounded Breakfast*, which was published in 1985. Since then Edson has brought out at least one more volume of prose poems, *Tick Tock* (Coffee House, 1992), and has published a number of poems, all of high quality, in magazines and anthologies, and it would have been good to have them represented in this volume. For even though his work has shown a maturity of vision and approach from the start, Edson has pursued a number of preoccupations and similarities of theme and image in each book, particularly in the later volumes where his vision has become darker, more apocalyptic.

But this is quibbling with an already generous volume, and one whose design and layout enhance Edson's prose constructions. The Field Poetry Series and the Oberlin College Press are to be praised for making available this long overdue collection of Edson's work which definitively shows him to be not only a consummate artist, but one of the most original and provocative literary figures of our time.

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