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The Poetry of Ross Donlon

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Abstract: Ross Donlon is part of the emerging poetry sub-culture in Australia. As a current Australian poet he too is international in outlook just as he seems to be imaginatively vital and exquisitely lyrical. As the study of his five collections show he is rich, clear and lucid. Besides being cosmopolitan he is visually strong, experimental and innovative. Like Max Harris he seeks to weld art and literature, and his erotic poems remind one of the celebrated A.D. Hope to whom love was 'religious mystery' and sex is 'sacrament' (O'Connor).

Keywords: poetica, Ross Donlon, contemporary, experience, Australian, relationship.

Ross Donlon is one of the contemporary emerging Australian Poets. His poems have been widely published in Australia, New Zealand and the USA. His works have been broadcast on Radio National's poetica and community. Till now he has published five collections. They are: *Tightrope Horizon* (Five Islands Press, 2003), *Shh and other love poems* (Mark Time Books, 2009), *My Ship* (Mark Time Books, 2009), *The Blue Dressing Gown* (Profile Poetry, 2011) and *The Awakening* (Mark Time Books, 2014). His poetry is not very difficult to understand, but it is different from the general run of poetry-making. He is honest in self-revelation as well as in revelation of the

realities of human relationships around him. He sounds personal yet universal. His concepts, themes and experiences make him write personal, lyrical poems, but he becomes ‘different’ and remarkable as he defies the conventional norms of a lyric. The private and personal experience of Ross Donlon becomes objective and impersonal. He makes his ‘I’ impersonal to reveal an egoless mind and to sound down-to-earth. He is an experimenter and does not like to stick to a particular trend of poetry writing. He has been successful in doing so. This makes his style unique. The variation in his style makes his poetry more interesting.

‘I’m shaping up the overall sense of the poems: your unflinching honesty really makes the book, I think, a little bombshell and, if I might say, quite outside the normal run of current poetry-making and with this I feel a natural accord: to write poems that are not overly knowing and sophisticated, over-intelligent, ironic or sardonic and hidden below a journalistic impersonal mind, but centre on the power of true feelings and try as best as is possible to name them. As Ted Hughes has said, “Maybe the reason we’re so affected by this sort of poetry, when it’s genuine, is that we are starved of it, and now we really need it” (Hughes 373).

Paul Deaton’s comment on the launching of Ross Donlon’s *The Blue Dressing Gown* (2011) points to the genuineness of the poet’s poetry. It also points to the poet’s aesthetics. Memory becomes an important element in his lyrical experiences. It is his strong sense of the past, personal and individual with which he recalls the days of his childhood and various events to construct and re-construct his life and vision. He appears factual, intelligent and empathetic.

Personal relationship

As Louise Oxley notes, “Ross Donlon is a fine observer of human frailties. In these poems, he leads us through the familiar sites where they often appear-- schoolyard, and dance-hall, bedroom and doctor’s room-- to the book’s heart: the tragedy of a father disintegrating in the aftermath of war. But whether grieving or poking

fun, the poems in this book are beautifully restrained; full of tact, wisdom and tenderness” (Donlon 2011, back cover).

Personal relationships form an important part of Ross Donlon’s poetry. Most of the poems on personal relationship are concerned with his father. In his collection *The Blue Dressing Gown*, he has dedicated a whole section titled “Bill” to his father. He narrates the tragic experiences of his father that he had suffered after the Second World War. His father could not return to him and to his mother after the end of the war, nor could Ross ever get an opportunity to see him even once. The memories, as recollected, also portray his tragedy of a fatherless child. With soul-feeling, the poet seems to recognize the factors beyond his control, and never blames his father for gradually killing himself by indulging in alcoholism and for staying away from the family. As he writes in the poem ‘Return to the ferry hotel’:

I couldn’t blame him for something I didn’t know. And
I didn’t know a lot of things.” (Donlon 2011, 61)

Several questions keep rising in his mind:

I wondered where he got the money for lodgings...
Why didn’t he go home to Kentucky? Was
he sick with something else he brought home from New
Guinea? Had
he fought it? (Donlon 2011, 57)

Through the use of the letters, telegram and reports, he recreates facts objectively and gives a description of the death of his father. The use of those outdated means of communication distinguishes him from other lyrical poets for serving as ‘new’ images and turning ironical from the current perspective. In fact, he develops a sort of “discontinuous narrative” as he describes the death of his father. He remains simple, objective and factual. He treats death the same way as life and living; death as part of life. This helps Ross Donlon turn his personal experiences/context objective and impersonal, for example, the description of his father’s death in ‘Telegram from San Francisco 1951’:

MAN ABOUT 34
BLUE EYES
ONE HUNDRED FIFTY ONE POUNDS
RED GREY HAIR
FIVE FEET EIGHT

DIED AT 90 EMBARCADERO
IDENTIFIED AS CHARLES WILSON DONLON
BY HOTEL CLERK (Donlon 2011, 48)

In poems like ‘Telegram from San Francisco 1951’, ‘Reply Collect’, ‘Coroner’s Report’ etc., the poet makes use of available documents and converts them into a readable poetic form, very much as in ‘found poems’. There is yet another perspective that makes the poet different from other contemporary Australian poets. Donlon not only portrays the negative side of his father as irresponsible towards his family but also shows his other humane side which is positive. He shares the memory of his father’s concern for him and his mother as he talks about the trouble that he had to face after returning to San Francisco. His father’s concern for them and his troubles can be traced in the poem ‘Letter on Embarcadero Y.M.C.A. Letterhead Dated 1948. Posted 1948’:

I love you Peggy and always will
I want to see my Son
to help bring him up in this world

Peg do you want me now.
I’m down Peg sick and lonesome but I’ll come back up
For you and Ross I’ve been through a thousand hells
Since I came to San Francisco
But I’ve never stopped loving you and Ross. (Donlon 2011, 40)

Bronwyn Lea rightly appreciates this aspect of the poet: “Writing with a warm and human touch: the father poems are a knockout. Just wonderful.” (Donlon 2011, back cover)

Other than his father, he has dedicated poems to his mother, grandfather, grandmother, daughters, and unborn grandchild.

Aesthetics in his poetry

Donlon's poetic consciousness is much influenced by various art forms such as paintings, sculptures, music, poetry, etc. He uses images and symbols interpretatively which is the mark of a genius. He creates a verbal image of his own as he interprets his experiences of watching works of art such as paintings or listening to a piece of music. For example, in the poem 'The Scream' which is based on the painting of the same title by Edvard Munch (1893), he relates the celebrated image of the painter to his ninety years old mother's scream. For Munch, the painting represents the universal anxiety of the modern man, but for Donlon, it is the image of a woman's survival, with a sense of irony:

I'm sorry,
And mean no disrespect
to the iconic image,
it's just that *The Scream*,
that primal cry
by Edvard Munch,
always reminds me
of the first time
I ever caught sight
of my ninety year old mother
in bed
without her dentures." (Donlon, *Glass Air*)

The poet ironically compares Munch's woman with his own mother without the dentures. In another poem 'About Suffering' based on the poem 'Musée des Beaux Arts' by W.H. Auden, Donlon talks about the world's indifference to human suffering. Auden refers to the painting, *Landscape with the Fall of Icarus* by Bruegel. In Greek mythology, Icarus succeeded in flying with the wings made by his father, using feathers secured with wax, and fell into the sea and drowned. The ploughman ignores his cry to be unimportant. As Auden writes in the poem:

...the ploughman may
Have heard the splash, the forsaken cry,
But for him it was not an important failure; (Auden)

Donlon, on the other hand, replaces Icarus with Saint Sebastian, who was an early Christian saint and martyr. It is said that he was killed during the Roman Emperor Diocletian's persecution of Christians. He is commonly depicted in art and literature tied to a post or tree and shot with arrows. His plight remains unnoticed by the larger crowd. As Donlon writes in the poem:

On clouds above, cherubs gambol while
relatives weep. St Sebastian's chest is patterned prettily with
darts
but Sebastian the martyr has gone." (Donlon, *Glass Air*)

Donlon's description can also be related to the crucifixion of Jesus Christ.

By the time nails go crunching in, the victim's face
is in another place. Skyward rise the eyes and there's almost
a smile
as arms hang like a shroud." (Donlon, *Glass Air*)

There are a few other poems like 'White Cockatoos' (Donlon 2011, 14), where Ross Donlon uses myths and imagery with interpretation.

Association with nature

Nature also plays an important role in Ross Donlon's poetic creativity. He associates himself and human life with nature and its creatures. As a keen observer of nature, he turns anthropomorphic. For example, in the poem 'Budgies', he presents birds as his friends. He represents them as his guides and shows his intimacy with them:

They taught me to be tender, their claws
clutching my fingers like small children
holding on as we might cross the road.
So when storms crashed or spreadeagled cat
slammed them back and forth in the dark
I was afraid for them, playmates of an only child.

I gave them love, names, and histories,

learnt about life and death - for some did die,
cold as cuttlefish on the sandy floor -
so their leaving was hard to understand.” (Donlon, *Glass Air*)

In another poem ‘White Cockatoos’ he observes the activities of white cockatoos and compares them with the Sphinx of the myth of Oedipus:

You wouldn’t want one
to fly into your chest and hold you,
sulphur crest cocked in your face
daring you to speak,
the way the Sphinx did to Oedipus.” (Donlon 2011, 14)

Donlon seeks for peace and silence in the lap of nature. As he writes in another poem ‘The Schooner’:

I slip the boat,
cool for a moment
by the schooner’s side. Water
laps the hull, spreads time
through light.
I push into silence
and a mirror sky.” (Donlon 2009a, 2)

With his preference for brevity, concreteness and affinity with nature, he is drawn to the Japanese mode of haiku, and creates verses in 5/7/5 syllables stanzaic pattern. As in the poem ‘Watching the Sea Haiku’, which is based on the bronze sculpture *Man Watching the Sea* by Rick Amor, he gives us the picture of a man and the sea:

Hands in his pockets
coat flapping against the rail
he sees the tide out.

By a winter tree
a man looks over the rail
as the sea watches.

Eyes blind to the view

he remembers one summer
a lifetime ago.” (Donlon 2014, 18)

He also composes independent haiku which shows his awareness of the living moments of life:

After that last dream
my former partner and I
went to counseling.” (Donlon 2014, 8)

The poet’s excellence, however, lies in his experimentations in the Japanese form of poetry:

He’s ripped her skirt/ her eyes/ are popping...
1, 2, 3.1, 2, 3.
If Jude’s bra strap/ snaps now/ they’re cactus
1, 2, 3.1, 2, 3. (Donlon 2014, 10-11)

Ross Donlon effectively creates momentness of a moment.

Poetry of love

Love is a major theme in Ross Donlon’s poetry. He recollects the memory of the time spent with his beloved in his poems. He presents sensuous images of physical relationship without being vulgar. Rather, he makes the physical body a means of the soul’s union. As he writes in the poem ‘Shh’:

don’t kiss me yet
just rest your lips against my mouth
while I taste the faintest touch
of you.
But breathe me
while our senses scan the past
until we’re here
curves and angles resting comfortably
complex lives a perfect fit.” (Donlon 2009b, 4)

Likewise, in another poem ‘with her’, he highlights the physical relationship as an important part in love and it is not restricted with the growth of the age:

nearly sixty
yet we slide beneath the sheet
like children slipping beneath the first wave of summer
and it’s she who turns first
to fold her hair before it’s caught
as I turn to hold her
my palm floating across her back

pausing then stroking again
like soothing something young and wild
shifting her thigh across mine
kissing her lips like a kiss before sleep”(Donlon 2009b, 6-7)

A self-proclaimed ‘reality wrestler’, dreamer, and minimalist (Donlon 2011, 96), Ross Donlon, despite being ‘Frankly Popular’ (Donlon 2011, 87), has been awaiting recognition as a poet in his own country and overseas. With his range of poems – dark and light, comic and love, and exploratory, the poet registers a strong presence in contemporary Australian poetry scene. He writes skilled and well-crafted poetry with an awareness of love, tenderness, relationship, worlds of nature, and music, and fine arts. He is restrained, refined, perceptive, personal and passionate as he observes people, places and ideas, at times with a sense of detachment, or something beyond, seeking to connect with a larger society as well as with his own inner self.

Ross Donlon seems to unveil himself as much as to reveal the world around, interpreting his observations, thoughts, and ideas with a passionate naturalness. His images are interpretations of the inspiring sensuous frames– be it verbal, musical, visual or complex of personal relationships, especially the father-son relationship that ingrain his poetic memory. Michael Sharkey seems right when he says: “His self-deprecation, understatement and human sympathy are combined with enviable tact throughout....” (Donlon 2011, back cover) but, not without a subtle sense of humour or irony.

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