

“No man is an island”: Crossing Thresholds – Journeying with the Recent Poetry of Syd Harrex¹

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Abstract

Syd Harrex’s poetry has been widely published both overseas and in Australia, and in retirement he continued to write and to be involved in the mentoring of creative writing. He always considered that his professional activities, which had brought him in contact nationally and internationally with contemporary writers, had significantly nourished his own development as a poet.

In 2009, as we were working with Syd to gather poems together for *Five Seasons*, he experienced the sudden diminution of eyesight, the onset of macular degeneration, and this radically changed the way he was now able to compose. This paper explores the connections between Syd Harrex’s recent and earlier poetry, the ways in which his creative process changed with the failing of eyesight, and the impetus to write back to his Tasmanian-islandic self through the memories of childhood, as prompted by the melodies and rhythms of everyday life.

Keywords

Memory, islands, *Five Seasons*, littoral, transcreation, vision

As John Donne wrote, “No man is an island, entire of itself” (1057). Perhaps drawing upon Donne’s reflection, Syd Harrex has described his inheritance as *islandic*. His island-self was created in the Australian island State of Tasmania where he lived out his first three decades. Stories of shipwrecks and imagined maroonings shaped Syd’s boyhood games; his island childhood was influenced not only by the visceral experience of living separate from the main, but also by

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the literature of islands, such as Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe*, Barrie's *The Coral Island*, Stevenson's *Treasure Island*, Golding's *The Lord of the Flies* and Shakespeare's *The Tempest*. In adulthood, Syd had a long association with Kangaroo Island in South Australia. It is in the tranquil town of Penneshaw that Syd's more recent writing-self had found a place of solace, inspiration and respite. Overlooking Backstairs Passage, the narrow body of water that separates the island that locals call KI from the South Australian mainland, Penneshaw boasts views of the ferry crossings and the lighthouse signals that beam in from its mainland counterpart, the little town of Cape Jervis. Syd wrote in a recent notebook:

My life's an isthmus
betwixt and between
the island and mainland
where seabirds hold aerial,
beach, turf, and tidal
disputes about sovereignty.

Islands and the main are connected like body and soul. Syd's relationship with islands was both visceral and metaphysical. Inhabiting both the body of the main and the soul of the island shaped his poetic self: "No man is an island, entire of itself; every man is a piece of the continent, a part of the main" (Donne 1057).

As we find in the following unpublished poem Syd wrote in 2010, the two islands of Tasmania and KI have helped to forge his identity.

Versifications in Time and Space

Dedicated to Melinda and Molly

At long, long last
I am beginning to be
who I was meant to be
irrespective of sun, moon, stars
and all that horoscope nonsense.
Believe everything at your fingertips
and grow your own survival.

In pursuit of vagabond images
I cast my plagiarising net
far and wide across the straits
that have separated my island
lives like continents of otherness.

My identities have been forged, in all
weathers, by moonlit gateway straits.

Donne got it right with undone
but wrong about that dismissal
of his song superbly metaphysical.

In late 2009, as we were working to gather poems for his most recent collection, published in 2011 as *Five Seasons*, Syd experienced the sudden diminution of eyesight, the onset of macular degeneration, and this radically changed the way he was now able to compose. The new process of creative development took on a much slower rhythm. No longer could Syd tinker with words on the page. He had to craft in the mind's eye, making his recent poems more like flashes of lightning; more oracular, yet no less ocular; the forms free-falling and less controlled, but signalling a lightning lucidity.

What emerged with the emergence of failing sight were the new risks and renovations, the resculpturings and metamorphoses, as he realised new versions of the islandic self. The postcolonial imperative of writing back became very much a personal necessity. Losing real vision inspires remembered vision; Syd's recent poems create a new way of seeing that is of the senses, while transcending them.

The poems we proofread and typed before 2009 were always in the Modernist vein: aware of form and the breaking of rules, full of literary allusion, reminiscences and word-play. In this sense, Syd's poems have remained unchanged. The changes manifest as subtle shifts that we have uncovered slowly as we reworked together fragments of speech, echoes, quotations, allusions, melodies. The poems, as they arrived in Syd's head and worked their way through his pen down onto the page, were now fugitive, and the poems that once came to us (when Syd could still see) as highly polished, reworked and complete were now – in the absence of sight – bursts of ideas, maps of memories, songlines. We found that as we were typing these poems we had to become interpreters, not just of Syd's handwriting, but also of potential meanings that lay quivering beneath the surface.

The following are two poems that focus on memory, and that explore how losing real vision inspires remembered vision. These are unrevised poems, and as such are purely from Syd's pen with only a couple of tinkering made by us to allow for pauses and sense.

Catch 23

Because I cannot read
I can only write
but the catch is, of course,
I cannot read what I write,
trapped in the cell of paradox.

Islanders United

For Janet Wilson

When you arrive in Penneshaw
prepare for Jamesian shocks
of recognition, with New
Zealand memories paddling in
your mind, but also not
the views and vistas I
promised you because my
newly achieved affinity with
Homer, Milton, Aldous
Huxley, and Ved Mehta
as I attempt to show you
something of what I used to see
here while you see it for
the first time. But I still
can offer visual guidance
of memory-saturated times
here where you contemplate
the necessary separation from
mainlands periodically
to recover memory's old melody.

Everyone is an island inside
the social self, but islands
are beautiful places caressed
by the abiding sounds of the sea.

Syd wrote in his notebook, "To repossess our memories is a basic instinct." The libraries of associations, of recollections, of memory became more and more a part of his spontaneous writing. Syd's recent poetry is more automatic, and therefore less controlled. His poems are more spacious, leaving breathing room for the reader to interpret. They are shorter, often, yet complete in the way that a seed holds within it the materials of an entire tree.

Syd's new approach to writing necessitated a new way of envisioning his poems speaking to one another (island-connected), and so we arrived at the idea of ordering and grouping a collection of poems around the seasons, which has now been published as *Five Seasons*. The inclusion of a fifth season was necessary and natural, to provide a home for the poems that we call "Out of Season." Within that fifth season you will find poems that tackle the "Blind Side" head on. Other poems that have found their way into four traditional seasons are no less confronting in their risk-taking. Yet many describe lyrically, gently, the guiding principles of *Eros* and *Thanatos*, of love and death that have shaped Syd's poetry for decades. The moon, sun and stars are charted, as are

love, fate and the mysteries of nature. We believe that Syd's later poems are now more complexly sensuous than previous ones. As one sense recedes, the others rally to the fore. Sounds and music feature more than ever. Syd's observations were still likely to be of the visual kind, but more and more poems were shaped out of something he had overheard, and a poem was just as likely to be formed out of a long-remembered song as it was out of a present moment of seeing the moon rising in the sky. Syd shared Li Po's gift to "palm/poems out of skies" (Harrex 31).

Before Syd's vision was altered, he was a poet who spent time with his poems, meticulously crafting them like a gardener tending possibilities for future fruiting and flowering. Later, Syd had to rely on instinct, and his many years of experience as a wordsmith (constant gardener) had left him with an astute command of language and form. While he could no longer read to himself what he had just penned, the words fluidly emerged into their shapes, cloud-like, looking and behaving just like poems that had always been there. His craftsmanship, inherent. He wrote into exercise books, divining moments and releasing them in one sitting before those moments eluded him. Syd's recent poems are mercurial, slippery things that he would seize and wrestle to the page. The poems increasingly were concerned with the collision of recollections with the immediacy of a sensuous present. Perhaps Syd may have considered that one benefit of this new way of writing is that it freed him of the poem once it had been intuited.

Syd captured something of this new crafting process, and something of the way he saw himself still ever-evolving as a poet, in two recent poems.

A Stranger to Myself

My tinkering days are over,
my divining days have just begun.
I used to think the sun was awesome
rising and declining;
I still have a vestige of that belief
but now, in autumn's mistiness
and the final colouring of the leaf
I think I can revise not only my strategies
for disbelief in the turning of the leaf
for gold and red will remain
my favourite desperate colours
when the end returns yet again.

A Critic's Nightmare

Poor fellah my editor,
I concede my handwriting
in the hurly-burly of
my eye in a fuse frenzy
rolling, has to also fathom
the plunging necklines of my
metres, the harp
exquisite music of my lines
tossed overboard as my ship
of poesy is battered
and wrecking in a fearsome
storm of automatic inspiration;
influenced of course, as are
all aesthetic moderns, by
'The Drunken Boat' as it's best
known in English – tossing
all-ways in Verlaine's bedroom,
got on with the serious
business of dying with eyes wide open.

Syd's daily writing practice became a personal necessity. He wrote to stay buoyed on the sensuous tides of everyday; pen and paper and manuscript circulation anchored him to the world; his island-self wrote to stay connected to the "main." Reflecting on what writing poetry always meant to Syd, he said, "it is the constant questioning of what images work for life and what images are dependant on life." For Syd, life and poetry were one and the same. Syd was more prolific towards the end of his life than he ever was before writing poetry became a way of re-visioning his lost vision.

We have a mountain of exercise books containing riches yet to be unearthed that we liken to Syd's sacred Mount Wellington – the mountain of his childhood that looms more than ever in his recent poetry. Syd spoke spontaneously in his writing – a moment-to-moment lyrical elasticity – and we gathered the poems as they were given to us, precious gifts. We have been compiling a selection of Syd's poems that are guided by the feverish hand of *Eros*, called *Poems Fall in Love*. And walking beside *Eros* is always *Thanatos* reminding us that in the end, it is only life and love and death that matter. Here is the title poem from Syd's soon to be published collection of love poetry.

Poems Fall in Love

His poems fall in love with her voice
as she reads them to him with poise,

delicacy and a respect for the waiting
silences which also have something to say,
an innuendo slant in an image, or a hint
in the rhythm of a leitmotif in Chopin
perhaps, or a jazz rhythm recalling
Ella Fitzgerald who demonstrates why
old songs never die, never die...

A companion volume of poetry (islands ever united) will be called *In the half-light* and is concerned with the sense of illumination that comes from being deprived of light. The poems write back, as always to Syd's poet precursors and guiding lights, and they write to the lasting impressions that burn for all time in our memories: the images dependant on life. Here is a poem from *In the half-light*.

To Close Your Eyes

For Jane

Yesterday, and yesterday,
and yesterday back
to the first syllable
of unrecorded time
my dream was fissuring
away until consciousness
came to my sunrise
rescue, celebrating with magpies
opening our dream-time eyes
and Chopin waltz time
out of the throats of birds
invisible in the branches.
Better at times like this
not to see than not to hear
at least for as long as
it takes for a sonata
to close your eyes until
all is vibrantly still.

The collaboration with Syd is ongoing and will be continually renewed. We will keep Syd's Mount Wellington bathed in light, and we will keep making the ferry crossings between our island lives, in the spirit of friendship, collegial inspiration and continued creative exchange. Carrying Syd's poems across the threshold from darkness into light has embraced all three of us in a dynamic process of transcreation. In a recent act of divination, Syd wrote: "I start where backwards always was waiting/not where the sun rose, but in the dark/and where forwards is the promise of rain/on a delicate mourning/What can I

salvage? The beauty of what is/inherent – the lovers of poetry – without them/who would I be?” For Syd, his mates, his kin, his beloved poet-predecessors and his editors are the lovers of poetry that kept isolation and darkness at bay. Through poetry and friendship, Syd’s islandic self was connected to the main. Syd was “involved in mankind” (Donne 1057).

Our work with Syd now continues as we, Melinda and Molly, bring together old-mate poems for near-future publication. Together with Syd, whose words we still hear rich, loquacious and vital, we see more.

We invite readers of *Asiatic* to journey to Syd’s Mount Wellington, and reflect on the many ways in which, as Kirpal Singh recently noted in his review of *Five Seasons*, Syd’s poems “enrich by enlarging our vision of life and living” (169).

Up and Down the Slopes of Mount Wellington

He had patiently abided
 with Winter, shoving frost-
 dew iced breezes down
 the mountain to sloping valley;
 had hoarded pen, paper,
 wine, and incarcerating memories.
 But once melting ice and snow
 graduated into sun-lyrical
 creeks – supporting gravity-defying
 trout – as the confetti wild flowers
 sucked in the new-birth sunshine,
 the mentality of hermitage, too,
 joined the gentle race of melting
 snow into lyrically pure emerging
 pianoforte and flute-ing streams
 meandering between blackberry bush
 and daisy-daubed green banks
 where looping the loop moths,
 ants, and colourful miniatures,
 were re-appraising the birthing
 of the spring and its prospects.

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Syd Harrex with Molly Murn (right) and Melinda Graefe (left)