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Error *by Elizabeth Campbell (Review)*

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There is something about the poetry of Elizabeth Campbell that syncopates like an idling Harley Davidson. In the poem "destiny", written mainly in lines of fourteen to sixteen syllables, the urge to settle into a steady iambic rhythm is constantly frustrated, only to return again to its regular beat before once again hopping sideways in distinctive fitfulness:

> She wrote a poem too, my grandmother, years before she gassed
> herself like Sylvia Plath. She was a teacher as well
>
> but lost it and went into a ward. Left a small boy and girl.

With the fourth line the poem itself slips away, jumping two generations, to a poem "printed in the school magazine in year ten," a poem "about hope and Spring." Is this preoccupation with the past the "Error" which provides the title of both the volume's first section, and of the collection itself? In the previous poem the reader is asked:

> What part of your mind
> should you give to the past – a third? Half? More
> as you grow older?"

Many of the poems in this section rest upon memories: of childhood, of family history, and of regret. Perhaps the burden of the past is best set aside and ignored in favour of a new, fresher present and future, but it is clearly also useful to carry such baggage around, if only as a store for poetic inspiration.

But life demands a price be paid, perhaps in madness. The moving, untitled poem which begins "What is madness and can horses have it?" describes the tortured life of a gelding with a brain tumour, while "The mad, unseen, are nuns to us" (the second of two poems about the Old Testament figure, Job), with its reference to convents and mental hospitals, suggests that life itself is a total institution of the kind described by

Erving Goffman in his 1957 paper "On the Characteristics of Total Institutions". According to Goffman, the inmate of a total institution "begins a series of abasements, degradations, humiliations, and profanations of self. His self is systematically, if often unintentionally mortified" (24). Is it, then, worth it? Is life nothing but a big mistake? A drawn-out melodrama of pain and humiliation? The final poem of the section, "happiness", is a précis of negative utilitarianism which begins, grudgingly, in favour of existence:

> You decide, on balance, you are happy to exist.
> Because the balance of happiness is relief –

but having analysed the nature of this relief, the poem concludes, inevitably, that "you are surprised now you ever agreed." Life is a mistake and if we were consulted, before it began, why on Earth would anyone bother?

The consequence of life, the corollary of error, is fear, the theme of the volume's second section. In an explicit nod to the Creation and the Fall of Man ("beyond snakes' silent innocence of symbol") the first poem describes the children's fear of the Snake-Man's annual visit – a fear that is ultimately and intimately tethered to life's transience. The children huddle together, their knees touching, as if

> the naked waiting ankle were portal
> to the death-world, the death-life:
> where we live within fear of death as in a room.

This idea of the death-life is continued in "the diving bell" about a visit to the cinema to see

> the film about the man trapped
> in a paralysed body

(presumably Julian Schnabel's 2007 film *The Diving Bell and the Butterfly* – incidentally, this theme has become something of a genre in its own right. Consider Dalton Trumbo's 1971 film *Johnny Got His Gun* and Alejandro Amenábar's 2004 *Mar adentro/The Sea Inside*). Despite the horror of the "man-metaphor" on screen, the overwhelming self intrudes and the poet is "distracted by the pain in my leg". Which is fortunate; stricken reality imposes itself on the questionable message of the film: "why should brokenness be truth?" Does suffering bring wisdom? If so, it is yet another of God's cruel tricks:

> Diminished to be magnified, pure mind
> locked in pure body

summarises the poet, only to immediately conclude, somewhat dismissively, that "he dies in the final scene:" These doubts about the merits of corporeal purity arise again, obliquely, in the last section of the collection with reference to the Cathars, a gnostic religious sect which flourished in the French Pyrenees from the eleventh to the thirteenth centuries. The Cathars believed that salvation could only be obtained through an ascetic purification of the body, but as the poem "Sirventes" wryly remarks

the Cathars came,
like flies, and now are gone: these Pyrenees remain.

The idea that life is to be enjoyed, that life itself is all we have, is central to the fourth section. The first poem, "Ithaka", is inspired by Constantine P. Cavafy's poem of the same name. For Cavafy, it is the journey of life which counts, an assertion that Cambell would like to share but which fear can all too easily undermine (as Cavafy also understood). Campbell responds uncertainly to the Greek poet's inducement to make the most of the hedonistic pleasures to be found on the shores of the eastern Mediterranean sea:

if fear
is your waiting wife, you'll count all night
the Alexandrias burned, isles bounded, stars fixed,
and rise to a self as settled as a curse.

We are warned of the error inherent in thinking too much, in acquiring "knowledge of my own soul".

The final section is devoted to the six fifteenth century Franco-Flemish tapestries known as the "Dame à la Licorne". The poems are concerned with love and its redemptive power; its ability to reconcile the world and the soul:

Was this the only way
to love the earth: to love
you in it?

But love can also be treacherous:

I chose a lover who loved death
and feared it and found it in me.

There seems to be an incompatibility between love of life and concern for the soul. The choice must be made: this life or the next. In the poem, "Planh: mon seul desir", life is chosen and the lover, who

put me gently away with all the other
death loving things of the world

is abandoned: "I left him to it".

The last poem of the collection: "canso: a mon seul desir" is inconclusive, an ending forewarned in the earlier poem "Ithaka":

An old respectable trick, I've done it,
This making a perfectly ended poem
that tells the reader 'don't waste
your time on endings'

“Canso: a mon seul desir” links, gnostic-like, the lower, material world with the higher, spiritual plane but, in the final lines of the book, offers only an open-ended question:

> the emptied, the beseeching gaze
>
> Of a heart whose eyes are cast down.
> She grows the question
>
> Up out of her head like a ladder.

Perhaps the greatest error is to try and resolve questions of a metaphysical nature, questions which are, by definition, unanswerable. Other errors are submission to fear and egocentricity, a concentration on self, including an obsession with the past. Yet life cannot avoid these traps, or it would not be life. Perhaps the greatest error is to assume that there are any answers.

Works cited

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