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A REVIEW OF ROBERT CLINTON'S *TAKING EDEN*

Robert Clinton's *Taking Eden* won the 1998 Katheryn A. Morton Prize in Poetry. Most poems in this book rich with implication seek, beyond the busyness of day-to-day existence and sometimes within it, a realm of more authentic experience. Poems of daylight awareness vie with poems of dark underconsciousness. Here and there fragments of primitive ritual, ancient Oedipal antagonism, and oddly compelling statements that don't quite make sense rise up to light.

Over a third of the nineteen poems in Part I show us a father-son relationship from the point of view of the son, a typically naive child, who views his parents with wonder and awe. The last four stanzas of "My Father" reveal this mythic inflation in the son's perception of his father:

When my father comes to live with us at night I ask him—
do the animals know that we can't see well in the dark,
but he's fast asleep. In his chair he's like a lion.

In the morning I am dressed by unseen hands, my mouth
Is rinsed of dreams, my eyes are fixed for daylight.

My father has lifted and gone. I climb in his chair
for a minute, and hear his men calling him

up and down the roads.

Not much happens. They don't even talk to each other. Son attempts to initiate a conversation, but father—who later in the poem "has lifted and gone," like a deity ascending to his far-off dwelling place—has fallen asleep. Sitting there in his thronelike chair, he is "like a lion," king of beasts. Afterwards, sitting in that chair himself for a few moments, son can hear "his

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men”—a phrase suggestive of fealty or servitude—call him to his unimaginable life of adventure “up and down the roads.” Three poems later, in “Coal,” in which son seems to be an adult, we learn that father (now dead?) had been a miner and that those roads he had literally traveled up and down were underground coal roads. Perhaps, then “his men” were those to whom he was answerable, not those answerable to him. With one exception, all Clinton’s poems of boyhood naivete are quietly ironic. Eden, we later realize, existed only in our head.

The contradictory details of the boy’s fuzzy recollection notwithstanding, “The Red-Backed Book” shows us genuine closeness as father reads son to sleep at bedtime. We never learn what damaged this relationship, but later poems in Part I, such as “A Visit Home” and “My Sunday,” in which son is now more man than boy, imply an irreparable rift. Mother in “A Visit Home” is referred to only as “A woman,” father only as “Man in the corner.” Father and son don’t speak to each other. Mother at one point says, “*Why are you here?*” as if son had no right to visit without sufficient justification. Mother and father in this poem behave less like parents and more like those cherubim, fierce guardian lion-birds, stationed to prevent Adam and Eve from returning to the Garden. “My Sunday” and “The Corn Doll,” with their confusing but disturbing elements of primitive ritual, blood sacrifice, and perhaps Oedipal conflict, imply that we wake from the dream of Eden into a world bordering on nightmare. Still, in “Coal,” the speaker receives two underground visions, one visual (of the supporting, life-sustaining mother), one aural (of the unseen, singing father, “him who named me”). What has shattered in the above-ground world of sunlight remains unbroken in subterranean darkness.

Part I ends with the tour de force “Treetops,” in which the speaker imagines having a tender, though at times enigmatic, relationship with his unborn, unconceived, never-to-exist son. The corresponding tour de force poem that all but concludes Part II is “The Good Dread Wife,” in which the speaker recounts his peculiar relationship with the not-exactly-human woman, his muse, he will not exactly marry. Part II, then, marks a movement in the life of the implied protagonist of this book. In these twenty poems, he is no longer a son looking back at his boyhood. He is now a man in search of some touch of Eden that will sanctify—or offer sanctuary from—his postlapsarian life.

Artists often find Eden in their art. We see this in three Part II poems. “Solitary” uses masturbation as a metaphor for writing poems. As false as it is

true, this fanciful notion is happily corrected by “Happiness,” which gainsays simplistic ideas about poetic inspiration. The poet, self-indulgently venting his momentary despondency (“How here is empty/ How I am an empty box”), happens upon the phrase “greenest melancholy,” begins playing with its possibilities, and soon discovers that the blank-wall world he was trapped in now “is windows.” His wife, reading the poem the next morning, commiserates with him, unaware of the “melancholy green/ that glints amazing/ on her garden table.” Ironies abound in this deceptively simple poem. More complex is the delightful and exasperating “The Good Dread Wife,” in which nothing seems certain. Together these three poems give us glimpses into a poet’s inner life.

Six poems in Part II, as well as six in Part I, are about journeys. Two about historical American journeys, “Pilgrim’s Progress” and the title poem, show that those who first came to this land and those who at various later times pushed westward in search of a better life were disillusioned by the harsh realities of their imagined Edens. The other four journey poems attempt to enter sacred space.

The narrator of “In New Hampshire” drives up the road to Otter Creek Dam, noting the unending blight of human habitation, from the edge-of-town squalor of “a house of metal, its discarded wheels/ a decoration for the hill behind” to the forest-clearing squalor of “a beat-up shack . . . against a tree.” The poem ends by asking, “*What, in God’s name, / am I doing here?*”—that fortuitous “in God’s name” perhaps implying that this journey, too, is a failed pilgrimage.

“Four Days” is about a similar journey, this one apparently more successful, though its surprise last stanza, emphasizing (as does the title, of course) an unexplained four-day absence of an unidentified someone from an unspecified somewhere, strikingly recalls the ending of “Lazarus” in Part I, in which Lazarus literally and quite successfully goes back to nature, finds death preferable to life, finds it life-giving/life-sustaining, and finds his return to life, four days later, a fate worse than death. If the four days of “Four Days” are those of Lazarus’ sojourn in the country of the dead, then Clinton here obliquely evokes attitudes we associate with ancient earth-mother religions so successfully eradicated by Judaism and Christianity.

In the other two journey poems, the prerequisite death is not that of the body. “North” takes an imagined journey “straight north to the pole/ with-

out meeting anyone else.” Solitude is not the only requirement. One must travel naked, so to speak, “leaving behind what I have packed in a box under a tree.” To leave my things is to leave me, divesting myself of me so not-me will be unencumbered by all that baggage. By poem’s end the narrator reaches the *axis mundi*—“still point of the turning world,” Eliot called it in *Four Quartets*. “North” concludes with the narrator “coming on the pole at sunset and no one there and/ everything turning above.” Leaving world and self (“no one there”) behind, he has an oceanic (“everything”) or quasi-mystical experience, the outward journey being perhaps little more than metaphor.

With its incantatory repetitions and its ritualistic detail, “This Means,” immediately following “North,” conceals as much as it reveals in spite of the implied promise of the title. This time the journey is toward “she.” The “he” giving enigmatic clues about “she” to the narrator functions as mystagogue, guiding the initiate into the secrets of what resembles an ancient mystery cult based in nature worship. The poem, minus its middle two stanzas, follows:

This means she has passed here,
pointing to where I could see only
hills of grass and unturned stone.

This means she has stopped here,
he said, pointing to where I could see only
pools of water in the shade, old oak trees,
holly trees, and laurel.

.....

This means she will speak now
what is her substance, and her temper,
and her end, he said, listen:
but I heard no solvent voice
saying in the white fields, saying
where the dunes began.

This means I have a key,
he said: he took a key out

from his pocket,
fitted it to water,
was at once invisible.

The initiate, having attained a state of psychic readiness, learns the way: downward, through extinction in the perfect embrace of water. “North” and “This Means” regard ego as a little raft bobbing blithely and blindly up and down on a vast ocean it is unaware of, carried on the back of a great unseen current. In such a context an Eden experience is a depth experience, oceanic and archetypal, profoundly meaningful in ways that elude explanation.

The painting on the front cover of *Taking Eden* is Rodney Hatfield’s *The Boat*. Its (childlike?) (primitive?) simplicity is disturbing if we take it at its (unspoken) word. A man alone stands in a small boat, arms extended horizontally. In cruciform posture himself, he holds some sort of cross in each hand. His face is covered with or has at last become a tribal mask, signifying the extinction of personal identity. Those crosses probably signify the same thing: the sacrifice of superficial ego on the altar of deep self, the death prerequisite to absorption within the all. Sky and sea are nearly indistinguishable, as if this man were lost—which is to say, found—in the middle of an endless, beginningless *axis mundi* anywhere-everywhere-nowhere beyond space and time: the ultimate, inexplicable Eden Clinton seems bent on taking.