

Stephen Edgar, *Exhibits of the Sun* (Black Pepper Publishing, 2014)

Meditations on being and knowing habituate the text, whose speakers struggle to come to terms with their limitations: What can't I know? What can't I be? Stephen Edgar draws on a rich body of literature to explore ontologies and phenomenology, and crafts poems that are so dynamic, the reader will find him/herself in the text, throughout the text, as s/he asks new questions alongside the speakers, or perhaps identifies with one of the many voices that surface. Given the scope of philosophical and poetical thought from which the poet draws, not all referenced authors are mentioned explicitly. What one finds, then, is an intricate intertextuality in Edgar's marvellous and marvellous tenth book, *Exhibits of the Sun*. In this way, form echoes content, in that what is seen or known is no more and no less important than what eludes one's grasp.

In first-, second-, and/or third-person pronouns, the speaker/s interact/s with the reader from a variety of vantage points that exhibit planes touched by the sun, in microscopic nearness or macroscopic distance, as s/he/they question/s the process by which meaning is made. Walter Benjamin and Marcel Proust are acknowledged for their influence, and unnamed journeymen and women souse the speakers' observations to boot.

The reader suspects s/he hears traces of Alexander Pope first, in 'Jacarandas', as s/he observes 'A child, in thrall to purple, who wants more / Than more can satisfy' (10).

Walt Whitman's 28 young men appear to surface in 'The Sculptures by the Sea':

... swimmers
Dripping into their shadows as they amble
Around and through each other on the sand,
Adhering oozily among the waves. (18)

A moment of identification between the observer and the observed connects the second-person addressee of 'Grand Canyon' to an unnamed figure, who 'Finds where you are' (62), and again we hear Whitman, now asking, 'What is it then between us?'¹ (1385).

A speaker observes, 'And on the square these actors and events / Transpire and play on' (62), and Whitman responds: the actor or actress plays 'The same old role, the role that is what we make it, as great as we like, / Or as small as we like, or both great and small'.²

Edgar's speakers and sources are not only those he names, addresses, or otherwise identifies, but they are also the broader tradition within which he roots the text, a tradition that is neither national nor global, neither microscopic nor macroscopic, only, but is both and all. Jean Beraud, John Hughes, Oswald Spengler, Amanda Stuart and others visit the text, taking no more the behind nor the fore than Benjamin or Proust. They feature in the experience of becoming that is each reading of each poem in the text.

What then does the reader make of these relations, which *are* the text, not the focus only, but the source, as well, from which the focus draws? To approach a name would appear no different a pursuit in *Exhibits* than to approach any of the other many planes presented. 'Planes', in that the universe presented is no composite whole, but consists instead of those composite parts upon which the focus of the sun is shone: 'Nothing's more abstract than reality', observes the speaker in

¹ Walt Whitman, 'Leaves of Grass', *The Norton Anthology of American Literature* edited by Nina Baym, Robert S. Levine, and Wayne Franklin. 8th ed. Vol. B (New York: W.W. Norton, 2012) 1385.

²Whitman 1385.

‘Morandi and the Hard Problem’, ‘These surfaces propped up against the day / To hold the light’ (50). As the moon reflects the sun, and so is known, so too is each encounter, each illuminated surface, established in relation to that central force, light. A surface enters light and so is known.

The multiple shifting identities and surfaces that are the characters and nonhuman planes that inhabit the poet’s universe, then, are discursive – and yet Edgar’s speakers balk at the limits of language. This trepidation toward these limits is visible in ‘Let Me Forget’:

Behind that door, past comprehension,
Beyond imagining, the universe;
The laws upon
Whose unknown code the selves that you rehearse
From day to day are based; oblivion. (31)

If a surface enters light and so is known, then that same surface obscured by any barrier – a door, in this case, or distance, even where ‘No human presence has been known’ (11) – is not removed from being known, but is merely abstracted even further. ‘Behind that door’, which might be distance, space, or time, exists the broader universe, parts of which the speaker knows, others he does not, and other parts, still, he knows but chooses to ignore: the screaming lobster in the boiling pot is described but not named, for instance; and yet the speaker acknowledges these conspicuous absences in writing ‘Let Me Forget’, an elegiac ode to the presence of light as something that masks an ever-encroaching absence.

The speakers unite in this absence, as each exhibits the process by which s/he makes meaning. There is no grand narrative for this process, other than that there is absence and that meaning is made.

‘What’s it about?’ the speaker in ‘Paris’ demands. ‘Come on. No jokes’ (28). The text’s central question—meaning—is posed, and is met only with language games, or ‘jokes’.

‘How will they make those actions correspond,’ another speaker queries, ‘To some imagined grand event / When they themselves are cast among the clues’ (38)? In this poem, ‘The Clues’, the speaker shows a process of making meaning in relation to both time *and* space, indicating names as other mere features, or ‘highlights scattered and askance’, across the sunlit planes on which the speaker’s life is lived and the reader comes to recognize her/himself.

‘... not understood, but held in mind,’ yet another speaker observes, ‘A weight of reference and felt perception / Solidifying out of thin air’ (66). The fragmented imaginary, that ‘thin air’ out of which reference solidifies, speaks to discursive limits yet again.

Each of these speakers speaks to the absence, and to the filling in. The ‘weight’ of reference, which is the composite material of language itself, solidifies out of this absence; the ‘clues’ one uses to construct meaning include the self, and as such further indicates the limitation of scale seen throughout these poems; the speaker in ‘Paris’ asks forthright that ancient question as old as recorded history, and receives nothing but language games in response.

The philosophy Edgar grapples with is not easy. The questions are difficult to ask, and impossible to answer. And yet Edgar aptly leads his reader on this journey of questioning, wrought from his own experience. He does so with the precision of craft over language, music, meter, and rhyme that only a seasoned poet could accomplish without calling disproportionate attention to either content or form.

The resulting collection is so masterly that the reader is not likely to notice until many poems into a first reading that most of the poems follow end-rhyme schemes and adhere to set meters. These features are not, however, a rule. Shifting is both a central concept to and characteristic feature of this collection and, as such, the speaker, tone, address, gesture, and features in each poem

vary according to the poem's needs. Ever reaching toward the sublime in the beyond, Edgar describes such unreachable heights as 'Charged with the thrumming potencies of un-ness' (51). The reader might also find this beyond further than his or her reach, and yet s/he will also experience the thrumming potencies as they surface in the text.

Zach Linge