‘No man is an island’ - Crossing thresholds: Journeying with the recent poetry of Syd Harrex

Molly Murn and Melinda Graefe

As John Donne wrote, ‘No man is an island, entire of itself’. 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 influenced not only by the visceral experience of living separate from the main, but also by 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’.

As we find in the following unpublished poem Syd wrote in 2010, the two islands of Tasmania and KI have helped to forge his identity.

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2 Donne, 1057.
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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 tinkerings 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.

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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 sensual 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’.3

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. Now, Syd must rely on instinct, and his many years of experience as a wordsmith (constant gardener) have 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 has 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

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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 sensual 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

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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.

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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 mankinde’.4

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’.5

Up and Down the Slopes of Mount Wellington

He had patiently abided
with Winter, shoving frost-
dew icicled 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
tout—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,
ant, and colourful miniatures,
were re-appraising the birthing
of the spring and its prospects.

4 Donne, 1057.
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Melinda Graefe is a PhD candidate at Flinders University, researching women’s historiography in the novels of Walter Scott. Melinda co-edited with Syd Harrex Mrs. Collins’ The Slayer Slain (1999), and co-edited with Molly Murn Syd Harrex’s Five Seasons (2011).

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