

NATURAL HISTORY

Recounting the Seasons: Poems, 1958-2005. John Engels. University of Notre Dame Press, 2005.

James Walton

In his Foreward to this generous selection from a poet's life's work, David Huddle proposes, for a starting point, "The Garden in Late Summer" from *Walking to Cootehill* (1993):

the world flowers: foxglove,
hollyhock, calendula wrenched
sunward, cosmos by its own weight
downsprawled, cumuli
of marigolds, beaded lily stalks,
curl and shrivel of peony leaves,
lightburst of gloriosas,
and from the beds of alyssum, pink
and white, shastas, dahlias,
all grand manner of rose.

The passage is framed (and subtly inflected) by a consciousness of seasonal change that the poem takes personally. "Who among us," it begins, "can truly say/ he outlives the thick matters/ of cold?" At the end it reverts to summer's arrival, "bedizened, decorous,/ old, male and uncertain, riding/ conclusion, unwilling to last." No poem, of course, can epitomize the half-century's unfolding of a poet's craft and vision, but "The Garden in Late Summer," as Huddle suggests, seems a good place to start.

To a street-talking reviewer, John Engels appears to know all species of plant and animal life as if he had named them. He knows things (not mere phenomena) in their particularity, recounting their progress from the diluvial mud through an emergence into air and light to a violent shattering or slow, certain disintegration. In "Nothing Relents" (*Signals From the Safety Coffin*, 1975) the poem's "spade breaks through/ into the muddy cisterns of the earth," reveals a mock-resurrection of corpses disgorged by the flood, "digs like a legged worm/ into the belly of the planet." The plenitude of material objects forms a (nearly) impermeable barrier against abstraction, "transcendence," or the void.

Resistance to abstraction doesn't preclude an allegorical link between fishing and poetry. In "An Angler's *vade mecum*" (*Signals*) the poet's seasoned

dedication to both enables a smooth accommodation between the literal sense and the dark conceit:

there is considerable art
to this, but it is best
to speak flatly

of such matters

Failure at this austere art involves an obtrusion of the personal—“the poet (myself),” he tells us in the Preface, “as hero”:

the salmon has eluded me.
My shadow has fallen
on the stream.

The shadow of the poem itself finds a place in the fish story:

I have

a *papier* model
of a salmon. I am
pleased with it, it is
most natural, as a sportsman
and angler the exact
reproduction of natural objects
appeals very much
to me.

The reality effect is revisited in “Carving the Salmon” (*Sinking Creek*, 1998), where *papier* is exchanged for wood and the work-in-progress begins to assume an illusory appearance of life: “But it will be/ a long while before I learn/ to fashion the blood.” In “Advice Concerning the Salmon Fly” from the same volume Engels returns to the question of craft:

it is imperative
that your pleasure in the making
be not diminished by what no doubt
will be error and mishandling enough.

Remember, always, that craft is improved
by exercise and discipline, in fact
the vision (I mean this fly, this little roar of light...)
.....

being part
 of art's virtue, itself
 improves.

The art that improves by itself leaves room for mystery: "all this" the poem reminds us, is "merest recipe,"

for the same fly tied by another, and apparently
 in detail of form and material utterly

the same, may occasion twice
 the killing, or none
 at all, and what's
 to account for that?

In neither "*vade mecum*" nor "Advice" is the allegory developed at the expense of a highly particularized literal surface. The "artist's rod" is never less an angler's than a poet's, his "masterpiece" a real fish ("forty-three pounds"). Sometimes a catch is just a catch. The fusion of the poem and its referent draws attention to their separateness—a split that might serve as a (simplified) model for a body of work whose marked awareness of itself as poetry operates with and against—lets itself be drawn in or down by—the strong pull of the earth. "Come back," and again, "come back" becomes a refrain sung by the earth or the earthbound subject to those who have escaped its grasp. The phrase, usually repeated, seems merely enigmatic when heard by a speaker whose world has been colored by the gore of a slaughtered hen ("*terribilis est locus iste*," *Signals*). Its meaning is clear enough as a silent plea to the dead Christ, launched by the painted figures of Magdalen and John into the "intractable/ white field of the sky" ("The Fragonard, the Pietà, the Starry Sky," *Vivaldi in Early Fall*, 1981); as the bereaved poet's command, years after the event, to a child that died in infancy ("The Silence," *Cardinals in the Ice Age*, 1987); and as the appeal of earth itself to the speaker's old, addled, dying father, airborne for the first time ("Winter Flight," *Cardinals*). In just one instance—but shared by two poems—the words seem to come from a non-empirical place. In the long "Interlachen" (*Weather-Fear*, 1983) they penetrate an atmosphere rank with mortality. In "Eve Considers the Possibility of Pardon" (*House and Garden*, 2001) they accompany the sound of "a name we never clearly have heard." In both they're heard in a (mere?) dream where they descend with a "fragile rain" and must pass through the "delicate membrane of the fallen sky."

For the poet-as-empiricist, or -naturalist, *naming* (a key word in Engels)

is the first imposed responsibility, and its limitations the principal challenge to a transgressive imagination. It follows that the figure of the poet in *House and Garden* should be Adam, abetted in this secular context by an Eve who not only shares the duty of naming but crosses more readily (as above) the line to the unnamable: “Everything,” she declares in “Eve in the Garden at First Light,” “Everything is named/ that I could name.” But “much/ was beyond me. Too much,” and she recalls the revelations of the *first* first light, “on which I hawked and choked” until “sight cleared and there before me, there they lay

before me, the great meadows and mountains of the world,
the morning rising, and the waters
bursting and flooding up from the deepest centers
of the earth, gathering, currenting, rushing down

to pool in the low voids which filled and overflowed
as I stood still close to breathless watching, all the while
light exploding upward from beyond what I had not yet known
to name as light, whereby I saw, I saw, and saw...

Now, in the sunrise of the fallen present, she sees again:

Under the branches, in the green shadows of pines,
the golden duff of pine needles softly
thickens and the morning that enters the grove to drift
among the scaling boles seems the remains of light—something,

a further morning, a sea of light
with no opposing shore,
withdrawing.

Adam, for his part, resists at first the notion that the text of the world comes to us from elsewhere. For him the power to name has served as compensation for the Fall: “We’ve lost the kingdom, but borne away/ this greatest of its treasures” (“Adam Thinking Back”). His (postmodernist?) hubris has made him think he can “look down/ on the resumptive body of the world,”

to make of it to see or touch,
by which necessity
it will bear names, and be. (“Adam Looking Down”)

But his more characteristic note is one of disenchantment with the power

of *his* “text,” of language itself, to convey what is seen, heard smelled, and tasted of the earth’s inexhaustible richness and changefulness. “Adam in November” dryly states the predicament of a series of projected figures of the poet himself:

I tend

to speak though lacking clarity,
not knowing the names, not having in need
the language, given to interminable

revision of the text. And this is where
the true anger locates itself,
that I have no ability or hope
that I may speak to the ordinary

with much in the way of truth or generosity.
And it must seem I make my rituals
to be the sole judge of the truth,
instead of what they are, mere sanctimonies

of procedure...and so
the names refuse themselves, and always it ends
in so unsatisfactory an obliquity as this.

In “Pilgrimage” (*Seasons in Vermont*, 1982), the poet ritually visits a river bank within a familiar precinct, “wishing to see the plain truth of maples in autumn,/ but wholly incapable, finding instead/ how exhaustible are the names of color.” If he waits till dark, when the moon rises from the fog,

the trees will shine forth again

as if it were full day, in the last seasonal burst
of the last color for which, on this night
of a killing frost, my breath
visible before me, I cannot
and do not wish to find a name.

In “Letter” (*Big Water*, 1995), he complains of a loss of control that verges on entropy, prefiguring the collapse of Adam’s demiurgic illusion, thwarted by the mutability of subject and object alike:

—you’ll have

to imagine for yourself what I mean—lately,
though my eye for them persists,

the resemblances have begun
to resist my saying. This letter

is disorderly, I'm afraid, but things
are changing for me, therefore
for the world which over all these years
has accustomed itself
to being seen by me
in my particular way
and discovers it a grievous business
to have to reset itself, so that often
I wake up these days
in a confusion of recollection.

Together with “West Topsham” (*Blood Mountain*, 1977), “Letter” might be called “Confessions of a Repentant Overreacher.” The earlier poem, also a letter, seems to have been (dis)composed by an aging, infirm Tom o’ Bedlam. (Among Engels’ personae a sense of physical decay acts as corollary to their moral and aesthetic anxieties.) “West Topsham’s” poor Tom is a lover lost on the way to a reunion with his beloved, a poet estranged from his audience: “I think my words/ will echo only in my own mind forever, to what purpose/ I do not know.” Recovery of the needed connection calls for a return to the “literal surface”—“and for all/ the extravagance of what has gone before I now repent,/ and make an image.” The attempt fails—“I draw back always,/ I cannot be understood”—but “West Topsham,” like “Letter,” seems to succeed as one of a poet’s periodic efforts to purge his work of its “obliquity,” to create the space for such a pure “image” of estrangement as he provides in “Unfocusing on Window, Tree and Light” (*Cardinals*):

In one of those odd and idle
gestures of reconciliation
I have accustomed myself to make
toward the world I have through God’s disfavor
lost, hoping to justify it

in the fullness and perfection
of a single word, I have proposed to myself
the locust tree against the sky,
its thorny branches enclosing light,
to be a figure of loss.

For formal restraint amid difficulties (indicated but obliquely in the prefatory “Short History of My Voice”) the reader might choose among two very different sets of lyrics. In one of them, from *Vivaldi in Early Fall*, En-

gels impersonates three heroes of arts other than poetry. Van Gogh, prophesying the “Weathers of His Death,” envisions the final state as a “dream without color” and constructs for it an image that anticipates the “figure of loss” from “Unfocusing”:

the way
the slim branches of the young trees,
themselves nothing like light,
with the wind among them turned and brightened.

In place of “dead silence,” the composer in “Mahler Waiting” wishes for an apocalyptic crescendo, a music to untune the sky:

the clashing
of boulders, trees battering one
another, floods, tornadoes, the fires
bellowing outward
from the deep heart of the world!

In the volume’s title piece the aged Vivaldi turns Fall to a kind of Spring:

the pines
just beginning to sing
on the hillside, the rivers
coloring with the first rains
(which are, as usual, precisely
on time). And there is also

this young girl

Toward the end he returns to the beginning “in full belief,” and “the face of God”

passes through my walls to show me
how the motion of song sleeps
at the center of the world, as indeed,
among the Angels, innocent of time.

A second class of poems deserving praise for their formal economy (and more) consists in a series of laments, not elegies, spanning more than two decades, on the death of Philip Stephen Engels, August 21-October 24, 1965. The earliest poems in this cycle (from *The Homer Mitchell Place*, 1968) are in quatrains that act as a measure of restraint. But their rhymes

turn sharply slant or vanish and their meter becomes faintly irregular as if broken by a grief and rage impatient of the formalities and of the “music” of verse, like the last lines of Blake’s “Holy Thursday” (*Songs of Experience*):

“And because I am happy & dance & sing,
They think they have done me no injury,
And are gone to praise God & his Priest & King
Who make up a heaven of our misery.”

Later, in a section called “Exorcisms” (*Signals*) Engels provides, as a counter-example, an immaculate “Sestina: My Dead in the First Snow,” closely followed by the shattering of the frame in “Nothing Relents,” where he is “torn by the alarums” of his voice

to cry out into the dazzle of Thy
high noon O God such anger
festers in the tree the flood the stone such

bile and storm surge in the root and beasts
in the foul walls race the planet bursting swelled
with ripeness fat with fatness open to the light and I

like a blind grub twisting in light
mandibles wide in spasm the cold
talus falling back and in the chasm squirming

The concluding three-line envoy of the quieter “Sestina” is left open, echoing the poem’s most insistent theme—“It will take a long time”—assurance that the poet’s history of grief will remain free of any fatuous (and now hackneyed) gestures toward “closure.” The note of loss will persist beyond the last of the Philip poems.

By Engels’ own account the loss of the child banished, “abruptly and violently,” the poet as hero from the center of his earliest work, changing its direction. Place—northern Indiana, Wisconsin, Maine, Ireland, Yugoslavia and, above all, Vermont—came to predominate over personality; and over place, a power that he does not name, “nature” seeming by now too domesticated a word for the manifold and mobile, light-giving, dark and devouring force, by turns seething or “cold” and “dead” at its center, that is presented in these poems with unsurpassed scope and precision. Engels’ “nature,” in Joycean parlance, is a concretely realized “audible-visible-gnosible-edible world.” Yet throughout the eleven volumes represented here (together with a group of uncollected poems), the theme of loss merges with a sense

of the insufficiency of language, personified at last in the figure of Adam. Poet as hero finds a successor in poet *manqué*. The misgiving is hardly a new thing among poets. The perception of writing itself as “supplement” has been taken in more senses than one. It can signify the mere artificial tracing of an order of things (however elusive) already complete in itself, or the making up for a deficiency, a lack, in that order. Either way, the street-talking reviewer, sadly unattuned to the original, no less than a substantial class of less disadvantaged readers, will return with gratitude and admiration to John Engels’ supplement for “a long time.”