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Dancing in Asylum provides oral poetry

Dancing in Asylum
by Richard Lemm
Pottersfield Press
\$5.95

by Steve Gregoris

Richard Lemm's *Dancing in Asylum* displays an inherent link with the oral tradition. The smoothness and vigour of this, his first volume of published poetry, evokes the distinct sense of poet as storyteller. I do not mean to burden 'what' Lemm says with any implicit moralism or pre-conceived system of value judgements; the kinship is rather a comment on 'how' he speaks, on what might be called style. Rather than act as a device which telescopes poetry neatly into category, this association provides an approach, an 'in'. There is a certain ease and fluidity about Lemm's craft which, like the storyteller's, has an inviting, vital and ultimately satisfying effect.

With a perceptive eye, the poet has transposed images of experience, memory and imagination onto the page, addressing himself to the particular reader, while remaining generic. Even when writing about personal situations (his family or some memories) as he often does, Lemm is never exclusive; that is, he never tailors his poems to a definite audience. After both being fooled and fooling himself about the intentions of a sensuous Hare Krishna disciple, he is tagged with a red nose and finds that

In the washroom, half-a-dozen men unpin their roses, glancing at each other with cynical regret.

("Love Story")

Indeed, his endings — his sense of poetic closure — tie the often scintillating phrases and images into striking revelations.

Lemm extracts fibers of memory and realisation from life and imbues them with delicate yet potent form, much like tapping a vein of precious metal and proceeding to mould it into shape. He is, however, far from being a mere wordsmith. There is neither a 'frisson' between words and their context, nor evidence of sophisticated word-games. The poetry is observation and precise articulation completed with an often pointed phrase or image. A beautiful woman, born into money, remains a school-teacher, a job which appears to be below what society commonly accepts as her station:

You would trade your gray days
for a dark night of the soul,
but a child has drawn your golden face
inside the centre of a daffodil.

("Cordelia")

On the other hand, apparently unresolved images become reference points for much of Lemm's poetry; as above they exhibit man's intimacy with nature. Though there may be no personal renewal, the poet rejoins a vital, searching humanity:

... I join the crowd
shifting like flowers in a forest
towards each breath of light.

("Old Man of the Woods")

Dancing in Asylum's intense images of the animal, vegetable and mineral world joins man integrally to his natural situation. This imag-

ery is often a spring-board into poems which both explore growth, and probe and psyche. With this Lemm uncovers moments of stability — instances of sanity and tranquility — within apparently aberrant behavior. "The Sprinter" and "Dancing in Asylum" make such efforts to understand such situations; they poignantly manage to consolidate past and present. In the latter poem, the poet's mother — in her youth — is said to be "Possessed by the devil . . . spreading your legs for clever demons in the night." At the end of the poem she is in her old age and

When the accordion player comes once a month
to play in your retirement home,
you are the only one to dance
so they tell me,
you dance and you dance.



The delineation of experience and general movement of the poem have unobtrusively become something more than mere mimesis, yet are not charged with a penantic righteousness.

Lemm delves into the past, grafting its images into the fabric of the present, addressing the past to the here and now:

throwing snowballs, foot-
balls, handgrenades, and
their follow through
ends on this afternoon
when I throw frost-licked
apples to the cows

("Missing Person")

There is a definite causality about the poems; reminiscences provide food for poetic thought; they are intimately linked to the present. The future is quietly implied, but must be interpolated. Because the future is yet to be experienced, the poet rarely brooches it. His concerns are uncovering meaning in experiences which are rooted in man's immediate kinship with nature or his past voyages of discovery through it.

Dancing in Asylum finds joy in the human condition, joy that encompasses touches of irony, grace and inner strength, but which most of all exhibit a perceptive sense of beauty which is Lemm's own, and which he offers to us.

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