

‘Rather a lot of death’: Misreading Lauris Edmond’s Late Song as an intentional last collection

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The critic MacD. P. Jackson, in writing of Shakespeare’s rivals, touched on a critical truism. ‘Poetry is not autobiography,’ writes Jackson. ‘There is a “reality prior to the poem”, but the poet transmutes it, constructing a verbal object designed to evoke an aesthetic response’ (224). When reading last volumes, however, this New Critical edict is frequently ignored. As readers, we tend to approach last collections with a different kind of expectation, or perhaps a better word is hope – the hope that the author will somehow speak again from what Lauris Edmond termed in her poetry the ‘irredeemable silence’ of death (1977, 11). Last volumes frequently assume the status of a final letter, written when death weighs heavily on the author’s mind, and we expect from them a distillation of all that life came to mean, framed as a kind of parting gift. Many of us read last volumes, particularly those that are posthumously published, in the hope that we will be able to locate the author as they examine life from the brink, and we tend to think that if we look hard enough we will be able to see them standing there, watching, as the final curtain comes down. As a result, we find Plath’s *Ariel* resonating with the exultant despair that prefigured her suicide. Introducing Janet Frame’s posthumously published *The Goose Bath*, Bill Manhire goes so far as to suggest that

[i]n a very loose and inexact way this collection gives some sense of what a further volume of autobiography might have looked like: the crowded world of relationships and travel; the moments of mischief and joy; the energy and courage of the clear-sighted, confident woman whom Michael King so richly portrayed in *Wrestling with the Angel*. (23)

Though Manhire’s comment principally refers to the editors’ artificial arrangement of Frame’s poems into a narrative structure that ‘follows the course of a human life’ (23), it also indicates that, while poetry may not

always be autobiography, it is nevertheless capable of functioning and being understood in this way.

In the case of Lauris Edmond's posthumously published *Late Song*, the expectation of autobiographical resolution is pronounced. In her lifetime Edmond frequently drew attention to the relationship between her poetry and her own lived experience. In an unpublished essay Edmond describes poetry as her way of dealing with experience, as 'searching for what makes sense in the putting together of your life'.¹ For her poetry was focused on the question '[h]ow is [reality], most exactly, for me?' Edmond observes in the same essay that her poems 'record, or express, my attempt to come to terms with realities I have had to confront. . . . They are one effort, among countless others, to find words for something that is mysterious to us all'.

In line with her own explanations of her work, a considerable critical history of reading Edmond's poems as autobiography has emerged. For Kirsty Cochrane, Edmond's poems 'assume the status of testament: to life lived, its fallibility, meetings and partings, grief and exuberance' (232). More than this the poems generate 'the sense . . . of meeting the person' (231). Mary McCallum writes of Edmond's 'rigorous self examination' (46) and the feeling she has 'come to know Edmond through her poetry'. In his obituary for Edmond, Ken Arvidson notes the equivalence between her identity and her verse, writing that '[h]er personality and her poetry are inseparable' (2000, 23).

It is unsurprising then that Edmond's final volume has, more so than many last collections, elicited autobiographical readings from critics. The introduction to the volume encourages readers to connect Edmond's death with the poetic farewell contained within its pages. Frances Edmond (editor of the volume) writes that the poems in *Late Song* possess

a greater detachment . . . a sense of being at one remove, as if she was already on the way toward that place which is "too far for any remembering". These are poems in which even moments of celebration are framed by the final event: "Go to your death in the black," she wrote. And with this subtle and haunting collection she does. (vii)

Here Frances Edmond elides both the literary and material death of the poet, going so far as to suggest that Edmond 'go[es] to [her] death' within its pages.

Critical views of the volume have echoed this interpretation. 'Edmond clearly knew there was at least a fair chance that these poems would be

read posthumously' observed Roger Robinson in his review in *New Zealand Books*. 'She has built in that way of reading, and it is implied in the pun of the book's title' (13). The idea of *Late Song* as an autobiographical coda is repeated in other reviews, one tellingly misquoting the book's title as 'Last Song' (Smither, 169-171). It is Elizabeth Smither who most emphatically locates Edmond's identity in her verse speaking of Edmond's continuing 'autobiography-in-the-poems' (170) of which this is the final installment.

Understanding Edmond's final volume in this way is no great departure from critical interpretations of her previous volumes. Indeed, it is almost inevitable that Edmond's last collection would be understood as a concluding chapter of autobiography, for as Ken Arvidson notes, 'an autobiographical basis is rarely absent' (1990, 127) from Edmond's work. However, the actualities of Edmond's death, her ongoing preoccupation with mortality in her poetry, as well as the circumstances surrounding the production of her final volume, suggest that, while an autobiographical interpretation may be appropriate for much of Edmond's poetic oeuvre, understanding *Late Song* as an intentional final collection is problematic.

Edmond's death was sudden and unforeseen. It appears she was preparing to leave her Grass Street home when she suffered a massive heart attack around 10:30am on Friday the 28th of January 2000.² Locating a premonitory knowingness within Edmond's final volume thus runs counter to the reality of Edmond's death. Interestingly, Edmond's previous collection, *A Matter of Timing*, was far more explicitly focused on mortality. In his review of *A Matter of Timing* in *The Press*, Tom Weston suggests that the volume contains 'an unmistakable sense of signing off' (14). Had Edmond's death occurred before she wrote her final volume, no doubt *A Matter of Timing* would have been seen to possess the same premonitory awareness located by Robinson in *Late Song*.

The most significant way in which *Late Song* differs from Edmond's installments of 'autobiography-in-the-poems' is the fact that it contains a number of undisclosed editorial changes that run counter to the emphasis Edmond gave the volume during her lifetime. Edmond sent a volume of poetry titled 'Poems for Miss Black' to Elizabeth Caffin on the 13th of August 1999. At this time, Edmond was preoccupied with the life of Pauline Brown, the 'Miss Black' of the section of poetry that (suggestively) appeared in the middle of the draft and provided the name for the collection. Brown was a convicted murderer who had gained some

prominence in 1995 having been the focus of a *Listener* article that described the circumstances of her crime: Brown murdered her ex-husband on the 10th of September 1993 because she believed he had been sexually abusing their two year old son. The *Listener* article describes how, before committing the murder, Brown had approached the police, Social Welfare, two doctors and a solicitor and informed them that she needed help as she wanted to kill her husband (Stirling, 19). Edmond was captivated by Brown's story. She contributed a piece of writing about Brown called 'Silent Tears' to the anthology *Writing Wellington*. Here she identified Brown by name and included two of the Miss Black poems published in *Late Song*. Edmond also worked for some years on a manuscript of the same title and made numerous attempts to get it published.³ The title of the draft volume of poems originally sent to Auckland University Press openly disclosed her preoccupation with poetry that held some relevance for the 'Miss Blacks' of the world. This was not a volume for those with a 'nose for nuances' (Edmond, 2000, 24) or 'perfect agility in [their] intellectual/ dancing toes' (Edmond, 2000, 24). Rather these were poems that offered 'the morning sky/ softly blooming into a new day . . . the sunrise,/ its gentle patterns of light' (Edmond, 2000, 24) to those for whom poetry often had little significance.

Just ten days before her death Edmond wrote to Caffin again:

I'm also very pleased indeed to know you will do **Miss Black** [*author's emphasis*], later in the year. I had actually been reading through the MS to get some sort of new impression, since I hadn't looked at it for a while – and I want to ask you if I could send you several new poems that might perhaps replace one or two towards the end of Section 3. The poems there now I still stand by, but there is rather a lot of death, and I thought I'd like one or two with a different theme.⁴

Just what this 'different theme' was to be Edmond did not make clear. Nor did she identify the poems she wished to replace. Although in her final correspondence with Auckland University Press Edmond had restricted her potential revisions to 'the end of Section 3' and the possible replacement of some of the poems about death with other poems focused on 'a different theme', to some involved in the process of seeing the volume towards publication, Edmond's wish to add new poems and replace other ones suggested that the manuscript was unfinished. As a result, discussions between Edmond's literary executors (then Frances Edmond and Bridget Williams⁵) and Auckland University Press about possible

changes extended beyond the issues identified in Edmond's letter. On behalf of family members Frances Edmond voiced concerns about 'Poems for Miss Black' as a title:⁶

It has a certain awkwardness and it feels too personal an address to an individual for a book that is effectively the last new work of Lauris's that will ever be published. I don't feel the title encompasses the subject matter or the place of the book in her canon. We would prefer it to be called 'Last Poems'. It is simple and clean and a much stronger statement than 'Poems for Miss Black'. There are added complexities because of Lauris's relationship with the woman she addresses as Miss Black. I am happy to talk over these matters with you if you would like to.⁷

Personal meetings between Caffin and Frances Edmond followed. Caffin notes a conversation with Frances Edmond in the AUP publication file: 'Agreed to include the few new poems. In last section. F to arrange order by 24/5. Title. My arguments were heavy & understood & Frances will go back to the family'.⁸ Frances soon responded on the family's behalf:

I have consulted as widely as I could in this last week with Lauris' family and trusted friends and the consensus is that 'Poems for Miss Black' is an inappropriate title. Comments include: 'focusing the reviewer's attention on poems about that particular event [the murder] creates a morbid curiosity that you DON'T want', 'taking a title from a weak sequence is not wise', 'the title does not reflect the content of the book.' My own view is that while I wish to respect Lauris' wishes we have already tampered with those by taking out *Carnival of NZ Creatures*⁹ and by adding some other poems. I could not be happy with 'Poems for Miss Black' as a title. . . . I have gone back to the text itself to look for a title that I think reflects the book and its place in her canon. I have come up [with] 'Late Song'¹⁰ which I think embraces the content of the book, and the time in her life that it was written and suggests her death as well. I have talked it over with family and they are all in agreement.¹¹

Eventually the change in title was accepted although Caffin remained committed to openly disclosing the adjustments made to the volume. She wrote in a letter to Frances Edmond:

The text as it appears was essentially decided by Lauris and the only changes made to it were changes she was aware of. She was unsure about the inclusion of *NZ Creatures* herself and after she and I had discussed it I believe she agreed to its removal; as for the extra poems we know she wished to include some, though of course we don't know for sure which ones. I do feel explaining all this and especially Lauris's vital role in planning the collection is important in

the cause of literary scholarship. . . . I have, as you may know, a long and deep commitment to NZ poetry, I have written about Lauris's work and I think it is very important for later scholars that the facts are known clearly.¹²

The draft blurb sent by Caffin to Edmond's literary executors accordingly framed the volume in a way that addressed Edmond's wish to temper the focus on mortality. Here death is characterized as merely one theme among many. Caffin writes: 'Inevitably there are poems, poised and calm, about death. But there are many also about new life: her grandchildren, travel scenes, love in old age; and amusement and delight balance more somber meditations. A central sequence, addressed to a friend in prison, explores the paradoxes of confinement and isolation for a woman and a mother and is something of a new departure'.¹³ However, the published blurb, as a result of revisions of Edmond's executors,¹⁴ plays down the Miss Black sequence and the breadth of Edmond's other concerns. Here death is 'unflinchingly contemplated; new life is welcomed, in her family with her grandchildren, with a new friend'.

For all of the reasons above, *Late Song*, as it was published, is to some extent an act of ventriloquism, for the premonition suggested by the title, as well as the emphasis on death, is partly a result of editorial intervention. Edmond's death becomes part of the text because of changes made to the volume that were motivated primarily by her family's care for her memory, that is the need to make the volume fitting as 'the last new work of Lauris's that will ever be published'¹⁵ and to reflect the place of the book in her canon. Despite the fact that *Late Song* is not part of the event it comes to symbolise, Edmond 'go[oes] to [her] death' within its pages and, paradoxically, the volume becomes remarkable for something that Edmond wished to tone down. It is an undeniably beautiful farewell. Indeed, *Late Song* offers everything we could hope for from a last volume in terms of the kind of closure and poetic 'goodbye' that we long for as readers. More than this, it is a highly appropriate conclusion to the career of a writer who placed herself at the centre of her poems. However, the editorial changes described above also make it (to some degree at least) a work of fiction in the sense that, as Edmond's last installment of the 'autobiography-in-the-poems', it does not embody the entirety of her final concerns. Edmond's own 'Poems for Miss Black', with its arguably 'awkward' emphasis, illustrates that death happens while we are in the thick of life, attentive to all its possibilities and taken up with our own personal (and sometimes unpopular) fascinations. However much we may

want to see *Late Song* as an intentional last volume, the editorial history surrounding the volume shows, quite firmly, that it is not. Perhaps it is something richer, offering us the finality and closure we long for as readers, and as human beings looking to make sense of death? However, for Edmond's last installment of 'autobiography-in-the-poems', we must be attentive to circumstances surrounding the production of *Late Song* and how Edmond framed what was to become her last volume during her lifetime.

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ENDNOTES

¹ A copy of this unpublished and undated essay, which is based on Edmond's interview with Elizabeth Alley for Radio New Zealand (1980), exists in the Mallinson Rendel archives, Mallinson Rendel, Wellington.

² I am grateful to Frances Edmond for clarifying the circumstances of Lauris Edmond's death.

³ Writing to Fiona Kidman on 11th February 1999 about Reed Publishing returning her 'Silent Tears' manuscript, Edmond communicates her realization that the work will never be published in its existing form. Fiona Kidman papers, MS-Papers-7118-050 (correspondence with Lauris Edmond (a), 1996-2000), Alexander Turnbull Library (ATL), Wellington.

⁴ *Late Song* publication file, letter from Lauris Edmond to Elizabeth Caffin, 18 January 2000, Auckland University Press (AUP) archives, AUP, Auckland.

⁵ Bridget Williams resigned from this role in 2003.

⁶ I am grateful to Frances Edmond, Elizabeth Caffin and Auckland University Press for granting me permission to reproduce their correspondence in this article.

⁷ *Late Song* publication file, email from Frances Edmond to Elizabeth Caffin, 4 May 2000. AUP archives, AUP, Auckland.

⁸ *Late Song* publication file, Elizabeth Caffin, internal memorandum, 17 May 2000. AUP archives, AUP, Auckland.

⁹ Edmond suggested 'Carnival of New Zealand Creatures' as a potential last section for 'Poems for Miss Black'. However, she remained uncertain about its inclusion as it was 'a complete contrast to the three other sections' (Lauris Edmond Papers, Poems for Miss Black (file), MS-Papers-7372-34, letter from Lauris Edmond to Elizabeth Caffin, 7 August 1999. ATL, Wellington). Edmond asked her sister Lindsay Rowe for advice on the subject. Rowe responded that "Carnival" would not trivialise "Miss Black" but in my view, would be an awkward bed fellow – uncomfortable at best and not strong enough to grab, as it were, a fair share of the duvet' (Lauris

Edmond Papers, Poems for Miss Black (loose papers), MS-Papers-7372-43, fax from Lindsay Rowe to Lauris Edmond, 20 August 1999. ATL, Wellington). *Carnival of New Zealand Creatures* was eventually published by Wellington's Pemmican Press in 2000.

¹⁰ This title comes from the last poem in the volume of the same name.

¹¹ *Late Song* publication file, email from Frances Edmond to Elizabeth Caffin, 25 May 2000. AUP archives, AUP, Auckland

¹² *Late Song* publication file, email from Elizabeth Caffin to Frances Edmond, 12 June 2000. AUP archives, AUP, Auckland.

¹³ Blurb faxed from Elizabeth Caffin to Frances Edmond, 14 June, 2000. AUP archives, AUP, Auckland.

¹⁴ Bridget Williams faxed a revised blurb to Elizabeth Caffin (20 June 2000) asking that it be included in the volume. See *Late Song* publication file. AUP archives, AUP, Auckland.

¹⁵ *Late Song* publication file, email from Frances Edmond to Elizabeth Caffin, 4 May 2000. AUP archives, AUP, Auckland.