



[The Swerve](#) by Julith Jedamus

Publisher: [Carcanet Press](#) , 80 pages

Reviewed by [Denis Joe](#) August 2012

There are those who think that that as long as you can write then you can compose poems. Novelists and other prose writers have turned their hand to poetry on many occasions - Raymond Carver and Jorge Luis Borges are two of the most successful - but on the whole, prose writers don't really hack it as poets. James Joyce's *Pomes Penyeach* is among some of the worst poetry ever published, for example.

Julith Jedamus's previous publication was the novel *The Book of Loss*, and *Swerve* is her debut collection of poetry. I first came across one of her poems when it featured in The New York Times, in May 2011.

The Drowning of Drenthe

, which appears in this collection, is a wonderful poem that takes us from the physical journey and age, through nine tercets. Some of the rhyming may strike some as clichéd ('The linseed mill with icy arms,/The whitewashed churches purged of charms') but I think that Jedamus shows a great deal of artistry. The simplicity gives us a sense of wonderment, almost child-like. There is a nursery rhyme feel to the poem. The final stanza - the denouement – seems to confirm a feeling of awe:

***The past is new, the future old;
Who can say now what rhymes are told
In this drowned world?***

This feeling of wonderment pervades many of Jedamus's poems in this volume:

***He strokes her hair,
breaths her beauty,
carries her up the stair
to the bed where she wept for duty,
drops her shroud onto the chair.***

***What groves
of words, what shadow-lines
save this lover's loves?
What unveiled truth gains
from praise at two removes?***

Admetus, Alcestis bases its end rhymes on George Herbert's poem *Jordan*. Jedamus does something quite clever with this poem. By creating a rather childlike feel, the poet seems to ask us to confront what poetry really is about. In the same sense that the great metaphysical poet did (*Who says that fictions onely and false hair/Become a verse? Is there in truth no beauty?*), we are taken back to Platonic aesthetics: love of truth is aroused by the contemplation of beautiful ideas, so beloved by the later Romantics and captured in Keats's *Ode On A Grecian Urn*: "'beauty is truth, truth beauty,' – that is all / Ye know on earth, and all ye need to know"

It seems that Jedamus feels that the issue remains unresolved, and puts it to us with such simplicity. That is not to say that Jedamus patronises the reader; the question itself is a very

basic one and though the rhyme scheme appears almost childish, the poem as a whole is very sophisticated in its use of metaphor. The second stanza is made up of two questions that could be read as one. Jedamus doesn't attempt answers just as Herbert expected his audience to ponder the question.

There is one thing about Jedamus's poem I find strange, and that is why the penultimate line of her poem does not follow Herbert's end rhyme. I think that *Admetus, Alcestis* would have been a stronger poem if Jedamus had used 'divines' instead of 'gains'; it would have semantically made sense without disrupting the flow of the poem.

Jedamus uses a simple rhyme pattern to great effect in the poem *On the Fast Train from Cambridge to London, Second Class, No A/C, Nine Tunnels*

;

***'To the fens and back again'
goes the sleepless mind's refrain . . .***

driving the poem forward and capturing the speed and direction of the journey. And this is something that is noticeable about Jedamus's poetry: the movement and pace seem to be the primary aspect of her work, even in those poems that ask questions, such as *Rievaulx I: The Abbey* ("Where is your limestone Eden, your stronghold of love?")

we have barely time to pause and reflect. Yet returning to those pieces means that we will discover more about the nature of the poem. And Jedamus's work is worth returning to.

Another aspect of the poetry is the emphasis on landscape portrayals: *Love Sonnet To A Rock in Bohulän*

:

***to have met in this granite
archipelago, my ice floe
heart, . . .***

maintains the harmony but draws us into a world that is strange: hard ("granite"); cold ("ice floe") yet also warm ("heart"). And this interplay of landscape and the personal is achieved to great effect in the poem *On The Day He Suffered Most, Sycamores*:

***he couldn't see or hear or breathe . . .until the seethe
of leaves lifts him – and through the pane, unscathed,***

he watches himself slow, settle, cease

In the 'freer' poems Jedamus also excels in maintaining those elements which are important to poetry. The title poem is a perfect example of prosody, the line-breaks maintain the flow of the poem, both in its sound and in its connotation:

***If a young girl thought that her soul left her as she slept,
drawn out of her body like a letter from a perfumed envelope –***

***if she believed that the white peach she ate for breakfast had slipped
from a tree in a Nepalese courtyard in the fourteenth century,
would these be fatal errors? . . .***

The poem seems to raise the same issue over truth and beauty that *Admetus*, *Alcestis* does. We could assume that these lines are autobiographical, yet does it matter? Surely what matters is the poem.

Today we understand the meaning of the word 'Truth' to be factual; the opposite of 'falsehood. Yet the word has a greater meaning, derived from Norse and Saxon. The Anglo-Saxon word *trot* *h* is defined as "loyalty, honesty, good faith" and we are familiar with the idea of the 'true church', in which the use of 'true' seems to be related to the old usage rather than defining the church and its teachings as factual. It is in this sense that one can view Jedamus's poetry.

These are the real strengths of Jedamus's poetry, Her poetry is not 'back to basics'; for me she is concerned with making the best poetry. In a world of rant and performance - telling it 'like it is' and 'sticking it to the Man', of hectoring and lecturing - it is sometimes difficult to maintain a view of what poetry is and what it isn't. Julith Jedamus is obviously someone who has learned the craft well and knows how to draw out the best from that understanding.

The Swerve is an excellent debut from a writer who shows a great deal of concern for poetry. In a sense Jedamus takes a risk in being dismissed as a dilettante by those who prefer their poetry to 'tell them something'. But if I want to know something I will read a newspaper or a reference book. If I want to simply indulge in beautifully crafted poetry then I will turn to Julith Jedamus.