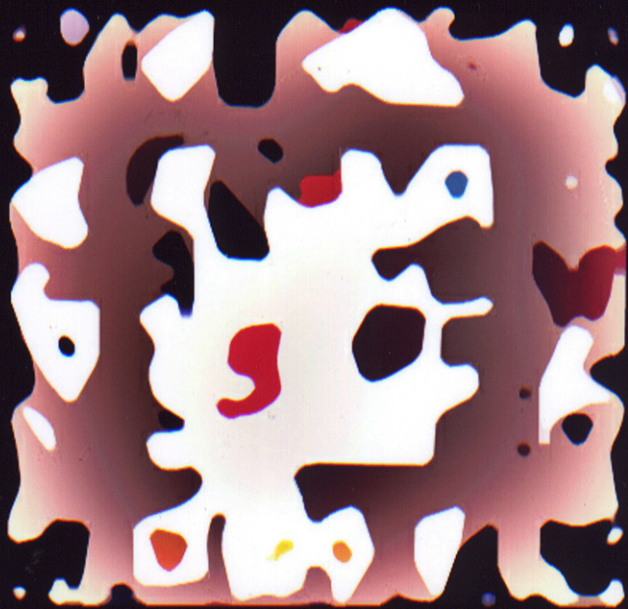


Othello's Rage

a memoir



Chester Eagle

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Othello's Rage is published by Chester Eagle, 23 Langs Road Ivanhoe 3079 Australia, operating as Trojan Press. Phone is (03) 9497 1018 and email address is cae@netspace.net.au

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I was still exploring, and I knew it. It was a fascinating time. I was living in East Gippsland, but with strong connections to Melbourne, where I'd first heard the music called, in those days, 'classical'. Only a handful of Gippslanders had any interest in it, so that when I came back from Melbourne with new recordings, I listened for the most part on my own. I'd read a lot of books in my university days about composers and I was a subscriber to the English 'Gramophone' magazine, so I had fresh input every month about works to hear. Music fascinated me, though I had no training. Feelings had a freedom in music that they had nowhere else. You only had to listen to Beethoven ...

I was also exploring Gippsland. It kept offering wonders. I drove into the mountains and found secret places. Ruins of mining settlements, long ago. Roads to deserted farms, and other farms where my students' parents welcomed me for cups of tea and talk ...

... talk, talk, the lore of the place was endless, the history, mysteriously vague, hovered in the air like visions, waiting to be reborn. Lots of people knew their bits, other people's bits, but nobody knew it all. Not a soul. It was all about us, everywhere, but it never became firm, or clear. The history of the place, well known and yet again not, was almost as mysterious as the future. I felt locked into time and yet released from it. I think that what I felt was less mysterious than I realised; I think, now, that what I felt, or perhaps it was the way I felt it, had the potential, the possibility, of

things we learn about when we're young. As we settle, we lose something and often enough we're grateful to see it disappear; I mean it's a relief to know that we won't do all sorts of wild and dangerous things that are there inside us, latent, possibilities containing great danger which we might be foolish, or impulsive, enough to accept.

So I was exploring music, I was exploring Gippsland, I was exploring myself, though I hardly realised it. I was becoming a good teacher, though I had a long way to go. How could you be a good teacher until you'd found yourself? That was an easy one to answer: you could explore, and teach whatever it was you discovered. So long as you had sympathy with the pupils you taught, and I did, then your discoveries became theirs; you always had something new to give them because you were always discovering yourself ... or do I mean discovering something new for yourself? Words have a way of saying more than you mean to say.

The trouble with exploration, though, is that you may not like what you find. That's why I'm writing this memoir. I want to talk about getting a jolt. I want to talk about the Moor, Othello, in Shakespeare's play, Otello in Verdi's opera, the black man who loved the daughter of a wealthy Venetian family, Venice being the Queen of the Adriatic, the ships of Venice being a link between the civilisations of Europe and the cities of Araby. The Moor, Othello/Otello, pulled me up with a jolt.

I am ready to begin.

There were two other people who were interested in music as I was, and they were married to each other – Estelle and Richard Symons. Estelle had been a teacher, but had put her career aside to look after her children. Richard was an engineer with the council of my district; he and I spent hours listening to music, drinking wine, and talking about the jobs we did. We complained a good deal to each other about how much more we could achieve if the people we worked for weren't so narrow-minded. We gave each other chapter and verse of the omissions and commissions we'd had to endure. Nobody knew what we should be doing except us! Estelle, when she heard any of this, took little notice. Something lingered, alive and well inside her, of her university years when every idea was an option, to be considered and then adopted or rejected. A thought was a possibility. A new feeling was a path on offer. To be taken, or not? Although I knew her well, I found her hard to predict, mainly because I didn't know how she reached decisions. I was used to her expositions of ideas but not how she'd accepted them, if she had.

Estelle and Richard had decided that marriage shouldn't imprison them. Each did things without the other. Both of them visited me, mainly to listen to music, and I didn't necessarily know, when I heard the sound of their car outside, which one would be there when I answered the door, although the later in the evening the more likely it was to be Richard, who was a night owl by

nature. Either way, I drew them to the fire if I had one lit, made coffee, and asked Estelle, or Richard, what they would like to listen to, if I didn't have something new that I wanted to impose, because I am forced to admit that I was, for all my courtesies, the creature of impulse that most of us are in our twenties.

I loved many composers at that time, and I was trying to fill the gaps in my knowledge. I knew Carl Nielsen, and I'd absorbed Beethoven's quartets. I knew how great Bach was but I didn't listen to him very much because I was still distancing myself from the Christianity of my school and college years. I knew a few things by Sibelius and the more popular works of Vaughan Williams, and I played Haydn, Mozart and Berlioz a lot. I'd recently heard a performance in the Melbourne Town Hall of the Fantastic Symphony and, my seat being right above one wing of the orchestra, I'd watched conductor, timpanist and woodwinds bring off the effects of the French composer in his pastoral movement, where rolls of thunder speak of a distant storm. That I should be enraptured by such moments is indicative of why I felt scorn for the melodramas, as I thought them, of Verdi and, especially, Puccini. I was not an Italianate man. Strongly as I felt about many things, it was in my nature and my upbringing to restrain my feelings, to avoid them, much of the time, or to step around and over any uncomfortable implications they might have for me. Everyone in my family had lived, satisfactorily enough, it had always seemed to me, within

the normal restraints. Many years later a comedy team produced the line 'No sex please, we're British', and this could well have been applied retrospectively to me. Sex was always there, the great undercurrent moving everybody, but it too, or most of all, had to be managed with considerable caution, because ...

Well, look where it might take you!

I read in 'Gramophone' about a new recording of Verdi's *Otello* and then I read further until I felt I needed to know about the remarkable development that took place in the composer's last years. *Aida*. The *Requiem*. *Otello*, *Falstaff*, *Quattro Pezzi Sacri*, including the *Te Deum*. Something had happened to the Italian so that his musical style, which I had always thought vulgar, became spiritualised (the church pieces) and more symphonic in their writing (the operas). I bought the new *Otello*, with a powerful cast under Karajan, and played it once or twice. Verdi had changed. My earlier judgements, ungenerous as they had been, weren't appropriate any more. I mentioned this to Estelle and Richard. Richard was mildly interested, but caught up in an argument with whoever he reported to at council. Estelle said she wanted to hear whatever it was that was causing me to change my mind about Verdi. We must make a night when she could come up and listen.

We'd known each other for several years. I knew a little of her teaching before she'd married and had children. We'd discussed any number of things and knew each other's minds well. She had a city

background while my family were country people, which went some way to explaining our differences over the town where we lived. She thought it impossibly small-minded, brutally restrictive without even realising it; the minds of the young people in her classes were seen, by her, as on the way to being squashed, crushed, by the limitations of the place where they'd been brought up. She quoted a man she'd taught with in Ballarat who said the only kindness a teacher could give his charges in that city, one of the state's wealthiest, was enough marks to get them to university, meaning out! Our town was both smaller and poorer than Ballarat, so what other policy could any humane teacher have?

I, on the other hand, found local practice fascinating. It was different from the area where I'd grown up and what seemed restrictive to Estelle was new enough, for me, to offer possibilities I hadn't thought of. I'd become fairly popular because people sensed that I was interested in them, and, more than that, I wanted to know ...

What I didn't know was that general knowledge running ahead of self-knowledge is a dangerous situation. I was about to find out.

Estelle sat in a broad and commodious chair I'd bought from a departing teacher and had had recovered for three pounds. I have it still. I sat on the other side of the room, after putting on side 1 of *Otello*, and we listened. The opening is tumultuous, Otello enters, he stops a fight, then he in turn is arrested by the arrival

of the woman he loves. They sing, because that's what people do in operas, and how they sing. He says, 'Let war, thunder and the world be engulfed if after infinite wrath comes this infinite love!' Desdemona says, 'You led me to the shining deserts, to the burning sands, to your native land; you told of the pains suffered, and the chains and grief of the slave.' She says she loved him for the spirit she saw, blazing inside him, and he loved her for pitying, for feeling, in response to the things he told her. This is human passion raised to great heights and the two of them, black man and white woman, are swept up. He is afraid, he says; it may be that in the unknown future of his fate there will never again be a moment such as this. Desdemona has a woman's answer, which means, I fear, that it is an answer bound to be thwarted:

'May heaven drive away care, and love not change with the changing of the years.'

They kiss, Otello and Desdemona, they look upon the stars, and they go in, clasped in each other's arms. It is, however, and unfortunately, only the end of Act One.

From my chair on the other side of the room, near the gramophone, I said, 'How was that!' and Estelle, shifting in her chair, picked up her wine for a sip before saying, 'Hmm. Well!', which told me she was as moved as I had been. I put some wood on the fire, and poked it till it blazed. Words are best avoided, at times. Simple little actions can fill time just as well. We were taking in what we'd heard. Then the talkative side of me took over. 'I've been telling you what I've been reading about

the late Verdi ...’ ‘Ssshh,’ said Estelle, and put her glass down. ‘Let’s sit quietly before we go on.’ So we sat, on what was a mild evening, with the fire lit more for companionship, or focus in the room, rather than need of heat, and when I sensed that we were ready, I put on Act 2.

I can look now through the libretto of Verdi’s *Otello* without being able to remember where, exactly, we were in the excitement of the opera when I sensed that something had changed between us. I don’t remember Estelle signalling to me to turn the music down so that it must have been at the end of a side, as we used to say in the days of long-playing discs. The first words I can recall were Estelle saying, ‘We’re in trouble. What are we going to do about this?’ I realise now, looking back, that I was flushed with that state known as denial. She looked at me from the other side of the room. ‘Come over here.’ I shifted my chair to be beside her. We took each other’s hands. Estelle was nearly as troubled as I was. ‘I swore I wouldn’t let this happen.’ I wasn’t admitting anything, to myself or to her, but I had her hand, and the music had stopped. The fire was what was known in those days as cheerful, though we were not. I think I said, ‘The music ...’, as if offering an excuse. She said in reply, as I recall, ‘That won’t help us. What are we going to do?’ I find myself, looking back on this moment, forty-five years later, wanting to freeze everything, in hopes of examining the two people with a dangerous love flaring between them, wanting to

see into them to know what they were, what they might have done with the moment, and why they acted as we shall see them act. Estelle's marriage was maintained and I took another path, marrying too, raising a family, and so on, Othello's path rejected, just as he, the mad Moor, rejected the path his better mind had undertaken to follow when he was singing his duet with his wife. Othello in his rage of jealousy elected an alternative to what Desdemona had prayed for – an unchanging love contrasting with the years – and Othello was doomed. He'd reached a turning point and, fool, he turned, never to regain the advantage he'd once held. So simply do lives pivot. My own life, and Estelle's, had reached a turning point, and I want to hold this memoir there, at the turning point, for a moment, before letting events move on.

Hold!

Ah ...

Estelle and I saw each other as often as usual in the weeks that followed, no more no less. We didn't know what to do. If she spoke of her situation with Richard, she didn't tell me. I said nothing of it to him, yet he must have known, or sensed. He often said to me in those days, 'This town's too small. Our circles are too small. There's not enough people we can talk to about the things we need to talk about.' That was certainly true. I had nobody I could turn to for advice, because I knew what anyone I spoke to would say. A married woman! With children? Whatever can you be thinking

of? I knew what everyone in my family would say: ‘How are you going to get yourself out of this?’ Nobody would speak on passion’s behalf, and I scarcely had courage to speak for it myself, yet it was there, burning inside me. Who speaks for passion? Nobody. Why not? Because it’s seen as destructive. Passion? Surely it makes us noble? Surely it changes us from mortals to the closest we’ll ever come to being more than mortal? It does! The Greek gods are divinities for no other reason than that the passions they feel are acted on, no more than that. Half the time in Homer we don’t know whether we’re looking at a god or an empassioned human, because you can’t tell the difference.

Oh yes you can. The gods get away with it, most of the time, and humans suffer the consequences. Isn’t that so?

I don’t know what would have become of Estelle and I if the matter had been left to us, but it wasn’t. A few weeks later I learned that Richard had decided for us. He’d applied for, and got, a new job in the city. He, Estelle and the children would be leaving. I was both horrified and relieved. I still saw Estelle, as our days ran out. We took a walk on an island cut off by the nearby river, and I remember her looking at me when we stopped to admire the long-protected trees. Her eyes told me that she saw me as being as helpless as she was herself. She’d already told me, and she told me again, weeks later, by letter from the city where her life had been re-established, that she was brave enough to make

a gesture, but not to change the path of her life. If you make a gesture to display your feelings, you may suffer for it, and that has to be borne, but you can't allow a passion inside yourself to be destructive of others. This was, in its way, a policy decision and it would rule her actions, whatever happened. Walking on the island, or rather, having stopped to wonder at the trees, I saw from her eyes what lay ahead for me. I too must accept. Whatever bound her must bind me. We drove home, we made a pot of tea, we parted for that afternoon. We had two more weeks, I think it was, before the removal van would take her things, their things, to the capital.

A few days later, she named a night. 'I'm coming up to be with you. It'll be the last time.' She told me the day of their departure. The night before she was to visit me I heard her car visit some neighbours of mine, a few doors down the road. Her car? Richard's? I knew it was her because Richard was tolerant of the people who lived near me but impatient with them too. He wouldn't be spending one of his last nights with them. It would be Estelle, and she'd be playing cards, I supposed, because that was what those people did. I listened to music, trying not to think of Estelle sitting under the standard lamp of my neighbours, playing cards and chatting. I certainly didn't listen to *Otello*: something more decorous than that. I probably did some work in preparation for the following day. About eleven o'clock I heard her car start up, down the road. She was going home. There would be voices saying goodnight, though

I didn't hear them. I heard the car get underway, change gear, then slow. Then stop, outside my house. I listened, in surprise, to the silence, then footsteps, then a knock.

Estelle was at the door. She was very beautiful in black trousers, capacious white wool jumper, and black hair streaming across her shoulders. I closed the door and looked into her eyes, but she was looking into mine, reading my thoughts before I knew them for myself. 'I'm too early, aren't I. By a day. Or a night. It's tomorrow night I'm coming. You're right, we made an arrangement, we have to stick to it. I won't stay with you now, I'll see you tomorrow.' And she was gone. Her footsteps clattered on the drive, then the engine started again.

I remember a feeling of confidence, strange as it may sound, as the sound of the car died in the distance. Our love was secure for the little time it had still to run, before she would be gone from proximity to me, and we entered the inevitable period of letters and a slow, sad, dwindling of interest, the connection fading because it couldn't even be sustained, let alone strengthened. It would only be strengthened if we became more dependent on each other, and Richard, with his clever move, made, probably, in desperation, had made any such development impossible. In a week she'd be gone.

Yet we had a gesture to make towards each other, and we did. She came back the following night, in black, all black, this time, and we sat on a divan I'd pulled near the fire. It was a good fire, lit early, and built until it

had a deep bed of coals under the logs. I don't think it occurred to either of us to compare our love with the fire, glowing strongly but doomed to be dust by morning. We certainly knew that our love had never been allowed to peak until that night and it would have only the one chance to do so. We sat side by side, feeling the quiet of the night outside creeping into us. It is a lovely feeling to be with someone one loves with certainty, knowing that a surrounding silence is an assistance in concentration on a feeling that's of great importance but which has never been fully felt, because never fully allowed, before. We sat beside each other, each feeling the developing certainty in the other, until we embraced, kissed, then stood to put our clothes on the floor. I walked to the bedroom to get a contraceptive, I walked back. We lay back. The divan was ours. Each was the other's. I was hers. She was mine. Space is an indefinable, because elastic thing. 'Had I but world enough, and time ...' This was our time, and a simple, single divan was world enough, set, as it was, in a world amplified to the limit of our thoughts. We loved, it would damage others, it would be hated, because thought impossible, indecent, by the township around us, by her family and mine, so we had allowed ourselves – or she'd allowed herself, and I'd allowed myself to be ruled by her decision, the only one within her range of possibilities – a gesture of love. We gestured, twice, quickly, then we dressed again, then we took ourselves to the chair by the fire where she'd sat for *Otello*, and we squeezed into it – there was

room enough, with the two of us pressed together – and, simply by being close, and fulfilled, we gloried in each other, triumphant in our love!

She didn't stay late; I didn't go to the car to say goodnight. There seemed no need. A few days later Estelle, Richard and their children left the town, a van travelled the highway a little before or after them, and they settled in her mother's house in a suburb, far away.

Letters began.

I seized them from my mailbox and took them away to read them privately. I want to add 'in deepest concentration', but that would hardly be true. I was like a man who gobbles down water then wonders why he's still thirsty. 'Can't get no satisfaction,' Mick Jagger sings. Take it slowly, Mick! Slowly! I'd read the letters over and over, day after day, until I'd sucked them dry, then I'd write, proudly, commenting sometimes on what she'd said but mostly on events around me. I was still obsessed, remember, by the world. I didn't understand very much, I was locked up in myself, and I'm inclined to think that I couldn't understand anything much in those days unless I could relate it in some way to myself. My urge to enlarge, to grasp, the region I was in was a commanding one. Fulfilment, for me at that time, could never be partial. Looking back, I see my love for Estelle as a trap. We needed to pass quickly through the stage of lovers possessing each other, obsessed with each other, and then to use each other freely, a base, with permission to walk in and out of each other's lives at will.

I might have given Estelle that if I'd understood it at the time, but I was locked in the ideas of marriage that had surrounded me from birth – the habits of my family and all the other families I'd known, both in my upbringing and in Gippsland, where I was. Impossible! People couldn't have the freedoms I was imagining. Estelle couldn't. She understood freedom and the loss of it better than I did. I asked her to make a mountain trip with me; I had places to show her and things to discover ... besides, mountains were a place of ecstasy for me, and my idea of love was ecstatic too. I spoke before of gods; mortals could enlarge themselves by loving, it flowed through the veins of being and one became more than a single human. One flew, one soared, saw more than earthbound people saw, and one was more than human. Feelings were a festivity of enlargement. One could be more than one!

Two? Estelle tried to make arrangements for the trip we'd planned – her children, time away – but she couldn't. Her mother, who would have had the children, was troubled. Estelle couldn't come. Daughters depended on their mothers and the freedom she was crying for hadn't been handed down.

Her letters spoke of the silences of her mother, and her grandmother. Each of them took it for granted that they couldn't speak. Each had been widowed young. Each had had to shoulder a heaviness of responsibility. Children. Being in charge. Making do. Never an indulgence such as Estelle had briefly dreamed

of, and was now renouncing. We were doomed, though we struggled on. She sent me poems she'd written and I pored over her words, marvelling at the passions that words could point to. I told her what I was writing, and what I planned to write next time a holiday gave me days to myself.

We came through, painfully enough, and each with a considerable sense of loss. The ways of the world had blocked us. We hadn't been hard to squash. Each of us understood too well the forces closing us down, we evaluated, and saw we had no chance. There are only a handful in any generation for whom defeat isn't inbuilt in the mind. I ask myself why this is so. Were we right, Estelle and I, and was the world around us wrong?

I find myself wanting to interrogate Othello, and the composer and the dramatist who presented him. I want to challenge the power of art and ask if perhaps it hasn't failed us. What a fool Othello was. Why do I, did I, bother with him?

There's a lesson that's both moral and mortal to be listened to, here. Human societies are sheep-like, sticking instinctively together and treating the individual who separates himself as an object lesson in curiosity. If he stands alone, what will happen to him? Ah, you see! Foolish sheep, entrails torn out by dogs, eyes pecked out by crows. Protection lies within the mob. Stick with everyone else. Don't be daring. Stick together, do what everyone else does, and if anything goes wrong, appeal to those who look the same as you do. Individuality

that's too gross invites destruction, the curse falls on the ones that are alone ...

... and all the rest of it. You've heard it a thousand times. It's rubbish but it's also the way things work. It's true because everyone makes out it's true and that's what makes it true. A new truth can't be born unless people suffer for it. Exponents have to suffer, even die, before a path, a practice, becomes viable. Who wants to die for a feeling?

Who wants to kill? Othello did, and what a fool he was. At the end of the play, and the opera, Iago's dragged away for punishment, so the herd-audience, the sheep-audience, have a victim they can blame, but who's to blame but themselves? Who gave Othello his glory and who tore it from him?

Answer, the mob? No, answer, the mad Moor himself. He claimed too much. He claimed, and took, more than he could control himself to manage. Nobody writes plays, or operas, about self-control, self-management, but it's the central virtue, personal and social. It's one of life's mysteries that when we bring up children we know that we have to let them make mistakes, and learn from them, but at some point – Where? Where? Where? – we intervene. We say no. Don't try. Don't see what happens. Play it safe. Stay within the bounds.

I rarely play *Otello* now. I rarely read the play. The only lessons I've still to learn are how to write like Shakespeare, or music like Verdi. It's 10am as I sit

here writing; I won't learn those lessons by morning tea! Writers develop the art of living in other people's passions, and I suppose that's what I'm doing here. I'm treating my younger self as an 'other', I'm looking at him, and the woman he loved a while, and I'm drawing something, some riches, from their pain. They did give each other love, they did sit in each other's arms before a fire, filled with a burst of glory they'd ... stolen? snatched? ... from an ungenerous but indifferent world, so they did know each other deeply for a short time. I think *Othello/Otello* is a lesson in loss, and I think the best way to think of loss is not to complain about what might have been – because it was never, as they say, *on* – but to rejoice in whatever it was you got away with, if you were lucky enough to get away with anything at all.