

Long Paddock

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Take Me to the River

John Watson, *erasure traces collected works vol 2*
Sydney: Puncher and Wattman, 2008
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Kerry Leves, *A Shrine to Lata Mangeshka*,
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Depending on your point of view and your personal preferences, the first sequence of poems in this volume will either enthrall or infuriate. "Erasure Traces" is an abstract rendering of a real thing (in this case, a river) against a theoretical and analytical backdrop which builds up, I hardly dare use the word, images, only to tear them down. The river is no longer a natural phenomenon in this poem, it has been erased by the linguistic tomfoolery that Watson uses so that the river becomes a "site" where language can erase the river at will. Things start off well enough:

You sketch in ink the linkages of cells
Drawn from the microscope's stained slides
Of all you see
And then, after an interval, return
To expunge rogue cells and leave only those
Which look downriver into light.

But half way through we get this:

You are just in time
To see the present overtake
The possibilities it has rejected
Which could be misleadingly likened
To a breeze crossing the water-

This process is tantamount
To the excision of previous material -

It's like Watson needs to lecture us on the slippery nature of language and reality, and that what the reader really needs is commentary or a "Deconstruction for Dummies" manual to help us along. So much so that the commentary becomes the poem, and what follows are really little more than thoughts written down in a process of working through the material rather than the poem being an articulation of the "thing itself".

There is, in my opinion, a much better poem buried deep beneath the surface of what is printed on the page. Watson probably knows this, too and I suppose that's his point but you can't reduce a "river" to a "notion", or to random musings on language, theory and formal inventiveness just for the sake of it. There is beauty in this poetry but overall

Watson is not concerned with beauty and aesthetics and a poet should always be interested in beauty.

Kerry Leves' *A Shrine to Lata Mangeshkar* takes its title from one of the most famous Bollywood "playback" singers. A "playback" singer provides the actual voice for the screen actor to mime to. It's an interesting phenomenon in relation to Leves' book in that the poems attempt to get behind the surface meaning of the visual. This is poetry that is clearly concerned with the image but it is also poetry that aims to go beyond the "merely". This is poetry as travelogue, poetry as witness to the world but it is poetry that doesn't lapse into shallow tourism or self-centred idealization. It is a poetry that is concerned with what lies beneath the surface.

Watson and Leves are both concerned with landscape in general and "the river" in particular. Indeed is it possible to write about India and not be concerned with a river?

But the similarities in theme and style end there. Whereas for Watson, the poem is a vehicle for erasing language and meaning, for Leves the poem is a place where the reader is drawn into the poem through language. That is, through language that builds something up rather than tearing it down.

Ghats

The gods shinny down guyropes of light.
What is the name of the river
That holds the river?
Dumb in the gaze of the boatman
We trails our hands in the holy flow
Where indistinction is all.

River

Vendors of sweets,
vendors of death's sweet perfumes
fix dark eyes on us, see possibilities
we've come here to shed.

(from the poem, "Varanasi")

In Leves' poetry, the river has not been reduced to a site for intellectual gymnastics and linguistic tomfoolery, Leves' river is allowed to flow, to move through a landscape, to be in fact an actual river. In contrast, Watson's river is not a river at all. It is an idea of a river, a conceptual river, a place setting forth arguments about what a river might mean. Which is all well and good, but no-one can go swimming in an idea of a river, and no-one can be baptised in a concept.