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Two Poets Read at a Tangent (from work journals¹)

Gig Ryan, *Manners of an Astronaut*. Hale & Iremonger, 1984.
Antigone Kefala, *Thirsty Weather*. Outback Press, 1978.

Just finished re-reading Gig Ryan's² *Manners of an Astronaut* (1984), her second collection of poetry. The *switches* within a sentence often across lines of one expression to another, from one image to another seemingly unrelated is always deft. Jerky movements of perception brought into counterpoint "alignment," so to speak. We see all failed manners—then their contraries—dragged into the failed vision of day; failed "manners" and a desire to make sense when sense is disrupted.

In the persona's constant alienation with and astonishment at the arrogance and gall of those around her (especially men), "she" tries to plot a way through, but undoes herself (usually with drugs) and can't break the reliance on the false art-party-ironies of the city. A need to be *in* the rapidity of the city and seeing its emptiness, its glass, its hypocrisies but also constantly addicted, caught in the non-generative irony of ennui and the delusions of "art" (as opposed to creativity). Often accruals of aphoristic observations, declarations and oppositions.

"The New Morality" ("for Dante") plies the moral code with its contradictions, and *La Vita Nuova* is reclaimed for its subject (and the "dolce stil novo—"sweet new style"—ironised):

Her face flooded with cocaine in her triumphal bed.
Childhood didn't affect me.

From "her" to "my"—the imploding call & response of gender and identity expectations, the failed encodings of the social contract. And the jolts in perception—of statement shifting to perception, of rhetoric shifting to lyric, interiority to exteriority and vice versa in an aporia of the social-private existence:

I run into people whose names I can't remember,
watching the hydrangeas. ("Eliminations (II)")

And the slippages as propulsion (and compulsion?) of the absurd realism—the not remembering is linked with the concrete and representational "watching the hydrangeas." And who is watching? Definition and evasion—the anecdote reverses. Social performative expectation is disdained—vanity of vanities is/are male, as "achievement" becomes display

and is recruitment of a female companion as showing off, as an illustration of and for male social “worth”/cache (trophyism)—the lines drop and congeal. And always the debasement of art as viewing more than creating (re talking more than doing):

He borrows the mirror for hours to prove his clothes
are special. He shows you his delicate jewel.

You’re supposed to sigh, and help him
with his coat, but talking about it makes me sick! (“His Cubist Drawings”)

So, the “you” and “me” dissolve into each other in their disgust at the expectations of his social performance—and the role “she”/“you” are expected to play. “She”/“you” won’t. They call it out. Display is male and where it is “present” in the “female” it is product of male projection and *enforcement*. The “classic” prosody “tool” that Ryan develops as part of this undoing of prosody and “tools” (males) is shown in the inversion and reversal of this line (the basic building blocks of the book are lines in this *manner*):

Your sense of urgency would kill a car. (“His Cubist Drawings”)

It is an absurdist collapsing conceit; the metaphor that is hyperbolic because of what informs it (its materials re what it is observing). The extremes of the parts are the rank bullshit of the social constraints of gender, art and display (and such urgency might, to be literal, cause a car crash... the overwhelming glib irony of the conceit which converts it to statement). Ryan has a “genius” (not a quality, a mode of configuring speech) for the staccato-fast accumulation, this *Allegro vivace* of anti bon mots.

But there are also love poems against love poem “traditioning”—there are obsessions, adorations, and deep self-excoriations (for having such abstract intense emotions). And emotions are the most suspect affect of all!

Brilliant book, if still “caught” in its own definition of bandwidth. City poems half in love with an “easeful” city, to echo John Keats’s “easeful death.”

Note: Book was glowingly blurbed by Martin Johnston. He was clearly overwhelmed by Gig Ryan’s in your face fuck-you “Sophistication”!

And as I type this I prepare for another journal entry in a new volume, another volume, and note that this entry on Gig Ryan’s book ends with a comment on “flying termites” when I was preparing to write a new entry on the thousands of flying termite wings I found outside around windows and in the gutters which I just cleaned because storms are expected!

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Reading Antigone Kefala’s³ *Thirsty Weather* (1978)—some vague *unanchored* wafty/wispy lines, but when the poetry does anchor experience, it is *intense*—the “earth” of the women “in their dark clothes,” the escape and arrival, the displacement (which is also part of why there is more ethereal less anchored imagery ... those “imagined” places of water on a dry road in “thirsty weather” ... so good reason, likely).

Kefala's "The Place" is a fantastic poem—the best I've read in my latest immersion in "past" books out of Australia. It is anchored, its "error zones"⁴ are fraught with tension, threat, apprehension and the anxiety-tension of "hope"—as a poem of refugee/immigrant displacement. Poised, always building, each line on the edge of certainty/uncertainty. The shifts from the "solid" to the "figurative" increase our uncertainty, our following the "protective" voice searching for sanctuary but wary of (and on) the journey. Note the shift from "small" to "full"—places/hills as uneasy but also "logical" juxtaposition making the uncanny more than the "art" of the poem:

The place was small, full of hills,
palm trees, almond trees, oleanders,
glass flowers falling from the sky
on the ascetic hills, the bare houses.
The ancients had been here looking for copper. (13)

We have the tension between "reality" and "imagination," but more threateningly, between the false securities of the organised unfolding, the false securities of form ... the anxiety between the present and the ancient...

And the hope extended as a gift that is not "real," but still real to children who are those the parents most hope to rescue, to take to better conditions—a deft deflating irony that is also cautious in the light of harsh realities; almost too much to hope for—people cannot eat toys or live on letters ... the ships sink for all the hope, and brute reality cannot be flourished and decorated with language (even as poetry). So how does a poem articulate this crisis, this *ambiguity*, this distress? Well, like this:

The ships we had heard, had sunk
weighed down with charity of the new world
that kept on feeding us with toys,
letters in foreign tongues
that we could not decipher (14)

"We gave them to our silent children," as the next stanza begins. The deflation vs. affirmation, the crisis of survival vs. hope,⁵ the sunken treasure aspect of deliverance. Mighty and moving poetry. Legit, necessary, and beyond its own ambiguities.⁶ Not a lot elsewhere in the book approaches this intensity and "resolution," which is *not* "resolution" as well (though later work frequently reaches such intensity and engages with this paradoxical "resolution"). Many of the poems after the first few sequences—the shorter poems—are disappointing (to me)—wind, light and shape (or empty shapes) ... occasional strong "anchors," but often too wispy, too "vague" for my⁷ receptionality. Those earlier Kefala sequences/poems I so admire were often on the edge of interpretation—their intensity in the edginess and also flux of solidity, a contradiction of *substance*. I am reminded of her poems I included in the *Penguin Anthology of Australian Poetry* from the book *The Alien* (UQP, Brisbane, 1973), "The Alien" and "The Wanderer," and their specificity and abstract evocations, evident in these lines:

... at night I see it rising from the hollow tower
dripping with mist

this land we search for in each other's eyes
its surface steaming in the shafts of light
immersed in silence ("The Alien," 244)

and:

The world
made of a matter that never
forgets, a symmetry so exact,
fatality at the heart
of each thing. ("The Wanderer," 245)

The liminal flux, the migrant-exile-disrupted person looking for "place" and "replace," but looking for it in others as well as the self, wondering always what can be reflected back, then reminding one's self that there is always a "somewhere," that the world knows is, wherever we are, however we "wander" or are disrupted.

NOTES

1 This is an extract from my journals wherein I have over recent years undertaken a "project" of reviewing all the Australian poetry volumes from the 60s-90s on my shelves—JK.

2 Gig Ryan's bio note in *The Penguin Anthology of Australian Poetry* (ed. John Kinsella, 2009) reads, in part: "(b. 1956) is poetry editor for the *Age*. A freelance reviewer, poet and song writer, she is also a musician with the band *Driving Past*. She lives in Melbourne." It should be noted, that as with Antigone Kefala's book discussed below, these are early books, and many other vital books of poetry have followed. Both Ryan and Kefala are much lauded poets.

3 Antigone Kefala's bio note in *The Penguin Anthology of Australian Poetry* (ed. John Kinsella, 2009) reads, in part: "(b. 1935) was born to Greek parents and grew up in Romania. She now lives in Sydney and has worked as a teacher, in libraries, and as an arts administrator."

4 See my *Displaced Poetics: beyond landscape and lyricism* for a discussion of these "dynamics" of a poem.

5 The pain of this shows the involutions entailed in all words with multiple meanings (as all words have—some maybe more than others), the versus as competing or challenging, or the process of contrasting. Obviously I use it in the latter sense, but the echoes are of poetry as well. An irony is cast on the "review" authoring in the use of the word "Legit" shortly after. As if it is a legal issue. But maybe it is in the sense that there is a right and wrong, and people suffering is always wrong and legitimacy surely resides in working communally and interactively in an "international regional" way to alleviate suffering and distress. ("International regionalism" is a core notion in my practice, and appears as an argument against economic globalism but for international conversation with full respect for regional integrity across most if not all of my critical books.)

6 Looking beyond ambiguity into generative activism (but eliciting activism also potentially inherent to ambiguity) is the theme of my book *Beyond Ambiguity* (Manchester University Press, 2021).

7 The restless searching for a surety of the past which can never really solidify as a theme seems essential to me in understanding movements of people across the earth, but also the substance of displacements. Poetry becomes part of a rectification, a "corrective" in this—not answers, but potentially "illuminations."