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TEXT prose

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On the novel I did not write

Twelve months into my Doctor of Arts candidature at the University of Sydney I realised that the writing project I'd set myself, and on the basis of which I'd been accepted into the program, was something I would be unable to complete. In retrospect there were two main reasons. First, having published an early section of the novel, I subsequently lost momentum; I came to think of this, perhaps ridiculously, as *the voice* having run out of breath. Second, and more important, I now felt that I could not, in good conscience, write the novel I'd initially proposed, namely, to fictionalise the circumstances surrounding the death of the Australian poet Michael Dransfield (1948-1973), and to riff on questions of literary milieu and posthumous reputation. Although it was an anxious period I did not consider withdrawing or suspending my candidature. Perhaps naïvely, I assumed that my enthusiasm for the novel as originally conceived would return, and that I would resolve the ethical quandary, but neither of those things happened.

1.

In 2016 *Southerly* published 'The Final Cast', the story I'd hoped would become the first chapter of the creative component of my thesis. The publication was something to be pleased about; up until that point I'd published more poetry than prose fiction, and thus I felt I was making headway in the genre I'd chosen to pursue during my candidature. As a poet

I'd become accustomed to sending out poems as I finished them, and hoping, once a sufficient number had been selected for publication, that a collection might ensue; in submitting my story to *Southerly* I was simply transposing the habit. And once the story had been accepted, I thought I knew what would happen: it would appear, and then, with more confidence and an added sense of legitimacy, I would carry on writing, adding, expanding, progressing towards a novel length manuscript. Unfortunately, the publication had a deadening effect, delivering not the impetus I'd hoped for, but a logjam. I sensed I'd finished even before I'd properly begun.

The one aspect of the story to have worked, I allowed myself to think, perhaps rather smugly, was the voice, which, as I'd learned in an extract from a book by Richard Cohen, an extract I'd encountered in a unit of study that I was obligated to complete as a condition of my candidature, 'refers to a specific aspect of style, the aspect that makes the words on the page sound like those of a human being talking, with a personality' (Cohen 114-5). I felt my story's first-person narrator had a personality, in the sense meant by Cohen: warmly neurotic, downwind of self-deprecation. However, on seeing 'The Final Cast' in print, the voice struck me as alien. While writing the story I'd tried only to maintain verbal momentum, the fluency and/or the impression of fluency – fluently-warmly-neurotic – which for this particular story had seemed apposite, but I wasn't confident that I could re-inhabit the voice, or have it re-inhabit me, for the duration of long form prose. Furthermore, I was concerned that readers, were there to be any, would prove unwilling to endure such a voice for upwards of forty thousand words, that being the self-mandated, though in essence quite arbitrary, minimum length for a literary novel, it seemed.

Where had the voice for my story come from? Contrary to what I once had thought, and what on many occasions I'd heard and read in the types of author interviews one finds, even now, in the weekend supplements of metropolitan newspapers, the voice had not arrived *sui generis*, divinely given, but rather, in part, had emerged from an earlier, liberating bout of *influenza*, which is always embarrassing to admit: I'd been under the sway of the Chilean poet and novelist Roberto Bolaño. As Chris Andrews, one of Bolaño's two main translators into English (the other is Natasha Wimmer), and the author of the monograph *Roberto Bolaño's Fiction – An Expanding Universe*, has suggested, 'the invigorating effect of Bolaño's stories...concerns their forms and rhythms. His prose has a contagious, joyful energy, even when treating desolate themes' (10). 'Contagion' was correct: if one 'gets' Bolaño one reads him quickly, even feverishly. By way of an example, here is the opening to *Distant Star*, the first of Bolaño's novels that I read:

I saw Carlos Wieder for the first time in 1971, or perhaps in 1972, when Salvador Allende was President of Chile.

At that stage Wieder was calling himself Alberto Ruiz-Tagle and occasionally attended Juan Stein's poetry workshop in Concepcion, the so-called capital of the South. I can't say I knew him well. I saw him once or twice a week at the workshop. He wasn't particularly talkative. I was. Most of us there talked a lot, not just about poetry, but politics, travel (little did we know what our travels would be like), painting, architecture, photography, revolution and the armed struggle that would usher in a new life and a new era, so we thought, but which, for most of us, was like a dream, or rather the key that would open the door into a world of dreams, the only dreams worth living for. And even though we were vaguely aware that dreams often turn into nightmares, we didn't let that bother us. (3)

This I found intriguing, exhilarating even. I knew something of Allende, and of Pinochet; indeed, it was the type of thing I prided myself on knowing. Walter Benjamin. Rosa Luxemburg. Steve Biko. My sympathies were reflexive, and I shall say nothing about them here. Of more interest, for our purpose, was my being caught immediately by the 'joyful energy' of the prose, for which Chris Andrews, having transported it from the Spanish into English, deserved a great deal of credit. Taken in isolation, the maddening sentences border on naïve, but in the aggregate, their effect is to fuse voice with narrative momentum. Or perhaps another way to say this: Bolaño's prose leans into the void, where it produces a vertiginous effect, all the while conveying a bruised mimetic content, or perhaps, or rather, one feels Bolaño's world is accessed through a bruise, or through a series of such bruises. Vulgar and acquisitive as it may be, and it came to seem this way, I wanted some of Bolaño's 'verbal proliferation' for myself (Andrews 3).

There were other things to learn of and from Bolaño's work. For instance, in the chapter titled 'Bolaño's Fiction-Making System' (33-68), Andrews discusses, among other techniques, 'overinterpretation'. Andrews uses overinterpretation non-pejoratively 'to refer to the way certain characters and narrators seize on minimal detail, invest them with weighty significance, and invent stories to connect and explain them' (56). Some of these narrators seem to 'manifest a benign form of apophenia, which the psychologist Klaus Conrad defined in 1958 as "unmotivated seeing of connections [accompanied by] a specific feeling of abnormal meaningfulness"' (56). The narrators' apophenia, I came to understand, via Andrews, was in fact contagious (that word again): readers acquired it from the prose, which is to say, the prose, shaped and sprung, functioned as the medium. How then was it possible, on reading the

opening to *Distant Star*, for a reader not to connect President Allende, poetry readings, revolution, armed struggle, and the coming nightmare? How could a reader not sense the ‘abnormal meaningfulness’ of such connections? And who among those readers would not read on to see how the narrator ‘invent[s] stories to connect and explain them’? As with apophenia, so too with overinterpretation. The effect is set in train by the novel’s very first sentence, which seems at once analeptic – the narrator ‘flashing-back’ to his former self – and proleptic, in that readers learn that the narrator’s former self will see Wieder again (as in, of course, auf Wiedersehen), just as they know that Allende’s presidency will end, an awareness that for many readers is made more acute by their extra-textual knowledge. Bolaño’s narrator is narrating from beyond the moment of the nested prolepsis, such that readers do not yet know, on reading that first sentence, who the narrator is (or is going to be), or where the narrator is presently located (that is, the time and place of narration). These are questions of an as-yet-absent-but-emerging context, all of which pertained to the story-world Bolaño was only just beginning to open up. The first sentence, over-interpreting for a moment longer, might be thought of as ‘the key that would open the door into a world of dreams, the only dreams worth living for.’ And which dreams were those? Literature, poetry, the novel qua novel, but also this particular novel, *Distant Star*.

For Bolaño, I learned, again via Andrews, poetry was the preeminent dream ‘worth living for’. Andrews argues that in Bolaño’s oeuvre, poetry ‘stands synecdochally for what Giorgio Agamben ... calls “neotenic openness”’ (193). ‘Neotenic openness,’ writes Andrews, ‘to allow the expression its broadest sense, is a youthful openness preserved beyond the age at which it is typically lost, and therefore a quality that is distinctly manifest only in individuals who are at least relatively old’ (193-4). In other words, writing poetry, but also reading it, *beyond a certain age*, is emblematic of the openness one typically associates with the young. I rather liked this formulation; it was more congenial than others I’d heard, and infinitely kinder than ‘when are you going to get a proper job?’ ‘Youthful openness’ was enervating. And yet, might poets and readers of poetry feel frustrated that poetry had been afforded a symbolic value within the economy of the novel, rather than being met, which is to say, transmitted and received, according to its own valences? The irony, of a poet setting poetry aside in order to write a novel that would trumpet the importance of poetry, was not lost on me. All of which is to say that Roberto Bolaño’s prose, and *Distant Star* especially, as translated into English by Chris Andrews, was a powerful influence on the voice of my short story, not that anyone else would necessarily make the connection. I did not set out to imitate: the influence happened in the background, in the sleeper-cells of my writer’s brain.

2.

My intention, then, had been to fictionalise the circumstances surrounding the death of the Australian poet Michael Dransfield. For this I would have ‘mined’ – excavated, made my own – Felicity Plunkett’s article ‘Haunting an old house: The posthumous career of Michael Dransfield’, and Patricia Dobrez’s *Michael Dransfield’s Lives – A Sixties Biography*, both of which reiterate Dransfield’s ‘romanticism’, though the point of Plunkett’s article was to question, or ‘problematise’, just such a notion.

To summarise, for reasons of expediency: Michael Dransfield is commonly referred to as a member of the ‘Generation of 68’ poets, and he is often described as a Keats or Shelley-like figure (Plunkett makes this connection, as does Dobrez, who in addition refers to others who have done so, including Rodney Hall and Geoff Page). Dransfield was one of the twenty-four poets to be included in John Tranter’s seminal anthology, *The New Australian Poetry*, which itself owed much, as a publishing venture, or intervention, but also to the influence of those poets included therein, to Donald Allen’s *The New American Poetry*. To simplify, the ‘Generation of 68’ celebrated ‘progressiveness’ and experimentalism in form and theme, and was contrasted, especially by its own members, with the more ‘conservative’ poets of an earlier post-World War II generation. Such claims and counterclaims were signs of vitality; a drab consensus, or at any rate, hypothecated pockets of drab consensus, often facilitated by nepotism and/or self-interest, and whipped to a grey lather of soft regard, would have been infinitely worse.

Dransfield, then, afforded an opportunity to pursue a local example of what H.J. Jackson (2) has called ‘present and future fame’, namely, the reasons for an author’s popularity during his-her lifetime, or lack thereof, and the reasons why the work might still be read, or discovered, in the years after the author’s death. Jackson shows how literary merit is only one factor, and not necessarily the preeminent one. Others include networks and literary politics, as alluded to above, but also changes to intellectual fashions, the existence of posthumous archives, preferably containing one or more unpublished manuscript (in Dransfield’s case, what would become *Memoirs of a Velvet Urinal*, and *The Second Month of Spring*), and the efforts of a committed advocate (Rodney Hall, who as poetry editor at *The Australian*, was an early supporter of Dransfield’s, and would later edit *Michael Dransfield: Collected Poems*). The nature of Dransfield’s death, following the self-administered injection of an

unknown substance, according to the Coroner (Dobrez 509), contributed to Dransfield's mythopoeic aura. All of this, I thought, made Dransfield's 'story' congenial to narrative fiction; he seemed already like a character from a novel.

And so, on reading Jackson's study of the Romantics and their various posthumous fates, I began to imagine transposing other 'characters' and histories from Romantic England to Menzies and/or Whitlam Australia (1949-1975); this, I thought, was a personal instance of apophenia. If Dransfield was so widely considered a Keats/Shelley figure, who might the Wordsworth be, the Coleridge, the Mary Shelley? Might there also be a poet to 'raise from the unread', such as the Romantic era's Robert Bloomfield, whom Jackson identified as a 'potential candidate for recovery' (204). And would it not be useful to have a character who might argue against the prevailing mood, or rather, against the mood from which one perspective on the era is said to have prevailed, against 'progressiveness', etc., a heretic to speak some other truth? And wasn't Whitlam our very own Allende? Wasn't he too, at least in some sense, 'assassinated'? And Dransfield had died in 1973, the year of the military coup in Chile; were there not obvious connections to make, replete with abnormal meaningfulness? The material was laid out before me, begging to be written.

3.

Which brings us to the second reason I did not write my novel: Henry James' *The Aspern Papers*. As you may know, the narrator of James' novella, a literary biographer, travels to Venice to acquire from Juliana Bordereau the papers of the great, dead poet Jeffrey Aspern (Bordereau and Aspern had been lovers). The narrator's apparent motivation is to celebrate and enhance Aspern's reputation, though from the very beginning the tone of the narration indicates his self-interest and sad pomposity. A famous exchange during section VII, a little over halfway into the novella, will serve to establish the conflict between the narrator and Juliana Bordereau, and to crystallise the dominant theme:

She looked at me in her barricaded way. 'If you write books don't you sell them?'

'Do you mean do people buy them? A little – not so much as I could wish. Writing books, unless one be a great genius – and even then! – is the last road to fortune. I think there is no more money to be made by literature.'

‘Perhaps you don’t choose good subjects? What do you write about?’
Miss Bordereau inquired.

‘About the books of other people. I’m a critic, an historian, in a small way.’ I wondered what she was coming to.

‘And what other people, now?’

‘Oh, better ones than myself: the great writers mainly – the great philosophers and poets of the past; those who are dead and gone and can’t speak for themselves.’

...

‘Do you think it’s right to rake up the past?’

‘I don’t know what you mean by raking it up; but how can we get at it unless we dig a little? The present has such a rough way of treading it down.’

‘Oh, I like the past, but I don’t like critics,’ the old woman declared, with her fine tranquillity.

‘Neither do I, but I like their discoveries.’

‘Aren’t they mostly lies?’

‘The lies are what they sometimes discover,’ I said, smiling at the quiet impertinence of this. ‘They often lay bare the truth.’ (108)

The familiarity of James’ concerns was astonishing. They were continuous with our own as to the evaluation of literature, history and biography, memoir versus fiction, the nature of truth, a writer’s penurious existence, the attendant anxieties, etc. How could so much have changed and yet so little? I saw also how the ironies of *The Aspern Papers* issued from, while at the same time indicting, the bathetic, even unpleasant narrator, and on this point I was quite aggrieved; after all, I’d written ‘The Final Cast’ in the first-person, and naturally I worried that the narrator’s personality, his character, with its numerous bunions and foibles, had issued from my own. Is that how it was, with merely a cigarette paper between us?

To read *The Aspern Papers* when thinking to write a biographically based novel about Michael Dransfield, a poet who, as with Aspern, had ‘suffered an early death’ (52), was undermining, to say the least. James’ narrator seldom mentions Aspern’s poetry, but instead is fascinated by the poet’s life, hopeful

of rumour and innuendo and intrigue, of finding some new poem or biographical titbit from which to profit, that being the cardinal reason he wishes to acquire the letters Aspern wrote to Juliana Bordereau. There is nothing noble in the narrator's pursuit; indeed, in Tessa Hadley's words, the man is a 'literary property developer' (315). And there was I, proposing something similar with Dransfield. Perhaps the lives of dead authors should be off-limits to 'publishing scoundrels', as Juliana Bordereau calls James' narrator (127), and to which one might add unscrupulous fiction writers, not to mention scumbag wannabes, for a time equivalent to copyright? For 'literary specialists', Hadley tells us, there is something even more chastening to *The Aspern Papers*, in that it delivers a second recognition:

Perhaps as well as being a fable of literary "discipledom" and its ignominies, the story is also a fable about the ignominies – the appropriations, the disingenuousnesses, the manipulations, even the coarsenesses – implicit in the very act of writing. As well as opposing the "literary industry" to "art", might it be that the story opposes "art" to "life", in a complex ironic act of self-critique?... As the story progresses the reader may begin to wonder whether writing itself (and by extension our enjoyment of and community with the writing, in reading) is not, as Joan Didion expressed it, "an aggression ... an imposition ... an invasion of someone else's most private space". (320-1)

Recalling Jackson, one acknowledges the essential role played by advocates – critics, fellow writers, biographers, disciples – in securing an author's posthumous reputation, but one sees also that biographical writing, and perhaps in particular, biographically based fiction, is all at once a dirty, invasive, self-interested business. There is, quite obviously, an ethical question when drawing on the lives of actual persons, which extends to authors, namely as to one's putative right to trespass, and James' novella, though a work of fiction, proves instructive. *The Aspern Papers* implies that a will-to-trespass is inevitable, even, in some sense, that just such an appetite is constitutive of the craft. Hadley notes James' culpability in this regard, qua author: it is he inventing and writing, not his narrator (321). Indeed, Gary Scharnhorst has argued that *The Aspern Papers* draws not only on an anecdote concerning Lord Byron's papers, that there had been an attempt to 'pilfer' them from a former mistress, but that James was, rather guiltily, reflecting on his own practice vis-a-vis the use of papers and letters in the critical essay/biography he had written of Nathaniel Hawthorne. James, in other words, knew how an author's archive might be obtained, scoured, and used for one's own purposes, not the least of which is to make progress in one's own career, because he himself had done just such a thing. Scharnhorst suggests this experience as

both a source for *The Aspern Papers*, and a contributing reason as to why James, ‘when his health began to fail’, burned his files (216). ‘The example of Hawthorne,’ writes Scharnhorst, ‘had convinced him [James], it seems, to trust no one, not even an executor, especially an executor, with his own literary estate’ (216).

And so: *The Aspern Papers*, and the associated research, was the second reason I did not write the novel I’d intended. I came to believe, ultimately, that I had no right to trespass on the life and death of Michael Dransfield. My decision augurs poorly for my future as a fiction writer, especially one with an interest in the lives of actual persons – perhaps I’m confusing ethics and propriety? Perhaps I’m weak-minded? – and yet, I’ve been unable to talk myself around.

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