

TRANSNATIONAL LITERATURE

Ken Bolton, *A Whistled Bit of Bop: Poems* (Vagabond Press, 2010)

In a 2005 interview with Peter Minter in *Jacket*, Ken Bolton observed that – John Kinsella aside – experimental Australian poetry had difficult securing an international audience. Paradoxically, an Australian poetry confidently global in mien, plurally allusive, heterodox, faced impediments in getting a hearing in precisely the sort of milieu that had spurred its production in the first place.

Two lessons can be drawn from this. One, a larger theoretical point, is that globalisation is not as efficient as its eulogists in the late 1990s would have it, that sometimes the least global permeates across national or regional barriers which strains out the work more genuinely synthetic (if one may be permitted to be so oxymoronic) of global referents. When one adds Pascale Casanova's observation that the metropolitan centre is often looking for certain specific presentations of a peripheral country's literature rather than the full monopoly of the literature as such, one can understand why like does not seek like, why the global might find the global, on the other side of the world, merely an ironic, and perhaps subversive, duplication.

Another reason, though, is more endemic to Australia and how it has been perceived in the Anglophone world. Long seen as the redoubt of the traditional, the antidote to the over-cultivated nonsense of the Northern Hemisphere, Australia must thence needs be the desert from which the prophets come, ready to rebuke us chattering apes of etiolated Northern Hemisphere nescience. Or perhaps Australian poems need to be vetted by the tradition, welcomed in to the sedate and the tried-and-true, so that the roof does not come off world poetry by some insufficiently forewarned-of seismic tug from the Antipodes. Indeed, the Australian poets most often hailed in mainstream New York organs – A.D. Hope himself, Les Murray, Stephen Edgar – have been shoehorned into this model, very reductively the case of Murray whom the future may see as *au fond* an experimentalist.

Bolton's poems, which not only dispense with conventional rhyme and metre but also use the entire page, flouting decorum with a sprawl of words here, there, and everywhere, drawing on the syncopated asymmetries of jazz and the self-aware structural exposure of abstract painting, are continually on the move. Indentations, gaps, asynchronous beats push the words hither and yon on the surface of the text, making the eye as active a mode of cognition in reading Bolton as the mind. In a sense Bolton's verse is insufficiently static to be apprehended and exported in the manner of the more conventionally organised poets whom a certain strand of international taste has found more congenial.

The only way in which I would differ with Bolton's opinion is that he may be overrating the extent to which mainstream Anglo-American organs are open to avant-garde Anglo-American work. The New York School of poets, from whom Bolton derives such sustenance and for which he shows such admiration, possessed its sense of solidarity and community precisely because it was, as David Lehman justly put it in his acclaimed book on the subject, the last avant-garde. Its mode of poetry was not exactly beloved by academic critics and mainstream publishers, the poets allied with dissident strands of opinion and practice in an art world already friendlier to more experiential modes of representation to gain its ballast. Frank O'Hara's accessibility and John Ashbery's inaccessibility, through harnessing differing streams of cultural

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capital, managed to break through, but it was a breakthrough against the tide. Bolton's invocation of Ashbery and O'Hara in a suburban Australian context of minor pleasures and whimsical perplexity is winning, yet it necessarily avoids O'Hara's evanescence and Ashbery's sombreness, present in their poems for those who have ears to hear. These poets, and certainly their younger contemporary Ted Berrigan, had to go through a lot to forge the community to which Bolton dialogically responds:

I think Ted was the first
Poet who died, for me.
O'Hara was gone
when I began reading him
& gone famously – it
was always part of his legend
& made him seem
fated, heroic, graceful (68)

Bolton's virtual acquaintance with these people becomes real, part of the 'positive unoriginality' that Meaghan Morris has diagnosed as recurrent in Australian culture. Bolton coins, out of the derived and epigenous, something authentic and heartfelt.

I very much enjoyed the time I spent with these poems. I especially liked those where lateral address, to friends or peers, complements the cross-temporal or geographical excursions such as the invocations of the New York poets. Frequent collaborator John Jenkins, close friends Pam Brown and Sal Brereton, and, particularly intricately, the late Sasha Soldatow are addressed or imbricated as the poems unfold, giving a sense of an intermediate space between writer and reader, a first community of reception that at once defines the immediate circle in which the poems were conceived and gives the more distant reader an anchor to more firmly ground their relationship to the work.

An e-mail from Pam
Says Sasha has died

– Who might have quoted the line
'All I want is boundless love'

His *attitude*
Might have quoted that –

Sasha wouldn't (84)

There are a multitude of factors at work, at play, here. There is elegy and deflection, mourning and flippancy, emotion and asceticism. One poet heard from another about a third, and we, as the audience constitute a fourth hearing about the death in the poem. There is indirection and communication, velleity and forthrightness here. Boundless love is no less a desideratum by being put into a quote, but putting into a

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quote shows that we poets – for Bolton has included us in the game along with Brown and Soldatow – know how to invoke distance and irony, not so much to lessen our own sense of emotion but to guard it from a sense of cliché that would let outer vulgarity impinge upon the integrity of our loss. Also important is the difference between someone’s attitude quoting a line, but that someone not himself enunciating it. So much of any poetry stems out of an ear for things left unsaid, so that what is missing from the page becomes as much part of the interpretive scene as what is manifest. Saying rather than implying is reserved for the most official, the most thundering and loud of pronouncements; or it can be that the said is but a camouflage and the truth lies in the broken, fractured non-plangent beauty of innuendos. I also value the peer relationships here, the sense of trust, of solidarity – to me, a member of a younger generation, this seems very much a Baby Boomer trait, a willingness to at once cultivate individuality and be part of a team, an exemption from the relentless self-aggrandisement and positional arms-race engagement that has afflicted younger cohorts.

Unlike with the explicitly named poetic collaborators, the reader does not know just who precisely are the persons referred to in ‘Some Photos for Gabe, in London, and a photo for Yuri, Newly Arrived,’ but the sense of camaraderie and solidarity is similarly infectious:

HI Gabe, some photos, muchacho! – *What,*
No gravy? True, there should be a lot
 To say – it having been so long. (And I should, should I, begin
 ‘*Dear Gabe*’? – but to announce ‘nothing’.
 I think my ‘famous’ ‘light’ ‘tone’.) *And what*

Is it, you say, with the format. – ‘verse’? I know, but
 I’ve begun now (86)

The sense of inadequacy extends to the poet’s own evocation of his light tone, which he certainly puts under scrutiny if not erasure. Bolton shows that lightness can encompass many shades of meaning. In a way reminiscent of the American poet Mark Statman – with analogous, if more direct, New York School lineage – Bolton combines good cheer, an awareness of perceptual gaps, and a sort of probing inadvertence to create, after all the difficulty of reading these non-linear, hyperconscious poems – a teasing lightheartedness.

The lightheartedness is at once the key to the success of these poems and their biggest problem. One of the great gifts of the generation of ’68 was their freedom from the stentorian bravado of their predecessors; they delivered us from the pompous enunciator poems about explorers or opera singers that had been carried off in bravura ways by poets such as Douglas Stewart and Francis Webb but had seriously begun to pall. Yet when one compares Bolton to say Edgar, one sees Bolton far more innovative in technique, but Edgar more capable of writing about serious subjects. (There are other Australian poets, such as Alan Wearne and Laurie Duggan, who may be said to split the difference here, being both innovative and often – when called for – pessimistic – the late Dorothy Porter was another example in a different mode.) Now, it is arguable that the very idea of ‘serious subjects’ presumes a retrograde,

bourgeois referentiality; yet the lightheartedness of Bolton's improvisations is underwritten by someone; there is some ideological prompting or guarantee, benign or malign, that makes it articulate, and one wishes the poetry – without becoming soddenly political – would be more aware of this. It is wryly pleasing to see New York portrayed as a faraway land of grace and nuance that can serve as a clearing-space for their Antipodal equivalents; yet many New Yorkers – like Ted Berrigan who lived a life of financial penury and critical marginality – have found their experience a bit more on the rough-and-tumble side. In 'Triumvirate (Three Poems)' Bolton does examine the dark side of the US, particularly in political terms; but often his New York is a kind of Disneyland, as, admittedly my London is a kind of Disneyland – it is the price of cultural colonisation to have to carve out a relationship with a more privileged locus of one's language partially through idealisation, and Bolton's oeuvre indeed shows idealisation as much as critique as a kind of post-colonial response, or at least a reaction to asymmetries of power. And the sophisticated reader of Bolton must realise that the poet is already aware of the ironies of the conditions of his experience. With writers such as the US poet and art critic Peter Scheljdahl, or the British World War II poet F.T. Prince – famous mainly for his anthology piece 'Soldiers Bathing' (and weirdly a favourite of Ashbery, whose taste in poetry is famously weird) Bolton is aware that his riffing on their work adds nuances of meaning that are mainly his, as is the very idea of not just showing indebtedness and fascination with the big names, but with less laurelled if still meritorious and interesting figures. These poems are replete with joy, but hardly innocent; there is just too much irony here even in the midst of small-scale exuberance. Yet the future might not care about these multi-tiered ironies at all, might only savour the moments of supreme intelligent joy found in Bolton's 'bounded comfort' (88). Lightheartedness, though easy to appreciate, is not a natural or easy gift; and Bolton's brilliantly articulate lightheartedness shimmers with a sense of being 'amusing & sort of/Crooked in relation to things' (28).

Nicholas Birns