

TRANSNATIONAL LITERATURE

Storytelling Permutations in the Performance of Life Narrative Betty Roland's *Caviar for Breakfast* Maureen Clark

...the storyteller knows how to make you long for the story to be true, that completeness. This longing is ancient, as you strain you know the longing of tens of thousands of years of humans in your body. That longing's even in the stones of the earth, in its dust.¹

Betty Roland (1903-1996), a little-known figure in Australian literary circles, was a prolific storyteller. Whilst there are few zones of literature into which she did not venture between the late 1920s and 1990, Roland is perhaps best remembered as a dramatist. Her Australian outback melodrama, *The Touch of Silk*, was first performed by the Melbourne Repertory Company in 1928, and is still produced today. Reviewers of the time described the play as 'a beautiful and abiding piece'² of theatre, and named Roland as Australia's first genuine playwright. *Silk's* bleak twists and far-reaching insights into authoritarian bourgeois morality, helped to make it the first among a number of successful radio serials for Roland and paved the way for later film scripts.³ Perhaps because she was a playwright rather than a novelist at the time, Roland has never been grouped with Australia's celebrated women writers of the 1920s and 30s, such as Miles Franklin, Eleanor Dark and Katharine Susannah Prichard. Roland was, however, engaged in a burgeoning cosmopolitan print-culture that extended well beyond those years as well as Australian borders.⁴

The lure of travel haunted Roland for much of her life. Her writing reflects personal experiences in Joseph Stalin's Soviet Union in the 1930s, the UK in the 1950s and Greece during the 1960s, charting the evolution of a personal and political philosophy marked by worldwide social upheaval and major historical happenings. Among these were the Great Depression, two World Wars, the rise of fascism in Europe and the Cold War between the United States of America and the Soviet Union, which lasted for over half a century. *Caviar for Breakfast* (1979, revised 1989) a travel memoir, which retraces Roland's adventures in the Soviet Union prior to the Stalinist purges in 1935, is the subject of this paper. The book, which serves as the second volume of Roland's autobiographical trilogy, is presented in diary form, with all the expectations of immediacy and reliability encoded in that mode.⁵ When taken together, the trilogy effectively re-enacts the historical subordination of women's sexual identity in a number of male-dominated societies, giving a fascinating insight into the

¹ Sue Woolf, *Leaning Towards Infinity* (Sydney: Vintage, 1996) 272.

² Betty Roland, *An Improbable Life* (Sydney: Collins Publishers, 1989) n.p.

³ For example, *The Spur of the Moment*, (1931) reputed to be the first Australian 'talkie' and *Heights of Danger* (1953), both written under the name Betty M. Davies. *The Touch of Silk* (1928; revised 1955) was followed by *Feet of Clay* (1928), *Morning* (1937) and *Granite Peak* (1952). One of her radio serials, *A Woman Scorned* (broadcast in the 1950s), was the inspiration for the television series *Return to Eden* (1985).

⁴ For more details on Roland's body of work, see my article, "I" and "You" as Fragile Fabrications of the Imagination: Betty Roland's *The Eye of the Beholder*, *The Journal of Commonwealth Literature*. September 2013, 48 (3).

⁵ The first is *An Improbable Life*, (Sydney: Collins, 1989) and the third is *The Devious Being*, (Sydney: Angus & Robertson, 1990).

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values and ideas of the mushrooming modern cultures in which Roland travelled, worked and lived.

A particular complication with the title under discussion, however, is that over 45 years elapsed between the time the events took place and when it was first published by Quartet Books, Melbourne, in 1979. Added to this concern is that the second edition, published by Collins Publishers, Sydney in 1989, claims to repeat the same chronological 'as-and-when-it-happened' diary mode of the first, when in fact it does not. There are a number of minor differences between one edition and the other consisting of transposed dates and content. Of more significance is where Roland chooses to direct her audience in relation the beginning of her story. The first edition begins in Melbourne aboard the vessel, *S.S. Ballarat* on 14 January 1933 with Roland and her Australian lover, the wealthy Marxist scholar and communist, Guido Baracchi,⁶ bound for London. The revised version on the other hand, opens over three months later on 24 April 1933 with the couple about to sail out of London on the Russian ship, the *Felix Dzerzhinsky*, headed for Leningrad. In its return performance, *Caviar for Breakfast* is played out in a disfigured, headless-ghost form, for the account of the couple's voyage around the Australian coastline towards Perth, does not reappear.

In the introduction to the 1979 edition, Roland makes it clear that the book is 'based on the diaries that [she] kept at the time' (1).⁷ Her prologue to the 1989 edition confirms this and sets the terms of reference for a story, whose narrative substance rests upon a series of diary entries, 'as one woman's view of a stupendous moment in history, aware of its limitations but with faith in its veracity'.⁸ Here Roland's introductory words convey the notion that what is to follow is not a literary enterprise of the imagination one might expect of a work of fiction, but the purveyor of narrative truth. The author is at some pains to insist that her chosen method of composition not only holds together the ordering of events, but is an accurate reflection of her personal feelings and experiences during the time she spent in Russia. As Nicole Moore rightly points out, by presenting her story in chronologically marked steps, Roland 'maintains its assertion of transparency, seeming to avoid those mediations and absences which flow from remembering and forgetting'.⁹ As suggested above, the discrepancies between the two editions of *Caviar for Breakfast* go far beyond the possibility of a memory grown imperfect with age. It might also be said that as scripter, narrator and protagonist of an old story begun differently anew, Roland provides an inner-world setting that invites distrust of her observations as much as belief in them. As when reading a novel, the obvious discrepancies between the two editions may lead to suspicion about what is real and what is fabricated. They also signify the capacity of any imaginative storyteller to construct a counterfeit, or simulated, sense of reality whether or not s/he works with the diary mode of representation.

⁶ Baracchi was one of the founders of the Communist Party of Australia in the 1930s.

⁷ Betty Roland, *Caviar for Breakfast* (Melbourne: Quartet Books, 1979) 7. Unless stated otherwise, all other references to the text are from this edition and page numbers shown in parenthesis.

⁸ Betty Roland, *Caviar for Breakfast* 2nd ed (Sydney: Collins Publishers, 1989). ix. On this point see Nicole Moore, 'The Burdens Twain or not Forgetting Yourself: The Writing of Betty Roland's Life, *Hecate*.18. 1(1992) and Jeff Sparrow, 'Guido Baracchi and Betty Roland in the Soviet Union' in *Political Tourists: Travellers from Australia to the Soviet Union in the 1920-1940s* eds. Sheila Fitzpatrick and Carolyn Rusmussen (Melbourne: MUP, 2008).

⁹ Moore, *The Burdens Twain* 6.

Elizabeth Podnieks, in *Daily Modernism*, argues that, as a literary mode, the diary crosses generic boundaries into autobiography as well as fiction. Moreover, Podnieks believes it is likely that ‘there has never been a time when all diarists truly wrote unselfconsciously, unaware of the implications embedded in the act of writing itself’.¹⁰ By this I take Podnieks to mean the lack of privacy inherent in putting pen to paper in whatever form. That storytellers are known to revise and re-write their diaries in the re-imagined production of autobiographical narratives is hardly virgin territory; Samuel Pepys, Lewis Carroll, Virginia Woolf and Anne Frank being but a few well-known examples. Roland demonstrates a tendency towards revisionist writing throughout her *oeuvre*, either repeating or transposing details from one text to another as she shapes and re-shapes her personal history. This practice emphasises the considered, present-tense performance of autobiographical narrative production, as opposed to what might more closely resemble the spontaneous capture of moments in time, of the diary mode. As consciously-crafted literary genres, however, autobiography and diary are strategically involved in re-writing processes which offer a sense of intimacy with their subjects. And both share a long tradition of being written with particular audiences in mind.¹¹

As to this, Roland’s trilogy is an interesting case in point for it highlights the complex differences and similarities between autobiography and diary as (in)distinct literary genres. In the closing pages of her second volume of autobiography, *An Improbable Life*, Roland re-works and re-enacts some of the events omitted from the opening of the 1989 revision of *Caviar for Breakfast*. Moreover, whilst the time-scheme of the author’s diary is maintained, some of the details of the 1979 edition are contradicted.¹² Speculative though it can only ever be, a plausible explanation is that, in her idiosyncratic way, Roland decided to correct newly remembered inaccuracies in her earlier writing. In both its 1979 and 1989 manifestations, *Caviar for Breakfast* may well have served the temporal-strategy interests mediated by Roland’s discourse as she experienced herself to be in the act of writing. Given the extensive passage of time since her year in Stalin’s Russia, it is quite feasible that Roland’s emotional and intellectual development had become such that to be in a position to change, or rearrange, the story of her past was cathartic. It might be said that, for Roland, as for many literary diarists before her, writing about the past offered a way to escape the pain of it in the present. If we accept this scenario as a possibility, then autobiographical recollection becomes agency, a way of feeding the storyteller’s survival instincts and fuelling a desire for immortality. The scenes absented from *Caviar for Breakfast*, if only to reappear in altered form in *An Improbable Life*, may well offer a key to Roland’s personal psychology and ideological point of view in the overall context of an ongoing quest for self-knowledge. They might also be seen as part of a quest to install her-story as a form of life beyond death. The competing narratives also function to create a disquieting sense of gravity, however, and the reasons for these are discussed below.

¹⁰ Elizabeth Podnieks, *Daily Modernism: The Literary Diaries of Virginia Woolf, Antonia White, Elizabeth Smart and Anais Nin* (Montreal: McGill-Queens UP, 2000) 31.

¹¹ Podnieks 43.

¹² For example, the 19 April diary entry of the 1979 edition of *Caviar for Breakfast* states that Roland knew little about the financial agreement between Baracchi and his wife Neura regarding their impending divorce (11). But in *An Improbable Life* she writes: ‘There were a number of things that had to be done and matters that must be attended to. The transfer of all [Guido’s] available assets to [Neura], for one thing. He fully informed me of this and, whatever I may have felt, I was in no position to demur’, (161).

The opening pages of the 1979 edition of *Caviar for Breakfast* tell of Roland's desperation to escape an unhappy marriage to her husband of ten years, Ellis H. Davies. Davies was twenty-one years her senior, a construction engineer and womaniser, who placed little or no importance on Roland's desire to be a writer. Albeit dripping with drama, Roland's remark that 'anything, *anything*' (4) would be better than continuing to be Ellis Davies' wife, helps to convey her state of mind when she finally decided to leave him. That decision involved taking the drastic step of travelling to Russia via England at a time when few Australians, women in particular, were so inclined.¹³ It also meant she would live there with Guido Baracchi: 'an Italian, a Roman Catholic (failed!) and a Communist' (5). Roland's resolve to leave Australia with Baracchi, was calculated in the knowledge she would be ostracised by her family. She also knew that Baracchi was still married to his second wife, Harriet 'Neura' Zander, who awaited him in London. Added to this was that, apart from a strong desire to visit the Soviet Union, Baracchi wanted to escape yet another extra-marital affair that had produced a child.¹⁴ Roland's willingness to flee her own disastrous marriage to someone who exhibited such obvious moral cowardice could lie in the fact that she possessed 'a very strong narcissistic streak'.¹⁵ The author's self-confessed narcissism, coupled with an equally self-declared confidence in her attractiveness to men, may well have helped to foster the delusion that, in her case, 'things were going to be different' (4).¹⁶

As mentioned above, a further consequence of the 1989 edition of *Caviar for Breakfast's* 'new beginning' is the omission of the couple's voyage aboard the *Ballarat* out of Port Melbourne, en route to London. Jettisoned in particular are notes of the visit Roland and Baracchi made to the home of author and 'dedicated Communist' (9) Katharine Susannah Prichard and her husband, Hugo (Jim) Throssell V.C., after docking at Fremantle on 5 March 1933. As Roland has it, the visit to the Prichard / Throssell home was extremely tense.¹⁷ Throssell remained dour and silent throughout the visit, whilst Prichard carried on an animated conversation with Baracchi that excluded her husband. Roland's relayed memories suggest the marriage between Prichard and Throssell told a story of opposing and incompatible personalities. The author's negative impressions of the Prichard / Throssell relationship have no physical presence in the 1989 edition of *Caviar for Breakfast*, but are clearly evident in the closing pages of *An Improbable Life*, where she writes: 'What made Katherine [*sic*], a dedicated communist marry a man like him? She had no respect for soldiers and, to her, a Victoria Cross was not so much a reward for valour as an indication that the recipient was good at killing other men'.¹⁸

Roland turns speculative informant in *An Improbable Life*, by inferring the possibility of an earlier romantic attachment between Baracchi and Prichard: 'Although no mention was ever made of it, I had the distinct impression that there had been more than mere political

¹³ Fitzpatrick and Rasmussen suggest that it is likely the total number of Australians who visited Russia in the 1930s was 200. 1-39.

¹⁴ See Sparrow for a more detailed discussion of Baracchi's predicament which, in Sparrow's account, was characteristic of Baracchi's personal history as someone who lacked sexual restraint.

¹⁵ Nicole Moore, 'An Interview with Betty Roland', *Southerly* 67.1-2 (2007) 364.

¹⁶ Things were not different. By 1942, Roland was in a similar position to the other women whom Baracchi had loved and left: unmarried and on her own with their daughter, Gilda, to support.

¹⁷ Roland is not alone in this view. Drusilla Modjeska, *Exiles at Home: Australian Women Writers 1925-1945*, (London: Sirius Books 1981) points to the fact that tensions between the couple as a consequence of financial and domestic difficulties, were commented upon by friends such as Nettie Palmer (1996, 139, 155).

¹⁸ Roland, *Improbable Life* 157.

affinity between the two, though Guido had married someone else [...] and Katherine [*sic*] had gone to Western Australia and married a hero of Gallipoli, Hugo Throssell, VC'.¹⁹ Roland's observations supplant the version of events as they appear in the 1979 edition of *Caviar for Breakfast* and, in the process, serve to shift attention to Throssell's tragic fate. By a remarkable coincidence Prichard shared a room with Roland and Baracchi during a visit she too made to Russia in 1933. In the telling of this encounter, Roland claims she grew to like Prichard, describing her as 'a serene person with a soft voice and a gentle smile' (75). With a touch of burlesque humour, Roland recalls a 'strange *ménage à trois*' (75), which saw Prichard sleeping on a mattress on the floor whilst Baracchi and Roland shared the bed, but only after the three had drawn lots and Prichard had lost. As it happened, by another more unsettling chance, Hugo 'Jim' Throssell committed suicide prior to Prichard's return to Australia from Russia. The tragedy of Throssell's death devastated Prichard and haunted her for the remainder of her life.²⁰ The letting go of the details of the Greenmount visit from the 1989 edition of *Caviar for Breakfast*, expresses the consequences of the violence of romantic love in real life which are not often reflected in Western culture's pervasive 'happily-ever-after', romance literature. As Roland tells it she underwent any number of humiliations at the hands of Baracchi, such as sharing him with other women and, at one point, living with him under a communal roof with his second wife, Neura.²¹ For all its degrading episodes and disappointments, Roland's love affair with Baracchi was never *really* done until shortly before he died. In fact, in a letter to him dated 20 January 1972, over thirty years after they separated, she declared that she still loved him.²² Worth noting, however, is that Roland's apparent embrace of the attitudinally-gendered 'stand by your man' paradigm in Western culture was not sustained once Baracchi failed to remember their daughter Gilda in his will.²³

Writing on the life of Baracchi, Jeff Sparrow comments on what he sees as Roland's tendency to revise her impressions of the time she spent with him in Russia. Much like Nicole Moore, Sparrow does so in the context of a perceived shift in Roland's political views from Left to Right and back again, that coincided with what he calls her 'long and bitter estrangement from Baracchi'.²⁴ If I understand them correctly, for Sparrow and Moore, Roland's chaotic flirtations with Stalin's oppressive regime could be traced back to her attachment to Baracchi and the flaws she came to see in him. Added to this, they argue, was Roland's contemporary desire to identify with a post-Cold War readership more sympathetic to a discrediting of Marxist leanings such as those exhibited by Katharine Susannah Prichard.²⁵ Implicit in these assumptions is that *Caviar for Breakfast* should be discounted as offering a consciousness-raising, alternative picture of life in the Soviet Union as Roland remembered it. Such conjecture also seems to discount the possibility that, bringing her personal problems into the public arena may have been a conscious political act performed by an ever-evolving gendered self caught in social structures not of her own making. As

¹⁹ Roland, *Improbable Life* 156.

²⁰ See Modjeska 140 on this point.

²¹ Betty Roland, *The Devious Being* (Sydney: Angus & Robertson (1990) 2-5.

²² Australian Manuscripts Collection State Library of Victoria (SLV), Justus Jorgensen Papers, 1924-1975, MS10079, Folder No. 11.

²³ Despite his promises that he would remember her in his will, when he died at the age of 88, Baracchi 'forgot' Gilda and left his entire estate to his then neighbour's wife, yet another woman with whom he had become romantically attached. Roland never forgave him.

²⁴ Sparrow 122-145.

²⁵ Sparrow 137-8; Moore 6.

Podnieks writes: 'autobiography is just as much about the person who writes in the present as the person who lived in the past, for the past per se is never recoverable'.²⁶ Much like history, the facts of a life can never be fully realised, only partially imagined.

To see Roland's complex love affair with Baracchi as the only explanation for her fluctuating play with politics in Stalin's Russia seems too simplistic. Sheila Fitzpatrick, for example, suggests that, unlike 'the writer Katherine Susannah Prichard and the civic activist and feminist Jessie Street [...] Roland had a shrewd eye for the real-life problems of the Soviet Union. Despite the fact that she joined the communist party in 1934 following her return to Australia, she was no dupe of the Kremlin'.²⁷ Drusilla Modjeska adds to Fitzpatrick's observations when she opines Roland 'was not without guts'.²⁸ The harsh living conditions in the Soviet Union saw the author go hungry and become 'thin from lack of food'²⁹ as a consequence of severe shortages. To cast Roland in a play as the Westerner who *ever* saw good in Stalin's oppressive Soviet Union in any 'real' sense, would be a mistake. Whatever *Caviar for Breakfast* may lack in direct political analysis of Stalin's authoritarian regime, it makes up for in its consistent references to the plight of ordinary Russian people: the dispossessed peasants, the homeless, the beggars who, like prostitutes, were officially non-existent (49, 60, 78). Roland speaks of the optimism that accompanied the abundance of work in Moscow, where there were more jobs available than people to fill them (71). Yet, almost in the same breath, she tells of the disenfranchised who were refused work permits because they did not, or would not, toe the party line, the prevalence of 'hungry wretches begging on the street [...] because without a union ticket no one can or will employ them' (73). It must also be emphasised that Roland openly contrasts the social condition of deprived Soviets with the pessimism of the Australian men and women of the Great Depression, those who sat in parks: 'heads bowed in their hands waiting for the next handout from the soup kitchens; the long queues waiting for the dole' (71). According to Roland, for all its claims to social equality in the 1930s, the new Soviet Union was a patriarchy where class (and gender) inequality reigned. Simultaneously, she hints that the same could be said for so-called egalitarian Australia and other parts of the Western world such as the United States of America.

Roland tells stories of Americans who were either living or vacationing in the Soviet at the time of her stay there. One such was no other than 'Joe Kennedy, the elder brother of John, the future president of the United States' (158). The concern here is that it was in 1933 that 'the first American Ambassador since 1917 presented his credentials at the Kremlin and US dollars were flowing into the depleted coffers of the State' (148). This meant that, on hand, were American 'experts [who taught] Russians how to use the tools of modern industry' (148). In Roland's account, these Americans happily surrendered their passports to become Soviet citizens for a time and did so gladly while Russian people were being disenfranchised (37, 95, 148, 184). As Roland clearly shows, when Stalin's first five year plan ended in 1933, things were not all bad for foreigners who were able to pay their way, but this was not the case for many thousands of Russians unprepared to accept marginalisation because of their politics.

Roland and Baracchi's stay in Stalin's Soviet Union went far beyond their original 21 day tourist visas, which neither entitled them to remain longer, nor to search for work. That

²⁶ Podnieks 46.

²⁷ Fitzpatrick 1-39.

²⁸ Modjeska 144.

²⁹ Modjeska 44.

stay extended to 15 months, however, a fact made possible primarily because Baracchi was wealthy and possessed the necessary ‘hard’ currency” (32) to pay their way. Foreign cash, particularly US dollars and English pounds, was the *lingua franca* in the Soviet Union at the time (17). It is not unreasonable to suggest that Baracchi’s family wealth was as much the key to his acceptance as a Soviet resident, as was his Marxist scholarship. In Roland’s case, living with Baracchi and posing as his wife, meant she also qualified for a residency / work ‘permit and a ration card’ (33).³⁰ And whilst they may have experienced fleas, bed-bugs, bad food and discomfort (59), nonetheless they possessed the financial means to improve their lot. Whilst Russians queued for food and were ‘stoically resigned to cold and heat’(45), Roland and Baracchi could buy goods and services with their foreign money. Moreover, the fact that they were strangers in Russia meant that they were treated almost as guests, a courtesy that simultaneously distanced them from the reality of everyday Soviet life and increased Roland’s sense of guilt. The comment that she ‘would feel better if somebody abused [her] for enjoying so many privileges’ (57), is indicative of the everyday moral dilemma she claims to have experienced during her stay in the Soviet Union,

It is no accident that Roland’s memoir takes its title from the fact that caviar, considered a luxury in Western society, was plentiful in the USSR. It was not marmalade but caviar that found its way to the morning toast enjoyed by foreign tourists, if not by the Russian people whom she describes as lovable, patient, kindly, unfailingly courteous and warm hearted. Roland confesses that the stigma of her bourgeois background was always hanging over her when in Russia (88). But she is also concerned to note that the Russian government was intent on exporting wheat to buy machinery while its people starved; that churches were now the haunt of beggars whose only crime was that they resisted collectivism and that May-Day celebrations had an ugly side that saw the poor ‘rounded up off the streets by the militia [who herded] them into the trucks as though they were cattle’ (146). For her, this was evidence that those who chose not to live by rules which demanded they work for the State and not for themselves, were condemned to poverty and hunger. Some of her most evocative writing is dedicated to questionable conduct on the part of Stalin’s new regime:

I had no idea there were still so many little churches. Their fairy tale cupolas decorate the skyline of a distant hill and are scattered among the sea of concrete surrounding us – tiny jewels in an otherwise drab landscape. There is one on the corner of the *pereulok* (small street or lane) that leads to the house in which we live. It is faded and neglected and is the haunt of beggars, wretched tattered creatures who stare as one goes by and sometimes beg for bread [...] They are the dispossessed – peasants who have resisted collectivisation and have been evicted from their villages. Beggars, like prostitutes are officially non-existent, but the girls in the New Moscow bar and these poor wretches in the church belie the claim. (60)

Never the shrinking violet, Roland delivers her lines directly from centre stage, not from the wings. Deliberations such as these give short shrift to notions of equality under Stalin’s regime and instead level a charge against officials who tormented those easily bullied, or humiliated. Not by chance do these lines sit cheek to jowl with the story Roland

³⁰ Although Roland and Baracchi never married, Change of Name Deed Poll No. 21021 dated September 19 1949, records a name change from Mary Isobel Barrachi [sic] to Betty Roland. Betty Roland papers 1930-1995 State Library of New South Wales (SLNSW), ML1303\96. Personal documents 1933-65, Box 1 of 4.

tells of Baracchi's, 'towering temper' (58) when she received the attention of other men. Problematically, however, when writing of such instances Roland dips into Baracchi's Italian heritage, choosing to model him as a violent cultural stereotype: 'He was all Italian at [such] moment[s] and looked capable of murder' (59). As a consequence, Roland's credibility as unbiased narrator is diminished. The feasibility of her fear of Baracchi's fits of rage is substantiated, however, by an analysis of his handwriting, which, for reasons known only to Roland, she commissioned in 1957 whilst living in London.³¹ The Chirologist's report considers four different letters from Baracchi to Roland written between 1934 and 1971. Whilst he qualifies his opinion as a possible consequence of Baracchi's prevailing ill-health, the Chirologist nevertheless states his expert view that the writing belongs to a man of erratic temperament, someone who could be impatient, aggressive and had a desire to dominate.³² From Roland's narrated perspective, Baracchi's conduct with regard to money matters and the social power it held in particular, also suggests that his politics were more symbolic than real. As she writes: "Guido, despite his idealism and belief in the equality of men, is extremely touchy about money, especially *his* money" (157, italics in the original text). As Roland tells it, the possibility that the Russian authorities would not allow him to take his money with him when Baracchi left the country, drove "him to the point of apoplexy" (171). Such comments can be read as attempts by Roland to discredit Baracchi. Equally, however, they can be seen as a desire to separate herself from what she came to regard as a socialist politics of hypocrisy that preached equality whilst embracing the rich and rejecting the poor. The act of remembering forms part and parcel of the shifting system of values that affect the way we see the world over time and space. Given the plurality of forces in play, the social contradictions represented in Roland's retrospective narrative could well have led to disenchantment with communism which, over time, became indistinguishable from her disillusionment with Baracchi. In fact Roland's compelling desire to write her life as a new cycle of existence only begins to make sense at the nexus of then and now socio-cultural politics, the politics of identity and the politics of romance.

Caviar for Breakfast contains elements of instability and violence, both personal and political, which reek of a romantic drama in which the two principal members of the cast are Roland and Baracchi. Although no longer a member of the Australian Communist Party when he travelled with Roland to the Soviet Union, Baracchi did so with a highly developed political agenda in mind. This included the smuggling of documents from 'the Party Secretariat in Australia with instructions to deliver [them] to the Comintern in Moscow' (13),³³ a task he accomplished with Roland's help. It was she who took the risk, secreting a 'long manilla envelope [amongst] silk stockings and other feminine belongings in [her] trunk' (13) until they reached their destination. Roland's scallywag sense of humour comes through when she writes: 'political pariah though I am, I nevertheless have my uses, and my unmistakably non-proletarian appearance renders me unlikely to attract the attention of Customs officers or other Government busybodies' (13). According to the dramatically-

³¹ The three page report of Chirologist, A. Humphry Reeve, is among the papers of Justus Jørgensen, the founder of Montsalvat, an artists' colony near Melbourne, Victoria about which Roland writes in *The Eye of the Beholder* (1984). Much like Baracchi, Jørgensen had a profound influence on Roland.

³² Australian Manuscripts Collection SLV, Justus Jørgensen Papers, 1924-1975, MS10079, Gold Envelope - Folder No. 11.

³³ Baracchi was expelled from the ACP in 1925 for his right-wing leanings and again in 1940 as a consequence of his objection to the party's Stalinisation.

inclined, if perhaps politically naive, Roland, the errand had a ‘certain cloak-and-dagger element to it which [Baracchi] enjoyed immensely’ (13), albeit at her expense. Explained early in the narrative is that Baracchi travelled to the Soviet Union illegally without a visa and ‘with his name omitted from the *Felix Dzerhinsky* passenger list’ (13). Although it was he and not Roland who was the distinctive Communist empathiser, this meant that, officially, Baracchi had ‘never been to Russia’ (148). Thus, any risk associated with the contents of ‘the long manila envelope’ was Roland’s alone to take.

The symbolic equivalents and contradictions that comprise the values and implications of living under culturally specific patriarchies have, historically, defined women by sex-based, economic factors. Roland proved useful to Baracchi in a number of ways during their time together in the Soviet Union. The fact that she could type, had brought with her a portable Remington typewriter, and could write good English as opposed to ‘American jargon’ (35), served Baracchi and the new regime, well. Soon after their arrival she had a job with an English language newspaper, the *Moscow Daily News*, where she hoped to gain insight into many aspects of Soviet society that would otherwise not be possible’ (36). The editor was Michael Borodin, whom Roland describes as ‘an old Bolshevik, one of the great figures of the Revolution’ (36), but whose influence was fading. Another was ‘Red’ Rose Cohen, ‘the wife of a prominent Party official’ (37) and another old friend of Baracchi’s. Borodin was arrested and charged with treason in 1937 and died in a prison camp in Siberia. Rose Cohen was also arrested and executed in 1938.³⁴ Sparrow notes that Roland’s papers indicate that ‘when she and Baracchi tried to leave the Soviet Union, the authorities repeatedly tried to dissuade them’³⁵ and in fact offered them Soviet citizenship. Sparrow is of the view that had they accepted that offer and decided to stay, they may well have shared a similar fate to Borodin and Cohen and many other foreign residents who did not survive the Moscow trials, which were a part of Stalin’s Great Purge.³⁶ It is difficult to reconcile such a life and death situation with Sparrow and other scholars’ view of Roland as politically unaware, at such a tumultuous historical moment.

The timing of Roland and Baracchi’s stay in the Soviet Union was immediately *after* Hitler’s rise to power in Germany and just *prior* to the Stalinist Purges, which began in 1935. Roland refers to such horrors directly when she dedicates her book to the memory of the writer Winifred (known as Freda) Utley, a Trotskyist of British descent, Utley’s Russian partner Arcadi Berdichevsky who perished, and to other friends who suffered a similar fate. Roland and Baracchi were befriended by Utley and Berdichevsky and lived for a time in their Moscow apartment. As Sparrow notes, Berdichevsky was ultimately arrested for his association with Utley and her Trotskyite activities. He was sentenced without trial to five years in a concentration camp where he died in 1938.³⁷ According to Sparrow, the news of Berdichevsky’s fate, about which Roland learned in correspondence from Utley in 1939, ‘ended [her] enthusiasm for the Communist Party’³⁸ forever. Worth noting is that, according to Sparrow, ‘aside from a few brief comments on his association with Freda Utley, Baracchi never wrote his own account of his and Roland’s experiences in the Soviet Union’.³⁹ Baracchi

³⁴ Sparrow, 137.

³⁵ Sparrow, 137.

³⁶ Sparrow, 186.

³⁷ Roland, 189-91, Sparrow, 136.

³⁸ Sparrow, 137.

³⁹ Sparrow, 141.

died in 1975, some four years before *Caviar for Breakfast* went to print. This being the case, there is something uncomfortable about the fact that the story of Baracchi in the Soviet Union is only ever enacted through Roland's imaginative recollection of a long-past lived reality. To put it another way, Roland only ever re-imagines, and re-writes Baracchi's story through her experience, a manner of narration that involves a degree of (dis)possession. As the narrating diarist Roland enjoys a privileged position. It is she who holds the power to decide what will be said about herself or another and what will be kept secret. In this process, subjective representation becomes an end in itself, one that is both simulated and manipulated and a way to hide as much as to reveal.

During an interview with Nicole Moore in 1991 (published 2007), Roland confessed she held the view that to (re)produce a story using the diary mode is always a manipulative exercise. Words written down in a diary served as a reminder of what you may have meant. But a diary, she said, is 'a very incomplete thing. It's a terribly good thing for jogging your memory, but it isn't ready to go into a piece of work, you have to embroider it, and recast it and change it'.⁴⁰ Here Roland suggests that, when writing *Caviar for Breakfast*, different words had to be found, with different functions and different purpose in the present as a way of explaining and making links to the past. Roland's revelation turns on its head her previously stated assertion of faith in her story's veracity.⁴¹ Instead it challenges the ideological concept of truth, which underpins the diary mode's traditional authority. It may be true that, as a system of discourse, the diary is culturally encoded to give the illusion of authenticity. But it is also fair to say the diary's restraints are such that details are often lacking and only tantalising fragments of past experiences can remain on its pages. Much like the discursive, constantly changing status of history, what someone may choose to diarise as experienced reality at one time, cannot deal truthfully with the concerns of another in any absolute sense. Coloured as they inevitably are by situations appropriate to the present, recalled experiences can only ever be tentative or uncertain things that are permeable to all sorts of interpretations, unbidden thoughts and feelings. By their very nature, the contents of a diary set up a tension between past and present, sense and reference, which serves to demonstrate the complexities between the two poles. The 'real' is a conceptual notion, as indeed is time, and this may well be what Roland is hinting at when she refers to the 'limitations' of her diary in the introduction to *Caviar for Breakfast*. And in fact the two manifestations of the book possess a sense of mobility, re-presenting the past in two shifting presents to suggest that, in any life, the past is never absolutely over or completely dealt with, that the past always intrudes on the present and vice versa.

Sheila Fitzpatrick notes that a photocopy of a 163 page book manuscript titled *Caviar for Breakfast*, with the chapters dated as one would a diary, is to be found amongst Roland's papers held by the National Library of Australia, Canberra.⁴² Fitzpatrick goes on to observe that the photocopied chapters closely approximate the content of *Caviar for Breakfast* which, as we have seen, was first published by Roland as a diary in 1979, then in a revised edition in 1989. Both editions can be considered creative works of non-fiction which use the authoritative system of signs of the diary form to order past events into a meaningful

⁴⁰ Moore, 'An Interview with Betty Roland', 363.

⁴¹ Roland, *Caviar for Breakfast* 2nd ed. ix

⁴² Fitzpatrick cites Roland Papers National Library of Australia, MS6772, Box 5, Folder 6, which contains a photocopy of a book manuscript consisting of the chronological record of events on which *Caviar for Breakfast* is based.

structure. This calls into question the relation between a life lived and its artistic transformation in literature. By extension, it also raises the question of whether *Caviar for Breakfast* as an accurate reflection of reality or the realistic representation of it. But this is not to say that the 'original' diary does not exist. Nor does it mean that Roland's journey to the Soviet Union did not take place. What it does suggest is that in the performance of storytelling, Roland produced an imaginative, if not entirely imaginary, account of that journey. In the process she positions herself at the heart of the narrative to account for changes in her personal and political views over time and space. Some of these views are demonstrably contradictory. Yet there is little doubt that the shifts in the politico-temporal terrains of *Caviar for Breakfast* give voice to Roland's struggle to generate meanings of social significance as an Australian woman who lived, loved and travelled with Guido Baracchi in Joseph Stalin's Russia in the 1930s.

Betty Roland was in her late 70s by the time the first edition of *Caviar for Breakfast* was published in 1979. By then Baracchi and many of the people Roland had known and loved throughout her life had become a chorus of ghosts. Some had died from natural causes, some had committed suicide. Some had perished in the Stalinist purges. One had been murdered. Others had simply forgotten her. In a letter to her friend Rose Ribush dated June 20, 1983 Roland, then nearly 80 years old, laments that there had been little reader interest in *Caviar for Breakfast* and to all intents and purposes the book was a failure.⁴³ That failure could be attributed to the fact that the story she tells is not simply one of bargain tourism but of the violence and contradictions that accompany the origins of any new state, whether personal or political, past or present. Roland's story stages an encounter between her disillusionment with Communism's violent contradictions that readily translates into the personal story of the violently ambivalent emotions of her disastrous relationship with Guido Baracchi. None is more content than the other for each evokes the despair of those without power over their own lives, women (and men) who are impotent to defend themselves against ideologically driven social systems with the authority 'to approve or condemn' (Roland, 1979, 38).⁴⁴ Any reading of *Caviar for Breakfast* involves engagement with re-enacted elements of reality represented by the assemblage of stories about people and events narrated within the cultural values associated with the material which defines it. Despite its anchorage in the diary mode, the book can be seen as a creatively fashioned travel memoir dressed up in self-conscious, autobiographical clothing. At its core are the interplay of past times, people and places as reconceived in the present by Roland's storytelling artistry, the artful mimesis of what she claims as her actual lived experience. As a representation of reality, autobiography is a literary mode haunted by the fact that there is always a mismatch between an original and its copy. It is just as impossible for the written (or spoken) transcription of a life to enjoy a one-to-one ratio with 'what actually happened' as it is for a ghost to re-enter a world that fully resembles that in which it lived. Yet who else but the teller decides when and where to begin, or end, her story? Who else but the teller decides who or what will take centre stage and who or what will remain hidden in the wings? Who else but the storyteller has the power to replay the past, change the part she played in it and make herself up all over again as tangible evidence of existence?

⁴³ SLNSW, ML1303/96, Box 1 of 4.

⁴⁴ Roland, 38.

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