

# TRANSNATIONAL LITERATURE

## Dan Disney, *and then when the* (John Leonard Press, 2011)

The title of Dan Disney's 'first full-length collection of poetry' (as described by the back cover) might prepare us for a possible indefiniteness, something like being suspended in mid-air. At 44 pages in total, *and then when the* should not really claim status as a full-length collection, even if a reasonably large font – larger than the very small one it is printed in – might have extended its length beyond the 50-page mark. Still, it gives us a tempting foretaste of what Disney might be writing in years to come.

The apparently pedestrian character of the title should not deceive anyone, though. From the first poem, the reader will find a poet interested in ideas, not in the banal. Titled 'Standing among the philosophy class', this introductory poem invites us readers to join the author in his quest

to hear how we might come to know the world through pure reflection  
without recourse  
to experience (1)

The author is a member of a collective, but it is his rain-soaked observations the reader is compelled to reflect upon, while

... we wait  
at the doors of an unlocked lecture hall.  
Coughing has been falling from a cold man's mouth. A huddle of minds  
in the dark morning  
apprehend. (1)

Thus, winter cruelly reminds us we need to confront the quotidian lucidly. The conversation among the waiting students may be simply seen as 'fog-breathed'. Outside, however, reality keeps its course:

... The trees  
are wearing the shape of trees. (1)

In an article on aesthetics (amongst other related subjects) Disney published in October 2009, he expressed his frustration with (academic, but also possibly, I suspect, poetic) jargon: 'as much as I am interested in ideas and in talking about ideas, I remain frustrated that complexity has been mistaken (or swapped) for excellence'.<sup>1</sup> This dissatisfaction is significant as far as his poetry is concerned, because his is not a poetry constrained by the dry, purely speculative language so much poetry burdens us with these days. His poems, perhaps surprisingly, seem to churn out idea after idea, evoking and connoting them with a serene rhythm. The first two lines of 'on locating the essence of the dinner party' read

<sup>1</sup> Dan Disney, "'Does anybody else here not understand?'" Language, post-philosophers, bewitchment and confusion: some post-conference reflections', in *Text*, Vol. 13 no. 2, October 2009 <http://www.textjournal.com.au/oct09/disney.htm>, accessed 11 September 2013.

Book reviews: *and then when the* by Dan Disney.  
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<http://fhrc.flinders.edu.au/transnational/home.html>

when coats, bottles, bouquets are thrust across night  
or when guests enter bookish... (2)

The guests might be bookish, but Disney's poems, despite his extremely variegated literary and philosophical influences – Eco, Heidegger, Sartre, and the list goes on – are fortunately anything but. Take, for instance, these lines from his poem 'Kant's statue, Kaliningrad':

Under the lunge of airliners, of smog-dirty billboards  
Kant's gaze.  
'What can I know? What ought I do? What may I hope?' Five foot tall dandy  
in a smock of bird shit, Kant's statue  
before eternity, points beyond glasnost and cosmonauts  
apartment blocks terraforming bony swamps  
like a death mask. (30)

Here we have a keen eye for detail, which in turn focuses our reader's eye on a philosopher's view on existence; yet Disney brings down all pretence of grandiosity by picking on the uproarious aspect of how the statue has been covered with droppings, 'before eternity'.

As the Kantian quotes in the previous poem show, Disney has a taste for playing with words and with text. The effect, thus, can be humorous, or purely mordant, as in the poem 'decay is inherent in all compound things':

once the spectacle  
  
is switched off  
    every thing harkens: notice the grind of the exponential?  
The mathematics of it acute as the limit and bend  
    of sky...  
  
    ... And who among us invented  
the *laissez-faire* of history?  
    Work out your own salvation. With diligence (27)

Of course different poems speak to different readers in different ways. And there will be readers whose poetical taste will no doubt feel challenged by Disney's impetuous journey across metaphysical thought. His poetry is not for the faint-hearted: it juxtaposes transcendence and absurdity, the classical canon and the present.

*and then when the* includes also two distinct series of short poems. The first one is titled 'Smalltown études' and comprises six poems on a string of towns on the Great Alpine Road in Victoria. Again Disney demonstrates a discerning eye for detail. While in 'Bairnsdale' the Main Street is clustered

with pensioners  
combing back their hair in cafeterias  
and blinking over cappuccino, the *Herald Sun*, alone, (8)

in 'Ensay' we hear '(as trees fall) the ministrations of Radio National'. Farther up the highway, at 'Swifts Creek' our attention is deftly focused on the young faces of 'freckled generations' staring from behind the school bus windows, while

the cemetery  
is carved with phonebook names. (11)

That ineffable loneliness we city people normally associate with rural Australia is elegantly conveyed in 'Benambra', where

scarecrows mute as doppelgänger survey the wild churchyard  
long empty of its song'. (13)

This series has an apt counterpoint in the next poem, 'Collins Street, 5 pm', a longer poem in unrhymed couplets. The author gently rebukes contemporary Melburnians,

the well-born, Melbourne heigh-ho masses, amid velvety fumes  
in short black everything, (14)

and wonders who they really are and/or represent:

... Is it that we're rich as Midas, a paradise of cadavers  
loping the shining streets? (15)

The second series included in the book comprises five poems under the generic heading of 'Still lifes'. These are poems based around visits to five different cities in the world (Rome, Vientiane, London, Genoa and Minsk), and were written between 2005 and 2009. The tone in these is sombre and complex; these poems are less casual than the rest, their manner not as droll as elsewhere in *and then when the*. In Genoa, the poet comes face to face with an

old town  
scanned by empty-roomed eyes. Where are they all? The unsound  
and non-hearing, the shrill-hearted  
and too loud, prefacers and professors, the unforgotten  
... *where are they?* (41)

The reader will also find an interesting break from normality in two poems that have been laid out vertically across the page; while their titles ('How to hunt March hare' and '... never come to thoughts. They come us') are placed horizontally, in order to read the poems we have to turn the book 90° left.

Disney's *and then when the* is a well-worked first book of poems; there is both judicious elegance and rhythm; there is both humour and sadness; it is both casual and serious in its approach to poetry. Most of the poems invite rather than necessitate a re-reading, something you cannot say of all contemporary poetry.

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