

Confessional Surrealist Feminist: Vicki Viidikas's Poetics and Politics

PRITHVI VARATHARAJAN
Independent Scholar

Vicki Viidikas, Sydney poet, fiction writer, and bohemian, died in 1998 at the age of 50. Viidikas lived through a turbulent period in Australia in her youth, and travelled widely in India later in life. In her formative years of the late 1960s and 70s, inner-Sydney was buzzing with the counterculture that had made its way across the Pacific. John Tranter's description of Viidikas as one of the 'generation of '68' poets makes reference to this scene, and more broadly to the anti-capitalist revolutions of May 1968 in France, which had ripple-out effects in the USA and other countries (Tranter xv). While the label has been contested (see Scotney 148–49), it also recognises that many of the poets included under its umbrella—including John Forbes, Robert Adamson, Martin Johnston, Tranter and Viidikas—rose to prominence around this time or shortly afterwards. Viidikas's first published poem was 'At East Balmain,' published in *Poetry Australia* v. 19 in 1967. Viidikas went on to publish three books of poetry: *Condition Red* (1973), *Knäbel* (1978), and *India Ink* (1984), as well as a book of short stories and prose poems, *Wrappings* (1974). In 2010, Transit Lounge issued the posthumous collection of poems and prose, *Vicki Viidikas: New and Rediscovered*, edited by Barry Scott. This was an attempt to bring her work out of the shadows, as it has suffered critical neglect compared to many other (male) poets of her generation (see McCooey 196).

Viidikas's poetry is commonly read as a window to her lived experience, as Gig Ryan notes in her article 'Fuori Le Mura' (par. 2). Her poetry is often in a confessional mode, but it has not been situated in the twentieth-century genre of confessional poetry—due perhaps to its other aesthetic elements that complicate this categorisation. Viidikas was influenced by French surrealism and second wave feminism, and both of these inflected her confessional voice. In this essay I seek to illuminate the relationships between the confessional, the surrealist, and the feminist in Viidikas's poetry. I do this by contextualising her work in the confessional poetry genre, the surrealism of André Breton, and in feminist politics of the 1960s and 70s. From the late 1960s onwards Viidikas was steeped in feminist ideals for women's writing, and became committed to representing female subjectivity in highly personal and uncensored ways. I show that in her poetry, a feminist ethos energises her confessional voice, while also complementing her surrealism.

Having described this entwined aesthetic, I then examine the social and material circumstances of her poetry's production. This context allows me to look to her later years, in the late-1980s and 90s, when she retreated from publishing. There would be no more books after *India Ink*, and only a handful of poems appearing intermittently in journals. Critics have explained her withdrawal from publishing with reference to her use of heroin (see below), but I argue that Viidikas's long-standing opposition to mainstream culture, including the notion of a literary career, played a role. I make close readings of poems published in journals in the late-1980s and 90s, to show that there were other factors at play besides her drug addiction. The essay uses formative aesthetic, political, and material influences to read Viidikas's work from 1973 to 1998, and to make sense of the last period of her life, when she retreated from the social and literary networks that had previously sustained her.

Confessional Poetry and the Generation Of '68

Many critics of Viidikas's poetry focus on its representations of lived experience. Pam Brown states: 'Viidikas's work is all about subjective experience . . . emotions were what she was trying to express' (pars. 7–9), and Kerry Leves notes in his foreword to the *New and Rediscovered*: 'Vicki tended to write about—her own words—"emotional experiences" and some of her poems could be declamatory, but her best poems are oblique and compressed' (16). The subjectivity of her poetry has sometimes been framed as a phenomenological interest in the self—in their article on Viidikas's poems in India, Christine Williams and Ande Sudhakar claim that, 'In a way, Viidikas was writing her self, as sensed, onto the page. This self was later made public as art' (15). Martin Edmond inverts this claim: 'She . . . sends despatches from the frontiers of experience, with the emphasis always upon the nature of the experience rather than the nature of the self who experiences' (par. 5). There are differentiating nuances in each of these descriptions, but the common perspective is that Viidikas's subject matter was distilled from her life, in both poetry and prose: as Michael Wilding notes, 'for Vicki Viidikas, life and writing were inextricable. She spun her writing out of the life she lived' ('Vivid' par. 1). This has been reinforced by the poet herself: on the back cover of *Condition Red* she tells us, 'I want a poetry of the spirit/of the body/of the emotions.'

Viidikas's poetry combines an interest in biography and subjectivity with a confessional mode of representation. The poet alludes to this combination of subject and mode in 'Trying to Catch the Voice':

I'm not quite sure when it was, the first time I wanted to say something about myself, that I was quite definite I had to speak, and someone would listen. Whenever it was it was early, I wanted to run into the darkness and start talking to the night, standing in that black tent, a voice in dark veils, imagining an answer.
(*Wrappings* 7)

Viidikas states that her writing is motivated by a desire to 'say something about myself' to an attentive listener, to a 'someone.' This is a statement about her confessional mode of writing, gilded by a lyrical sensibility, with the poet uttering her thoughts 'to the night,' represented as a 'black tent.' The audience for this confession is indefinite—a someone that is also imagined as ambient or environmental (the night). 'Trying to Catch the Voice' is an artful rendition of thoughts that Viidikas shared on tape with Hazel de Berg in 1975:

I really started writing, I suppose, when I left home, which was when I was 15. What I was writing was really confessional . . . I'd go out to a party or something. If anything had upset me, I was depressed, I'd go home and scribble things down on bits of paper—really just what my inner feelings were at the time. And I did that for a couple of years without realising that what in fact I was writing was poetry. ('Interview' 9'14–9'46)

This confessional impulse exists in many of her poems—here is 'Future' from *Wrappings*:

It doesn't really matter if I met him in a bar, picked him up or was picked up; in the morning he pushed me out of bed saying, 'You must go, my wife's due back.' And catching the 7.43 am bus I thought, it doesn't really matter, what did I expect? These are my fingers spread out to touch, the palms turned down, the kisses like nets; these are the lines, when I was a girl the fortune teller said, 'You will travel.' (43)

The poem reads like a diary entry, but with poetic repetitions ('picked him up / or was picked up') and lyrical flourishes, such as in the final lines: 'These are my fingers spread out to touch, the palms / turned down, the kisses like nets.' It expresses an open female sexuality, with the poet's sexual encounter represented as the acquisition of worldly knowledge, like travel. In this aesthetic her poetry may be situated in the confessional genre which includes Sylvia Plath, Anne Sexton, Robert Lowell, W.D. Snodgrass, and John Berryman; this is a genre that was contemporary to the poet in her formative years. As Melanie Waters has noted, confessional poetry is characterised by its 'strategies of self-exposure' (380). Citing Diane Middlebrook's and M.L. Rosenthal's histories of the genre, Waters elaborates:

Confessional poetry first came to prominence in the United States in the 1950s and 1960s as a lyrical mode that 'violated the norms of decorum for subject matter prevailing in serious literature.' Defined through content, rather than form, the confessional poem took 'private suffering' as its 'ultimate referent,' negotiating the putatively taboo topics of mental illness, institutionalisation, domestic violence, sexuality, incest, bereavement and suicide. (380)

Many of the taboo topics of the genre feature in Viidikas's work. She often explores sexuality and desire, in poems such as 'Mad hats of desire':

OK romantic I wanted
to wade your body
not scale it lightly
like far off cliffs
I wanted to rip suck bite kick
growl laugh nuzzle your self (*Condition 53*)

Other poems in *Condition Red* on this theme include '9 of hearts' (1) 'red is the colour' (14), 'O woman of the moon' (35), and 'Hot poem' (45). The trauma of rape is another taboo subject that Viidikas broaches in that collection, in the poems 'Punishments and Cures' (11) and 'Cracked windows' (18). Reflecting on 'Punishments and Cures,' Adamson has written that:

[The poem] draws from the experience and the trauma of a woman being raped. When I think back over my long friendship with Vicki, it seems to me this was a wound that didn't really heal. Being raped at a young age became more than a wound, or even a wound that healed as a scar, it became a source of hidden rage that lasted a lifetime. (par. 29)

Viidikas kept probing these taboo topics, and in that way made a significant contribution to the genre; as Wilding notes, '[Viidikas] eagerly seized the opportunity to record what had rarely been written about explicitly before—a world of gays, lesbians, prostitutes, rapists and their victims, drug dealers and their junkie clients' ('Vivid' par. 4). While *Knäbel* and *India Ink* do not probe sexuality and desire in as concentrated a manner as *Condition Red*, uncensored representations of experience, in the confessional mode, are prominent across her work.

Such poetry may appear traditionalist and at odds with the experimental spirit of the generation of '68, in that the confessional genre is indebted to nineteenth-century Romanticism: John Tranter notes that many of the gen '68 poets were, instead, invested in Modernism (xix). Viidikas's poetry also partakes in the Modernist ventures that Tranter names, however, such as the cultivation of individualist values, aesthetic fragmentation, and the disruption of artistic

canons (xix). The last of these—the subversion of (patriarchal) artistic canons—is signalled eloquently in her prose poem ‘A Trunkful of Structures,’ where she writes: ‘I am in a library, my feet up on a chair, Great Lives, Great Men and Great Words confront me. I don’t even flinch’ (*Condition* 61). But there was certainly also a Romantic strain within the generation of ‘68, in the work of poets such as Viidikas, Michael Dransfield, Charles Buckmaster, and Richard Tipping; for David McCooney these poets ‘represent . . . a neo-Romantic, late modernist aesthetic’ (192). And as Livio Dobrez argues: ‘[Viidikas’s] subjectivity is extreme, one in kind with . . . the neo-Romantic strand in the [generation of] ‘68, and, within this strand, polarized against the cool subjectivity of, for example, Nigel Roberts’ (129). While Viidikas’s lyricism may seem to indicate a traditionalist Romantic poetics (despite its non-traditionalist subject matter, as confessional poetry), her work was experimental—this is perhaps more evident in the poetry’s other aesthetics, and in the way these are paired with its confessional mode.

The Surrealism of Viidikas’s Poetry

As I have noted, critics usually focus on the biographical aspects of Viidikas’s work. Adamson has remarked on her surrealist aesthetic however, stating that: ‘she often said she made use of her subconscious imagination as much as raw experience’ (par. 30). In a posthumous radio tribute to Viidikas—produced by her peer Robyn Ravlich and broadcast on ABC Radio National in 2005—Viidikas can be heard saying:

The sort of writing I’m interested in is a particular kind—there were a lot of French writers, and symbolist poets, surrealists, who were also interested in this sort of writing. Which in effect I could say is giving your imagination full rein, and really letting yourself delve right into your subconscious and drag out what’s in there, rather than having a concept which you’re quite conscious of and put down. (17’43–18’15)

She refers here to the surrealism of Breton, and to the tradition of automatic writing—of delving into one’s unconscious and sharing what one finds, rather than ‘having a concept which you’re quite conscious of and put down.’ In this practice of automatic writing, the French surrealists were indebted to Freud’s theories of the unconscious, as Maurice Nadeau notes (48). Inspired by Freud, the poets who founded surrealism out of the Dada movement in the 1920s and 30s—Breton, Louis Aragon, and Philippe Soupault—fixated on automatic writing’s potential to free the artist from reason. Breton, to this end, defined surrealism as:

Pure psychic automatism by means of which one intends to express, either verbally, or in writing, or in any other manner, the actual functioning of thought . . . Surrealism is based on the belief in the superior reality of certain forms of previously neglected association, in the omnipotence of dream, in the disinterested play of thought. (par. 46)

Viidikas also refers above to symbolism, which goes back to the non-realist and highly suggestive representations of Charles Baudelaire, Stéphane Mallarmé, Paul Verlaine, and Arthur Rimbaud in the late nineteenth century. Both movements resisted realism, while surrealism was focused particularly on automatism and the unconscious. Surrealist poems, infused with dream imagery and unusual syntax, appear in a sustained way in *Knäbel* and *India Ink*. *Knäbel*’s surrealist depictions can seem fuelled by drug taking, most obviously where drugs are mentioned (e.g. ‘Rehabilitation’ and ‘Strong Wash’). Drug taking was a known strategy for the surrealists—indeed, the parallel between surrealism and drug taking is drawn in Breton’s manifesto: ‘It is true of surrealist images as it is of those engendered by opium that Man does

not evoke them, but that they “offer themselves to him, spontaneously, despotically . . . the will is powerless, and no longer governs the faculties” (Baudelaire)’ (par. 73). Viidikas’s ‘Strong Wash’ begins:

Hey now snakey
gris gris nights and lizard days
the red hot mutter sigh cleaves
tangerine high and saffron thighs . . . (10)

Adrienne Sallay has noted that this stanza ‘invokes the influence of LSD with its image of hot days and stoned nights’ (par. 47). Other poems in the collection appear to be surrealist without the use of drugs. ‘Beach and Autumn’ subtly blends an experience of swimming with dream. In the poem, the lines, ‘You paddle north into the sky, / the blue wave lifts from your eye’ give the scene an upside-down, dreamlike cast, with the swimmer carrying a wave into the sky (12).

Viidikas’s last book, *India Ink*, is a catalogue of her journeys in the subcontinent in prose poetry form, and contains surreally fluid poems about landscapes and Hindu gods and goddesses. Here for instance is the opening of ‘Mamallapuram (Tamil Nadu)’:

Where the sand ends endeavour begins. Take living stone and a man with tools, the fire of daylight, and the flame within the stone. Turn everything inside out, mix sweat with wandering sea, and where the structure ends, a source begins: red element/green life/gold light/black stone/sweet memory. (*India* 51)

The poem conveys Viidikas’s experience at a temple town on the coast of Tamil Nadu, and in its imagery is reminiscent of a Dali painting. The surrealist depiction of the scene continues throughout the poem: ‘While other worlds dream, a temple of solid rock rises from the sea, its ceiling of air matches a floor of moving water’ (51). Vivid dreamscapes abound in *India Ink*: in ‘Wet Fruit’ the poet records, ‘Mirage of oasis on burning sands . . . Through dark nights the sardines flash, deep ocean reflects a thick drape of stars’ (21). And ‘Cannibal’ describes a morning in which, ‘A ming blue sky overhangs the desert . . . Up there a world without end / a self exciting circuit’ (9). The poem ends with a communion of self and landscape: ‘Inside me the morning tastes fresh as I eat’ (9). Communion between self and nature is a common move in Viidikas’s poetry; it appears again, for instance, in ‘The flow of them all’ in *Condition Red*:

What huge grasshopper is crawling the hill?
What turtleness of feeling slid off the satin reeds?
Blue dragonflies are singing in clouds of transparent light.
. . .
Am I part of the river, the deck, or the willow? (32)

Viidikas’s confessional mode and her surrealist aesthetic sometimes operate separately: ‘Mamallapuram (Tamil Nadu)’ is surrealist without broaching taboo topics, while ‘Future’ is confessional without invoking surrealist imagery. Sometimes, however, these aspects converge in the same poem: ‘Cracked windows’ conjures surrealist imagery in representing the trauma of rape (‘I know of no place where the body / can . . . watch faces reassemble, the window pane / replaced, tongues of velvet and / the sounds indelible’ [*Condition* 18]). Because of these irregular overlaps, it is difficult to classify her poems as confessional or surrealist; nor is it fitting to say that her poetry is always confessional and surrealist—the reader may instead be aided by an awareness of each tradition wherever it is prominent. By contrast, Viidikas’s

feminist ethos is a near-constant presence, complementing and enhancing both her confessionalism and her surrealism.

Confessional Surrealist Feminist

In her formative years Viidikas was immersed in radical politics, particularly the second wave feminism and anti-war politics that took shape in Australia in the 1960s. Critics such as Sallay, Ryan, and Ann Vickery have highlighted Viidikas's investment in countercultural politics and her work's (most obviously *Condition Red*'s) engagements with it (Sallay par. 6; Ryan par. 1; Vickery 271–72), while McCooey highlights feminism as an enduring theme in her poetry:

Poets such as Viidikas, Jennifer Maiden (b. 1949), and Pam Brown (b. 1948) represented a radical poetics that was open to issues of gender while anthologies such as *Mother I'm Rooted* [1975] and *The Penguin Book of Australian Women Poets* (1986) attempted to redress the imbalance [in gender, of previous anthologies of Australian poetry]. Susan Hampton and Kate Llewellyn, the editors of the latter anthology, observe that the political speech of women poets has often been suppressed (16). Not surprisingly, the relationship between poetics and politics is often central to the work of many women poets of this era. (196)

The feminism that Viidikas absorbed in her formative years celebrated the emotional content of women's writing; this feminism was grounded in work by Hélène Cixous, Julia Kristeva, and Luce Irigaray, and in the English sphere in texts such as Kate Millet's *Sexual Politics* (1969) and Germaine Greer's *The Female Eunuch* (1970). This ethos comes across strongly in 'Vicki's Voice—Remembering Vicki Viidikas,' ABC RN's posthumous radio tribute. In this program Robyn Ravlich proposes a feminist perspective:

Adamson: With Vicki it was more an organic consideration of the poem. She wouldn't like that term. Holistic. That's the way she approached poems. The words were connected to the meanings and the emotions as well as the intellect.

Ravlich: Was it seen as female, also?

Adamson: Yes! That's how Vicki saw it. (Ravlich 23'59–22'21)

In the program Ravlich and many of Viidikas's peers describe her poetry as distinctly female¹. For example an unnamed female interviewee remarks:

I think she did something very important for Australian poetry. Part of that was just talking very frankly as a woman about very intense emotions. Especially *Condition Red*, but the other books are marked by a certain intensity, and it's as though the poetry is working through powerful emotions. (35'00–35'26)

This view of Viidikas's writing reflects a contested but powerful approach to women's liberation in the 1970s, which was that in order to liberate women from patriarchy and from patriarchal notions about women, the essence of female subjectivity had to be identified and celebrated. While writers such as Monique Wittig, Adrienne Rich, Angela Davis, and Audre Lorde would later critique the universalist conception of women inherent in this approach to women's writing (women worldwide as one group with a shared subjectivity), as ignoring national, racial, and class aspects in female identity, Viidikas's poetry enacts this second wave

ideal. As Estelle Freedman writes in her introduction to Cixous's 'The Laugh of the Medusa' (1975):

Academic and literary feminists [of the 1970s] championed competing theories of women's liberation, some emphasising the social construction of womanhood and others the deep psychic structures that shaped female experience . . . Cixous belonged to the latter group . . . [I]n response to the erasure of women from a male-defined, phallogentric culture, she urged women to write, to unleash from repression a female unconscious deeply connected to the sexual. Cixous invoked 'a universal woman subject' with unique erotic potential. (318)

Cixous's ideals for women's writing are evident in poems such as 'red is the colour,' which explores female emotionality and sexuality:

red is the colour
when creation burst and the first physical thing
stepped amazed into itself

what the men with wordy heads
label 'primitive' and 'less intelligent'
...
red was the silence dispensed with his eyes
when his hands were mute with love
...
of the absence of the touch
knitting the body into waking (*Condition 14*)

Here redness is physical, sensual, and female. In a rhetorical move that is concerned with gender stereotypes within a patriarchal culture, the imagined intensity of feeling in the Big Bang ('when creation burst') is represented as female; the poet then represents male intellectuals—'men with wordy heads'—finding this 'primitive' and 'less intelligent.' These stanzas critique a male perspective on female subjectivity, represented by the colour red. Given the significance that redness carries in the poem, the title *Condition Red* could be read as 'condition female.' Placed in the broader countercultural context, it could also mean 'the socialist condition,' as Ryan has suggested:

Condition Red (UQP, 1973)—which most likely took its title from Kubrick's *Dr Strangelove* (1964) in which Condition Red means war—burst with unsettling depictions of contemporary life and the status of women, a year after Equal Pay had become law[,] . . . the intense political and social tumult of the 1960s and '70s, and the dynamically modernising upheavals wrought by the first Labor Government in 23 years (Australian troops withdrawn from Vietnam; Equal Pay legislation; Single Mother's Pension; voting age lowered from 21 to 18 years, free university education, etc.). (par. 1)

In Viidikas's work, the feminist aim to represent raw female experience is sometimes twinned with both the self-exposure of confessionalism and the dream imagery of surrealism. Take the poem 'Knives' in *Knäbel*. The premise of this poem is that the poet possesses three knives which serve different functions:

These three knives were designed to cut.
 I take the first and scalp the sunlight from the sky.
 I take the second and carve a face within the moon.
 The third is more dangerous. Its work is for the heart.
 With this I cut away distortion through the night, so in the
 day the flesh will hold.
 I sculpt carefully and leave no scar. Not even my mind will
 undo the opening. (*Knäbel* 46)

Here the image of the poet performing surgery on her heart is a metaphor for resolving emotional trauma; the poem expresses a melancholic yet pragmatic state of mind, using surrealist imagery. This poem was featured in ‘Vicki’s Voice’ along with a preface by the author which evokes automatism, by noting that the poem emerged from her spontaneously and whole: ‘The poem “Knives” was written straight out. I didn’t revise it, well I changed about two words in it, but it just came straight out in one piece’ (21’39–21’50).

In the final lines we get a clearer sense of the subject of the poem—a fractured romance or relationship between the poet and her addressee:

. . . the knives curve bright and luxurious, through the past
 and into the future.
 With each knife there is a lesson. Wounds heal better when
 left alone.
 It is for you I offer these cuttings.
 Undo honestly and the life will be visible. (46)

‘Knives’ expresses female subjectivity in the unconscious, and through the poet’s candid thoughts on a romantic experience; in this sense it marshals both surrealism and confessionalism to the second wave literary feminist project:

To write. An act which will not only ‘realise’ the decensored relation of woman to her sexuality, to her womanly being, giving her access to her native strength; it will give her back her goods, her pleasures, her organs, her immense bodily territories which have been kept under seal; it will tear her away from the superegoised structure . . . [through] this job of analysis and illumination, this emancipation of the marvellous text of her self that she must urgently learn to speak. (Cixous 323)

A recurrent theme across *Condition Red*, *Knäbel*, and *India Ink* is female experience in all its forms, and in this sense all her books have a feminist underpinning that interacts, often in subtle ways, with other aesthetic strains. These strains may seem arbitrarily paired, but they have a historical commonality that may have led Viidikas to them. Confessional poetry and surrealism had Freud in common, as a motivating force or inspiration—indeed, confessional poetry arose partly through the popularity of Freudian psychoanalysis in America (see Nelson I; Sumner 86). Psychoanalysis was also important to the second wave feminists whose ideals Viidikas emulated: Cixous belonged to a group called Psych et Po, or Psychoanalysis and Politics. We can therefore speculate that Viidikas was attracted to the psychoanalytic background common to confessional poetry, surrealism, and second wave literary feminism; it exists as a shadowy link between these different interests.

Production Contexts

Having described the aesthetic composition of Viidikas's poetry, I want to consider the material circumstances of its production. Viidikas's position within the generation of '68 had a significant bearing on her artistic practice. The generation was sustained by a series of overlapping networks, as Fiona Scotney argues in her PhD thesis (50). Scotney describes 'the key nodes' for the generation as: Monash University, where the poets Laurie Duggan, Alan Wearne and John Scott met as undergraduates in the late 1960s; La Mama theatre in Carlton, where Kris Hemensley launched a poetry workshop in 1968; Robert Adamson's house in Balmain, where *Poetry Magazine* (later known as *New Poetry*) was edited, and around which poets such as Michael Dransfield, Charles Buckmaster, Martin Johnston, and Shelton Lea clustered; the wider suburb of Balmain, where many of the Sydney poets including Viidikas lived; and a host of small poetry magazines from Sydney, Melbourne, Adelaide, and Brisbane in which the poets published in the 1960s and 70s (50).

All of the above networks are social, or pertain to publishing venues, but there was also an aesthetic mode of networking among the generation. Poets would often refer, in their work, to other poets in their community. As Scotney notes, 'While naming and dedicating poems is not unique, such a high level of shared naming among a group of poets is' (110). In her article 'Name-dropping in Australian Poetry,' Fiona Hile demonstrates that naming is now a common practice: 'Many . . . Australian poets—Ken Bolton, Pam Brown, Duncan Hose, Ann Vickery, John Forbes, Laurie Duggan and dozens more—name-drop with a frenzied decisiveness' (par. 2). Scotney states that this was uncommon in Australian poetry before the generation of '68; she mentions the Beat Generation as a major American precursor (110–11).

This aspect of the gen '68's ethos arguably added to the urgency of Viidikas's work—of its being in the present, countercultural, moment. Viidikas and Wilding would often write each other into their poems and stories: as Don Graham notes, 'Viidikas wrote several poems and stories at/for Wilding. Perhaps the most representative one is "The Incomplete Portrait," which appeared in her book *Wrappings*, published by Wild & Woolley in 1974' (87). Other notable examples are Viidikas's prose poem 'For New Zealand Poet, Stephen Oliver' (1988), a kind of anti-ode written to Oliver after a falling out with him,² and the long poem 'Letter Via Poowong' which is subtitled 'For Shelton Lea' and twice notes 'Shelton and Christine' as the intended audience (232–37). Wilding elaborates on this practice of inserting peers into their poetry:

Writing was part of a dialogue with the world for Vicki and other writers of the 1970s. Predating blogs and the web, it was a direct and instant medium of exchange, inviting rapid response. We used to respond to each other's stories and poems with stories and poems in reply. ('Vivid' par. 6)

While Viidikas often laboured over her poems, paying attention to form and craft as Adamson notes (par. 30), speed was arguably central to Viidikas's practice: the speed of an experience—lived or manifested in the depths of her mind—rendered immediately into verse, to be shared with her community.

1985–1998

Viidikas did not produce any books after *India Ink*, and published only a handful of poems in journals until her death a decade and a half later. Critics have linked Viidikas's retreat from publishing, and from the literary community, to her growing dependence on heroin at this time. Brown for instance notes:

Australian poetry presses supported Vicki Viidikas, publishing four of her books in a decade. Her last title appeared in 1984. She lived a further fourteen years without a new collection and with her writing appearing only scantily in a period when women's writing was booming. Sadly, as Viidikas's heroin addiction increasingly formed the basis of her *modus operandi*, she became marginalised and publishing and performing opportunities vanished. (par. 14)

Oliver elaborates on Viidikas's social marginalisation in 'One Day in the Life of Vicki Viidikas,' noting the damage her heroin addiction did to her friendships with other writers (50–51). Viidikas made reference to heroin in her poem 'Separation Blues,' published in the journal *Outrider* four years after *India Ink*. The poem describes '18 days in a new house' where time seems cyclical, or frozen—the phrase '18 days' is repeated at the beginning and end, and a radio and a broken toilet appear twice in the poem (187). Drugs are mentioned incessantly: 'You frowning and full of heroin'; 'The syringe that hurt going in'; 'Us bingeing on white fire drugs'; 'Sweet poison and the kiss of fix'; 'Hogging joints in big overcoats' (187–88). The poem describes the poet's disillusionment with the transcendental aspect of drug-taking, ending, '18 days you show me tenderness / But the pedestal reveals no Goddess' (188). As Viidikas published few poems in the last years of her life, the drug theme here is revealing. 'White Poem,' published posthumously in the *New and Rediscovered*, is also about drugs: as Ryan notes, 'white . . . refers to heroin [in this poem]' (par. 13).

Williams and Sudhakar offer a different account of Viidikas's retreat from publishing in the late 1980s and 90s, by pointing to her Beat-poet-inspired refusal to join the literary establishment:

Viidikas was prepared to go further than most creative writers in exposure of her post-Beat humanist self rather than hide behind walled façades or masks of self-importance—such as an extensive published body of work—and using justifying language about her life and art. (16)

Indeed, Viidikas has admitted that she identified with the margins of culture,³ and her failure to join the ranks of poets with careers may be seen as a choice, as well as an outcome of her drug dependence. Wilding explains Viidikas's marginalisation in similar terms, drawing a story of cause and effect that registers factors besides her drug addiction. A semi-autobiographical short story titled 'Mere Anarchy' makes reference to Viidikas, and to avant-garde publishing, at the time (Wilding referred to Viidikas in his fiction as 'Valda'):

Valda's work was perfect for their needs, sex and drugs and written by a woman. The absence of the political was ideal.⁴ The war raged on, the bombing escalated, and the Libertarians fought the fight to print four letter words. They would have liked to appropriate Valda . . . But Valda would not be appropriated. She held them in contempt, their intellectualism, their theorised sexuality, their unstylishness, their straightness . . . Perhaps there was a component of envy, their moneyed backgrounds, their university scholarships and grants and salaries. To Valda they were people playing at bohemianism, with an escape route always on hand. For her, for the authentic existence she espoused, there could be no escape. She began to slide away from us, or we from her. Increasingly it was the world of the Cross [Kings Cross], of hard drugs, of opiates, dependency, the twilight demi-monde that claimed her, or that she claimed. (*Wild* 63)

Wilding's reference to the war raging on has been echoed in Viidikas's poem 'Update on Liquidation,' published in 1993. In the poem Viidikas observes the outbreak of the Gulf War:

They won't recapitulate
on wooden idols or weapons of steel:
Gods of War
who hold nothing sacred,
they return
to their locations of crime
and say that non-violence
is irrelevant, dumb (98)

Palpable here is Viidikas's despondency; her anti-war politics seem to have had no effect on the war machine. For a poet so informed by countercultural politics, the wars of the 1980s and 90s in which the UK and the US were involved (the 1986 US bombardment of Libya, the Falklands War, the Gulf War) must have been disheartening. Continuing to publish in this context may have seemed futile to the poet. It is also worth noting that Viidikas spent long periods of time away from Australia (in India), and in a pre-Internet era—when it was relatively difficult to stay connected to a national literary culture from afar—this would have set the scene for her eventual marginalisation when she returned to Sydney.

Whatever the precise reason for Viidikas's retreat from publishing in the late 1980s and 1990s, an irony is that it occurred just as a new technology of networked communication went mainstream in Australia. Australia was connected to the Internet in 1989, and the use of email began to grow from the mid-1990s onwards. While there are no accounts of Viidikas's interactions with this new technology in the last years of her life, her networked literary production foreshadowed the immediacy of email and instantaneous publishing that would soon follow—as Wilding has noted ('Vivid' par. 6). I gesture to these paradoxically opposite trajectories (Viidikas's retreat from her literary network, and the growth of a communications network) to position Viidikas in relation to both social and technological revolutions, that mirrored aspects of her work, in the last three decades of the twentieth century.

NOTES

¹ The notion of an essential femininity and an essential masculinity was critiqued in third wave feminism, particularly in Judith Butler's *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (1990). Butler argued that femininity and masculinity are culturally constructed and performed, rather than being innate to female and male bodies (10). However, the concept of an essential female subjectivity was a powerful one in Viidikas's formative years.

² See Oliver's 'One Day in the Life of Vicki Viidikas' for the interpersonal background to this poem.

³ Viidikas stated:

I like all writers who are out of step, and I guess that's what I try to write about myself, the realities of subcultures in Western societies such as bohemians, junkies, criminals, prostitutes, atheists, homosexuals, or people who are just plain amoral. ('Statement' 155)

⁴ While her anti-war politics did not often appear in her poetry, Viidikas's work was consistently feminist, and therefore political (one of the rallying cries of second wave feminism was that 'the personal is political')—but this was not always recognised as such.

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