

RE-WRITING FEMINISM IN KATHARINE SUSANNAH PRICHARD'S *INTIMATE STRANGERS*

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Greg threw himself back on the sand.

'Sing, "More love or more disdain I crave"—like you used to', he begged.

'So sentimental a ditty?' Brows arched, eyes oblique in the three-quarter face she turned to him, Elodie murmured derisively:

More love, or more disdain, I crave
Sweet, be not still indifferent,
Oh, send me quickly to my grave,
Or else afford me more content,
Or love, or hate me, more or less,
For love abhors all lukewarmness.

Her voice flowed through the quiet air, a moving quality in its undertones.

Give me a tempest, it will drive
Me to the place where I should be;
Or if you'll have me still alive,
Confess you will be kind to me,
Give hopes of bliss, or dig my grave,
More Love, or more disdain, I crave.

Defying this attempt to defuse its poignancy, the song is quickly established as a motif within the text of Katharine Susannah Prichard's *Intimate Strangers* (1976). Entangled in the text, the lyric from the song, a couplet here, a cadence there, grows in significance as it articulates the frustrations of Elodie, the central female character. It buzzes in her brain like a Perth summer fly—usually when her hands are absent mindedly idle in tepid, greasy dishwater or are busily sorting through the dusty trinkets of her married life. The domestic binds in which she is caught are reinforced by the bars of the song. It is in the maze of her marriage and her children that her life and her identity have been lost. It is here that her passion has lost its direction, its momentum and even its goal. In singing this song then she not only demands strength of passion from others, she demands it also from herself.

The song is appropriated from a discourse of libertine masculine love: written by Charles Webbe and set to music by Purcell in the late seventeenth century. The song takes on a problematised position early in the novel. Sung by the woman at the request of her husband, the lyric runs at cross currents to her motives and desires. Yet it remains, and as the refrains

settle into the idiom of the text, they take on a new and poignant meaning. Elodie struggles to utilise the words and the tune to her own ends but is frustrated as they refuse to express the meaning with which she thinks they are infused. The song constantly eludes Elodie. Somehow the cadences never resolve as the romantic lyricism of the verse sings against the forces of her anger. The struggle is emblematic of the other philosophies and ideologies which come into play with her consciousness.

Intimate Strangers is without doubt the Prichard novel which carries the most historical and biographical baggage. The novel is accompanied by a quiet scandal which has simmered and, occasionally, flared since its publication in 1937. The discussion/argument about its heritage has moved through the pages of Australian literary journals, across the screens of Australian television and even through the gloss of the Australian *Women's Weekly*. The circumstances of its publication have overshadowed its text and, as a result, the novel has rarely, if ever, been evaluated for its literary qualities. Nothing, that is, beyond a succinct denial of its literary value. Admittedly, as a novel in its own right, it stands as a poor sibling to *Coonardoo* and *Working Bullocks*—the canonised Prichard texts. It stands, instead, as a fatally flawed work of art. But, as such, it holds an enormous significance for the study of Prichard's work as a whole and, in particular, her positioning within feminist discourse. For in *Intimate Strangers* the conclusion indeed denies the logic of the novel. The momentum which grows and the tension which is sustained throughout the body of the novel, suddenly and dramatically stop. The concluding chapters are re-inscribed in such a way that every aspect of the novel which has been previously established is rendered benign.

The conclusion of the novel essentially denies the novel's demands: the demands of tragedy, the demands of romance, the demands of feminism to name only a few of the many aspects which converge in the overdetermined thematic structure of the text. The main body of the novel in fact gains a great deal of its literary attraction from the tensions created in it by this overdetermined structure. It serves to position the text in a quest for a single determining answer to the problems of human existence. In a similar way to the text of *Coonardoo*, this novel searches through a variety of philosophical, anthropological, historical and mythological influences for a single determining theory which will answer the problems of human existence. In their very entwining, these influences become jointly powerful as they in fact serve to deny any such answer. The very effort of totalisation becomes self defeating:

She could not escape the snare so many centuries had laid for her. The round of female duties entering into it entailed: the defeat and repression years of habit had inured her to, sapping her will, keeping her treading the line of least resistance without thought of her own body and soul in its process. (138-9)

The feminism of the text is established loudly and soundly early in the novel. It is a pre-De Beauvoir, room of one's own feminism: an as yet inarticulate anger at the responsibilities of a woman as a wife, as a mother, and her incarceration within the domestic sphere. A room of one's own lingers in the novel as a naive and innocent testimony to Woolf. Prichard wrote the manuscript in her own room which she had built with the royalties of *Coonardoo*. Dirk, in Chapter 19, cites her husband's refusal to allow her a room of her own as indicative of their collapsing marriage. But the feminism of the novel is of a kind which is derived as much from correspondence and conversation as it is from Woolf. The incidence of women around the world talking and writing their feelings of injustice and frustration into a shared consciousness was beginning to form. It is a raw and immature feminism—yet to find representation or popular voice. Indeed, the feminism of the novel attempts to articulate this anger without the weapons which are now wielded—an established idiom, recognised frames of reference, the power of legislation, were not within its grasp or even its imagination. The anger, however, was intense. It rages across the pages.

Elodie reflects:

Domestic Tragedies are all played out in an atmosphere of low comedy. There is no heroic satisfaction in surviving or being annihilated by them. No exaltation of misery in drudgery and measles, your face swelling and discolouring until it looks

like a dead blow fish: about being bad tempered and preoccupied with all the sordid and ugly details of a small house and smaller income. Dirty drains, black grease, mosquitoes, flies, socks that have to be darned. How could such a glamorous emotion survive such prosaic reality? A note of rapture soar over so many dish washings and peeling of potatoes, scouring of dirty floors and emptying slops?....The great lovers of history and fiction never seemed to be bothered by such considerations. (206)

It is not just an anger at bonds of domestic responsibilities—it is also a demand for, individuality, emancipation and, above all, a voice.

Was she receding into the background of a life where her husband and children held the stage, rather than contend for any individuality of her own? If she had a mind and soul of her own, why should she not be airing them as freely and as gaily as Greg and the children? 'Anything for a quiet life'. It was so exhausting to have to argue about everything you wanted to do: to defend everything you thought or said. She was subsiding into herself, rather than make any demand for a will and a way of her own. (81-2)

'Give hopes of bliss or dig my grave
More love or more disdain I crave'.

The images of Elodie as a dead fish which goes with the tide, a snail of a woman, suffering with the weight of a house strapped to her back, a mouse caught in a trap with its back broken and its bright eyes protruding in the agony of a slow death, a woman whose body cries tears of sweat after being raped by her husband, violated in some supreme way, and a drab and haggard woman caught in a mirror against a backdrop of garish Chinese lanterns and coloured streamers gives dimension to this dumb anger. Marriage becomes the villain. Dirk's and Ted's wedding is far from the culminating event of romantic fiction and becomes a collage of recalled events which shimmer in Elodie's brain like a hangover. Dirk, black and blue with her husband's caresses, recounts to Elodie her loveless marriage which alternates with the smell and sight of rotting sheepskins.

Why then, or perhaps more aptly, how can this intense anger be diffused and dismissed so quickly and easily by the novel's conclusion? The question reverberates through the mind of the reader who attempts a second reading of the novel. It is only then that the implications of the novel's conclusion become starkly visible.

1927: Prichard begins work on *Intimate Strangers*. May 1933: a manuscript of *Intimate Strangers*, in which the main male character Greg shoots himself, is completed. June 1933: Prichard sails to London on her way to the Soviet Union. November 1933: Prichard learns from a newspaper headline in London that her husband has killed himself at their Greenmount home. Boxing Day 1933: Prichard returns to Australia and finds herself in severe financial difficulties. 1937: the novel *Intimate Strangers* is published but with a re-written ending.

What we read in the concluding pages of *Intimate Strangers* was written some time after the main body of the novel and in between the two stages of writing, Prichard had endured the most tumultuous time of her life. 1933 was a threshold year through which she passed from being a romantic writer interested in the tragedy of human existence, to being a committed socialist realist. Although there has been a fair amount of petty conjecture against it, I think we must accept Drusilla Modjeska's assertion that Prichard did indeed come into contact with Socialist Realism during her visit to the Soviet Union (*Exiles at Home*). Whilst there is little evidence to prove this historically, a textual analysis of the first publication after her return, *The Real Russia*, reveals the extent to which she was applying herself to the theory as well as applying the theory to her writing. In *The Real Russia* the reader witnesses a self-reflective exercise of socialist realism through socialist realism. In the chapter on literary culture in the Soviet Union, the text expounds the virtues of this new literary theory with a language and literary style which is itself socialist realist. Throughout the volume there is ample evidence

of each of the component parts which constitute the theory of socialist realism. *Partynost*, the expression of party spirit in accordance with the objectives and methods of the communist party, *Narodnost*, the expression of a typical national style, *Ideynost*, the embodiment of ideas, especially political and social ideas of a progressive nature, *klassovost*, the expression of the characteristics of class in art, the positive socialist hero and the positive ending each recur throughout the text. Whilst essentially a work of reportage, *The Real Russia* stands as one of the first, if not the first, socialist realist texts to be published outside the Soviet Union. When Prichard found the emotional energy to return to the manuscript of *Intimate Strangers* she did so as a socialist realist.

At the conclusion of the novel, Elodie and Greg sit on the beach and commit themselves to each other as comrades rather than as lovers. Their marriage has found a new purpose, not in each other, but for the cause of the working people. Elodie's anger has dissolved into the ocean of socialist realism. The initiative is his not hers as he articulates their new found motivation:

Walking back to you, Elodie, I got a vision of what she meant. I understood what Tony was driving at when he talked at those meetings of the unemployed. I got hope...a feeling that it was good to be able to fight against this outrageous business of crushing and thwarting hundreds and thousands of men and women, in order that a few may be successful, have wealth and luxury. When you think of it, quietly, the whole scheme of things we've accepted blindly is insane...and wars are fought for it, the laws are made to protect it. I'm thrilled with the idea that there's a big job on hand building this new way of life, and I'm needed to help with the building of it. It's like being born again.

Elodie found herself caught up on a gust of excitement. (408)

In the *Communist* of Friday 18 August 1922, C.J.S. writes:

She must realise that as she has been the slave of a slave for centuries, so the only way to get her freedom is for him to get his; and that she must join him and help him to win his freedom first. She must make one last sacrifice in her own interest and in his and in her children's; she must bury her own injustice against man as a sex for ever and prove herself a fitting helpmate in the fight, not for one sex against the other, but for their class in its emancipation. Without her, her man can do little; she can thwart him at every step and make his life a burden for him by putting petty obstacles before his work as a Communist. But with her the ground can be covered fast. (2)

'Or love or hate me more or less
For love abhors all lukewarmness'.

The clash of the two incompatible philosophies of feminism and communism within the text of *Intimate Strangers* emblemises the ideological struggles faced by so many women in the first half of this century. Unable to reconcile the two, the text of this novel collapses under the weight of its own assertions. The main body of the novel flourishes with the energy of an overdetermined quest for an answer to the problem of the human condition. The concluding chapters wither under the false confidence of a theory or philosophy which arrogantly proclaims that it has found the answer. It withers precisely because it ignores one of the most pressing questions posed by the text: how can a woman exist as a passionate, valid and valuable human being when she is constantly incarcerated in the drudgery of domesticity and consistently finds herself in a position which is subservient? Can cooking and cleaning for a husband and children be so easily justified when the cause is proletarian emancipation? How can the anger which rages across the pages of this novel be so easily quelled by the self-assured proclamations of communism? The tragic conclusion to which the novel builds is written over in favour of a happy ending. The feminist nemesis of Dirk joins Maretti and together they form a socialist hero, sailing off into the sunset to work together as

comrades. The causes of the Communist Party of Australia are praised as the only true solution to the problems of the human condition, *Partynost*. The language and the ideas are those which are common to the people with whom they are now associated and to the country in which they live, *Narodnost*. The ideas they proclaim are those which are in the interest of the working class, *Klassvost*. And they are ideas which will serve to enlighten the working people who read them and inspire them to work together for the overthrow of capitalism and the proletarian revolution, *Ideynost*.

More love or more disdain I crave
Sweet, be not still indifferent.

Elodie sat up, disturbed by the sense of a debt that would have to be paid. 'I've sung those words and meant them, Greg', she said slowly. 'Some day, I can tell you why; but now, we won't grab for personal things any more... We'll have something bigger than ourselves to live for'. (409)

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