

Books That Make Us: Exploring Author-Reader Relationships in *Turn Left at Venus*

HARPER BOON and LEIGH DALE
INDEPENDENT SCHOLARS

Inez Baranay's *Turn Left at Venus* (2019) is a structurally complex novel that tells the story of Australian author A.L. Ligeti, Ada to her friends.¹ The narrative introduces the reader to Ligeti's works, the most renowned of which is titled *Turn Left At Venus*—a science fiction novel that explores the feminist utopia that is the planet of Lueshira.² The near-doubling of titles underpins the structural complexity of Baranay's book, the chapters of which alternate between memoir by A.L. Ligeti; extracts from or samples of Ligeti's writing; responses to that writing; and chapters about those who meet Ada / A.L. Ligeti in late old age.³ Through this doubling and cross-referencing of author-as-character and character-as-author, as well as the embedding of formal and popular readers' commentary about Ligeti's novels and stories—often comically misguided, and misguidedly adamant—both authors' novels can be read as exploring Stephen Orgel's suggestion that “[i]f readers construct books, books also construct readers” (285; see also Latham 183). It is an observation amplified by Elizabeth Webby, when she remarks that the “life/fiction opposition is too simple: the values people act upon in life may, in fact, be derived from novels they have read” (xiii), a claim that might be read as driving the conclusion to Baranay's novel.

In specific and compelling ways, *Turn Left at Venus* can be read as an exploration of the combination of mutuality and unpredictability that underpins reading relations which, in turn, affects the degree of influence of specific texts and of sets of texts seen as comprising a field such as “Australian literature.”⁴ Baranay's novel represents the agents of literary networks as characters: publishers, authors, reviewers, bloggers, booksellers, general readers, and at least one scholarly critic, all of whom participate, consciously or not, in attributing worth to a literary work—or diminishing it. Drawing attention to the mechanisms of cultural formation and the volatility of literary reputation, Baranay shows that such attributions of value are influenced by a network of texts *about* the work, texts *in* the work, and texts *surrounding* the work that shape its reception. A book that simultaneously functions “as” literature, whilst offering direct and indirect commentary on the making of literary value, offers an opportunity to open out discussion of how value-making is grounded in the more routine work of general reading, fan responses and reviewing. For if the *ways* in which one reads have implications for the value of a *field*, then scholars need to think critically about the limits and opportunities of specific cultural formations of reading by and through which texts are appraised.⁵

Baranay lays down a challenge to the current conventions of value-making in publishing and reading late in the novel when she declares that certain kinds of narrative—by implication, realist ones that do not challenge the status quo—are always preferred by those seeking commercial gain. In *Turn Left at Venus* she writes: “Story is an idea entwined with the mainstream publishing industry of late capitalism,” which is to say that specific narrative forms that presume an oppressively normative set of beliefs about cultural value are constitutive of the publishing industry. Baranay's irony is scything: in such stories, “[t]hings have beginnings. People have reasons. The past affects the future. There are desirable outcomes. If a voice deserves to be heard it will be” (220). The myths of the well-wrought novel, the just society, and the deserving writer are entwined: only “good” books receive sales, prizes, media attention and critical acclaim; only “bad” books do not. Contrastingly, *Turn Left at Venus* suggests that the current operation of Western publishing industries, and the keys to its transformation, lie

in personal relationships—at which point it seems right to acknowledge that our interest in Baranay’s work, and *Turn Left at Venus* in particular, has been driven by the ethical and theoretical problems of engaging with what might be termed a living corpus—which is to say, both the writing, and the writer.⁶

In both versions of *Turn Left*, the reader is offered warnings about and models for such relationships between authors, books, readers, and scholars, for there are tensions between those characters who wish to stabilise meaning and value according to their own interests and approaches to reading, and those who promote or embrace ambiguity, fluidity, and multiplicity. Utilising characters who participate in reading and critique allows Baranay to highlight the fact that these agents are themselves also “textual,” in the sense that it is not only writers, but readers and critics, who might be known to each other *as texts*, so that any easy distinction between text and person, like that between fiction and non-fiction, collapses.

Such tensions and instabilities in the reading experience and critical practice are central to *Turn Left at Venus*, whose characters embody the competing priorities of social, cultural, academic, and economic agents. Most of the explicit commentary about meaning comes in the form of fan blog posts, distinctly marked by a sans serif typeface and indentation,⁷ while the posts themselves raise issues that are at once critical (in the sense of presuming that a text requires interpretation), personal (there is often intense emotional investment in a reading), and commercial (addressing the question of whose work gets published, and read), as in these comments on genre:

The question of, or debates about, whether Ligeti had “transcended the genre” implied there was something to transcend. Which there was, and will I dare say what? *Turn Left* does transcend being one of those genre books that only the genre tribe would devour, the genre aficionados, addicts, the fans, the self-styled keeps. Transcend that, to be read by other readers. By the general reader.

Transcend being attractive to only the initiated. And how? By being literature, having literary values . . . which are?: well-crafted prose, let’s say, a distinctive voice maybe, a unique vision could be it, a way with figures of speech, an ability to create characters that leap off the page into your dreams, into your thoughts, into your fantasies, into your life, making your morning coffee for you . . . being your portal to Lueshira. (113–14)

Describing the embodiment of the literary text in the reader of which Webby speaks, Baranay also models the non-hierarchical, even anarchic, fluctuations of influence and value within cultural networks. The novel investigates, whilst also problematising, the view that there should be clear distinctions between author, general reader, fan, and scholar.

As a discipline, we rarely speak of the conventions that differentiate the ways in which scholars and readers might speak about living and deceased writers, the different ways in which we speak about those who are present and those who are not. Out of deference to this concern, at the recent conference “Texts and Their Limits” (2021) we modelled the author-as-text that is the concern of *Turn Left at Venus* by having the writer herself read the opening scene that introduces the young Ada and her lifelong friend Leyla, as their friendship is formed on a boat travelling from Europe to Australia in the post-war period:

They were two little girls on a very big boat. They peeked out from behind big legs, big laps, looked at each other amid all the baggy trouser knees and coat-tails, the scarred stockings and restitched hemlines, and left all the big people to approach each other. The boat was full of people, all the fathers mothers aunts

uncles grannies taking all the children to, to where they were going, they had to start thinking of where they were going, they were saying not to think about where they came from, they had no past, their lives beginning there, and the two little girls who recognised each other at once did not look away, found each other, never parted that whole lifetime voyage.

They would get to where they were going but for a while in the present no other world needed to be imagined, any other world refused to be. (5)

Baranay's reading aloud drew attention to one of the defining elements of her style: the mix of accretion and alteration within unusually long sentences, a pattern that refuses the narrative mode of the realist novel in which grammatically perfect sentences, usually of one or two clauses, predominate. In the third sentence, the accretion lies in the accumulation of family nouns without punctuation—"fathers mothers aunts uncles grannies"—and then alteration, even retraction: "taking all the children to, they had to start thinking of where they were going, they were saying not to think about where they came from, they had no past." Driven by a powerfully poetic and original sentence structure, this scene presents a meditation on value that presents as a problem of scale: the two "little" girls on a "very big" boat; yet their diminution is resisted, even reversed, by a narrative perspective that foregrounds their viewpoint and their "irresistible force" (5). There is a sense that the girls are contained by the boat, but they also transcend it; the boat's lack of stability is reinforced in the aural movement of the writing, so that both sound and image are metaphors of a space or place that is simultaneously fixed and mobile.

Structurally, this friendship between Ada and Leyla is important to Baranay's novel, which offers vignettes of their occasional "reunions" in adult life. Yet, *Turn Left at Venus* is better described as being built around Ada's career as a writer, her modes of performance in "becoming" and then "being" not "Ada," but "A.L. Ligeti." Crucially, the foundations of reading that drive her writing are shown as having been laid not in formal education but in her private life: Ada's own "childhood was in the books she read, that's where Ada could find it if she ever needed to, was asked to" (30). Late in the book, Baranay dedicates a brief chapter to "What Writing Is For"—a fan's exploration of A.L. Ligeti's views on language and literature: "The purpose of language is for thinking. Noam Chomsky said that on the radio. . . . Thinking comes first. With language to think with, more thoughts become possible, thoughts become richer" (220). With Ligeti's inspirations ranging from Chomsky to Enid Blyton, from her own journal to Walter Benjamin, this valuing of eclectic texts becomes a way to extend the cultural reach and significance of both Ligeti's and Baranay's books.

The first epigraph to *Turn Left at Venus* (from Antonio Tabucchi's *The Woman of Porto Pim*) in fact positions Baranay's novel as the full expression of its writer's own preferences: "Having reached an age at which it seems more dignified to cultivate illusions than foolish aspirations, I have resigned myself to the destiny of writing after my own fashion." If this statement cues us to the position of the novel within Baranay's oeuvre, the second epigraph cues the reader to the novel's generic affiliation with science fiction in its renowned feminist forms. Taken from Julie Phillips's biography *James Tiptree, Jr.: The Double Life of Alice B. Sheldon*, it signals Baranay's life-long interests in science fiction, writing, and travel: "A hopeless xenophile . . . all my life. In fact what draws me is so damn xeno it's not really here." And just as both Ada and Baranay seem inspired and directed by travel, both also seem drawn to anarchy, a place or mode "without authority" (46).⁸ It is strongly hinted that Ada's father died in support of his anarchist cause, although it is also possible that her own imaginings contribute to this interpretation (46; 47). Baranay links anarchism and storytelling with the mythos of the ancient Grecians, and their

gods, heroes, marble statues, democracy, Olympus, Olympic Games, philosophers, civilisation. It's as if those people were not people like we are, they lived in such a different way, they had no machines and no gunpowder, their stories were sung to each other not written in books; was it possible to even imagine their lives? (47)

It is this kind of questioning about the relationship between forms of story, social structures and cross-cultural knowledge that, when, coupled with her own sense of alienation, leads Ada to begin keeping another “book within a book,” “not a diary but a pretend diary kept by someone from a book” (45). This careful layering of fiction and transcription is looped back to anarchism in the chapter “Portal: Anarchism,” which presents another embedded form of commentary—in this case, forum posts, in which readers of Ligeti debate the importance of anarchism in her work. One contributor rebukes the science fiction writer for having been entrapped in binarism:

As long as there is an idea called Anarchism there will always be Statism. As long as people call themselves Atheists then God or the Gods are maintained. As long as people declare themselves Gender-fluid, gender categories will be perpetuated. To oppose something is to keep it going. So Ligeti has done as much as anyone to perpetuate the status quo. (51)

Another comes to Ligeti's defence:

There is a distinction. There's the way anarchism is in our world, which is a reaction. And there's the way the society on Lueshira works, which does not call itself anarchist, as it only knows itself the way it is. (51)

This latter view seems more authoritative, not least because it is one of very few “answers” that the reader gets to the novel's many questions.

For Ligeti and for Baranay, anarchism—the absence of a central authority to determine a final meaning—is linked to writing. It is a mode that recalls Roland Barthes's description of textual networks

[that] are many and interact, without any one of them being able to surpass the rest; this text is a galaxy of signifiers, not a structure of signifieds; it has no beginning; it is reversible; we gain access to it by several entrances, none of which can be authoritatively declared to be the main one; the codes it mobilizes extend as far as the eye can reach, they are indeterminable . . . the systems of meaning can take over this absolutely plural text, but their number is never closed, based as it is on the infinity of language. (5)

Throughout *Turn Left at Venus*, texts are transformed, multiplied, and vivified: for example, Ada's hospice nurse and fan, Jay, uses a text-to-speech app to read the story “Going Out” to her dying patient, first asking the author “What voice should I choose” (94).⁹ At this precise moment Ligeti does and does not have control of the story: they are allowed to decide the voice, but the voice that reads their words aloud is not theirs.¹⁰ Similarly, when a film is being made of *Turn Left At Venus*, Ligeti becomes resigned to the fact that the film's directors “would re-imagine it, it would be theirs not hers” (261).

This problem of the author's loss of control over meaning is more fully opened out in a discussion with Ada's apparently most simpatico lover, Noemi. In considering whether to

have a relationship or to finish writing her book, Ada's meditation on her priorities becomes a reflection on what happens to her books once readers get hold of them:

Ada tells Noemi, "I still had no idea how readers could make of the book I wrote a different book."

Noemi says, "You wrote a book that no one else had read. Then there were readers and they changed the book. The meaning of a text becomes what people say it is. Increasingly people learn about a book by what is said about it, not by going to the book."

"How do you know that?"

"Baby, I write about architecture. It's the same thing." (104)

The indeterminacy and proliferation of meaning described here work against stereotypical beliefs in the singularity, agency, and consistency of the writing life, in turn inducing doubt in the actual author—Ligeti—about their existence *as* a writer.

As the debate between readers of Ligeti shifts to the question of whether the society on Lueshira can be defined as anarchist, Baranay's artfully constructed "readers" ask questions about genre, gender, value and authority that might arise from reading not only Ligeti's but also Baranay's *Turn Left*:

Do we have to regulate, to categorise, is it all a way of control?

Are gender categories a way for The System to control us?

How do you enforce rules if there is no hierarchy? . . .

Did Ligeti's ideas about anarchism change after *Turn Left At Venus*?

Anarchism: principles and pitfalls. (54)

These questions, each of which is a thread, prompt another discussion about how literary value is made, but any attempt at a definitive answer is undone when the dialogue is dismissed as parallel to "another thread here from a while back about anarchism in *Turn Left At Venus*" (52). In disdaining readers who are "out of the loop," the book hints that there are answers inaccessible to Baranay's reader, however attentive they might be.

Within Baranay's novel, anarchism is tied very explicitly to the free expression of love, fluidity of identity, and the possibilities of transformation that are opened up by writing and reading:

Leyla said, "As an artist you can live the way you want."

Ada said, "You can't make rules about love."

Leyla said, "Love doesn't have rules."

Ada said, "People should be free."

Leyla said, "Free love is the only way."

Ada said, "Love freely." (49–50)¹¹

Ligeti's writing ambition is to "transcend, to know, to create, to be free, to be understood. To make something understood. She hadn't worked it out even that much. *She knew she needed to*

find the words” (47; emphasis added). Similarly, she needed to find the *world* “she might want to live in and [she] lived in it by making it up” (100).

Notwithstanding these ambitions, Ligeti’s first novel is initially unsuccessful. It is a failure modelled and reinforced when Leyla recoils from the book’s lurid cover, reminiscent of pulp fiction, that features a “man in a spaceship surrounded by writhing fantastical creatures”:

Leyla gave her a look, like, *Really?* . . .

Leyla didn’t say she wanted to read it, and the way she looked at it Ada didn’t offer to give her a copy.

Leyla said, “When you make a work of art you can call yourself a writer.” (130)

The careful emphasis on Leyla’s agency created by the repetition of her name is belied by her basic error in reading: judging a book by its cover, hence misjudging her friend.

Years later, Leyla again undoes Ada when she calls someone else a “real writer” but, now established in her career, Ada challenges her friend’s evaluation:

“What do you mean?” Ada dared to ask. Leyla did betray a fleeting discomfort, she did not like to be asked what she really meant. She was hardly going to say what she really meant. She meant that she had picked up a notion of Ada being outside the world of literature, real literature, the stuff classics were made of. (169)

Ironically, this formative relationship with Leyla, which consolidated Ada’s childhood self-confidence, is one of the few constraints on Ada later in life because it positions her “outside the world of literature.” When they meet again in their seventies, Leyla is characteristically disturbed by Ada’s self-confidence and seeks to retaliate, momentarily pretending not to recognise her friend:

Just because that’s what she does.

Just because something about Ada says Ada is willing to be a kind of supplicant.

. . . Two old women who had wanted since childhood most of all a sense of freedom, yet as if they could not be free entirely . . . (238)¹²

Crucially, though, it is Leyla’s misreading of both the cover and of Ada (or at least their relationship) that leads to moments of failure in the friendship.

Misrecognition, misreading, and debates about categorisation can all leave the reader off balance; such scenes also occur in Baranay’s earlier novels. In *Always Hungry*, for example, one character is left uncertain about whether her seductress is serious or not:

Bette is speaking in foreign sayings that don’t really translate poetically or psychotically or why she sounds as if she believes what she’s saying. . . .

She doesn’t understand Bette’s tone, is it a kind of joke? Is it her accent that makes it so hard to know? Or is it because she is apparently some kind of European aristocrat? Or thinks she is? . . .

Marisa cannot tell whether Bette believes she is speaking literally. (44)

It is a “scene of reading”—a modelling of interpretation—that accentuates undecidability whilst drawing attention to the dynamics of desire that underpin credulity and appreciation. Such shifts of time, voice, place, and genre can disorient, inviting and warning of the risk of misreading, that can only be parried (perhaps temporarily) by repeated close reading. This pushes the reader towards a scholarly mode that demands a substantial investment of time; such practice reinvents us to examine the text-reader relationship, inclusive of value-making, in light of Orgel’s and Webby’s observations.

However, if judicious scholarship seems a way forward, at least one moment in *Turn Left at Venus* shows that academic methods can also be constraining. One poster writes:

We were made to read Ligeti in my Anthropology degree. The books make you ask whether what you had been taught as bad manners, wrong thinking, or undesirable relationships, whether that was a description not of the world but only of your own culture’s customs and prejudices, which would mean it’s all entirely relative, not part of the essential commonality of humankind. I got an A. (184)

A form of reading that is coerced, literal, and moral (however morally desirable) is ironically rewarded with that triumphant “A.” Contrastingly, the reader of Ligeti’s work who makes the strong, insightful comment about assumptions within professional and general circles of reception about the relationship between conventional literary forms and conventional forms of cultural reward quoted above—“Things have beginnings. People have reasons. . . . *If a voice deserves to be heard it will be*”—tells us that “the main purpose of a novel is not to tell a story, nor is it to communicate with others; *the purpose of a novel is to create a way to think, to make a place where thoughts can grow*” (220; both emphases added).¹³ Such ambitions are greater, less easy to reach; certainly they cannot be measured through the dollar value of a book. As Baranay seems to want to show, literature can be both driven and disadvantaged by being, or seeming to be, an incommensurable object, the value of which is made in the marketplace of discussion, although it is the literal marketplace in which the actual writer—here, Baranay—must live and work.

While A.L. Ligeti values being read, she also seems pained and at times almost disturbed by what she sees as misreadings of her novels and stories; Baranay’s *Turn Left*, on the other hand, seems to revel in allowing readers to contest and to misread. In comic moments from one of the chapters of textual commentary on Ligeti, Baranay models the limiting of texts, culminating in a wonderfully disdainful quantitative judgement:

This comment has been removed by our moderators as it does not meet our community standards. (182)

What cloud did you come in on?

This comment has been removed. (183)

This book is dull and boring with maybe 8% of good parts but there’s not much of a story and too much philosophising. (189)

More tentatively, in the face of an apparent ambiguity and multiplicity, one worried Ligeti fan comments, “You don’t know if there’s any right side to be on in this story” (226).

Baranay’s creation of fan commentary is matched with her inclusion of scholarly commentary in several forms: as discussion of Ligeti’s writing and in Ligeti’s writing itself.

Ligeti's character "The Stranger,"¹⁴ an anthropologist, produces sought-after reports on new worlds, making all those who follow them to those worlds *readers* before they are travellers:

They wanted his reports to be their guidebook even while they wanted to feel like the first explorers. . . .

They wanted to go somewhere that would transform them.

They wanted transformation that was easy, an agreeable, gratifying process that told them they were fine people already. (158)

Here Baranay warns against that "agreeable, gratifying process" that is antithetical to the challenge and transformation ostensibly enabled by travel; both Ligeti and Baranay seem to be critical of ossification and smugness, the certainty that one's theories are correct, that cultural difference is banal or irrelevant, not least because we travellers and readers are "fine people already."

If the capacity of art is to transform or at least to challenge judgements such as these, the responsibility of the reader is to be open to transformation, and to understand that their own response is in turn transformative for the text. The chapter "Music on Lueshira," from Ligeti's *Turn Left At Venus*, describes The Stranger's experience at a concert in these terms: "[H]is presence, his active listening, in some measure altered the music and that meant the music was to some extent created by the presence of each listener and their expression of their collective self" (96).¹⁵ This theory of the interaction of creation and consumption is extended in The Stranger's "critical" discussion of the textual life of the Lueshiran Dark Saga story cycle, which follows the same semi-anarchic, non-hierarchical network of cultural valuing as on Dunya (Earth). Literary criticism on Lueshira takes the form of "debates and gentle disagreements about the origins of the classic story cycles of Lueshira [in order to] provide one of the ways that Lueshirans can entertain some conflict within their harmonious reality, just enough to make things interesting" (40). The Saga also serves an entertainment purpose, based on the "description and conversation and of course the poetic turns of phrase and word games that even the device found it hard to translate" (39).

The role of an anticipated reader is implicitly discussed in Ligeti's own professional development when the young Ada meets a man in a Sydney bookshop who will give her the book that begins her writing career. He speaks of the allure of science fiction, specifically its capacity to speak of "Other worlds. Crazy weird lives" (108).¹⁶ Ada interprets her interlocutor's stumbling words as meaning "the possibility that some things could be otherwise, *the possibility that something imagined well enough has an existence*" (108). Suddenly, she envisages her fellow shopper not just as a fellow reader, but as *her* reader, and thus can envisage herself as a writer: "[H]e is my future reader, he might be the one in the future reading the book she is at present writing" (109). Ada's transformation into an author is based, then, not only on her having actually written a novel that exists at that moment as a private typescript but, crucially, on an encounter in a place where readers gather, and books are sold; her literary ambitions are not simply private, but relational and commercial; facilitated through both institutions and individuals.

Inside the book that the young man recommends to her, there is a call for submissions to that book's publisher. For Ada, in Sydney, the address of the San Francisco publishing house Dagon—the title of an early short story by H.P. Lovecraft—is something abstract and mystically authoritative. But her encounter with a potential reader has emboldened her. "Back in her own room" Ada writes "The End," types a fresh copy "making a carbon copy for herself" (109), then dispatches the story to the United States. She imagines publication itself as a kind of magic but is challenged during her first in-person conversation with a sophisticated San

Francisco eccentric, Sophie Stein, who Ada asks to be her agent. Just as she has learned from the young man in the bookshop that he might be her reader and thus she herself a writer, Ada learns from Sophie that “a writer has rights” and that “the actual human persons who worked at a publishing house mattered.” And just as a chance encounter with a young man in Sydney is crucial to Ada’s decision to send her first book to a publisher, so is the interest of one person in San Francisco, who it turns out has enabled its acceptance and publication. Sophie remarks off-handedly that, although Dagon “picked up some interesting things for a while, once Jimbo was gone there wasn’t anyone to save it” (138). With “Jimbo” no longer at Dagon, Ada’s book has dropped out of sight; it requires another *somebody*, Sophie, to bring it back to the attention of readers.

As this account of the publication of her first book suggests, Ada is something of an ingenue early in her career, content to “fit the bill” of the young lady writer in her only interview to promote *Turn Left*:

So this reporter came, who wrote for the Womens Pages, which was a thing then, I think women weren’t meant to read the rest of the paper, and the men didn’t read the Womens Pages. This reporter had no idea, came with some questions on a paper, including, I swear, “What’s the most important item in your glory box?,” which I somehow knew meant a trousseau. (123)

Ada’s writing life is transformed by meeting Sophie, who (as her name implies) can offer wisdom about writing. Sophie finds a more appropriate publisher for Ada’s book, again on the basis of personal connections: she knows “a commissioning editor who wanted to publish as many women as she could” (138). In contrast to the reporter (who perhaps stands in for Australian literary culture in the post-war period), Sophie mobilises indeterminacy: Ada is transformed into “A.L. Ligeti”; disagreement over how to categorise the novel is welcomed. ““Some people will say that this is not Science Fiction,” said Sophie; ‘we only hope they make a noise’” (138). Sophie is at once strategic—she knows the right commissioning editor, she de-genders Ada’s writing name—and anarchic—she knows how to make a noise.

Later, having become a famous writer, Ligeti is able to reflect that they prefer to meet with their readers “in the books’ dimension not in this world of favourite celebrities and absurd transitory kerfuffles about what *The Stranger* could look like” (262). This preference for meeting in books continues the pattern established when Ada found her own life in books during childhood: having arrived in Australia she “sat in a corner and read. Sometimes people came into the room and could not see her . . . They made her memories, those books, even if they were all mixed in her mind; the early reader does not know there are categories and scales of value, and eras, and chronology. Date of publication, reputation, genre, none of that, though these days it’s the first thing you know” (30).¹⁷

If we were to characterise these kind of meditations on the making and reception of literature in *Turn Left at Venus* in terms of Edward W. Said’s musings on what he terms “late style,” they seem like a reconciliation between that “spirit of reconciliation and serenity . . . often expressed in terms of a miraculous transfiguration of reality” with what Said identifies as an almost opposite form, one not marked by “harmony and resolution” but “difficulty and contradiction.” The template for Said’s essay is provided by Adorno’s discussion of Beethoven, from which Said quotes several sentences before concluding,

This is the prerogative of late style: it has the power to render disenchantment and pleasure without resolving the contradiction between them. What holds them in tension, as equal forces straining in opposite directions, is the artist’s mature

subjectivity, stripped of hubris and pomposity, unashamed either of its fallibility or of the modest assurance it has gained as a result of age and exile. [n.p.]

What is missing from Said's argument, which references (only) male monuments of European culture, is any sense of the existence of writers like Baranay, whose identity might position them *outside* existing terms of reference, such that the holding in tension of "disenchantment and pleasure"—critique and "jouissance" (Cixous 154), both in multiple forms—is a signature of the work throughout the life.

Baranay's concern in *Turn Left at Venus* is with the politics and processes of reputation-making for writers, particularly the Australian writer, and more particularly still, the Australian writer whose works are grounded in an interest in differences of gender, of sexuality, and of culture and language. But rather than seeking "serenity," it seems that Baranay is much more interested in exploring "disenchantment and pleasure," valorising fluidity and contestation by drawing attention to questions about the processes of literary value-creation that elude definitive answers. And it is precisely this strategy that, paradoxically, gives her work greater value. This claim rests in part on Tom Phillips's discussion of what he calls "immortalizing" (12), which he sees as being grounded in writerly interest in *transformation*. One of the most notable of these "transformations," central to our discussion here, is the tension, and thus the constant oscillation, between a concept of "the book as a (provisionally) fixed structure and the instability of textual meaning, informed by its multiple intertextualities, its potential for indeterminacies and its capacity for dislocating generic and ideological frames" (17).

While we might move smoothly from this claim into an embrace of a model of textual proliferation, perhaps of the kind described in Barthes's prose that seems to celebrate a kind of textual ecstasy, we can also ask a question more common to Australian literary studies: what if these meanings do not proliferate, because texts are not widely read? Here, it is crucial that the last scene of Baranay's novel entails the meeting of the author A.L. Ligeti and her most devoted fans, the latter orchestrating her death in terms that accord with her influential story of death rituals on Lueshira, titled "Going Out: The Space Traveler Reports." In a DIY ritual using donated drugs for apparent euthanasia—although it might also be murder founded in misreading the text—the fans participate in a kind of "going out ceremony"—to use the Lueshiran term—by each saying what Ligeti's work has meant to them. It is recursion of text, reading and reader through which Ada's own "adaptation" from life to death will be managed. The most effusive fan is Sola who, like others, encounters Ligeti first during tertiary study; Brix, who follows, first read Ligeti while in prison:

"I had to read *When I Was A Woman* in my Culture and Society course, and first I was like, what, and then I was like, Oh. Em. Gee. . . . And it changed the entire way I think, and I learned how the text creates the reader."

Brix: "Someone gave me Space Traveler when I was inside. Once I got out, I became a Ligeti completist and started writing Space Traveler fanfiction. I was one of the first posters at Ligeti 21st Century." (267)

Brix's identity is now, in part, constituted by her writing—"a Ligeti completist," and a pioneer—mimicking, perhaps enhancing, perhaps displacing Ligeti's own works as much as any other adaptation might.¹⁸

Baranay shows that evaluation and interpretation are contingent and powerful. They can be shaped by relations with the writer, but in unpredictable ways; always semi-anarchic despite apparently controlling or confining scholarly and commercial apparatuses. Leyla's mistaken attribution of genre to *Turn Left At Venus* (mere "Schlock") leads her to regard Ada as "not a real writer," whereas Ada's agent Sophie seems keen to provoke argument and

ambiguity, apparently in agreement with those who contend that disputation helps to create the value of a literary work in the scholarly sphere (Graff 252) and on television (Malik).¹⁹ In the online world, Ligeti's most dedicated readers and fans debate her identity and her intentions; some respond by becoming writers themselves, demonstrating Orgel's and Webby's points, that books can construct readers who then act upon the world in modes they have learned from fiction. Commenting on this making in another novel, *Always Hungry*, Baranay describes followers of the charismatic trans writer and fan, Tango, and their texts: "This is Tango's true tribe, her family, her kin, the ones who seem to know as well as she does every word she has written, every speech she has made, every interview she has given. They tell her she inspires them, gives them reason to live, each in their own way" (22). Ada, contrastingly, is independent from, even bewildered by, her fans, and yet even for her, finding readers is at once abstract and vital.

As we have noted, in perhaps the most powerful demonstration of this point, it is her readers and fans who curate the death of A.L. Ligeti: in its final moments the novel returns to Ada's senescence where her hospice nurse Jay leads other Ligeti readers as they speak and act in accordance with their interpretation of her story "Going Out." The novel ends with their wild celebrations:

There is a dizzying silence as they gaze upon Ada's still, silent body.

For the duration of some breaths.

"And now, *parteee-ee-ee!*" comes the joyous call, whoops and applause, someone performing a click upon a device and with a blast of exultant music the dance music begins to blare.

It's their world now. (268)

This final scene needs to be read in light of the scenes that bracket the story. Baranay's reader is first introduced to Ligeti as a *writer* through Jay, when Jay confidently asserts the phonetic pronunciation of the author's name—"Ah-dah not Ay-dah" (7). Baranay neither rebuts nor embraces this assertion, leaving it to the reader to make their own way through the labyrinthine construction, alteration, and retraction of meaning (and value) in *Turn Left at Venus*. It is possible that in this opening moment—and at the end of the book—Jay embodies a misreading reinforced by a horrifying self-confidence about interpretation.²⁰ It is ironic, then, that Jay is trans, which connotes (sometimes incorrectly) a fluidity of identity, possibilities of transformation, and the free expression of love.²¹ This apparent mismatch between personal identity and critical politics further serves to disorient the reader, and demands ever closer attention to the novel itself.

Paying "active attention . . . is the means by which we concentrate in a selective way on specific features of the world," given the "almost infinite number of potential external stimuli" (Mynott 67). It is a distribution of attention that has become fraught when many of those charged with the curation of reputations in the public sphere are hard pressed to manage even a thorough first reading of a new work of Australian literary fiction. In fact, one review of *Turn Left at Venus* (no longer available online) claimed to have skimmed those parts of Baranay's novel purportedly by Ligeti, perhaps demonstrating that preference for books with beginnings, characters who have reasons, and stories in which consequences and outcomes are conventional. The taking of such shortcuts, along with a preparedness to imply that a book does not *need* careful reading, are debilitating for dissident writers like Baranay, not least in a time when powerful, angry voices find ample space in the public sphere while books struggle to find places on library shelves and in classrooms. In this cultural and political moment, a highly

original and formally challenging novel that models, questions and makes comic use of reader responses, especially as they are organised around differences of gender, of language, and of cultural value, makes an important contribution to improving our understandings of those cultural formations of reading by and through which texts are given value as “Australian literature,” while amplifying and validating the diversity that characterises the lives of readers.

We would like to thank Inez Baranay for participating so generously in the preparation, delivery, and rewriting of the spoken paper from which this essay is taken, and JASAL for two very constructive and detailed readers’ reports.

NOTES

¹ As Kerryn Goldsworthy has observed, Ligeti can be taken as referring to Austrian-Hungarian composer Ligeti György Sándor (1923–2006)—a complicated connection that positions the old-world composer and the Australian writer through a lens of cultural *status*, signalling shared cultural heritage as well as shared innovation. In an earlier Baranay novel, *Always Hungry*, characters listen to a Ligeti string quartet (60).

² There is a subtle difference, but these distinctions are imposed by reading and convention. As printed on the cover and title page, Baranay’s novel is titled TURN LEFT AT VENUS; scholarly convention creates both the italics, and the lowercase “a.” Contrastingly, the “at” in Ligeti’s *Turn Left* is always capitalised.

³ Imposing the linearity that is conventional in a scholarly article on such a densely woven and structurally complex book is, as we discovered, a formidable task.

⁴ We draw attention to this Australian field in a context of general numerical decline: a 2022 article points to a cessation of publication of 140 Australian journals in the last decade, the overwhelming majority of which “served the arts, social sciences and humanities disciplines” (Jamali et al.); in Australian literary studies there has been a steep decline in tertiary activity measured in numbers of subjects offered, numbers of full-time scholars, and dedicated resources in libraries and archives; postgraduate research remains vibrant.

⁵ There has been little scholarly attention to Baranay’s work to date, with the exception of essays from Alison Bartlett and Paul Sharrad, published before *Turn Left at Venus*.

⁶ There are various exemplars of this point in Baranay’s earlier novel *Ghosts Like Us*, including the Holocaust.

⁷ These choices of typography and layout embed commentaries—such as the following blog post—within the novel whilst also drawing attention to them, such that they are simultaneously differentiated from, while being part of, the story of A.L. Ligeti’s writing life.

⁸ In an interview in *Booklover*, Baranay describes “utopia and anarchism” as “two longtime interests of mine” (“Why Inez Baranay Wrote *Turn Left at Venus*,” n.p.).

⁹ Even this request for direction, ostensibly a minor detail, seems meaningful: Jay is no anarchist, being bewildered by the very idea of an absence of hierarchy (71).

¹⁰ Ada categorically uses they/them pronouns while in the hospice despite using she/her in the retrospective parts of the novel. It is unclear when this change occurs; our usage of pronouns changes to match the moment in the novel we are discussing.

¹¹ In an earlier Baranay novel, a character contends that “we are evolving towards realisation of identities that are fluid, sometimes a dribble sometimes a deluge—sexuality that is unstable, beyond classification, constantly mutating” (*Sheila Power* 272).

¹² A similar move—drawing attention to the interpersonal politics of being noticed—opens *Ghosts Like Us*, which begins “No-one she knows here can see her” (9), a statement that becomes even more disorienting when it turns out to be literally true.

¹³ The idea of art as a model for being is emphasised in *Ghosts Like Us* which contends in part that three artists, whose works span over a century, will be claimed by “the people that in a sense it created” (50).

¹⁴ The Stranger (always capitalised) could be a reference to the detached protagonist of Albert Camus’s *L’Étranger*, which would suggest implications for how the novel perceives modernist modes of storytelling. It could also suggest Robert A. Heinlein’s *Stranger in a Strange Land* or Naomi Mitchison’s *Memoirs of a Spacewoman*, both of which feature a protagonist learning about new worlds (see note 16). Mitchison’s protagonist, as a scientist and explorer, views the world through a scholarly lens; arguably, Camus’s Meursault embodies this academic detachment.

¹⁵ Significantly, this immersion and interaction are interrupted by some Lueshirans who inform The Stranger that he has received a message from his vehicle, that is, from his “own people” (96).

¹⁶ The phrase “other worlds,” which evokes both Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak’s discussion of cultural difference in *In Other Worlds* and Patrick Parrinder’s discussion of science fiction in *Learning from Other Worlds*, is a trope

of Australian migrant writing. Coupled with the imagery of “the two little girls on a very big boat,” the metaphorical ship, scales of difference, and the collapsing of time and memory, it is not difficult to make connections to other works with similar concerns, such as Shaun Tan’s oil painting for Children’s Book Week 2021 on the theme “Old Worlds, New Worlds, Other Worlds.”

¹⁷ Regarding the irrelevance or even encumbrance for general readers of notions of categorisation developed by writers, librarians, or scholars, see respectively Latham; Lamond; Nolan and Clarke.

¹⁸ Another fan in this ceremony comments on the embodiment and vivification of texts when they share that they were “dating someone who always said they came from Lueshira” (267). In response, “a few of them breathe in ways that are like chuckling of amused recognition of those who claim to be from Lueshira.”

¹⁹ Intriguingly, one study with a tiny sample size (12) found male readers more inclined to stick with a genre or author throughout their reading life, whereas female readers reported changing ways of reading; this hints that investments in distinctions created by genre and canon might be “masculine” phenomena (Els).

²⁰ Baranay suggests that “[t]his is one way to read *Turn Left at Venus*—an interesting one that can be supported by the text—chosen death always has questions around it. There, of course, would always be a question of ‘is it ok for Jay and the other fans to do what they did.’ As she is not going to revive, has arguably made her wishes clear, their choice seems kind to me. Still, reading that scene as a misreading is, evidently, possible and it pleases me that it can be” (Interview).

²¹ Jay is just one of several trans characters in Baranay’s novels, including Tango in *Always Hungry*; Ada, and a friend of hers in *Kings Cross*; and other fan characters in *Turn Left at Venus*. A fan asks of the A.L. Ligeti short story “*When I Was A Woman*,” “Why aren’t there more transwomen in WIWAW slash?” (189).

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