Michael Dransfield on the New England Highway

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This paper takes its origins in the observation that most towns along the New England Highway between Sydney and Armidale define themselves as vestibular. A drive up or down this highway and you pass through the gateway to country music; the gateway to horse country; the gateway to wine country. It's a bit like the opening of *Get Smart*, where Max passes through gate and doorway after gate and doorway. In meditative driving mode on the way to Armidale, the imagination reaches out to the journey's end, envisaging the gateway to some New England Nirvana, secured within all these other gateways. Armidale is one of the few towns which has no epithet of vestibularity: instead, it carries an epithet which sites it as both urban, and naturally ideal: the 'city for all seasons'.

Yet, weaving in another strand of observation, and clinging to the imaginative goal, it may be that Armidale is, in fact, a gateway. In 1968 Al Alvarez, the British writer and critic, led a writer's retreat here. At this retreat, Michael Dransfield, amongst other writers, was exposed for the first time to confessional poetry. Dransfield's diaries, held in the National Library, record the impact of this, as does the poetry itself. Could Armidale, then, be a gateway to confessional country?

This paper, then, looks at the idea of Armidale as a site for a crucial moment in the revolution of the Generation of '68. Focussing on Dransfield, and playing with metaphors of drugs, veins and bodies, as well as the overarching local geographical metaphor of gateways, my aim is to problematize the security of the narrative of the Generation of '68, whilst positing a place on the map for Armidale as gateway to confessional country.

The revolution in Australian poetry of the late 1960s is well-documented: that is, a version of a narrative concerning the cast, script and plot of the revolution has been circulated and canonised. Livio Dobrez' *Parnassus Mad Ward: Michael Dransfield and the New Australian Poetry* is a sprawling and idiosyncratic set of gospels, casting Dransfield as a sort of Christological figure. Yet when, early in the book, Dobrez quotes Robert Adamson's allusion to 'the sixty-nine generation or whatever Tranter calls it', the comment underlines the fact that, to some extent, the Generation of '68, like any other artistic movement, is a construct: in this case, something Tranter's Adamic impulse brought into existence (Dobrez 31). On the other hand, Adamson's quip puts sex in the limelight more than it was, in terms of discourse, anyway! The poetics of the New Australian poetry is less about sex than about drugs.

The narrative of the Generation of '68 is often mediated through a discourse of drugs and the body, and the drugged body. John Tranter, for instance, in a line which is now the once-upon-a-time preface to the Generation of '68 fairytale, described the pre-68 literary scene as host to 'a moribund poetic culture' (Tranter xxvi). Poetry needed a shot in the arm, it needed to be brought back to life. In *Parnassus Mad Ward*, Dobrez positions what he calls Dransfield's Visionary Impressionism alongside that of Brett Whiteley and a cache of puns about spikes and needlings, and trips and journeys.

Dransfield himself moves from an early Romanticism, replete with archaic diction and primitivist currents, into the collection *Drug Poems* (1972) with its graphic meshing of drug and body images with images of poetic inspiration: the 'doctor of dreams' (149), the 'probing in blood for a vein' (134); 'fixing up on images' (139); 'eye and ear/... signalling to each other across this void/ like fantastic beasts/ jungled in hallucinogens' (145). But Dransfield also knew that the realities of his addiction were destroying vision and volition. The famous last lines of 'Fix' predict the downwards trajectory the *Collected Poems* charts: 'Once you have become a drug addict/ you will never want to be anything else.' Dransfield's drug poems descend from relishing the standard '68 metaphor of the transfusion of images and dreams: [sending] 'the dream transfusion out/ on a voyage among your body machinery... sweet, illusory, fast, with a semblance of forever', into articulating the desolation of being unable to write, unable to read, unable to have any connection with people. In his late poems, especially the Madness Systems poems, there's no exhilaration, just a chaotic flailing language, the underside of a dream of drug-liberated consciousness. This is poetry coming down.

This shadow side is what makes the Dransfield archive such a haunting place, to use the metaphor Jacqueline Rose mobilises to describe the relationship between dead writer and the reader in the archives (Rose 1). In the Dransfield archive, however, amongst the more scholarly and respectful feelings most of us put on at the library door, I found myself repeatedly wanting to smack Dransfield. As late as 1967 there are puerile posturings and a floundering around for identity which at times shows little in the way of self-awareness: 'I have my plans, and schemes and hopes and dreams, but years have passed and I am no nearer. Only it is that I am older. Nineteen now.' (5. x. 67) 'Am making all efforts to obtain a lute. For I am a troubadour, and need such things.' (9. ix. 67) Then there are the repeated projections of future fame, expressed in equally silly language: 'Eventually, parts of this book will be published, and it, with my other manuscripts, will be given to the Mitchell Library ... when I am no longer, let us say, a mortal.' (24. iii. 1967) There are moments of dazzling insight and lyricism amidst this, but the tension between the epiphanic and the embarrassing is problematic. In one of the more self-aware moments, in 1967, Dransfield comments that 'I am as a poem, irregularly composed.' (1. i. 67). More specifically, Dransfield writes ambivalence: the clear face and the shadowy underside. This has, arguably, facilitated the construction of the Janus-faced Dransfield the literary community either loves or loathes. Demonising and hagiographical cases each find plenty of evidence in the poet's prolific output, as long as the opposite current is ignored or erased.

All of a sudden, though, the archival holdings shift. In the journals and drafts there's a sort of sloughing off of this excess and grandiosity. This reminds me of what Plath describes as 'peeling off dead hands, dead stringencies'. There's a shift of focus to beyond individual subjectivity, into a sense of a sort of collective poetic soul. At the same time, there's a deployment of poetic modes and politics reminiscent of those of the American confessional poets, especially Lowell, Plath and Sexton.

On 24 May 1968, Dransfield's journals record his first brush with the confessionals, mediated by Alvarez. He records his impression of: 'Alvarez reading poetry, intoning, interpreting, Robert Lowell, Ted Hughes' marvellous poems 'Eagle' and 'The Otto', the poems of a Pole called Herbert, and lastly, Sylvia Plath.' (29. v. 68). There's a draft of a poem called 'Armidale: Last Poem', which is typical of the writing in the journals in its prose/poem hybridity, and its leaping from the springboard of an initial image into a morass of other images and proto-images.

Dransfield, notoriously, didn't like to edit his work, and his own editors have

usually been similarly lighthanded, as the *Collected Poems* makes clear. In offering 'two cheers for Michael Dransfield' (Forbes 215) upon the publication of this book, John Forbes makes the point that this sort of all-inclusive editing doesn't do the poet any favours. It strikes me that there is often a sort of hagiographical impulse at work in posthumous publications, as though the 'shall we say, no longer mortal' corpus can only be touched with the most delicate hands. So it's a rare thing to find a poem by Dransfield which has not been published.

'Armidale: Last Poem' is certainly pretty unformed. It opens with the lines: 'Odd to have met/ with other, foreign poets in this upland town,/ coming together in the huge/ experience of new things written.' It veers off into a contemplation of suicide. This seems to have been a dominant theme at the Retreat. Alvarez himself was working on his study of suicide, *A Savage God*, which opens with a now-legendary account of Sylvia Plath's last days, itself one of the founding myths of another literary moment, the American confessional school. In his journals, Dransfield dives into the confessional obsession: the idea of death as the space where the poet can finally be liberated. In his poems he mobilises a set of symbols used by the confessionals, as well as finding a place in his work for the myths of Sylvia and Robert.

One of these is the idea of Icarus-writing. Anne Sexton used Icarus as a metaphor for poetic daring. Robert Lowell's metaphor for poetic daring appropriates Lévi-Strauss' raw/cooked dichotomy. Sexton's Icarus inhabits the raw end of the spectrum. Cooked poetry, for Lowell, is 'marvellously expert and remote ... constructed as a sort of catnip or mechanical mouse for graduate seminars' while the raw is 'jerry-built and forensically deadly' (Hamilton 277). Icarus is raw, forensically deadly; Sexton's 'sensible' Daedalus is cooked. The raw may be deadly, and Icarus may plunge into the sea, but this is valorised well above the sensible and remote. In one of Sexton's tributes to Plath, 'To Friend Whose Work Has Come to Triumph', the energy of Plath's writing is embodied in a vision of Icarus:

> [Icarus] glances up, and is caught, wonderously tunneling
> into that hot eye. Who cares that he fell back to the sea?
> See him acclaiming the sun and come plunging down
> while his sensible daddy goes straight into town.

Plath herself, especially in the *Ariel* poems, describes a competitive relationship between true poetry and everything that gets in the way: the false notes. She uses a metaphor of the body: the bleeding body, the body on fire, the electrified body, to describe something like Sexton's Icarus. 'Ariel' itself charts the trajectory from the cooked to the raw: the allegorical ride into power from from 'stasis in darkness' to 'the red/ Eye, the cauldron of morning', the site and source of the emotionally honest self. Another myth Plath toyed with is that of the death of Isadora Duncan. In 'Fever 103' the feverish exuvial imagery is imagined as Isadora's deadly stripping:

> Love, love, the low smokes roll
> From me like Isadora's scarves, I'm in a fright
>
> One scarf will catch and anchor in the wheel.

Dransfield juxtaposes the myths of Sylvia and Isadora in one of his post-Armidale grapplings with confessionalism: 'The dancing class of one', each woman dicing with and dancing towards death. He writes a poem called 'Icarus', in which Icarus can't breathe until he flies: 'Aloft on a scheme of wax and feathers/ higher than eagles'. It's a moment of triumph, though Dransfield sees that it can only be transitory: 'His

science faltered in the sun hot sun/ he fell through/ blazing like gold/ at the end of a rainbow'. Dransfield's Icarus is the damned if you do, damned if you don't dreamer; Sexton's has no choice but to dream and dare. A later Dransfield poem, called 'Robert Lowell' is weighed down by ridiculous amounts of poached egg. I have not yet decided what the poached egg means, beyond its being a surreal image of something mundane, the opposite of the visionary. The poem ends with Lowell as intrepid explorer and Icarus figure, leaving the earth because wherever he goes all he finds is poached egg. At the end of the poem, the 'intrepid explorer flew into the skies./ he found that the sun was a poached egg.' I don't know whether this undermines the confessional vision of visionaries acclaiming the sun: it's one of the poems that goes a bit beyond quirkiness, and you wonder whether Dransfield has lost the plot. What is clear is that he is experimenting with the icons and discourse of confessional daring.

As all these confessional metaphors describe competitive relationships between the forces of the heart and the imagination, and the worldy forces which threaten to oppress these, this gives the ambivalence in Dransfield's writing a focus. He starts to write poems which take the confessional protest against cooked poetry, the poetry of Daedalus, and apply these in an Australian context.

The result is some of his best writing, in which he writes about the destruction of the imagination through themes of the destruction of indigenous cultures and the landscape of Australia. He begins to turn his railing against society into something focused and cogent. The Armidale landscape is a prominent imprint on these poems. He leaves behind the imagined landscapes of the earlier Courland Penders poems in favour of charting jagged, organic landscapes.

So we have a poem like 'Lamentations' with its pretty contemporary grappling with questions of settler cultures' collective barbarity and guilt, and the politics of apology:

> No separate identity excuses me
> from past barbarities, the guilt of blood.
> I mostly run away from these painful affairs,
> on voyages, on hallucinogens,
> visit the bulldozed graves of contemporaries,
> see how the great are fallen.

Works cited

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