

THE CITY AS THE *TOPOS* AND THE *HABITUS* OF MODERNITY IN THE POETRY OF MICHAEL DRANSFIELD

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This paper suggests a hermeneutical reading of Michael Dransfield's poetry in its singular articulation of urban experience. It is not a study about its literary merit (or otherwise) or an attempt to situate his poetry within the context of Australian tradition. The present hermeneutical reading aspires to bringing out the symbolic osmosis that his poetry frames between the personal and the collective, between the inward and the outward, and the integrative statement produced as an aesthetic configuration. We won't try to evaluate Dransfield's poetic achievement within the value system of literary experience in Australia; we won't even attempt to situate his poetry within the scheme of historical development in Australian writing. On the contrary we will try to delineate the various integrative ways through which his poetry locates the individual within urban space and articulates a special sense of temporal identity to the writing 'I' in his verses.

In his judicious studies on Paul Celan, Hans-Georg Gadamer stated:

Hermeneutics means not so much a procedure as the attitude of a person who wants to understand someone else, or who wants to understand a linguistic expression as a reader or listener. But this always means: understanding this person, this text. An interpreter who really has mastered scholarly methods uses them only so that the experience of the poem becomes possible through better understanding. He or she will not blindly exploit the text in order to apply a method.¹

Gadamer's admonition is extremely relevant especially to the study of poetry; instead of falling victims to naïve psychologism or to a reductionist abolition of the specificity of the text, hermeneutical reading emphasises the semantic fields which each text produces and through which its symbolic structures become meaningful as aesthetic singularities. The specificity of the text crystallises the location where the embodied meanings of the collective have been translated into the reality of the individual, in the sense that the idiom of the text, instead of separating the poet from words, or subsuming the person to

language, essentially establishes a bridge of communication between the individual as agent within language and its surrounding culture as objective structure outside the subject.

By avoiding psychologism and reductionism we leave the text within its own specific topos; therein we can engage ourselves in a meaningful dialogue with its semiotic forms in order to "understand" its statements as symbolic translations of extra-lingual experience—in the special way however that such meta-textual realities are encoded within the text. Experience is both outside and inside the text; however in each case we are referring to different forms of experiential relationship. The text localises the infinite potentialities of scriptibility. What a poet produces in the poems is a singular lived spatial identity which has to be seen as both singular and spatial. The attributes themselves generate the differentiation in the experiencing of the text.

Hermeneutically, however, spatial identity raises the question about where poets live. This is a crucial question for the understanding of what poetry means today in the age where "all that is solid melts into thin air". Michael Dransfield's poetry constructs an extremely interesting form of spatial identity establishing a singular poetic destiny within Australian tradition. Dransfield died in 1973 only 25 years old still struggling to locate himself in the sprawling megalopolis of Sydney. And what was Sydney back in the 60s for its poets? A place still looking for its symbolic articulation.

For various reasons high modernists in Australian literary tradition peopled space with abstractions and articulated their experience of the city with the idyllic notion of a grand vision of utopian egalitarianism. The utopian element in Australian literature is extremely strong to this day, through the demonic attempt to establish in the country the vision of the continent of the Holy Spirit or of the common people, as envisaged by idealistic pioneers. The 1890s generation together with the Jindyworobaks and the modernists of the post-war period thought of literature as an organic network of symbols expressing ideas of a missing synthesis; like their fellow poets in the United States, they were struggling for the "supreme fiction" of their experience in the country or of the country experiencing itself. The "land" became the ultimate code of signification, in a kind of westernised version of the religious eco-psychism of Aboriginal cultures.

Dransfield's generation was a peculiar one; transitional and polymorphous, revolutionary and yet moralistic, full of different orientations and forms of expression, filled with a kind of ecstatic enthusiasm about

something important that was to come out of its euphoric confusion and chaotic creativity. Dransfield is the poet of inner space, who opened the realm of introspective conscience to Australian poetry, by breaking into the parallel realities of conscience. He found the city in himself as something locked-in within his very subjectivity. His personal idiom maps out his subjectivity in terms of urban spatiality, using the metaphors of urban topography in order to navigate himself within the confusion and the fascination created by urban chaosmos.

— He died young and therefore his work exudes somehow the feeling of unfulfilled promise. Yet we can clearly see where he was standing on; we can see the inner space of his poetic language and how he constructed his poetic dwelling. He lived in the city and yet he dreamed of a far away private kingdom; he destroyed himself in the city and yet he envisaged an escape into the mythopoetic paradises of the bush; but what was his specific poetic locality?

His poetry articulates the emotive space where the poet is still struggling with the structural disorder of language. He admired John Keats, Percy Bysshe Shelley, Charles Baudelaire, Arthur Rimbaud, Basho, Ryakon and others. He was especially fond of Apollinaire's Alcohols and (strangely enough) of Charles Algeron Swinburne's oratorical exuberance. He has been accused of "limp Romanticism" (Haskell, 1998: 268) and of extreme self-indulgence. Within the context of dominant neo-formalism of today, as expressed by Les Murray, he is also seen as a victim to his own era, the 60s, which was inauthentic and false, according to this interpretation, full of the un-evenness of an era of excess.

But through hermeneutics we can see beyond the questions of literary categories and historical periodicities. Dransfield was a member of the '68 generation, culminating in the more inquisitive and resourceful work of John Tranter, Robert Adamson, John Forbes, and others. Every poet exists because of his successors not because of his contemporaries. By opening a possibility of language and creating a field of semantic variations, he manages to break the continuum of language and generate a new problematisation of representations. As the sociologist Margaret Archer has analysed, the nexus between culture and agency can be located in the process of morphogenesis versus the stability of morphostasis;² poets constantly create new forms by altering and elaborating past traditions. Such structural elaborations do not simply change the past; morphogenetic practices essentially prove the cultural agency of the individual, the dynamic interaction between the person

and its cultural structuration, irrespective of the actual content of the representation.

We must see his poetry not as a running commentary on his biography based on a Byronic revival of romantic thematology; on the contrary we have to see it as a meta-narrative on his experience both as a human being and as a creator of language, in his attempt to tame the polymorphous disorder of his medium in an era of experimental reorientation. By doing so we avoid facile pseudo-Freudian interpretations or postmodernist nihilistic disarticulations of subjectivity. The subject, that is to say the verbalised person, the speaking I, is active in the production of its verses. It occupies space and generates spatiality; without that specific subject the text would not have been possible. The poem locates such spatiality within specific situations. Consequently, interpretation situates the poem within its own networks of signification; by displacing the poem from its semantic field we dislocate its signifying potential and render it meaningless.

For Dransfield the city as space and as lived experience configures one of the central concerns of his language; the romantic idea of the city as a battlefield where the individual will be inexorably defeated or its modernist reconceptualisation as the birthplace of alienating depersonalisation loom large in his poetic universe, since romanticism and modernism are linked by the central importance they attribute to the poet. Dransfield incarnates the "negative capability" of John Keats and the negativism of other poets who could be hardly called neo-romantics, like the Japanese poet Basho or the American Black Mountain and New York Deep Image poets. Yet his poetry charts the territory of being where imagination sees its body losing its corporeal spatiality, its very space, by acts of self-cannibalisation.

His *Drug Poems* (1972) articulate his most complete perception of the city as the place of a continuous self-sacrifice, like the Moloch we see in Fritz Lang's movie *Metropolis*. In his poem "The city theory" Dransfield sees his urban reality as a façade, as wallpaper covering nothingness, and causing this profound existential angst that leads to "anonymity". The poet defends language from externalisation and one-dimensionality. "*They know your symbols; to learn this / shatters you*".³ Such statement reveals the most important concern of Dransfield's poetics: by pointing out the "anonymisation" process, he emphasizes the crucial importance of the naming mission of poetry. In his poem "The Poet of great cities" he states: "*before day comes he constructs a society of shadows / more exactly than the sun, and with more feeling; / tells no-one; sleeps 'til evening*".⁴

His city is not travelled through in the manner that Lorca and Mayakovsky went through New York; the poet does not celebrate the complexity and the diversity that liberate and enliven. On the contrary there is a looming dark presence around his words, which has nothing to do with himself and his personal journey towards self destruction. His poetry depicts a space that de-materialises itself, loses weight and implodes into namelessness. Dransfield's poetry explores the condition of being outside language and of being without identity within your own words. If the mission of the poet is to name reality in its multivocality and plurofirmity, what happens when the poet understands that his own medium betrays such mission? He either escapes from poetry and its places like Arthur Rimbaud or he persists till the end with the nobility and the rage of a moral desperado. This was the answer of Hart Crane, Robert Duncan and Frank O' Hara in the United States or, in a minor scale, of Charles Buckmaster in Australia.

The poet, and as Dransfield declared "to be a poet in Australia is the absolute commitment", is expelled from language while constructing his poems. The more he explores his poetic dwelling, the more unwelcome he feels in it. John Ashbery observed that Frank O Hara's poems are "chronicles of the creative act that produces them",⁵ what we called "meta-narratives of lived experience". Dransfield's poetic space frames the universe of an inverted moralist, of a sceptic who discovers in the solidity and stability of the city the troubled reality of moral dilemmas that have to be answered, deciphered and translated into acts of meaningful communication. In such moral perception of his poetic space he verbalises the certainty of an identity without form, the poetic dwelling of words in which: "*Reality is superfluous / we have scrapped it / the replacement arrived today in a parcel from Asia / unpacking it we wondered how the community would react / forgetting that a rich society is not a community / forgetting that a rich society does not react.*"⁶

These are not simply the pronouncements of a disillusioned romantic, of a dilettante who complains about the quality of living in modern affluent bourgeois societies. There is something deeply tragic in these verses, a feeling of tragedy missing from other poets of the same period. Dransfield signifies the great tragedy of poetry in our days to articulate homelessness from within the safety and the comforts of a middle class home. Dransfield knew that only the homeless understand the importance of dwelling; since modern cities have lost their "organic" communitarian connection and become amorphous masses of huge crowds, the poets have taken on them the mission of constructing

new cities where human imagination can discover its shared valuations. Poets are the real architects of modernity because through their work we can see the kaleidoscopic reality as a multimodal ontology which does not end up in generalisations, abstractions or reductions to meta-physical beings. In the chaosmos of the city, Dransfield discovered the irreducibility of individual beings into any ontological primordially or primary Being. His poetry enunciates the disunity of individual within the unity of space. Their unity lies in their dissimilarity; he expressed it in his brief but so poignant poem: "*I was flying over Sydney / in a giant dog. / Things looked bad*".⁷

But how could things be bad in a city full of promises and pleasures? Unquestionably, the city is not a *polis* any more. The city-space which was formed during the industrialisation period is not the place where communal bonds, rituals and feelings are forged, enacted and generated. The city of modernity functions as a "Chaosmos", as a huge transformer in which the body enters a specific pre-arrangement of space and gradually develops the certainty of its own inner subjectivity and self-awareness. The city is the topos where individuation takes place and where the community is forced to break down into the monadisation of its inhabitants. We have the tendency to see such reality as something morally evil or existentially alienating especially through the eyes of a nostalgic perception of existential unity between humanity and nature.

But if the opposite polarity to the city is not the village or the polis but nature, after Charles Darwin we know that nature is not a not a pleasant garden to satisfy our needs and desires; on the contrary the romantic ideal of an animate nature full of the passion and the intensity of the human soul has today completely collapsed when our contact with nature (and whatever we mean with this word) has been mediated through the experience in the city where modern subjectivity is born and where new forms of representation are established.

Every poet, and every human, builds his/her own city by dwelling in it; we could even say by living it and not simply living in it. The city is not its buildings, its streets or its multitude of people. It is beyond that an inner experience of a specific symbolic order and of a specific state of being. In the city we are our individual selves whereas in nature we are representatives of the species. In the city we have a different essence with a different density and with a different self-perception. We inhabit different dimensions despite the commonality of appearance and rituals, because the city brings out the topography of an inner space imaginatively formed.

Dransfield and his generation experience this drastic and radical change of internalising reality and thus created new dimensions of being. Introspective conscience was always an urban achievement because in the city the poet must reclaim personal space every day and by reclaiming space to establish a new self. Space and self are different states of being not different essences. There is no vacuum in space; space links and connects, gives the very habitation to each entity. Space is presence and everything absent is the very essence of space; everything absent can be imaginatively reconstructed and therefore poetically experienced. If empty spaces frightened Pascal in the 17th century, today we know that their very emptiness is the secret of our being; our journey through emptiness gives birth to our temporal self-understanding. Time is born out of space, of our body moving through points in time that can be reconstructed through the faculty of memory and therefore of imagination.

Modernity introduced a new perception of space; not so much fragmented, centre-less or in ruins, but multilayered, multinominal and multivalent. Precisely because of its multiplicities the space of modernity is irreducible to one unifying principle, centre or practice. Its moral universe also is an ethical pluriverse, which despite giving the false perception of relativism and of "anything goes", is deeply circumscribed by strong desires for totalisation and synthesis. The space of modernity "totalises" itself by being so polymorphous, because forms themselves stand for symbolic fields of identification by encoding personal subjectivity, collective beliefs and individual difference.

By being in the city we translate immediacy and proximity to symbols of identification; poetry explores and explains forms of space awareness and therefore it raises the great problem of temporality. The poem itself is the symbolic locus where zero-time is achieved; the atemporality of every poem is due to the intense awareness of space-consciousness. Poetry sees through space and articulates the concrete dimensions of the mental perception it presupposes. Every poem de-totalises plurality and stresses their very specificity of each being separately. In the city we are in search of otherness beginning from our separateness.

Poetry is born as we struggle for personal space in society and language; and personal space means a fissure in time from where we can observe ourselves and more importantly observe our observation. As Martin Heidegger had said "space gathers everything together"; space links, joins and constructs a visible body where invisible relations of

feelings, power or history are articulated. Precisely because of its multi-dimensionality, the poem transports its reader to different levels of self-perception; despite having its own home the reader yet feels homeless; he feels nostalgia for a journey towards a lost Hestia which gathered the *communitas* of feelings and narrators together. The poem makes its reader lose its centre; not by de-centring him/her but by making him experience centreless-ness. Poetically we inhabit space in the same way as space inhabits us. Only ideology de-territorialises existence; poetry articulates spatialities.

Dransfield's poetry articulates the destruction of lucidity and the loss of "self"; but the articulation itself is morphogenesis which establishes the locus of empowerment: "*history's plenty / private or public / brimming / rimming / overflowing / & never may stop / growing*".⁸ The theme of "Unreal City", which was so dominant in Romantic and Modernist poetry and indeed philosophy, expressed through a negative attitude towards technology and urban anonymity, becomes the semantic field of new dynamic forms of meaning and self-definition. As Edward Timms observed "The City was primarily perceived as the locus of alienation. Gradually they [the poets] became aware that it is also the centre of political power".⁹ This was the awareness that destroyed Dransfield and his generation. The gradual understanding of the city as the centre of power that depersonalised and de-individualised human beings, as the habitus of an all pervasive and uncontested structure that dominated their interaction and determined their existence is probably the main focus of Dransfield's poetic legacy.

His poetry expresses the chaotic disorder within language that has been established by the destabilising influence of power. Madness and drugs express the protest against the medium of expression that is not liberating the individual but encapsulates the inner horror of being possessed by the very presence he abhors: "*Madness systems part three: don't Brandenburg me / no concerto*".¹⁰ Madness establishes itself in the poet's language; it is his language, by extinguishing the need for unity and the value of meaningful communication. But in itself madness is an alternative language, the price we pay for language; thus it creates another presence and another reality: "*i don't / want to / Freak you / ian but / there's someone / under the / bed*".¹¹

Dransfield's relation with spatial identity bears an innate ambivalence towards its own articulation; by verbalising the spatial form, the poet objectifies his reality and historicises its objecthood. Yet at the same time he discovers something in there which is not himself, which

was never meant to be part of his consciousness. "Camus wrote; By the treatment the artist imposes upon reality, he declares the intensity of his rejection of it. I am learning what that means".¹² Dransfield's poetry articulates the painful awareness of a negative language, not of a language of negations in the mystical sense, but the awareness of a language that can never articulate positive statements about the self and its space. Such struggle with the medium, which can be also seen in the poetry of Martin Johnston or even Francis Webb, is probably the most poetic element of his writings. If romantics believed that language liberates the eternity of the subject, Dransfield and his generation, in Australia, America and Europe, realised that in the same act of liberation something extremely negative was lurking, undermining their ability to construct the supreme fiction of their culture or the supreme myth of their own existence: "...the true / art of our time is something which / desolates".¹³ The poem is not interrupted by reality but it interrupts its reality, it can not complete itself and yet it is not a fragment. It is an act of existential "throwness" in which the subject loses its presence within language and is transformed into negativity and emptiness and, more importantly for the poet, into the inability to dramatise a meaningful dialogue.

Dransfield's poetic idiom is not an artistic failure although it depicts a failure of articulating the inner space of being. Such failure however eventuated as a result of the colonisation of language by the demonic disorder inflicted upon it by power. Yet from such demonic chaos the poet can dream of a beauty that redeems and atones: "Sea. You eat ships / you taste wrong / you isolate and desolate / you are not home to men; / yours is the / subtlest beauty".¹⁴ His city can be at the same time the topos of his exile and the habitus of his existence; even in his defeat, the poet can transform his struggle with language, and what language encodes, into the expression of a missing unity; and all the more the poet misses such unity, all the more he longs for the quest and the journey that lead him to the opposite direction. Having lost the innocence and the naivety of paradise lost, he knows that his reality gives the only answer to the dilemmas of the mind. "we were on the river / swam through the water into our / reflections".¹⁵ The city is always a reflection of the mental dilemmas that tortured and inspired a sensitive nature lost in the painful realisation of its own fragility.

NOTES

- 1 Gadamer, Hans-Georg, *Gadamer on Celan, "Who Am I and Who Are You?" and other essays*, translated and edited by R. Heinemann and B. Krajewski (Ithaca: State University of New York Press, 1997), p. 161.
- 2 Archer, Margaret S., *Culture and Agency: The Place of Culture in Social Theory* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1988).
- 3 Dransfield, Michael, *Collected Poems*, edited by Rodney Hall (St Lucia: University of Queensland Press, 1987), p. 118.
- 4 Dransfield, *Collected Poems*, pp. 137-138.
- 5 Ashbery, John, "Introduction" to *The Collected Poems of Frank O'Hara*, Donald Allen (ed.), (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), p. ix.
- 6 Dransfield, *Collected Poems*, p. 226.
- 7 Dransfield, *Collected Poems*, p. 148.
- 8 Dransfield, *Collected Poems*, p. 354.
- 9 Edward Timms, "Unreal city—theme and variations" in Edward Timms and David Kelley (eds), *Unreal City, urban experience in modern European literature and art* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1985), p. 11.
- 10 Dransfield, *Collected Poems*, p. 377.
- 11 Dransfield, *Collected Poems*, p. 377.
- 12 Dransfield, *Collected Poems*, p. 385.
- 13 Dransfield, *Collected Poems*, p. 284.
- 14 Dransfield, *Collected Poems*, p. 10.
- 15 Dransfield, *Collected Poems*, p. 380.