

PAM BROWN

Louis Armand, *Letters from Ausland*

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Sometimes my imagination lives in Zlin, a city three hundred kilometres across the Czech Republic, via Brno, from Prague, where Louis Armand lives. Late one night in April 2009 I had a long conversation with Louis on the motorway back from Brno to Prague in a mini-bus he was driving. Behind us a group of Irish and Australian poets dozed in the back seats. We had been down to Brno to read poetry at a student bar.

From that conversation I discovered that Louis Armand is a writer-thinker who has a kind of Derridean incorruptible ethos, of someone who writes and edits magazines and collections of essays without conceding to public opinion, the media or the phantasm of an audience that might tempt him to simplify or repress. (Even if some of these projects, like his imprint Litteraria Pragensia, are, of necessity, made within an institution – that in itself being always a problem or challenge for poets). This particular ethos and his determination to realise his ventures are what makes Louis' poetry and his publishing exploits so broad and so engaging.

It would be intriguing to see Australian culture from the viewpoint of an Australian writer who has lived in Prague for over sixteen years and this collection of poems reflects that perspective.

To begin *Letters from Ausland*, “Burning Section” is a group of “Australian” poems that leap straight in with a poem dedicated to John Forbes, et al:

But the poem is only a way to dream without  
having to suffer – and it dreams us too,  
on the other side where time is forever  
advancing like a threat.

In the poem “Roland Robinson’s *Grendel* & Death in Custody” Louis reinterprets Robinson, the Jindyworobak poet who lived briefly with Northern Territory Aborigines during world war II. Robinson believed that popularising Aboriginal myths would lead Australians to a more profound knowledge of the land, and to a growth of national pride. Robinson’s 1967 collection of poetry was called *Grendel*, after Beowulf’s “monster”, and he noted that Aboriginal mythology provided him with material and inspiration. Here, in Louis’ powerful revisionist poem, Grendel becomes a kind of Redfern domestic anthropologist/detective driven by mistrust and scepticism ferretting through past public excuses for deaths in custody:

Our deletions  
are accumulating, like Royal Commissions or radio talk-back.  
Grendel and John laws exchanging product placement  
between early morning traffic reports  
...  
Knowing, as well as you do  
there's no such thing as accidental death in custody

Then there are poems that are like capsules of modernist Australian painting – Arthur Boyd's “territory of conscience”, Albert Tucker from the “angry decade of the 1940s” – “someone has vomited a mess of symbols on the floor”, and an iconic Sydney poem from a later time – “*Paysage Moralisé, Lavender Bay*” – with “a mangrove odalisk, a Japanese divan, a blue square” – just like a Brett Whiteley postcard. The poem echoes Auden's *Paysage Moralisé* with its shifting, double meanings: “The artist in his subterfuge unaware / that the true critic is within”. Then in Louis' poem “Plutonium 239” a Saddhu, or wandering yoga mystic, in a digital nuclear age, will find his way, as if no longer guided by the stars but by GPS.

“Drinking at the Vandenberg” and “Concerning the Pleasure of Crime against the Establishment” remind that political idealism and protest, and the ALP are all in decline:

So much for utopia. The decade when ideology  
ended, left us standing in rain with fact-files and useless  
megaphones  
...  
When the television broke down we left it that way,  
a box filled with grey static, like a picture of what lies  
behind every image.

There are poems that traverse the nuclear wasteland of Maralinga and imagine Kafkaesque scenes while undertaking some philosophising in the Australian outback – “What good's nostalgia? / Or memory, without ‘progress’? Or poetry?” – and, later, a poem called “Nostalgia” that “digs in the old trunk” and finds an Aussie beach scene with a drowning at the centre of its glaring blonde colourfulness. And then, a great “off balance” poem, “Holiday at Mentone” that ends:

Already the huge animal looks as if  
it's sleeping, full of drowned horrors. The public  
have set up picnics on a wooden strand.  
A funeral party. At the first sign of life they fled.

And in “Biodegradable”:

A damaged landform staggering upright  
and dissolving in brief nocturnal laughter

Or in “*La guerre est finie*”, these lines:

Everything that goes without saying  
has been passed over in silence

And, of course, there's the doubting poet:

Have I grown up into an idiot picking at  
old sores, waiting for the truth to come out?

The Europeanish second section is “Forgetting Verlaine” (at last!). Here the poetry takes us to Mexico, to Oaxaca, to the cliff divers of La Quebrada in Acapulco, (but none of this, for Louis Armand, is anything like “travel poetry”, it's more a slanted, analytical trip through compelling, odd landscape) – then to Europe where we find Dante Alighieri, Claudel in Paris “beneath the window Rimbaud masturbated from”, Carthage (“A scenery of date palms and cats” and an out-of-place lone eucalypt), poems from places like Geneva, Trieste, Siena, and “Goethe in Venice”:

Years pass. Lying awake one April night  
amazed, you calculate the odds, each wrong step confronted with a  
sense of ending. It has no name.  
Expecting any day now to find a skull  
on a beach to enlighten us

The memorial poem “Forgetting Verlaine” is written in couplets. It's a puzzling, melancholic poem that aptly enacts the work of mourning:

Or somewhere  
a bell is gradually tolling, that might once have seemed  
  
ominous, but isn't: awaiting the arrival at that senescent  
plateau where everything peaceful has a troubled past.

The third section, “Letters from Ausland”, introduces fourteen-line sequences that are, however, not exactly sonnets. They are two long philosophical enquiries, the title poem and, running with imagery although tempered, because it's written, an expressionism called “Circus Days”, which introduces a brief, wild concept, a fifth century Spartan Greek battle under a contemporary Big Top, and then moves on into its own warped narrative, “Why not describe everything backwards?” – a poet's question - and later:

Am I talking to myself again? Waiting for catharsis  
to unfold, the way things happen in restored old  
subtitled films. Hello, are you happy?

“Kino Pravda”, truth cinema; this group of poems is theatrical and painterly. “Boy with the Red Piano” is like a movie scene, and in “Leden”, the suicide of Petr Lebl, the director of the Na Zbradli theatre in Prague, is remembered. He “hanged himself among the stage scenery”,

Suspecting time flows only in dreams or poetry –  
each instant what it is and no other.

It's fairly evident from the visual elements in his poetry that Louis is a painter.  
“Grace” is like a painting or pastel drawing –

Fruit in a bowl of no colour  
Apples, pears, mandarins. A piece of cake

– and in this pinstripe-wallpapered room is a reproduction of what sounds like a *fin de siècle* scene on the wall:

In it, a man with yellow hair sits at a table.  
A woman, crème de menthe in hand, appears to be alone – posed  
  
beside a window streaked with grey  
verticals. Who would suspect from this  
that there is anything between them

Other diversities and traces in this section include Paul Celan, Chechnya, the unknown soldier, Vasco da Gama, a poem for Vincent Farnsworth (the US-born poet and musician, editor of *Jejune*, now living in Prague), Piltdown Man, Roland Penrose, Bo Diddley, Charles Olson, Jack Spicer, Boris Pasternak, Ophelia and “Still Life with Robert Desnos”, the romantic photographer, a poem that ends

Perhaps in future this  
will be a prerequisite, shedding tears for money.

Or staring and listening in a bed in Realville

The final group, “Diner Poems”, is another filmic sequence – but of course, the poems are from the great movieland, black & white, technicolour, CGI and 3D, that is the USA. “Diner Poems” ranges impressionistically through New York city scenes, acknowledges that Ted Berrigan died a quarter of a century ago and also asks “But is

poetry already dead?”, imagines Garibaldi in Washington Square (a nod to Italian immigration), Stonewall, and Judy Garland, includes poems for Pierre Joris, Robert Creeley and a letter to Harriet Monroe, and regretfulness – “Broke everything/because you loved /to make things out of the pieces”:

The waitress ignores how she makes you  
suffer, filling and forever refilling the empty coffee cups.

Somewhere a telephone  
is waking up. Lights go out in the canyons

Louis Armand says “We remain, as Zukofsky says, the toy of paradox”. *Letters from Ausland* is replete with paradox and moves in and out of languages, places, thoughts and imagery with an uncontrived precision. These poems are so richly cognitive and intensely imaginative that they can be revisited, read and thought about many times.