

STILL LIFE WITH HYPODERMIC

Michael Dransfield and the Poetry of Addiction



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On Good Friday 1973, at the age of twenty-four, Michael Dransfield, then the emerging young star of Australian poetry, died after injecting himself with a lethal dose of heroin. His death was the first drug-related fatality in the Australian literary community, and his *Collected Poems* (University of Queensland Press, 1987)—spanning 389 pages and including seven previously published volumes of work—poses considerable and often daunting questions which neither his editor, Rodney Hall, nor his critics have cared to address, such as the history of addiction in Western culture, the concept of authentic experience, and the way we understand public and private responsibility to function in the modern world. That it took such a personal tragedy for the poet to engage so definitively with the experience of addiction is lamentable. That he created, in such an astonishingly short time, a body of work as profound as it is extensive, can only be wondered at, and deeply admired.

In his introduction to the *Collected Poems*, Rodney Hall comments that:

Michael Dransfield's poems caused a ripple of excitement when they were first published [October, 1969] by periodicals in the context of poetry which tended to take pride in tailored understatement and civilised ironic commentaries on society.

At that time, poets themselves were inclined to avoid all mention of what they did [...] Even then, like persons given to some vice, they tended to take refuge in football gossip or such, rather than confront the challenges of talking shop. Michael had no such inhibitions.

I doubt it has ever been the case in Australia that its literary institutions represented anything other than the epitome of "tailored understatement and civilised ironic commentaries", particularly in Sydney, the poaching ground of such militant conservatives as A.D. Hope and James McAuley ("the Official Poets, whose genteel / iambics chide industrialists / for making life extinct" ["Endsight"]). Nevertheless, it is worth considering, that at about the same time as Dransfield began publishing there appeared on Sydney's horizon that *enfant terrible* of Australian art, Brett Whiteley.

In 1969, Whiteley (almost ten years Dransfield's senior) once again

made Sydney his permanent address. He had already succeeded in becoming the Tate's youngest ever acquisition; in upsetting the London establishment (with his 1964 "Christie" exhibition); in provoking the lasting admiration of Francis Bacon and scorn of critic Robert Hughes; and in being hailed by Lee Krasner (Jackson Pollock's widow) as the next Arshile Gorky. Before returning to Sydney Whiteley also lived for a time in New York, at the infamous Chelsea Hotel where he came into contact with such popular figures as Jimi Hendrix, Janis Joplin and Bob Dylan.

It would be hard to over-estimate the impact Whiteley had at that time on Australian cultural life. At the same time as heroin was first appearing on the streets of Sydney (brought by Australian and American GIs on leave from the war in Vietnam), many of the new ideas floating about the arty cafés of Paddington and Darlinghurst (Pop Art, Mao, Buddhism, etc.) were being imported by the likes of Whiteley—whose notorious *American Dream* was exhibited at the Bonython Art Gallery in June 1970. According to Alan McCulloch in *Art International* (Oct. 1970), Whiteley was "postulating a Joycean reassessment of the new nine muses: zoology, ecology, botany, sociology, sex, narcotics, pollution, travel, and political science ...". Many of these ideas were shared by Dransfield and it would be interesting to consider possible influences along these lines. Certainly Dransfield must have been aware of Whiteley's work, and may even have met him on odd occasions (Dransfield's home in Balmain would almost have been within shouting distance of Whiteley's at Lavender Bay), though it is well enough known that Robert Adamson, another Sydney poet, was a close friend of both of them.

Like Whiteley, Dransfield had a very real fascination with the question of visionary experience, responsibility and addiction. Dransfield never stopped writing about it, and it preoccupied Whiteley up until his own heroin death in June 1992. In *Drug Poems* (Sun Books, 1972), the last volume of Dransfield's poetry to be published during his lifetime, one can almost detect the palpable presence of Baudelaire—at that point a shared interest for Whiteley and Dransfield. The first section of this volume, "Shooting Gallery", plausibly alludes to the tenth of Rilke's *Duino Elegies* ("the shooting-gallery's targets of petrified happiness")—which Dransfield had read—though it is more likely the case that it refers to Baudelaire's prose poem "Shooting Gallery and the Cemetery"—which, prophetically enough, concerns itself with the classical poets ("Horace and those Poets who were pupils of Epicurus"), the vanity of man, and the pre-eminence of death. *Drug Poems* likewise engages questions of vanity ("heroin chic") and mortality:

Elsewhere, in the poems from *Streets of the Long Voyage* (1970),

Dransfield's engagement with the recurrent motifs of overdose, withdrawal, rehabilitation and addiction, is devastating in its immediacy: "becalmed now / on Coleridge's painted sea in Rimbaud's / drunken boat. High like De Quincey or Vasco / I set a course / for the pillars of Hercules, meaning to sail / over the edge of the world" ("Overdose"). For Dransfield, as with Whiteley, addiction becomes the locus of the artist's interior struggle—an idea whose genealogy follows diverse paths through Modernism and the "addictive personalities" of French Symbolist poetry, back to the beginnings of English Romanticism. In the Fourth *Canto of Childe Harold's Pilgrimage*, Byron reveals the paradox of this addiction: "To mingle with the universe, and feel / What I can ne'er express, yet can not all conceal." Or, as Dransfield writes in *The Inspector of Tides* (1972): "to be a poet / what it means / to lose the self to lose the self" ("Byron at Newstead"), or in "Geography": "I dream of the lucidity of the vacuum".

In his essay on the effects of hashish written in 1851, Baudelaire speaks of the boundless fluidity of sense and imagination created by it; of the torrential associations of words, the transformation of sounds into colours, colours into music, and music into numbers; of the rhapsodic suggestiveness of the smallest noise; and, above all, of the "hurricane of pride" which leads the mind "to that glittering abyss in which it will gaze upon the face of narcissus". The significance of "specularity" here—and of the dispersal of self, language, meaning—recalls a common metaphor of the Romantic sublime: the ocean. Byron describes this ocean as: "boundless, endless and sublime—/ The image of Eternity—the throne / of the invisible." In Dransfield, the sublime and the narcissistic movement of addiction are fused together. The geography of the poem, as a substitute for the poet's body, becomes a place where inner emptiness stops generating that need for things which, to paraphrase Bataille, mutilates the world and turns it into badly handled objects; where it becomes instead a "pure" absence (addiction as subjectless economy). At the same time, however, the addict's cessation of desire also symbolises the poet's romantic inner struggle—by isolating himself within the community the addict effectively elevates himself to a position inscribed by nearly three centuries of literary convention (Coleridge, de Quincey, Baudelaire, Rimbaud, Burroughs, Artaud, Michaux, etc.).

At a time when the so-called "inner self" was continually threatened by the unprecedented rapid intrusion of images, addiction—for Dransfield—constructed a solitude which became both more difficult and more urgent for the poet's survival. In *The Second Month of Spring* (1980), Dransfield's bleakest collection, this crisis can no longer be resolved by a gesture of transcendence, and hence "interiority" becomes the specular limit of the poet's

self. Elsewhere interiority is a question of intensity always relating to a particular experience of withdrawal. Dransfield does not miss the paradox of the poet's abstract withdrawal from a world that has become insufferably abstract itself: addiction is henceforth this continual hesitation at the limits of the self between moments of withdrawal—locked into this death-like economy by the fact that the addict himself is, ironically, the logical achievement of our specular, mechanised consumer society (its “body machinery” (“Fix”)).

In the *Poem to Hashish*, Baudelaire also documented the faculty of drugs to give a “lost” soul a moment of “holiness”, and to break “the heavy darkness of day-to-day existence”. But there is also a remorse somewhat voluptuous and theatrically confessional, yet containing a plausible note of fear and a sense that the drug-induced utopia was too ravished and too ephemeral to give artists, the assurance, even the mask which Baudelaire thought they needed (a type of fetishism negated, to a greater or lesser extent, by the experience of terminal addiction).

Like Baudelaire, Dransfield's vision insisted that poetry have as little commerce as possible with the middle-class world, and that the poet, in his isolation, serve only his art, which is itself in the service of beauty—where “beauty”, as Rilke states in the first of his *Duino Elegies*, “is nothing but the beginning of terror”. This terror, largely of bourgeois existence, takes the form also of a type of duty. The poet is responsible for upholding his art against the encroachment of philistinism—which is the sense one gets from Dransfield's comment that: “To be a poet in Australia ... is the ultimate commitment” (“Like this for Years”).

Reading Dransfield today, it is important to keep in mind that Australian poetry in the late sixties was very much anchored in this difficult strait between European Modernism and British neo-romanticism, as exemplified for a previous generation by Kenneth Slessor and Ern Malley. Versions of Byronic Romanticism had reached out towards a larger horizon, but this was not the path which Australian poetry had chosen to follow, convinced the way forward lay in rediscovering authenticity in an alienated post-war world. In this context, Dransfield's poetry of addiction raises significant questions that have yet to be addressed, and which remain pressing, all the more so now in a world where consciousness is seen as a construct rather than a given, and where the spectre of an “authentic” experience seems as far away as ever.