

## Nicolas Rothwell, *Quicksilver* (Text Publishing, 2016)

The cover of Nicolas Rothwell's new book suggests that reflection is at least partly what he is referring to with this title, and reflection that is broken into uncountable shards of mirror glass, all shapes and sizes. A sense of infinity about it, of the eternal. *Quicksilver* is, of course, liquid mercury, which was once used as a coating for mirrors; the word is also used as a descriptor for rapidly-changing and unpredictable. Thinking about his body of work, reflection is present throughout, about an ancient landscape, aspects of human existence that are both unpredictable but also unchanging, the quest for meaning versus the rapid changing nature of modern life.

Rothwell describes *Wings of the Kite-Hawk* (2003), *The Red Highway* (2009), and *Belomor* (2013) as fictions; they are the precursors to the new book, with *Quicksilver* as a 'companion piece' to these, a reflection on the previous journeys and their narratives. On his website<sup>1</sup>, Rothwell states this about his works: 'Some are fictive, some lie close to the daily world we occupy, some stand far apart. They share a goal: they seek to convey something of the scale and grandeur of what surrounds us, and what remains beyond us.'

*Quicksilver* is composed of six 'reveries' that delve into the relationship between humans and nature, not only in the Australian but the European experience as well. Or more particularly, the focus is on the European in Australia, and how we read the landscape with eyes from another world, and think and write about it in words from another language, rather than the language of the Australian landscape and its original inhabitants. The author's own writing reflects this, I think, as he writes of Indigenous art and its sacredness, mainly *through* European cultures, whether it be explorers, artists, religious figures or other European influences.

Rothwell thinks about landscape with, and through, literature, so in 'Into the Red', in which he records his travels across the western interior, his encounter with a Perentie compels him to remember Tolstoy's lizard. In 'Words and Nature', he discusses Andrei Tarkovsky's film *Stalker* and links the filmmaker's transcendent view of nature with the Pilbara. 'The Mirror That Creates: Australia Imagined in Western Eyes' contains complex ideas about how Australia was shaped by the concepts of those from elsewhere, so that the language used was not from the country itself or its original inhabitants, at least initially. As a result, he feels, 'loss and longing are coded in' the language, a 'nostalgia for a world that is not present, and cannot be present' (109). He sees this in the writings of memoirists and poets, especially those of the last century.

In 'What Lies Beyond Us' he presents ideas about writing that are evident, perhaps, in his works, which themselves flow between fictional and non-fictional. He is interested in hybrid forms of writing, feels that the novel may be at an end, and that, indeed, all imaginative writing may be in danger. He quotes Deborah Eisenberg, who feels the 'pure licence' (144) afforded to writers is due to the sheer irrelevance of their work: they are no threat. However, despite this gloomy, almost apocalyptic tone, he sees hope in Australia exactly because the country is an incomplete project: 'a culture that remains unplayed-out, conscious of what lies before it rather than the golden chapters of an impossibly vanished, all-dominating past it feels obliged to desecrate; conscious, too, of the indigenous realm that at once questions and underpins it' (147). The writers he is thinking of seem mainly to be male history and nature writers, such as Tom Griffiths and Mark McKenna, although he does also mention Germaine Greer's *White Beech* (2013). I would like him to consider other writers (women, Indigenous) who tackle the

<sup>1</sup> <http://nicolasrothwell.com/>

Australian landscape and undertake journeys within the country, and within the self, such as Saskia Beudel, Kim Mahood and Alexis Wright. I also disagree with pronouncements about the death of the novel or imaginative writing. As Jane Smiley has said, the novel form is 'extremely capacious'<sup>2</sup> and is irreplaceable; we don't have to declare one form dead in order to experiment with other forms.

The last chapter, 'The Gleam of the Outsider: Seeing with Wide Eyes', discusses Jean Dubuffet and his Collection de l'Art Brut, an 'outsider' art collection, and the psychiatrist Hans Prinzhorn and his interest in the art of the mentally ill. Rothwell sees that outsider art and that of Indigenous Australians is connected as they both produce art that comes from within rather than from 'clichés of classical art or art that is fashionable' (176).

The longest and central chapter is 'Quicksilver: Reflections' which takes the reader into complex territory concerning chaos, upheaval, sacredness, and transformation. The author returns to a childhood place, the Praha Hotel in Slovakia, and tells the reader about medieval Kabbalah and the cult formed by Jacob Frank in the eighteenth century, and his influences. These beliefs are dark and chaotic, involving the pursuit of havoc as a goal, as a utopia. He leads the reader from here into the work of German ethnographers Frebenius and Petri, who witnessed momentous changes in the spiritual world of societies in the Kimberley and surrounding regions. The havoc and chaotic energy is echoed in the collapse and energy of these societies as new cults replaced old religions, the sacred never disappearing but transforming (like quicksilver). Petri described it as a disruption of the 'spiritual equilibrium' by European colonisation (45); Rothwell notes that it is not fully understood by mainstream society how Aboriginal spirituality was transformed.

He moves into the genesis of the Western Desert art movement in the Papunya settlement, and the conflict over the revealing of sacred emblems. Once again, the Aboriginal understanding of what happened was different to official accounts. It was a time of grief but also, according to Rothwell, a 'further instance of upheaval in the realm of belief' (49). The artists did not anticipate the interest from the outside world in their art, and there seems to be some debate as to the effect of this on them and whether it is ultimately destructive or liberating. Rothwell seems to believe it to be the latter: 'but once the first transgression has been made, once the sacred, that quicksilver, has been put in play, you can never tell where it will go' (52).

I sense that Rothwell is forming a body of work that is ongoing, thinking back to the eternal quality of quicksilver reflection. This book does not contain the conversations with characters that are a strong feature of his fictions; these are often critical of the narrator, argumentative, revealing, harsh, melancholic or disruptive. In a sense these self-interrogations bring the reader into the writer's thought processes effectively. But it does anchor these other works and take the reader into other realms of thought, about sacredness and landscape, sacredness of landscape, and the European struggle with Australian Aboriginal understandings of country and spirituality.

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<sup>2</sup> Jane Smiley, 'Jane Smiley' in Meredith Maran (ed.), *Why We Write: 20 Acclaimed Authors on How and Why They Do What They Do*, Plume, New York (2013), 213.