

# Posthumous Poet

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John Kinsella (ed.)

MICHAEL DRANSFIELD: A RETROSPECTIVE

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FOR THOSE WHO grew up reading his dreamy, solipsistic sequences, Michael Dransfield met immediate needs. He expressed overtly the counter-cultural attitudes of the times, and portrayed the frustrations and elations of transition into one's twenties. He was the most convincing of the slash/dash lower-case poets, one whose experiments were not a plaything but the means to new meaning. Rereading him now, we meet a gifted but also indulged individual — a young man with his own country estate, a stash of opiates and a library of Romantic literature. His own portrait of himself to the world is of a doomed youth, a Dedalus of Darlinghurst, set 'to deify doubt'.

Dransfield was always up against 'the problems of the day'. His philosophy is concerned with what he calls 'complexity'. Dransfield incisively demonstrates the shift in thought from the adolescent who knows everything to the adult who knows otherwise, due to consciousness of complexity. In social terms 'there / are no people in cities, only strangers, populations, / or the sometime consolation of familiar / others' ('Geography'). In literary terms, the complexity is wrought between 'my first love / the silence' and 'the craft of singing' that 'recruits apprentices from the abyss'. Relationships are a delicate complexity: involvement is tentative, and solitariness soon resumed. This last complexity is the result of an unresolved, transcendent narcissism. Identifiable in many of the fantasy poems, but also in his works of self-defeat and imminent death, it informs the epigraph: 'I'm the ghost haunting an old house, / my poems are posthumous.'

Dransfield may haunt these pages; the editor, John Kinsella, overshadows them. The introduction is as useful for Kinsella studies as Dransfield studies. Dransfield was his teenage hero, and Kinsella is quick to laud the poet, sadly a eulogy that turns into overbearing appropriation. Unlike most selections, meant to show the artist's best work, this one is made to prove a thesis: 'it was Dransfield who lifted Australian poetry into a heightened state of modernism, bordering the post-modern.' Poets who border postmodernism are numerous as grains of sand; the 'little pebble' Dransfield is singled out for dual-coding, hybridisation and meta-textualisation, though there is plenty here of a more conventional nature.

More dubious is Kinsella's extravagant claim that 'critical analysis of twentieth-century English-language poetry will be realigned once a thorough textual investigation of Dransfield's poems [is] made', an unqualified apostrophe that sounds hollow after Kinsella initiates little such investigation himself. Placing Dransfield in some phoney hierarchy of world poets

in English is to up the odds dangerously, especially when the argument wavers around words like 'perhaps'. All of which is a pity, as Kinsella has some fine perceptions about his idol, once he gets past his Parnassus complex. He is helpful in showing how Dransfield was a blocked individual, someone who didn't break through early restrictions of place and identity. 'Let yourself vanish,' the poet says in 'Bum's Rush', though this captivity to a psychology is found in his restless tidal poems as much as in those of wilful self-oblivion. Addiction, dissembling, misanthropy, doom and useless longing preoccupy this loner.

Kinsella is right to dismiss the idea of Dransfield as a confessional poet. But it is impossible to separate Dransfield from the presentations of himself that animate his poetry. Poems such as 'Island' and 'The Hermit of Green Light' are elaborate scenarios reminiscent of the Pre-Raphaelites he so admired. The trick in these works is how he turns the discourse around by reference to an 'I' or 'he' that we know to be the poet. Self-reflexiveness is Dransfield's haven, the fallback of someone engrossed in self-reflection. Mirrors are a common object in his poems; the world of self-made illusion seduces and troubles the poet. The pathos of the lone voice is turned into performance.

Because this multifaceted portrait of the 'I' is so central to any reading, we have to interpret some incontrovertible evidence, even if it is not called confession. Here is a suburban boy who lives in an escapist dreamworld of ancient manor houses and medieval retro; a drug addict who lives where there is 'nothing beyond the candle and the spike' ('Mazurka'). Here is familiar post-adolescent behaviour, frustrated but also skilful, feeding off neuroses. Perhaps not so familiar are the corresponding elucidations of strangeness and disintegration that Dransfield tables with the same equipose.

This seamless drift in the *Retrospective* toward 'the long voyage into solitude' ('Going Away') is the most disturbing sensation left by the poetry. The personal mood of disquiet engendered by this drift is indistinguishable from the emotional life of Michael Dransfield and implausible as merely the result of a series of clever constructs.

Dransfield's achievement has to be assessed beside its untidy profusion and editorial indiscretion. He shows the makings of a great social satirist. The politics of 'Endsight' and 'Letter to People about Pelicans' is pointed and far removed from the caginess of his poetic personae. His lyric gift can be calmly dilatory or rigorous.

Dransfield, permissive with subject, elastic with grammar, a perfecter of instant cadence, is unquestionably a source figure for contemporary Australian poetry. It is on these grounds, rather than tendentious agendas for making him a harbinger of postmodernism, or a token god of international English language poetry, that this collection is justified. Kinsella, conscious of Dransfield's tendency to expatiate without resolution, has selected non-rambles that are amongst the best of Dransfield's tight experiments, including great works ('Geography', 'Chopin Ballade') that are layered with the philosophy of 'complexity'.