

Illusory Stream

Dianne Dempsey

Tracy Ryan

Jazz Tango

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THE SETTING IS a dirty, Blakean London, in the new millennium, where bicycles that cannot be unchained are bent and broken instead. Our ingénue, Jas, an Australian expatriate, tries to make her way as a French translator in the world of publishing. It's a struggle. Jas's literary antecedents may be traced back to Miles Franklin's *My Brilliant Career*. At the turn of the last century, Sybylla Melvyn was sure of one thing: she wanted her freedom. To the eternal frustration of Franklin's readers, Sybylla rejected the inestimably eligible Harold Beecham, even though he offered her a cartload of writing equipment, in preference for a life of penurious independence. Throughout the twentieth century, the literary tradition of the female quest for happiness beyond the constraints of colonial boundaries persisted. In Christina Stead's *For Love Alone*, Teresa Hawkins embarks on a gruelling love affair in London. She is followed by Caro Bell in Shirley Hazzard's *Transit of Venus*, Zoe Delighty in Stephanie Dowrick's *Running Backwards over Sand*, and Lark Watter in Glenda Adams's *Dancing on Coral*. Dancing or running, courageous young women must symbolically break their parochial chains in order to pursue the quest.

So now we come to Jas, bravely seeking work in Blair's England. She rejects one offer of employment in a publishing company because of the boss's avarice, choosing instead to work for low wages in a bookshop. Jas is then offered freedom from penury in the form of marriage to Todd, a wealthy and handsome lecturer in music at a provincial university. Todd is elusive, and Jas uncertain of his love for her, but she can see no other way out of her poverty. Rather than sell her soul to a publisher, she pimps it to a husband. Do what you like with your days, Todd tells her: the world is your oyster. And what does she do? She cries. Todd finds her work at his university, which Jas unenthusiastically accepts. Todd's intellectual friends are foils to her insecurity. We know all of this because of Jas's tangential discourse with the reader.

Tracy Ryan, we are told in the Introduction, is paying homage to the *Pilgrimage* novels of Dorothy Richardson, which have been described as unrecognised classics of modernist literature. Richardson's novels were highly autobiographical. Virginia Woolf dubbed her a female James Joyce. Feminists argue that the *Pilgrimage* novels contain a concealed subtext of lesbian desire and sexuality. (Maybe if a subtext is too successfully concealed, it disappears.) When Jas eventually discovers that she is a lesbian, the reader is as surprised as she is. Miriam, her lover, is as mad and sensitive as a cut snake. And Jas is torn between her love for Miriam and her feelings towards Todd. This is further complicated when Todd turns out to be bisexual. Todd tries to defend his own ambiguity while being distressed by his wife's sexual proclivity. What all this means in terms of the novel's central message is open to speculation. More problematic are the substantial flaws in the novel's voice.

Jas is portrayed as being so naïve that she learns from talk in the bookshop lunch room that men like to smoke after having sex. At the same time, Jas's associations and memories are those of a mature woman. Ryan tries to cover this flaw, having an older friend of Jas's observe: 'Sometimes when you talk about your childhood, I think you grew up in my generation.'

The virtue of stream of consciousness writing, in terms of poetic and intellectual content, is often illusory. At times, Jas's observations and associations border on the banal. Stringing together associated ideas and thoughts, and throwing in the occasional one-word sentence, does not poetry make.

Tracy Ryan's previous book *Vamp* has been described as a postmodern feminist vampire novel, which may give the reader some idea of her self-conscious approach to writing in general. Ryan would have us believe, in this hotchpotch, that Jas is a gifted woman struggling in a world made by men; struggling not only to assert her creative talents but her innate sexuality. *Jazz Tango* asks us to sympathise with Jas on lesbian-feminist grounds, all the while paying homage to Richardson. The problem is that Ryan does not extend Richardson's vision; nor does she have a particularly interesting viewpoint.

If at the start of the twenty-first century our heroine is still stumbling along London's dirty streets looking for freedom of expression, then what on earth have the likes of Miles Franklin, Shirley Hazzard or Dorothy Richardson, for that matter, been doing all these years? Peeling potatoes?