

Ken Bolton, *The Circus* (Wakefield Press, 2010)

Poet and art critic Ken Bolton continues to push the boundaries in his latest work, a long narrative, in which he offers us a wonderfully-composed poem.

The Circus is written in quatrains of varying line lengths that work marvellously to provide, among other things, a close-up, float a mood, or make a practised cultural reference. In its entirety, the work makes for a witty articulation of existential concerns. It also serves as a microcosm of daily obsessions. The loose but disconnected narrative circulates around the lives of the men and women in a travelling circus in Northern Italy as they go about rehearsing, resting, gossiping, performing, etc. Who is coming and who is going? A part of the circus has yet to arrive, since ‘Elephant, and one tent, are missing, and the magician’ (13). Concrete details emerge in filmic scenes:

Olivia and Regina, the ballerinas, sit after rehearsal. Olivia’s eyes are
closed
Regina leans, legs splayed, her back against their trailer, examining
Her small, relatively recent tummy. How recent? But relatively small.
In
Any case her bum is larger too – she checked – so, all in proportion. (5)

A mood of philosophical inquiry lingers: ‘Ulysse wonders again about his name’ (2). The troublesome matter of circus insiders and outsiders intrudes: Arturo ‘considers for a moment the circus life’ (10); Ulysse wants to know whether the cat is ‘travelling with us’ (27). The itinerancy of circus life is temporarily halted: César thinks the site looks bleak now but will soon look like home (2).

Members of the public also make casual, if anxious, inquiries: A middle-aged man asks uncertainly about a ticket, wondering whether opening night is ‘the best night to come’ (11). Even the animals fret: the elephant worries about the possibility of AIDS, if he ‘can even *get* AIDS’ (6). Its comic but grave existential anxieties make *The Circus* a clever rumination on absurdity and sensibleness beyond the circus. Indeed, the foreman sets the mood of existential inquiry immediately:

THE CIRCUS FOREMAN sends off for another peg. How many pegs
Are there? Are there ever enough? There are
More than enough, many more. But ... a peg too far?
They are short one peg. (1)

The circus is a world of spectacle. It is no surprise then that much observing or watching goes on in the poem. However, Bolton makes watching into a disconcerting happening, lending the otherwise relaxed narrative an absorbing tension. This tension is signalled early, when the cat, which is ‘no part of the circus’, ‘is here to observe’ (3). Humans also observe one another; indeed, the narration often returns to an earlier scene but from a different visual perspective, immersing us in the boredoms and happenings of the circus:

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From the ticket box Arturo watches the ballerinas resting
After riding the horses. One sleeps. (The other appears to be
Examining her navel.) No ticket sales are likely this first morning –
though he is on duty.
He fiddles with the transistor's tuning. His afternoon, however, will be
free. (5)

In this watching, the circus emerges as its own world, in which the extraordinary can
assume a quotidian calmness in the otherworldliness of the spectacle:

Simonetta Gianfelici is seated at a small table, a card-table in fact.
She is practising card tricks. She shuffles, fans the cards in one hand
and presents the cards, as though to another person, holds them,
Then shuffles again. From a small pot she pours a cup of tea. And
begins.
Each time she fans the cards out in her hand – *for another to see* – she
peers inquisitorially at this imaginary other. Her husband looks
at her as he walks by. (42)

Performances draw attention to the strangeness of circus spectacle itself: 'It is
otherworldly' (51). In moments of absorbed watching, however, instances of
dynamic, if comical, juxtaposition occur:

Tomaz sits reading the paper. Beside him sits the cat, that has been
around, on and off, for days now.
Not a circus pet but not a stranger. For his own amusement Tomaz
addresses it occasionally.
They are both watching a small lizard as it suns itself. It moves
snappily – freezes – moves again.
The cat watches aloofly. Tomaz with more interest. (34-35)

The ironic interplay of various forms of culture – perhaps their pollution of one
another – intensifies in the narrative, for example, in the guise of Guido Caselli who
wants the clowns to be less theatrical; but it is not clear even to him, the chief or solo
clown, where Commedia Dell'Arte begins and the circus ends:

Guido watches his five secondary clowns go through their paces.
They have come from a theatrical tradition – not circus.
They have many of the moves and gestures, now – right back to
Commedia dell'Arte. Hmm.
Every week or two he adds a more genuinely circus step, or tumble, to
their repertoire. (56)

Bolton's moves in *The Circus* have a cool elegance. Admittedly, his cultural
references can become distracting, but he does make them rather wittily: it is droll,
when the elephant casts himself as Joe Turner the singer (7); the elephant even
wonders whether he resembles the comedian 'Zero Mostel' or 'Rumpole Of the

Bailey' (7). The narrative itself can be perplexing in its dislocations and revisitations, but this is part of its tonal mood, in which,

Meanwhile, near Lucca,
Elephant, magician, juggler and monkeys
Are stopped for a snack.
They have done their last small show (12)

or Arturo sits as a café, while 'Some *mental wind* carries his mind' (84). Bolton is also in great flight, with such relaxed but exact observations as:

Mildly melancholy, mildly elated, then tearful almost
But close to laughing.
Paolo leans against the soccer goal the kids have erected.
The afternoon a sky of beautiful clouds. (6)

Bolton's resistance to the charmed poetic turn makes *The Circus* fascinating in its restrained, and deconstructive, image-making. Thus, trees 'suggest an aureole of anger about the small figure' (38) or under the rising moon tents and parting clouds, circus tents, vehicles and cages 'Appear silvered, colour subdued' (44). Indeed, the poetic lies frequently in the ordinary detail, in which time itself becomes implicated, revealing its elasticity:

It is wonderfully relaxing, poetic,
To be playing football with the swifts about.
Time stretches, the air cools in the fading light,
Each boy momentarily heroic, lost in thought, able to run forever. (61)

In the focus on the work's witticism, it is easy, however, to overlook the way the poem constructs its odd beauty out of fragments of circus life, in which the lyrical and the narrative combine. Indeed, this is part of its strength, the quotidian rhythms underscoring the poem's surface intensities:

Attila watches Julie Lautone let a soccer ball pass before her. A boy
darts a glance
As he runs past her to retrieve it.
Arms folded, cardigan pulled about, she moves on.
It is a lowering, beautiful sky. (38)

Bolton is well-known for his collaborative work. Michael Fitzjames's black-and-white artwork attends Bolton's poem. The poem stands on its own, as does Fitzjames's artwork, but the interplay between the visual and verbal offers another aesthetic dimension to the work. In all, *The Circus* is wonderful in its effortless rhythm, its relaxed observation, and its elegant witticism.

Tina Giannoukos