

***Obiter Ficta* collected and edited by A Grandnephew (Humanities and Allied Researches Press, Thailand, 2004)
Grandnephew's Treachery. Les Cousins (Humanities and Allied Researches Press, Thailand, 2008)**

The voice of this remarkable pair of novels would quite like to know who has stuffed up so badly. It's not desperate to know, being, on the whole, against desperation. Nonetheless, it would be quite nice to be told, if someone wouldn't mind terribly.

It insinuates an accusation of mass incompetence in the management of our lives, this voice behind its two front-man narrators, as it plays with and plays about the chunks of officialese, hyperbole, and foolishness which comprise many of our public discourses, seeking a controlling narrative in a world whose information systems are always on the point of dissolving into nonsense:

Cutting from Northumberland Ferret: 11-6-1971

Owing to a confusion by a government clerk between two words with very similar forms but quite different meanings, the government of Rumbandia has sent 115 citizens, who had originally been conscripted to train as army plumbers, on two-year overseas scholarships after which they will be required to serve as gynaecologists in the government hospital for at least five years. (*Obiter Ficta* 76)

While the project of the narrator of the first book, *Obiter Ficta* ('Grandnephew'), is to besmirch Granduncle's name, and that of the narrator of the second, *Grandnephew's Treachery* (a collective of concerned relatives, 'Les Cousins'), is to restore the reputation of the dire departed by undermining the accuracy of Grandnephew's account, the bedrock business of these books is to offer samplings of our current re-negotiation of what we mean by 'sanity'. The scene of contestation is the mess we make of information, and the narrators of both books battle on with bilious mock-heroism through a hail-storm of pseudo-knowledge, holding their learning before them like a shield:

Grim-faced, the spokewoman (sic) said that while all regretted the loss of life, specific and credible reports had indicated that it was not in fact a toy factory but a sophisticated high-tech research centre specializing in the production of new types of miniaturized weapon. Its lead product was reliably reported to have been a miniature submarine designed to be mass-produced, so that a fleet of them could sail up sewers under a city and launch a surprise attack through its lavatories. (*Grandnephew's Treachery* 42.)

It doesn't take long to realize that there is more afoot here than a spat over the life of a possibly scandalous eccentric. The books' ultimate backdrop is a metaphysic of sorts, an attempt – no less – to sketch the state of the world in a time of the breaking of nations. But where others have seen destruction of the civil order in terms of physical conflict, the Book reviews: 'Obiter Ficta' and 'Grandnephew's Treachery'. Robert Lumsden. 1
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author of these books sees dissolution in terms of sophistications which overwhelm commonsense, a misalignment of messages and a diffusion of data which interpretation, however capacious or adroit, is powerless to master. Instead of the thunder of distant guns, paper wealth fluttering from high windows. Instead of speeches demanding service to discredited ideals, promises not worth the air they're breathed into. In addition to being a dead person in the process of reconstruction, 'Granduncle' functions as an analogue to the Gnostic *demiurge*, the less-than-lovely creator spirit who – or which – having a void to fill, distracted or bored, in an idle moment, shat the world. The deity of continents, caught short.

Though the two books are often both funny and good fun, it must be admitted that the *aperçus* from which they're composed fail persistently to achieve the vacuous optimism which is currently mandatory even among those who are starting to believe that they're about to lose the world on which they've long depended. The cold eye cast here upon the contemporary scene never manages to confuse glee with happiness. The intelligence for which it speaks – candidly offended by what it considers inherently offensive – fails consistently to rise to anyone else's occasion.

The tone – hardly matched for its mix of absurdist relish and delight in serendipitous learning since Beachcomber and the translations of Myles na Gopaleen's *Irish Times* pieces – ranges between testy and mocking, appalled and mordantly delighted:

Characteristics frequently mistaken for intelligence:

fine physique	(America)
bad temper	(Britain)
silence	(China)
verbal diarrhea	(France)
organization	(Germany)
family relationship to the president	(Rumbandia)

(*Grandnephew's Treachery* 60)

It was the Portugese poet Fernando Pessoa who left behind a trunk filled with 25,426 scraps of paper offered in no particular order. Pessoa was content to allow those whose principles of meaning he could never know to decide the person history would take him to be. Coherence of account was to be achieved according to the inclinations of those who survived him. (He would perhaps feel vindicated to see how his evasive action has been secured by the attempts of those critics who have tried to deny it as they shuffle his fragments about like B.F. Skinner's brainwashed pigeons pushing tidbits about their cage.)

The format in these two novels is similar to that of Pessoa's trunk, though there have been developments in the who-am-I, really? shell-game since the poet's passing. The lingering hope in Pessoa's writing that some sort of modernist underpinning, a structure informing chaos, would somehow, surprisingly, emerge from the confused diversity of 'modern' life is nowhere to be found in these novels. No pearl awaits discovery under any putative shell. Meaningful recognition of the extra-human is not on the table. An Book reviews: 'Obiter Ficta' and 'Grandnephew's Treachery'. Robert Lumsden. 2
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author composes in this way, possibly, from a refusal to be bound by others' perceptions even as he gives his reader interpretative carte blanche. Possibly, also, as a prophylactic against despair.

A steely thread runs through each item, even the most lightly erudite, the most humorous, then plays out, or is cut short. Since anything at all seems likely to be said and believed or to occur without warning at any moment, the endurance of any particular thing – occasion, relation, relationship, current 'truth', item of information – is not to be depended upon. Relevance is out of the question, causal relation a quaint pre-Humeian notion. *Sic transit.*

The author, currently based in Thailand, probably cannot be reached by electronic means.

Robert Lumsden

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