

**Troubling Our Sleep:
Ted Jenner's Postmodern Classicism**

Ted Jenner, *Writers in Residence and Other Captive Fauna*. ISBN 978-1-877441-09-7. 130 pp. Auckland: Titus Books, 2009.

A review-essay by Jack Ross

*The thought of what America,
The thought of what America,
The thought of what America would be like
If the Classics had a wide circulation...
Oh well!
It troubles my sleep.*

(Ezra Pound, 'Cantico del Sole', 1984, 183)

i. The Masks of Catullus

Ezra Pound's 1918 poem 'Cantico del Sole' was prompted by a 'recent decision' from 'a learned judge' that some

approved publications at times escape [the law on obscene publications] only because they come within the term 'classics,' which means, for the purpose of the application of the statute, that they are ordinarily immune from interference, because they have the sanction of age and fame and USUALLY APPEAL TO A COMPARATIVELY LIMITED NUMBER OF READERS [Pound's capitals]. (Pound 1984, 183)

Donald Gallup, the editor of Pound's *Collected Shorter Poems*, adds that he 'considered the matter far too serious to be written of in anger'; hence his choice of the 'cadences of the "Cantico del Sole" of St. Francis of Assisi' (184).

I think it's fair to say that the Classics still retain these associations for a lot of readers today: an atmosphere of shameless sexual licence, of animal-like pursuit of pleasure without pangs of conscience, lightly concealed by 'the sanction of age and fame' (pretty much the Church's propaganda line during the first few centuries AD).

No doubt that's why they've proved such a boon to rebellious, anti-puritan poets throughout the modern era. The fact that (as Pound's 'learned judge' put it) they're 'ordinarily immune from interference' permits a kind of verbal extremism which may shock readers but which is unlikely to lead to actual prosecution. The court-cases which muzzled Baudelaire's *Les Fleurs du Mal* and Flaubert's *Madame Bovary* left a long shadow. Nor were such trials solely a nineteenth-century phenomenon. Max Harris, the magazine editor who first published the works of the mythical Ern Malley, was convicted of obscenity by an Australian court as late as 1945.

The first-century-BC Latin poet Catullus, arguably the greatest extremist of all, has accordingly proved a favourite mask for a number of contemporary writers (including not a few New Zealanders): Catullus the no-holds-barred satirist, the ultimate connoisseur of love's extremes, the enemy of wowsers everywhere – a kind of antique *poète maudit*, without the boulevardier affectations ...

Take James K. Baxter's sequence 'after Catullus' (from his posthumous 1973 collection *Runes*), for instance. He called it 'Words to Lay a Strong Ghost', and that appears to be just what it's designed to do.

Looking at my journey's end –
Two breasts like towers – the same face
That brought Troy crashing
Down like a chicken coop – black wood and flames!
1 – *The Party* (Baxter 1974, 3)

It's a very masculine view of the end of a love affair. There *she* is, still vamping the men, and here *I* am, left licking my wounds at the back of the chicken coop ...

The usual advantage of a sequence of poems is that different points of view can be admitted. Baxter allows us only the most limited insights into Pyrrha's world, however: her sorrow (like Lesbia's) at the death of a budgie ('Partly on account of / The bird, and partly for herself' (1974, 6). For the most part, though, 'Pyrrha doesn't talk' (4) and this appears, in context, to be seen as a good thing.

Having said that, one of the most interesting things about Baxter's group of poems, besides the obvious transpositions of Catullus's sophisticated urban world into a contemporary New Zealand scene of pub flagons and rugby matches, is his daring interpretation of Catullus 63, the famous hymn to Cybele. Baxter interprets this as a first-person statement on the poet's part, rather than an imaginative leap into the persona of one of the goddess's self-castrated eunuch priests:

It is not women only
Who lose themselves in the wound of love –
When Atthis ruled by Cybele
Tore out his sex with a flint knife,

He became a girl. Blood fell
In flecks on the black forest soil –
So it was for me, Pyrrha,
And the wound will ache, aches now ...

Love's suffering can literally make a man into a girl, it seems, forcing him:

To live in
Exile from the earth I came from,
Pub, bed, table, a fire of hot bluegum,

The boys in the bathing shed playing cards –
It's hard to live on Mt Ida
Where frost bites the flesh
And the sun stabs at the roots of trees,

No longer a man – Ah! don't let
Your lion growl and run against me,
Cybele's daughter – I accept
Hard bondage, harder song!
8 – *The Wound* (Baxter 1974, 11)

This promising intimation of sexual ambivalence isn't, unfortunately, followed up on in C.K. Stead's 'Clodian Songbook' (published in various instalments from 1982 onwards). These are (as he explains in the notes to *Between* (1988):

not translations but sometimes versions, sometimes approximations, sometimes poems which use the Roman poet only as a stepping-off point for going in a different direction. The persona is neither Catullus nor myself, but a shifting fictional identity somewhere between. (Stead 2008, 525)

Increasingly, though, his various masks of Catullus tend to resolve into a kind of stoic voice of mourning, as the years go by and the friends (and lovers) drop off. ‘Cat/ullus’, for instance:

Zac’s dead
buried with his brother Wallace
beside the carport
under the pongas.

Zac of the goldfish eyes
and nice-smelling fur
who when I had a problem with a poem
slept on it,
who lived to put his paw-print
on a valued citation (366-67)

A certain witty appositeness there in praising your cat for helping you find the right quotation at the right time! The voice also enables him to get over his awkwardness at having to elegise his poetical elders – Allen Curnow, for instance:

And though I cannot send you poems of my own
I offer this by my older friend Catullus
so you’ll know my boast of verses wasn’t idle.
Let it come to you, as it does in the Roman’s trope,
like an apple given to a girl, hidden in her clothes
and forgotten until it rolls to her mother’s floor
and has to be explained, and cannot be. (383)

Satire, elegy, love-longing, self-hatred, self-castigation: Catullus can clearly stand for a lot of things for our poets. But there’s no disputing that this is still firmly in the region of classical ‘circulation’ foreseen by Pound’s poem. Are there other ways of assuming ancient Roman (and Greek) *personae* in modern poetry, ways which don’t have such an automatically revisionist social and sexual agenda?

That, I would argue, is where Ted Jenner comes in. Here’s ‘Catullus reads a new poem aloud: Lesbia/Clodia fidgets’, from his first book of poems *A Memorial Brass*, published by Alan Loney’s Hawk Press in 1980:

My attention flickering – a cicada
on the window-sill (or ceiling
or crack in the wall)

just hear him catalogue those favours
of his minute after minute; despite
household spies, public benefactors,
threatened auctions of manuscripts,
 breast-bands and chemises;
despite the one mature affair, and the
 impossibility
of his love uncoiling again from its own
tension above the faded sienna bedspread:

even now there's one eye cocked at eternity. (Jenner 1980, 15)

The idea of taking the woman's side in the debate is not the only striking thing about this poem (it's interesting how sedulously Stead, and Baxter before him, avoid this very feature – the utility of the Catullus mask for them appears to be that it gives them tacit permission *not* to explore their feminine side). The tone of voice here reminds one of the ultra-refined Court ladies in Pound's *Cathay* (1915): 'The Jewel Stair's Grievance,' for instance. It seems that it's precisely the psychology of that 'Other' that Jenner is intent on exploring – whether it be, here (fleetingly) Catullus's mistress, or (in the same book) the virtually non-existent 'Sulpicius Lupercus Servasius Iunior' – 'a Roman poet of the 5th c. A.D. so obscure that the very form of his cognomen varies in ms. tradition' (1980, 25). Not only does he not have a stable name, but 'His sole surviving contributions to Latin literature consist of three Alcaic stanzas [...] and twenty-odd elegiac couplets (on the already well documented diseases of money-grubbing rhetoricians)'.

'My attention flickering – a cicada / on the window-sill'. We see here the first intimations of Jenner's abiding themes: a taste for the obscure and fragmentary (whether they lie concealed in Classical papyri or landscape details from Africa); a distrust of conventional romantic readings of the poet-as-hero (whether it be Catullus or Ezra Pound himself); and a love of the fleeting and evanescent as opposed to the fixed and stationary. Hence his distrust of Plato's idealism; hence, too, his abiding love of Herakleitos and (to some extent) the more specific and rooted-in-the-actual Aristotle.

The territory that Jenner occupies as a poet, while on the surface not dissimilar from Baxter and Stead's classical ventriloquising, is not dominated by the same need to sound hip and sexy. *His* Catullus can be fussy, erudite, complaining. Like them, Jenner veers between translation, adaptation and contrapuntal variations – as he says of his version of the Greek poet Ibykos in *A Memorial Brass*:

Of the pieces that comprise this sequence only the fourth could be considered a complete adaptation of an existing fragment. The remainder quote or expand upon selections from the fifty or so ‘nipped buds’ – lines, half-lines, phrases, a single word – that have survived in grammarians’ tomes or in scholiasts’ footnotes. (1980, 24)

Unlike his predecessors, however, Jenner is himself a Greek scholar, author of a number of learned articles on the interpretation of Ibykos’s texts, and the eventual author of a dual-text edition / translation of 22 of his fragments which appeared (with drawings by John Reynolds) from Holloway Press in 1997 as *The Love-Songs of Ibykos*.

These early poems do admittedly have a strong flavour of Ezra Pound – and to some extent of Basil Bunting – the same defamiliarising precision of word and phrase (in the same way that Baxter and Stead recall to us the tone of Robert Lowell’s seminal 1961 book *Imitations*). The difference is that Jenner has persevered with his explorations of this classical indeterminacy and fragmentariness as a pre-condition of his writing. He doesn’t so much resolve his distant models as assert their intangibility.

Take, for example, his recent *Sappho Triptych* (Puriri Press, 2007). This veers from versions of the most familiar Sapphic fragments: ‘The Moon is in her cave / and the Pleiades have set’ (5) to a kind of transformative celebration of the conditions of our occupancy of this world:

Memory is the off-white eggshell colour of the walls of the local dispensary which
smell of disinfectant; the odours of 'Reception' at 'Rustling Oaks' retirement village
where the smell of carbolic competes with the stale redolence of a bowl of roses.
(Jenner 2007, 6)

How different from the frank, manly tone of Stead’s Roman elegies! A deliberate reversion to the cult of feeling – *The Man of Feeling* – seems to be on the point of overwhelming us as we disappear into the flower-scented disinfectant of the retirement home.

It is the colour of the petals of *Plumeria natalensis* we picked in the botanical gardens
and carefully pressed between the pages of the novel we returned to the municipal
library long before it was even due. (6)

A lovely sense of futility there. It *was* due back eventually – but not yet. All pleasures and emotions are fleeting, but is that really enough reason to *anticipate* their departure?

It is the colour of Basho's bamboo leaves blanched and etiolated by the autumn rains,
which never materialised

The texture of the stalk of straw a herdsman in Niger spits out of his mouth in times of drought (6)

Bashō, yes, but how far from his Buddhist delight in the material world.

The smell of ichor, the substance that coursed through the veins of the Olympian gods and became, on the same day we realised that the gods were never going to return, the colourless fluid that oozes out of a suppurating ulcer. (7)

The moment we see that there *are* no gods, that same moment their divine blood turns into pus, or into:

The texture of a dry and friable fragment of papyrus newly unearthed in the sand of an ancient rubbish dump at Oxyrhynchus on the Nile; a tattered and perforated fragment which looks a little like the first draft of a work in progress by a particularly fastidious poet who valued the pumice as much as she valued her pen and ink. (7)

We know of Sappho that her reputation as the ‘tenth muse’ of antiquity was based on nine lengthy books of poems, arranged (according to meter) after her death by the assiduous librarians of Alexandria. The processes of decay are seen here to have had the paradoxical effect of *turning* her into a modern, though. Her fragments now look ‘like the first draft of a work in progress [like Joyce’s *Finnegans Wake*?] by a particularly fastidious poet.’ What Sappho *was* is beyond our grasp. What Sappho *is* is a kind of mirror: a modern despite herself, through the accidents of history, and the unforeseeable coincidence of the modern taste for the sketchy and fragmentary.

The colour Sappho turns when she turns ‘paler than dry grass’, her ears ‘hum’, her forehead ‘drips with sweat’ and a mist veils her eyes – ‘at such times / death isn’t far from me’, Sappho of Lesbos who was small and dark and sang of a girl whose hair seemed to have been spun out of filaments of sunlight. (7)

The common strand in Jenner’s classicism and his response to particular landscapes: above all, those of the Africa where he spent many years as a teacher of Latin and Greek, is this devotion to the particularities of memory – and the simultaneous, contradictory truth that it *cannot* be preserved, kept for us, except (possibly) for the faintest intimations of texture and scent.

The value of the masks that he himself assumes resides, then, simply in this: that they neither pretend to reconstitute the reality of the ancient world, nor are they mere mirrors for the pubs, beds or bathing sheds of our own. For Jenner these shreds of ancient poetry remind us of our common conundrums: the *fact* that (as Herakleitos put it first) we ‘can not step twice into the same river,’ and yet (anticipating dialectic) that there may be, somehow, unity in opposites: ‘the path up and down is the same.’

ii. Writers in Residence

Having looked at these examples of Jenner's poetry, let's move on to his most recent publication, the main focus of this essay, *Writers in Residence and Other Captive Fauna* (2009). At first sight this is a far more expansive, less constitutionally fragmentary set of texts – less of a postmodern echo-chamber, and more of a set of Borgesian stories and parables.

It begins with a sequence of short prose works (one hesitates to call them 'stories', exactly, since that would imply a conventional narrative momentum which they largely lack – Jenner, in the notes at the back of his book, refers to them simply as 'pieces'), with strange, punning titles: 'Arthur's Pass' describes the complex trajectory of a jogger named Arthur as he travels – in memory as well as reality – around a set of suburban streets. 'Doubtful Sound' talks about a man's attempt to reconstruct the reality of his writer neighbour (who happens to be working on a story-cycle called 'Arthur's Pass') simply from the sounds of the space in the flat the one inhabits parallel to the other.

This sense of *overhearing* the writer at work – the writer thinking about himself writing, then extending this to imagining others thinking about him writing, then on to imagining them seeing it as a deficiency in him that he doesn't spend *enough* time thinking about them, even envisaging them wanting him to recast their reality in his writing – may sound like a fairly conventional postmodern *mise-en-abîme*: a kind of Kiwi version of Robbe-Grillet's *Voyeur*. And much in this early piece by Jenner would seem to support that reading. He mentions in his notes that "'Writers in Residence" s[...] was begun and then abandoned in the 1980's [...] It was not until the new millennium that the series was revisited and expanded' (128).

My neighbour's rooms are in reverse order to mine, a mirror image in fact with wooden steps at the left of the living-room instead of the right, and bathroom on left and bedroom on right – that is if you're looking from the rear of this block of flats, or, to be more precise, you're standing in the long, tree-lined grass behind our two flats at this late hour of the night, directly facing his living-room window, which is almost totally obscured by a combination of drawn curtains and washing hanging on the clotheslines, including a shirt of his oscillating gently on a coat-hanger suspended from a makeshift clothesline. (42)

That ‘oscillating shirt’ is the subject of an earlier piece in the series, ‘A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Shirt’. The intriguing thing about this kind of landscape precision in the description of a banal urban environment, though, is its lack of any particular sense of social comment or political engagement. That, I suspect, is why the series proved unfinishable in the 1980s and had to wait so long to be completed. The Marxist in Robbe-Grillet and the other stars of the *nouveau roman* – Marguerite Duras, Claude Simon, Nathalie Sarraute – could seldom be submerged for long. Jenner’s piece might *seem* to be about ‘suburban neurosis’ or some other buzz-word of the time, but actually his focus is quite different:

I see very little of my neighbour and hear even less, and yet we live so close to each other, close enough at times to shake hands if, for example, we met on our respective stairs, separated as they are only by a thin partition wall, or if we faced each other in our adjacent bathrooms, standing at our back-to-back, reverse-order washstands, acknowledging each other instead of nodding to ourselves in our respective mirrors before swishing water over our hands and faces and listening to it curling and gurgling at the plughole with its characteristic gutturals only just audible above the drone of the long-haul juggernauts on the motorway. (42-43)

Kafka’s late story ‘The Burrow’, about a mole-like creature whose efforts to create the perfect underground lair are gradually undermined by his own self-doubt and paranoia, might be a better model than the *nouveau roman* for the nature of Jenner’s imagination here. Jenner’s protagonist’s peace of mind is destroyed by the fact that he’s become aware of this proximity, of the strangeness of living so close, inverted into the folds of another’s body, almost – and yet remaining apart. It’s interesting (parenthetically) that there’s been no mention of the *gender* of this secret listener up to now, leading readers (or this reader, at any rate) to fall into the easy genre-assumption of a *woman* overhearing the activities of a contiguous yet paradoxically separate *man*.

Pacing back and forth in my bedroom upstairs or living-room downstairs in 20-30 minute sessions each evening, up and down without deviation as though following a figure in the carpet, or, in my case, the knots and grains in the floorboards, I often have to ask myself if I don’t cover as much ground in half an hour as the jogger who makes a regular circuit of the surrounding streets at nightfall. And I sometimes wonder if I don’t hear more of this jogger than my own neighbour who can be heard ascending or descending his fourteen wooden steps at irregular intervals but might remain silent, seated at his living-room table, for three or four hours at a stretch, writing. My neighbour, you see, is a writer, and a reasonably serious one at that. Three to four hours, I tell you, almost motionless but for the fugitive fingers tapping a soundless devil’s tattoo on the keys of his laptop. (43)

The jogger (needless to say) is 'Arthur' – or some simulacrum thereof. It makes sense that both this listening neighbour and the writer would overhear the same things, overlooking, as they do, the self-same streets. Where the one creates a character, the other notes a kind of social fixture.

His writing consists almost entirely of sketches and short fiction, if the cancelled manuscripts I keep finding in his dustbin are anything to go by. But here's the interesting question concerning all this writing, the one I cannot resist. Does he model any of his characters on the habits and personalities of his immediate neighbours? The fifteen to twenty fictional characters said to be baptised somewhere in the Southern Hemisphere every second can't all be drawn purely out of the writer's imagination. Surely the vast majority of them emerge from personal observations – a shrewd smile or an unnerving frown, a fleeting gesture, the face in a crowd that stares at you and won't let go, the intriguing behaviour of the man next door who seems to be spending an inordinate amount of time outside your kitchen or living-room window in the guise of sweeping up grass or leaves on the front path. And yet I've searched in vain for any trace of myself in his discarded 'literature'. The ingrate apparently ignores both his neighbour and the keen and even painstaking interest he takes in him. (43-44)

'*He takes in him.*' This doesn't, in itself, preclude a romantic twist – a man might fall in love with his 'artistic' neighbour just as easily as a woman. But there seems to be more of a longing here to *be* him than to be *with* him. The listener wants to be the writer – *is*, in effect, the writer now, a writer is recording his impressions of another writer, inspired to do so by that first writer's persistent refusal to acknowledge him. Talk about the anxiety of influence! And the wry note in that side-comment about the 'fifteen to twenty fictional characters' born even in our remote hemisphere shows (I think) both the young and the mature Jenner's despair at the thought of adding more to an already-overstocked menagerie.

Aloof, intractable, deliberately (affectedly?) enigmatic – that's the writer I know best, and he refuses to let me play even the slightest, the most indirect, role in New Zealand literature. Now perhaps you can see why I intend to wait for him one evening, stride out on to the verandah as soon as I hear his key turn in the lock and ask him point-blank, Will you finish 'Arthur's Pass' tonight? Or have you started something new? And he will turn towards me, slowly, calmly at first, his eyes invisible behind the thick lens mottled by reflections of the dark, forbidding foliage surrounding us, and then suddenly, with his sparse and wiry tuft of a beard bobbing uncontrollably, his lips elongated, stretched thin by a string of plosives and sibilants, Please! Please! he'll protest, in a kind of tonic crescendo, *Pleese!!* before pulling the door open with such force that he'll catch his nose on its sharp wooden edge and stagger into his flat, abusing me with a gamut of expletives. (44)

To the plethora of echoes I've already mentioned in my attempt to sum up the peculiar atmosphere and effect of this story, I think one now has to add Samuel Beckett. That '*Pleese!!*' has something of the effect of the bleaker moments in *Krapp's Last Tape*. Jenner too clearly longs to play a 'role in New Zealand literature'. Which of us, in the deepest recesses of ourselves, is innocent of such grandiose fantasies? Yet to go on from that to imagine oneself both as the pushy, intrusive stranger and the tuft-bearded, retreating writer takes a bitter intensity of self-knowledge which few self-portrait painters can muster. 'Writers in Residence' isn't fun to read, exactly, but it's horrifically funny in parts, relentlessly self-loathing and self-destructive in others, full – above all – of a curious poetic distillate of loneliness:

Eleven-thirty. Listen. A footstep on the stairs. And thirteen more buried within the drone of traffic on the motorway and water dripping from a kitchen tap and splashing in the sink with a sound like those large beads of water that sweat on the ceilings of ancient caves, seeping, constantly falling and shattering on the calcified floor. (44)

No real communication between people is possible in this brittle 'calcified' world of Ted Jenner's. Even writers (and would-be writers) – though it's doubtful there's really much difference in the present scenario – can't talk to one another, let alone the sketchy 'Yvonne's' and 'Sue's' who occasionally obtrude upon the action.

A minute after twelve. Now there is no sound in our respective flats except the sound of the drop of water which, at increasingly longer intervals, falls from a tap on my bath, splashes, pulverized, on the enamel of the bathtub, and dribbles into the drainpipe, conveying a dead fly, a family of drowned ants and several loose strands of wiry hair down into that chaos of primeval waters beneath the earth. (44)

I think, finally, of Georges Perec – of his magnificent reconstruction of the world of a Parisian apartment-block in *La Vie mode d'emploi* [Life: A User's Manual]. He, too, leaves us with a vision of the subterranean world, the tunnels and sewers under the earth, the realm of the Magna Mater and all that darkness we've tried to exclude from our sanitised, pre-fabricated, freeze-dried living arrangements.

iii. A Brief History of the Muses

Ted Jenner's work – his *published* work, at any rate – is admittedly sparse: five books, some quite slim, as the harvest of more than thirty years of writing. But that does have the effect of making us consider each piece extremely carefully. It certainly shouldn't preclude us from taking him seriously.

Since this book, *Writers in Residence*, is the fullest he's published – containing pieces from the whole span of his career – it invites the closest attention. The others might be accounted for simply as chips from a classical scholar's workbench: some lovely yet fragmentary translations – and reconstructions of ancient remains so slight that it would be charitable to call them fragmentary. Here, though, he goes on the record once and for all.

Scott Hamilton, in his introduction to the book (now reprinted on his blog *Reading the Maps*) talks about his first reading, as a schoolboy, of Jenner's 'Progress Report on an Annotated Checklist for a Motuihe Island Gazetteer of Ethnographical Topology and Comparative Onomatography,' included in Michael Morrissey's pioneering 1984 anthology *The New Fiction*, and now reprinted in *Writers in Residence*.

Jenner's extraordinary text made me realise for the first time that there is no Chinese Wall between different types of writing, and that the 'technical' languages of subjects like botany, linguistics and geography can be as poetic as Keats' nightingale and Wordsworth's daffodils. (Hamilton)

Jenner himself, in an online interview, explains this text as presenting a minute description of the island of Motuihe in Auckland's Hauraki Gulf as a microcosm of the history of New Zealand. Hamilton goes on to comment:

Even an attempt to make an exhaustive catalogue of the contents of a tiny piece of the world like Motuihe Island is doomed to failure, because reality is infinitely complex and continually in flux. To experience reality properly we need poetry, myth, and magic, as much as philosophy, philology and physics. Plato was wrong to want to exclude poets from his Republic.

Jenner's horror of dogmatic ideology and rigid categories is reflected in his continual undermining of scholarly conventions and procedures. His texts show us the limits of our understandings of the world, and the inadvisability of using dogma to cover for our ignorance. More than a few of the pieces in *Writers in Residence* feature a narrator or monologist whose pretensions to omniscience are gradually undermined, until confusion replaces certainty.

This description certainly helps us to understand texts as apparently diverse as 'In Italy Take Care Not To Miss' (Jenner 2009, 61-67) and 'Athens: three Sketches – or what we missed in translation' (68-69), with their parodies of the implicit paradox of the travel book or the tourist brochure. 'Things can only happen once, not be repeated, as the brochure advises,' as Jenner explains in the interview quoted from earlier. (Cross and Hamilton)

Uncertainty is one thing – whether it be the unreliability of translation, the fragility of transmission, the fatuity of conventional systems of information storage, or the intangibility of individual identity. There's another level to these texts which accounts for their curious power.

'A Brief History of the Muses' is one of the strangest texts included in *Writers in Residence*. This prose-poem/pagework was first included in Jenner's private-press chapbook *Dedications* in 1991, and is now reprinted on the last three pages of his new book, after a long series of landscape notes recorded during his lengthy stay as a teacher of classics in Malawi.

The form of the poem is complex. Each page has three sections of prose, divided by fragments of a drawing of three women, presumably 'the Muses, of whom there were originally three, later nine with inflation in the various departments of arts and sciences,' as Jenner explains helpfully in his notes at the end of the book (130). The various segments of these drawings rather resemble that child's game where the first person draws a head, then folds the paper so that only the bottom of the neck can be seen; the next person draws the torso, then folds it over so that only the tops of the legs can be seen; and finally the last person draws the feet; after which the piece of paper is unfolded and the grotesquery of the finished item is revealed.

As for the text, Jenner's notes explain that it was based on a lecture entitled 'Feminism and Italian Avant-Garde Art' where 'poet Giulia Nicolai spoke of a secret alphabet in pre-literate Greece linked to the months of the year and invented, long before the Greeks modified the Phoenician symbols, by three priestesses of the Moon who each corresponded to one of the three lunar phases.'

a chain of molecules arranged in a certain order, and thanks to the mere fact of having an order, they had only to float in the midst of the disorder and immediately around her other chains were formed. (Their periods were heaven's fair new letters: first quarter, heaven's fair new letter C.) But in the

[...]

luminous colonies of the sea's depths, in the ribbons of kelp that began to emerge from the soft crust of embryonic continents, every now & then a swarm broke loose only to divide once again, repeat that sponge or polyp whence they came – mOOn over mushrOOms mOOn repeats itself in cycles: the

[...]

phases alternate, always the same. The great division within living beings had begun. (Their periods were heaven's fair new letters: full moon, heaven's fair new letter O.)

Strictly through the mechanisms of tortoise-shell lyres and prosody, in a mirror-fingered dawn, the virgins reproduced them- (125)

This ‘unholy mixture of mythology and microbiology’ (to quote from one of Jenner’s notes on another piece in his book) seems to envisage some kind of universal dance within nature itself, some inevitable sense in which the alphabet itself was born (like Aphrodite) literally – pun intended – from sea-foam. ‘C’ is (of course) our starting point: the new moon, the maiden, ‘first quarter, heaven’s fair new letter,’ rapidly modulating into ‘O’, the full moon, the matron: ‘The great division within living beings had begun.’ For the time being, though, ‘the virgins reproduced them-’

[...]

selves mOOn over tOwers mOOn. But between the part that transmits the orders of reproduction and the part that carries them out an irreconcilable gap has opened and they speak: ‘Your sentence over, boys, you feel you have finished too soon, you feel uncomfortable and want to prolong the


[...]

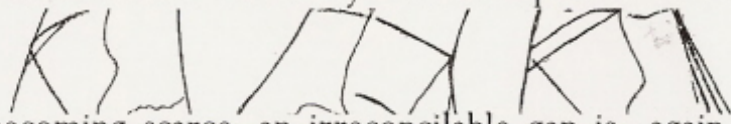
gesture. If only your arms were so heavy that an appreciative sweep lasted 10 minutes, we should be saved from literature.’ (Their periods were heaven’s fair new letters: half moon, heaven’s fair new letter D.) By now the battle is joined between those that believe and those that would like to be-

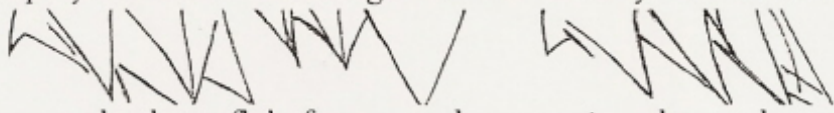
[...]

lieve. In the letters of their alphabet, however, everything has been registered: the stage is magically cleared of debris and the reborn Rockettes assume their traditional formations mOOn over tOwn mOOn. Strictly through the effects of architecture, in a mirror-clad dorm, the virgins reproduce them- (126)

And thus is born the battle of the sexes – the simultaneous attraction-repulsion between the masculine and feminine principle. This in its turn gives rise to ‘literature’, the division of the half moon D into the ‘man of letters’ while the virgins – ‘reborn Rockettes’ – remain apart ‘in a mirror-clad dorm.’ COD – Cash On Delivery? Or (reshuffled) OCD: Obsessive Compulsive Disorder? It’s perhaps helpful here to know that (as Wikipedia informs us): ‘the Rockettes have performed five shows a day, seven days a week, for 75 years’ since the group was first formed in 1925. ‘Their best-known routine is an eye-high leg kick in perfect unison in a chorus line, which they include at the end of every performance.’

selves  heaven's fair new letters, last quarter, heaven's fair
new letter O suddenly breaks loose – could it be the gentle
curve of their eyebrows in International Hotel lobbies or
the soft chime of their circumflex accents in airport bars?
But the material necessary for self-repetition shows signs


of becoming scarce, an irreconcilable gap is again opening
between us, they cancel the last bold letter at the first
quarter of the new moon, substitute (all phases apparent) O ,
heaven's fair new asterisk, and accuse us of misinterpreting
the polyvalence of their significations. 'For your vision has


become the housefly's fragmented perception, boys, thus we
restore you to your freedom: call it the distance between your
multiple footnotes and our whole configuration.' So we were
left with mOOn Over fOOtnOtes mOOn as our letters re-
peat themselves in cycles, the phases alternate, always the same.

[figure 1: *Writers* (2009)]

[...]

selves, heaven's fair new letters, last quarter, heaven's fair new letter) suddenly breaks loose – could it be the gentle curve of their eyebrows in International Hotel lobbies or the soft chime of their circumflex accents in airport bars? But the material necessary for self-repetition shows signs

[...]



of becoming scarce, an irreconcilable gap is again opening between us, they cancel the last bold letter at the first quarter of the new moon, substitute (all phases apparent) 0, heaven's fair new asterisk, and accuse us of misinterpreting the polyvalence of their significations. 'For your vision has

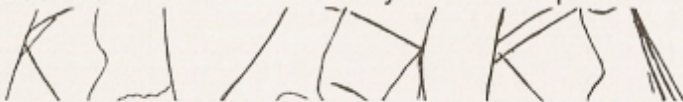

[...]

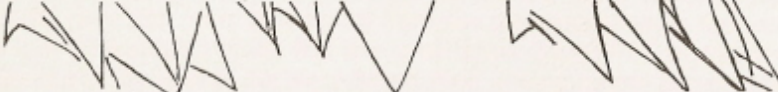
become the housefly's fragmented perception, boys; thus we restore you to your freedom: call it the distance between your multiple footnotes and our whole configuration.' So we were left with mOOOn Over fOOtnOtes mOOOn as our letters repeat themselves in cycles, the phases alternate, always the same. (127)

You'll note from the illustration included above that that closed bracket ')' should be a complete inverted C – but it's not easy to find a way to reproduce that on a standard keyboard. The '0' in the next paragraph, again, should be a capital 'O' (or a zero?) on its side. Unfortunately even the complete reprint of this page included (in full) as an *erratum* in the Titus edition of Jenner's prose-poem has failed to restore the correct reading.

If you examine the earlier (1991) version of this text from *Dedications* (included below), you'll note the discrepancy. 'The phases alternate, always the same,' but 'heaven's new asterisk' was a set of interlocking half-circles in the form of an asterisk in the first printing.


 selves, heaven's fair new letters, last quarter, heaven's
 fair new letter  suddenly breaks loose - could it be the
 gentle curve of their eyebrows in international hotel lobbies
 or the soft chime of their circumflex accents in airport bars
 ? But the material necessary for self-repetition shows signs


 of becoming scarce, an irreconcilable gap is again opening
 between us, they cancel the last bold letter at the first
 quarter of the new moon, substitute (all phases apparent) ,
 heaven's fair new asterisk, and accuse us of misinterpreting
 the polyvalence of their significations. 'For your vision has


 become the housefly's fragmented perception, boys; thus we
 restore you to your freedom: call it the distance between
 your multiple footnotes and our whole configuration.' So we
 were left with mOOOn Over fOOtnOtes mOOOn as our letters repeat
 themselves in cycles, the phases alternate, always the same.

[figure 2: *Dedications* (1991)]

Clearly this backwards 'C' represents the third part of the triple Moon goddess (Maiden / Matron / Crone) familiar to us from Western Matriarchal tradition. The 'C', the 'O' and the reversed 'C' serve as mirror images and (accordingly) completions of one another. The *Dedications* version

ends with a *reversal* of this, though – the asterisk becoming a spiky *inversion* of the pattern: ‘an irreconcilable gap is again opening between us, they cancel the last bold letter at the first quarter of the new moon, substitute ...’ – *what* do they substitute for that last bold letter? A COD (archaic term for joke)? A CODE (awaiting decipherment)? The asterisk makes more sense than the toppled zero in the 2009 version, but both, essentially, are *stand-in* letters, symbolic enactments of the ‘housefly’s fragmented [many-eyed] perception, boys ... call it the distance between your multiple footnotes and our whole configuration.’

Despite the many layers of complexity in Jenner’s text, its basic cyclical intention is clear enough – its *mélange* of Astronomical / Biological / Cultural alternations within a kind of cosmic flux. On the one hand one is reminded of the (equally conjectural) Druidic tree-alphabets in Robert Graves’ *White Goddess*; on the other hand, however, the echoes of pop culture (Rockettes) and the poetic canon (e. e. cumming’s destabilising ‘mOOn’ letters) seem just as crucial to the final effect. Literature – literally: ‘spelling things out in letters’ – has to be taken here as a kind of evolutionary original sin, leading to self-consciousness, conflict, guilt and all the other lovely legacies of Patriarchal tradition. At the same time, though, it opens up a magic realm of reproduction, possibility, and all the natural processes of change.

Is ‘A Brief History of the Muses’ to be construed, then, finally, as a *hopeful* text? I don’t know if that’s the kind of terminology so confirmed a sceptic as Ted Jenner would permit himself. But it’s certainly wildly funny (in parts at least). He remains a *littérateur*, a man of letters, dedicated to the transmission and thus perpetuation of memory. These lapidary fragments of translation and cultural / mythological tradition he has ‘shored against our ruins’ (Eliot 1980, 146) are not really, in the final analysis, compatible with a philosophy of the complete vanity of human wishes.

The virtue of Ted Jenner’s poetry, then (I see no need to exclude his more extensive prose texts from this category, given their basic features of conciseness and internal complexity) is his ability to balance competing, seemingly contradictory paradigms. As he himself put it in his online interview with Brett Cross and Scott Hamilton: ‘I see no contradiction between classicism and postmodernism.’ In both cases, the fact of having to live in a state of indeterminacy is the key.

Through no fault of their own, most Classical authors have come down to us in fragments – some so fragmentary and gnomic as to be virtually meaningless. Through no real fault of *our* own, in the late-modern world the stabilities of cultural norms and the unitary self have deserted us. Jenner’s is, accordingly, a less than epic vision: not a Platonic ‘spume that plays / Upon a ghostly paradigm of things’ (Yeats 1973, 445). It’s more like the world envisaged by contemporary physics: a series of necessary impossibilities, transcending traditional notions of time and place, taking place at a level unreachable by our senses.

For Jenner, this cosmos of quantum mechanics is not only compatible but necessary to account for the continued potency of these relics of our Classical past. Who would have thought that the half-life of Sappho's fragments would be so long? That they would still be glowing in the dark at this distance in time? Their very indeterminacy is, it seems, their strength. Whether we see them simply as an elegant metaphor for our contemporary reality, or the literal means of its creation, we're forced to come back to them again and again, as they rebuild themselves link by link from the garbage-dumps of Egypt.

The Classics are back; so much is clear. One could deduce as much simply from the renewed popularity of Classical studies in our High School curricula. But it's more than that. Poets as diverse as Anne Carson and Michael Harlow (who supplied a blurb for Jenner's book) appear to be drawing fresh sustenance from the detail, the *letter* of these ancient texts. It's no longer enough (*pace* Lowell, Baxter, Stead) to read them simply as sexy and unashamed. Ted Jenner in particular has shown us that a life unexamined in the light of these snippets of our past is not worth living – that Homer and Virgil (and Plato, particularly) – may now have to take a back seat to Sappho, Herakleitos – and Ibykos.

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