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REVIEW
THE SPECTACLE OF MATTER BEING TRANSFORMED

Helen Garner. *Cosmo Cosmolino*. Ringwood: McPhee Gribble Penguin Books, 1992. ISBN 0 86914 265 8. 221 pp. $29.95.

Helen Garner's latest novel is an unusual and fascinating triptych in which the first two sections, independent stories in themselves, introduce and give perspective to the third section of the novel. The same themes, and some reference to participants, link the three parts. The themes may very inadequately be summed up as friendship, loyalty (and disloyalty) and human relationships, and these supply the basic matter which Garner transforms into stories recognisable as psychological reality on the surface level and rich with implication and meaning at a deeper level. The stories are written with the same tender, wry strength that characterises Garner's earlier work. The adjustment of form and material is challenging, but satisfying and stimulating for readers who like writers to take them in unaccustomed directions.

It is not that *Cosmo Cosmolino* is greatly different from Garner's novels like *Monkey Grip* or *The Children's Bach*, with both of which it has some connections. But in each section of the triptych the narrative embraces a kind of fantasy which is not very far removed from everyday experience. For many people, much of everyday life does convert to fantasy if they choose to see it as such; and the spectacle of matter being transformed into something non-material is by no means rare even for the unimaginative materialist.

Some of the original experience which contributed to the second section, "A Vigil," was first presented by Garner in a piece called "Death," published in the *Adelaide Review* in August 1987. In this piece Garner described a visit to a crematorium where she was taken down to the furnace room and saw, among other things, the incineration of a coffin and the body it contained. Many details of the furnace room are repeated in "A Vigil," including the tattoos on the hands of the workman who acted as

her guide. The original experience provoked the writer's curiosity and awe. She reports, typically, I think, if one considers the compassionate and unsentimental stance in her own stories, that she likes the fact that her guide "so tenderly" handles a plastic bag containing the ashes of a still-born child "and that nothing he says about it is sentimental" (Garner, 1987, 10). Watching the feet of the corpse consume, she is full of wonder as she stares into the orange flames, and she suggests that we are drawn to watching fire because "[i]t's the spectacle of matter being transformed." The piece ends with Garner's comment that the visit gave her, for the first time,

> a conviction — I mean not a thought but knowledge — that life can't possibly end at death. I had the punctuation wrong. I thought it was a fullstop, but it's only a comma, or a dash — or better still, a colon: ... what about energy, spirit, soul, imagination, love? The force for which we have no word? How preposterous, to think that it could die! (11)

Cosmo Cosmolino is not so much about the perpetuation of life after death, as about the wonder inherent in the spectacle of matter being transformed. The transformations take place in different ways.

At one level, Garner centres her transformations on the idea of angels, quoting Rilke's phrase, "Every angel is terrible," as an epigraph. Of the four possible angelic appearances, only the final transformation of the material substance of the fourth, the young woman Maxine, is inexplicable in rational terms. Maxine's flight above the Melbourne suburban house, clasping an armful of winter jonquils, is nevertheless a fine climax to the novel. The benediction of four flowers, which she drops to her more earth-bound friends in the street below, allows the novel to return to reality in its last moments. Until Maxine's transformation, the stories do not resist a rationalisation of the angelic phenomena, although the reading that enjoys resting in uncertainties without irritably reaching after fact, is perhaps what the text really invites.

In the first story, "Recording Angel," a first person female narrator visits a friend of many years, now married with children, who is about to undergo surgery for the removal of a brain tumour. Patrick is one of those infuriating and incurably patriarchal men who seem to be born with a beard, bushy eyebrows and a nice, crinkly smile at the corner of

their eye. Having decided where their friends and relations fit in their patriarchal taxonomies they can weather any vicissitudes a relationship might offer, secure behind their "terrifyingly simple categories" (6).

> Only *Dissatisfied Women* become feminists. Lesbians are *Heavy Drinkers*. Derelicts suffer from *Human Degradation*. Some women *Lack the Quality* to make a man *A Good Wife*. Ursula, for example, *Became an Alcoholic and a Prostitute.*

Patrick lovingly disapproves of his friend's life, and what he sees as her wasted opportunities, so that she "slides down, and down, and down" (8). She would like to escape "the rubrics under which he had long ago marshalled into a cast-iron curriculum vitae" the evidence she herself had provided and which he interprets as:

> sad girl; problem with her father; full of anger; nympho; self-destructive; unstable; hyper-sensitive; a failure at marriage; unfeminine; man-hater; lost soul.

Patrick's imminent danger and her entrapment in Patrick's mind, make her think what might happen if the operating surgeon should "lose his way, and broach the box of bone where Patrick's official grids were stored ... and finally excise [her] file from the bee-chambers of Patrick's memory" (17). Patrick's wife, Natalie, tells the narrator that burning the decades of postcards she had sent Patrick could not shift the idea of herself that she had given him. In other words (which the narration does not quite use) if Patrick were to die, could she "spring away free into newness of life" (17)?

The boldness, the apparent callousness of this thought, is matched only by its honesty. How many people have not felt some tiny trace of similar relief mixed with the sincere grief at the death of a particularly intractable and loving friend? Describing the death of Ursula who fell under a tram in St Kilda Road, and whom Patrick had definitively placed as "an Alcoholic and a Prostitute," the narrator recalls her own narrow escape from a similar encounter with a tram: "I knew what you had already found out: the colossal weight of the thing, its dense rigidity, its utter lack of give" (7). Positioned as it is in the narrative, the description seems to apply not only to the juggernauting tram but also to the juggernaut of patriarchal taxonomies on which loving and reliable men like Patrick ride.

The "evidence" about herself which the narrator provides for Patrick is, of course, not evidence at all. Despite what Natalie says, the narrator does not "give" him the idea of herself that he holds. Patrick's taxonomies were in place long before he met the narrator, and they developed independently of anything that she did or was. Patrick's grids could transform anything the narrator did, or anyone she became, into the one grey picture of herself, just as the furnaces of the crematorium transform coffins and bodies into grey ashes.

The angel that Patrick sees in his dream, looking down at him from the rim of the lion's-den pit, is "a black man, tall, with shining skin" dressed in splendid robes and a great feathered head-dress, looking "in majesty" (11). This magnificent male vision of the angel of death is contrasted with the narrator's final vision, as she leaves the hospital, of a "small, serious, stone-eyed angel of mercy" (22), confronting her with what seems to be a gun. The vision is ambiguous: does the angel extend a very doubtful mercy to the narrator by setting her free by Patrick's death, or is she mercifully condemned to remain entrapped in Patrick's restored mind? Or does Patrick's danger remind her of her own mortality, and is a small, caped boy with serious stone eyes simply this woman's concept of the angel of death who will eventually visit *her?*

In "The Vigil" Garner transforms her own crematorium visit, which was awe-inspiring but not horrific, into a descent into Avernus undergone by a decrepit, aimless youth called Raymond. Although Raymond was not directly responsible for the death of Ursula's daughter Kim, he used her, and deserted her when she was obviously suffering from an overdose of drugs or alcohol, or both, and she dies, choked by her own vomit. Discovering the body, Raymond flies from the place; but he is hauled to the funeral by Ursula, who apparently has friends in the furnace room. They escort him down to their grey kingdom to watch the final transformation of the girl for whom he had not cared enough to do anything to prevent her transformation from life to death. It is interesting to see how Garner transforms her own factual narrative into the searing, nightmarish ordeal that Raymond faces. Here, the bald, tattooed attendant is Raymond's vision of an angel of death: "he lifted his chin and turned on Raymond eyes as inhuman, blank and depthless as those of a figure carved in granite" (46). "You know where to find me, now," he tells Raymond, "I'm always here. Always on duty" (47).

After this it is not surprising that Raymond turns up in the third and largest panel of the triptych as a born-again Christian, wearing a Bible

with cigarette-paper thin pages next to his heart. He joins the household of a journalist, Janet, an ironic, independent, quietly desperate remnant of the collective that had shared her house some twenty years ago. Also resident is Maxine, a carpenter full of New Age mysticism and naive wisdom and charity which are made to seem more impressive than suburban Marxist collectives or Jesus freaking.

However superficially but desperately Raymond clutches at his Bible, Maxine simply and trustfully lives in a world of auras and incarnations to which the narrative gives credibility. Except about herself, in moments of naive enthusiasm, she does not speak about her apprehension of others' psychic fields, although she discerns Raymond's encounter with death and the dark column of self-repression that always stands like a shadow behind Janet's left shoulder:

> These matters Maxine had learnt not to speak of. Now she dismissed them, firmly but with respect, and as they faded she arranged her features into what she hoped was a suitable smile, and moved forward into the room. (94)

Maxine, however, interprets Raymond's arrival as the visitation of a not very highly developed angelic being, and she determines that he will father her child. She makes her own icons of child-bearing: a tiny, delicate and beautifully balanced cradle made from twigs, and a straw "bride" made in the fashion of pagan Britain. She will name the baby "Cosmo Cosmolino" — "world, little world" (144). Maxine visits Raymond in the night, and he impregnates what he imagines is the succubus of dead Kim, whom, tremblingly, he welcomes. Unfortunately, Maxine's psychic wisdom is no match for the financial scams practised by middle-class confidence men on their classmates, who are groping for some spiritual fulfilment which also carries the promise of financial gain. To participate in the "aeroplane game" she takes the thousand dollars Raymond has saved for the day when he will be rescued from the household by his brother Alby. Alby, a former inmate of the commune and one of Janet's past lovers, arrives with a rented truck full of tatty furniture that even Raymond recognises as junk and garbage. Anticipated throughout the story like a rather more punctual Godot, Alby turns out to be an adequate angel of mercy. In appearance he is almost as shabby as his furniture, but he is made of better material. Dismissing Raymond's loss — he does not appreciate how hellishly miserable Raymond had found the weeks of

normal labouring work which earned him the money — he decides to settle in with Janet for a while. For her part, Janet fights the dark pillar of self-denial that looms at her shoulder and responds to Alby's comparative sanity and intelligence. Perhaps it is not accidental that the pillar bears a shadowy resemblance to Patrick:

> How long did she struggle? She felt the vast patience of the thing, its utter imperviousness to argument; but she fought it, with a mad pugnacious hubris she pitted herself; and at last a tremor rippled through the pillar, a slow, long shudder; and then it thinned, faded, and was gone. (192)

Alby flies in, Maxine possibly in child-birth, flies out. Her going is more enigmatic than his coming, but both are satisfying events in the story. Only Raymond is left perplexed; he is not stupid, but life has always been many steps ahead of him, perhaps because he is so utterly, if self-protectively, self-centred. It seems that whatever is fated to transform him has not yet materialised.

The narrative of *Cosmos Cosmolino*, as in "The Vigil," is in the third person, and moves with an easy, conversational grace and delicate realism that are characteristic of Garner's prose. One imagines that there is no experience, however intimate, embarrassing or abominable for which Garner could not find redeeming prose, without torturing or ransacking the language for apocalyptic words and images. She evokes the same kind and depth of inner experience or human relationship as one might find in a novel by Patrick White, but her style is very different, and her descriptions, although they reveal the inscape of things as White's descriptions do, are always immediately, sometimes disturbingly, accessible. Maxine's tools and the furniture she makes are installed in the shed at the bottom of Janet's garden:

> The furniture, when it came, filled Ray's panel van like an excursion of handicapped children, some supine and passive, some eagerly upright but exhibiting at the windows bizarre body language which snagged the attention of pedestrians and left them puzzled and staring. (83)

The accuracy of the descriptions is mediated by the decorum of compassion practised by the writing. It transforms Janet's recollections of her house in the commune era, the all-too-human, all-too-unsuccessful attempts at unselfish equality, the rigour of what Vincent Buckley in his epic Melbourne poem, *Golden Builders*, called "the unforgiving and compassionate young" (Buckley, 47). The final transformation in this triptych of stories is perhaps Garner's transformation of the world and time of *Monkey Grip* into the world and time of *Cosmo Cosmolino*.

WORKS CITED

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