



current issue

Issue Five

**Review: *Absence and Negativity*, *Southerly*, Volume 60, Number 2, 2000. pp. 208.
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Beyond a certain point there is no return. This point has to be reached.

Franz Kafka, *Reflections on Sin, Suffering, Hope, and the True Way*.

... introducing this issue of *Southerly* as guest editor, Michael Brennan promises a diverse array of writing and approaches to the topos in question. *Absence and Negativity* features a number of papers presented at an eponymous conference in July 1999. Among other things, these papers attempt to revise some of the enduring stereotypes and clichés about Australian literature and critical writing about literature. As Brennan affirms, the themes and terrain explored present "a topos of dissimilar ideas all the more pleasurable for the absence of singular possibilities" (6-7). The strange attractions of negativity/absence do seem to connect with a plethora of explorations of the limits of contemporary forms, whether one chooses to call its temporality modernist, postmodernist, or something else altogether. Texts literally, and not just in terms of subject matter, give way and open themselves to gaps, silences, interruptions, disintegration ...

... as in Kevin Hart's erudite keynote address which explores the modern significance of "religious poetry" through various histories (literary, philosophical, theological) in seeking to comprehend Francis Webb's "Poet" and Webb himself as religious poet. In a modernity haunted by God's withdrawal, Hart's thinking on Webb moves through the Levinasian idea of poetry capable of being "a testimony of radical openness toward the other rather than language trapping being and meaning like a spider's web;" it is a saying that "unsays itself and so keeps open the risk of transcendence" (18). An imaginative style of interpretation that is attuned to significant things left unsaid ...

... to revise James McAuley as "conservative, anti-communist, Catholic politico-poet," Noel Rowe finds in McAuley's poetry, particularly in his late work, a concern for negativity as the "fault" of theology ... David Brooks looks at Judith Wright's poetry to explore a kenotic theme in Australian letters more widely, an "ontological self-consciousness" inhering in the Australian condition and attempts at identity manifested in some of its key cultural artefacts. This condition, Brooks contends, anticipates the much wider condition felt lately as the postmodern/poststructural anxiety over origins (64). Australians have had to construct an identity from what little they could find around them that seemed reliable: the fact of being uprooted, displaced, thrown into change, in short, a self-conscious and ontological anxiety over the possibility of origins as an origin which precedes ... examining an anxiety over the need for origins and models of influence, whereby Martin Harrison contests stereotypes of Australian writing as traditionally anti-modernist, seeks to expose such claims as not only erroneous but as themselves perpetuating a tired model of how literatures develop. A thoughtful

exploration of modernist themes which places Australian writing within a manifold network of international poetic cross-currents ...

... in which more direct encounters with contemporary form take place, including Bernadette Brennan's exploration of the literary enactments and experiments of Brian Castro's novel *Drift*, a fissured text marked by erasure and death, "of the writer, a race of people and of writing itself" (39). The people in question are the Aboriginal people of Tasmania, erased by the violent impositions of European settlement, an erasure that Brennan is convinced *Drift*, beyond its complicated bearing of witness, subverts ... and with bold gestures, Jane Sloan's ficto-critical essay stands out as the most eccentric of the conference papers and as a contemporary engagement of topic with process and form. As Sloan states at the outset, she does not "want to produce an argument so much as to describe something" (65). Sloan seeks to evoke, question the possibility of evoking, speak of, evade speaking of, what she has called "deadly silence." Sloan's inventive reading of Brenda Walker's *Poe's Cat* in the review section is also an engaging ficto-critical piece leading the reader into layering of voices ... as the thematics of desire, speaking and writing, are articulated in Kate Lilley's study of John Tranter's *The Floor of Heaven*. Moving through Shakespearean references (Merchant of Venice) and the politics of gendered voices, Tranter, in Lilley's view, opts not for "the version of impersonality associated with language poetry but a feminized rhetoric of character, talk and affect which is 'thick inlaid,' and which recognizes, as a consequence of its critique, the necessity of rewriting and rereading classic homosocial narrative and compulsory heterosexuality" (110). Committed political statements such as this are rare ...

... amongst the three prose pieces in this issue, two of which are extracted from larger works, the stand-alone piece by Mark O'Flynn entitled "Banjo" combines whimsy and social reality to create a contemporary vernacular story that simultaneously pays homage and updates Banjo Patterson's myth-making of Australian figures ... close to the vernacular is a chapter from John Kinsella's *Post-Colonial-A Novel*, intercutting travelogue-style accounts with historical documents of a marginal Australian landscape and its forgotten stories, invisible people lost in ... the extracts from Louis Armand's *The Garden*, exemplifying more bold trends in the internationalization of Australian literature, written in an experimental form borrowing from the French r_cit as practiced by the likes of Maurice Blanchot, this work consists of a cascade of unpunctuated disorienting prose drifting between subject and object, traversing spatial and temporal warpings as well as boundaries of imagination and reality. At times, the flow momentarily twists into interjections seemingly reflecting upon its own possibility, which,

functions in weightlessness against a vertical backdrop where everything is in suspense a cliff face echoing between lines of noise on the margins of a sea traversed by an emergence of meaning which is perhaps a mere surface effect concealing the abyss of the seduction of language a r_cit of the wave's journey as it draws ever over to the receding shoreline (181).

Armand's willingness to take chances with form is also evident in his latest poetry collection, *Land Partition* (Textbase: Melbourne, 2001) ...

... a strong selection of contemporary Australian poetry has been included in the issue. Many of the pieces are brief and exhibit an efficiency of expression ... Elizabeth Allen's "Two Poems" exemplify this tendency, together producing maximum affective charge through sparse phrasing ... amongst the more sustained contributions, Kevin Hart's "The Hall" generates a fractured imagery of youthful memories that compound sexual awakenings and religious ecstasies ... while John Tranter's "Blackout (Parts one to three)" creates a whirlwind under constraint of appropriated texts (see the explanatory note at the end) ... "Black Smoker" by Dorothy Porter is a stark and uncanny melange of war trauma and fertility, bringing them into a disturbingly appropriate proximity ...

... and much in *Absence and Negativity* brings together often disparate approaches that

challenge and revise received views about Australian writing, pluralize its identity, and open it up to contestations taking place beyond a narrowly national debate ...

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