

# NODES OF BRIGHT COLOUR

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*Ladylike*, Kate Lilley  
UWAP, pp. 88 \$19.95

*Crimson Crop*, Peter Rose  
UWAP, pp. 86 \$24.95

University of Western Australia Press over the past four or five years has developed an impressive catalogue of contemporary and canonised Australian poetry. Kate Lilley's *Ladylike* and *Crimson Crop* by Peter Rose are worthy additions to its coffers. Lilley and Rose are both highly sophisticated, accomplished poets and, perhaps even more importantly, they are urbane. As implicit as the East Coast is to their lives and livelihoods (Rose is the editor of Melbourne's *Australian Book Review* and Lilley is an Associate Professor at the University of Sydney), their work refuses the easy closure of the local in order to chart much broader terrain. So these books also help to ensure UWAP's presence as a national, rather than a purely Western Australian, publishing house.

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In different ways, both collections turn to Europe in search of a foundation for poetry. But Lilley does so in order to recover, reclaim or refashion what might otherwise have been lost in the vestiges of colonial memory. Hers isn't a highly localised poetry, however, in that its spaces aren't contingent purely on an antagonistic relationship to these memories: 'not Paris / not Sydney either', she writes in 'Metaland'. This poem was written after Grace Crowley's *Still Life* (1938), a piece of Sydney cubism inspired by Crowley's artistic education in France. As the form disintegrates into a thread between nodes of bright colour, its 'white smudges [are] returning in translation'. The 'white' could be a recurring archetype of cultural flow from the continent, but the poem translates it into blurred confluences of 'here and there', evasions of origin or home required on a quest for something else entirely. Indeed, this constant shifting between poles is central to much of *Ladylike*, as the personal bleeds into the impersonal, as the mother becomes the daughter, as continental man becomes contemporary woman, as lyric poem becomes found text.

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The first half of *Ladylike* sees that shell around the subject of the confessional lyric cracked a little, before being opened up to transpersonal regions of linguistic expression. In the book's second half, however, domains previously exclusive of the feminine are rendered entirely feminine, and are articulated by the female subject. In an intriguing prose introduction, 'Fifty Minutes', the poet asks,

In the criss-cross of mother and daughter, student and teacher, poetry and criticism, what is mine and what is hers?

Lilley's mother is well known as a poet to many of us, but her name isn't particularly relevant here (she's only referred to as 'Mum'). It is important to know that she wrote poetry, but beyond that the elision of her mother's proper name serves to release her from her category as a Famous Poet so that, along with Lilley herself, she might be re-integrated into a broader ocean of matriarchal, pedagogical, familial and artistic relations. This is fundamental to an understanding of *Ladylike* as a whole, for it outlines Lilley's attempt to *dissolve* the identity of the confessional subject, rather than to define or solidify it.

This dissolution quickly becomes apparent in the remarkable opening sequence, 'The Double Session'. As the title suggests, these poems are doing more than one thing; more specifically, they're mapping a new kind of confessional poem. Bridging two worlds at once, 'Sprechstimme' ('speech-voice', or a cross between singing and speaking) verges on the domain of the lyric (the *singing*) only to split it into series of rough-edged, conversational shards (the *speaking*):

Beauty was never my friend.  
Our birthdays were a year apart.

My roots were one foot in the amusement park  
and another in a world of disappointment.

Sift and twist: twist and sift.  
Chance meeting – cigarette lighter – blousy attrition.

In a nutshell success has been non-stop  
since the door to the nursery closed.

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The success of poems like ‘Sprechstimme’ stems from the fact that the thematic progression is echoed structurally: the aesthetic pleasure of the end-rhyme in lines two and three is suddenly disrupted by a ‘world of disappointment’ in line four; the shift into anacoluthon in line five ruptures once and for all a poem that had begun as an individual’s moment of recollection. The absence of personal pronouns in the final couplet, then, ensures that it refers both to this individual *and* to anyone (or anything) else; it’s an open region, where the poem has grown larger than a subject’s determination of it.

Language is released yet further from subjective condensation in the book’s second section, ‘Cleft’, which the poet dedicates to her mother. The relation here, of daughter to mother, extends beyond the elegiac; it’s not a simple matter of one person mourning or remembering another. Instead, ‘Cleft’ is the search for an articulation *of* that very relation, of daughter merging into mother, or the other way around. Lilley diffracts this process through a series of differentiations, producing forms that coalesce around a gathering force: a black and white photograph of a young girl (of her mother, presumably) that comes towards the end of the section. It’s a motion towards the past and to an origin. Poems such as ‘Little Maisie’ and ‘Maisily’ both recall that past and differentiate it into a potential infinity of linguistic estimations:

... glimpses LITTLE wonder LITTLE laugh a LITTLE  
wider LITTLE crooked LITTLE mite LITTLE book  
LITTLE booby smart LITTLE girl tight LITTLE plug...  
(from ‘Little Maisie’)

confusingly immensely peculiarly soothingly brightly gravely  
fortunately dazzlingly strikingly soundlessly splendidly  
faintly sighingly privately repeatedly roundly educationally...  
(from ‘Maisily’)

The past is a continual recurrence, mother continually produces daughter; daughter continually wanders back to the mother. ‘You go on living’, writes Lilley, ‘*happen never happened*’.

The final sections of *Ladylike* draw on raw materials from pamphlets associated with bigamist Mary Carleton (1642–73) and texts from early psychoanalytic studies, particularly Freud’s. This is where the book’s initial propositions are realised practically. Indeed, the Freud

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remixes are powerful ways of questioning the whole history of the confessional tradition. The confession itself, whether to a priest, to a psychoanalyst, or written after Robert Lowell, always sinks into a patriarchal scheme of classification, evaluation and judgement. Instead, Lilley goes somewhere else:

Pity my ruins  
these novels of my life  
unsufferable mischiefs have at last exhorted from me

It hath been my mishap to miscarry  
an affair in the English tongue  
(locked repository of excellencies)

Though envious of clouds obscure my brightness  
there is nothing of lewdness, baseness or meanness  
in the carriage of this noised story

I am – ladies – your devoted husband.

Poems like this one are gestures rather than emphatic statements about one thing or another. They toy with clipped, lyrical prosody before riding right over it. Then, the closing gaff is like a smirk at tradition *and* at the lyrical notion of conclusion – that final, poignant breath, that place of rest or peace. Instead, grammatical convention is overturned and, in the excitement of the rupture, we're left with confusion rather than conclusion. If it gets the attention it deserves, then Australian poetry won't be the same after *Ladylike*.

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Unlike Lilley's innovative reconfigurations, Rose drifts, almost unconsciously, almost inevitably, back to the Empire, as if a poem simply won't be complete until it's situated with relation to an event or idea from the European continent. In a way, I find it hard to keep remembering that this book was published in 2012, and not in 1912. So much of it relies on a calm authority derived from the fact that the speaker has seen somewhere else, or read about it. And this 'elsewhere' is invariably

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located somewhere in Western Europe; *Crimson Crop* navigates through contemporary Australia using these coordinates from the Northern Hemisphere as points of orientation. In the opening poem, 'Prelude', it's a recollection of a man 'at the Rome Railway Station'. In the next poem, 'Sheridan Close', it's 'echoes of the E flat in *Rheingold*'. In the next poem, a 'devilish diva' is in an 'Eiffeled apartment'. Then a poem's dedicated to Peter Porter (that most famous of Australian Anglophile poets). Then the speaker's recalling a Gladstone that came 'all the way from England' before going to see a performance of *Fidelio*. And so on. Things continue this way in order to climax, apparently, in the book's fourth section, fifteen poems written in the style of the Roman poet Catullus.

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In this regard, Rose is breathtaking: his prosody is faultless, as is his ability to fuse an aesthetic expression of time to one of sound.

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At the same time, however, there's a very keen sense of the poetry's immediate location: all manner of minutiae are channelled through the eyes of a rather transcendent speaker, who, although he's never quite *in* these places, relies on them for his poiesis. But in remaining there, in those places, in taking them in before looking back, whimsically, to the North, there's a disturbing dislocation in the poems – an imaginative vagabondage born of the privilege of a particular kind of education, of a particular idea about what constitutes 'poetry', 'thought' and, even, 'life'. The cover of the book illustrates the situation graphically: it's David Rose's *Waratah* from 1978, a beautiful print of the same plant in hues of thick charcoal with a bleeding, fiery red for the flower. But like many of the poems inside, the flower has been extracted from the conditions of its existence: it's stranded in white space; the background could be an overcast sky, or a white tile. Rose's speaker occupies this same kind of position – he's an Australian, he talks about cricket and Melbourne and uses some of the vernacular, but then, at the same time, he's not really part of places, or *within* them:

... I was reading aloud  
when a young couple, inspecting the flats,  
walked past my window.  
Suspicious was their look,  
as if they didn't like what they heard...  
(from 'Open Book')

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Rose, writes Peter Keneally in *The Sydney Morning Herald*, is ‘an erudite observer of our general decline, like a stoic Romano-Briton, reading Virgil in the garden of his villa, wondering if those hairy Germanic characters camped in his fields are really here to stay, and amused and appalled in equal parts by the prospect’. And it’s true, that for all the connotations of snobbery, Rose is incredibly erudite and remains, in spite of any hairy Germanic threat, committed to cherishing those moments that touch him most deeply. In this regard, Rose is breathtaking: his prosody is faultless, as is his ability to fuse an aesthetic expression of time to one of sound. All of these elements combine most powerfully in the book’s second section, a series of elegiac studies of death, loss and mortality. Certainly, Rose’s elegies are intensely stylised; such affectation surely makes ‘Learning to Surf: A Dream Manual’ the most unlikely surf poem in the history of poems about surfing (which, admittedly, probably isn’t all that extensive):

Surf picks me up and cushions me –  
shaky equilibrium. Through the surge  
I waver like a victor on a podium,  
marvelling at my effrontery,  
knowing it leads to a foamy grave,  
mandatory and imminent and grand.

A victor on a podium? His effrontery? A grand, foamy grave? I imagine a pale-skinned blow-in from the city, anxiously wobbling around on a big foam Mal. I imagine someone so uncomfortable with the language and the experience of the ocean that he sees little of it other than a tomb beneath. But this isn’t really the point. The point is that the poem is dedicated to Rose’s dying father; it’s *that* experience, of an imminent death and one’s attempts to account for it, which demands that the poet leave those bright, moving things behind to search for a stillness – both within language and within the space left by a departing life.