**Paris Studio: Contemporary Writing by Fourteen Australian Authors**

**review by Patrick West**

*Paris Studio: Contemporary Writing by Fourteen Australian Authors, Who Lived, for a While, in Paris*

Edited by Victor Barker & Illustrated by Fred Cress  
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Why do writers who only read and write in English want to come and do it in Paris?... Why English language writers in Paris? I do not understand.

That (almost) makes two of us. More to the point, why Australians? There is something that grates about this collection of writings, and something important as well. Rarely has it been so vital for writers in this country to seek purchase in their understanding of Australia's cultural relationship to elsewhere. Surely I am not the only one experiencing that peculiar sense of vertigo (of which more later) which accompanies the feeling that a historical period, perhaps thought safely dead and buried, has now reappeared, only in more insidious guise. Toward what depths do we plunge in our intellectual and artistic isolationism and felt need to escape?

I wanted to like this sometimes irritating publication more than I was able to. It sets the scene for a dialogue with the problem of creating art and ideas in an increasingly conservative nation. What is missing is any substantial impulse towards giving the slip to the more conventional ways that we have acquired for thinking ourselves differently. The exceptions shine out all the more brilliantly for their rareness.

The questions at the head of this review appear in one of several contributions by the editor, Victor Barker (whose interventions, by the way, are a study in immodesty: an infiltration to the highest echelons of contributor status). The answer he provides is at least consistent with, if far more explicit than, the permutations of responses to the same problem contained on many other pages. "Unlike any Australian city, [Paris] is a grown-up city that treats writers like adults." And a little later on, this: "Let's be honest. We Australians live in suburbia. There's no longer need for lungpower to call the cattle home, for muscle to defend the homestead. It's time to learn a little softness, a little grace, a little cool." Paris is thereby constructed as a pedagogue. Only being *treated* like an adult, in this scenario, allows you to be one. It is this species of thinking I call the "first flight out" syndrome. It would appear not to be a question, for instance, of finding the "Paris" in Brisbane or Sydney. Rather, finding the airport....What should adult writers (writers for adults) be doing today in Australia?

This section of *Paris Studio* is revealing also in other ways: "...a little softness, a little grace, a little
cool." How easily description of the French capital slips into cliché. "Paris is not all Dior and Picasso," claims Barker at the end of the previous paragraph, one complete with the "scent of Pernod" and a redolent "zinc counter". One full, in other words, of stereotypes of Paris pretty much along the lines of the references to Dior and Picasso. There is the intimation of an opposition here between Paris as imagined (in Australia), and Paris as actually lived by the contemporary (European) writer. It's too fragile though. In other words, something hasn't been given the slip.

I recall my strong feeling of a certain "sameness" in this publication. What sort of writing did my disappointment hold in reserve as an expectation? To begin with, I suggest that there was some failing in the editorial brief: either the one given to these fourteen writers directly, or the one more nebulously imagined as the guiding principle of the anthology. All the contributors have been resident in recent years in the Keesing Studio in Paris, the product of Nancy Keesing's legacy. (The section on the studio towards the front of the book is an interesting and worthwhile piece of historical housekeeping.) It is a pity that this shared habitation (inhabitation?) did not lead to a greater reflectiveness on personal experiences. Attempts at writing differently: I think this is what I really desired. A sort of "seeing ourselves as others see us," with all the attendant variety. What's here is all a bit too dutiful, almost writing by the numbers. There is an awful lot of geography and mapping, not always made interesting and fresh for the reader. And your eyes could be sunburnt by all the descriptions of light (which read too often as if produced only on cue). One more preventable continuity between the discrete pieces is the poor quality of the proofreading. Words are missing or misspelled, punctuation is out of place, or just plain wrong: it's like having sand thrown in your eyes while you're trying to concentrate. And an artist friend of mine thinks that the illustrations are all rather weak - superficial and caricatured.

At a deeper level, one could make the case that the sense of similarity connecting the contributors in terms of their personal preoccupations has a quite precise and significant cultural and textual point of reference. In the home of deconstruction, there is an ironic absence of any substantial degree of self-interrogation by these visitors to Paris. The meaning of being a writer is more often centralized than dispersed or re-examined by these particular writers.

Fortunately, there are exceptions. Bernard Cohen and Robyn Ferrell, from the viewpoints of the creative writer and the philosopher respectively, generate a complex and robust interrogation of what it might really mean to fly off to Paris, these days, to write. From one perspective, each piece is about writer's block, which stems on my reading from some sort of blockage in the Australian body of writers - about the place where Dior meets Derrida perhaps. We might call this a problem of mistaking the superficial for the substantial. The best critique that I feel capable of making of this publication is the sweeping one. Most of the writers who have contributed to Paris Studio seem to have fallen into the trap that Cohen and Ferrell (described in the mealy-mouthed lower-case usage of the Preface as a "philosophy professor") at least peer out of.

"Paris Does Not Exist." This is the burden of Ferrell's intelligent and exquisitely balanced essay. More precisely, the city is "a necessary non-existent... fictitious so that other things may be fact." What proves to be fact in Ferrell's case is the inability to pierce through the transcendent to the immanent with the pen. She simply can't put pen to paper in Paris. The visiting artist from Australia: more colonial than ever as a result of colonization by their self-made fictions of home and (particularly) of elsewhere, and most particularly of Europe and Paris. One might say that Ferrell finds only the evanescence of what she had hoped to find. Her essay is subtle; I'm concerned not to be unduly reductive. Also, I find myself wanting to present long extracts from this piece in a way I don't with most of the others. Accordingly,

I never felt so alone as I did in Paris. It was the wreck of my dream of writing; it had all gone in a cloud of vanity. I was left in a cold morning of self-disgust, the emotional corollary of the argument of this piece. The idea of the studio at the Cité, of making application, and of getting it, had all been fired by the fantasy which - I am convinced - explains its existence at all. And yet it was a disabling
fiction. It was an invitation to play a part. Looking at the whole thing again; the loss of myself as writer; the writer gone from Paris; the absence of Paris itself; the century having moved on - it all seems inevitable. Paris, ce n'existe pas.

Bits and bobs of the French language are often used in Paris Studio like adjectives. More effective is Ferrell's notion of what the vernacular did to her on the street: "And there was the language, which every day proved my foreignness - a feeling I passionately loved." At least twice elsewhere in her essay she talks of trespass, of which this is an example in the linguistic realm. If only there could have been more of such trespass and transgression throughout the anthology. A touch of Henry Miller really wouldn't have gone astray. I reach for my battered copy of Tropic of Cancer: "We are all alone here and we are dead... It is now the fall of my second year in Paris. I was sent here for a reason I have not yet been able to fathom..." Touché.

Bernard Cohen is no Henry Miller. Thank goodness for that. All the same, his contribution "Vertigo: A Paris Diary" is the best specifically literary equivalent of Ferrell's transgressive piece of writing. His notion of giddiness and falling is a well-wrought expression of the free-falling into a cultural and historical oubliette analyzed with equal deftness by the philosopher. Buy the book at least for this. Whether it be about the Arab Institute, the ferris wheel in the Tuileries, or the Eiffel Tower, Cohen writes to the point, albeit often an imagined smashing to smithereens down under an icon. And like Ferrell, at least he does manage to write through the difficulty of writing: "Is this my vertigo - a distorted writer's block? How ridiculous! Just get on with it! ...I am, after all, writing something: about my vertigo." For Ferrell, her residence in Paris, "just described as so hard in practice, now slips through my writing into yet more beautiful theory." There is an attempt here to recuperate the fantasy of Paris for the writer, as a useful fiction: a "beautiful theory". Should the writer go to Paris trying in all ways not to be a writer? Trying to be found by the fantasy (for fantasy and fiction surely there is) rather than trying to look for it? It is probably still important to go.

But perhaps other forms of vertigo have changed the relationship of Australia to Paris in ways not yet fully available to reflection. History has a way of overtaking all of us. Post September 11, what has not changed? Before Paris, Bernard Cohen was in New York: "At the top of the World Trade Centre, the windows stretch from floor to ceiling. It is possible to look almost straight down. It was thrilling more than frightening. I cannot be sure I would not have felt vertiginous had I known how to open the windows."

Patrick West is a lecturer in writing at Griffith University on the Gold Coast who would be happy to go to Paris again.