

THE BOYS IN CAMBRIDGE

Clive James' *Injury Time* and John Kinsella's *Graphology*

1. DEADLY CONSCIOUS

Martin Duwell ends his essay on Clive James' *Poetry Notebook* with the following:

I think the wider the perspective, the better the critic: we should be able to match observable practices in *our own poetic culture* with things as disparate as Zulu praise poetry, the oriental lyric, the Arabic tradition etc etc. Of course, much in poetry – like English poetry's hits – requires a profound immersion in the language and so our perspectives are, naturally, limited. But professional linguists suffer similar problems (though they are probably even better language learners than literary people) and yet they aren't inhibited from making statements about language in general (the study of linguistic typology) and they certainly don't think that English is a base point from which one will be able to say anything at all useful about language as a whole. I'd rather, in other words, that poetry critics behaved more like typologists when they wanted to speak generally about the nature of poetry and less like sophisticated grammarians of English. James is never limited to English poetry and is more polyglot and more widely-read than I am, but there is still a European perspective on poetry in his approach.

Speaking generally, I would suggest that rather than having the critic as typologist we need to find the theoretical basis underneath language, that we need linguistic philosophers, the task being that of the translator who becomes a shaman intent on knowing the spirit of language rather than merely putting dirt from one place to another. I do agree though that James' represents an anachronistic idea of 'European', and also 'Australian', poetry, one that has held onto high universals in its pre-identity politics iteration. It is fundamentally conservative and undialectical if not ahistoricising to boot. This is the British Museum's idea of poetry for the (white, male) people with no forthcoming repatriation, solidarity or hope.

James is considered in *Poetics for 'Australia'* not necessarily because he is 'Australian', which is surely a debatable label for him nowadays, but because he has an interest in 'Australia', meant here as a collective of poets in the immediate post-war era who he frequently cites (Douglas Stewart, A. D. Hope, James McAuley, Gwen Harwood and Judith Wright). James references remind me of stories of migrants who are locked into the language of their home country from the moment they left, forgetting along the way that home changes too. As Justin Clemens stated in *The Monthly*:

From the evidence of the writing here [*Sentenced to Life*], James doesn't seem to have taken in any new technique or idea since 1950. One of the things that made him such a great media personality was that, like his compatriots Germaine Greer and Robert Hughes, he parlayed colonial antsiness into a satirical doubling of the master's discourse. Too firmly ensconced in the metropole, though, one succumbs to *arriviste* fantasies. James was always more timid than his famous comrades, and more middlebrow, too. I can't help but see this as correlated with his favoured medium: *English TV as light suburban home therapy*.... Once upon a time, James would happily lap at the weirdest secretions of popular culture with gusto, but something in him just said "no" to the real developments in poetry.

As slapdash journalism that adds wry insinuation and comic flair, Clemens' statement makes sense but read symptomaticly it seems dismissive. It drips with anti-suburban elitism failing to distinguish what might be possible in tv, England, therapy, lightness, home and indeed the suburbs themselves. Putting those component parts together does not *inter alia* lead us to negate James with ostensibly more 'difficult' contemporary verse but allow us to look further inward to cultural conditions that continue to matter, regardless of what wannabe metropolises on the periphery would have us believe. Yet, I do not want to argue what the 'real developments in poetry' are or have been since 1950, but rather to suggest that we can find something in the possibility of 'light suburban home therapy'. After all, one can get therapy from any source one so chooses (even from Lacan). What is the therapy the suburbs need then and is that the therapy that James provides?

I think the suburbs are a style of life and because of that are a kind of *tabula rasa* in so far as one can find almost anything one so desires there. But in thinking through the suburbanite's soul of despair we might suggest the suburbs need not only a bit of city and a bit of country but also a method through which they can synthesise these oppositional poles in such a way that mitigates the ever present (un)consciousness of death. In poetry this might be a way to bring together Romanticism|Modernism if one was working in a European lineage, or Dravidian|Mughal in an Indian iteration, or saltwater|freshwater here in Australia. This is about directed balance, of elevating retrospectively and predictively to enable a life that offers solace, pleasure and contentment in the unfolding present. That might be what the suburbanite needs most of all.

TV as light suburban therapy seems anachronistic now in light of how people consume media on demand on a variety of devices. It is as if one were nostalgic for a public intellectual from a time not only when intellectuals mattered but when there was a public as opposed to fake news subcultures, market segmentation and user generated content. There is after all some very good TV, but is James' poetry able to match it?

I began reading *Injury Time* in bed while an episode of *Parks and Recreation* played in the background (the death of Little Sebastian if you must know). James' book is an easy read and says what it needs to say in a plain journalistic style – no defamiliarisation here, no estrangement, just good old say it like you mean it. Hence, the preference for actual similes as opposed to metaphoric thinking. For example:

It's like a party but nobody came. [4]¹

Trailing his seaside fingertips

Like a stylus through the wave's green face [17]²

¹ So it really isn't like a party at all unless it is like a party *where* nobody came.

² His fingers as a stiff, inanimate, regular, mechanical needle? That doesn't seem to be consistent with 'grace' and 'glide' later in the stanza.

Reading Laforgue, I love the way he crowds
The world of things into his racing frame
Yet makes them fit, like lightning in the clouds.³

Perhaps the ants are in there
Like vagrants in the ruins of New York. ⁴

That you are frail like other men ⁵

I used to know the back of my hand
Like the back of my hand ⁶

Of veins making tracks like the river system
Of a whole new nation ⁷

Of books that I forgot I wrote. I'll sign
Each tempting title-page with my by-line
Like a machine for hours on end.⁸

Please see the footnotes to see why this is poor phrase making. And, just so you get the idea of the inattentiveness to words as words consider:

Eventually the spinning coin will shiver,
The rumble as it falls ends with a sigh.

³ But doesn't lightning come out of clouds? Isn't it remarkable because it doesn't fit in them?

⁴ How do we know there will be vagrants in the ruins? Or will there be any people in ruins anywhere, ruins are usually abandoned, rather than full of vagrants, and besides ants are quite organized with their elaborate housing systems, their systematic workloads and ordered hierarchies.

⁵ But if you were frail like other men why do you undergo chemo?

⁶ Quite a funny one.

⁷ I think rivers predate nations, they are geological time not historical. New nations, as a general rule, do not go about creating new rivers, maybe dams or aquifers, but not rivers.

⁸ But when do machines sign? Why not robot, cyborg, automaton?

And from a second poem:

Spatter my eyes with salt tears as I write.

A shiver and then a rumble, not a rumble and then a shiver? I personally would love to know if James can indeed cry freshwater tears, for that would be something to write about. If metaphor is the substance of poetry, then structurally James is not metaphoric, which is to say, not poetic at all. As the above examples suggest, it *tells* you what death is by saying ‘death is like a box of chocolates’ and, on rare occasion, by saying ‘winter is coming’, ‘a chapter closes’, ‘the birds have flown’. This is the kind of poetry one reads in workshops aimed at emerging writers whose verse reaches for profundity and fails precisely because it has only made the first (mis)step towards showing what poetry actually is. Even if James claims that ‘I knew I would write poetry for life’ I would argue that there is very little poetic thought here and his best work comes in the post-script where he writes a letter to the young poet. It offers some salutary advice on criticism and is shorn of the cliché his verse is full of. He states:

There is no reason to shoot critics as long as they quote you. Even the most hostile critic is working for you if he quotes you; and the chances are, he being his tin-eared self, that *the line* he picks out as self-evidently absurd or clumsy is one of your best, and will induce his readers to buy the very book on which he is ineptly pouring his brain-dead scorn.

First things first, dear reader – don’t buy this book. Secondly, it is not only the assumed gender of the critic that one is drawn to in this passage, but also the focus on ‘the line’ – surely the poem turns on particular words, or if one wanted to be more precise, on sounds within words and how they might indeed play together. James might like to yoke poetry to music and write against the practitioners and critics who have a ‘tin ear’. But he himself often forces rhymes simply so a poem will fit a scheme he has made. This might be the reason there is such imprecise imagery. At the level of the line, his work is bad, but at the level of the word, it fails abysmally. Where the poetry really breaks down however is in their political implication. If the form is

conservative, there is also content that seems wilfully irresponsible if not downright nefarious. Consider 'Imminent Catastrophe', which states in full:

The imminent catastrophe goes on
Not showing many signs of happening.
The ice at the North Pole that should be gone
By now, is awkwardly still lingering,

And though sometimes the weather is extreme
It seems no more so than when we were young
Who soon will hear no more of this grim theme
Reiterated in the special tongue

Of manufactured fright. Sea Level Rise
Will be here soon and could do such-and-such,
Say tenured pundits with unblinking eyes.
Continuing to not go up by much,

The sea supports the sceptics, but they, too
Lapse into oratory when they predict
The sure collapse of the alarmist view
Like a house of cards, for they could not have picked

A metaphor less suited to their wish.
A house of cards subsides with just a sigh [Ed: no it doesn't, maybe a whoosh]
And all the cards are still there. Feverish
Talk of apocalypse might, by and by,

Die down, but the deep anguish will persist:
His own death, not the Earth's, is the true fear
That motivates the doomsday fantasist:
There can be no world if he is not here.

What a display of righteous, fatuous, conservative nonsense. From this poem one can only realise that he's a nutjob. One might be tempted to be sceptical of the burghers

and experts, the boffins and eggheads, especially if one ascribes power to the tv host. But, if one opens one's eyes to the birds and the weeds, the crayfish and the herring, then one will note that the natural world is under attack on an unprecedented scale. You don't need a professor to show you this as any amateur fisherman will attest. One need only think of supertrawlers in waters off the coast of England, or the absence of prawns in the Swan River. Even an English garden where James sits and writes is part of an ecosystem under threat in such a way that we need to take seriously the implications of poet's role in ecology. Prince Charles also knows that.

The implications of a poem like 'Imminent Catastrophe' can be as profound as we make them. After all, and to return us to Clemens, the normalising of far right racism through the cultural industry of reality television is a real possibility – Pauline Hanson and *Dancing With the Stars* or Donald Trump and *The Apprentice*. This enables a type of neo-fascist politics through its aestheticisation, revelling in a society of the spectacle that mocks the life of ordinary people willing to subject themselves to culture industry mincers beyond their control. I do not need to make a claim that poetry is a rebuttal of this for there are haters a plenty in every field, but rather I would suggest that one can find allies using all the tools that are readily available in order to cultivate a utopian possibility in the face of the real. James is not part of creating the paradise of tomorrow, or even today's resistance, but as he prepares to depart from this mortal coil, his example of sad production and his hobbyist's naïve attentiveness might allow poets in 'Australia' to measure themselves next to a more expansive idea of who writes and what that means for us all.

2. LIFE AFTER INTERNATIONAL REGIONALISM

If one wanted to, one could find antecedents for Suburbanism anywhere in the network – Romanticism, Modernism, Negritude, Tabi, Sangaam have all mattered as cohesive bodies of poetic thought. But it is important to look closer to home, to interrogate a discourse that matters in 'Australia', namely John Kinsella's 'international regionalism'. In an interview with *The Griffith Review*, Kinsella stated

that:

International regionalism is a way of discussing and viewing the local in an international context. It's a means of exchange, of sharing knowledge and awareness. The integrity of the immediate, of the regional, is my primary concern – if you can't respect the ecology of the place you're in at a given time, the biosphere as a whole will suffer. I feel the regional is enhanced by an understanding of what happens elsewhere, but in the end it's what happens where I am standing that seems most vital to what I have to write. But it doesn't exist in a vacuum, and there are many ways of seeing. In essence, I like to look at things up close, over a period of time, from different angles, but in wider contexts – social, historical, cultural, political – as well.

There are a few things going on in this passage – one is the sense that the international is coterminous with the natural world ('biosphere') but also that context is coterminous with intellectual fields or disciplines ('historical, cultural, political'). This is not local in a world of mere nations. Expanding further, in *Spatial Relations* Kinsella suggests that international regionalism:

...sounds like a contradiction, an oxymoron really, but the two factors can coexist and, I feel, need to. A concept of regional identity, retaining a sense of immediate spatiality, doesn't mean we should – or really can – close ourselves off from what happens in the world at large.

But perhaps, we need to ask where is a place that is not regional? Where can one be unlocated? After all, one is always in a unique place and one is always part of the world. If you read, for instance, the letters of Rex Ingamells, an avowed nationalist, it becomes obvious that he existed in a dynamic, transnational literary milieu as well as having a firm sense of his immediate surrounds. In his letters there is mention of Federico Garcia Lorca, Maxim Gorky, Stephen Spender, Alfred Tennyson, W. H. Auden, Longfellow's *Hiawatha*, Whitman's 'A Clear Midnight', Clifford Whittington Beers' 'A Mind that Found Itself' and Mark van Doren's *An Anthology of World Poetry*

yet there is also attention to where his body is at the present moment.⁹ At its most basic then, every specific place is part of the globe considered as a whole and although Kinsella suggests that ‘these [*Graphology*] are all poems of resistance and protest, even when affirming’ it is hard to know what the negation of the international regionalist is. Ironically then, international regionalism lacks a clear sense of what it opposes even as we can guess that might be a type of parochial universalism that flattens out distinctions of different ecologies – of the potato not the *mardirra*. Kinsella ends up being a defender for regional places, meant here in the sense that they are not the metropole, that York is not New York. This view is there when Kinsella writes that international regionalism:

... comes out of a pacifist anarchism, though its application is general and increasingly adaptable (or so I’m finding!). It’s about language and cultural preservation in the face of globalism: creating a universal language of resistance, on the one hand, but a language of interaction and cooperation, on the other.

Globalisation, that historical movement of the 1990s, is what Kinsella is working against. Think NAFTA, think WTO, think World Bank, think President Clinton, think end of history. And in that resistance, Kinsella finds a kind of faith. As he says, ‘letters of protest are also ways of saying thanks. To protest against the destruction of bushland is to affirm the necessity or *sanctity* of that bushland.’ But,

In promoting an internationalism, I feel that one should be wary of ignoring responsibilities in one's own backyard. This is the regionalism issue again. In my case, the degradation of land, the ecological disaster that is modern farming in the Avon Valley, a murderous history of displacement of the Nyungar people, and the

⁹ All taken from Ingamell’s correspondence archived at the State Library of Victoria: Lorca in Mudie 18/1/25, Box 1469; Gorky in Vance Palmer 11/12/44, Box 1469; Spender and Auden in Ballantyne, 3/10/42, Box 1467; Tennyson in Deveney, 17/11/45, Box 1466; Shaw Nielsen in Robinson, 6/6/44, Box 1470; Longfellow in Ewers, 8/8/41, Box 1466; Whitman, undated from Robinson, (5/76-78), Box 1470; Beers and van Doren in Hart Smith, 2/8/43, Box 1467.

obligation to actively support the pursuit of land rights, are just some of the issues that inform whatever I do or say, in whatever context.

The Avon Valley does belong next to or within or besides 'Australia' somehow, the latter simply being a frame of reference even as it is not located or local enough. The other discourses that structured thought in 1990s 'Australia' when Kinsella coined his phrase included the Keating led rhetoric of multiculturalism, republic and reconciliation. Yet Kinsella seems not to offer a utopian model of how we might cultivate a self-determining sensibility that builds from that moment. There is slippage then between his located location of the Avon Valley and the narrative myths of 'Australia' when he can write in 'International Regionalism and Poetry etc.' of 'Aboriginal literature', itself a colonial invention, that:

I am strongly *against* the publication of Aboriginal song-cycles that have been collected by white anthropologists. It's simply not the non-indigenous publisher's right to access such materials at will.

In no passage in this piece does Kinsella define his terms. Kinsella might be right when it comes to *private and sacred songcycles*, but he essentialises all Indigenous songs as well as assumes that all relations between people cannot be complex or continue to unfold in situations where people do not definitively articulate how they identify. Those things are contested and it is incumbent to see through conservatism towards community forms of acceptance and identity rather than remaining indebted to outdated models that reify an identity politics. In other words – how would Kinsella critique the work I have done with my brother-in-law who is Ngarluma on *tabi* (an open song poetry genre from the Western Pilbara)? Does Kinsella not simply fetishise authorial identity without recourse to collaboration or the fact that one can be conversant and expert in traditions that aren't one's 'own'? Should Kinsella himself be working on Jack Davis, Kevin Gilbert, Lionel Fogarty or does he judge himself by a different standard? To think that one cannot be a fellow traveler to struggles one is not 'essentially' part of denies imagination, empathy and poetry itself. These are some of the vexing questions for international regionalism, but what are we to make of Kinsella's poetic expressions of it in *Graphology*?

I agree, in general terms, with Thom Sullivan's reading of *Graphology in Plumwood Mountain*, which stated:

The energies and impulses of the poems, or clusterings of poems, remain in flux, creating a sense of impermanence or capriciousness. It requires some trust that an individual poem, or clustering of poems, is of-a-piece with the sequence, and creates a sustained tension in the work. A resistance to closure also allows the sequence's inclusiveness of reference, from the organic to the cultural, which is itself an exploration and substantiation of identity.

These are poems that are in flux, that are open, that sustain tension, but I think the referents are the opposite of what Sullivan claims, namely that they are 'inclusive'. In its three pages, 'Graphology: Canto 2' states the names of Engels, Beauchataud, Governor Macquarie, Prynne, Yeats, Bismarck, Klages, Pulver, Virgil, Nadjamerrek. The apparent eclecticism of Kinsella's signposted referents appears superficially impressive, like any suburbanite namedropping, but what it cultivates is a readership that might, on a good day, get less than everything intended. Thus, at a constitutive level his poem is a code that relies on a historical celebrity of dead men and a liberal cult of personality for the speaking poet himself. I do not mean that one might not know who this roll call is, but that to know the roll call and to also know Kinsella's region seems difficult despite the prolix description of the latter by the poet himself. In other words, we do not know what the synthesis between the international and the regional is other than through Kinsella alone, which might explain the dearth of truly attentive criticism to his oeuvre as a whole – Kelmscott is a long way from Klages and to yoke them together critically would take admirable skill that avoided the undialectical quality of the poetry, or indeed the unreconciled phrase of 'international regionalism' itself.

However, like all poets, Kinsella has his backers (David McCoeey who launched this collection but also Harold Bloom, J. H. Prynne and Jacques Derrida) and his attackers (Ivor Indyk). Yet, he has worked in so many different ways that we must play the ball and not the man. It is a case of choosing which of Kinsella's work that we may like,

not should we like him at all. From *Graphology*, there were several passages that approached the suburbanist, and it is there even in the précis, when it states:

... But yesterday I was nearer
a potential epicentre, wandering the eastern outskirts
of Northam town, noting newbuilds uneasy
alongside lozenges of haybales, a dry downslant
creek storm-drain rehabilitation where trees
lose title deed, and a pitbull and bull terrier
rise up in their half-wired verandah pen to rip
my proverbials out – I ritualise *smile and move on*,
interiorise compassion, like the plaster-concrete
white-swan planter peering up into the high hooks
of power poles, the pressure of rural services –
revelations of locality and self.

Although we are located in Northam, not far from Kinsella's property Wheatlands, we are in the unfolding suburbs that spring up all over the world. There are of course local variations, such as the 'lozenges of haybales', that locate us. Yet, I recognise the 'plaster-concrete/white-swan planter' from visits to my aunty's home in Noranda in suburban Perth as well as the Mainline suburbs of where I was educated in Philadelphia. In other words, the scene is recognisable to me precisely because I think of the suburbs as a type of internationalism here. And yet, for Kinsella it becomes a poem about place and the rural, about 'locality and self', the body being the place he writes from in order to speak of the ecologies of his immediate surrounds, of 'what happens where I am standing that seems most vital to what I have to write.' This is anarchism as a type of ecological liberalism against the suburbanising nation with its 'uneasy newbuilds' that refuses to see the possibility of the state and its popular style of life, which must always be engaged with and negotiated.

The persistence of land, meant here as nature, is marked in Australian poetry and poetics with less attention paid to the city and even less to suburbia. Kinsella himself is part of that, part of a frame that has been determined by globalisation's gaze that

projects onto the nation what it assumes must be frontier, nature, outback rather than apprehending the ways in which a style of life here is distinct. In that way, it is a recurrent trope of commentary to look to an idea of ‘Australia’ rather than apprehend it immanently. This is not to lament the passing of the farm like Les Murray or to rail against the superphosphates as Kinsella has, but to suggest that even in my country patch (Redgate) this outdated idea of land is constantly being remade, either to furnish the suburban majority with commodities or to accommodate them in a literal way. This is the sprawl as it comes from a regional town, which is surely what the long-term future has in store for Bunyah and York as well.

Suburbanism, however, does not preclude either the possibility of international regionalism nor post-Negritude creolisation as it applies to colonised people as a whole, nor even the aesthetics demanded by updated and remixed Imagism as a precursor to Conceptualism in a digital age. But it comes after them all. What might matter for reading Kinsella however is that we continue to rebel, as he himself has, including against his very influence. That might not only mean situating ourselves in a geography from where he comes from, but regarding that as a country within a nation, country being, of course, not the same geographic sensibility precisely because it is based in land and not the attempted monopolisation of violence, which defines the modern state. This would allow us to engage with Kinsella’s anarchism beyond mere negation and towards a creative act that seeks a new *polis* in a philosophy that has Indigenised itself and offers a reality check to the fantasies that the landmass of ‘Australia’ is simply a colonial outpost. What that means is less a reification of the pastoral, including its internal antitheses, and more the establishment of a tradition that sits beyond ‘the West’ as an organising principle. That might be the suburbanist rebuttal of an international regionalism that has become stale and the knowledge that Cambridge for all its benefits is not a poetic home for us all.