Paul Sharrad reviews Vishvarupa by Michelle Cahill

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Publication Details

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Abstract
The Indian interest of this collection of poems is clearly announced in its title: a Sanskrit word meaning the full manifestation of the divine countenance (such as Arjuna experienced in relation to his teacher Krishna in the Bhagavad Gita). It also carries the idea of a manifold of multiple aspects: appropriate for this varied selection of topics. The poems are carefully arranged so that the three main focuses — meditations while bushwalking, a mother reflecting on her life and that of her daughter in suburban Australia, and travels in India — become a varied selection. It’s possible that something gets sacrificed in this arrangement, as otherwise there might be a sense of building a Yeatsian poetic mask through sequential investigations of the Hindu deities (Vayu, Agni, Hanuman, Kali, Durga, Sarasvati, Ganesh, Lakshmi), or of the poet’s persona growing through progressive exploration of yoga and Hindu ideas (at times there’s a faint echo of bhakti devotional poetry). However, it’s no doubt a good decision, because otherwise the Indian material all together could be hard going for the uninformed reader.

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The number of footnotes illustrates my point. It is a fair bet that most Australian readers of poetry these days would be familiar with words like puja, fakir, and karma, may have assumed the naga asana in their yoga classes, and will have heard of Kali, Hanuman and the Mahabharata. But they probably will not know much of the six pages of material at the end of this collection. Hindus might, of course, but this raises the question of the intended audience and what is strategically productive in addressing it. Some of these poems have, indeed, appeared in Indian publications, but most of them have come out in the USA and Australia. So if the average reader finds a loading of ‘Indian’ signs, will an expectation of some significant encounter with things Indian be enabled or hindered by labelling a poem ‘Deva Loka’ rather than ‘Place of the Gods’? Does it convey authority on the poet and is that in fact warranted apart from resting on detailed references suggesting extra-poetical apparatus? Raiding the ‘myth kitty’ without some personal engagement in making it meaningful here and now is as unproductive in Indian context as it is in verse deploying the figures of Classical Greek story. (One ‘Indian’ poem that does work well is ‘Vayu, God of Wind’ because that is all the explanation needed to appreciate the flow of images in the scene depicted.)
though, there needs still to be something that makes the poems more than hermetic/ personally significant. Some of Fiji Indian Sudesh Mishra’s poems on India in which his travel is an occasion for sardonic dramas that become an ironic self-inspection solve this private/ public diary writing.

One thing that does take these works into a general space of cultural engagement is their juxtaposition of Australian life with Indian settings and cultural references. It’s a while since the ‘hippy trail’ was a familiar aspect of Australian writing, so it is good to be reminded of how hanging out in the foothills of the Himalayas (‘Prayerflags from Dharamsala’) is still part of lives that include working as a doctor in Sydney and taking children to school (‘Rainy Days’). The connections find witty irreverent apotheosis in ‘Parvati in Darlinghurst’, where a tantric goddess is also a no-bullshit call-girl turning a trick for a bemused Shiva-punter. And in ‘Ganesa Resurrected’, we are charmed to see the elephant god zipping by on a skateboard, “a spiritual pest inspector”.

Apart from these witty cross-cultural moments, there is a deadpan aspect to many of the poems documenting time in India that is reminiscent of some of Vicky Viidikas’s work. This is refreshing, given the number of verses about India that tilt into portentous revelation, or staged wonderment, or outsider outrage. Still, at times I thought cutting a final line or two would have provided greater impact (ending ‘Nasreen’ at “the cigarette’s ember in the pin-cold night”, for example). Other poems seemed to lack a moment of reflection that would bring the ‘data’ of a scene into meaningful connection or provide a sense of its effect on the viewer. It is there in ‘Amante de lo Ajeno’, a poem about tourists in Spain, where the heat, the footloose encounters, and the tang of sexual excitement make the postcard come alive as an experience, and I love the closing desperation of the lover of all that is distant and foreign realising her alienation: “uncertain if it’s me, a fragment”, suddenly seized by “a clamour in my throat, a small emergency of words.” (68). It is there, too, in ‘The Stinking Mantra’, where we feel the exhaustion of a sleep-deprived mother grieving over a dead possum, watching it decay while her daughter plays and “the riddle of days” goes on around her.

There are a number of poems about human suffering, whether from wars, illness or boating accidents, where the disparity between the events depicted and the careless techno-rich hedonism of our age and location seems to be the point, but I’m not convinced that they express more than their own occasion for being written, even though they declare a search for “an image/ to make sense/ of what it could signal/ to be human in the First World” (‘The Dream Aesthetic of War’). The poems that work are the ones that let the story carry the message and imply the feeling: ‘Sita’, ‘Shaping the Linga’, ‘Durga: a Self Portrait’; or those in which the mood of a scene is evoked quietly: ‘Triptych of Wings’, ‘At West Head.’ I particularly liked the carefully modulated irregular free verse of ‘The Sculpture Garden’ where the misted grounds and taut lines of statues generate an affect registered as “an implausible want”.

One aspect that gives shape to the things observed is a sense of the writing persona. Often we get a hint of the ethnically displaced figure reflecting on the nature of her alienation. In Mumbai, the chaotic excess of the city eludes entrapment in words, just as the poet’s name “is the antithesis/ of myself, a colonial slip” (‘Ode to Mumbai’). This background is elaborated on when the poet visits her family origins in Goa (‘Shaping the Linga’), when she remembers the frightening attention of a hijra on a Bombay train journey when young (‘Sita’), but it also slips into some of the Australian settings (‘Childhood’ recalls “the warmth of uncles, aunts, cousins/ left behind in foreign cities”). In a sense, this is the answer to the questions about what holds the collection together and gives point to the Indian material: the poet herself holds her material together. Her different locatedness gives the diverse material a particular angle of vision. It is a delicate process to express this ipsisity (if there isn’t such a word, there should be) without seeming to ‘protest too much’ or to retreat to solipsism. There is, however, a sense in which we are all/ all increasingly part of a global literary community if not a transnational multicultural one, whether we travel or live at home. Cahill’s experience is that of many people of South Asian origin — many writers of South Asian origin. A poem title ‘The Stinking Mantra’, for example, echoes (perhaps unintentionally) the title of a collection The Stinking Rose by Sujata Bhatt, and Cahill’s undramatic tone and occasional surrealistic image are suggestive of a dialogue happening through a number of national literary circuits.

It is not that Cahill is playing the ‘migrant’ card, when she says she’s “another foreigner”, like the
Henry Moore sculpture in Sydney (‘Pastiche’); it’s just that the poet is always foreign to her world/ her material, and, increasingly, we are all, like ‘Kali from Abroad’, “a global denizen”, no longer singular, no longer neatly comfortably residing in any one country or culture: at best, cosmopolitan, at worst, “deviant, without genealogy” (‘Durga: a Self Portrait’) or “so brittle lately, imperfectly divided” (‘Dying to Meet You’). In fact, the uniqueness of Cahill’s Anglo-Indian roots, Kenyan and London sojourns and Australian residence makes her increasingly typical of most writers, even most Australians, though this does not reduce the specific qualities of her own experience or her poems’ capacity to lead other readers into new engagements with Hindu or Australian cultures. It is not an attempt to ghettoise the writer in a ‘multicultural’ or ‘diasporic’ identity to suggest that it is those poems when we get a sense of a personal presence behind the words which most succeed, since that presence inhabits so many different spaces.

One interest in Sujata Bhatt’s verse is how she gestures towards the unconscious as the only place where genuine interpersonal contact can occur despite linguistic and cultural differences. Michelle Cahill also voyages into dreamscapes as a kind of meta language of suggested meanings. These are skilful pieces that create haunting moods via carefully modulated rhythms, with echoes of Coleridge (‘The Ghost Ship’) and gothic tales (‘The Abbey’). The poet seems to be most at home in the dark of night (‘Somewhere, a River’) or the quiet of early morning (‘Enough’) — perhaps not unrelated to the odd hours a medico has to work? The down-side of some of these dreamscapes is that they can seem rather like set exercises, and occasionally the writer tries too hard for effect: “the splatter of moss/sown like a seam through stone”, for instance (‘The Abbey’). If it’s a splatter, then surely it’s too diffuse to assume the line of a seam, and is “sown” a deliberate pun or a typo (a seam is sewn), but is moss sown? Why are the isotopes leaked from a nuclear plant apologetic (‘The Fire Eaters’); shouldn’t it be the plant or its owners? At other times, the appropriate words are found: “The pines disguise their idiom of crows.” (‘Lung-Ta’) captures India’s ever-present background noise of cawing. ‘Six Myths of Love: Psyche’ succeeds in its succinctness and tight patterning:

Carried on wings of Zephyrus, waiting
in an empty warehouse from where I view
the city’s clock towers and cathedral spires,
I watch bats knit the dissolving winter sky.

Dusk brings you close enough for me to trace
the broken lines in your hands. There are maps uncharted, swithering currents. There is no language other than now. Like candle or snow

you disappear, leaving what is undisclosed.
While trains keep time, and streetlights burn
you draw me from midnight’s cusp. Birds rise
from your hands into the bleeding shadows. (29)

The collection strongly favours the three-line stanza that seems to be a default option in much Australian verse these days. I see how it can provide a nice balance of linked openness and formal order, but occasionally feel there could be some stronger sense that this particular form is needed to carry the content, and not six or seven-line chunks or just one chain of free verse (the second most frequent form in this collection). Cultivated informality runs the danger of seeming too loose. Having said that, there is a mix of structure from two to five-line stanzas, irregular lengths of free verse and one block prose poem (‘Agape’, a very fine, lightly humorous reflection on a student crush on a tutor in anatomy, making a point about the workings of the heart). It is just possible there’s a debt to Kamala Das’s constructions, most lines working around eleven, sometimes fourteen syllables, and staying artfully shy of prose by sparing use of alliteration and subtle consonance. Das’s working themes of female desire and entrapment also find resonances in poems like ‘(In)Visible’, ‘Shaping the Linga’ and ‘Durga: a Self Portrait’.

There’s a lot to admire in this collection, and I look forward to seeing the poet’s multi-located ‘presence’ on the
page developing further and in greater concentration. Elegantly set out on ‘parchment yellow’ pages, the poems
evidence Five Islands’ now well established record in supporting the work of Australian poets, but it is a pity that
the binding did not hold nearly as long as the publisher’s track record.

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