

## Adam Aitken, *Eighth Habitation: New Poems* (Giramondo, 2009)

Diversity often connotes looking ‘forward’ to Asia, cosmopolitanism looking ‘back’ to Europe. As exhilarating as the recent transnational turn in Australian literature studies has been in its dispelling of limiting territorial stereotypes, it has not fundamentally altered the way the world is seen outside Australia. Europe stands for sophistication and nuance; Asia for alterity and exoticism. There are many delights and opportunities for wisdom in Adam Aitken’s collection, but the overriding theme is expanding our idea of cosmopolitanism. Thus this is not a book about Asians as other or Australians in Asia. But neither is it a book covering traditional Asia except as encountered in (to the extent that the phrase is plausibly un-ironic) contemporary civilisation, any more than a Peter Porter or an Andrew Sant write about Europe ‘as such’.

Even this extended notion of cosmopolitanism, though, has its challenges. Cosmopolitanism often means, *de facto*, the meeting of transnational or transcultural elites; people with the means to travel and the cultural orientation to cross boundaries, see them as permeable. When Aitken writes about Cambodia, a country devastated by war, cruelty and ideological turmoil, he makes more visceral, affective demands of cosmopolitanism than is usually done, to mark war, trauma and ideologically motivated cruelty as distinctly Asian would be horrendously wrong; they have occurred just as much, or even more in, Europe, and as a thinker such as Pierre Clastres has shown, may even be inherent in an idea of the state itself. But in a poem such as ‘A Map of Cambodia’, Aitken is aware that the subject stretches accustomed mode of poetry:

Does anyone out here deserve thanks?  
 For the map?  
 Magenta for bombed areas  
 Beaches named after hotels  
 Islands sold off to foreigners  
 Note the tippled effects of forced evictions.  
 Shaded areas mean gas,  
 One piece for the Thais, another for the Viets and BHP. (79)

Obviously, there is a sense of the map and the poem as analogous modes of representation (on think a bit of Kevin Hart’s poem ‘The Map’ here): accurate on one epistemic level, inherently flawed on another. The dry tone both attests to and mocks this representative quality. Moreover, there is a sense of a palimpsest here, as valence of a generation ago is interlaced with later neoliberal extraction and exploitation. Ironies abound: the Vietnamese, still Communist, once military occupiers of Cambodia, are now cooperating with the Australian conglomerate BHP in extracting oil; the appalling condominium prophesied at the end of Orwell’s *Animal Farm*. The map is informative, tells us the truth about this; but we need another layer of awareness to diagnose and understand this. Yet if the map is fallible, surely the poem can be also? The poem is not content to remain on its level; it aspires to a less demarcated realm.

A river flowing backwards  
 When you need it.

Book reviews: *Eighth Habitation: New Poems* by Adam Aitken. Nicholas Birns. *Transnational Literature* Vol. 5 no. 1, November 2012.  
<http://fhrc.flinders.edu.au/transnational/home.html>

This soul's consolation, though, is only available in the past: not so much a literal past but a prelapsarian residue of consciousness. There is no utopian, imaginative agenda; just a moment of ease, what in a European context would be *dolce far niente*. To abide monochromatically on an urbane, cosmopolitan level would be an imprisonment, whatever its reach. Yet these poems, which stretch for a more emotional dimension, cannot find it in a way with which their self-consciousness would abide in a totally comfortable manner. In 'Siem Reap Dawn', the first of the sequence 'Postcards (after Michelle Cahill)', Aitken describes the storied city near the Thai border and Angkor Wat in a resolutely unromantic way:

TV going off and on  
I sip beer with the Russians  
The rodents have all been eaten.  
And Buddha hung with fairy lights  
Visibly delighted  
Withdraws cash from an ATM. (85)

At first this might seem a parable of the triumph of worldwide capitalism with only a soupçon of regret, in the mode of a Pico Iyer. But the past cannot be eliminated totally; the Russians probably are ultimately there because of the role of their former Vietnamese clients in Cambodia. And why have the rodents been eaten? Because people are hungry? Suffering, famine, desperation is alluded to here, even in this most anecdotal and lucid of poems. One can sense occasions where deep feeling might manifest itself; but it is only accessible by evocation, always at a remove. The emotions that are present are, again, ones of ease, of enjoyment from the acceptance of the given and circumstantial, as in another postcard poem, 'Singkhran, Siem Reap River':

So much to celebrate, and lives are short.  
Chasing snakes or frogs  
Harvesting morning glory

In The Raffles Hotel gardens.  
What I wish for  
Is a place to park my bike, a table to write on, some roses,  
A waterfall ... (91)

This is not utopian. It is a step above the functional; relaxation, ease, comfort, tranquility, yet in a war-ravaged, now capitalism-permeated land such as Cambodia (yes there is a Raffles Hotel in Siem Reap, he does not mean the one in Singapore), such ease may indeed be utopian, and its very possibility, given the events of the past four decades, a great moral victory. Aitken is both passionate and scrupulous; and to get insights like this one has to attend to his poems with a virtuosity analogous to that with which he so gracefully and thoughtfully composes them.

As a reader I would like to see more emotion but as a critic I am fully cognisant of why it is not there, that its relative absence is a mode of askesis, of knowing and culturally

sensitive austerity. A far earlier Anglophone poem about Cambodia, James Fenton's 'Children in Exile', allows considerably more emotion – and is far more directly about the Khmer Rouge atrocities – but also risks far greater sentimentality. Aitken's coruscating intelligence will not let itself be pinned down like this. Sometimes, as in 'Translations from the Malay, 1930', there is a sense of greater difficulty in the negotiations between languages, contexts, discourses. Much as in Theresa Hak Kyung Cha's *Dictée*, a translation exercise is used both to reflect the inherent inequality that exists when one language is that of the coloniser and the other that of the colonised, but also to point out how such exercises, even if discursively necessary, are always absurd instances of aporia. Here, the seamless cosmopolitan voice is bursting with the awareness of roadblocks, gaps, and missed crossings. But generally a spirit of urbane sophistication predominates here, an Asian classicism not in terms of its indebtedness to T'ang dynasty poetry and so on but in the way it generally resides in, and revises, the classical temperament. In our day, the classical temper, to be other than stick-figure, must be multicultural, diasporic. Indeed a classical temper can even evade certain romantic dangers of multiculturalism – essentialism, nationalism, excessive othering.

But Aitken's poetry can also contain considerable emotion. 'Dukkha (craving)', my favourite poem in the book, again a part of the Postcards sequence, begins startlingly:

It came as a surprise, most of all to me,  
To have come this close  
To a thug's approach  
To ritual sacrifice (89)

The stance of the assured observer is jolted, made aware of its potential vulnerability to more primal forces. The speaker realises the relative luxury of his present life and hearkens back to a possible past life of even greater opulence, sharply rebuked by the chastening of *samsara*. 'Dukkha' usually translated as 'suffering', manifests itself here as the margin between false sense of life being 'paid for/debt free': and the larger reality of ontological vulnerability, *Dukkha* stands for both what must be gained from the past, from knowledge in general, and as a sign that knowledge alone cannot suffice, cannot conceal the reality of suffering, always one step away. Few would imagine craving suffering, but suffering is sometimes need to pierce complacency, to remind us that we cannot hope, whether personally or culturally, to get ahead of the balance of life.

Aitken is a poet capable of conceiving an ambitious, cross-cultural agenda and more often than not realising it. His poems fulfill the old Horatian ideal of both teaching and delighting; and also make us aware that we will only be truly cultured when an Asian reference comes as easily to mind here as does a European.

## Nicholas Birns