

LISA GORTON'S LAUNCH SPEECH

15 AUGUST 2014, UNIVERSITY OF MELBOURNE

for PETRA WHITE'S THIRD POETRY COLLECTION, *A HUNGER* (JOHN LEONARD PRESS).

The Press would like to thank Lisa for her permission to post the speech.

Petra's poetry is not like Stevie Smith's poetry but it is unlike other poetry in the way that Stevie Smith's poetry is unlike other poetry. Like Stevie Smith, Petra pays no heed to the codification of poetry into mainstream and experimental traditions, poetic and unpoetic matter. Office work and romantic love, stars and a dancing cow: Petra takes up unusual topics and long-familiar topics, unusual images and long-familiar images, and treats them with the same intensity and directness. These poems are everywhere saying what Petra says in one of her love poems: 'And love is common, but/ this is mine and no-one's ever known/ it or its like...' Reading *A Hunger*, you enter into a world that is closely personal but also large.

The most striking impression of these poems is of a mind alive in time, forcing itself moment-by-moment forwards: self-disputing, self-testing, hungering. Petra writes, 'We have to give ourselves to something, whether it feels/ right or wrong, we flow out into/ otherness...' ('The Sound of Work'). The whole collection is characterised by this forward-moving pressure of thought, at once urgent and vertiginous. Poetry is what she thinks with and line break by line break her poems force thought up against its cliffs of fall. Bureaucracy, boredom, jogging – poems about these alike confront death, rapture, terror, love: those abstract nouns that are abstract in language only. *A Hunger* takes on 'Our human idea of having a Self, / this bulky thing, this grandeur'. It is by this pressure of thought that the poems in *A Hunger* break open the confessional mode.

Gerard Manley Hopkins in the Victorian era began a poem, 'No worst, there is none. Pitched past pitch of grief/ More pangs will, schooled at forepangs, wilder wring...' Petra's poetry has that same pitching forwardness. You can hear the influence of Hopkins in some lines: 'mutuality, mutability, love nuanced and grappled, hard'; or, 'to risk what there is in hope of havocking more to risk'. Here, as in Hopkins, repeating sound patterns spring changes of mind, doubts and renewals. Petra's poems advance as thought reacting to thought; it often feels as though the poems are self-generating in the moment of our reading them, as though the mind thinking is the mind reading itself. More than anything else, this sprung language of thought distinguishes *A Hunger*: its intimacy, its risk, its heady precarious-feeling compulsion.

Any genuine poetic style can be rephrased as an argument. I think you could find in Petra's style the argument that contemporary secular poetry must keep as its range the death-facing desperation and conviction of Renaissance religious poetry, which itself inherited the language and imagery of love poetry. Petra brings that same largeness of thought and feeling to all the parts of *A Hunger* – not only the 'Thirteen Love Poems' but also the poems about depression, work, boredom, ambition and bureaucracy.

One of the recurrent images in *A Hunger* is of armour – shells, casings, protective self-enclosures. Impelling all the poetry is the notion of quest, the knight-errant of self going into the 'terrible otherness of the world that goes on'. In *A Hunger* it is essentially dramatic, this confrontation between the questing self and 'terrible otherness of the world'. It brings in quick shifts of scale, from intimate closeness to blank immensities – quick shifts of scale matched by quixotic shifts of tone. The poems go from rapture or terror to comedy in a line, sometimes a single word:

The trapping of his breath, the only outward sign,
I devour it like meat, ...
as if it was him,
tenderly and watchfully in all love's creepiness...

It seems to me admirably singular and brave, Petra's insistence on the rapture and fear closed in our days and forever breaking out through them. There is no sense in these poems of being at the end of history – post-modern, post-romantic. It is the moment-by-moment urgency of thought, I think, which gives these poems their immediacy, and makes the lyric poem no retreat. In *A Hunger* the lyric is not a minor mode because Petra has set it in its whole history and made that history present as the full language of thought. These poems take words from Herbert, Petrarch, Donne, Shakespeare and the Bible. 'He comes down from the shower like a flock of goats', she writes. She writes of 'unquenched souls', of 'convocation' and 'fathom'. In these poems Petra claims for her single love, for one life, the range and long tradition of love poetry and this ambition, this conscious largeness, is part of what the poems risk. She writes, 'Power to love draws the long breath from me.'

This is a heady and original collection, with shock after shock of reality in it. In place of smashing champagne over a ship's prow, I'm going to read a poem to launch it. A smashing poem!

MEMORY

Our selves are for us, only we can get them right,
until they are folded away. Very hard to think
how we will fade like chalk left years on a blackboard,
how the woman who plants her feet on the floor
three and more times a night to shift her limbless daughter
in the bed that will always be too big,
will vanish despite her hard work to stay alive, the daughter too,
but we cling to what we're made of,
we cannot imagine
being made of anything else.
Love of course is in our heads,
as real as we make it, but in its pigskin gloves we feel
steeped, in it enough to last out the centuries.
There is no one ever quite as you or I, as I or you,
our never-to-be-repeated stuffs
shine out like gold from the thimble
of the gold spinner, glimmering
in that bubble our planet that is destined to be out-fired
by the ever too luminising sun – perhaps
as early as five billion years into our memory.