

A Universe of Clowns, Serge Liberman
Phoenix Publications, Brisbane, 1983.

"A Universe of Clowns" is the title of the recently-published second collection of stories by the young talented writer, Serge Liberman. What is immediately and distinctly apparent in so many of the stories is the artistic maturity of the author in his depiction of setting and people, most particularly in the way he portrays his characters, along with their motivations and actions to which he brings a clinical illumination and perspective.

In his creative work, Liberman knows very well that a short story worthy of the name has its own rules of organisation. Because of its narrow frame, it must concentrate in a highly-synthesised way the various components of characterisation, narrative, perspective, imagery and symbol. The separate elements must then merge into a unified wholeness of form and content.

Naturally, a short story must also have a pivot, an axis around which the central characters revolve, along with the more peripheral ones to play out the themes and leitmotifs explored by the author. And important is not so much *what* the writer tells about, but *how* he tells his story. Every true writer has his own method and his own rhythm, these together being given the term: style. And style means the writer's personal voice, his own intonation, temperament, colouring and resonance in his creation of word-pictures as in his sharing of observations and weltanschauung which, with his own special art, he shapes into narrative. What is most fundamental is ultimately the epic harmony, the indivisible unity, conveyed, sometimes more successfully, sometimes less so, by the story.

The title story, "A Universe of Clowns", reflects a deep resonant insight into the clownish toying with human existence, evoking also the vision of the comic mirror of tragedy and the tragic mirror of comedy in the course of human life in all its dimensions.

Against a broad canvas, Liberman draws with a sure and masterly hand the love and self-sacrifice of an esteemed professor of medicine approaching middle age for a young incurable patient for whom he jeopardises his very career that he may ease, as far as he is able, her end. There are in this powerful story many imaginative insights and meditations, as when the great man of medicine, for all his knowledge and abilities, recognises his impotence, his absolute inability to stem the course of suffering, wilting, decay and death. In the context of the situation, he raises also those time-honoured unanswerable questions:— Who is it that toys with man so capriciously? God? Fate? and in what consists the interplay between free will and determination? — many questions that the thinking person has asked since Creation, that inform the magnificent drama of Job, artistically woven into the narrative along with others. Liberman constructs for his characters a stage on which he lets them play out, like actors, their different roles, behind masks in which they pretend to be other than they really are, just as clowns by their very nature must do in a circus.

The young patient, Elizabeth, tells how in her childhood she fell in love with just such a clown and grieved deeply for him when the circus moved on. She had lost her clown, and lost her dream, but found consolation and rediscovered her dream when her father brought home a clown he had bought. The world is full of clowns, whole circuses of them that enter the living vibrant human world. . . And like a refrain of black humour such as attends human existence on earth, the professor is moved to reflect, to hope, after Elizabeth's death, that she now found herself among the clowns.

It is a very impressive story that evokes the image of a journey along the alleys of the past where, were one to look back, one would see the many departed, their youth and humanity interred with them in their graves. As already indicated, it is a story of love and self-sacrifice, and of the quiet heroism of a man, heroism so often overlooked and unremarked. There comes to mind two lines of a splendid poem:

"And even after those so often silenced
There may yet remain the finest song."

In the book, there are stories of a universal nature, albeit with an Australian, more specifically with a Melbourne, setting. A considerable number of them, however, deal with Jewish themes, the characters portrayed having survived the European death-camps and come to Australia bearing their wounds and scars from the vale of tears. The Holtzmans, the Rotboims, the Shragas and the many other Jews who make up the immigrant scene in Australia endure hard times in their efforts to strike roots in the new terrain. The "computer" now at the very heart of their being repeatedly recalls with distress their yesterdays, their sufferings in Auschwitz and Siberia; the pages of their lives repeatedly open to that earlier sojourn through the vale of tears. And on account of this there follows a deep rupture between them and their children who see in the parents an obsession with Auschwitz.

Rita, for instance, the daughter of Shraga Sztayer in "Words", becomes estranged from her father. "I don't want to criticise, but you're all the time growing away from me," Shraga Sztayer says, to which Rita, with a shrug of a shoulder, replies, "That may be, Father, but I'm sorry, I can't live in your past." The truth, however, is not that her parents want her to live and breathe the atmosphere of their sorry past, but only that she understand it and not look away for, as Sztayer remarks, "It is your past and your people's past."

It is Barfuss, the publisher who declines to publish any more of Sztayer's Holocaust poems, who is nearer the mark. "Europe, Auschwitz, Siberia," he says, "they're behind us, The people, yes, the people are tired of the same reworked themes."

Serge Liberman knows Yiddish and this is a great asset in his being able to look deeply into the psyches of his Jewish characters, of the older Yiddish-speaking generation which has transposed its bitterness, migraines and neuroses accumulated through their lives and who now empty themselves of complaints against God and man, particularly against their children who refuse to go in the way of the elders. They would wish to hand down a legacy; but it is rupture they see instead, a sharp drift and separation from Jewish life and its spiritual heritage, the young flitting and straying towards the tantalising misleading beguiling flickerings of light they see in the outer non-Jewish world.

Rosalie Richter, for instance in "Moscow! Moscow!", feels herself cramped and trapped in a darkness that is her parent's home from which she seeks to escape, as her older brother, Judah, before her has done. He has indeed forsaken home, but has attained nothing. Liberman, himself one of a younger generation, understands well the mentality of his young rebels with their outer and internal conflicts which he weaves intricately into his stories.

Regrettably, limitations of space do not permit me to pause as I would wish over such interesting stories as "Moscow! Moscow!" with its alluring allusions to Chekov, or "The Fortress" or "The First Lesson" or any number of others which during my reading of them gave rise to comments and annotations along the way.

However, there is one story, which is linked thematically with a story in Liberman's earlier collection "On Firmer Shores", that I do feel the need to discuss. This story, "Friends", in an economic form comprising a mere ten

pages, highlights the tension between youthful ambition and later pragmatic domesticity — the dreams and ideals which the younger person may nurture and which, later, particularly after marriage, become transmuted into the pursuit of "a good time", a comfortable home, a luxury car, and materialistic success in one's career.

The author describes the early friendship of two school-boys who, in time, grow to maturity. One of them, Andre, has dreamt of following in the footsteps of the great humanist Albert Schweitzer and dedicate himself as a doctor to the performance of such deeds as have been laid down for him by his spiritual mentor and thereby to find both a higher and deeper meaning in his life. These fine dreams, however, have been exchanged for an existence of domestic contentment, Andre now a prosperous doctor living in a comfortable home outside Paris. When his one-time school-companion visits him and sees what has become of him, the two become estranged. A wall has risen between them as a result of the changes the narrator-visitor sees in Andre and the adjustment and conformism shown by Andre in the pursuit of this worldly material success.

This story, as indicated earlier, is thematically linked to another, "Honeymoon", in Liberman's earlier collection. The scenario is different. A husband and wife visit San Remo in Victoria twenty years after their honeymoon there. Now, on the threshold of middle-age, their life together serves as a model for their neighbours and friends. They are, pure and simple, to be envied. Their children, too, are good-natured and sensible, even while the children of so many others have been misled towards drugs, sects, and the like. And how many families have in the meantime broken up? The wife, Madeleine, is happy, contented, just like the doctor Andre in Paris. But in him, in the husband, there is a worm that keeps gnawing at him, and, looking at Madeleine and seeing her contentment, he wants to say,

"What have we done with our lives? We are comfortable, people envy us our harmony, but what have we achieved, for all our wants and our dreams? Madeleine, where did we go wrong? Let us turn time back these twenty years and start again. We are not young anymore, but nor are we too old. Let's go away! Let us hear, see, feel! There are books still burning within me. Perhaps there still a chance to leave a name."

Whoever has carefully observed the younger generation and its ways will also have noted crystal-clearly how the author has pinpointed the problem, the tension between idealism and domestic compromise. Of course, as always, there are exceptions and some do retain the idealism of their youth. But the majority — what do they live by? What is their higher purpose in life? How quickly and easily do so many slide into the comfortable lap of their essentially egocentric careers and shed all that they have wished for before!

Serge Liberman is a profound, earnest and gifted writer. His is a humanist approach to human values ("God is all the goodness that is in men — if you ever want Him, then look only into yourself. . ." — "The First Lesson"); he would turn away from those materialistic ambitions that would have others pursue shadows they mistake as light and are misled by mirages and rainbows. The limitations of human character and conduct that affect not only the simple but also those of high achievement and renown who carry academic tags — these are by Liberman illuminated from within with a powerful light in a generous succession of stories in his "A Universe of Clowns".

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The Skin Trade, Manfred Jurgensen
Phoenix Publications, Brisbane, 1983.

In a poem called "poetry" which embraces simultaneously the craft of poetry, the finished poem and the woman who is the subject of the poem, Manfred Jurgensen asks how to address himself "to no one", and how to express the joy felt "when I am part of your creation". The poem concludes:

as long as you live, I cannot die:
you gave birth to my fictional i.

The poem, from *A Winter's Journey*, is dated 1977.

The main sequence of poems in *The Skin Trade* was written in seven days in mid-December 1982, and the author explains in his prefatory note that although the rage and pain of *The Skin Trade* poems may be read as autobiography, nevertheless his real concern is not the identification of the poems' "i" with the poet, but the identification between poet and reader: "Writing means to me, above all, addressing someone."

The poet has not learnt, and cannot learn, how to address no one. First and last, the real inspirer of a poem, the ultimate "you" that gives birth to the fictional "i", is the reader. In the middle, as the medium, is the overt subject of the poem. In this case, the unfaithful lover.

So the someone addressed is essentially *not* the splendid Angelica whom the poems denounce for her trading of skin and soul, nor the friends and enemies invoked in other poems. Anyone who survives eight years of intimate relationship with a true poet, as Angelica has done, knows this. Behind the rage of the poetry that exposes Angelica's betrayal of self and lover, is the irony of the poet who, as artist, exposes, flays, betrays and vivisects everything most precious and intimate to himself in the reality of the other person. If the poet were to make anything other than this complete betrayal he would betray his art.

Art exists as a betrayal or subversion of reality. And if even the most extreme realistic art subverts reality, poetry, the least realistic of literary arts, does so with perfect completeness. The nineteenth century expressed this in Arnold's gentlemanly dictum that poetry is a criticism of life, and the best of late twentieth-century poetry simply replaces *criticism* with a more strenuous word like *subverts*. Again, when Arnold attacks the idea that a poem is an allegory of the poet's state of mind, Jurgensen warns against "a voyeuristic interpretation of the lyrical i". That Arnold's "Empedocles on Etna" and "Sohrab and Rustum" are entirely about Arnold's state of mind, and that Jurgensen chronicles a lived experience, are facts which cast no shade over the principle each endorses.

Poetry, like the other arts, subverts and triumphs over reality wholly through its form. In *The Skin Trade* Jurgensen takes what reality shows as a sordid, titillating account of pseudo-cataclysmic events in human relationships, and he reveals, through the mastery of form, the essential purity of passion towards which such relationships aspire. There is, of course, little that is *pure* about the rage and hurt of the fictional "i" of the poems. There are great depths of feeling, but the depths are as muddied as any human passion. The art of *The Skin Trade* approaches perfection not because the poet has achieved mastery of the form of his expression, but because the form has mastered the poet. To say how this happens, and why, in the process, the anguish and bitter detail of the experience are sharpened and made more palpable rather than frozen in static elegance, demands a more thorough discussion than the present allows. Yet some attempt should be made.

The jacket cover of the Phoenix edition of *The Skin Trade* reproduces Bernini's "St. Theresa in Ecstasy", and the explication comments on the