

Louis Armand—A Retro Record*

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Abstract:

This essay opens with the provocative question, “What might an Australian writer who has lived in Prague for over a quarter of a century make of Australian culture?” In its light, Brown goes on to read collections like *Letters from Ausland* and *Indirect Objects* in order to document the “energetic and curious intellect driving the imaginary in these poems”. In her reading, Armand’s analytical thinking upsets conventional expectations, arranging a kind of sur- or hyperreality and fashioning fresh concepts.

Keywords: Louis Armand; poetry; Australian culture; close reading.

[where we are now]

Where we are now, wherever that is now, *Je suis un autre* has become *Je suis un mangeur de vortex métamorphe*—“I is a shapeshifting wormhole eater.” Yes, this is a Louis Armand glitch. An irrepressible glitchhead, Armand’s bugs epitomise the human world as is—often insane and often insanely beautiful.

Take, for instance, *The Garden*, first published in 2001 and again as *The Garden [Director’s Cut]* in 2020. The book, an assemblage from notebooks, is 150 pages comprised of a single unpunctuated sentence recounting the writer’s trip to Morocco, accompanied by an Italian anarchist photographer in the mid-1990s. The unexpurgated version is an amplified exposition of the original that leads you into hyper-imaginative zones as astounding as a perfumed garden, as seductive as its fragrance and as artfully designed. The director’s cuts, similar at times to jump cuts and glitches, variously intersperse a Biblical garden, Derek Jarman’s garden, Hieronymous Bosch’s *Garden of Earthly Delights* and others. It is a chimerical tale of disorientation and lust—the chronicle of a writer with debilitated perception “pouring His morose soul into His writing-machine” (Armand 2020, 33). A quintessential phrase that ironically sizes up Louis Armand’s compulsive and caustic interpretation of how we live and write in this perplexing, precarious era that we have all had a hand in turning into a catastrophe on this altered planet.

[back at the millennial turn]

Back in the year 2000 I contributed to Armand’s fold-up zine *PLASTIC (SEMTEXT)*. In my role as poetry editor for Australia’s literary quarterly *Overland* magazine, I had read and published his poetry. I had also wondered whether this Sydney-born glossologist had invented his name—perhaps it was a French pseudonym? This notion might have been prompted by the poet and editor John Tranter, who had already met Louis, describing him to me as “a mysterious young man.” Or could his name have been borrowed from Anne Rice’s fiction, *The Vampire Chronicles*, where ‘Armand’ lives to be 500 years old? This was my as yet unsolved speculation.

In 2004 I began co-editing with Tranter on his online magazine *Jacket*. We published Armand’s intriguing poem, “Port Lights Shadows & Particles”—

have sobered up
from summer puberty & moonlit
smells — now everything
is politics & fastfood escapism — up on stilts we made
that
 first quiet house from
 cardboard
out over the reeds & water blue light
born of darkness — the night the salvage crew
 broke down
 the old derrick in port arthur, texas
like a violin in a mercury jar
saint petroleum will guide thee
& protect thee always
 in private life though sometimes
one is too controlled &
hypersensitive
 remembering to quote our favourite oriental
philosopher at each opportunity
thinking a chair uncomfortable with itself
all the blood you
left behind in rooming houses
seems forgiven now & you are more beautiful &
lucid without it — in venezuela
rain filled the shoes left on the windowsill
 a bleached-out calendar year
records that we are long past our time
& have been
all along — waiting for the news
to arrive by any other ship than this one
anchored beneath the skyway of neon babylons
as musical faces in porthole windows
look back singingly forlorn where
 twin shafts of sunlight illuminate a room
(Armand 2014d, 61)

In terms of meaning and narrative the poem was not straightforward, but the expressive, dreamlike imagery of the tale it aspired to tell provoked my developing intrigue with Armand's poetry and its portent—"a bleached-out calendar year / records that we are long past our time / & have been / all along." Some of Armand's poems that I'd published earlier were included in the survey anthology *Calyx:30 Contemporary Australian Poets*, edited by young Sydney poets Michael Brennan and Peter Minter. And other early poems I published eventually appeared in Armand's collection *Land Partition* in 2001. I had also read his inventive book *Malice in Underland*. Though the title seemed pretty corny, riffing not only on Lewis Carroll but also on Australia's nickname "down under," it was impressively more punk than pun. From then on, I continued to read Armand's writings.

I eventually met Louis Armand in Prague in April 2009. He and David Vichnar had invited me to take part in the inaugural “Prague Micro Festival Poetry Series” and asked me to recommend three other Australian poets. So Michael Farrell, Philip Hammial and Jill Jones completed our small contingent. Late one night on that visit in 2009 I had a long conversation with Louis on the motorway heading back from Brno to Prague in a mini-bus he was driving—behind us a group of Irish and Australian poets dozed in the back seats. We had been down to Brno to read poetry at a student bar.

From that conversation I discovered that Louis Armand was a writer-thinker who has a kind of Derridean incorruptible ethos; of someone who writes and edits magazines and collections of essays without conceding to public opinion, the media or the phantasm of an audience that might tempt him to simplify or repress (even if some of these projects, like his imprint Litteraria Pragensia Books, are of necessity made within an institution—[that in itself being always a problem or challenge for poets]). This particular ethos and his determination to realise his ventures are what makes Armand’s poetry, prose, and publishing exploits so broad and so engaging.

[cz – oz]

What might an Australian writer who has lived in Prague for over a quarter of a century make of Australian culture? Armand has returned to Australia at various times to participate in conferences, readings, and festivals, and to travel through parts of the country. He has collaborated with the well-known Australian poet and activist, John Kinsella, on several publications. Armand’s work continues to be published both online and in print in Australian magazines, journals, and critical anthologies. In exchange, as founding editor of the extraordinary *VLAK* magazine, which was a large international omnibus of incisive articles on happening culture, wonderful post-punk graphics and writings, and, more recently, in the acerbic online magazine *ALIENIST*, Armand has published many Australian writers and artists.

Published by D.J. Huppertz’s Textbase Press in Melbourne in 2001, the aforementioned *Land Partition* opens with the line “*how many contexts wrecked on these shores?*” (Armand 2014a, 9). That question cues an investigation that’s a kind of psychotopography rooted in the ramifications of colonisation. The poem’s title is ‘Notes on Incarceration, Geography.’ Its long eccentric form sprawls through nine sections that produce a darkly oblique record of Australia’s early shipwrecks, drownings and its laborious construction of prisons. The poem details the building of a breakwater at the late nineteenth century prison at Trial Bay in New South Wales and the prison’s later conversion into an internment camp to detain Germans, labelled ‘enemy aliens,’ during the first world war.

from ‘lagers point / (trial bay)’ –

reverence for the past / order
is broken: from the crumbling seawall
 the rocky headland ...
“one man’s
labour was sometimes required
for nine days
on the preparation of an individual block”

The prisoners who performed ‘hard labour’ constructing the breakwater were labelled ‘public works’ prisoners. The breakwater project failed and by 1915 the gaol had become a detention centre –

narrow isthmus, hard-faced
& remote (as internal exile or “enemy
alien”), dragged from the
sea edge persistently
the cormorants

crowd in nightmares to their sides, the solitary & collective
figures obedient as ghosts *con-*
demned to walk this earth – or “natural
histories” cast up
from elsewhere, to spring from nothing & vanish again, under
pain of (...)
(Armand 2014a, 15)

Like all Australians, Louis Armand knows the sorrowful history of Australia’s settlement as a penal colony and its subsequent development on supposedly unoccupied land.

It is likely that some readers here may not know of this particular history. So, I will provide a brief precis. As recently as 1835 the country of Australia was declared *terra nullius* (literally, in legal discourse, “land belonging to no-one”) by the British Governor Bourke of New South Wales. This enabled the colony to continue its denial of the existence of Indigenous people and their lands. This was, of course, then disputed for many years. One hundred and fifty seven years after Bourke’s declaration, the Meriam people of the Torres Strait brought a momentous case, ten years in the making, to the High Court of Australia that finally acknowledged the history of First Nations dispossession in Australia and abolished the legal fiction of *terra nullius*, thus altering the foundation of Australian land law. Indigenous people had lived here for a period now known to be at least 60,000 years.

Although Armand’s poems in *Land Partition* do not directly address the dispossession of Aboriginal land, the context from which he writes is inescapably informed by that knowledge.

“Utzon,” another poem in *Land Partition*, scrutinises the incredibly complex and distinctive architecture of the Sydney Opera House, designed by the young Danish architect Jørn Utzon. Construction began in 1959 but six years into the project a debacle arose when the state Minister of Works, Davis Hughes, began questioning Utzon’s designs, schedules and cost estimates. He eventually stopped payments to Utzon who was forced to withdraw as chief architect in February 1966. The people of Sydney marched in protest demanding Utzon’s reinstatement. In spite of the outcry the government’s position endured and Utzon packed up and returned to Copenhagen. The building was opened in 1970. Jørn Utzon never visited the Opera House.

like an immovable sphinx
absorbed
in its own enigma
(Armand 2014b, 37)

Louis Armand is also a visual artist (painting & photo montage). *Land Partition* appraises a number of iconic Australian twentieth century artists like Arthur Boyd and Sidney Nolan and poets of that era—Frances Webb, Bruce Beaver, and Douglas Stewart—alongside several international art figures.

[the toy of paradox]

In the decade following on from 2001 Armand published a number of poetry and prose collections, a collaboration, and five collections of essays and criticism. In 2011 a new collection of poems, *Letters from Ausland*, was published by Vagabond Press in Sydney. Replete with paradox, these poems moved in and out of languages, places, thoughts and imagery with an uncontrived precision.

Extending Armand’s connection with Australia, *Letters from Ausland* begins with “Burning Section”—a group of poems dedicated to the late Australian poet John Forbes (1950-98)—

But the poem is only a way to dream without
having to suffer – and it dreams us too,
on the other side where time is forever
advancing like a threat.
(Armand 2011h, 11-12)

This collection’s title puns on, literally in German, ‘a foreign land’ and an abbreviation often used for Australia, ‘aus’. These poems take an assiduously cognitive and imaginative turn that Armand often applies sociopolitically. He tackles the Jindyworobak Club. ‘Jindyworobak’ meaning ‘to join’ or ‘to annex’ is from the language of the traditional custodians of Melbourne, the Woiworrung people. In the 1930s and 1940s, the club taking that name was a coterie of white poets with strong nationalist ideas who believed that popularising Aboriginal myths would lead Australians to a more profound knowledge of the land, and to a growth of national pride.

In the poem “Roland Robinson’s Grendel & Death in Custody” Armand reinterprets Robinson, a Jindyworobak poet who lived briefly with First Nations people in the Northern Territory during the Second World War. Robinson’s 1967 collection of poetry was called *Grendel*, after Beowulf’s ‘monster,’ and in it he noted that Aboriginal mythology provided him with material and inspiration. Here, in Armand’s powerful revisionist poem, Grendel is in Redfern, an inner suburb of Sydney where many Aboriginal people live and work. She is imagined as a domestic anthropologist/detective driven by mistrust and scepticism engaging with morning radio shock jock John Laws as she ferrets through past public excuses for deaths in police custody—

Our deletions
are accumulating, like Royal Commissions or radio talk-back.

Grendel and John Laws exchanging product placement
between early morning traffic reports

...

Knowing, as well as you do
there’s no such thing as accidental death in custody
(Armand 2011k, 13)

Then there are poems that are like capsules of modernist Australian painting—Arthur Boyd’s “territory of conscience,” Albert Tucker from the “angry decade of the 1940s”—“someone has vomited a mess of symbols on the floor,” and an iconic Sydney poem from a later time—“*Paysage Moralisé, Lavender Bay*”—with “a mangrove odalisk, a Japanese divan, a blue square” (Armand 2011j, 16) —just like a Brett Whiteley postcard. The poem echoes Auden’s *Paysage Moralisé* with its shifting, double meanings.

The artist in his subterfuge unaware
that the true critic is within
(Armand 2011c, 19)

In “Plutonium 239” a Saddhu, or wandering yoga mystic, in a digital nuclear age, will find his way, as if no longer guided by the stars but by GPS. “Drinking at the Vandenberg” and “Concerning the Pleasure of Crime against the Establishment” remind us that political idealism, protest, and leftwing ideologies are all in decline—

So much for utopia. The decade when ideology
ended, left us standing in rain with fact-files and useless
megaphones
...
When the television broke down we left it that way,
a box filled with grey static, like a picture of what lies
behind every image
(Armand 2011b, 22)

There are poems that traverse the contaminated wasteland of the late 1950s to early 1960s British nuclear test sites on huge desert areas of the Maralinga Tjarutja people’s land in South Australia. The poem’s Kafkaesque scenes are accompanied by philosophising in the vast Australian outback—

What good’s nostalgia?
Or memory, without “progress”? Or poetry?

And, later, a poem *called* “Nostalgia” that “digs in the old trunk” and finds an Aussie beach scene with a drowning at the centre of its glaring blonde colourfulness. This is followed by an “off-balance” poem, “Holiday at Mentone,” that ends

Already the huge animal looks as if
it’s sleeping, full of drowned horrors. The public
have set up picnics on a wooden strand.
A funeral party. At the first sign of life they fled.
(Armand 2011b, 24)

and in “Biodegradable”

A damaged landform staggering upright
and dissolving in brief nocturnal laughter
(Armand 2011b, 28)

or in “*La guerre est finie*”, these lines—

Everything that goes without saying
has been passed over in silence
(Armand 2011b, 29)

and, of course, there is the doubting poet—

Have I grown up into an idiot picking at
old sores, waiting for the truth to come out?
(Armand 2011f, 37)

The Europeanish second section is “Forgetting Verlaine” (at last!). Here the poetry moves to Mexico, to Oaxaca, to the cliff divers of La Quebrada in Acapulco, (but none of this, for Louis Armand, is anything like “travel poetry”, it is more a slanted, analytical trip through compelling, odd landscape) —then to Europe where we find Dante Alighieri, Claudel in Paris—“beneath the window Rimbaud masturbated from,” Carthage—“A scenery of date palms and cats” and an out-of-place lone eucalypt, poems from places like Geneva, Trieste, Siena, and “Goethe in Venice”—

Years pass. Lying awake one April night
amazed, you calculate the odds,
each wrong step confronted with a
sense of ending. It has no name.
Expecting any day now to find a skull
on a beach to enlighten us.
(Armand 2011e, 39)

The memorial poem “Forgetting Verlaine” is written in couplets—it is a puzzling, melancholic poem that aptly enacts the work of mourning:

... Or somewhere
a bell is gradually tolling, that might once have seemed

ominous, but isn’t: awaiting the arrival at that senescent
plateau where everything peaceful has a troubled past.
(Armand 2011e, 39)

The third section, “Letters from Ausland,” introduces fourteen-line sequences that are, however, not exactly sonnets. They are two long philosophical enquiries, the title poem and, running with imagery although tempered, because it is written, an expressionism called “Circus Days,” which introduces a brief, wild concept of a 5th century Spartan Greek battle under a contemporary Big Top, and then moves on into its own warped narrative—

Why not describe everything backwards?

A poet’s question. And later –

Am I talking to myself again? Waiting for catharsis

to unfold, the way things happen in restored old
subtitled films. Hello, are you happy?
(Armand 2011a, 49)

Another group of poems, “Kino Pravda” or “truth cinema,” is both theatrical and painterly. “Boy with the Red Piano” resembles a film scene, and in “Leden,” the suicide of Petr Lébl the director of the Na Zábradlí theatre in Prague, is remembered. He “hanged himself among the stage scenery”

Suspecting time flows only in dreams or poetry –
each instant what it is and no other.
(Armand 2011i, 62)

As I have said earlier, it is evident from the visual elements in Armand’s poetry that he is a painter. The poem called “Grace” is like a painting or pastel drawing—

Fruit in a bowl of no colour
Apples, pears, mandarins. A piece of cake
(Armand 2011g, 65)

And in this pinstripe-wallpapered room is a reproduction of what appears to be a *fin de siècle* scene on the wall

In it, a man with yellow hair sits at a table.
A woman, crème de menthe in hand, appears to be alone – posed

beside a window streaked with grey
verticals. Who would suspect from this
that there is anything between them
(Armand 2011g, 65)

Other diversities and traces in this section include Paul Celan, Chechnya, the unknown soldier, Vasco da Gama, a poem for Vincent Farnsworth (the US-born poet and musician, editor of *Jejune*, then living in Prague), Piltdown Man, Roland Penrose, Bo Diddley, Charles Olson, Jack Spicer, Boris Pasternak, Ophelia and “Still Life with Robert Desnos,” the romantic photographer, a poem that ends

Perhaps in future this
will be a prerequisite, shedding tears for money.

Or staring and listening in a bed in Realville
(Armand 2011l, 72)

The final group, “Diner Poems,” is another cinematic sequence—but of course, the poems are from the great movieland, black & white, technicolour, CGI and 3D that is the USA. “Diner Poems” ranges impressionistically through New York City, acknowledges that Ted Berrigan died a quarter of a century ago and also asks “But is poetry already dead?” Garibaldi is placed in Washington Square (a nod to Italian immigration). The 1969 gay riots at Stonewall Inn in Greenwich village and the gay icon Judy Garland are here. There are poems for Pierre Joris,

Robert Creeley, a letter to Harriet Monroe, and there is regret—“Broke everything / because you loved / to make things out of the pieces” —

The waitress ignores how she makes you
suffer, filling and forever refilling the empty coffee cups.

Somewhere a telephone
is waking up. Lights go out in the canyons
(Armand 2011d, 76)

These poems deliver Armand with a conclusive corroboration with the New Yorker who was the influential instigator of objectivist poetry: “We remain, as Zukofsky says, the toy of paradox.”

[indirect objects]

Armand’s ekphrasis is not made from any critical distance—it is an immersion—he gets *into* a painting like an all-night drug tripper gets *in to* the dawn. For instance, the bluesy punk impressionism of the opening poem “Acid Comedown & John Olsen’s Five Bells”—

Call it topographic, eyeball to eyeball with invisible
fidget wheels, the whole blueprint in acid-dissolve.
Intelligence reports arrive from remote space colonies
dot-dash-dot on tree-branch telegraph wires,

meteorites and pool hall metaphysics.
(Armand 2014a, 11)

This is a painting by John Olsen made in tribute to “Five Bells,” a poem by Kenneth Slessor. One rainy night in the early 1930s Slessor was part of a group of artists and journalists riding a ferry across Sydney Harbour to go to a party. One of them, a cartoonist named Joe Lynch, had filled his overcoat with bottles of beer. Somewhere between Circular Quay and Mosman, Lynch fell overboard. Dragged down by the weight of the beer, he drowned in the harbour. His body was never recovered. Slessor began the elegy for his friend in the early 1930s and finished and published it in 1939. John Olsen’s painting is a large mural commissioned by the Opera House in 1971.

Armand’s poem is associated with venues of the annual New Year’s Eve celebrations at Sydney Opera House and the adjacent Botanical Gardens. The party is over, the poet is coming down under tickertape detritus, in a starry night under the giant fig trees. He offers a televisual, possibly empathetic, political gesture to the continual construction of Australian cities, witnessed by a cloud or rain spirit, a Wandjina—

Slow-motion videos of a city
in mid-construct – Wandjina Man drunk under a wall,

dreaming of blond missionary ancestor spirits
turned to coruscated glass and steel...

then everything grows grey and rainy and a little grim as dawn arrives

...
Rain spirals darkly,
each grey drop like a map of endless underground.
(Armand 2014a, 11)

This opening sets the tenor for an atmospheric, moody set of poems including revised 'improved' versions.

"Utzon," first appearing in *Land Partition* a decade earlier, has sections deleted and lines simplified into a definitive adjustment. At the early stage of building the Opera House—"cranes / stooping / over the quays"—construction cranes are ready to alter the location on Bennelong Point. "Port Lights Shadows & Particles" has been given conventional grammar—capitals, no ampersands and correct punctuation—as if the poem "grew up" in the seven years after it is free-form appearance in *Jacket* magazine.

Indirect Objects is loaded with attempts to transform or restore a destroyed world (where we live) and shares with the reader the proposition that renewal is possible. But not without regard for the past.

Snake Bay is a bay in the Tiwi Islands in the Timor Sea, north of Darwin in the Northern Territory. In 1956 the painter Russell Drysdale included Indigenous figures in his painting "Snake Bay at Night." Armand's poem "After Russell Drysdale's *Snake Bay at Night* & Deuteronomy" is an acute critique—

... occasionally memory creeps in,
like an irrational return to a point we started from.

And, emphasising the fearful power of god given land –

A mad dog stalks the relics of shipwrecks,
the unmarked graves of aborigines murdered by experiment
(Armand 2014b, 13)

Armand speculates that "great montage" of the painting might have been made by

...some demon of history like a mind gone astray
in the night, mad with visions of sexual punishment.
(Armand 2014b, 13)

There is a superb aggregate of extraordinary, iconic Australianisms in this collection: a northern river meeting a night sea in a dreamily humid methadone metaphor, the tropical erotic-exotica of Donald Friend's Balinese pen drawings, Richard Lowenstein's classic-1980s rock film *Dogs in Space* alongside a junkie Darlinghurst Gauguin selling his drawings to obtain money to score drugs in a poem dedicated to John Kinsella that proceeds via seedy street philosophising that aspires to a better life. A Nobel Laureate becomes "Patrick White as a Headland." Sydney painter Charles Blackman and poet Francis Webb appear. In Melbourne—a monologue from an Aboriginal boxer in Fitzroy, freeze frames at St Kilda Beach, Swanston Street, and Brunswick Street.

Kristen Valentine, writing about Armand's novel *Canicule* in 2014, said "Armand uses language to paint a picture just as vividly as if we were watching this unfold on screen..." (Valentine) which is a good way of putting it. Some of these paintings-in-poems are in the first section of *Indirect Objects* called "Realism," which is an odd title for a collection of poems definitely located in Australia. "Realism" in some ways seems a sombre tag to the book's title. Indirect objects can be rare. You can sometimes read for several pages before you encounter one. Everyone can recognise a direct object when they see one, but an "indirect object" is an odd grammatical concept. The term seems stretched enough here to mingle with the melange of allusions, similes, descriptions and metaphors that incorporate these vivid, image-rich, hyperreal poems.

"Realism" is an extraordinary poem comprising four preludes—three in couplets, and one in quintets (or five-line stanzas). It begins with a quote from William Carlos Williams that says in part—"The only realism in art is of the imagination." In Louis Armand's case it is also art's relationship with emancipation that registers strongly. This remarkable poem moves in its preludes through an initial anxious energy as an exhausted persona (the poet) travels through harsh sheep farming country where alcohol and over-the-counter drugs smother the numbness and anomie that a young jackeroo or farmhand might feel in the face of slaughter yards and endless plains' horizons broken by occasional silos and surreal sunsets that eventually seem conventional, leading to a sense of desperation—

A hundred pages on
through plotless outcountry
(Armand 2014c, 16)

There is a turn in this road trip in arriving at the east coast's "flat edge of pacific breakers." Then the collision of the ocean and urbanity reminds the jet lagged yet still cogent prodigal of lost political causes—

We could've been the children
of Whitlam and Coca-Cola.
(Armand 2014e, 43)

which is an Australian riff on Jean Luc Godard's intertitle in his 1960's film *Masculin-Féminin*—"The Children of Marx and Coca-Cola."

One of the challenges of minimalism is finding a way to gouge relatable connotation from simplicity. Armand is particularly skilled at doing that. The poem traverses grinding hard yakka and the tedium of distance. It hauls along through the dead of night between outback mining towns and salt flats pushing past "a punchline without a joke" until daybreak reveals "barbiturate cloud patterns" and "unfamiliar / regions of cross-sectional debris." Attempting to get a grip on this place, he asks the question—is 'the scene ironic or insincere?' The reply—

An ambiguous terrain, its objectivity
is a thing of the mind, una cosa mentale
(Armand 2014e, 45)

In the second prelude the prodigal poet returns to the foci of his journey. In a monumental segment of five stanzas of five lines each, he is, in Sydney, addressing the Road Builders'

Obelisk and colonial history, or mis-history. It is the oldest true obelisk in Sydney, built in 1818. Located in tiny Macquarie Place on Bridge Street, it was designed by architect Francis Greenaway. This elongated sandstone pyramid's purpose was as the geographical milestone for the measurement of road distances in New South Wales (especially apposite to this circuitous road poem).

Soon enough, yet cautiously, the poem heads out again and the third prelude recounts "The Effect of Travelling in Distant Places" where an experiential resolution or 'answer' is sought—

the sick man groans,
dragging his sack of instruments
on into the immeasurable –
beckoned by its fool's glimmer
(Armand 2014e, 48)

The problems of religion, greed, capital, false gods are all encountered in eight couplets then "the eye too, is a product / of history." Or perhaps "seeing isn't believing" as the poems' slightly abstracted ecological predicaments, like brackish bore water contaminated by alkaline salinity, are reduced—"Being/ so much dreck and signage."

The body suffers in parallel with the land and, finally, there is a "Reprise"—

we reached the next turning point
and came to a standstill:
from centre dead up against periphery
(*no things but in relations*).
(Armand 2014e, 51)

The reprise is of the times, briefly. It is a sleaze reprise, back in Sydney, a place once nicknamed "Tinsel Town," at the harbour—

A bridge to the
promised land in perpetual
strip-tease slung above the 100,000
expiring light bulbs of LUNA P RK.
undressing the blacked out scar of
decommissioned navy yards, dry
docks ... Our hungers for elsewhere
were free to enlarge, conscripted
to the Big Idea – not by ballot but by
lottery –
(Armand 2014e, 51)

In the final twenty-odd couplets the poem briefly laments American influence in Australia, revisits the outback journey, remembers earlier times—"the halo formed / around the analogue dial / wandjina like, and electric as / spirit medium shot at high speed." There is no actual conclusion to "Realism" but "Escape was a sad parody of a film / that's been running for a century." The prodigal, back on the western highway, checks the rearview mirror—"testing the

stringency / of what it means to be invisible – / though drawing no conclusion from it” (Armand 2014e, 51).

There is an energetic and curious intellect driving the imaginary in these poems. Armand’s analytical and motile thinking upsets conventional expectations. He arranges a kind of sur- or hyperreality and fashions fresh concepts as images and metaphors tumble over each other and extensive transcultural classical and popular cultures combine to make poems that are often reminiscent of large colourful, layered, goopy oil paintings or stacked banks of video screens simultaneously playing different images.

Finally, here are two incomplete lists that give an idea of the abundant artistry this collection contains. The poems embrace innumerable literary, philosophical, mythological and artistic figures like Arcimboldo, Rachmaninov, Aristotle, De Kooning, Blaise Cendrars, Charles Mingus and many others. They roam through many places, both actual and imagined. A sample includes Las Vegas, Cittavecchia, Manhattan, Paris, Bolzano, Rapallo, Ravenna and, of course, Prague. The dedicatees are as various as the poems’ influences, themes and associations constituting a transnational *ars poeisis*. Some, but not every one of them, are Gwendolyn Albert, Anselm Berrigan, Ali Alizadeh, Amiri Baraka, John Tranter, Karen MacCormack, David Vichnar, Kenneth Koch, Howard Barker, Mahmoud Darwish, David Malouf, John Kinsella, Charles Bernstein, Bruce Andrews, Cy Twombly, and many others.

In the early years of the twenty-first century Louis Armand’s particular critical interpretation and poetic exposition showed that poetry, as a form, can be a philosophical gesture. Since developing a multifaceted cultural practice Louis Armand has continued to produce audacious mixed media works that are incisive, sardonic *and* serious.

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 - “Forgetting Verlaine.” Armand, *Letters from Ausland*, p. 39.
 - “Goethe in Venice.” Armand, *Letters from Ausland*, p. 37.
 - “Grace.” Armand, *Letters from Ausland*, p. 65.

- “Hugh Tolhurst, with Lines for a Poem.” Armand, *Letters from Ausland*, pp. 11-12.
- “Leden.” Armand, *Letters from Ausland*, p. 62.
- “*Paysage Moralisé*.” Armand, *Letters from Ausland*, p. 16.
- “Roland Robinson’s *Grendel & Death in Custody*.” Armand, *Letters from Ausland*, p. 13.
- “Still Life with Robert Desnos.” Armand, *Letters from Ausland*, p. 72.

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