"The Short Stories of Serge Liberman"

With the appearance of his sixth collection, *Where I Stand*, Serge Liberman has now published some 87 stories, some over fifty pages long, which makes him (with the possible exception of his fellow Jewish writer Morris Lurie) probably the most prolific Australian writer currently working in the form. Not only is it a substantial body of work but it is an extraordinarily consistent and unified one as well. Liberman came to Australia with his Russian Polish parents at the age of nine, forced out of Europe by the Nazis. The cultural implications of the Jewish diaspora and the specific event of the Holocaust hang heavily over all his work. Of those 87 stories, only three or four are not concerned with Jewish cultural identity and the same themes and dilemmas recur over and over again.

Liberman clearly believes that the unexamined life is not worth living. He likes to take a moral problem, show it in different lights without necessarily committing himself to one answer or solution. He can be a heartbreakingly clumsy writer at times. For instance, there is a sentence in "St Kilda Madonna" (VC) that goes for seventeen lines and contains nine parentheses. His command of Australian idiom (which fortunately he rarely attempts) is nil and the occasional ventures into comedy and what I can best call Jewish fable are uncertain at best. His language is full of old-fashioned and formal words and sometimes tends to abstraction and he is no disciple of the modern trend of understatement. Here, for instance, is a sentence from the title story of *A Universe of Clowns*: "Events, attachments, even sickness, he had since his student days looked upon as the workings of chance, the random inter-acting of the individual's thoughts, feelings and actions together with the parallel or concurrent events taking place outside himself yet entangling him in an intricate mesh where the ruffing of one corner sent might currents through the entire lattice."

And yet the gaucherie of some of the writing hardly seems to matter. It is all part of the intense moral earnestness that informs his imagination and, as with Thomas Hardy, a comparison that would not otherwise come quickly to mind, it is the signature of his integrity. Even the titles of the books indicate the bitter solemnity of their concerns, especially the Dostoievskian *The Battered and the Redeemed.* Sometimes, too, his prose can take on what seems almost a Biblical cadence, the nature of which can again be suggested in some of the titles of the stories: "Sustenance Was I to the Needy", "Bone of My Bone, Flesh of My Flesh", "From Olympus the Laughter."

Any discussion of Liberman's work has to begin with the role of the Holocaust in it. For most Jewish writers their Jewish identity in general and the Holocaust in particular are important; for Liberman they are all-important. Although the Holocaust is never dealt with directly, it casts its shadow over the majority of these stories in several ways. Sometimes it may be only a small, specific detail such as the revealing appearance of a tattooed number on the arm of a character, the revelation that a character escaped Auschwitz, the suicide of someone who also survived but was

unable to forget. In "Music" (BR) Mr Glick persuades a young Jewish boy reluctant to take his music lessons by showing him a photo of himself and two other men playing; it turns out they played in the concentration camp at Therensienstadt and this was what saved their lives.

But the Holocaust has a much wider and deeper significance than these individual examples would suggest. Liberman has always followed the great Russian tradition of his predecessors, Tolstoy, Dostoevsky, another doctor-writer Chehov and Isaac Babel in asking the fundamental questions of life. In "The Parapet at Bracken Bay" (BR) the narrator-doctor puts them directly: 'What am I? What can I believe? What can I know? What must I do?' The answers, he says, find him, rather than vice versa: 'I am a doctor, a husband, a father, a man.' 'I can only believe in procuring the well-being of those who come to me.' 'I can only truly know that which I can touch, intuit, taste, smell, see and hear.' And what he must do is implied in the answer to what he believes: 'Anything else is superimposed invention, overlaid embellishment.'

The protagonist in this story comes to a resolution, however limited and compromised. In the vast majority of the stories, however, the Holocaust stands squarely in the way of any kind of discovery of meaning in life. Liberman's questers and dreamers are forced to confront the possibility or even probability that there is no ontological meaning in life and that the only meanings are in fact biological. We are all composed of molecules. His protagonists wrestle fiercely and in different ways with this, as a few quotations will demonstrate:

'God *is* only an idea, created, nurtured and sustained by the human mind.'

- "Drifting" (OFS)

'I, for whom sentiment, like everything else, is the product of a particular configuration of cells activated by a spurt of chemical substances . . ."

- "Two Letters" (OFS)

'Not philosophy, not metaphysics, but simple, humble biology. Behaviour all comes down to genes and genes to molecules and one day we shall understand such events as war, murder, love, loyalty in this way.'

- "Words" (UC)

'And yet, reduce the human body to the basic structures of blood, collagen, fats, calcium, starches, whatever, and only the untutored will insist that it is, *in essence*, different from that of the dog, or the weasel, or a mole.'

- "The Sniper" (LWL)

'We, *homo sapiens*, possess the might of Samsons, Hercules and Atlases all in one to create all these, yet mere molecules, the minutest atoms within us hold us hostage, turn our heads, fire our glands, breed fantasies and feel illusions that, even when seeking to create, nonetheless destroy, destroy, destroy . . . '

"Praised by Moloch, Blessed be the Seraphim" (BR)

The very repetition of these sentiments (and I could have quoted many more) suggests the obsessive weight they hold in Liberman's imagination – though not perhaps, the variety of conclusions his protagonists come to, the tenacity with which they continue to seek meaning and the miraculous and sometimes believable epiphanies with which many of the stories end.

But the significance of the Holocaust does not end there. There *are* some survivors and they escape to Australia or elsewhere but their misery may not end there. In

Judah Waten's wonderful story "Mother", two parents and their young son arrive in Australia from Europe and the two males immediately embrace their new life with enthusiasm. But not the mother. She eternally rails against the new country and yearns for her old Europe, even though she recognises it is now only a Europe of the mind. This tends, by and large, to be the pattern in Liberman's work. Female immigrants, particularly the older ones, never really adjust to the new country and feel bitterly lost in it. The ten year old narrator of "Two Years in Exile" (OFS) says of his mother that she finds it very hard to adjust to Australia. 'Mother cannot forgive Melbourne, upon which, she says she has merely stumbled.' Melbourne is 'a tail torn from the rump of the world' and she herself is 'a foreigner Jew in an Australian marsh.'

Sometimes, it is a matter of actual persecution but not often. In "The Kitchen" (OFS) Morris Nussbaum and his wife buy a run-down house and do it up but just as they are finished tragedy strikes. Two of Morris's workmates taunt him during the lunch break for being a Jew, he slips and hits his head against the lid of a can of paint and a few days later he dies of a brain haemorrhage. The story is repeated almost identically in "An Alchemy Splendid" (WS). In "Greetings, Australia! To You Have I Come" (UC) a young boy arrives in Australia, willing and even eager to engage in a new life until he is set upon by three boys who torment him on account of his Jewishness. As usual, the last word is left to the mother: 'Even here?! For this have we come?! For this have we bled?! For this?! Everything for this!' More often, though, it is not the effects of actual anti-semitism but a state of mind that afflicts the characters.

The experience of dislocation and the subsequent determination to preserve their culture can affect the protagonists in other ways as well. Liberman is not unsympathetic to his predominantly Jewish characters but he is aware also of the destructive side-effects their insistence on preserving their culture can have at times. It is a striking thing in these stories that almost every marriage, or plans for marriage, between a Jew and gentile is fiercely, even fanatically opposed by the Jewish parents. In "Drifting" Baruch/Bernard becomes President of the Rationalist Society and grows away from his Jewish roots to marry a *shiksa,* a Jewish girl. His parents disown him but although the mother eventually comes around, the father reverts even more obsessively to the active practice of his Jewish religion. More often it is the mother who is most fiercely resistant, as in "Laudate Dominum" (OFS) where the conflict, for once, is not between Jew and gentile but between Catholic and Protestant and where the young man's mother drives the initially happy couple insane. In "Passage" the protagonist succumbs to his parents' insistence he not marry a non-Jewish girl.

Another variation on the theme occurs in "Discovery in Venice" where 'Marguerite and I', Catholic and Jew, are touring Europe on their honeymoon, having left devastated families in their wake. Though they are very happy with one another they remain bitterly disappointed with their parents' attitudes. But the story suggests enigmatically that the cultural gaps between the two lovers will widen. As they visit a ghetto in Venice Marguerite's response is 'How quaint . . . How picturesque and old-worldly!' but Reuben's feelings are more sombre: he senses that the solemn traditions of his ancestors have become with him 'diluted and withered and as good as lapsed.' Watching the beauty of Marguerite as she prays to her God he feels again his own 'inner grey, hollow and dismal poverty.'

And as well as marriage, the parents will frequently push their children into career paths they don't wish to tread. In "Before the Law" (OFS) a young Jewish boy wants to become a writer but his parents remorselessly force him to study law. After he graduates they throw a party for him. The story ends savagely with him smiling,

A bitter smile, an angry smile, a smile aching with regret.
I had become a lawyer, yes, but I no longer loved my father.

The domination is not always as obvious or as fiercely resisted as that but often the characters in these stories, many of them doctors, look back on their lives with a mixture of regret and resignation, the regret stemming from the fact that their parents pushed them in directions they didn't want to go. The narrator in "Honeymoon" is typical in this respect. A couple return to the site of their honeymoon twenty years before. They have led decent, respectable lives, brought up two children, still love one another and yet the narrator is filled with frustration at the ambitions he once held that were never fulfilled: 'Within me, a book is waiting. And there are places to visit, different experiences to savour.' As he hungrily kisses his wife he knows 'with silent agony that in her embrace there passes through this world an anonymous life destined to whimper out slowly in an unmarked death.'

Sometimes it comes out in a more comic form. Ronnie Silver in "Of Clay that Bleeds and Clay that Bleeds" (WS) wants to be a journalist but his parents insist he study medicine and make something of himself. 'What kind of career is there in newspapers? ' his father asks, as he sits there reading *The Age*. And in the story "Africa" from the same collection the newly graduated and idealistic doctor wants to treat the poor in Africa but his parents are horrified and morally blackmail him. 'We have never asked much of you,' his father says and then proceeds to sum up what they have asked: 'Only that you hold fast to your studies, cultivate good friends, following everything that your heart desires with all your heart, grow into a man who may stand tall in the world, keep to your *Yiddishkeit*, and get married, live a normal life, have a family, create a happy home.'

Another misanthrope who feels he has wasted his life is Henry in "The Caterpillar" (LHL). At thirty-seven he recognises clearly that 'he had achieved little, was achieving little, and would never achieve more than little' – despite the fact that he has an attractive wife, two children and a steady if unsatisfying job as an insurance salesman. In symbolic protest he goes to a New Year's fancy dress party dressed as a caterpillar inside a cocoon. A variation on the theme occurs in "Jewel in the Crucible" (LHL) where a doctor, also 37 and with a lovely wife, fine daughter and luxurious house, is bored and jaded with the sameness of his life. As he thinks about the tragic lives of others, however, his mood begins to shift and he experiences one of those epiphanies that are common in these stories. He rings his wife to arrange dinner and feels a sudden uplift of spirits: 'For humanity I am ready.' Even Max in "O Sylvie, Sylvie!" ((VC) when he is forced into inventing a story pursues the same theme: though he and his wife have what seems on the face of it an excellent relationship he feels unfulfilled and despondent.

Serge Liberman has never written a novel, although some of his stories, like those of Alice Munro, are quite long. The opening story in his latest collection. *Where I*

Stand, is titled "An Alchemy Splendid" and runs to 95 pages. The collection was, in fact, originally conceived as a novel and this story has certain structural qualities that resemble those of a novel. As in all of the stories except the last, the narrator is a Jewish doctor named Raphael Bloom, who had first appeared in "Beinish Gotteskind" (VC). Like most of Liberman's many narrator-doctors he rarely intervenes in the action but is there merely to observe or to listen to other characters without passing judgment. We learn only the most meagre details of his personal life. He is a very good listener and in fact some stories are told almost entirely in the voice of the protagonist while the doctor listens in, making only the briefest of prompts.

"An Alchemy Splendid" is constructed in many ways like a short novel. As Raphael tells us at one point, 'Were this a symphonic suite, Jacob Glanz would have been the third of this movement's major motifs.' It tells a number of stories about interrelated characters. Apart from Raphael there are Rebecca Nissen, her step-son Leon and his *shiksa*/convert wife Elizabeth, Jacob Glanz, and his son Lenny. All are familiar types and raise questions that have been asked in earlier stories. Rebecca Nissen (formerly Nussbaum and before that Rivka Shuster) is a survivor of the Holocaust. Her three husbands have all died. Like most of the women in these stories she hates Australia and she is bitterly resentful that Leon has taken a gentile wife, even though she has converted.

Jacob Glanz is her closest friend but the experience of the Holocaust has turned him into a bitter unbeliever who rails at the meaninglessness of life. His wife Sarah died in Australia, redoubling his conviction of the lack of any ontological order in life and he despises his gauche and timid son. He attributes his survival to chance – 'to the random and indifferent and capricious workings of chance', a word that comes up frequently in Liberman's work. As he puts it to the doctor, 'What are any of us if not simply the outcomes of mere sticky, messy blobs of fluid mixed together?' The complex fates of all these characters are worked out at some length and at the end there is a kind of epiphany; something comes out of the hopelessness and meaninglessness of this world.

Raphael Bloom figures in all the stories in this collection except the final one, "Africa", which I suspect is the most autobiographical of Liberman's stories, apart from perhaps "Pebbles for a Father" (VC). As I mentioned earlier, the doctor-protagonist gives in to his parents' importunities and abandons his idealistic ambitions to serve poor people in Africa. He stops worrying, too, about the questions that recur over and over again in Liberman's work: 'What is life? . . . What is its meaning? . . . Or our purpose? While does it *have* a meaning or purpose, or is everything indeed vain, profitless, absurd?' The ending is one of, if not acceptance at least calm resignation. Imagining he is called before a heavenly prosecutor after death and asked to choose any reward he wants the doctor says: 'Only to that know that mine was a life well spent, so that I may from here on be forever in peace with comfortable knowledge of the fact.'

That kind of balance and resignation, a kind of achieved wisdom, is what characterises Serge Liberman's stories as a whole.

On Firmer Shores (1981)

A Universe of Clowns (1983)
The Life that I Have Led (1986)
The Battered and the Redeemed (1990)
Voices from the Corner (1999)
Where I Stand (2008)