

Gardening in Hell: Abject Presence and Sublime Present in *Dead Europe* and *The Vintner's Luck*

LAURA JOSEPH
University of New South Wales

In their recent analysis of Silvan Tomkins's work on affect theory, Eve Sedgwick and Adam Frank identify an impasse within contemporary theories of subjectivity. Sedgwick and Frank argue that current critical models have no way of accessing the conceptual space between two and infinity—that is, the space between binary opposition and innumerable variation. Sedgwick and Frank emphasise that access to this space is necessary for “enabling a political vision of difference that might resist both binary homogenisation and infinitizing trivialisation” (Sedgwick 15). An engagement with biological models such as Tomkins's is one way this impossible conceptual space between two and infinity might be accessed. This essay contends that such a possibility is also fleshed out in the queer, disturbing and sublime matter of contemporary Australian and New Zealand literature. The work of Australian writer Christos Tsiolkas and New Zealand writer Elizabeth Knox can be seen to insist corporeally on contradictions at the heart of identity and desire, on the irreducible particularity and impossibility of the speaking subject. This essay will analyse in detail Tsiolkas's 2005 novel *Dead Europe* and Knox's 1999 novel *The Vintner's Luck*, in order to show via the rhetorical operations of queerness how the dark matter of literature, by seeping into impossible spaces, opens up new possibilities.

Populated by demons and angels, and with part of the action located in hell, both novels incorporate the impossible presence of the supernatural figures of Christian theology. In fleshing out these super-real creatures and impossible bodies both texts exceed the limits of realism. Such impossible presences constitute not only a means to read these novels together, but one form of the excessive matter by which both texts rupture, disrupt and refigure genre and subjectivity.

This essay contends that the queer disruption of coherent identities rehearsed in both novels, one becoming, the other disintegrating, works to refigure historical, individual and national narratives of identity. Concluding with

a disarticulation of the first-person voice, *Dead Europe* is propelled by an escalating disintegration of bodies, subjectivity and genre. In *The Vintner's Luck* this trajectory is reversed; Knox's novel plots the process of an angel becoming human, and concludes with the wingless Xas assuming the first-person narrative voice. Set in nineteenth-century Burgundy, *The Vintner's Luck* traces the impossible relationship between vintner Sobran Jordeau and the angel Xas. These two texts, individually, but perhaps more potently in their conversation, figure queerness as the becoming and undoing of the subject, the locus of a necessary impossibility and a queer opposition to the logic of opposition.

This essay will first analyse *Dead Europe's* furious undoings of subjectivity, genre and narrative through attention to the disturbing presences that haunt the novel. I will then move on to argue, via Julia Kristeva's theorisation of abjection, that the apocalyptic impetus of *Dead Europe* and the novel's compelling revelation of the impossible constitution of being is the site of the novel's political charge. Here I will also be drawing on the recent insights of queer literary theorist Lee Edelman to argue that, in perversely inhabiting the "other side of politics", *Dead Europe* violently opposes the logic of opposition, making all recourse to the space of "two"—self/other, life/death, inside/outside—impossible. This essay will then examine the other end of the spectrum through the impossible as staged in *The Vintner's Luck*. Again, matter is a site of refiguring subjectivity, difference and the dynamics of self and other. This analysis will draw on Gaston Bachelard's theorisation of the generative properties of matter to consider what can be gained from gardening in hell, by being perversely attentive to these dark substances. Finally, this essay will examine, through the concept of alchemy, the intersection of the abject and the sublime to show how the matter of impossibility might be transubstantiated into new spaces of possibility, just as realism is transformed by the incorporation of extra-real and impossible presences.

Also in the territory of reimagining identity (a motivating question of this enquiry, although not explicitly taken up in this paper) is the extent to which Australian and New Zealand literature can be read together; what the imaginative limits of transnational criticism might be. In considering the queer dynamics of subjectivity fleshed out in these two novels, this essay suggests that repopulating the space between two and infinity, imagining identity—conceptualising difference—in a way that does not insist on coherence or non-contradiction, might be productive in opening and sustaining transnational conversations. While it is beyond the scope of this essay to make this argument explicitly, the question of transnational criticism

implicitly informs the following analysis of the substance of *Dead Europe* and *The Vintner's Luck*.

The repulsive matter that permeates Christos Tsiolkas's *Dead Europe* is perhaps best summarised by Les Rosenblatt's now infamous description of the novel as "a Judeo-Christian devil's jumping castle submerged in excrement, blood and foul vapours" (Rosenblatt 49). Most responses to this novel—Manne, Sparrow, McQueen and Padmore to name a few—incorporate the word "disturbing". This essay contends that the presence of this repulsive matter works to disturb, disperse and finally disintegrate the speaking self. On a train from Prague to Berlin, the protagonist Isaac says that "this journey seems to be taking me further and further away from myself, from all my certainties, even from a sense of my own origins" (Tsiolkas 259). Isaac's journey away from himself is realised through abject undoings of the body and violent consumption of others. The horrific undoings that propel *Dead Europe* can be productively elucidated by Kristeva's theorisation of abjection. Kristeva famously theorises the abject as that violent visceral reaction to the experience of the liminality of the self; the abject is that which does not respect borders; an ambiguous substance—repulsive and compelling in its revelation of the heterogeneity of self (Kristeva 4). Strange and repulsive, abjection opposes the language of opposition and works, like queerness, to disturb rather than define identity.

Isaac's first-person narrative in *Dead Europe* unfolds according to a trajectory of escalating abjection, a progressive breakdown that is apparent in an analysis of the first and last scenes of the novel. Isaac's story begins and ends with an encounter with a Russian sex worker in a hotel room. The uncanny repetition of this space and nationally inflected body serves as a very clear marker of the protagonist's trajectory. The first of these scenes emphasises boundaries, rules and limits as Isaac indicates to the youth the limits of their encounter: "I mimed to him that we would not need any condoms as I had no intention of fucking, or being fucked" (26). The second rehearses, through the murder and consumption of the Russian, a total disintegration of bodies, subjectivity and narrative. In this final, harrowing scene, Isaac not only penetrates the man, but violently kills and eats him: "my teeth sink into its face and the eyes disappear forever. I pull away skin and muscle and bone and the blood gushes" (382). It is at this point that consciousness falls away, the "I" disappears forever, and the first-person narrative concludes in the ripping apart and consumption of the Other.

This ferocious apocalyptic impetus of *Dead Europe* can be further elucidated through an analysis of the rhetorical operation of queerness in the novel. *Dead Europe's* narrative of escalating abjection and death-drive disintegration

resonates with queer literary theorist Lee Edelman's argument for occupying the side "outside all political sides" (Edelman 7). Queerness is a rhetorical figure that, as Edelman puts it, "can never define an identity, only disturb one" (17). Asserting that the most potent challenge queerness can pose is by embodying this disturbance, Edelman calls for representations of queerness to harness "our ability to insist intransitively. To insist that the future stop here" (Edelman 31). This call is answered by *Dead Europe* as the text grotesquely materialises this "other side" of politics. Ending with the disarticulation of the first-person narrative, *Dead Europe* can be seen to eviscerate coherent identity positions.

An almost overdetermined example of *Dead Europe* disturbing coherent positions, of inhabiting the "side outside all political sides", is apparent when Isaac recounts a conversation about religion, war and politics to his boyfriend in Melbourne:

- Religion's fucked.
- And capitalism?
- Fucked.
- Communism.
- Fucked.
- Australia?
- Very fucked.
- Europe?
- Doubly fucked.
- America?
- Arse-bleedingly fucked. (349)

This furious negativity and repetitive recalcitrance echoes Edelman's untenable call to "fuck laws with both capital ls and with small, fuck the whole network of the symbolic order and the future that serves as its prop" (29). Tsiolkas's position, like Edelman's, is a realisation of impossibility. In the conversation Isaac recounts, this realisation concerns the impossibility of political identities—capitalist, communist, continental, national, religious. A litany of identity categories, positions that are disturbed, or "fucked", rendered unstable and impossible. Rather than being a depoliticisation, *Dead Europe's* evisceration of coherent subject positions speaks the politics of destroying the self. Edelman calls the undoing operation of queerness "politically self-destructive" but suggests, via Lacan's reading of *Antigone*, that "perhaps [. . .] political self-destruction inheres in the only act that counts as one: the act of resisting enslavement to the future in the name of having a life" (Lacan 30).

Returning to abjection as the literal and metaphoric site of the consistent, and escalating disturbances of the novel, it can be seen that *Dead Europe* resists such enslavement through fleshing out the impossibility at the heart of the

speaking subject. On the train to Berlin, when Isaac realises his journey is taking him further away from himself, he experiences “an impossible hunger. I say impossible because nothing could satisfy it” (255). At this point he notices that the smell of blood has “a coarse corporeal solidity to it”, a scent with the texture of velvet (255). Journeying away from self is achieved via vampiric communion with the corporeal solidity of blood—the velvety matter between life and death, self and other that disintegrates individual, national and ideological forms of subjectivity. In this impossible undoing, the hellish matter and dark substances of Tsiolkas’s novel can be seen to flesh out a space of possibility for the political vision of difference away from the binary homogenisation that Sedgwick and Frank call for.

In Tsiolkas’s novel, the impossible constitution of being, or the heterogeneity of the subject, is realised at the corruption, then dispersal and disappearance, of the speaking subject. The reverse of this process is equally impossible, and is apparent in Elizabeth Knox’s *The Vintner’s Luck*, the queer tale of a fallen angel becoming human. An inversion of Isaac’s journey in *Dead Europe*, Knox’s novel concludes with an apprehension of impossibility through the assumption, rather than the disarticulation, of the first-person voice.

The queer impossibility of *The Vintner’s Luck* is cast into relief through an examination of the simultaneity of abject presence and sublime present in the novel. The experience of abjection is consonant with immersion in the sublime, which Kristeva names “an impossible bounding” (Kristeva 12). So too with Jean-Francois Lyotard’s theorisation of the sublime. Lyotard’s formulation of the sublime as the horror and awe of the impossible striking like lightning in “a kind of spasm” (Lyotard 56) elucidates the impossible spasm of being rehearsed in *The Vintner’s Luck*.

This spasm of being, a chiasmus of reason and imagination, self and other, and life and death is apparent at the scene of the death of the novel’s human protagonist, Sobran, as he orders the angel Xas to end his life:

‘I want you to put my hand on your mouth.’ He saw his hand lifted, his clawed fingers and one damaged nail like a chip of agate. He felt the kiss, the smooth, plump mouth.

‘It wasn’t possible,’ he said. What he had wanted, with all his heart, was to match this being stride for stride over the miles. But a crippled angel will outstrip a man. (Knox 235)

A literal spasm of being, Sobran’s last breath “a long second, like the shock of falling” is an apprehension of the impossibility of “matching this being, stride for stride”. Impossible is also the last word of the text. Revisiting Sobran’s

cellar over a century later, the immortal angel Xas addresses his long-dead lover:

You fainted and I caught you. It was the first time I'd supported a human. You had such heavy bones. I put myself between you and gravity.

Impossible. (241)

The sublime impossibility of *The Vintner's Luck*, the impossible presence of an angel in a realist novel, and the impossible projects of the angel Xas—gardening in hell and cultivating relationships with mortals—is the space where particularity and possibility emerge.

Xas's becoming human through contact with mortality, or what he calls "perishables", is akin to Gaston Bachelard's theorisation of the individualising properties of matter. Bachelard's insights show how the impossible presence of *The Vintner's Luck* imagines a model of difference and particularity that resists the "coercive universalisation" Edelman and Sedgwick warn against. Emphasising the "individualising power of matter" in his mediation on water and dreams, Bachelard asks: "Why does everyone always associate the notion of the individual with form? [. . .] matter is the very principle that can dissociate itself from forms" (Bachelard 2). In *The Vintner's Luck*, the matter of sublime impossibility is given flesh, irreducibly corporeal. The angelic body Sobran faints against is "a warm, firm pillow of muscle"; the wing he is braced against, "pure sinew and bone under a cushion of feathers [. . .] The angel was breathing steadily, and smelled of snow" (3). Xas also exudes the "rain-on-dust scent of angel sweat" (201). Later in the narrative Xas explains to Sobran the ways a body might enter heaven and hell, which exist in relation to the earth like "a fold in the map". Xas emphasises his own solidity when he says: "An angel isn't earthly, but *is* a kind of animal—as you must have realised. Roses and angels aren't souls and have to move through space". (26) This insistent corporeality is perversely generative; it is from the matter of hell, roses and bodies that particularity flourishes in the novel.

The matter of particularity, or the particularity of perishable matter, is precisely the means by which Knox's angel becomes human. In Bachelard's formulation, the matter of images is a substance that is richly generative; possessing a strange organic quality that grows away from form. Bachelard articulates the emergences of matter in a description that could be of Xas's garden in hell: "In the depths of matter there grows an obscure vegetation; black flowers bloom in matter's darkness. They already possess a velvety touch, a formula for perfume" (Bachelard 2). Flowers blooming in matter's darkness is precisely the image evoked by Xas when he tells Sobran about his garden:

Have you even seen an annular eclipse? It has that atmosphere [. . .] All the colours are saturated, plush. The light is grayish, dim, like cold water, and unsteady, as though shining off a lava flow. You expect a chill, but the air is very warm—and the water falling in the fountain sometimes sounds to me like a tongue moving in a wet mouth [. . .] There are no pale greens, and all the rose leaves and stems are dark—the red blooms tend towards black and have that scorched look to their outer petals that some earthly roses have in the bud and lose as they unclench—open, I mean. (95–96)

Tending to this obscure vegetation in the centre of hell, the fallen angel has created a formula for perfume in the depths of matter. Thus in *The Vintner's Luck* ephemeral substance is the site of growth, an impossible flourishing of life through the otherworldly image of the scorched red blooms. It was Xas's interest in the particular that landed him in hell, and it is through contact with the flowers of hell and with humans—what he calls “my communication with perishables”—that sees him unlike other angels, who “though well read [. . .] are almost impervious to experience. They're thick. They're made that way—durable, unchanging, placid” (144). Contact with the perishable, permeable and transient matter of roses and humans transforms Xas: the particularity of matter and the matter of particularity engenders him, finally, as a speaking subject as he assumes the first-person narrative voice.

The Vintner's Luck ends with Xas's first-person description of his revelation about particularity as “the pollution of God's plan”. The emergence of the first-person voice through a realisation of particularity is an appropriate conclusion in Edelman's terms, as he associates queerness with “the insistent particularity of the subject”. Xas says of God and Heaven that:

In His world it is as if there are no particular things—or the particularity of each thing depends on another. So hollyhocks smell like watermelon or watermelon like hollyhocks. And there is a taste in some good but perishable sparkling wine that is like the binding of books printed between 1890 and 1920, perhaps some chemical in the glue. This hateful phenomenon of likeness is more than the meanings made by human minds—that old conspiracy of significance—it is evidence, the pollution of God's plan. (240)

Here queer particularity, figured as contagious corruption—the pollution of God's plan, in Edelman's words “the stubborn particularity that voids every notion of a general good”—is a perversely generative aberration that disfigures and refigures coherent positions, identities, and laws. Edelman argues that particularity or singularity offer a position that is “better than good”—a means of resisting the “coercive universalisation”, or in Xas's words “this hateful phenomenon of likeness”. Resistance to universal homogenisation through

an insistence on singularity and difference brings us back to Sedgwick and Frank's appeal to reinhabit the space between two and infinity—a space that is fleshed out in *The Vintner's Luck* and *Dead Europe* through the “stubborn particularity” of abject presence and sublime present.

The stubborn and queer instance on the matter of impossibility in these novels can be illumined via analysis of the alchemy of abjection and sublimation. The original meaning of sublimation is one of the processes of alchemy. It refers to the creation of Uranogaea—the marriage of sky and earth, “the sky terra-fied or made earth” (55). Bachelard draws our attention to a seventeenth-century description of sublimation: “If we ‘then clip the wings of the spirit,’ if we *sublimate*, we will have a pure salt, *the sky of the terrestrial mixture*”. A process of materialization then, like Xas, of the ethereal made terrestrial; the angel made human. Kristeva, too, speaks of alchemy. Reflecting on the generative capacities of abjection as a resurrection following the dissolution of self, the death of the ego, she describes abjection as “an alchemy that transforms death drive into a start of life, a new significance” (Kristeva 15). The alchemy of abjection rehearsed in these novels can also be in terms of this other meaning of sublimation, where clipping the wings of the spirit, or removing the wings of the angel, enables a “new significance”; an alchemy of the death drive—an impossible bounding that reveals the impossible constitution of being and in the depths of matter enables the growth of a new significance outside binary logic.

Returning to the possibility of inhabiting this space between two and infinity, the angel Xas, who in accordance with a treaty between God and the devil may “go freely”, is thought by his friend Niall to allow the existence of such a space. Xas explains to Sobran that Niall “thought that what I did—‘you curious creature’, he called me—in going freely, would gradually fill up the only space between those two parties not already polluted by prophesy, policy and stony laws” (30). Between prophesy and policy, a position on the other side of “politics” that is impossible, that is, in Isaac's words, “arse-bleedingly fucked”, is the site at which violent anxieties about coherent difference—the logic of “twos”—can be challenged. In their impossible disintegrations and becomings, these novels queerly flesh out spaces between two and infinity. It is in the alchemy of abject presence and sublime present, through the matter of impossibility that particularity flourishes, where individuation is possible. The specificity, singularity, particularity and peculiarity these novels insist upon is also an important lesson for transnational criticism—the impossible task of stubborn insistence on the particular must be undertaken to resist the “coercive universalisation” fantasies of coherence insist upon. It is in disturbing

material, or the matter of disturbance, that literature tends to particularity, grows roses in Hell and gives flesh to impossible spaces and voices. And it is in these impossible spaces, the sites of disintegrating subjectivity and becoming human, that *Dead Europe* and *The Vintner's Luck* cultivate “a political vision of difference” between prophesy, policy and stony laws.

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