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*The University of Sydney*

**Peter Kirkpatrick**

*Asterism*

Abstract:

“Asterism” is written in the form of a verse letter to friend and fellow poet, John Watson, partly in response to one of his own poetry pamphlets, *Brief notes on Brahms*. It represents a work of autoethnography that proceeds from a consideration of my relatively new experience of living in an apartment in an area of Sydney which long ago housed both sides of my family, mixing up that history with asides on music in a series of autobiographical reflections on the nature of home, and the question of how to be *at home* in the world – especially if that part of the world you inhabit constitutes stolen land. These elements are held in suspension within the metaphor of the constellation or asterism: the self as an inferential shape picked out of a galaxy of memories. Drawing on the baroque image of the *Harmonia macrocosmica*, the seventeenth-century star charts of Andreas Cellarius, as well as the map of Sydney Trains, the poem concludes by wondering how to make, in the sense of manufacture, a home in the world out of the random and scattered parts of one’s being, while dancing in the sky.

Biographical note:

Peter Kirkpatrick is an Honorary Associate Professor in the Discipline of English & Writing at The University of Sydney. He is the author of three collections of poetry, most recently *The Hard Word* (Puncher & Wattmann, 2021), and also publishes widely in Australian literary studies and cultural history. He is currently working on a study of Australian poetry and popular culture, *The Wild Reciter*.

Keywords:

Home, belonging, Australian poetry, autoethnography

## Asterism

Erskineville, November 2021

For John Watson

Dear John,

La Niña beats last summer's leaves  
from late-deciduous fiddlewoods that blaze  
beside my window, and batters the blossoms  
off jacarandas in the street to set  
each swimming in its lavender reflection.  
We live in *Vibe*. The next block, *Zenith*, sprouts  
a glazed white fourteen-storey stump that marks  
the southern border of the Inner City,  
and looms so large that every night I fancy  
the Pointers or the Cross itself must slam  
right into it, exploding cosmic fireworks  
– as if it were the skies that wheeled, not us.  
That said, at night it constellates its own  
carton of random stars: a box of lights  
full of people in rooms high in the air  
where screens flicker, or dinner's being fixed,  
or backlit figures move inscrutably  
on wall-wide windows framed against the dark.

Close by, electric trains play heavy metal  
across an amplifying railway bridge,  
proving the root of *Vibe* lies in *vibration*.  
But if they interrupt our dialogues  
– or those on TV that stand in for them –  
at least they testify that life is going on  
somewhere along all stations on the line  
from Liverpool to Central via Bankstown,  
or else on one or more selected stops  
from Bondi Junction to the Illawarra.

I like apartment living – its apart-  
ness, yes, but also my admission to  
a part of something bigger: that odd commune  
that only really meets when the alarm  
goes off at two a.m., and one and all  
descend in several states of dishabille,  
their poodle, groodle, spoodle, labradoodle,  
python or cat in freaked attendance,  
to gather into casual chatty conclaves.  
Then the brigade comes, tinkers with a switch,

and lets us reascend the Land of Nod.

Thanks for your latest bundle of slim volumes,  
especially *Brief notes on Brahms*. I came  
to Brahms quite late, long after youthful flings  
with Berlioz and Bruckner: my three Bs  
you might say. And there's something in J. B.  
that doesn't sing to me, some wound or *Weltschmerz*  
(is that too grandiose?) that holds me back  
from an unwavering appreciation.  
Like the way his fourth symphony begins  
with sets of ebbing questions and replies,  
but ends with a descent down eight dark chords  
into the pit of the next century.  
Even his lifelong love for Clara Schumann  
under the spectral shadow of her husband  
was bottled up in "eager reticence"  
(your splendid phrase) and stoppered into song,  
never to overspill as opera. Not  
surprisingly he ended in Vienna  
where Freud would drive a *Ringstrasse* around  
the psyche's *Innere Stadt*.

Speaking of which,  
another block of flats nearby called *Erko*  
shows off a photo-mural of the workers,  
long since displaced, who once lived in its footprint.  
Maybe they'll name some future units *Povo*?  
So very different from the fifties, when  
my family were Newtown locals, over  
the railway line in Alice Street, off King,  
about a k from here. Half-memories  
of tiny houses filled with relatives  
are likely lifted from my mother's tales  
of Christmases before I came along,  
back in that seeming happy time before  
the lot of them decamped to other suburbs.

Though I was raised four stations south of here,  
almost as soon as I could walk and talk  
my mother grabbed my hand and guided me  
on Friday shopping missions up the length  
of King Street from St Peters to the Bridge,  
revisiting old haunts. I hated it:  
the faded late Victorian facades,  
their cracked stucco mouldings and broken finials,  
the passing fug of pubs, the painless dentist,

the dim shop windows with their ancient merchants,  
and Mum eternally detained in chat  
with them. Then off we'd go again, grace notes  
upon the street's unfolding stave where others,  
the stayers and the recently migrated,  
now called the tune.

A futurist at four,  
I hated Newtown's thin antiquity,  
its beaten-down Australian decay.  
Maybe I wanted what our TV hinted:  
mid-century modern plastic-perfect genius,  
smoothly veneered and coolly angular,  
that stayed within its lines of narrow styling;  
even the people, clean in black-and-white,  
who in their laundered looks all played their parts  
in gleaming US newness under glass.  
But I'm a Gemini and stay divided  
on the effects of change. Bring back the Habsburgs,  
I sometimes think, and Austria-Hungary too;  
let there be more archdukes with feathered hats,  
more operettas set in rural Schmaltz  
with opening choruses of hearty peasants;  
more tafelspitz and schnitzel, more clear beer!

Now I'd wish back the Newtown of my childhood,  
its trams, its milk bars, butchers and greengrocers,  
its women frocked in floral prints, its men  
in tailored slacks and winklepicker shoes.  
I'd add some music and a samba sequence  
– maybe more Leonard Bernstein than Lehar –  
together with a love plot set against  
a factory closure, postwar immigration  
and bodgies; plus, of course, a grand finale  
where all the local nationalities  
sing *Newtown is an Old Town That I Love*,  
just as the Bluebags<sup>[1]</sup> win the premiership.

Bring back a complex, long-lost neighbourhood  
that's aged in place and not been reimagined  
by hipsters or the activewear brigade  
with their craft beer and vegan fucking restaurants,  
and café after café after café.

Another memory: McConnell's gym  
in Chippendale was where my family's men  
took me to see my cousin Ray at training.  
I was eleven, thereabouts, in awe

of all the dark and light-skinned boxers sparring  
 or shaping up, and the whole atmosphere  
 of sweat and liniment; the sense of mission,  
 and of a coded yet coherent world  
 that was the pride of hands – hands that I knew,  
 that shaped things, worked with wood, drove buses, laboured –  
 and here beat out a kind of chivalry;  
 a world with its own unity and purpose,  
 that wasn't made by putting words with words,  
 and one that might have welcomed me some day,  
 but never did, before it disappeared;  
 before I disappeared into the library.

An old, white, straight, retired cis-gendered male  
 is no-one's hero, least of all his own;  
 a knowledge tempered by awareness that  
 life writing writes itself in everything  
 these days, when autofiction is a fact  
 and your biography becomes a *journey*  
 wherein the main protagonist transcends  
 past traumas into true identity,  
 into the *me* they're ultimately meant  
 to be. So if this seems to steer that line,  
 let me just say, deep down, I don't know what  
 I am, beyond a kind of asterism;  
 beyond an inferential shape picked out  
 from a dim galaxy of memories,  
 joined dot-to-dot by puzzled consciousness  
 to expurgate my being in its best,  
 most flattering pattern, leaving lesser lights  
 for larger magnitudes: far grander stars,  
 with which to cast more hopeful horoscopes  
 and constellate the blankness in between.

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Apologies. This train of thought became  
 derailed near Newtown via old Vienna,  
 and right this instant is transmogrified  
 into the Picnic Train that's steaming homewards  
 below our balcony to Central, trailing  
 its plume of burning coal, an acrid snuff  
 I last inhaled in Paris years ago,  
 like an olfactory madeleine of Sydney  
 in smoky winters of the 1960s,

when industries like Metters made their home  
 where we make ours, and long before the giant,  
 unsightly chimneys of St Peters brickpits  
 were gentrified into a local Stonehenge.

The Gadigal, still the original  
 and only real homeowners of this place,  
 knew other ways of being here and traced  
 a different set of lines along the ground,  
 before two centuries of real estate  
 made other plans. And in the singing stars  
 they saw Baiame where we see Orion,  
 both hunters: the one, creator and law-giver;  
 the other, rapist and exterminator,  
 who chases ghostly prey in Homer's hell.  
 If we the non-Indigenous admit  
 this land is theirs, Always Was, Always Will Be,  
 our activism seems confined to posters  
 on erstwhile proletarian terrace houses  
 that sell for millions, and have been restored  
 to recreate nobody's history.  
 High on its ridgeline, only King Street, bending  
 a four-lane dogleg around Newtown station,  
 preserves the outline of an ancient track.

I didn't grow up here, I'm just a blow-in,  
 along with the gym-junkies, yummy-mummies  
 and friendly-fascist footpath-riding cyclists  
 who also stake their claims to Erskineville.  
 Knowing these things, and knowing that I'm here  
 for the same kind of lifestyle I despise,  
 how can I think that I'm truly *at home*,  
 based on the local status of a mere  
 two generations of my ancestors?  
 Such thin white history embodied in  
 my ever-thickening presence doesn't cut it.  
 Roots only run so deep. I don't believe  
 the middle-class world-traveller who attests  
 to an unbidden spiritual connection  
 with the grim, godforsaken village which  
 some distant forebear had the great good luck  
 to fuck off from in order to come here.  
 Ulster exerted no familial tug  
 when I was there half a life ago, freezing  
 my arse off in Portstewart and Coleraine,  
 cold heart of my Kirkpatrick patrimony;

and Coonabarabran where Mum was born  
 is only one more struggling country town  
 whose streets abruptly terminate in dust  
 or scrub or sheep or wheat. Just give me Sydney.

And so my love and I now live ungrounded,  
 in air, adjacent to a skinny treeline,  
 inside an ordinary eight-flight eyrie  
 above five shelves of concrete, and above  
 the storeyed lives in this wide library  
 of families and individuals  
 called *Vibe*: those neighbours whom we know and nod to  
 or those we only recognise by sight  
 or not at all – who may be kindly strangers,  
 or tradies who arrive to rectify  
 the wear and tear in pipes and wires  
 that keep us all congenially in place,  
 in comfort with our screens and books, white goods,  
 soft furnishings and sturdy kitchen fittings.

For just as Metters used to mass-produce  
 the Early Kooka – lares and penates  
 to generations inter-War and after –  
 the profit and the loss of being modern  
 always ensures that home is neither here  
 nor there, but manufactured: *made* indeed,  
 from family, familiarity  
 and time – the door where everyone comes in  
 to an uncertain welcome.

Like the sparrow  
 in Bede's old parable about existence,  
 that flies out of the winter cold one night  
 and into a great mead-hall, where it flits  
 barely a moment in the hearth-lit rafters  
 above the careless thanes, and in that moment  
 knows – knows what? warm arrival, or blind terror? –  
 before it flutters out the other gable  
 and back into the darkness whence it came.  
 Or Goethe's wanderer, lost in the wild,  
 who finds no peace in nature and no home,  
 but climbs a mountain of romantic angst  
 in Brahms' exquisite *Alto Rhapsody*;  
 music that sounds the master's shadow self  
 in all its lovelorn bitterness, and yet  
 whose closing radiance folds him in its grace.  
*One note to hear that might refresh his heart:*

a benediction that (to quote you, John)  
descends “like moonlight”, ending in “the silence  
of cloud shadow,/Azure on snow”. Amen.

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No snow, but now the rain relents to leave  
only a wind-hunted spindrift of cloud.  
The reddening trees beside me churn and toss,  
their swirling branches turning into fireballs  
that sweep the corners of the sky to burn  
its blue screen down to jacaranda petals  
that decorate the street face of our building,  
and open up a portal to the stars  
– who will resume their places very soon  
when outer space reveals itself again  
in what you could regard as my crescendo.  
It’s just a glimmer in the strings right now,  
but coming at you thick and fast and loud  
in a full-on confectionery transcendence,  
the feel-good schtick a symphony is good at,  
like losing and then finding its home key.

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Some two a.m. I’ll wake up to a whinny,  
draw back the drapes and catch the heavenly Centaur,  
no longer fixing Lupus with a lance,  
but dabbling his huge hooves in the pool  
attached to *Zenith*. Wide-eyed I’ll watch as,  
five storeys high, he straddles the fiddlewoods  
and leans his window-filling face to me  
to speak in a half-animal, half-god  
mysterious tongue – but with my father’s voice,  
perhaps, from the odd times when we were close  
and he was sober. And I’ll understand,  
and know precisely what I’m meant to do...

Look up, and see the southern constellations  
awakened in a high baroque array:  
that mad celestial bestiary of Cellarius,  
his great *Harmonia macrocosmica*,  
with its sky-wreathing Snake, its wide-mouthed Whale,  
its footless Bird of Paradise, its Phoenix,  
its Peacock, Toucan, Crane and Southern Fish,



its Unicorn, its Triangle and Altar,  
 plus that ancient galactic federation,  
 the twelve signs of the circling zodiac,  
 all crowded like commuters in a train  
 and shuffling round the sky to take their places  
 in a wild dance high over Erskineville,  
*allegro giacoso* from Brahms' fourth,  
 before it plunges to its passacaglia.

Around the asterisms of their lights  
 I'll take my shape, whose lines could just as easily  
 be linked through other sets of stars to make  
 a wholly different picture. Yet there I am,  
 having become the stations of my journey,  
 all stops along all stellar services  
 around an astral map of Sydney Trains,  
 to spin my exit out at City Circle  
 towards the nodding ferries at the Quay.

Below, the stars of *Vibe* and *Zenith* twinkle,  
 each one illumining its own small world  
 where life goes on, as on another planet,  
 in rooms where smart TVs are flickering,  
 and people move about as if on screens,  
 while right behind them now the brickpit's chimneys  
 have slowly started swaying, just to wave  
 their giant four-digit cartoon hand at me.

In the meantime, I mooch around at home,  
 wearing a most unseasonable jumper  
 in late November, thinking I might go  
 to hear some poets read in a small bar  
 with an unlikely name – more for the beer  
 and vague sense of community, I must  
 confess, than for the earnest verse, itself  
 mostly confessional, to be intoned  
 shyly into a floating microphone.  
 Perhaps I'll read a bit of this. Or not.  
 It's way too personal.

Best wishes,  
 Peter

## Notes

[1] Nickname of the Newtown Rugby League Football Club until the early 1970s, from laundry or washing blue, an antique fabric whitener; later the Jets.

## Exegetical statement

Both sides of my family once lived in the same street in Newtown, and seven years ago my partner and I relocated to the adjacent suburb of Erskineville. These industrial working-class places have become gentrified in my lifetime, and in “Asterism” I was moved to think about their transformation in connection with my own metamorphosis into a middle-class academic now implicated in that very gentrification. The distance between my present, individuated sense of “home” in these suburbs and my family’s collective past experience is thus examined chiefly through the prism of class. The focus is less on my personal history than on cultural memory; as Hywel Dix defines it:

At its most basic, cultural memory is the term used to refer to the process by which individual memories are transposed onto the social plane ... Cultural memory has the capacity to generate a shared sense of history, a collective identity based on knowledge, understanding and meanings that are widely held, and perhaps even a common purpose. (2023, p. 9)

Determined to avoid that lyrical commonplace, the confessional poem, “Asterism” is written in the long tradition of the epistolary poem or verse letter, a genre chosen because it is dialogic and has the capacity to explore larger issues in a light, conversational or even humorous manner. I have employed the form of iambic pentameter blank verse because I believe that it can still capture the cadences of everyday speech, playing colloquial intonation off against metrical patterning in ways that, ideally, generate varieties of shorter and longer rhetorical effects within a broader rhythmical architecture.

The poem is addressed to fellow poet John Watson who, as well as his major collections, also regularly produces twenty-eight-page pamphlets of his work for distribution among friends and supporters. One of these from 2021, *Brief notes on Brahms*, is the immediate inspiration for “Asterism”, with Brahms providing a point of musical departure for the poem, serving to dissolve the opening reflections on apartment living into memories of my family’s prior connections to the place I now call home. As inferred by references to Brahms’ Symphony No. 4 in E minor, the poem is written in four “movements”, like a classical symphony, though the third of these might be styled more an intermezzo.

Within the conventions of the verse letter, then, “Asterism” considers how subjectivity is constructed through cultural memory and the experience of place in terms of the autoethnographic process of *reflexivity*. As Keith Berry writes, “Reflexivity is a contested theoretical concept and methodological practice”, but also “it is ... a communicative process, which, if done well, is directed towards others” and thereby “creates the conditions through which autoethnographers co-constitute (i.e., creatively make and remake) ourselves within this

inquiry” (2021, p. 31). Or, in the words of Tami Spry, “Though there is an autoethnographic author, there is no *authority* from which one can state the wholeness or verisimilitude of the representation, since the central autoethnographic concern is with ‘we’ in a relational reflexivity” (2016, p. 82). The nature of “relational reflexivity” underpins the central idea of the self as asterism, “an inferential shape picked out/from a dim galaxy of memories,/joined dot-to-dot by puzzled consciousness”. This is echoed in the poem by the trope, introduced in the second verse paragraph, of the map of Sydney Trains. The networked self is usually taken to refer to the newly digital subject, but I wanted an image from an older technology, one which literally intersects the neighbourhood and links it to its working-class origins.

In contemplating the nature of home in relation to class “Asterism” also acknowledges the difficulties, both historical and existential, of finding a home on stolen land. Gadigal and other First Nations people are a strong living presence in Newtown and Erskineville and a major trace of their ancient land use abides in the shape of King Street, a section of the Princes Highway which is thought to follow a track that enabled communication between the people of what became Port Jackson and those of Botany Bay. Though the poem doesn’t presume to offer a solution to the ethics of settler-colonial habitation, recognition of continuous Indigenous occupation necessarily *unsettles* complacent assertions of belonging by the non-Indigenous, even at the scale of suburban familiarity sketched here.

Because the notion of selfhood explored in the poem is ultimately “ungrounded” and contingent, the poem finds an aesthetic, indeed knowingly factitious resolution in the notion of the constellated self as this is imaged in the southern stars themselves; specifically, as they are represented in the glorious star charts of *Harmonia macrocosmica* (1660) by Andreas Cellarius. His constellations are depicted fancifully dancing in the sky above Erskineville in a veiled reference to Kenneth Slessor’s 1920 poem “Pan at Lane Cove”, which imagines the Ancient Greek gods dancing “Like men of fire” above another Sydney suburb (p. 18). Slessor’s deployment of classical mythology is a way of dealing with European displacement in a strange new world, where the landscape seemed to lack a *genius loci*, for Australia was, and remains, a place where Western traditions struggle to find their metaphysical bearings. In “Asterism”, though, *Harmonia macrocosmica* – an artifact from the European “Age of Discovery” – is treated more ironically, even playfully. After all, no-one would think of using it for astronomical purposes today. Rather, it is employed as what I would call a figurative “baroquerie”, a *jeu d’esprit*, corresponding to the “confectionary transcendence” of the speaker’s own absurd apotheosis.

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