

**Emily Critchley**  
**Review of *Magenta Soul Whip*<sup>1</sup>**

Lisa Robertson's seventh book of poetry *Magenta Soul Whip* is a profound poetic meditation on the nature of things – after Lucretius' epic philosophical poem on Epicurean physics, *De rerum natura*. It is about creation; it is about humanity; our propensity for naming (language); faith, or 'the long science of submission' (9) as the poetry puts it; fear; love (familial, sexual, metaphysical) and the 'liquid rope' (26) that attaches all of these: that of knowledge. Says the opening line of the collection: 'Sit us on Lucite gently and we will tell you how knowledge came to us' (7).<sup>2</sup> The poem then provides a kind of alternative 'Genesis':

'First the dull mud softened, resulting in putrefaction, lust and intelligence, pearl globs, jewelled stuff like ferrets [...] then just the one vowel, iterate and buttressed and expiring; leaning, embracing, gazing.' (7)

The 'I' of the poem, and of humanity, in other words, is born.

The collection contrasts the sinfulness of wanting too much to know – knowledge as both illumination and also that which is reserved only for God, the 'light of the world' – with the dumb calm of giving this up for the security of faith. In this sense it is also about Adam and Eve, and the latter's understanding of the even bigger trick played on the pair by God – that he exists at all; as Robertson states: 'And Lucretius is a girl' (23).<sup>3</sup> The poetry explores humanity's endless capacity for self-deception: the desire of even a pre-conscious 'ego' for the warmth and security of the 'fib' of faith (10). Such a desire, to give oneself up wholly to something greater than oneself, gets metaphorized throughout the collection as, amongst other things, an adolescent's sexual yearning – 'like girls die of fierce love and friezes commemorate the fierce cords of light that are their souls' (13) – but the conscious or unconscious effect of the dynamic is always the same: a looping back on itself, to make the believer great:

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<sup>1</sup> Lisa Robertson, *Magenta Soul Whip* (Toronto: Coach House Books, 2009).

<sup>2</sup> 'Lucite', the title of the book's opening section, is an organic compound or acrylic glass that's man-made, colourless and highly transparent, but which can be tinted or rendered opaque by the addition of other substances – an apt metaphor for our own impressionable natures. It also has the unusual property of keeping a beam of light reflected within its surfaces, thus carrying the beam around bends and corners (hence the etymology of its name: from lux); as the poem states for us: 'determined light flows around our bodies' (29).

<sup>3</sup> Recurrent references to Lucretius confirm that our protagonist, too, regards the notion that the gods created our world or adjust its operations in any way as superstition (*religio* in the Latin).

listen to the human fibs. misery dictates. I remember the fibs of infancy, a fib per heartbeat cooked by earth. will this commemorate me? dominant do you remember me? my ego's made from milk, abundant fountains of milk, my dominant, my own, which dedicate themselves to the illuminant corpus, instructress of senses, so that I speak to you in the syllables of your name dominant and as bonus I make for you a nest of my ordinary thighs, tu, forma omnia et lege. (10-11)

Latinate etymological play, such as that here, floods the text, interrogating the tradition and authority that language carries. Corruptions of St Augustine's *Confessions*, for example, let us know that this 'human creature' (9) is the only originator or 'parent' of her 'own sensibility' (11). They roughly translate, amidst the following, thus:

should I invoke necessity or fate? whatever item I invoke is unbelievable. all gods are gravegods. what is without predicate? let's sing to the god who requires it. let's sing to our enemies also. I will seek thee, I will invoke thee and I'll invent belief in thee: a predicate is a noble enemy and my fidelity is my own disaster, thou hast inspired me through the feeling of humanity with this speech. (9)<sup>4</sup>

This is prefaced by a beautifully playful part literal, part aural mistranslation (reminiscent of Celia and Zukofsky's transliterations of Catullus) of St Augustine's

Magnus es, domine, et laudabilis valde: magna virtus tua, et sapientiae tuae non est numerus. et laudare te vult homo, aliqua portio creaturae tuae, et homo circumferens mortalitem suam, circumferens testimonium peccati sui et testimonium, quia superbis resistis: et tamen laudare te vult homo, aliqua portio creaturae tuae<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> From the original: 'quaeram te, domine, invocans te, et invocem te credens in te: praedicatus enim es nobis. invocat te, domine, fides mea, quam dedisti mihi, quam inspirasti mihi per humanitatem filii tui...' 'I will seek thee, O Lord, and call upon thee. I call upon thee, O Lord, in my faith which thou hast given me, which thou hast inspired in me through the humanity of thy Son...' *Confessions and Enchiridion*, newly translated and edited by Albert C. Outler: <http://www.ccel.org/ccel/augustine/confessions.iv.html>.

<sup>5</sup> Outler's translation is 'Great art thou, O Lord, and greatly to be praised; great is thy power, and infinite is thy wisdom. And man desires to praise thee, for he is a part of thy creation; he bears his mortality about with him and carries the evidence of his sin and the proof that thou dost resist the proud. Still he desires to praise thee, this man who is only a small part of thy creation.' *Ibid.*

Under Robertson's hand this becomes 'great virtues are numerous and wisdom has a laughable magnitude. the circumference of a human creature is his own testimonium, her superb mortal resistance as a creature is a liquid gate'. The sexual connotations of the female's 'liquid gate' here are telling; and I don't think the Miltonic resonances – from Book III of *Paradise Lost* – of the 'human creature' and the firmament of heaven: 'an expanse of liquid, pure' accidental.

Yet there is tragedy, too, in this poetry's acknowledgment that love of or for an other – sexual partners, parents, even gods – is only ever so much as a narcissistic 'feeding' of oneself: 'vanity itself, caro factum' (12). In this ontology of the 'disaster' of 'fidelity', love and the human weakness of needing to love, or loving to need, appear to be self-identical: 'Something might seduce us. A likeness. A knowledge. Samesame pouring through it.'

(8)

Given all this information and all this sin, who shall 'scape whipping? The 'Magenta Soul' of this poem is certainly self-flagellatory; she 'invoke[s] dominance to undo' herself (10) and wills 'ahead of [herself...] some form of satisfaction or vindicate legendary torment' to 'console' her 'welts' (11-12):

dominant – whom shall I serve? without you for whom welts fatten  
I'd be minus agency minus glory minus number my author who  
cuddles me insatiably my soul's bulky with you as it is bulky with fibs.  
(12)

The inky, heart colour of the title connotes both writing<sup>6</sup> and a resistance to the very lime-green shade the book is bound in.<sup>7</sup> Yet what is penned herein can hardly be illuminating, the poet seems to be suggesting, so used-up, so secondary is its language:

I'll not name each oblivion each venal carthage each dumb rut written up in verse. Dominant my ink's not diligent like yours. I simply tug and vend and strum at pacts secundum signa quibbling litteris in commodo. Sit poetica stupid with words past their sweet-arsed date.  
(13)

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<sup>6</sup> In the CMYK colour model used in printing magenta is one of the primary colours of ink.

<sup>7</sup> In light experiments, magenta can be produced by removing the lime-green wavelengths from white light.

Adam, as we know, was the original taxonomist and in *MSW* we have a superabundance of animals, vegetables, minerals and gods, whose names both ‘release’ them ‘into wild chance’ and do nothing to safeguard against their changing (29). Yet anxiously circling in and amongst these categories is our protagonist – an intellectual animal with a heart that yearns for metaphysical peace: ‘livid as an animal’ she ‘peruse[s] the long world that flares with souls’ (27). Though her ‘goal is tranquillity’, the vivacity and weight of her ‘mortality’ presses into the poetry with the kind of urgency that brooks no denial: ‘but my body keeps confessing to me / of existence [...] extravagance’ (26).

Yet the protagonist’s greatest problem seems to stem from the knowledge that, not only are each of her experiences ultimately non-communicable – ‘because the present is not articulate’ (7) – but that she, herself, is likely to leave nothing permanent to the world but a stream of used-up images, phantasmagoria of herself, ‘a vain wreath of milk’ (12). For all the blazonry surrounding the old ‘literature’ – ‘two angels blowing on the trumpets of fame held up by a globe decorated with three fleurs-de-lys and topped with a crown’ – our poet knows these are but ‘habits and tricks’ (7). She is as likely to dissolve into ‘duality’, or worse, incomprehension, at any moment:

We wear out the art. We start to modify our vocables [...] Since it is we who are one, and we who are scattered. We’re this pair or more which can’t absorb one another in a meaning effect. (7-8)

A Platonic striving for the missing part of ourselves (beyond ourselves) that might be a permanent point of understanding, or ego-ideal, seems bound to continue well beyond the end of this poem. Meanwhile, out of such a worn-out medium, Robertson’s poetry wrenches much to be marvelled at along the way.