



## OpenAIR@RGU

### The Open Access Institutional Repository at Robert Gordon University

<http://openair.rgu.ac.uk>

This is an author produced version of a paper published in

The F-Word.

This version may not include final proof corrections and does not include published layout or pagination.

#### Citation Details

##### Citation for the version of the work held in 'OpenAIR@RGU':

KOKOLI, A. M., 2006. To Hades and back: a review of Tracey Emin's Strangeland. Available from *OpenAIR@RGU*. [online]. Available from: <http://openair.rgu.ac.uk>

##### Citation for the publisher's version:

KOKOLI, A. M., 2006. To Hades and back: a review of Tracey Emin's Strangeland. *The F-Word*, June 2006.

#### Copyright

Items in 'OpenAIR@RGU', Robert Gordon University Open Access Institutional Repository, are protected by copyright and intellectual property law. If you believe that any material held in 'OpenAIR@RGU' infringes copyright, please contact [openair-help@rgu.ac.uk](mailto:openair-help@rgu.ac.uk) with details. The item will be removed from the repository while the claim is investigated.

To Hades and Back: A Review of Tracey Emin's *Strangeland* (Sceptre, 2005), ISBN 0-340-76944-0 (hdbk), £14.99

By Alexandra Kokoli

It is both an advantage and a relief to be reviewing this book so belatedly: an advantage because of the recourse to a wealth of press (p)reviews, which are often as interesting as the object in question; and a relief, because at this point in time there is no longer the expectation that a review should recommend (or not) a purchase. Were that the case, I wouldn't know what to advise: my personal enjoyment of *Strangeland* is not easy to justify on either literary or (post?)feminist grounds, although I wouldn't consider any such justifications necessary, especially in the case of an artist as politically and aesthetically complex and unclassifiable as Emin.

*Strangeland*, a selection of Emin's autobiographical writings in varying lengths and styles, is nothing if not a page-turner. In parts, it is almost as fascinating and compelling as the public persona of its celebrity author; on the other hand, it can also be facile, sensationalist and unforgivably contradictory on sensitive issues, again like the author herself. This may be why the editorial blurb, in spite of an effort to dutifully plug the book, reads almost defensive: the reader is cautioned that 'Tracey retains a profoundly romantic world view', a view – one presumes – that the rest of us have now lost, or are finally rid off, 'paired with an *uncompromising* honesty' (all emphases obviously mine). We also learn that her writings 'are deeply intimate *yet* powerfully engaging': shouldn't this 'yet' have been a 'thus'? Doesn't the fact that it isn't suggest that 'intimate' might here be closer to 'onanistic', in the metaphorical but also the literal sense? Finally, the author is described as 'a truly original, *beautiful mind*', which as far as I know has become a euphemism for the insane. There is, interestingly, a significant tradition in journalistic and some art historical writing that tends to cast Emin as a kind of rough yet brilliant 'primitive' *idiote-savante* type (cf. anything by art critic Waldemar Januszczak). This characterisation is not only offensively patronizing but markedly uninformative: it could be (and is) equally endorsed by fans and detractors. I think that Emin really is brilliant for many reasons and, although *Strangeland* may not rank very highly amongst them, it still does not deserve as half-hearted a sell as it gets on the dust-jacket.

The book, dedicated to the author's parents, is divided in three parts: 'Motherland', 'Fatherland' and 'Traceyland', following a deceptively normative nuclear family structure (while the reader discovers from the first story that Emin's was anything but), as well as a typically Freudian threefold configuration that points in the direction of a valid interpretative strategy for the whole of the book, if not all of the artist's oeuvre. *Strangeland* builds on Emin's autobiographical visual artwork by constructing its author's textual identity rather than simply revealing it. Hence in this review, 'Emin' is used catachrestically, to stand for the persona spun by the narration rather than the flesh-and-blood woman who wrote it. It is from this perspective that we should read the 'Author's Note' (p. 214), which attracted some derisive comments from reviewers:

I felt it would be unreasonable for anyone to read a book that had spelling mistakes throughout. It was my decision to have my spelling corrected, and I'm now in the process of learning to spell.

I'm not claiming that this statement is in any way insincere, but that it would be neither possible nor helpful to interrogate its truthfulness. Strictly speaking, it is also autobiographical, thus fictional, albeit on a different level than the rest of the text. Emin is cheekily commenting on the popular perception of her as a diamond still in the rough, in spite of considerable training and a spectacularly successful career in the art world; if we insist on reading her this way, if we find ourselves looking for more of the infamous spelling idiosyncrasies of her patchwork blankets, the joke is on us. (Let alone that, as anyone working in education knows too well, hardly anyone can actually spell nowadays, with the exception of people over fifty and some foreigners like myself.)

The book's tripartite division also serves to highlight Emin's hybrid cultural identity. 'Motherland' is devoted to her British seaside upbringing in 1970s Margate, where already broken child Tracey is initiated in different forms of marginalization: she is 'broken in' too early, is sexually abused by an array of 'friends' and strangers, is excluded for being born out of wedlock to a dark-skinned Turkish adventurer and a financially insecure Englishwoman, flourishes sensually and sexually against all odds but is promptly put down as a 'slag', thus gaining an insight in the vicissitudes of womanhood. Two of the most powerful pieces from 'Motherland' evoke the video work *Why I Never Became a Dancer* (1995): 'Hades' (the title remains unexplained – I think of it as the name of the story's provincial disco) and 'Why I Never Became a Dancer' manage to sidestep both nostalgia and self-pity while casting a reflective glance on Emin's troubled but in retrospect edifying teens. Emin is at her best where she does not explicitly seek to find lessons in these vistas of her past life. Where she gives advice (as she does in 'Traceyland'), the tone turns didactic and needlessly so, since the message comes out muddled anyway. This section also contains two handwritten texts: a threatening letter to her rapist and a poem, both of which act as a kind of interlude, interrupting the flow of the narration and reflecting on it in a different, freer style. The visual quality of these texts (compelling us to examine her handwriting as form, lines on the page, rather than mechanically reading them) and their confrontational tone strongly hint at Emin's artwork, especially her blankets and neon signs.

In 'Fatherland', perhaps the strongest part of the three, we are introduced to the author's Turkish roots through stories of her father's eventful life, her visits to the Turkish part of Cyprus and Minor Asia, but also an exploration of Emin's clairvoyancy and her unconfirmable (and all the more powerful, for this reason) descent from a Sudanese slave. It is not simply that we find ourselves on non-Western ground (or more confusingly, at the threshold between East and West), but we are given, in every respect, the 'other story'. We find out about her not-always-present, foreign, other-than-white father, Enver Emin, a great story-teller who has struggled with some of the same demons as his daughter: smoking, drinking, being 'over-sexed' ('Getting to Know My Enemy', pp. 72-75). Fantasies, dreams and legends (instructive community fantasies) that reign in the whole of *Strangeland* gain even greater intensity in this section. One of the most prominent motifs is the narrator's inability and growing unwillingness to distinguish illusion from reality, particularly as the lines of communication between the two become underscored. In 'Under the Shadow of the Mountain' (pp. 79-99), the narrator is woken by voices calling her name only to discover that it's actually the wind smashing against the house. This is little

consolation: ‘But I was afraid: I had been dreaming something stupid and Freudian.’ (p. 83) The most dangerous enemy is always within and usually in hiding; dreams are not to be brushed away because they do impact on reality, just as they are composed out of its less acceptable fragments. Even the detached dismissal ‘something stupid and Freudian’ fails to exorcise unwelcome evocations. Conversely, the margins of reality accommodate the marvellous as much as the uncanny. There is indeed a fairy tale quality to many of these pieces, as the publishers and many reviewers are keen to emphasise not just in *Strangeland* but in Emin’s outlook in general, neglecting to note that this quality is also strategically undermined. Typically, the more powerful the narrator’s illusions become (occasionally to the point of generating realities of their own), the harder she strives to keep herself grounded. However tenuous or disappointing, a grip on reality is worth maintaining:

[...] I suddenly had an urge to put my watch on. Time or no time, I wanted some worldly security. That’s what watches do: they keep us bound to this world. Dreams don’t have time. Neither does sleep, nor death. That’s why it is sometimes good to wear a watch. (p. 85)

‘Strange Land’ (pp. 123-131) is described as ‘a True Love story’ (p. 123) between the narrator and a Turkish man old enough to be her father (and quite clearly a father substitute) that is not allowed to develop beyond a conventional short-lived overseas romance (for her, although she is significantly more than a tourist in Turkey) and a blip in an otherwise good marriage (for the man’s wife). The man, Abdullah, seems to be the most deeply in love and most damaged by the end of the relationship: ‘Make our story beautiful’ he asks of her on their last meeting, and she does. This conventional affair is redeemed by the conventions of the ‘(true) love story’, inflected though such conventions may be through the dreamy sobriety of *Strangeland*.

‘Traceyland’ makes for a somewhat anticlimactic closing. The hand-written commentaries return here, but not to the same evocative effect as in the first section. I thoroughly enjoyed some of the Kathy Acker-esque pieces on sex, drunkenness and mild body horror, though not without some embarrassment (those who’ve read Acker in their – typically sheltered – teens will understand). The subject of Emin’s pregnancy scares, abortions and childlessness, treated here persistently and directly, makes for uncomfortable reading for a number of apparent and less obvious reasons. The only one I’d like to elaborate on is the gauche didacticism of ‘The Proper Steps for Dealing with an Unwanted Pregnancy’ (pp. 147-150), first published in the 2002 Anniversary issue of *i-D* magazine. I cannot imagine what kind of audience this is intended for, but I suppose it contains some good advice for young people with poor or no sex education and no-one to turn to at a difficult time, though I don’t know that this is the usual readership of *i-D* or *Strangeland*. Considering this piece in conjunction with ‘Abortion: How It Feels’ (pp. 153-159), ‘Small Hands’ (pp. 160-161) and ‘In My Dreams’ (pp. 197-199) and risking too literal an interpretation of ‘confessional writing’, one is led to the conclusion that Emin has issues when it comes to the subject of procreation. This is neither here nor there: if anything, autobiography is just the platform for such baggage to be set down. What I must take issue with is the insidious surfacing of such baggage in ‘The Proper Steps’, which despite conceding that many are not traumatized by abortion, insists on treating it as an earth-shattering episode in one’s life. The one thing that young women who find themselves accidentally pregnant need to know (and that after almost forty years of

pro-choice campaigning still – depressingly – bears repeating) is that no abortion need be a life-changing event; only guilt, inspired by religion or any other ideological structure, and misconceptions about femininity, our bodies, sex and babies make it so.

Anger, that symbol of feminist dissent so prominent in the 1970s, still reigns in *Strangeland*, fuelling some of the most engaging pieces such as ‘M\*A\*S\*C\*U\*L\*I\*N\*I\*T\*Y’ (pp. 137-143), which includes a barely disguised portrait of ex-boyfriend artist and musician Billy Childish. But, on the whole, the book is conciliatory and life-affirming in the most uncynical sense of the term. *Strangeland* ends with a restatement of what has probably been the motto of its creation: ‘DON’T BE AFRAID TO TAKE THE PAST HEAD ON.’ (p. 213)