

The Advertiser

Make the most of every day

Street to Street (27 October 2012)

Brian Castro

Giramondo, \$24.00

The Conversation (27 October 2012)

David Brooks

UQP, \$29.99

The novella is almost as diverse a form as the novel, but it lends itself particularly to the opposite poles of energetic compression (Castro) and elegant Aristotelian unity (Brooks).

Street to Street finds Brian Castro in characteristic boy-on-the-Weeties-box regression posing as a lecturer appraising academic and poet Brendan Costa who in turn is appraising the prodigious scholar and problematic early 20th century Sydney poet Christopher Brennan. Costa is not particularly interested in Brennan's doomed attempts to fashion his individual poems into a mythic unity, a 'single concerted poem' after the model of the French Symbolist 'livre composé' that the poet admired so much, nor does he want to write a straightforward biography, although he gives us a good deal of Brennan's star-crossed love- and lecturing-life. His concern is with "one loose thread", with the way in which the poet's life unraveled, not just through alcohol, poverty, personal tragedy and depression, but crucially through missing the tenor of the times and country in which he wrote.

Brendan Costa pursues this thread by throwing himself into Brennan's failure, reproducing the poet's life and loves himself in the non-identical, slightly warped configuration that is the essence of the mirror image, while elements in Costa's history reflect in a similarly wonky way autobiographical details familiar from author Brian Castro's previous work. Like a catherine wheel compressed and fizzing out in an extravagance of tragedy and comedy, pathos and bathos, sour and savage satire, this teeming novella recreates both the perilous insecurities of the life of the creative mind and the fatuities of the academy that mediates such creativity to the next generation.

In contrast, David Brooks's novella is a work of limpid stillness and restrained, pellucid style, a modern Platonic dialogue, both literally and figuratively, on the subject of love. An older Australian engineer, long resident in France, spends an evening in Trieste. About to dine at an exclusive restaurant he is joined, through a minor misadventure, by a much younger Italian woman, a linguist fluent in English, French and Russian, who is pondering a problem of the heart. As strangers who need never meet again both feel a freedom to share feelings and experiences they would hesitate to reveal to those closest to them. Their exchanged confidences, initiated by the young woman's quest for advice, her artless interest in the man's lifetime of intimate relationships, are counterpointed by a wonderful slow-paced meal of local food and wine. The night ends with a literally magical walk beside the harbour and lift to the man's hotel – the book with a twist that sends the reader swiftly back to interrogate those little frissons in the last few pages, briefly felt and passed over under the impetus of the characters' shared stories, the luminous night, the gracious and sensuous meal.

Katharine England