

The Many Mansions: Recent Australian Fiction

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IN the last two or three years most of the leading Australian novelists have published a book of some impact and some interest. It is to be expected that they will have certain features in common; yet each of the writers — and I take Hal Porter, Thea Astley, Thomas Keneally, David Ireland and Patrick White to be among the most important of current Australian novelists — has been so insistently individual that the resemblances, especially the fortuitous ones, are a little disturbing. These authors could not in any way be thought of as forming a school, a group. They have each, with perhaps one exception, made a point of working independently, they each have a recognisably unique style, and the latest novel is consistent with the previous publications of each. It is startling, then, to find the situation and issues of one novel meeting those of another, almost to the point of parody; though that could hardly be. Even minor images are echoed. This is not to argue that they are infuriating carbon copies of one another, as were the formula historical romances of the thirties and forties. Each is quite distinct, in setting, manner and theme. But considered together, they explore common ground; they afford to the observant reader a fair picture of the range and achievement of current Australian fiction, as that engaging problem presents itself to us.

These novels are not daringly innovative or experimental, nor is Australian fiction in general. Peter Mathers' *The Wort Papers* is the only fashionably *dernier cri* novel that comes to mind, and David Ireland has managed to produce an intriguing stroboscopic effect through his narrative

technique in *The Flesheaters*. The rest are, for the most part, conservative, well-made novels. Patrick White, who is held as technically the most modern of Australian novelists, admitted in an interview after the publication of *The Eye of the Storm* that his novels were probably basically nineteenth-century, and that he has never felt that his novels were particularly contemporary. He is no doubt overstating the case. Certainly none of these novels makes a fetish of modernity. One feature becomes clear, however: action is kept to a minimum, and the plot revolves around character, especially character in conflict with social forces. It is a perennial encounter. What identifies it as Australian is the way the antagonisms seem somehow institutional. These novels all question the controls and mechanisms of social governance. The difference from such earlier and unequal writers as D. H. Lawrence (in *Kangaroo*) and Katharine Susannah Prichard is in the controlling ironies of the recent novelists, and in the modified status of the new hero.

Hal Porter's most recent novel, *The Right Thing*,¹ might seem to be the most conventionally and typically Australian of them, at least in its choice of subject. The setting is a family property in western Victoria, in wealthy farming country. But Porter immediately announces a difference from the customary "pioneering the land" novel, and the drawn-out heroics of the battler. This is not just any rural household, but a family with a particular sense of class, or perhaps caste, and in a particular region of Australia — stable, unchanging, entrenched. Porter's focus is on that household, and the family's awareness of itself as on the land (although as the novel proceeds, that phrase begins to gather up and echo some of the moral tawdriness of "on the street") rather than with landscape or the struggles of life on the land. He is not at all interested in sheep-dips and stud bulls, or rolling plains and distant horizons, or the works and days of agricultural monotony. His concern is with the manners and mores of a particular group of

people, the Ogilvies — hardly a family — who have held the property *Erradale* for several generations, and who are determined to hold on to it and to the life style which ownership of the property and the house seems to compel. That is, the values that the Ogilvies abide by are utterly heartless, impersonal. "The land's no joke. People are. The land's valuable. People aren't."

The events are told from a number of angles, each revealing a partial truth. Different perspectives are supplied by Emma, wife of the elder son and so a "visitor;" and by Maureen, seduced by Emma's step-son; and briefly by old Mrs. Ogilvie. Some chapters come from the journal of Gavin, the sardonic second son. And even within chapters the structure is antiphonal. The effect is to increase the isolation of the characters and their uncertainty of each other's motives, and to arrest the action. They are lone wolves one and all, and at their centre is the Wolf-Grandmother, old Mrs. Ogilvie:

Mrs. Ogilvie's presence, small, upright, vivaciously Spartan, was the presence of a principle. It stimulated the better, less selfish side of hypocrisy, the underrated side so necessary if social communion is to be unchildish. An emanation from her attitudes had the effect of control, of being an arresting force or, rather of being a summation of arresting forces. Everything within the radius of her constraining spell . . . had the air of being arrested by her own vision of the right thing. (pp. 74-75)

Although Emma identifies her as both the wolf and the grandmother from the story of Little Red Riding Hood, Mrs. Ogilvie is more properly the fox gnawing at the Spartan boy's vitals. Secretly she despises the Ogilvies for the coarseness of their manners, their defective breeding and their meanness of spirit. Only Gavin penetrates her secret, and he will inherit *Erradale* because he is more a McLachlan than an Ogilvie. What he fails to understand is that he will be inheriting something more; she has spent sixty years recreating the garden of her childhood at *Kildermorie*. Gavin knows that she has done this, but he fails to fully comprehend how the presence of the past controls

him as it controls everyone else at *Erradale*. The novel charts the increasing tension of evil at large as time and consequence and moral judgment are held in check, held back by the ruthless determination and dominating will of this old woman, and by an adherence to the social doctrine of doing the right thing.

There is in fact no one right thing — and yet it is everywhere accepted as an imperative. At the Ogilvie dinner-table, where much of the action seems to take place, all manner of savagery and snobbery, the subtler pleasures of inhumanity, are practised behind a veneer of social etiquette. Good manners must be observed as well as preserved, if only in aspic. And decidedly they are not the manners of a Queensland shearer. “Whatever the seven members of the *Erradale* household really felt was kept from each other.” The passions are controlled, arrested; the right thing is always done, at the expense of self. Each character wears a mask to defend himself, and attempts to penetrate the mask of the others, to locate their vulnerable points, or waits for the mask to slip. “Events do not change man; they merely unmask him.” So Porter traces with unnerving accuracy and detail, the mounting pressures that eventually cause the Ogilvie world to buckle and tilt, cause the tribal mask of alert impassivity to drop just momentarily. The condition of stasis is monstrous and unnatural, because things must finally move (And when they do, it is with Porter’s characteristic theatrical flourish.).

The novel is a precise and penetrating analysis of Australian social behaviour, of the unquestioned values as well as the kinds of questions pursued. Prejudices are presented as defences against the threatened lowering of standards, even though the real corrosions of the spirit have long since taken place. That is, social values are discovered to be external and imposed (or derivative). There is no natural courtesy; manners are not the real and spontaneous expression of the individual. Those few who dare to be

themselves are ridiculed as eccentric. Conformity is not the right thing, yet the real vulgarity, as Porter demonstrates it, stems from the careful avoidance of being vulgar.

One might make a further generalisation from the novel, that here and in most Australian fiction, we are supplied with a perspective on character, and can draw our conclusions about it, yet we are still distanced from the characters, from the reality of their concerns, their anxieties, their tragedy. They live their lives separately and in some isolation, separate from each other and from us. We are not *involved* in their life. In *The Right Thing*, the Ogilvies have little association with the town, and they are suspicious of each other's motives. They are distanced from us by the slightly remote vocabulary they use, and by their coldness towards each other. It is difficult to warm to contempt and meanness. The contrivance, the wrought irony of Porter's style further divorces us from the event. But in addition to these matters of technique, there is something in the conception of character itself. Whatever core of truth they possess, they keep, as it were, to themselves. We can understand Maureen O'Connell's tragedy, but it is not finally tragic because we do not really know her as a character. We never do discover the real centre of Mrs. Ogilvie. Explanations from the past, and the reality of the past to her, are given, yet the strength of her personality is merely asserted. What is the key to her authority?

One might argue that this is a limitation in Porter's handling of character; but the same questions are prompted by Patrick White's Elizabeth Hunter (in *The Eye of the Storm*) and to a lesser degree by Thea Astley's Jack Holberg. These three have a curious family resemblance, especially in their effect on their subordinates. They are all selfishly and knowingly cruel, scornful. They live by some quasi-Nietzschean doctrine of will. Their power is, it seems, evil. But are they powerful enough, as figures? It is as though there is some ultimate reticence of conceptualisation, and at the same time some resistance by the

characters to allow themselves to be fully known — as though, in these three cases, the source of their personal authority is inscrutable, and not to be challenged.

Thea Astley's *The Acolyte*² begins by raising the question of credibility. We are not convinced of the genius of Jack Holberg: just how good a musician, a composer he is remains a vexing problem. In this respect he reminds us of White's Hurtle Duffield in *The Vivisector*. In both novels the creative capability of the artist is important, for it is played off against the way in which they freely and cruelly use up their friends and acquaintances, and expose their private weaknesses and foibles. Thea Astley's is a mocking wit, self-mocking too — but here it seems to me that she is amongst other things parodying White in the very sense in which Holberg incorporates parody into his own creations. "Certain captive objects were practising their own form of insubordination," she writes, in a sentence which could come from White (or Porter or Keneally), but is also her own. "The room was suspicious of me." And the household of bruised and ruined people reminds us of the burnt ones.

Holberg is a patron, like God; but the evidence of the novel suggests that it is a role which he is granted by others, rather than possessing by innate authority. He is brutally selfish, completely absorbed in his blindness, both physical and moral. He does not seem, finally, a great man. We do not altogether accept that he is worth worshipping, or that he can command the long devotion and loyalty of his acolytes. However we do relish the gusto of his social rudeness, one of the few affirmatives in a novel which keeps up a litany that being human is a hideous burden, that love is a punitive process, and that nature too harries the hurdled soul. Whatever happened to the tradition of vitalism in Australian writing?

The situation is akin to Porter's. At the other end of the crescent of inhabited Australia, in the withdrawn household that Holberg presides over behind the Gold Coast in

Queensland, time and events move slowly — for both Astley and Porter, slower than a late November afternoon. And for both, the reality of events lies outside the frame of the tourist brochure photograph. “Time, of course, is static. I’ve always believed this. It is we who go.” As in *The Right Thing*, so here the sustained indignities and humiliations force a reaction, though of an ultimately fruitless kind. The oppressive forces are too securely ensconced. Apparently identifying the real dimensions of this recurrent conflict, Paul Vesper, the narrator and acolyte of the title, retaliates in the only way possible, and exacts a token revenge on behalf of the bruised ones of all the recent novels. He begins an assault on the house with a catapult of his own invention. The intention is violent, but no lasting destruction is achieved. Yet he creates an adequate hiatus, a satisfying laceration, as the votary turns on the god.

Thomas Keneally’s *The Chant of Jimmy Blacksmith*³ varies the parameters and the odds, but essentially the same issues are involved. In charting the deplorable bigotries of 1900 against the dawn of Federation, he makes it clear that the Constitution of Australia is a social as well as a political legacy. And because there has been no substantial attempt to modify either, because the insensibility of the past can be so easily identified in the present complacency about racial and social inequities, we have yet another variation on the telescoping of temporal dimensions. This time, however, we are the gods, and the bruised one, Jimmy, is virtually on his own.

Jimmy Blacksmith is a half-caste, “a paley bastard” encouraged by a Methodist minister to aspire to decent European virtues like status and possessions; and in particular to try to breed the blackness out of himself by marrying a nice, i.e. white, girl. He accepts the necessity of assimilating himself to white society and the crisis is precipitated when inevitably he is rejected. The brutal truth is that society wants him to fail, especially when he looks

like succeeding. Slowly but carefully Keneally builds up in Jimmy a sense of confusion, of growing alarm, of helplessness inside the tightening spiral of events. Jimmy has impetus but no direction, and that of course is a comment of more than individual significance.

He takes his revenge, but because there are so many oppressors it is a random act, its meaning is not capable of precision. Moreover, because the novel is essentially a fable of moral indignation, Jimmy becomes a strangely unreal and legendary figure. He is somehow void of feelings, not only because white society will not permit him to have feelings but because his condition seems to be — until his anger overwhelms him — perpetual numbness. The white community too shows, in general, no responsiveness and takes no responsibility. It will tolerate no violation of its own system of controls, and relentlessly exacts its own revenge upon him. What in the other novels is seen as the austerity of a dominating individual will has become here the forbidding imposition of the collective will, soon to be framed in the nation's political charter. Jimmy Blacksmith has no place in the household of the nation. He is completely dispossessed.

David Ireland makes the point that society's solution to its problems is to institutionalise them. In *The Flesheaters*⁴ the constraining forces are represented by another house, a home for incurables — the incurably poor. Ireland's initial proposition is an Erewhonian device, that poverty is a disease, a mental disorder. Those who won't compete, who refuse to try harder, who opt out, who are unemployed and unemployable, are put into an asylum, a madhouse "home" called Merry Land. The events of this entertaining novel are the thoughts and experiences of Lee Mallory, one of the inmates, whose disability is that he does not have a job and seems never to have had one.

The inmates of Merry Land are scorned by the outside world; observed as curiosities — yet the outside world is no less mindless, no more mindful. The world is a mad-

house without walls, a colossal factory, a production line with roads as endless conveyor belts and the whole system thoroughly programmed. It is a novel, then, which protests at the way people are used and made useless; a novel which protests against the rejection of all values except production. In his previous novel, *The Unknown Industrial Prisoner*, Ireland had spoken for the workers. This time he speaks, more widely than Keneally, for the dispossessed. It is a deeply concerned examination of the moral values of Australia's social system, a dismayed discovery that things are wealth, not people.

And who is responsible in this case? Ireland is unable to place the onus on any particular figure. The amorphous will imposes the social constraints here; O'Grady, the man who runs Merry Lands, is as dubious an authority as the O'Grady of immortal "O'Grady says" fame. All the controls and mechanisms operate in a bizarre manner. In a detail which recalls Porter's and Astley's tourist brochure, Mallory watches a man walk past his window and into the frame. It is, he says, as if the panorama of life were painted on a strip of paper pasted to the window. The effect is caricature, fantasy; yet it is easy for us to re-insert the perspectives, spatial and moral.

Patrick White's *The Eye of the Storm*⁵ is noticed more fully elsewhere in this issue. It is sufficient to notice here how White gathers together what appear to be the recurring preoccupations of recent Australian fiction. With White we return to a single figure of enormous personal authority, who has a potency of control over others that approaches the larger than life. Elizabeth Hunter, by the exercise of her formidable will, constrains others to her. She has become a grotesque caricature of what she once was — but that "once was" is not adequately or convincingly portrayed. She is confined to her bed in a big old house in Sydney, surrounded by a bevy of subordinate characters to whom she is ultimately indifferent and relives her past in her drifting recollections. The nurses who

attend her (and who are in reverential awe of her powers of awareness, her disinterested omniscience), the housekeeper, lawyer, doctor, the son and daughter who have flown out from Europe, all these isolates drift and slide into and away from the vicinity of her bed, much as her own semi-consciousness might shift and float and bump gently, or ungently, into the events of their lives. Her confusion of past and present is sometimes, it would seem, intentional and malicious. She senses, smells out the secret truths of these attendant figures, forces them to admit that they are betrayed by their various lusts, but is indifferent to their failings and their pain. She has become immune to desire, finally to the desire to live — but that is achieved at last only by an exercise of will.

There is in all these novels a controlling governance of will; and those who are bruised by the negligent usage of the powerful are unable to register an adequate reaction. Their resentment and hatred is suppressed; yet there is a strong undertone of emotional violence as well as violation beneath those constraints. The “gods” cannot be really challenged, they are accommodated in secure houses. So the authors must come to the aid of the subordinate characters, and attach a moral framework from without the tensions that build up — of moral indignation through irony, or moral retaliation through symbolic gesture, or moral evaluation through literary allusion, as in White’s incorporation of Shakespeare and Stendhal, and Porter’s Old Testament and nursery rhyme images. The moral dimensions do not arise out of the characters themselves. The result is that by this paleness of internal controls, the characters — and the novels too, to an extent — all share a tendency towards caricature and grotesquery. And that permits, in every case, a saving grace of comic perception.

NOTES

¹Hal Porter, *The Right Thing* (Adelaide: Rigby, 1971). Further page references to *The Right Thing* appear parenthetically.

²Thea Astley, *The Acolyte* (Sydney: Angus and Robertson, 1972).

- ³Thomas Keneally, *The Chant of Jimmy Blacksmith* (Sydney: Angus and Robertson, 1972).
- ⁴David Ireland, *The Flesheaters* (Sydney: Angus and Robertson, 1972).
- ⁵Patrick White, *The Eye of the Storm* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1973).