

Recurrent Preoccupations

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This last issue of *JASAL* for 2018 brings together a diverse body of essays on Australian literature and critical debates. Although unanticipated, there are numerous resonances between the essays, whether in the critical approaches adopted by a critic or in the choice of texts selected.

In 'Beverley Farmer 1941-2018: A Tribute, Archetypes and Fluency in *This Water: Five Tales* (2017),' Lyn Jacobs 'considers the re-framing and interrogation of the gendered designs of oral and folkloric traditions in *This Water: Five Tales*, focussing on 'water' as a unifying theme and the fluency of Farmer's poetic prose' (1). She writes of the book:

Her reputation as one of Australia's finest prose stylists is confirmed by *This Water: Five Tales* where revived archetypal songs and laments, swan songs and discourses, with their elemental images of water, stone fire and blood, collectively evince a peculiar force. They are richly imagined, carefully wrought tales which celebrate the power and potential of literature to nourish, warn, disturb or enchant. (9)

Jacobs's essay is informed by her own ground-breaking research on the Farmer's work and reflects some of her interests on the writing. She notes, for example, that in Farmer's writing 'bodies of water feature as distinctive sites of negotiation between real and imagined worlds' (1). This is a motif she traces to the writer's experience across a number of geographical settings but also to a distinct thematic concern with nature and self, with climate change and the way place—and water as place—contains personal and cultural memories. Jacobs sums up Beverley Farmer's writing as follows:

Writing slowly and painstakingly, she has created a body of work since the 1980s that is relatively small but highly regarded for its experimental use of language and form and the extraordinary clarity, lyricism and poetic rhythms of its prose. There are recurrent preoccupations with place, gender, relationships and the cultural myths and practices of life, death and renewal. There is a constant celebration of the miracles of the natural world and of the transformative potential of art and story-telling. (9)

While Jacobs examines Beverley Farmer's provocative re-evaluation of traditional tales and myths, Stephanie Guest in 'Barbecued sunrise: Translation and transnationalism in Australian poetry' turns her attention to a different kind of process in literary writing and language. Guest identifies as a starting point for her discussion of '[t]wo Australian translations of Stéphane Mallarmé's 'Un coup de dés jamais n'abolira le hasard' (1897),' Christopher Brennan's and Chris Edwards's, that they 'parody the high Symbolism of Mallarmé's poem into a sometimes-ambiguous Australian vernacular' (12). Framed by a view that '[w]hile considerable attention has been given to translation as a mode of literary circulation and as a metaphor for an ethics of cross-cultural exchange and understanding, there has been little work done by proponents of World Literature on the linguistic problem of what happens *in* translation' (1), Guest's essay

hones in on both the lacunae and the excesses that haunt all linguistic and cultural translation. Drawing on a rich web of discourses on national(ist) and transnational approaches to literary criticism, Guest explores in her essay how Brennan's and Edwards' translations 'foreignise[...] both Mallarmé's French and Australian English to produce a site of highly playful transnationalism.' Central to her work is a concern with what Guest refers to as the 'three puzzles' the poem presents to 'its translator' (4). The first is the fact that 'Mallarmé's linguistic and formal innovations are intricately woven in the French language and are difficult to convey in other languages;' the second the poet's detailed but confounding instructions to read the poem; and finally the fact that 'some critics regard 'Un coup de dés...' as containing a secret meaning,' (4) one readers will strive to uncover. Central to Guest's essay is an attempt at answering the following question: 'How can one translate the already foreignised language, the musical correspondences, and the 'code' of the poem, all at once?' (4). In a rich and imaginative response to the poem, and to the work of both translators, Guest brings into play the way both Australian poets add to this dense and contradictory mix, noting at one point: 'Like Brennan's title-poster, Edwards's title is explicit in its infidelity to any 'original' (9). The essay foregrounds how 'The Franglais muzak of the two translations achieves a hilarious—alien, unnatural—transnationalism in Australian poetry while also illuminating an unfamiliar side of Mallarmé's poem' (10).

History and memory—national, cultural—emerge as a dominant concern in Ellen Smith's "'one should never go back": history writing and historical justice in Thea Astley's *A Kindness Cup*.' Drawing on established readings of the novel as 'an unflinching account of the violence of the Queensland frontier and dramatizes practices of national remembering and forgetting,' Smith asserts that 'Astley's novel is also a reflection on the *writing of history* that offers a critique of some of the political and affective investments that we may place in the work of recovering the past' (1). Working between debates about historical revisionism and national reconciliation Smith teases out the range of implications that emerge from re-written history. In the answer to a series of questions she pursues in this essay, Smith writes: 'At the novel's conclusion, the exposure of historical atrocities at a town meeting leads to an outburst of mob violence that is structurally very similar to the violence that has been exposed' (2). Smith's essay offers a provocative revision of established ways of thinking of certain kind of historical revisionism as naturally necessary and healing and sets out to consider the benefits of such narratives. She writes of *A Kindness Cup*:

By coupling the story of a massacre with the story of a town's commemorative celebration Astley comments on the way that nationalist myths both require and enable the erasure of frontier violence. Slanted remembrance and tradition, Astley shows us, are perhaps key to the ways the past can be misrepresented, and indeed denied (5).

Ultimately, Smith argues 'that we can read Astley's novel as offering a caution against some of the moral and affective investments that we might make in historical scholarship,' and concludes: 'The value of the creative work however is that it is able to do this work while also attending to its limits, thus insisting that we hold open the space between historical recovery and historical justice' (9).

Maria Takolander's 'Magical Realism and the Transcultural Politics of Irony: Alexis Wright's *Plains of Promise*' engages with Wright's novel within a critical and theoretical framework infused by 'a perceived incongruity or incompatibility between the aesthetic (which is said to be about 'formulas,' 'formalist . . . stunts,' and 'discourse') and the postcolonial (which traffics

in ‘faith,’ ‘being,’ and the ‘organic’) [that] informs theorisations of magical realism.’ Working with Bill Ashcroft’s take on these debates, notably an emphasis on ‘aesthetic form and what he calls its ‘material resonance’ (418), or affect, which is where he locates the potential agency of the postcolonial artefact,’ in her essay Takolander asserts ‘that magical realist narrative must be similarly returned to a ‘transcultural’—which is to say aesthetic or literary—space’ (1). Central to this work is a belief that ‘recognition of irony’s centrality to magical realist fiction has the potential to restore vitality and cultural agency to an important form of postcolonial writing’ (2). The essay ‘explores how Wright’s magical realist novel mobilises irony to underscore and undermine the double speak of colonialism, as well as to ‘break out of the heavy burdens of tradition with a tease of action and a sense of chance’ (Vizenor *Postindian Conversations* 60), in a way that announces a dynamic and authentic sovereignty’ (3). Takolander’s essay offers a challenging and rewarding reading of *Plains of Promise* that owes much to a close dialogue with Gerald Vizenor’s work, particularly his views on irony as subversion and resistance. As she posits in her conclusion:

One might, like [Alison] Ravenscroft, argue that this needs to be honoured by downplaying the recognisable rhetorical strategies through which this political standpoint is communicated. Alternatively, one might embrace, like Vizenor, the ‘humanistic tease, vital irony, spirit, cast of mind, and moral courage’ (*Native Liberty* 2) that we find in Wright’s novel and other magical realist texts around the world as they attend to Indigenous pasts and futures.

‘Contested land: Country and *terra nullius* in *Plains of Promise* and *Benang: From the heart*,’ by Jane Gleeson-White is the second essay in this issue to examine Alexis Wright’s novel, here in a comparative reading with Kim Scott’s book. Gleeson-White ‘examines the novels in terms of two environmental and political tropes—country and *terra nullius*—to argue that they work rhetorically to privilege an Indigenous understanding of two regions of the Australian continent over their conception as a blank canvas available for inscription by British property law and Christianity’ (1). The essay makes an important contribution to the rapidly expanding body of scholarship on Wright’s *oeuvre* and unwittingly sets up an important dialogue with Takolander’s reading of *Plains of Promise* and her work on *Benang*. As Gleeson-White asserts of the novels:

By politicising land, questioning its nature, and suggesting that land and society-economics-politics are mutually constituted, they reopen land as a contested site in the Australian literary imaginary for investigation beyond its more familiar tropes of bush, gothic, sacred, postcolonialism, feminism, masculinity. (10)

Michael Falk’s ‘The Endless Forms of Things: Charles Harpur’s Radicalism Revisited’ offers a reappraisal of Harpur’s work that deviates from much established scholarship ‘by focussing on the form of Harpur’s poetry rather than the content. In what follows I consider first the perspectival and then the progressive aspects of his verse. I show how these formal aspects of his poems are rooted in his convictions, and hopefully offer some new insights into his politics and poetics’ (2). Through engaged and provocative close readings of selected poems, Falk seeks to show that ‘Harpur’s progressive mindset infused nearly all his poetry’ (7). Taking as guiding concerns Harpur’s use of stylistic devices such as ‘voice’ and ‘focalisation,’ and his focus on themes related to place, people, landscape, progress and colonisation, Falk states as he concludes the essay: ‘He was a radical in the original sense of the word—he went to the roots of things. He took all his ideas back to first principles’ (10). He goes on: ‘This is the most attractive quality of his poetry today, its careful, questing, branching, self-conscious, thoughtful

quality. What is sometimes seen as Harpur's awkwardness is really his truthfulness' (10). Falk is interested in the paradox of a reserved individual who achieved constant exposure through his writing and his opinions: '[t]hrough he led a retired life, [Harpur] was a constant presence in the democratic journals and newspapers of the 1840s, 50s and 60s, penning squibs, satires, philosophical poems and brilliant short pieces of prose expressing his aspirations for Australian society. He lived through tumultuous times' (1).

Finally, in 'More than an Amanuensis: Ernestine Hill's Contribution to *The Passing of the Aborigines*,' Alexis Antonia, Hugh Craig and Eleanor Hogan turn to the complex collaboration between Ernestine Hill and Daisy Bates to examine Hill's role in the writing of *The Passing of the Aborigines* in particular. This is a rich and multi-layered analysis of the work of two people whose work on Aboriginal Australia left such a haunting legacy: '*The Passing of the Aborigines* was hugely influential for several decades after its publication, becoming an international bestseller and a long-time staple of Australian school curricula' (3). The authors go on to assert:

The backlash against Bates and *The Passing of the Aborigines* was only gaining momentum in the decade before Ernestine Hill's death in 1972. But for Hill, the book had become a running sore for personal and professional reasons, not least because her contribution to forging Bates's media image had never been acknowledged in full. This included her role in talent-spotting Bates, as it were, her foresight in recognising the potential of a newspaper serial and book based on her friend's life, her labour in producing and editing the narrative material, and in shepherding Bates and her manuscripts to the *Advertiser* office. (3-4)

The essay undertakes a patient unpicking of the collaboration between Bates and Hill, drawing on a wide range of archival sources as well as on 'computational stylistics techniques to develop profiles for the authorial signatures of Daisy Bates and Ernestine Hill, attempting to assess their respective contributions in compositing and crafting *The Passing of the Aborigines*' (6). Antonia, Craig and Hogan examine the nature of the collaboration between Bates and Hill in the writing of the book and seek to determine the extent to which they share its authoring. As they conclude:

the evidence of the computational stylistic analysis nevertheless supports Hill's claim that her own contribution to the writing of the newspaper serial and subsequent book was substantial. The results help define the parts of the book where she turned the raw material into a finished product which is in her style, rather than Bates's. Bates and Hill must share the responsibility for *The Passing of the Aborigines* and for its popular success, as well as for its lasting and profound impact on relations between Aboriginal peoples and Europeans in Australia. (14)

There is much in this issue to provoke and inspire, and I would like to thank also those contributors who so generously took the time to review a number of recent scholarship works in the field of Australian literary studies. This is vital work not often very well rewarded but certainly very much appreciated.