

**Antonella Riem. *A Gesture of Reconciliation: Partnership Studies in Australian Literature*.**

**Udine: Forum, 2017. 209 pages**

**AU\$45**

**ISBN 978 88 8420 995 5 (Paperback)**

[https://forumeditrice.it/percorsi/lingua-e-letteratura/all/a-gesture-of-reconciliation/a-gesture-of-reconciliation/libro\\_view](https://forumeditrice.it/percorsi/lingua-e-letteratura/all/a-gesture-of-reconciliation/a-gesture-of-reconciliation/libro_view)

Antonella Riem is a professor of English Literature at the University of Udine, in the north-east of Italy close to its borders with Austria and Slovenia. She is an internationalist, interested in Anglophone literatures across the world, and the founder of the Partnership Studies Group at the University, an international network dedicated to promoting a more equitable and caring approach to human relations (partnership) in opposition to a hierarchical, authoritarian (dominator) model. The Group is inspired by the anthropological and cultural work of Riane Eisler, an American whose writings have been influential across a range of fields—law, economics, anthropology—around the world. Riem’s Group focuses on exploring the partnership/dominator dynamic in World Literatures in English, with Riem particularly interested in the literature of India, Canada and Australia. She studied at the University of Queensland in the 1980s and has visited Australia many times.

Riem tells us that *A Gesture of Reconciliation: Partnership Studies in Australian Literature* is the ‘fruit of [her] thirty-year study of Australian literature’ and represents her application of the partnership approach to Australian fiction, reading a selection of texts with a view to promoting cultural transformation. In addition to Eisler, Riem is influenced by Raimon Panikkar, the philosopher and theologian interested in intercultural and inter-religious dialogue. These two philosophies guide her readings as she applies Eisler’s partnership/dominator continuum to a range of Australian novels and considers the way they align with Panikkar’s ideas about the rise of hyper-technological Western societies and the consequent diminution of creative value. Terms such as Panikkar’s ‘inter-in-dependence’ and ‘dialogic dialogue’ (‘a praxis of humanist thought which is a necessary harmonising counterpart to rational-analytical thought’ 14) and ‘scientific term’ appear throughout her discussions of the novels.

She opens her enquiry with a brief discussion of the scene of the flogging and death of the young convict Kirkland in Marcus Clarke’s *For the Term of His Natural Life* as exemplifying the cruelty of the British imperial project. It is one of the most vivid, if not sensational, representations in Australian literature of the way the ‘dominator model’ of authoritarianism diminishes the humanity of all participants, whether convict or free, and it serves as a marker for Riem’s later enquiries into Australian fiction in search of a more equitable model of human relations.

This she finds in the work of Patrick White and Randolph Stow, Peter Carey and Blanche D’Alpuget—she comments that she excluded work by David Malouf only because she intends to write a book on it. At the outset, Riem declares that her chosen authors are intent on denouncing ‘the evils of the dominator model’ and promoting a more equal, compassionate and eco-sustainable approach ‘to all sentient and non-sentient life’ (15). This ascription of authorial intention may surprise readers trained to work from the text but, of course, she means that she is seeking evidence for this intent in the novels regardless of any declaration by the novelists (though she finds evidence to support this, too, in published interviews and statements by some of them).

In this way, she considers Patrick White's *The Aunt's Story* and *Voss*, interleaved with readings of Randolph Stow's *To The Islands*, shifting back and forth between the novels in the longest section of the book. This allows her to draw out similarities in the novels, particularly *Voss* and *To the Islands*, and to consider an additional binary in the discussion of their fiction—the movement between the realist and the symbolist/poetic modes. She returns to the critical debates of the early 1960s when both authors were criticised for introducing poetic registers into a genre that had been defined by realism in Australia, and she argues that the more poetic elements in the novels are the surest signs of their humanity and resistance to the dominator paradigm. Here she calls on Panikkar's 'dialogical dialogue' to state that 'any successful text relies on a symbolic and archetypal kind of language, on the affinity between mythical-poetical symbols and on a historical-social dimension, which is not in conflict with the more imaginative aspects of life' (36). Those imaginative aspects are crucial to the partnership model, but it can seem that it reduces the realistic elements merely to giving 'life and credibility to a story' (36).

Riem's analysis of the novels also draws on the twelve archetypes of inner development proposed by Jungian psychologists as the individual moves from Preparation (Ego) to Journey (Soul) and Return (Self), though she stresses that this is not a 'monodirectional linear sequence' (58) but a spiralling or circular movement. Readers of *Voss* and *To The Islands* will recognise that these sequences can be applied to the narratives of those novels, just as many of the characters can be categorised within archetypal roles with the central journeying figure in each, *Voss* and Heriot respectively, following a Jungian journey. Riem draws out the schematic patterning, particularly in these two novels.

When she turns to Peter Carey's *The Unusual Life of Tristan Smith* and *Bliss*, Riem's background in postcolonial studies comes to the fore as she reads Tristan's deformity as symbolic of the imperial culture's rejection of the monstrous, so that the obvious Efica (Australia)/Voorstand (America) correspondences are overlaid with a kind of gylanic (to use Eisler's term) patterning of acceptance of difference. *Bliss* is read as Harry Joy's journey from the poisoned dominator atmosphere of advertising to a process of self-realisation. As Riem argues in detail, this is not a direct journey but a process of fluctuation and spiralling that leads to his understanding of the importance of creativity and storytelling itself.

She briefly returns to Stow's *The Merry-Go-Round in the Sea* and *Tourmaline* to find similar patterns of self-realisation. The exchanges and narrative shifts between the two central characters, Rick and Rob, in *The Merry-Go-Round in the Sea* allow her to explore Panikkar's dialogic dialogue idea. She examines closely the range of symbols (names, colours) in *Tourmaline* that reveal Stow's interest in Taoism.

The most surprising inclusion in this survey of Australian fiction is the single work by a woman, Blanche D'Alpuget's *Turtle Beach*. It provides Riem with the opportunity to contrast the dominator assumptions of D'Alpuget's Australian characters with 'a more partnership-oriented society' in Malaysia, 'still influenced by its Buddhist/Hinduist perspective' (163). She sees the Australian journalist, Judith, as representative of an exploitative culture that cannot understand the commitment of the Indian professor of history, Kanan, to an inner life and integrity. This is the shortest chapter in the book, and the least satisfying, as Riem falls back on some didactic assertions to carry her point home.

The partnership model provides an idealistic, even utopian, approach to literary criticism that tries to give literary studies a role in the transformation of Western culture, with the admirable

aim of contributing to a less violent, more accommodating (of humans and animals) and sustainable world. Riem's readings are full of interesting insights into the patterning of the novels, particularly in her extended account of White's and Stow's novels of the 1950s and 1960s. As well as incorporating Eisler's and Pannikar's work, she brings a postcolonial frame to her study and considers the relationship of postcolonialism to some postmodernist strategies especially in her last chapter on White's *Memoirs of Many in One*. Many critics have an urge to contribute to a positive transformation of our culture, whether that be directly political, nationalistic or a matter of human values, as in Riem's work. While this is difficult, if not impossible, when criticism is so secondary to the primary literary text, the attempt may reveal new insights into the role of fiction. Riem's readings come from a different perspective to most Australian literary criticism and challenge some common critical assumptions. She is openly didactic about the ethical goals of reading and writing.

Her emphasis on the 'mythical-poetical' aspects of the novels as opposed to their 'historical-social' detail raises questions about the role of the novel as representation. Her chosen novels are, for the most part, schematic and relatively unconcerned about the detail of Australian life. Riem draws each novel into her own dominator/partnership frame so that the novels appear to have a sameness of patterning and purpose. This can suggest, for example, that the attitudes of all non-Western peoples are pretty much the same, in opposition to the violent and exploitative Western dominator paradigm. Behind this is an ideal of a harmonious original state, a 'mutual partnership origins, where a relationship with Nature and the other is characterised by respect and sacredness' (48). It can be found in the Aboriginal characters, Jackie and Dugald in White's *Voss* and in the Hindu character, Kanan, in D'Alpuget's *Turtle Beach*. The absence of concern for specific details, of different historical and social experience, may challenge some readers but Riem is looking to the big picture where the future of the planet depends on a shared frame of understanding.

*A Gesture of Reconciliation* will be instructive to Australian critics as it brings some of our 'canonical' fiction into an international perspective and grapples with the relationship of fiction to the major philosophical crisis of our time: the exploitation of the planet and its peoples for the material gain of a dominant few.

Susan Lever