

NEWCOMERS, POSTMODERNISM AND FEMINIST EXPERIMENT

COLLEEN KEANE

THE last half-decade has seen radical developments in discourse, ideas and issues, within both the international and national settings. It has been an era of tremendous de-stabilisation and diversification, and challenges to monoliths of various orders, as former structures are debunked and subverted at various levels: discursively, politically, socially, culturally. The homogenising definition and meaning of 'nation' has been re-viewed nationally and internationally over this time. Homogeneity is giving way to diversity in numerous arenas. The cultural and intellectual output in Australia across these years has expanded. And women's contribution to the 'national literature' has been numerically extensive. Variety of mode, genre, theme and issue can be demonstrated in a cross-section of novels written by women in Australia over the past five years. Taking a sample of the products of newcomers in this period highlights the diversity and sophistication of literary production in this country and its interaction with the rest of the globe, discursively and culturally.

I would like to comment on the themes and issues of diversity and plurality, and their Post-Humanist relation to postmodern debates and stylistics and national identity consciousness. In making the choice to use the term 'Post-Humanist' I allude both to the de-centering of traditional Humanist concerns and subjectivity and to an ethical, democratic impulse which is still, I believe, the legacy of western Humanism. Postmodern and Post-Structuralist theoretical discourses and frameworks most often centralise the linguistic and semiotic at the expense of the social and ethical. The term 'Post-Humanist' offers a broader terrain of allusion and suggestion as regards theoretical, philosophical and socio-cultural possibilities.

Each of the three novels under discussion self-consciously demonstrates something of itself as a product of the historical moment in Australia, but in dialogue with larger latitudes of contextual reality, the wider world and its current multiple intersections of discourse, ideas, issues. In these works masculine, nationalist myths of character and origins lose not only their traditional shape but their very substance. Mary Fallon, in *Working Hot*, enunciates a radical contemporary psycho-sexual space. Brenda Walker's seedy inner city in *Crush* enacts the contradictory origins of choices and desires. And Beth Yahp's story-telling technique in *The Crocodile Fury* celebrates another culture for an Australian audience looking towards Asia in new ways.

Their relation to traditional Australian mythology and fictions regarding narrative, theme, mode, genre and stylistics is plainly 'different'. It is one of 'difference' from the more homogeneous mainstream, the formally, and formerly, unified mythical image of the 'Australian'. These writers seem more inclined perhaps to ignore it completely, though such a de-contextualisation is impossible. Women writers in Australia have never had the same stake in the heroic and masculine properties of the 'national', and have written against its grain. Many new women writers have other allegiances – primarily to feminism, to women's perspectives on the world, experience and socio-cultural issues, and to postmodern formal interests.

Working Hot remains perhaps the most confronting and demanding feminist novel to appear over recent years. This text won the Victorian Premier's award for new writing in 1989. Its overt exploration of eroticism, most specifically in the second section entitled 'Sextec', is remarkable. Its formal experimentation and mixed modes draw it into a close parallel with Marion Campbell's *Not Being Miriam*.

This text radically questions the definition and boundaries of the novel. It could be viewed as a prose poem, as its structure involves only the loosest of narrative sequencing amid a form that is a lengthy, impressionistic experiment with language, voices, and perceptions of women on the edge, against a ground that is both patriarchal and misogynistic. The text is composed of many forms of voice and direct address: letters, anecdotes, dialogues, conversations, and other word-work – epigrams, quotes, clichés, sayings. Linguistic play is a constant feature of the text, not superficially or stylistically, for the novel itself is a rehearsed experiment and demonstrated alternative to rational, linear models of expression and communication associated with men and patriarchy.

The content moves around questions of love and sex, and love between women in a patriarchal world, striving towards the expression of something 'different', with results that are often painful and contradictory. Intertextual references to writers and artists who famously explored difficult or perverse love abound in the novel, especially to Eve Langley in epigrams about life experience, and to Cixous, Proust, Genet, Stein, Wilde and others. The conditions of loving, using words and writing are thematic elements which bind the novel into a kind of shape beyond that of a pure, free associative amalgam of verbal and linguistic episodes, quotes and epigrams.

The graphic appearance of the text and its visual impact are also important experimental divergences from normative novelistic expectations, with major shifts throughout. Blank verse moves into verse narrative, moves into formalised dialogue, within sections and between sections. Quotations and epigrams are placed next to emotive, stream of consciousness tracts. The Contents page lays out the section titles: 'Milieu', 'Sextec', 'the Wound and the Message', 'Curse evidence', 'Which Craft?' and 'Tsunami' with brief descriptions ('in which the sore point of entry is touched', 'in which a consciousness is cursed') invoking the picaresque tradition. Erotic banter switches to lovers' invective on a single page, excess being the closest thing to an ordering principle. Metaphor, over-statement and cliché appear liberally, and words are often run together, 'eachother' and 'curseevidence', for instance, or used inventively for overt thematic and philosophical effect.

The subversion of the logical and linear has a philosophical and political aspect, and direct references to French feminist theory can be traced. This is explored in relation to a re-figuring of the feminine, and the transgression of linear logic, coherence and unity of plot, narrative and perception. Mixed media also abound, with poetry, radio plays, and letters, amongst others. But what emerges most powerfully through the many modes and directions in which language is pushed and played with is the experiment with the enunciation of sexual desire, obsession and the irrational, the 'Hysterical' perhaps. The social and cultural conditions in which desire and love between women is enacted force their way violently into speech and action, and into the text itself, in the way the lovers address and reproach each other and the tormented aspects of acting out desire in a misogynistic setting.

The violation of women's autonomy and free expression is demonstrated with references to the dual brutality and sentimentality of masculine norms, the violent encoding of gendered desire, and its direct and indirect effects on experience and expression. The trope of the prostitute appears, in a literal sense regarding pimps and

practices, and in a generalised analogy for heterosexual lust and the organisation of sexual exchange within the relations of a patriarchal order. Sado-masochism is implicated here, and the extravagant cruelty and sterility of self-absorbed lust is articulated in many and varied ways throughout this 'novel' of textual excesses and extremities, and sexual-erotic games.

Crush forms part of a rapidly expanding range of genre interests in Australian women's writing. Walker's work sits obliquely at the edge of the crime field, using it strategically, commenting on it, and yet not quite being enclosed or absorbed by it regarding adherence to paradigm and formula. *Crush* was her first novel, published in 1991 by Fremantle Arts Centre Press.

Crush opens with an inscription from a postmodern philosopher-critic, in this instance Roland Barthes, from *The Pleasure of the Text*:

The Death of the Father would deprive literature of many of its pleasures. If there is no longer a Father, why tell stories? Doesn't every narrative lead back to Oedipus? Isn't story-telling always a way of searching for one's origin, speaking one's conflicts with the law, entering into the dialectic of tenderness and hatred?

Walker's novel is more textually self-conscious and literary than other feminist examples of the crime genre, such as the work of Marele Day. The existential and psychoanalytic aspects and edges of her work take it even further beyond the formula and the specifics of the genre, and the more typical feminist appropriation of it.

'Inscription', 'Origin' and 'Location' are the suggestively post-structuralist titles of the section divisions, and each is further divided, or rather constructed, by alternating voices, the narrative perspectives of Anna Penn and Tom O'Brien. The murder mystery of the body found in the park and detection/deconstruction of evidence is paralleled by a simultaneous detection/deconstruction of lawyer Tom's identity by the agency and activity of Anna. The role and identification of fathers and inheritances, and of pragmatic, masculine priorities and Freudian overtones emerge. Anna (Penn) is the writer, decoder and inscriber at once.

The genre elements are evident: seedy urban settings and references to a criminal underclass, detached macho modes, murder mysteries, uncertain identities, coincidences. The tone is mostly clipped and the writing spare, with the first-person detachment of the hard-boiled Private Investigator. These characters, Anna and Tom, are 'classic' loners and outsider figures, both fatherless, both detached, self-protective but searching through stories and fictions. Intertextual references are made to other writers: Flaubert, Musil, Tolstoy, and of course, Raymond Chandler. Tom also demonstrates that his legal, textual practices involve an engagement with fictions of stereotype, hypothesis, construction:

I hear different kinds of stories in my business. I scan and edit them. I pull them into line with a bigger, more collective fiction. I present my edition of the story to the jury, the prosecutor presents a different edition. The jury? Their ideas about crime come from stories in the afternoon newspapers, drunk with indignation and sympathy. (22)

The triangular familial relations, Oedipal scenarios, and father searches are also inscribed. Men flee lovers and mothers, both Tom's father and himself, in different ways. But neither escapes the 'repressed', which eventually returns in various guises, not all negative. And there is also Anna's pursuit of Tom, and the sparse information about her

orphaned past, juxtaposed with a subtext of desire enacted in writing and in her 'crush' on the older Tom, with the 'grey chest' (115). The 'crush' reference appears at several different points, most ironically in Tom's typical hard-boiled, but rural-bred laconic, teasing edge:

Early one evening as I was walking along Alice Street I heard Frank Sinatra and Count Basie, live in Los Angeles. A thin voice was singing along, quite loudly: 'I've got a crush on you, sweetie pie.' Anna waved at me through the louvres and leaned back to turn the music down. I went into her room and sat on the edge of her desk. 'Where I come from', I said, 'a crush is a place where sheep wait to be castrated'. (25)

(ANNA) That night in my dreams I found some way to fit our bodies together, in comfort, in consolation, so that his face passed through the curve of desire and desolation and came to rest, at last. But when I woke I had forgotten the configuration. (88)

'Tom', she said, 'we construct our own fathers. Out of whatever materials we have to hand'. (106)

Freudian references, especially relating to fear of, and desire for, the father are scattered throughout in an overt manner.

The resolution has an edenic, pre-Oedipal resonance. Tom's ability to feel emotion is expressed in his longing for the missing Anna. He speaks directly with Tessa, his mother, about the past and Albert Flower, his father. Family Law may no longer be an area of enormous fear for him. Max seeks asylum and safety in the country, working Tom's inherited land. And Anna disappears into her writing.

The specifics of place and time also feature strongly. The dialogue between the urban and rural settings, signs and motifs locates the novel very definitely in the (West) Australian context. This novel self-consciously plays off the old and the new Australia against each other, in references to traditional life on the land, and the qualities that sustained it, that are juxtaposed with the diversity of multicultural, and sub-cultural, inner city life:

Sometimes a girl with a long sweet plait and an Alice headband comes out of the Fleischerei. Gay lovers embrace at the bus stop. A woman with a butterfly tattooed on her cheek takes her baby out in a stiff plastic stroller. The baby already has three studs in each ear. I watch the customers of the Halal Butcher, the Sisters of Charity and the Vietnamese Deli. I can smell the big tubs of carnations and autumn tuberoses. (127)

Anna's powers of observation, imagination and construction are proven in the course of the narrative to be more fine-tuned than Tom's.

The psychoanalytic implications are represented with a postmodern edge, hinting at the constructed character of all activity, interpretation and meaning. 'Other' discourses and dimensions of 'reality' are suggested. Anna, the writer, has poetic flights of fancy and imagination and her more sensual text, and subtext, is juxtaposed with Tom's cynicism; her desire hinted at in her responses to him and in the activity of writing itself. But she emerges at the conclusion as the self-reflexive writer constructing the ending, fabricating closure, and coolly disappearing as casually as she arrived. Walker's employment of the self-reflexive, desiring female writer in a text about various forms of deconstruction provides a fresh and complex angle on feminist postmodern genre interest.

Discussions of ethnic or migrant writing in the Australian context have focused mainly on the predominance of migration stories and first-person narrative accounts of transition and settlement, or marginality and alienation, as the case may be. There have been a number of these written in recent years – by Dewi Anggraeni, Yasmin Gooneratne, Angelika Fremd, Lolo Houbein. These writers address themselves more or less directly to their present environment and host culture, where Australian identity and culture feature at various levels in refiguring the self.

However, Beth Yahp's novel *The Crocodile Fury*, and to a lesser extent Fotini Epanomitis's *The Mule's Foe*, unsettle some of these general observations, analyses and projected norms of ethnic writing. *The Crocodile Fury* has been welcomed into the mainstream, being nominated for, and winning, several major literary awards, such as the Victorian Premier's Award in 1992. Unlike most of the 'ethnic writing' field it does not represent voices from the older channels of migration, the British Isles and various parts of Europe. These traditional sources of migration provide relatively accessible cultural frames of reference for a large part of the Australian audience and reading public. In both mode and content *The Crocodile Fury* does not fit comfortably into the existing discourse. Its source material is traditional and Catholic Chinese-Malaysian culture, and it marks a new kind of Asia-Australia literary link.

The central role of story-telling and the specific modes and rituals of pattern and repetition in Chinese story are also a challenge to the norms of an Anglo-Celtic Australian narrative tradition. The self-conscious narrative construction ensures a certain engagement on the part of an interested postmodern readership. It is a family saga deeply-rooted in Chinese story-telling traditions and localised versions of Chinese-Malay mythology. The narrator's grandmother and her gradually delivered stories are the organising principle of the work. She parcels out her stories like precious gifts, dependent upon her whim and will and the ever-patient attentiveness of her young audience, the narrator:

Grandmother wants her seeing to be written in shapes and patterns she herself can't read. In the words she sent both my mother and me to the convent to learn, the words of newspapers and city records, not those of talking story, ghostchasing or charm ... so her seeing can be printed on golden-edged paper ... So everyone will know ... That there's more than their way of seeing, and more to life and the afterlife than dressing in white with a head wrapped in cloth, and making everyone read their book ... (192-93)

Grandmother's 'business' and her 'plan' for the young woman steer both their lives, and while the book belongs to the Grandmother it is the girl's actual quest. The grandmother's social position and roles and survival struggle within various hierarchies, especially colonial and class structures, is the nexus of the tale. The direct story-telling mode draws on the fabulist or magical elements of the grandmother's spirit world, juxtaposed with the Christian, and more specifically Catholic, systems and rituals of the convent located at the edge of the jungle. Ghostchasing is one of her skills, along with special potions and powers for revenge, from which she scratches out a living after her special role as servant in the rich man's palace is lost. The edifice that is the convent on the hill was once the foreign rich man's palace, and undergoes cataclysmic changes which mirror external social forces during the novel's unfolding course. The narrator's mother carries on the traditional relationship with the edifice, as washerwoman at the convent, a convert to Catholicism after years of grappling with the 'badluck demon'

The symbolism of the palace and the jungle also plays a major part in structuring the novel. The jungle encloses and secludes many images and forces, including spirits and

revolutionary guerillas, with whom the crocodile figure is associated in complex ways as the symbol of oppression, fury and liberation:

Unlike Grandmother my mother says the crocodile saying is nonsense: but she never says this where Grandmother can hear. The crocodile, my mother says, is a fantasy. Its power lies in the fury of its birth. (125)

This, compared with the nun's view:

The jungle and the city are filled with enemies which may be seen even in the light of day. They are filled with dangers that tangle their paths and streets and walkways, making their very air sharp. Pitfalls lurk around every tree and corner . . . a crocodile lounging behind a tree or under an archway, mesmerising young girls with his stare. Lifting his knife to rip their skirts . . . (151-52)

The boundary or edge of the jungle shifts in relation to historical events and periods. The role of mixed cultural tradition is demonstrated throughout and the impact of hybrid elements is explored; incompatible religions, different social rules and values, in which the Catholic is more repressive for the young woman, and the material wealth, splendour and mystery brought by the coloniser and his alluring but incorporeal 'lover' establishes the local relations of desire and rebellion. The competing forces are marked in the Grandmother's response:

That is part of Grandmother's plan. That is why I go there. 'What did they teach you today? Grandmother asks. 'Tell me what you learnt'. Grandmother wants to know their secrets, to rival the golden-edged books they chant from. She wants to know what they are. 'Did you find their origin?' she asks. 'Did you learn their rules?' (294)

The world of women, the inter-generational links and relationships is another formal, as well as thematic, feature of the novel, and the one which perhaps brings the novel most clearly into the arena of feminist interests. The knowledges, powers and traditions of women, as well as the real value and nature of 'story', are to be kept alive by the young narrator:

Convent girls must speak plainly and clearly until they get to the end. They must remember that the last word is not the true end. Every story has a meaning which can be applied to the lives of the convent girls. Only when they see this meaning does the story end . . . They must remember that these are only stories. That real life is full of inconsiderations, but here everything fits. (40-41)

Like Grandmother she doesn't want to get to the end. After my mother became a Christian the Christian future swallowed the alleys and passages of her life's stories as soon as they were lived. The Christian future gulped down my mother's past. There was no way behind her: she could only turn forwards never back. (274)

The Crocodile Fury to some extent also resists incorporation, resists a simple appropriation for an ethnic canon or a feminist canon because of its very 'difference'. It is not easily absorbed by current Western literary interests and taste for diversity. It has an integrity that resists a naive inclusiveness which dismisses the actual dynamics of 'difference'. The book's modes are not so readily translatable into recognizable Anglo

thematics, it is 'difficult', it is 'different', it opens out the 'other'.

I propose then that each of the three novels discussed demonstrates varied feminist perspectives and formal, experimental interests in a broadly post-humanist frame. 'Postmodernism' as a description, *per se*, does not do justice to the specific, sometimes materialist of ten social, tenor of these novels. And yet they all illustrate ways in which they partake quite consciously of the postmodern milieu of their construction.

The novels reveal varying degrees of engagement with issues about the relationship between language, representation and reality, and the role of experimentation in demonstrating the possibility for change, and of making space for something 'other' than the realistic detail of the status quo.

Desire, female agency and the exploration of language, form and genre are evident in *Crush* and most particularly in *Working Hot*. *The Crocodile Fury* also foregrounds female experience and agency, in its celebration of the Grandmother and of narrative, of writing cultural memory and 'different' traditions.

The question then remains as to how radical these textual and generic games and experiments may be with respect to feminist literary critiques of social and symbolic hierarchies and repression at the levels of gender, class, sexuality, national identity and race, and language itself. Agency may have a liberal humanist inflection or a more radical, post-humanist inflection. Are these new novels illustrating that post-humanism also incorporates post-feminism? I believe that these three novels show that this is not the case and that feminist interests can still be lively within postmodernism.

WORKS CITED

- Fallon, Mary. *Working Hot*. Melbourne: Sybylla, 1989.
 Walker, Brenda. *Crush*. West Fremantle: Fremantle Arts Centre Press, 1991.
 Yahp, Beth. *The Crocodile Fury*. North Ryde: Angus & Robertson, 1992.