

BEYOND THE VERANDAH: ELIZABETH JOLLEY'S *THE ORCHARD THIEVES* AND DRUSILLA MODJESKA'S *THE ORCHARD*

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In this paper I propose to examine in part various constructions of the verandah in some late nineteenth century Australian visual and written texts, and their subsequent contemporary interpretations.¹ I will explore the idea that this space was not only a place to read, sew, talk or store goods; it was inscribed with discourses of nationalism, national identity and gender that enjoyed widespread cultural currency at the time. Accounts of this period by influential commentators such as Vance Palmer and Russel Ward during the 1950s in particular contributed to the construction and consolidation of the white, masculine 'noble bushman' as the pervasive national identity of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. This masculine identity was linked with the idea of a 'bush ethos', a national spirit reflected in the literary culture of the time which represented for these critics among many others the unique *Geist* of the Australian land and its people. According to Palmer, this ethos was far removed from the genre of romance that enjoyed widespread popularity in Australia and elsewhere during the late nineteenth century, the period from which he argued that the foundations of a national culture emerged. In 1905 he wrote that:

Ada Cambridge is an English woman who writes agreeable novels with Australia for background. It is hardly worthwhile seriously considering her books, as they make no pretence to being literature. Mrs Campbell Praed is a clever woman with a genuine talent for romance, but she is not in harmony with the spirit of her country, and her books about Australia are perhaps her least successful from an artistic point of view (Palmer 169).

Ada Cambridge, Rosa Praed, Catherine Martin and 'Tasma' (Jessie Huybers Couvreur) among many women writers worked within the popular romance genres during the late nineteenth century. Their works came to be regarded by various critics however as inferior to texts such as those by Henry Lawson which were understood to reflect the masculine *Geist* of the nation. Susan Sheridan has suggested that the romance genre was denigrated as a consequence in part because of its construction by various discourses as a genre gendered or coded as feminine (Sheridan 36-68). Yet it was the romance genre Sheridan argues that empowered many women writers to address issues of national identity; it provided a space which suggested that women and men did not necessarily share similar experiences of the diverse processes and practices that informed the construction of a masculine national identity.

Recent feminist-informed research undertaken by Sheridan, Ann Curthoys and Marilyn Lake among many others, has acknowledged women's diverse experiences, resistances and contributions to those cultural, political, social and economic processes that shaped nationalist discourses and identities. Furthermore some contemporary rereadings of Australian cultural history have suggested the

existence of various although not unproblematic feminine national identities which are understood both to complement and challenge the authority commonly attributed to the masculine national identity. The 'Coming Woman' for instance has been coupled with the 'Coming Man' as signalling a new phase in Australian national identity around the turn of the century. For Louisa Lawson the 'Coming Woman' symbolised both the financial and intellectual independence she believed women should aspire to and challenged women's traditional duties, described by Lawson as; 'the meet-your-husband-with-a-smile platitude that is so old that it deserved to be superannuated' (Lawson 133). Melbourne artist and academic Bernice McPherson has suggested in a recent essay that during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries an alternate feminine national identity located on the verandah was textually constructed within popular art and literature (McPherson 67-80). An interest in the possibilities and problems of the verandah as a gendered site within a late nineteenth century context informs the first part of my discussion; the second section considers the role verandahs play in two contemporary texts, Elizabeth Jolley's *The Orchard Thieves* and Drusilla Modjeska's *The Orchard*.

Since British invasion the verandah has been a notable design feature of Australian architecture and hence is linked with European colonial expansion and exploitation. Although the 'origin' of the verandah is unknown, historians agree generally that verandahs were introduced into colonial Australia in the last decades of the eighteenth century by British officials who served in Caribbean, Indian, Mediterranean and North American settlements before they were posted to the colony of New South Wales (Baglin and Moffitt 6; Drew 7; Freeland 45; Hudson 70-71; Sumner 309). It was in country areas initially that the verandah was accepted widely and it was not until around 1830 that it became a common feature of both coastal and country architecture.

The verandah also achieved popularity in England during the nineteenth century despite the inappropriateness of its various designs for that country's climatic conditions. This suggests that factors other than climatic ones informed decisions to construct verandahs. Ray Sumner suggests for instance that although verandahs provided people with a sheltered and shaded space and assisted in cooling buildings, their apparently indiscriminate use on houses of all sizes and styles, and in all the Australian colonies was a response to fashion rather than need. He writes: 'The meanest of single-fronted, single-storey terraces in Sydney or Melbourne had its verandah, even when this faced south and made the house consequently colder and darker'. (Sumner 310). While fashion may have been one influential factor, the verandah was also built as a means of access and a meeting place. J.M. Freeland argues that country houses in particular were built one room wide so as to benefit from the cool evening breezes. Moving from one end of the house to the other entailed passing through each room and resulted in a considerable lack of privacy. In an effort to redress this problem, a verandah was built along one side of the house with doors from each room opening on to it (Freeland 45). This served not only to increase personal privacies within the house; the verandah provided also both physical protection from climatic conditions and a social space where people could meet, talk, sew, read, eat and sleep. As

demand for this space increased, verandahs were widened and often framed the four walls of a house; in some instances they were enclosed and used as extended living/sleeping areas. There were differences of course both between and within the various colonies but these perceived benefits of the verandah in all its forms along with stylistic 'fashions' led to it becoming a characteristic feature of Australian colonial architecture.

Perhaps not surprisingly, the verandah became a popular subject for Australian fiction and art. Fiona Giles has identified the verandah as an important space in many women's writings of the nineteenth century. She writes: 'The verandah extends the domestic into the social life; it is marginal to both, but through the fiction becomes central, mediating the private and public worlds, and breaking down the division between them' (Giles 1). Griselda Pollock has noted a similar use of the verandah, the balcony, the balustrade and the embankment in the visual texts of the Impressionist painters Berthe Morisot and Mary Cassatt, and suggests that these devices demarcate what she calls: 'the spaces of masculinity and of femininity inscribed at the level of both what spaces are open to men and women and what relation a man or woman has to that space and its occupants' (Pollock 62). Ethel Mills' short story 'A Box of Dead Roses' published in Giles' anthology of nineteenth century Australian women's writing, gestures towards this idea of gendered spaces and the different experiences women and men have of them within historical contexts. The story centres upon a woman who waits each evening on the verandah for her husband to return home from work, until one night she witnesses him kissing a housemaid. Rather than causing her great despair however, this 'verandah tragedy' as one of the characters calls it, awakens her to the beauty, knowledge and power she possesses and leads her to discard her role as the waiting wife.

This tale is told in part by an old woman sitting on a verandah. Mills writes that:

On sunny days she would have her chair moved on to the wide, vine-sheltered verandah. She liked to see what was going on; and she said that in Australia most things happened on verandahs. This particular one had been planned and built in early pioneering days, and had, no doubt, seen many ups and downs of varied incident (Mills 169).

The narrative implies this verandah is the one on which the 'verandah tragedy' took place and suggests that the old woman's story is in fact her own. Furthermore, this passage points not only to the colonial history of the verandah, the physical protection it provides and the social space it offers; it posits the verandah as a site from which women may observe the so-called public sphere they are understood historically to be excluded from. This is not to deny the work women performed outside the home and their active participations in political and cultural projects; rather it acknowledges the ideological discourses circulating during the late nineteenth century which positioned women ideally within the private domestic interior of the home. Within this context, to be positioned in a place which includes or provides access to these sexually dichotomised spaces

may seem to hold some potential power for women to contest these discursive and very often material constraints. Yet what must be realised is that during the late nineteenth century, the verandah was understood to be an extension of the private sphere gendered as feminine in the sense that some activities such as reading, letter writing and storytelling which conventionally took place inside the home could be performed on the verandah. Furthermore, enclosed verandahs were used often as guest rooms or living spaces and understood therefore to be part of the domestic domain (Freeland 47; McPherson 69,71-72).

In her text *My Australian Girlhood: Sketches and Impressions of Bush Life* Mrs Rosa Campbell Praed writes of verandah rooms leading off from the 'sitting-room and best bedroom', papered with pictures of a royal marriage 'in which the ladies wore large crinolines' (Praed 154). This is not to suggest that men did not inhabit verandahs; indeed chapter sixteen of Praed's sketch entitled 'Verandah Talk' traces the conversations of a group of men on a verandah discussing mining matters, prospecting trips, land clearing and 'troublesome Chinamen'. Within the context of this narrative however these men speak of the so-called public sphere in which they work; women characters in contrast are positioned on the verandah where they view these 'masculine' activities. The narrator recalls for instance how the mistress of Dugandine sat on her verandah of afternoons for fifty years and watched the free-selectors clear slowly the scrub and gum trees to make way for millet and maize (Praed 132). This suggests that women are understood not to participate or intervene actively in these transformations that take place beyond the verandah. Rather than reading this as a reinscription of traditional gender performances however, it could be seen to expose and examine the gendered divisioning of social space and the differing relations women and men have with these so-called feminine and masculine spheres. This is particularly important if those constructions and circulations of a feminine national identity located on the verandah are to be considered within their historical contexts.

Bernice McPherson has argued that during the late nineteenth century, a feminine national identity was posited as a complementary companion to the masculine characters of the bushman or pioneer which enjoyed widespread currency in both 'popular' and 'serious' texts at the time (McPherson 79). She cites, among others, an anonymous visual work printed as the cover of the *Illustrated Australian News*' 1883 Christmas supplement entitled 'The Story of Santa Claus', an engraving by John MacFarlane called 'An Australian Native Convention' printed also in a supplement of the aforementioned publication in 1892, Charles Hill's 1869 oil painting 'The Artist's Family' and Henry Kingsley's *The Recollections of Geoffrey Hamlyn* published in 1859 as by no means isolated examples of the ways in which discourses of gender and nation intersected to construct a feminine national identity located spatially on the verandah. This was often done by conjoining images or descriptions of native flora, fauna and landscape with representations of women reclining or sitting on verandahs either alone or with family members and engaged in those so-called 'feminine pursuits' I have referred to previously. While this discursive construct may now appear to challenge the idea that the bushman was representative of the *Geist* referred to by Palmer, it must be recognised that this particular feminine identity was understood

during the period to complement rather than confront the masculine national identity (McPherson 79). Furthermore such representations reinforced conventional notions of femininity at a time when women such as Louisa Lawson, Catherine Helen Spence, Miles Franklin and Vida Goldstein among many others were questioning by various means these very assumptions. It is possible however to complicate the idea of a female national identity as simply a feminine counterpart to the masculine figure if it is read as emphasising the different experiences of women and men with relation to social spaces, practices and processes.

Women's experience of the verandah may therefore be seen as a complex one; it offers them the opportunity to view the so-called public world as Ethel Mills' story and Rosa Praed's sketch both demonstrate, yet they in turn may be observed. The problems and possibilities for women of seeing and being seen inform Drusilla Modjeska's *The Orchard*, and it is the verandah in this text that provides in part a space for the exploration of these ideas.

In *The Orchard* the verandah on Ettie's property is constructed as a place which deliberately calls into question the notions of spatial boundaries and imaginative borders. It is located physically, the narrator writes; 'between the soft interior of the house and the deep descent of the cliff' (Modjeska 158) and is understood as an inclusive and indeterminate site: 'Neither in nor out, it holds both possibilities and excludes neither' (Modjeska 12). This verandah is occupied primarily, although not exclusively by women characters and provides a place to read and reflect, to talk and tell stories. It offers protection from climatic conditions also but perhaps more importantly, the verandah in Modjeska's text is posited as a shelter from that gaze which watches and monitors women's bodies and behaviours: from her position on the shaded yet open verandah, the narrator sees without being seen. The narrator develops a medical condition however which results in a temporary loss of this vision. It is an episode which encourages her to examine women's experiences of seeing and being seen, and the ways in which these gestures are negotiated to shape understandings of a female 'self'.

The verandah is a protective place for the narrator while she recovers this vision. She writes: 'For several weeks I lay on that verandah, some days rugged up against the mist that threatened to suck us down into the arms of the trees, or against the wind that whooped up the valley; on other days my wintry skin welcomed the sun' (Modjeska 149). This refuge is a temporary one however. Every day Ettie coaxes the narrator to move beyond the verandah, taking small steps towards the garden, the valley and the work and relationships she had left abruptly behind her.

The grandmother in Elizabeth Jolley's *The Orchard Thieves* also takes small careful steps as she follows the path along the foot of a small cliff searching for her eldest daughter who is enduring her birthday silent and alone near the river bank. Jolley's text reads as one of the tales the grandmother tells her grandsons while sitting on a rug on the lawn in her shaded garden. Written in the style of the German novella, the characters are made known only by their position within the family. The grandmother lives with the eldest sister in a house with a wide

verandah which overlooks an orchard ripe with plums, and it is to this setting that the middle sister returns from England, refusing to speak of her past and her pregnancy. Her disruptive presence, together with a desire shared by the youngest sister and her husband that the grandmother sell her land and give each daughter a one-third share of the sale price, contributes to the increasing conflict and tension between family members.

It is on the verandah that the sisters and the husband discuss the possibility of selling the paddock of prime land for a good price and the inevitability of the grandmother's death. According to the middle sister; 'Mother ought to be in a retirement village with bowls and morning teas and games, you know, bingo and square dancing, not to dance herself, of course, just to watch, I mean' (Jolley 92). The grandmother overhears the conversation and is upset and disturbed by what she learns. She is unable to turn away her desperate and depressed middle daughter however and what follows is a story of trust and reconciliation told in part through the legend of Ceres and enacted by the grandmother and the middle daughter.

The text concludes with a family breakfast on the verandah and it is here, the grandmother realises, that tensions and ambiguities are held and played out:

[The verandah] was the place where that little art which is family life is practised, where great battles take place and the linings of the garment, which is the human body, are exposed but even then, the soul, if such a word can be used, is not completely revealed ... The verandah, she reminded herself, was a place of overhearing and it could be the place for reconciliation (Jolley 133).

The verandah in *The Orchard Thieves* is a space which accommodates both conflict and compromise, revelation and concealment. It is a place interwoven with the scripts of family life and their predominantly female players; similarly, the verandah in *The Orchard* is utilised primarily by women. In this sense, the verandahs in these texts can be understood as gender-encoded social spaces in a way similar to the construction of the verandah in various late nineteenth century texts. Unlike the female figures in these earlier texts however, the women characters in *The Orchard Thieves* and *The Orchard* are not 'confined' to the verandah. That is not to suggest that the gendering of this spatial and social space by various late nineteenth century texts was necessarily a restrictive gesture; I have begun to address above the problems and potentials this shift presents for women traditionally positioned within the domestic interior of the home. The verandahs in the contemporary texts however are places for women to pause as they traverse 'the public' and 'the private', houses and gardens, countries and continents. They are spaces seen to hold the possibility of blurring binaries and boundaries, yet they are also linked historically with women's specific knowledges of the social world. The women in *The Orchard Thieves* and *The Orchard* seek to expand and explore these experiences by moving beyond the verandah, yet it is a place to which they can return.

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Endnotes

1. This paper is concerned with the idea of the verandah as a gendered site. It must be noted also however that the verandah functioned historically as a space which both delineated class boundaries and offered a space in which members of different classes met. For example, it was on the verandah that farm workers often met their employers to receive instructions and wages, yet it was not a space in which equal power relations could be established.