

Deregulating the Critical Economy: Theory and Australian Literary Criticism in the 1980s

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If we were to think about how to write a history of the reception of theory in Australian literary criticism in the 1980s, we might begin by telling the story of a radical break with the past, of a generational change – even, perhaps, of a revolution. The hostility which attended the publication of the first *Oxford History of Australian Literature* in 1981 was certainly indicative of such a break. For John Docker, the attacks on Leonie Kramer and her contributors – all from the Sydney English Department – were proof that the ‘metaphysical orthodoxy’ of the 1960s was in crisis and that many younger members of the critical profession were dissatisfied with the assumptions of that orthodoxy. The title of Docker’s review, ‘Leonie Kramer in the Prison House of Criticism’, and the allegory around which it is constructed, with Kramer as the commandant of a ‘fortress criticism’ under siege, invoke the idea of historic, revolutionary change, an Australian storming of the Bastille, in which the younger generation cast off the critical principles of the Cold War generation.

Writing in 1987, in a review of Graeme Turner’s *National Fictions* (1986), David Carter used a very different language to describe the reception of theory in Australia. Carter argues that

The implications of the central, indeed orthodox, insights of structuralist and post-structuralist thinking have not yet made any ripples in the mainstream of *Australian* literary criticism of *Australian* literature. Articles bursting with theory might break the surface from time to time but they flop back into the stream and are swept along by its strong current (though there are rumours of a whole school approaching). (237)

There is certainly implicit here the notion of temporality, of history as the chronological displacement of one ‘school’ by another. But what interests me is not the temporal so much as the spatial metaphor. Carter’s deliberate emphasis – ‘the *Australian* literary criticism of *Australian* literature’ – implicitly conceives of Australian literary criticism as occupying a particular discursive and institutional *space*, a space with its own established protocols and rules of regulation – the ‘mainstream’ that is disturbed from time to time by irruptions from elsewhere. Taking up this spatial metaphor, we might return to Docker’s account of a temporal suc-

cession. If Docker could foresee the imminent downfall of 'fortress criticism', what new forces were at work *outside* its sandstone gothic walls? And what was the ground of Docker's own critique at the time? Docker ends his book *In a Critical Condition* (1984) by ridiculing Roland Barthes's Australian disciples for perpetuating colonialism through the importation of French theory. His account of structuralism was in some ways inaccurate. But what is significant is that in 1984, unlike many of his contemporaries, Docker did not look to this body of imported theory as the ground from which to mount his critique of orthodoxies in Australian literary criticism. Docker, after all, was himself inside the 'fortress'.

In thinking about the reception of theory in Australian literary criticism in the 1980s, we are therefore drawn inevitably into using spatial metaphors. By 1981, Aust. Lit. crit. was a powerful discourse with its own rhetorical protocols, its own rules of regulation, and its own institutional sites. These included a chair (established at Sydney University in 1963), the established canon and curriculum (still largely derived from the New Critical ascendancy of the 1960s), a number of specialist journals (including *Australian Literary Studies* and *Southerly*), and the peak professional body, the Association for the Study of Australian Literature (ASAL), established in 1977. Carter's suggestive metaphor of 'ripples in the mainstream of *Australian* literary criticism of *Australian* literature' invites us to think of the history of this period in spatial terms, as the problem of how a discourse regulates itself through the idea of an inside and an outside; how it seeks to renew itself by certain selected, even fashionable, importations from 'outside'. That outside defines itself in numerous ways: through the different intellectual provenance of its personnel, their different institutional positions, the unique profiles of the conferences at which they present papers and the journals in which they publish, and in the rhetorical protocols they deploy.

To understand the moment of 1981 it is therefore necessary to place the *Oxford History* not only in relation to other examples of Australian literary criticism before and since, but also in relation to intellectual developments taking place *outside* that discursive space which nonetheless disturbed its calmly flowing stream. One such event was the Foreign Bodies Conference: Semiotics in/and Australia, held in Sydney in 1981. Speakers at the conference from the disciplines of history, politics, philosophy and modern languages deployed structuralist theory as a corrosive oppositional discourse directed at what they saw as inward-looking nationalist traditions in both literary and historical studies. In her paper, 'Import Rhetoric', Meaghan Morris considers the effect imported theory was having on discourses that positioned themselves 'inside' Australia. Cultural importation, she argues, promotes a kind of 'speech impediment' whose sign is an anxiety about the use of spatial terms like here and there, them and us, foreign and Australian. Morris goes on to identify two different modes of import rhetoric: the first is concerned simply with the problem of how to speak here and now; how to use imported theories to speak in and about Australia in an increasingly international public sphere. But the second, which she terms 'cultural nationalist writing', reacts negatively to the threat of importation, nostalgically projecting the fullness of a national space that is

prone to infection from the foreign and impure. Morris observes that 'in this type of writing, a lot depends on solidarity ... [on the national culture] ... which has to be invented ... [and] on the call for ... speakers [to] identify themselves, [to] take a position in a struggle' (127).

Morris's prescient essay on import rhetoric has the potential to raise some extremely challenging questions about the relation between literary criticism and nationalism in Australia during the 1980s. In applying this model to examples of Australian literary criticism we might ask, what rhetorical protocols do they employ? How do critics and reviewers define their professional identities *spatially* in relation to import rhetoric and to a national tradition? Are these essays examples of 'Australian writing', betraying a nationalist anxiety about 'source, origin, identity and authenticity', or are they instead trying to find 'a way to speak ... here and now' in a globalised, deregulated critical economy?

Against the background of landmark events like the Foreign Bodies Conference of 1981 and the Futur*Fall Conference of 1984, where structuralism and post-structuralism were positioned as oppositional discourses, the institutions concerned with the circulation of Australian literary criticism can be seen to have deflected and weakened this corrosive project, which was taking place 'outside' Australian literary criticism. The journal *Australian Literary Studies*, for example, was founded by L.T. Hergenhan at the University of Tasmania in Hobart in 1963, moving with Hergenhan to the University of Queensland in 1975. Since its inception it has been the leading journal publishing *Australian* criticism of *Australian* literature, a profile confirmed by its affiliation with the Association for the Study of Australian Literature, with which it now shares a formal subscription agreement. When 'theory' first announced its presence in *Australian Literary Studies* around 1980 it was Anglo-American feminism that displayed the most determined intention to question the nationalist paradigm: an early example is Frances McInherney's article, 'Miles Franklin, *My Brilliant Career*, and the Female Literary Tradition' (*ALS* May 1980). By contrast, structuralist readings, when they did emerge, tended to be positioned as a supplement to, or enhancement of, the nationalist tradition, rather than as a threat to it from the outside. The major articles and books of the 1980s which employ imported theory applied it to canonical works and canonical themes, demonstrating how to do things with structuralism. It might even be said that these early structuralist readings had anxiously to reconstitute the nationalist tradition at every moment as the very ground for their intervention. Examples include Douglas Jarvis's essay, 'Narrative Technique in Lawson' (*ALS* May 1980) and Avis G. McDonald's 'Rufus Dawes and Changing Narrative Perspectives in *His Natural Life*' (*ALS* May 1986). Jarvis's opening sentences, for example, naturalise structuralist narratology within the Australian tradition. A.A. Phillips's essay 'The Craftsmanship of Lawson' is cited at the outset in a filiative way, so that Phillips's argument for and analysis of narrative 'craftsmanship' is made to prefigure the kinds of narratological insights Jarvis derives, via Culler, from the linguistics of Saussure.

Graeme Turner's essay 'Mateship, Individualism and the Production of Character in Australian Fiction' (*ALS* October 1984) was one of the most cogent of these

early encounters between the conventional repertoire of Aust. Lit. texts, the critical heritage surrounding those texts, and some of the most important structuralist work then becoming more widely known in Australia: Roland Barthes's 'Introduction to the Structural Analysis of Narratives' (translated in 1977 by Stephen Heath in *Image-Music-Text*), Culler's *Structuralist Poetics* (1975) and Seymour Chatman's *Story and Discourse* (1978). Nevertheless, even here the nationalist tradition has the capacity not only to absorb structuralist methodology, but to require a demonstration of how it has been anticipated by the domestic tradition. Turner naturalises structuralism's notorious theory of the de-centred subject as a French version of mateship. 'The literary convention of mateship', he explains, 'depends upon a representation of character which is ideologically opposed to the individual' (447). Or, as Jonathon Culler puts it in *Structuralist Poetics*, 'the general ethos of structuralism runs counter to the notions of individuality and rich psychological coherence ...' (qtd in Turner 448). Ironically, then, structuralist theories of character are made palatable by showing that they have long been 'a feature of the Australian tradition', a tradition which the new structuralist criticism replicates as its primary site of engagement – and incorporation – in the Australian context.

Turner's book *National Fictions: Literature, Film and the Construction of Australian Narrative* (1986) was a landmark work, announcing theory's belated arrival in the Australian criticism of Australian literature. Yet it perfectly demonstrates how theory was inflected by the very discourse from which it appeared to break. Reviewing *National Fictions for Australian Literary Studies* in October 1987, David Carter was almost alone in grasping this feature of the book. He begins by observing that the book 'is written both against and adjacent to literary criticism'. The fact that it is written 'against' that tradition seemed obvious. As Carter rightly observes, 'it is the first monograph treating canonical Australian narratives to find its context unavoidably defined, its very subject constituted, by the crossed lines of structuralism, semiotics, theories of discourse and Marxist cultural theory' (237). But Carter is right, too, when he notices that in the same moment that it makes 'its theoretical break with mainstream Australian literary criticism ... the book argues its case through orthodox accounts of a literary tradition' (239). Like critics in *ALS* before him, Turner applied theory by first rediscovering the classical issues of Australian literary criticism in the essays of A.A. Phillips, H.P. Heseltine and Brian Kiernan. His book was 'designed as an application of theory', but the context in which it is to be applied – that part of it, at least, that deals with Australian fiction, rather than Australian film – is pre-determined by a still-powerful tradition that chooses the texts Turner will examine and the kinds of themes he will find in them. Not the least is the idea of an Australian tradition itself, which, outside Australian literary criticism, had been vigorously attacked in the earliest applications of structuralism to Australian scholarship.

There was also a problem with the assumed readership. In the absence of a theoretically literate audience for this kind of work, Turner was not able to assume his readership. Carter observes, 'What's puzzling, then, in such a theoretically self-conscious work, is what might be called the suppression of theory in the accounts

of individual texts ... This effect has something to do with the problem of disparate readerships, in particular, the address to a theoretical lowest common denominator (literary criticism) through *thémè* (240). Thus many of the old terms remain effectively in place: the idea of nation, of a national tradition and a national character or type expressed through narrative and understandable though thematic analysis of canonical works.

In the 1980s, then, the cult of theoretical expertise continued to fracture the public sphere for Aust. Lit. crit. Conscious of 'importing' structuralist terminology into this foreign space, critics were uncertain about whether their readers were theoretically literate. The critics' uncertainty is confirmed by the range of positions taken by reviewers. Both in terms of their institutional locations and the rhetorical protocols of their writing, reviewers in the 1980s might be inside or outside Australian literature, and also inside or outside the new theory. They may pose as major importers of theory (like Graeme Turner, Andrew Taylor and Kay Schaffer), be hostile to theory (like Harry Heseltine and Fay Zwicky), or be informed but reserved. Both Kevin Hart and Imre Salusinszky, for example, begin their reviews of Andrew Taylor's *Reading Australian Poetry* (1987) with panoptical statements which position them as experts in an international context from which they can make magisterial pronouncements on the state of Aust. Lit. crit. From this perspective it can be seen that 'the history of Australian criticism is the history of Anglo-American criticism - slightly skewed ... and of local interest only' (Hart 114). Labourers in this small field must turn to world literature as a source of value-adding theories. Hart explains that '*Theories* ... usually arise in cultural centres then drift towards the margins' (114). He distinguishes between Australian *writing*, which is of world interest, and Australian literary *criticism*, which is currently 'in a poor state, cautious, unimaginative and derivative'. To be revitalised it must look toward the centre, to the internationally significant 'critics of the moment'. As it happens, these are mostly French-speaking, and Hart already knows their work, particularly Derrida's, very well; so well in fact, that while approving Taylor's workmanlike attempts to reinvigorate local criticism, he is condescending about Taylor's ability to do so, dismissing his theoretical introduction as 'a rattle-bag of points, mostly derived from Saussure ... - a New Accents in miniature' (115).

In a long double review of Robert Sellick's edited collection of essays *Gwen Harwood* (1987) and Andrew Taylor's *Reading Australian Poetry* (1987) (*ALS* May 1988), Mark McLeod reflects on the gap between the old and new orthodoxies. McLeod characterises the positions available in the field through nostalgic anecdotes about conference behaviour of ASAL delegates. The nationalist discourse of that Aust. Lit. tradition is personified in the figure of Les A. Murray at a conference at Augsburg in 1978: 'He seemed to speak for all the Australian delegates in his striped jumper and cords as he leaned back comfortably against a pillar which might have been a tree, and politely took it all in' (393). McLeod reads the Sellick collection into this tradition: 'Reading CRNLE's collection of papers on Gwen Harwood ... I have a comfortable sense of opening the known past ... From the

outset it's clear that the mood of the occasion will be supportive. Everyone's going to get along' (394).

In opening Andrew Taylor's *Reading Australian Poetry*, McLeod turns the cusp to register the new impulses of theory, and his response is highly equivocal. McLeod characterises Taylor's style as not simply registering the new theoretical discourses, but as flaunting them – and he suspects that he might be on the verge of exposing something fishy. Already, he suggests, structuralism has set itself up as a new orthodoxy. The name of the game for the reviewer is to catch Taylor out at being pretentious, using structuralist ideas while not really understanding them. The reviewer's own position in this game is potentially compromising. His ability to recognise that one book belongs to the past because it has no theory and another to the present because it has theory, stems from the reviewer's claim to know theory. But because he ridicules Taylor for cow-towing to a new orthodoxy, it would not be fashionable for McLeod to place himself too firmly or unequivocally within the structuralist camp. This complicated series of positionings is a way of claiming cultural capital. Theory has displaced the old non-competitive atmosphere of Aust. Lit. conferences, where everyone was supportive and got along. Now, after theory, to be of the present a reviewer must display theoretical literacy while trying to avoid being caught wearing the emperor's new clothes.

By way of conclusion, I'll try to sum up the main features of theory's – or at least of structuralism's – reception in Australian literary criticism in the 1980s. There is in the criticism and reviewing of the period a clear and often painful generation gap, before and after theory, with the reception of the *Oxford History* in 1981 frequently invoked as a watershed moment. John Docker and David Carter characterised this as an attempt to cast off the aesthetics and methods of the Cold War generation. The heat of the conflict also had something to do with theory's role in providing cultural capital for a new generation of academics in an increasingly difficult job market during the final, austere years of the Fraser coalition government, when the so-called Lynch razor gang turned its attention to tertiary education.

But the changes affecting Aust. Lit. crit. were as much to do with the importing of new ideas from outside its discursive and institutional space as they were with generational succession. Landmark conferences such as the Foreign Bodies and Futur*Fall conferences, and publications such as *Arena*, *Intervention*, *GLP*, and *Local Consumption* signalled well before theory's arrival in Aust. Lit. crit. that changes were taking place outside. Not surprisingly, when theory did arrive it fragmented the profession, and this was immediately reflected in a rhetorical uncertainty about the readership for literary criticism, a loss of certainty about a coherent public sphere for Aust. Lit. crit. Critics and reviewers using theory could not be confident that their readers spoke the same language. Lyn McCredden, in her review of Taylor's book, and David Carter in his review of Turner's, both commented on this uncertainty, McCredden asking, 'just how well-known and well-embraced by Australian critics are Derrida's ideas, complex as they seem and are? This unsureness ripples through Taylor's work' (94). Despite the appearance of radical change, however, theory was strongly naturalised by the existing canon

and themes of Aust. Lit. crit. As Imre Salusinszky said of Taylor's book, 'Taylor is innovative in terms of his reading, conservative in terms of the tradition he decides to read' (13).

Economic metaphors of value-adding and importing pervade the criticism of the period, and I want finally to raise some questions about the new theory and its relation to the dominant economic philosophy of the 1980s, economic rationalism. In her book *Ecstasy and Economics* (1992), Meaghan Morris describes economic rationalism as the ideology by which Australian society was adjusted by the Hawke-Keating Labor governments in accordance with the demands of a restructuring global capitalism. The relationship between this economic deregulation and the deregulation of the humanities academy – its opening up to imported theory – is implicit rather than explicit in Morris's discussion. For Morris, there is no question of protectionism, for in a post-colonial culture there is no immanent national identity to protect. Rather, the question is how to work in such a context 'without inventing a nostalgia for an unchanging, introverted (and imaginary) "national" culture' (97).

While Morris is more comfortable with imported than local languages, for many critics working inside Aust. Lit. crit, the 'historical discourses on Australian culture' were the mother tongue and transnational theory the second language. And as Graeme Turner warns, there are good reasons to defend the category of the national as protection against certain *practical* consequences of globalisation, economic as well as theoretical (Turner, 'Dilemmas'). The *Australian Journal of Cultural Studies*, for example, which he founded in 1983 as a major conduit for imported theory, certainly allowed Australian critics to engage in international debates. But in 1987 the *AJCS* was taken over by Methuen and from that time has been published abroad. It is now difficult to buy it in Australia, and its character and content have certainly changed. Most recently, the multinational distributor Carfax International have taken over, or have made take over bids on, a number of Australian journals, including the *Journal of Australian Studies*. What would be the consequences for such journals, with their distinctive identities and localised networks of production, if production were to shift off shore?

Despite the numerous economic metaphors that she applies to cultural studies, Morris does not directly confront the possible relationship between these transnational theories and the consequences of the 1980s 'economic rationalism'. On economic rationalism, she writes,

I would see the 'economic literacy' campaigns of the Hawke-Keating regime as promising economic salvation ... by means of an *internationalist* discourse on Australia's weak position in a changing world economy – and on the need for a well-informed citizenry to endorse the modernizing actions taken by the state on our behalf. This was a politics of consent depending ... on a continual assertion of the magic of expertise – on eroticized images of teaching, learning, (controlled) debate, (limited) consultation, and exquisite mastery of data. (*Ecstasy* 76)

These descriptors of economic rationalism have an alarming resemblance to theory's impact on Aust. Lit. crit. in the 1980s. Both arrived by importation in the late seventies and early eighties; both were internationalist discourses, displacing prior nationalist discourses; both implied that the nationalist position was 'weak' (economically/intellectually) in relation to modernity; both held out the utilitarian promise of usefulness (economic/interpretive productivity); and both were promoted by the 'magic of expertise', the 'exquisite mastery of data', often dividing Australian critics along generational lines. To explore these questions further we would need to connect developments in literary theory to a detailed account of the way in which successive Federal governments have sought radically to reform the academy during the 1980s and 1990s. We would need to ask, what relation might there be between the importing of theory, with its cult of expertise, and the Dawkins reforms, which, among other things, helped to produce a new humanities reshaped in the image of corporate culture and technocratic expertise.

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