

Recovering Australian Popular Fiction: towards the end of Australian literature

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‘Australian Literature’, a category once crucial to the proper recognition of a national cultural identity, now seems increasingly fragile and fatigued. The gains that accompanied the late colonial invention of this category are refigured as limitations these days; it is spoken for either defensively or abjectly, as if it is condemned always to recognise what it is *not*. Over the last 25 years or so, ‘Aust.Lit.’ has mainly responded to this by widening its net. The subsequent uneven dismantlings of the Australian literary canon – established early on but consolidated in the 1950s (mostly by excluding work from the previous two decades) and remaining intact at least through to the early 1970s – have had two major effects. They have enabled literary historians to recover a range of otherwise ignored writers from the past (in particular, women and some working class writers), and have encouraged literary commentators on the present to attend to what Paul Salzman and I back in 1989 called ‘the new diversity’ in Australian fiction: looking at women writers again, as well as migrant or diasporic writers, gay and lesbian writing, Aboriginal writing, and so on, all in the name of inclusivity (see Gelder and Salzman 1989). At the same time, the category of ‘Aust.Lit.’ itself – troubled in so many ways – continues to dominate local literary identification. *The Oxford Literary History of Australia* (1998) and the more recent Cambridge University Press literary history edited by Elizabeth Webby each follow the contemporary trend of thickening up the national literary field, but only to ensure that the concept of a national literature remains intact. There have been no accompanying studies that situate national literary production in broader contexts – the immediate vicinity of the Asian-Pacific rim, for example – in the way that the Caribbean, the eastern seaboard of the United States, Britain and West Africa have been super-regionalised by commentators like Paul Gilroy and Joseph Roach. In this transnational context of exchange and interchange (with Gilroy and Roach speaking not of particular nations but of, in their case, the Atlantic

rim, the 'black Atlantic', or the 'circum-Atlantic'), national cultural identity is always seen relationally within regional/global contexts (see Gilroy 1993 and Roach 1996). Under the prevailing sign of 'Aust.Lit.', however – with Frank Clune's call in 1945 for a 'Pacific Ocean Literature' now long forgotten (see Clune 1945) – this has not yet been allowed to happen.

Certainly, for all its earlier socialist inclinations, Australian literary studies has blissfully ignored Marx and Engels's comments in *The Communist Manifesto* on the increasing unsustainability of the national in the context of expanding markets and the 'cosmopolitan character' of production and consumption: 'In place of the old local and national seclusion and self-sufficiency, we have intercourse in every direction, universal interdependence of nations National one-sidedness and narrow-mindedness become more and more impossible, and from the numerous national and local literatures, there arises a world literature' (13). In fact, the history of Australian Literature can very well be read in terms of its struggle to form itself both within and against transnational or 'world literature' contexts – those contexts providing, as Franco Moretti has recently put it, 'a permanent intellectual challenge to national literatures' (68). This struggle has been spoken for recently in articles in the end-of-the-millennium issue of *Australian Literary Studies*, a journal that has itself both thickened the literary field (recovering minor Australian writers) while continuing to support a national canon. These articles each suggest ways of reanimating Australian literary studies – the critical literary practice – for the future, all under the rubric of 'new directions': Gillian Whitlock's 'Points of Departure' advocates 'an inter-cultural perspective' while urging us not 'to abandon the nation' (161); David Carter wants both to deconstruct national identity and 'constitute' it (that is, to be 'positive' about it) simultaneously (150); and Leigh Dale (the most Marxian of all here) offers a heady 'challenge' to 'Australian(ist)s' to abandon 'the isolation of Australian literature' and become 'a constitutive, rather than a reactive, part of global literary intellectual culture' (135). Each response continues to view the national defensively, speaking to it primarily through its neglect of the transnational or cross-cultural.

I would put myself in this context, too, by somewhat modestly suggesting – following Dipesh Chakrabarty – that we begin (all over again) to 'provincialise' Australian Literature (see Chakrabarty 2000). The irony of this point is not lost on me, of course: we know that 'Aust.Lit.' evolved as a category through its own provincial relations to the western European literary canon. But provincialism is not the same as provincialisation – a term which in this case would see Australian Literature de-consolidate itself across super-regional contexts (like the Asian-Pacific rim) as well as through 'world' or transnational contexts. In the latter case, this would involve turning more productively to Franco Moretti's own discipline of comparative literature – a discipline which has not been well received in Australia. It would also mean developing a more complicated set of relations between the national and what is often flatly called 'globalisation'. Usually, of course, the national has been seen defensively here, its 'uniqueness' (which took so long to lay claim to) in danger of dissolving away under the globalising logic of 'homogenisation'. We see

this, for example, in a recent polemic by Hilary McPhee called 'Who's Out There For Us', in *Australian Author*. This piece knows all about the limits of national identity in a world which increasingly functions transnationally. It retreats from this, however, by offering a more romantically conceived concept of the 'local' and the 'community'. This then supplies the thing that national literary culture needs in order to recognise itself – namely, its mistrust of globalisation. 'We need', McPhee says, 'a less pejorative way to think about the kind of provincialism that will ... help us to survive the blanding effects of globalism, that captures local difference ...' (23). Interestingly (although not untypically), the distinction between 'the blanding effects of globalism' and 'local difference' is then recast as a taken-for-granted distinction between literature and popular fiction. For McPhee, Bryce Courtney sits at the globalising 'end of the spectrum': he 'imagines his audience inclusively, not exclusively,' she says, 'as a non-book buying one – or one that finds most fiction too literary, too daunting ...' (20). Here, popular fiction is not only not literary, it is not even a 'book'. By contrast, for McPhee, Drusilla Modjeska is able to project an intimacy between herself and her readers which (although she sells overseas) remains utterly local: 'first and foremost', McPhee writes, speaking of *Stravinsky's Lunch* (1999), 'its imagined and actual audience is here' (21). The binary deployed in this article, then, links the local to literature and the global to popular fiction. It reminds us that the category of 'Australian Literature' in fact binds the two former features together as mutually strengthening: only literature is the proper carrier of 'local difference', and its properness rests upon the identification of its homogenising Other, the non-literary, the 'bland', the transnational: all of which are associated with (Australian: its 'Australian-ness' should probably remain in parenthesis) popular fiction.

In this context, we might see (Australian) popular fiction as, at least potentially, a 'permanent intellectual challenge' (in Moretti's words) to the 'one-sidedness and narrow-mindedness' (in Marx and Engels's words) of the category of 'Australian Literature'. As a teacher of popular fiction, I know just how incommensurable it is with literature; I know how easily it sits as literature's Other. Literature is creative; popular fiction is about production, sheer hard labour (think of Nat Gould churning out his four novels a year); it is industrial, not inspirational. Literature can claim genius; at best, popular fiction is ingenious. Literature is written to be read carefully, even studied; but popular fiction is to be consumed, 'processed'. Literature – even when its authors are published by Random House or Harper Collins or any other huge conglomerate in Australia – maintains a rhetorical distance from the world of commerce and the commodity form; while popular fiction sits happily right in the middle of the marketplace. Literature is serious, contemplative, unique, 'universal'; but popular fiction is entertaining, distracting, conventional, derivative, disposable: what Dorothy Green, who despised popular fiction, called 'pseudo, amusement-art' (179). Her subject here is Arthur Hoey Davis, 'Steele Rudd', whose increasing prosperity earned from writing is linked to his literary 'corruption', his derivative-ness. But of course, Green's most scathing remarks – all in the context of the revisions she was making at this time to her husband's history of Australian

Literature – are reserved for contemporary (Australian) popular fiction. Colleen McCullough's *The Thorn Birds* (1977) becomes iconic here, a novel which, in Green's review titled 'Porn Birds', is seen as American rather than Australian in its reader-orientation – a novel which does not belong here even though it is popular – and is therefore received hysterically as one of Hilary McPhee's 'non-books' that takes us 'further on the road to barbarism' (126).

Let me list some more contrasts typically drawn between literature and popular fiction. Literature is meandering, defiant and complex; popular fiction is supposed to follow a few simple 'formulas'. On the other hand, literature is 'understated' and evocative, while popular fiction is excessive, exaggerated. We might contrast Henry Lawson in this respect – whose fiction is described by *The Oxford Companion to Australian Literature* as 'deceptively lucid' and 'understated' (410) – with one of Lawson's forgotten contemporaries, the popular novelist Guy Boothby, whose novels were described in an obituary in the *Times* as 'frank sensationalism carried to its limits' (Loder 18). We can think of how Lawson was claimed for national literature, while Boothby – Adelaide-born, but a transnational expatriate for most of his writing life, publishing best-selling novels mostly in London and the United States – is utterly ignored. Almost no one in the field of Australian literary studies has ever written on Boothby – except for Robert Dixon. In *Writing the Colonial Adventure* (1995), Dixon discusses Boothby's 'Dr Nikola' novels, emphasising their 'motif of travel' (162): these are novels that move their characters back and forth from the metropolitan centre to colonial outposts, constantly undoing the category of the 'national' in the process. For Dixon, the combination of popular adventure/romance and transnationalism made writers like Boothby (as well as Rosa Praed and her 'occult' novels, Louis Becke and others) marginal to the nation: 'adventure/romance came to be placed in opposition to literary nationalism, and therefore aligned with the feminine, while realism came to be seen as masculine and egalitarian' (7). The placement of a localised literary realism at the heart of the Australian canon ensured the marginalisation of transnational popular fiction: Australian literary studies was simply critically unable to deal with it. Richard Nile has elaborated on these formations, drawing on Pierre Bourdieu – still rarely used in Australian literary criticism. A recent article focuses on Vance and Nettie Palmer and their 'nation-building' literary project, underwritten by a small coterie of like-minded writers including K.S. Prichard (an old school friend of Nettie Palmer's) who each worked towards 'the establishment of an Australian national aesthetic' (71). Palmer's derision for Ion Idriess provides a necessary base for all this, reminding us that literary identity (local, cultural) is always relative to, and exclusive of, the popular (global, economic). The relation works both ways, of course: Palmer thought Idriess's novels were 'distorted', while Idriess thought that Palmer was 'out of touch with reality' (141). Prichard's *Working Bullocks* (1926), although a 'commercial failure', 'became the commonly accepted literary marker for these writers of the Palmer acquaintance' (72) – a romance, certainly, but this generic feature is made both subordinate and respectable, as Pat Buckridge argues (in sympathy with the literary nationalist tradition), by being put to work 'in the service of an overriding

political purpose' (93). Here, of course, we have another distinction typical of the field: 'Aust.Lit.' is often claimed as politically progressive, while popular fiction by contrast is rendered conservative, even reactionary.

We can see some further attempts to open the literary field up to popular fiction in Australia in recent revisionist accounts of 'melodrama'. Elizabeth Webby broached the generic term in her essay 'Melodrama and the Melodramatic Imagination', in *The Penguin New Literary History of Australia* in 1988. She notes its origins in low British theatre and discusses a small range of Australian texts in relation to it, mostly from the late nineteenth century. She sees melodrama as the 'opposite' of romance, emphasising 'hatred and fear' and dealing with 'loss'; but since, as she suggests, 'Most Australian novels written between 1855 and 1915 would ... be classified as romance rather than melodrama' (215), the latter is recovered only in order to remain marginal to the literary field. Rolf Boldrewood's novels, for example, are claimed back from melodrama through their 'ambiguity': 'melodrama', she writes, 'abhors ambiguity' (215). Thus, although the '[d]isdain for melodrama' is noted in Australian literary criticism – which mostly prefers 'realism' – Webby's attachment to the literary makes it difficult to develop a more productive response to it. Marcus Clarke's *His Natural Life* is taken as 'the closest to being a work of melodrama' (219, 216): as if the genre cannot find its proper completion in Australian writing. Melodrama, she notes critically – reproducing Vance Palmer's view of Ion Idriess – is 'often far removed from the everyday'; this perception, right or wrong, is precisely why Australian literary criticism has treated it with 'disdain' for so long.

A decade later in *The Oxford Literary History of Australia*, Robert Dixon's much larger chapter on melodrama notes its use as a 'pejorative' term, but also identifies its 'relation to the vexed category of the "popular" – as a genre which may even mediate between popular fiction and literature (67). In fact, melodrama is taken as a kind of meta-genre, framing a wide range of popular literary forms: detective fiction, pastoral romance, invasion-scare literature, verse melodrama, village melodrama ('Steele Rudd'), women's occult novels, 'women's-point-of-view melodrama', convict tales, gothic tales, Pacific-trader fiction, and so on. Far from remaining marginal, melodrama is now all-inclusive. It is also seen not as 'far removed from the everyday', but rather, as central to the very fact of modernity – speaking directly to its 'abrasive disorder'. The turn-around from Webby's chapter to Dixon's, then, is quite profound; certainly Dixon is not so constrained by either the literary or the national. Indeed, he moves easily from the 'local' interests of Mary Fortune and Price Warung, to the transnational figures of Guy Boothby and Rosa Praed: each of these writers has a sanctioned place in the frame of Australian melodrama. Far from being a restrictive, 'unambiguous' generic concept, then, melodrama – dealing itself with 'proliferating identity crises' – provides one way of moving beyond the limits of the nation.

Dixon's chapter ends with a discussion of early cinema, citing Raymond Longford's disapproval of melodrama – which flows, instead, 'into our own age of television' (88). The problem here is that, as it becomes modern, melodrama is

sheared away from the literary altogether: *The Oxford Literary History of Australia* never mentions it again. Elsewhere, only one study of contemporary literary melodrama has appeared: Peter Pierce's book on Thomas Keneally, titled, in fact, *Australian Melodramas* (1995). But this book is more in tune with Webby's chapter than Dixon's, not least because while it casts Keneally as a melodramatic writer, it also wants to say that he finally transcends the genre to become 'literary'. Keneally is thus 'more complicated' than the 'standardfare' of 'popular melodrama'; his use of melodrama is 'serious' enough, in fact, for Pierce to cite Patrick White as his main influence and to compare him with Marx's favourite novelist, Balzac (171). In my view, this book doesn't quite know what to do with Keneally as a consequence. It wants Keneally to be a constituent part of 'Aust.Lit.' ('Keneally', he says, 'has long been the national melodramatist'; his novels are even seen as a 'great gift to Australia', [159, 177]), yet it also has to acknowledge that – after *The Chant of Jimmie Blacksmith* (1972) – very few of Keneally's novels have anything much to do with Australia. This leads Pierce to speak in quite a different way about Keneally's transnationalism, in a sentence that doesn't quite make sense: 'Keneally's melodramatic imagination is supra-national: it informs his notions of crucial shifts in world history in the twentieth century, and not only in Australia's' (167). Keneally is thus both national and supra-national, a part of 'Aust.Lit.' and a contributor (recalling Marx again) to 'world literature'. The casting of melodrama as both a marginal and all-inclusive genre further confuses matters here. At times, for Pierce, every discourse – including Australian literary studies itself – is 'melodramatic', a word which here simply gives expression to conflict or disagreement. On the other hand, it also describes excess and exaggeration, of the kind we saw with Boothby: Pierce speaks of Keneally's 'hyperbolic style', his 'superlative degree', his 'greediness' as a novelist, his 'extravagant language', and so on, running the risk of making Keneally seem utterly deranged (169, 170, 176). Melodrama thus raises, but does not solve, the binaries I've been tracing through here: whether a novelist is national or transnational, canonical or marginal (we might even say, normative or hysterical); and whether, in this case, a novelist is literary or a writer of popular fiction.

The contemporary critical interest in melodrama is symptomatic of the troubles that bedevil the category of 'Australian Literature'. Certainly, as it speaks both of its marginality and its inclusivity, melodrama functions as a refusal of literary canon-formation (which, by nature, is central – institutionally speaking – and exclusive). Yet – banished to the television after the 1920s in Robert Dixon's chapter – its capacity to unsettle the contemporary literary field may be somewhat curtailed. It can indeed seem as if the Australian literary canon has been dismantled; but as we move closer to the present, there are signs that it is becoming more coherent – and more restricted in its range – than ever before. Susan Lever's chapter on contemporary Australian fiction in *The Oxford Literary History of Australia* reproduces the inclusive range of *The New Diversity* a decade before – but closes by nominating 'three novels I believe to be 'great' in the old-fashioned sense': novels by White, Stead, and idiosyncratically (although he is characterised by, amongst other things, his disdain for the popular), David Foster (330). We can also see the restricted range of 'Aust.Lit.'

(my focus is on prose fiction) in current university subject offerings. In university handbooks White and Stead continue to dominate, along with Lawson and Henry Handel Richardson; epic social realism is maintained with Prichard and Xavier Herbert; and contemporary Australian fiction is almost exclusively represented through the novels of – not David Foster – but David Malouf, Peter Carey, Helen Garner and Elizabeth Jolley, with some interest in the highbrow 'dilettante' work of Robert Dessaix and Drusilla Modjeska. So much for melodrama: among all the mass and diversity of Australian prose fiction – and we ought to remember just how immense that output is and has been – this is about all that makes it into teaching subjects in the universities. Think also of the on-going canonisation of Australian Literature through well-funded, centralised editorial projects: Christopher Lee's commentary on the small number of 'little known nineteenth-century Australian literary fictions' that have come to constitute the extraordinarily expensive Australian Academy Editions series is a reminder of how the official sanctioning of a national literature can simultaneously underwrite its removal from the public sphere – directing it instead towards what Lee calls 'an affluent and discerning private readership' (127).

I would note, in closing, the recent work that has been done on Australian genre fiction, much of which continues to trouble the binary of the national/literary and the transnational/popular. Stephen Knight's 'thematic history' of Australian crime fiction, *Continent of Mystery* (1997) is one example, blaming the 'obscurity' of Australian crime fiction in Australian literary studies on the fact that so many crime novelists were indeed influenced and published transnationally – although it does try to recover the genre through a few invoked national paradigms (see Knight 1997). Knight's study is complemented by John Loder's *Australian Crime Fiction: A Bibliography 1857–1993* (1994), a book that includes many writers left out of *The Oxford Companion to Australian Literature* precisely because of their transnational identities. Similar work has been done on science fiction and fantasy, with Russell Blackford, Van Ikin and Sean McMullen's *Strange Constellations: A History of Australian Science Fiction* (1999) and Paul Collins' fascinating *The MUP Encyclopaedia of Australian Science Fiction and Fantasy* (1999). Science fiction and fantasy is even more marginal to Australian Literature than crime fiction, mentioned only once, belatedly and very briefly, in *The Oxford Literary History of Australia*. For Peter Nicholls, it remains 'a secret area of Australia's literary history' (viii) – although elsewhere, Nicholls has also noted that its transnationalism means that 'Australian sf is not an identifiable subject in any useful sense' ('Yesterday's Futures' 31). The readerships and processing and distribution venues for Australian crime fiction and science fiction and fantasy – as well as adventure thrillers, eco-romances, horror fiction, and so on – have also barely figured in Australian literary analysis. This means that such genre fiction, from this institutional perspective, is, like melodrama, popular and marginal simultaneously. It is worth contrasting this with two major studies of Australian reading habits which have appeared in the last decade, both of which link the transnational and the popular together as a way of moving beyond the limits of a nationally-conceived literature. In Martyn Lyons and Lucy Taska's neglected

Australian Readers Remember: An Oral History of Reading, 1890-1930 (1992), there are sixty-one interviewees, mostly born between 1910 and 1917. The authors' overall point is that an officially sanctioned Australian literary tradition 'obscures' a number of popular writers (like Ethel Turner, Mrs Aeneas Gunn, Nat Gould, Ion Idriess) who sit side-by-side on bookshelves with the British popular literature of Dickens, Scott, Thackeray and H.G. Wells (43, 51-7). More recently, Tony Bennett, Michael Emmison and John Frow's *Accounting for Tastes: Australian Everyday Cultures* (1999) gives us 2,756 interviewees, with a wide range of histories and identities. Here, the emphasis is almost completely transnational, with tastes for literature and popular fiction complicated across class, profession, age and gender differences. Their emphasis is precisely on the unsustainability of the national in transnational contexts: the category of 'Aust.Lit.' is therefore never mobilised, because it never inhabits the everyday – as they see it – in any real sense. Elizabeth Webby had thought that melodrama was 'far removed from the everyday'; both of these ARC-funded surveys return us to Ion Idriess's view of Vance Palmer, allowing us to ask, from the opposite point of the literary field, if the problem lies not with melodrama but with Australian literary studies itself.

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