

Something to Keep You Steady: Egalitarianism and Distinction from D. H. Lawrence to Christos Tsiolkas

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D. H. Lawrence's *Kangaroo* (1923) has often been seen as standing in the way of an appreciation of 'real' Australian literature. J. I. M. Stewart's notorious remark, when asked to lecture on Australian literature, that he could think of no Australian book worthy enough so would speak on *Kangaroo*, has come to represent the novel's overshadowing of the national literature. Andrew Moore, writing in the February 1995 issue of *Ramamim*, quotes Don Anderson as protesting against 'the slavish adulation of Lawrence', even as the same article quotes other academics eager to promote the conservation of *Wyewurk*, the cottage in Thirroul where Lawrence wrote the novel. Garry Shead's *Kangaroo* paintings reveal something of this ambivalence towards Lawrence, both fascinated by his Australian sojourn and satirising that fascination.

Lawrence clearly felt Australia was boring, insipid, wanting in moment. It lacked what Pierre Bourdieu has termed 'cultural capital'. *Kangaroo*, indeed, raises the entire issue of whether there was any 'distinction' in Australia. Whether Australia could accommodate the cultural contest, the *agon*, the way Europe could, was at the heart of Lawrence's strange decision to redeploy from Italy what was essentially the story of a European proto-fascist movement to the one place on earth where people were too contented for it to succeed. It is true that, as Robert Darroch, Bruce Steele, and Paul Eggert have shown, there were quasi-fascist tendencies within Australia—returned servicemen's groups that developed in the 1920s, and by the 1930s led to organised splinter parties. As Darroch suggests, figures such as Major General Charles Rosenthal and Colonel W. J. R. Scott could well have helped inspire the respective characters of *Kangaroo* himself and Jack Callcott, though one doubts they were models in a *roman à clef* sense. But the point is not that Australia did not have any fascist supporters but that Lawrence does not seem to think their aims are realizable there. And history bore Lawrence out. There was certainly no Australian equivalent even of a figure such as Sir Oswald Mosley, the eventual leader of the fascist 'New Party' in Britain, who was repeatedly re-elected to parliament in the UK in the 1920s and served at the height of the Depression in a Labour cabinet. Lawrence's sense that potential fascist agitation would find barren ground in Australia was clairvoyant; applied to any other European country except Britain, it would have been, in the early 1920s, over-optimistic. Darroch's researches perhaps preclude the assertion that *Kangaroo* was as uprooted from its 'proper' situation in Italy as Christina Stead's *The Man Who Loved Children* was from its 'proper' setting in Sydney to the United States. But the sense of transposition in both novels is apposite, especially as both Lawrence and Stead conducted these transpositions on an apparent metric of perceived significance—Lawrence from 'greater' to 'less', Stead the obverse. *Kangaroo* concerns not only the seeds of fascism in Australia but the circumstances of flattening, indistinct egalitarianism which would prevent both the rise of fascism to power as well as deter the rise of any other form of radicalism.

Lawrence did not see much of Australia. He kept to his cottage in the unglamorous seaside town of Thirroul and wrote a book that, though set in the country was, at least arguably, not deeply coloured by it. But he saw enough of Australia to see that it did not seem to resonate on the world stage. What people, both the establishment and the malcontents, were striving for in Europe, was power; and power, both the exercise of it and the desire for it, seemed to be absent in Australia. As Laura Frost puts it, ‘the democratic rejection of authority and hierarchy is complete in this Australia, embodying all the flaws of democracy’ (Frost 49).

To understand what Lawrence missed in Australia, one has to meditate on the idea written about so splendidly by Patrick Morgan a quarter-century ago—that of ‘getting away from it all’. Daniel Boorstin observed that it was not so much the idea of fleeing persecution in Europe that animated the Puritans and the Quakers to come to this continent, but the desire to hold sway in a new land, to build Zion *on their own terms*. Morgan’s phrase ‘getting away from it all’ suggests the obverse may be true in Australia. The impulse of settlement and Anglo-Celtic migration may have been imperialistic in racial terms, but in strictly intra-European terms it was almost inconceivably anti-hegemonic. This touchstone from *Kangaroo* is in line with these speculations by Somers in his dialogue with Jaz in Chapter IV, ‘Jack and Jaz’:

‘The bulk of Australians don’t care about Australia—that is, you say they don’t. And why don’t they? Because they care about nothing at all, neither in earth below or heaven above. They just blankly don’t care about anything, and they live in defiance, a sort of slovenly defiance of care of any sort, human or inhuman, good or bad.’ (63)

This refers to the context of the postwar situation in Europe. The tensions and rampant social discontent prevalent in Europe at the time make people care, one way or another. Whereas the unruffled placidity of Australia, and potential fireworks calmed by the ‘light of the Southern Sea, next the Antarctic’ (51) to which *Kangaroo* makes so telling a reference, quells any incipient caring, smoothes it down.

Lawrence’s protagonist feels he cannot be at home in Australia. This is not the colonial Gothic unease, the Clarcean ‘weird melancholy’, haunted by the strangeness of the flora and fauna and the suppressed acknowledgement of the Indigenous people, characteristic of so much nineteenth-century Australian literature. Australia is inferior to Europe, not because it is less antiquated (in European terms) or dignified, but because it is less interesting, less goes on there, it is a place, to use the title of Lawrence’s first chapter, to rest in. The conjured spectre of an Australian fascism at least puts Australia in the news. But the ‘implied author’ of *Kangaroo* does not go to Australia with hope of finding a new world, and this paucity of hope is confirmed once his protagonist gets there. Indeed, there is a nostalgia for England in the spring that would make Robert Browning blush, though Browning, Lawrence might contend, was speaking only from Italy.

Lawrence was not one of those writers who went to Australia to seek out a more interesting life, to undertake adventure, to be challenged. Many people went to Australia to seek a *less* interesting life—a good many refugees or migrants had more than enough of an interesting life in their former countries. Lawrence finds an uninteresting Australia, and does not set out to find broader, more illuminated vistas. His protagonist inwardly agonises, ‘But, oh, what did he care about it all?’ (20) and mourns that ‘In Australia, the need for authority was a dead letter’ (22). In Europe,

authority was not a dead letter, and that is why wars flared, social movements erupted, ignorant armies clashed there by night. Many writers from countries all over the world torn by ethnic or political divisiveness have come to Australia to escape this level of newsworthiness. Lawrence, nonetheless, is plaintive about its absence.

Lawrence's dirges on the blankness of Australian democracy have been seen as signalling both a colonial mentality and a nascent authoritarianism. Yet what *Kangaroo* seems to be arguing is that European hierarchy is preferable to Australian mateship not because its 'rule' is desirable but because it supplies something to be the object of struggle, a grid in which people in society can be assigned degrees; they can matter. It is not, in other words, the deference of distinction but the difference of distinction that is feared here, and it is not the classlessness of monotony but the monotony of classlessness that, in Australia, is the object of Lawrence's suspicion.

If outsiders have not cared about Australia, it may be because they see European ways of life replicated without the European conflicts that made Europe interesting. In recent decades Australia has become more noticed, and more notable, worldwide because both the Indigenous and refugee/detainee situations remind us of other European or Europe-derived circumstances. The peaceable development of representative institutions is precisely what people from other countries find so unexciting about Australia. But it is precisely why people want to live there.

Lawrence was from the working-class English Midlands, and his emergence as a novelist represented the extension of the literary franchise to those previously excluded by class. Did he resent that Australians faced fewer challenges than he perceived himself to do, that Australia was a society in which the network of privilege that stood in his way was from the beginning apparently (at least as Lawrence saw it) absent?

The Colonies make for OUTWARDNESS. Everything is outward—like hollow stalks of corn. The life makes this inevitable: all that struggle with bush and water and what-not, all the mad struggle with the material necessities and conveniences—the inside soul just withers and goes into the outside, and they're all just lusty robust stalks of people. (131)

The capitalisation of 'OUTWARDNESS' is notable, a rare graphic gesture for Lawrence that emphasises how salient the lack of inner meaning was for him. It is important to differentiate this sense of insignificance from the 'marginality' and the 'provinciality' of early twentieth-century Australia. Lawrence no doubt felt marginal in Cornwall when he lived there in an impoverished state during World War One; but, having taken a controversial moral position in a country at war, he did not feel insignificant. What Lawrence thought was missing in Australia was the very reason people came to Australia—to get away from all that. *Kangaroo* makes eloquent testimony to this disconnection. Yet today what Les Murray has labeled 'the Ascendancy' definitely exists in Australia, as in the US and UK: there is certainly intellectual snobbery; there are clear social distinctions between neighbourhoods and how people act in them. The aftermath of economic rationalism has imperilled, if not made obsolete, the mateship that those outsiders, unlike Lawrence, sought out in Australia.

For Lawrence's protagonist, Somers, Australia is 'curiously transparent' and 'absent'. He is fascinated by what we may describe as an absence of European political stakes associated with the consequences of colonialism. Colonialism, in exposing the white privilege of European

reform, undermines the rationale, in a sense, of the novelist. This has been, by and large since the eighteenth century, to chronicle the expanding middle class. Lawrence's work, as the embrace of it by F. R. Leavis indicates, is in a way the capstone of such an expansion. Does the humane work of the European novelist to deepen understanding across our differences stop at race? One can see a sideways answer to this in the sense—generally assumed—that in the old mateship ethos, there was egalitarianism, at the cost of racism. In the new, post-*Mabo*, but also post-Bourdieu, Australian ethos, there is multiculturalism and diversity, but also postmodern snobbery and a privilege no longer directly attaching itself to race but to status. The early twenty-first century seems to be caught between two realities, to adapt Matthew Arnold's phrase from 'Stanzas from the Grande Chartreuse', one snobbish, the other powerless to be born.

In *Kangaroo*, the social unrest represented by the figure of Kangaroo—himself a strange, very European figure—has no chance of success amid Australia's unflappable, flat mateship. Lawrence might well find contemporary Australia more Europeanised in this respect, though probably not to an extent he would feel comfortable in. *Kangaroo* thus raises issues for today, as both the malaise and a potential cure—now more realised?—it moots are live questions on the current scene. Lawrence might have welcomed the more resonant registering of significances, that Australia is now capable of mustering. But if the solution to the flatness he encountered was an accentuated inequality, would Lawrence have approved? These unanswerable questions cement the continuing capacity of *Kangaroo* to speak to a milieu which it so tentatively inhabits.

In a dialogue in Chapter IV of *Kangaroo*, 'Jack and Jaz', Somers is listening to some other men talk about Australia's future. One, named William James, asks: 'Supposing Australia said she were coming out of the Empire and governing herself, and only keeping a sort of Entente with England?' (62) Jack, his interlocutor, responds that it might possibly work, as long as Australia developed 'something to keep you steady' (63). The interesting choice by Lawrence's character, James, of the word 'entente', alluding to Britain's prewar and wartime diplomatic alliance with France, but also with overtones of the French *entendre* (to understand, to hear), again engages this issue of resonance. What networks of resonance will a postcolonial Australia develop with respect to the world? Has the incongruity Lawrence found in Australia—of egalitarianism without significance—been replaced by a worldwide practice of distinction?

Perlman, Tsiolkas, Liquid Modernity

To answer this requires leaving Lawrence's Australian non-idyll and moving into the risky and brutal world of Australian free enterprise, as described in the recent novels of Elliot Perlman. *Three Dollars* (1998) which explicitly tackled neoliberalism, or, to use the narrower term, economic rationalism, as its central problematic: not just as a reoccurrence of perennial greed, but as a specific manifestation of this epoch. In the more ambitious *Seven Types of Ambiguity* (2004) Perlman shows how neoliberalism has permeated Australian society, and provides a glimpse of hope that circumstances might change. Neoliberalism's arrival in Australia, no news to Australians, was, to a certain extent, news to the rest of the world, particularly since the representations of Australia in Australian film of the 1970s to the early 1990s emphasised the quirky and the idiosyncratic as Australian traits, and made a commoditised, globalised Australia seem beyond the ascribed national imaginary.

If one were to look at Lawrence's and Perlman's novels, with no other novel or no other representation of Australia, one would note certain differences. One of the most salient ones is, oddly, regionalism. One does not think of *Kangaroo* as a 'Sydney-side' novel, but perhaps it should be read as such. This is conjecturable in light of Lawrence's only other experiences in Australia. As Paul Eggert has explored, these transpired in Western Australia, where, arriving from Ceylon, he encountered the novelist Mollie Skinner, whose *The Boy In The Bush* he subsequently co-wrote or rewrote, and also had, on his voyage there, the shipboard companionship of Willem Siebenhaar who translated into English the famous novel 'Multatuli's' *Max Havelaar*, a tale of Dutch colonial brutality in Java. Both Skinner and Siebenhaar suggested to Lawrence that there were elements of dissent on the Indian Ocean side of Australia that did not need the imported European ideologies of *Kangaroo* to foment political awareness and disturb Australia's conformist complacency. Even more, Lawrence's actual experience of New South Wales was not largely centered in Sydney, but in Thirroul and environs. It was an intensely local and parochial one, and the Australia Lawrence projected from it was understandably an Australia that seemed, in the greater arena, particularly local and parochial. But there are certain larger Sydney-side continuities, as the similarity in feeling and social coverage between *Kangaroo* and the early Sydney novels of Christina Stead will testify.

Perlman's book, for all the global applicability of its *cri de coeur* against neoliberalism, is immersed in a specifically Melbourne milieu. Melbourne has always had a closer sense of proximity to the European than Sydney, and has always had more of a sense of continuity in its literary culture. Melbourne's urban and sophisticated tradition, which indeed would make *Some Versions of Pastoral* almost an alternative title for *Kangaroo*, retrojected in light of Perlman's own Empsonian borrowing, The Sydney-Melbourne difference also meant that there was an easier fit between anterior Andersonian traditions in Sydney and neoliberalism, though certainly not a complete or untroubled one.

Europe, in this libertarian context, is not forgotten and not un-influential, but does not need to be called upon as a cultural reserve as it is in the tradition in which Perlman's novel participates. When Perlman has as his intellectual monitor Alex Klima, the Czech-born psychiatrist of his protagonist, Simon Heywood, he is calling on an older Europe which has been through long decades of ideological travail and suffering to counsel an Australia used to the absence of conflict and a quiescent 'getting away from it all'. Perlman, unlike former US Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld in his famous 2003 statement, sees the Czech Republic as 'old Europe' and, as we shall see, unlike Christos Tsiolkas, does not see it, as 'dead Europe'. The wisdom of the Czech lands, personified by Klima, is something Australia needs to get over what is, in its confrontation with neoliberalism, its first serious encounter with a thought-system accepted by a wide swathe of society which has seriously challenged the assumptions that have existed among Australians for the duration of their modern political history.

Another note that might be taken by the observer in this thought-experiment of taking only *Kangaroo* and *Seven Types of Ambiguity* as Australian cultural documents is how much more heterosexual and even heteronormative Perlman's novel is. Somers comes with his wife, Harriet, to Australia, but the novel is not really about their marriage, but about his fascination with various male alternatives he meets in Australia. Even as compared to *Women In Love*, with its memorable male-bonding scenes, *Kangaroo* is a more 'male' book. At that time, there was something experimental about Lawrence's approach. In a sense, the defiance of the traditional

marriage-plot characteristic of the early twentieth-century novel finds an external reflection in the use of the unusual and distinct setting of Australia.

Perlman's novel, on the other hand, ultimately revolves around a happy, if slightly unlikely, love plot in which Simon eventually marries the object of his tender romantic obsession, Anna Geraghty, whose son by her first husband he had earlier kidnapped. Despite this odd element, and the novel's structure of having its seven major characters tell part of the narrative from their own points of view, the love plot is still a love plot—where Lawrence's is not. (On the other hand, Perlman's novel does have a substantial role for women, while *Kangaroo* lacks that). Indeed, the reference of Perlman's title to William Empson's famous critical book on the plural sense of words, and the multiple narrators, are the only aspects of the book that are unconventional (though several nineteenth-century novels use multiple narrators).

Lawrence's novel is set in the real world. It is not a fantasy. But we are certainly in Lawrence's own imaginative country. Indeed, part of the fun of reading *Kangaroo* is seeing how Lawrence so adamantly wrings the obdurate continental mass of Australia to the force of his own creative personality. Perlman certainly has his own emphases as a novelist—the rhetorical and forensic emphasis is notable, a clear reflection of his legal background, and one can see Anna as very much a fusion of the ideal of Amanda and the reality of Tanya in his previous novel, *Three Dollars*. Yet Perlman is also presenting the reader of 2004 with much more of a world that they will recognize themselves as living in than Lawrence does to readers in 1923.

There is a complicated relationship between Perlman's realism and his critique of neoliberalism. On the other hand, neoliberalism seems to have endorsed realism as its preferred métier. Certainly novelists such as Tom Wolfe, as close to an unabashed cheerleader for neoliberalism as contemporary fiction has produced, has also energetically argued for a return to nineteenth-century realisms, and the dominant temporal trope of neoliberalism has tended to be a critique of dominant twentieth-century ideologies for their socialism and collectivist emphases, and a return to the economic laissez-faire ideology of the nineteenth century (this, even though all the twentieth-century ideologies had their origin in the nineteenth century). Realism thus might be the idiom in which neoliberalism expresses itself, and Perlman might thus have his critique caught in a genre that, however he will, contains it.

Yet Perlman's realism also provides a sense of connection to other people that neoliberalism, with its extreme individualism and its tacit gospel of self-reliance, has tended to atomise and fracture. The importance of voice, of oral recital, in the novel may be an attempt to rebuild shattered community through listening, through opening up to the thoughts and views of others, instead of being locked into individualistic trajectories.

The largest question Perlman's novel raises is in its dénouement. In *Three Dollars*, Eddie Harnovey is rescued from complete degradation, recovers his humanity and discovers he is loved and valued. But he does not win out; neoliberalism remains in harness. In *Seven Types*, Simon miraculously ends up with Anna and, in effect, defeats his rival, Joe Geraghty, who is exposed and humiliated by the novel's end; this seems an allegory for a vanquishing of neoliberalism by more humane forces. In the 2005 of *Seven Types*'s publication, many no doubt hoped that Mark Latham and John Kerry would provide such a humane alternative; some years later, Kevin Rudd and Barack Obama may have realised that promise. It is still, though, an open question whether

one election can mean that neoliberalism can simply be turned out and the socio-cultural climate renovated--the sort of question raised by Perlman's dénouement. This is especially so since the dénouement is brought about by a trial in which the role of the law operates analogously to a democratic polity. Neoliberalism is ultimately defeated or checked by a public process. This is very different from the clandestine party organisation that represents all political alternatives in *Kangaroo*. Again, Perlman's political vision is much more 'nineteenth-century' than Lawrence's, less bitter, more socially hopeful.

If one wants to introduce a darker, perhaps more Lawrentian element into our present-day tableau, we should look at Christos Tsiolkas's *Dead Europe* (2005). Tsiolkas's book is structurally similar to Perlman's with multiple narratives set against a realistic tableau, though Tsiolkas's prose is much more visibly fissured and splayed. Tsiolkas redefines Europe's role in the Australian cultural imaginary. Previously, Europe had operated as a sort of cultural reserve, a source from which motifs could be extrapolated, an outer world that could be visited for a bit of redemptive broadening whenever Australia got too stifling and suffocating in its settler serenity. No more, says Tsiolkas. Europe for Tsiolkas is a cesspool of played-out ideologies, filled with racism, anti-Semitism, primordial violence, and the detritus of neoliberal pseudo-euphoria. Tsiolkas's half-protagonist, Isaac is just the sort of character who in a Boyd or Patrick White or Henry Handel Richardson novel might have made an expatriate pilgrimage 'home' that was in some way redemptive or broadening. But for Isaac, Europe and Australia are little different. Both are filled with racism and an unthinking selfishness. Pornography in Tsiolkas's novel is 'a reality of the New Europe' (Padmore 452) which is no longer a place where the culture absent from an intellectually etiolated Australia can be retrieved. As Ian Syson put it in his review of the novel, for Tsiolkas the 'dissonant beliefs, cultures and religion of Europe' have 'less enriched Europe than they have undermined it'.

This is the diametrical opposite of Lawrence's position. Lawrence misses just these dissonant contentious elements in Australia; he saw Australia as too lethargic, contented, and monochromatic. Indeed, the entire idea of a Europe-Australia alternative crumbles in Tsiolkas's hands; Europe and Australia are no different. Again, all Tsiolkas does in his diagnosis of Europe is pretty much extend Rumsfeld's implied characterisation of 'old Europe' as played-out, decadent, culturally exhausted, and to extend that to the new, post-communist Europe. Whereas Rumsfeld suggested that the new Europe's post-communist enthusiasm for free markets and the American geopolitical umbrella—itsself to wither in the economic crisis of late 2008—made it different, fresher, more vigorous, Tsiolkas sees it as more of the same. For him, there is no dichotomy of 'old Europe' and 'new Europe' only 'dead Europe'. Greece, the country of Tsiolkas's ancestry, which figures prominently in the novel, is a bridge here, politically part of the old as it had been on the US side of the Iron Curtain in the Cold War, culturally and historically close to the new.

This absence of a dyadic Europe-Australia relationship means that Tsiolkas's novel also upends the position migrant fiction has been expected to occupy in the Australian cultural imaginary, that of diversifying Anglo-Celtic Australia and testifying to the enriching contribution of non-Anglo Australians. Tsiolkas's subject-matter comes deep out of the migrant experience, but he will not play to these sorts of comforting harmonising scenarios.

And in a sense, we need Tsiolkas's suspension of these illusions so that he can help situate Perlman's Australia fully with respect to Lawrence's. It may seem that mateship and racism, neoliberalism and multiculturalism are yoked, and that in the cultural franchise we must necessarily opt for the latter. Under the *episteme* of mateship there was social equality, but at the cost of racial discrimination; it is only in the neoliberal era that discourses of multiracialism and a full coming to terms with the survival and disinheritance of Australia's Indigenous population has occurred.

In some cultures, this argument would make some sense. Such figures generally sympathetic to neoliberalism as Mario Vargas Llosa in Peru or Julia Kristeva in France could make the argument that their affinity for free-market economics is in tandem with its anti-centralist arguments, with a greater cultural liberalisation which allows for a more multiracial and pluralistic society—all part of what Zygmunt Bauman calls *liquid modernity* or Ulrich Beck characterizes as *risk society*. But one cannot see these arguments applying to Australia, with its close affinities to the Anglo-American democratic tradition. Of course, in reality the fiercest advocates of neoliberalism are also the most virulent opponents of 'political correctness' and the least enthusiastic about Indigenous land rights.

Tsiolkas not only tells us that we do not need neoliberalism to witness ethnic diversity, but that neoliberalism forestalls the full manifestation of such diversity by imposing a monochromatic heartlessness and depravity all the world over. Conflict, cultural difference, is not redemptive in Tsiolkas's view as long as it is accompanied by a social order that is unjust and that mistreats the poor, the vulnerable, the queer, and the marginal. Tsiolkas thus suggests the greater diversity and cultural richness introduced to Australia in Lawrence's day has not reached its full potential because it has been linked to a neoliberalism that introduces conflict in place of the 'getting away from it all' of the old Australia. At the same time, notwithstanding its rhetoric of capitalist dynamism, it introduces a sameness as throttling as the old Australia's, but one without the advantage of being endemically Australian. Though totally uneuphoric about Australia, Tsiolkas is even less so about Europe, old or new. When Rosie in *The Slap* washes Europe off her (258) it may not be a decolonising gesture, but it is certainly a cathartic one, and a move that has no aspirations to mattering on the European scene, or the globality which, in its mainstream iteration, has too often been a worldwide extension of European values.

Though loath to voice this overtly, Tsiolkas's texts spurn Europe with such grim brio because Australia in the twenty-first century *has* more resonance and can reach a broader audience. Whether Australian society still affirms mateship, or has succumbed to the siren song of neoliberalism, this reversal signals that the anxiety of not making an impact has considerably lessened with respect to writing from and about Australia. That this has been accomplished avoiding national teleologies—Perlman and Tsiolkas combined give the lie to any unitary nationhood, Australian or otherwise—and acknowledges a sense of the tragic potential inherent in any situation renders this phenomenon all the more heartening. A development that is accompanied by pluralism will be all the more able to salve the inequalities of neoliberalism and forestall the bogeyman of undue conformity that make many, like Lawrence, tacitly hope for distinction.

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