

The Nation or the Globe?: Australian Literature and/in the World

TONY SIMOES da SILVA
University of Wollongong

Although far more nuanced and complex than am I suggesting here, I want to take the central thesis in Philip Mead's 'Proust at Caloundra', a review-essay of Robert Dixon and Brigid Rooney's *Scenes of Reading: Is Australian Literature a World Literature?* (2013), as a reminder of the importance of the national, and indeed the local, in the transnational turn in literary studies of the last decade or so. As Mead notes, slightly tongue-in-cheek, '[a]ll models of the world literary system ... are structured according to complex political and cultural geometries and desires, as much as by national cultural genetics. There is no born-global of world literature.' Indeed, Mead himself does not make this point but I would suggest that there is a certain irony in the fact that so much of the anxious commentary about the desired end of the nationalist turn in literary studies often emerges from the very world that for so long has dominated forms of knowledge-making and cultural production, and to which the fields of literature and literary studies have been pivotal. Is this fear of loss of control and dominance a manifestation of a desire to transmogrify (evolving) defeat and erasure into victory in perpetuity? The geo-political world is changing faster than it is possible to detect and capture, and with it the material and ideological foundations that have underlined the triumph of Eurocentric models, cultural, political, literary. The trick is to reframe the debate, to obfuscate positional privilege, to reorient viewpoint. As Mead notes at one point, 'How literature is worlded depends, at least in theory, on where you're sitting and from what angle you're looking. It's perspectival.'

At the risk of worlding myself a bridge too far, the recent *Cambridge History of Postcolonial Literature* (2012) includes chapters on postcolonial literature in France, in Ireland, in Germany, even in Australia and New Zealand, yet there was no room for similarly conceived chapters on postcolonial writing in Ghana, Nigeria, Zimbabwe, Cape Verde, South Africa. Had the latter been allotted a chapter, moreover, chances are it would have been dominated by the work of J.M. Coetzee, through no fault of his own and for his sins, a South African and an Australian for all seasons, with passing references to Nadine Gordimer, André Brink and possibly Zakes Mda. Such theoretical blindness, which the worlding of literary studies has so often has engendered, however unwittingly, can and should be resisted by pointing out that doing away with national markers is a luxury not everyone can afford. The worlding of literature has given rise to a culture rich in material rewards (Huggan, 2001; English, 2005).

As Mead highlights, Australian literature exists and operates in this space, and in this climate. But it is salutary that such recognition should also refocus attention on the importance of the national and the local, and to the unsettled foundations of such entities. To do otherwise risks eliding the violent and protracted histories of dispossession, of oppression, of dislocation that undergird the national. In an argument that resonates elsewhere in the work included in the present issue of *JASAL*, Philip Mead suggests that at times such approaches are a necessary restraint to the exuberant desire to let go of the national that has deep political and ethical implications. Elsewhere he points out that '[t]he anxious, cultural-nationalist literary paradigm of Australian literary studies may have outlived its usefulness but today's world literary space with which literary critics and historians are engaging is hardly a quiet

verandah.’ The verandah here is the metaphoric space that speaks of Australia’s complex position in the world and the real space where Australian writer, Nettie Palmer, sat ‘reading *Remembrance of Things Past*’ in Caloundra. Both *Scenes of Reading* and Mead’s essay engage with a web of cultural encounters that resonate with the thematic and critical concerns of many of the essays in the present issue of *JASAL*. All in some or another write across a range of concerns that celebrate and challenge the transnational as creative and critical practice, and refute as much as they reaffirm the importance national points of origin in Australian literature. Speaking of the ‘continually evolving shifts in globalising literary studies’, Mead stresses that ‘none of these [new] enabling critical terms is neutral or without political provenance, the world is always already structured and despite appearances none of these shifts has been innocent and/or free....’ The nation is not over yet, indeed one might posit it is not even yet a nation.

Serendipitously, given that *JASAL*’s annual issue rarely is driven or framed by a distinct ‘call for papers’, Philip Mead’s essay aptly captures the dominant thematic and critical concerns of much of the work included in *JASAL 14.5*. Attention to the fading power and relevance of national, and to the emergent significance of transnational or post-national critical trends in literary studies and the attending implications of such shifts seems to dominate the critical *zeitgeist*, in Australia as elsewhere. Whether writing on particular novels or on the persistent longing for other places and cultures that inflect the work of Patrick White, Randolph or Laurie Duggan, or situating Australian literature with reference to international literary phenomena such as magical realism, many of the present essays complicate, even challenge the strictly national while simultaneously affirming its relevance. Importantly, often the writers do it unwittingly but just as often they set out to underline the unique social, historical and political foundations and boundaries of Australian literature. After all, in Meera Syal’s memorable words, *Life Isn’t All Ha Ha Hee Hee*. History can be a friend, even, and perhaps especially, postcolonial, postmodern history.

In their essays, Amanda Johnson, Ben Holgate and Maria Takolander show how Australian literature that genuinely engages with a growing sense of worldliness, postcolonial and transnational concerns cannot but bring into sharp focus the colonial foundations of the nation. In Mead’s words, ‘[n]arratives of Australian literature’s comparative worldliness will continue to be, in changing and complex ways, counter-narratives to its national and Indigenous streams.’ In ‘Making an Expedition of Herself: Lady Jane Franklin as Queen of the Tasmanian Extinction Narrative’, Amanda Johnson writes that ‘sincere postcolonial intentionalities—manifested through strong intercultural scenework and the deployment of particular kinds of disruptive narrative techniques—are sometimes residually “unsettled” by ideations of a doomed Indigenous culture at odds with a villainous colonial culture.’ She argues that while these works ‘can be shown as privileging fallible white viewpoints, yet they also articulate ethico-political positions in relation to contact, possession and exploration via explorations of intercultural portrayals.’ Johnson examines a number of recent ‘novelised portraits of Lady Jane Franklin in Richard Flanagan’s *Wanting* (2008), Adrienne Eberhard’s verse novel *Jane, Lady Franklin* (2004), Sten Nadolny’s *The Discovery of Slowness* (1997) and Jennifer Livett’s novel prologue from *A Fool on the Island*, ‘to argue that these literary portrayals differently exploit the historical figure of Jane Franklin ... to enact trenchant critiques of the parochial, racist colonial culture of early “Hobarton”.’ Working both with and against a national(ist) model in Australian literary studies, Johnson draws ‘upon the intercultural postcolonial theories of Indigenous culturalist critic Marcia Langton’ to explore the tensions in works that fit within what Mead terms ‘[t]he anxious, cultural-nationalist

literary paradigm of Australian literary studies' and also offer a revisionist paradigm in which the work of fiction 'contest the shortcomings of history.'

In "The Impossibility of Knowing": Developing Magical Realism's Irony in *Gould's Book of Fish*, Ben Holgate explores the way magical realism is being co-opted into Australian writing to show how it enables Richard Flanagan to engage in one such act of contestation and revisionism. Flanagan's sophisticated rehearsal of irony, magical realism and historical fiction 'navigates around his position as a white settler author without inadvertently appropriating Aboriginal cultural property and thereby perpetuating an aspect of the colonisation process.' Magical realism, at one level perhaps the epitome of the transnational as aesthetic paradigm and as political project (*pace* Linda Hutcheon), enables Flanagan to negotiate for Gould the settler narrator the kind of ethico-political position Langton may have in mind. Holgate posits that the 'gap between a twenty-first century reader's lament for a lost world and the nineteenth-century narrator's rage about the disappearance of that culture... instils' Richard Flanagan's novel 'with a particular kind of irony.' He asserts that 'Gould's baroque nightmare of the hellish conditions for convicts on Sarah Island, as well as the decimation of the Aboriginal people, challenge the accepted history of a peaceful British "settlement".' A similar treatment of the subversive potential of irony and magical realism is explored by Maria Takolander in 'Magical realism and irony's "edge": Rereading magical Realism and Kim Scott's *Benang*'. Echoing Holgate's treatment of magical realism and political intent, Takolander proposes that '*Benang* not only ironises discourse through its narrative strategy of representing the unreal as real; it also thematises the ironies of colonial discourse and, especially, historiography.' In a remarkable moment of critical synchrony, For Takolander, 'Kim Scott's novel, with its ironic subversion of colonial "knowledge," provides... a way to re-envision magical realism' that situates the role of irony in magical realist texts.

At a first glance, the title of Ken Gelder and Rachael Weaver's essay, 'Literary Journals and Literary Aesthetics in early Post-Federation Australia' appears to suggest a privileging of a more traditional nationalist critical model. Yet, in a rich and nuanced discussion centred around 'the moment of Federation—and following in its wake—just when the nation brings its colonies together,' they highlight precisely the 'splintering of literary activity across a number of journals that fragments, or perhaps continues to fragment, any received sense of what constitutes a national literature.' The essay examines the brief but often influential lives of a number of small journals and brings into play, 'a nascent aesthetic modernism that turns away from the bush, allowing us to contrast the vignette as primarily a feminine, metropolitan form with the masculine provinciality of the *sketch* so ubiquitous to a range of Australian literary magazines.' Of the stories of Katherine Mansfield published in *Native Companion*, for example, Gelder and Weaver write that they 'help to open up the connections between colonial identity and literary modernism in the *Native Companion*. Indeed, this journal, we want to argue, enabled a local modernist aesthetic to develop a couple of decades before the usual points of origin ascribed to Australian modernism by literary commentators...' In this way Gelder and Weaver stress the complex, often paradoxically fleeting yet enduring role played by many of the journals discussed in the essay in shaping an emergent literary culture in Australia. Feeding off the local but always in conversation with European influences, they articulated a national literature that challenged more traditional, insular models. They note, for example, that 'the first issue of [*The Heart of the Rose*] concluded with Nettie Palmer's translation into prose of Paul Verlaine's "Arts Poetica"' but also that it 'was an Australian magazine that allowed itself to imagine that it was powerful enough to relate its own influences back out to Europe.'

This concern with cultural flows, geography and literature inflects a second body of essays in the present issue. Thus in “Greece—Patrick White’s Country”: Is Patrick White a Greek Author?’ Shaun Bell examines the Australian author’s connections with Greece, whether *in loco*, through its culture or in the context of White’s relationship with Manolo Lascaris. Bell takes on what he terms White’s ‘public performance’ as it is enacted in works such as “Greece—My Other Country”, an undelivered political speech, and some of his fictional and non-fictional writing. In a brief comment on White’s *The Hanging Garden*, he asserts that ‘[t]he novella fragment charts the transformation of identity and understanding resulting from the dual displacements of cultural and geographic dislocation.’ Bell proposes that ‘[i]dentifying Patrick White as “Greek” has the potential to productively refigure him as a transnational and multicultural author.’

Attention to place, space, identity and literature mark also Kathleen Steele’s contrasting reading of Patrick White’s *Voss* and Randolph Stow’s *To the Islands*. ‘Establishing Voss and Heriot as Romantic Wanderer figures affords an opportunity to examine the aesthetics of melancholy, the sublime and genius embedded within the Wanderer tradition, and the effects these tropes have on gender in *Voss* and *To the Islands*.’ In a close reading of the works, Steele concludes that ‘[b]oth White and Stow hold to the Romantic tradition of grandeur and freedom attached to genius, wherein a male with talent is transformed into a “superior type of *being* who’ follows “sublime” path between “sanity” and “madness,” between the “monstrous” and the “superhuman” (Battersby, *Gender and Genius* 149).’ Randolph Stow’s work and his well-known love affair with the English east coast, are at the heart of Fiona Richards’ ‘The Englishness of Randolph Stow.’ Richards examines ‘the dynamic between Stow’s life, family history, imagination and creative output.’ Through a close analysis of these relationships, Richards sifts out Stow’s growing attachment to the English countryside and particularly to the coastal lowlands of Hadleigh, in Suffolk.

Mobility and its impact on the writer’s work, explored by Bell and Richards, returns as a thematic concern in Robyn Greaves’ ‘A “Grim and Fascinating” Land of Opportunity: the *Walkabout* Women and Australia.’ In a discussion that resonates also with the work of Gelder and Weaver mentioned earlier, Greaves examines both the magazine *Walkabout* (1934-1974) and the work of two of its principal contributors, Ernestine Hill and Henrietta Drake-Brockman. *Walkabout* was ‘a popular general interest magazine that enjoyed a diverse readership and had wide circulation.’ Greaves’ essay highlights how the magazine contributed to and disseminated Australia’s rehearsal of a national identity and what it means to be at ‘home in Australia.’ She is especially aware of the complicated place occupied by Hill and Drake-Brockman, travel writers whose work depicted ‘a land of contrasts whose environment still needed learning in order to better develop, possess and harness it.’ At once a product of the culture they inhabited and marginal to it, by ‘[p]lacing themselves outside the home in a masculine world on the road, and in a marginalised frontier space, women such as Hill and Drake-Brockman disrupt and subvert gendered notions of space, offering alternatives for others (particularly women), and a revision of traditional conventions.’

A different comparative approach emerges in Cameron Lowe’s ‘Anthropologist of Space: the Poetics of Representation in Laurie Duggan’s *Crab & Winkle*.’ Travel again dominates, even if principally of an imaginative kind. Focusing on ‘the representations of contemporary space in the work of Australian poet Laurie Duggan’, Lowe’s essay reaches across to the poetry of American Frank O’Hara. ‘In *Crab & Winkle*, a book-length record of Duggan’s first year living in East Kent’, Lowe writes, ‘the reader is offered a diaristic mapping of an

environment largely unfamiliar to the poem's (autobiographical) narrator.' In yet another instance of the intertwining of national and transnational concerns and viewpoints, Lowe shows how Duggan's work was inflected by his life as an Australian in England. In *Crab & Winkle* 'Australia—as physical and social space—becomes a ghostly presence, an imagined space that is nevertheless a vital component of the cognitive map the text constructs through a collage of everyday materiality and the mental spaces of memory and imagination.' For Lowe, Duggan 'creates a representation of space that is constantly shifting and provisional, dependent upon whatever material Duggan elects to incorporate into his experiential collage.' In a discussion that positions 'Duggan's work within a tradition of process-based aesthetics' Lowe traces the Australian poet's take on the 'spatial dynamic at work in O'Hara's poetry, the restless movement of thought and body throughout the structure of the poems.'

Expatriation and repatriation, repeatedly rehearsed, emerge as a key theme in Martin Edmond's 'On Tasman Shores: Guy & Joe Lynch in Australasia.' Edmond undertakes a detailed account of the life and work of the two brothers referred to in the title of the piece but also of a large coterie of artists, friends and hangers-on who constituted their own peculiarly mobile Antipodean salon. Edmond writes of the Lynch family:

For the Lynch family, it was easy to move back and forth between the two countries bordering the Tasman: from Melbourne to Auckland in 1907, when the boys were fourteen and twelve respectively; and then from Auckland to Sydney fifteen years later, when both were in their twenties. Since the 1920s, however, movement between the two countries has been more commonly one way, as Australian cities, and especially Sydney and Melbourne, were increasingly seen as metropolises and their New Zealand counterparts, relatively speaking, mere provincial centres. Now, with the turn of a new century, for the first time there are formal restrictions upon trans-Tasman travel, and upon the rights citizens of one country may lay claim to in the other.

The brothers' travels would take them across the world, first in the service of country and Empire, traveling to Egypt, Turkey and France, and later attracted to London by opportunities to develop as artists, but also for personal reasons. Of Guy Lynch, Martin Edmond writes that 'he was an exceptionally able administrator and publicist, a committed teacher and a practitioner whose work shows an eclectic array of influences: Assyrian, Greco-Roman, Oriental, Renaissance and Art Deco.' This array of influences underpins the brothers' work but also that of some of their peers, such as George Finey. Finey was responsible for bringing Joe and Guy Lynch to Sydney, and provided them both with work and possibly a model for the irreverence that would characterise their personal and artistic work. As Edmond notes, 'George Finey was hired, and fired, from almost every publication that, in Sydney between the wars, published black and white art—generally for a refusal to draw anything that was not in accord with his own ideas.' Edmond's essay is in part a meditation on a 'Tasman Sea, precisely defined by oceanographers, [that] remains inchoate as a cultural area.'

A different kind of take on coterie is invoked by Cheryl Taylor in 'Late Retrospectives on Twentieth-Century Catastrophes: the Novels of Ronald McKie.' Here Taylor proposes that a critical reassessment of the work of McKie is overdue, as his novels offer a 'particular view of early twentieth-century Australian society and literary fiction... forming as they do a point of intersection between various literary and social ideas and ideologies.' Taylor offers a critical overview of key thematic concerns explored in McKie's *The Mango Tree* (1974), *The Crushing* (1977) and *Bitter Bread* (1978), addressing in passing the critical reception they

received and their social and political context. Significantly, she writes that while ‘[a]ll three of McKie’s novels assume a central Anglo-Celtic identity for Australians,... [they] seek paradoxically to liberate that identity from English political control and cultural dominance.’

As noted above, it is remarkable that in a collection of essays such as this, compiled out of submissions for a general issue of *JASAL*, there should be such a close alignment in critical approaches and concerns. Equally, interesting, though, is the way in which the work of thinking both outside and beyond the nation nevertheless remains tied up to a body of writing and writers that in many ways speaks of a more or less established and unchallenged Australian literary canon. White, Stow, increasingly Flanagan, even Kim Scott, in many ways co-opted into Australian literature with an ease not enjoyed by other Indigenous Australian authors and their work, all speak of a certain way of representing Australia to itself and to its people. The same might be said of the work of literary journals, large and small, and of popular magazines such as *Walkabout*. Taylor’s is almost alone in her attention to a lesser-known writer, incidentally one whose work conforms neatly to a nationalist literary model. In the last essay in the collection, Theresa Holtby examines a novel by one of Australia’s most adventurous literary nomads, Christina Stead. In a close reading of *The Man Who Loved Children*, Holtby argues that the novel enabled Stead to stand up to Sigmund Freud, as it were, insofar as ‘Stead foreshadows the demise of Freud’s theories, producing a convincing vision of a self-defeating personality not driven by guilt but by a nexus of idealistic narcissism and unbridled egotism.’

While I realise that the above summary may ascribe to the eclectic nature of the issue a semi-forced cohesion and coherence, I want to encourage you to return to it in small journeys, engaging with the essays over time and listening in for the thematic resonances, critical similarities and political viewpoints they articulate and develop. I should add that *JASAL 14.5* includes a good number of book reviews of recently published work, an output for which the individual reviewers should be thanked but one that attests to the tact and perseverance of *JASAL*’s Reviews Editor, Jay Daniel Thompson.

Works cited

- English, James. *The Economy of Prestige*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2005.
 Huggan, Graham. *The Postcolonial Exotic*. London: Routledge, 2001.
 Quayson, Ato. *The Cambridge History of Postcolonial Literature*. 2 volumes. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012.
 Syal, Meera. *Life Isn’t All Ha Ha Hee Hee*. London: Picador, 1999.