

RE-FIGURING SEXUALITY

IMPRINTING/ERASING WOMEN

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CM: In this paper we are interested in the representation of the gendered body in the 1970s, 1980s and 1990s. Many contemporary theorists, leading on from the work of the 1970s and 1980s, argue the permeability of the boundaries between the binaries sex/gender and feminine/masculine, and in 1990 when Paul and I devised a fourth year course on gender issues in contemporary Australian writing part of our project was to explore whether men and women were writing in ways that had been freed up by the debates about gendered identity of the past few decades. We assumed that the material on the course—half by male writers and half by female—would allow us to explore the situation of gender in the 1990s.

PS: In teaching the course we realised that the men—e.g. Murnane, Henshaw, Winton, early Carey, Jones, Ireland—didn't prove to be examples of a changed 1990s' consciousness about gender at all. We actually spent a lot of time, together with the students, being alarmed at the way the male writers raised concerns related far more to the issues that produced 'images of women criticism' in the 1970s. We couldn't get past the obvious sexism in these writers, and felt guilty about lining the men up for criticism in the very context that we initially thought would have led to dialogue.

CM: The women writers led us to see gender issues as intersected by and part of a much wider range of questions about culture, society, politics—and about being an artist. The male writers' notions of creativity were all predicated upon rigid conceptions of the feminine which basically devolved back into viewing woman in essentialist and ahistoric terms—as outside of cultural space; as object. The women writers provoked more interesting discussions—and the students were not all female, I should add. After a few years we decided that the best solution was to get rid of the men—the course has been a great success ever since.

PS: We thought that the kind of theoretical issues we might be discussing would be something like Judith Butler's conception of gender as performance; instead, as we looked at

the world around us we discovered that the pejorative use of the term 'Politically Correct' was an indicator of a climate of reaction rather than receptiveness to these sophisticated ideas that built on feminist arguments of the 1970s and 1980s. We began by believing that this climate of reaction was really an American phenomenon. Eve Sedgwick has written a moving account of the media oppression directed against those who dared to challenge the status quo being established in Reagan's America as a reaction against the 'liberal' sentiments of the universities, of activists of various kinds. All this didn't at first seem adaptable to Australian conditions. But over the last few years, in fact during the very time when our course was wholly devoted to women writers, the Australian media has taken up the same reactionary rhetoric, the same pejorative use of 'PC' to stifle debate and wind back political reforms, as the American popular press.

CM: Your mentioning stifling debate takes me back to a 'space' that I inhabited as a student in a fourth year seminar at Melbourne University—as Helen Garner says in her story 'The Life of Art', 'This was in the 1960s; before feminism'. The seminar was run by two male academics (one of them Vincent Buckley) and dominating the discussion was a clique of male voices that belonged to people named O'Hearn, O'Connor, McCaughey, Steele—you might recognise some of them. A disgruntled group of women students went in a deputation to complain that they could never get a word in edgeways, and were told that they were lucky to be able to listen to discussion of such high calibre. I'm interested in this because of the *Irishness* of the whole experience, given that we are going to be talking, in part, about Winton's *The Riders* and Windsor's *Family Lore*—and also because of our feeling that women are being seen as intrusive now in much the same way as then. I was reminded of the seminar when Paul and I went to see David Williamson's *Dead White Males* recently.

PS: And a key text for Williamson is *The Taming of the Shrew*. Not only does he tell us that every woman secretly wants to marry Petruchio (especially feminists), but that human nature is unchangeable and universal, so that all women need to learn the lesson that Williamson thinks Kate is taught. This play literalises (against modern ironised readings) Kate's final speech, and we are meant to acknowledge that the men of the 1940s committed their bodies 'To painful labour' while their wives lay 'warm at home, secure and safe'. It wouldn't do to dignify *Dead White Males* with a detailed critique, but we were particularly struck by the audience approval for the reductive view of gender roles: a man in an apron was cause for hilarity, while a professional woman really only wanted to hang up her briefcase and find a dominating husband. Given the broader context of the PC debate, *Dead White Males* also got big laughs for jokes about Greek names, about multiculturalism, as well as about lesbians and feminists.

CM: The popular acclaim of *Dead White Males* is interesting in the light of Helen Garner's *The First Stone*, which has had a phenomenal reception (30,000 copies sold in two weeks). Her argument that feminism has gone too far obviously touched the same popular nerve: it isn't just academics that have been buying it. The crux of Garner's argument is that women's sexuality belongs to the private sphere: that situations such as the one that arose at Ormond should be negotiated privately—in much the same way as Williamson argues that the space for women is that of home and hearth, while men go out to do battle with the world. Garner doesn't want feminism to have moved on to the next generation: for her it stops somewhere in the 1970s. The sentence 'This was in the 1980s; after feminism' also occurs in 'The Life of Art', where she describes a rather bleak and problematic *post-feminist* world. Both Williamson and Garner see the fiftysomething generation as having a kind of wisdom and humanity that

the shrill current generation is lacking—though it should be pointed out that while Garner may be dubious about the feminism of the current young women, Williamson is derisory about feminism full stop.

PS: Another side of this is the reaction against the supposed domination of women writers in Australia. You probably all remember Gerard Windsor's winge some years ago that women writers in Australia got favourable treatment: he said that 'the atmosphere is encouraging and protective of women writers in the way that it is not of males'. The current version of this seems to be the curious discussion over the true worth of Elizabeth Jolley's work—well, curious to me, but I'm obviously prejudiced. This is evident in many expected and unexpected quarters. One prominent critic who queries the current valuation of Jolley is Peter Pierce, who offers an excellent illustration of the point we are making in his recent article in *World Literature Today*, 'Australian Literature Since Patrick White'. Pierce singles out as significant achievements novels like *Out of the Line of Fire*, and only comments in any detail on male novelists. His comment on Jolley typifies his attitude as a whole: 'Writing in a season when women authors tend to receive a relatively privileged hearing which few of them seek, Jolley may now loom as the biggest name among Australian novelists since Patrick White, but she may prove to be one of the soonest forgotten' (514).

For the rest of this paper we want to offer more detailed readings of two moments from the writing of the 1990s which illustrate the disturbing erasure of the female from the text.

CM: Two books published in 1990 were by a brother and sister: Gerard Windsor's *Family Lore*, and Penelope Rowe's *Tiger Country*. They are both family narratives. I am interested in comparing the representation of the female body in these texts—and in looking at the way *Family Lore* fits so well Elizabeth Grosz's formulation:

The coding of femininity with corporeality in effect leaves men free to inhabit what they (falsely) believe is a purely conceptual order while at the same time enabling them to satisfy their (sometimes disavowed) need for corporeal contact through their access to women's bodies and services. (14)

Tiger Country was on our course for a year, but then went out of print (though it is to be reprinted by the Women's Press in August). *Family Lore*, on the other hand, is in print. It received twice as many reviews as *Tiger Country*.

Female bodies are supine throughout *Family Lore*. They lie around on beds and operating tables being masterfully treated or eviscerated by male doctors, and one even lies outside on newspapers being masterfully initiated into the secrets of the stars by a son. The female body is represented as prone to disease and disintegration as well as being the site for transgressive behaviour, so the family history begins: 'I have two grandparents, one male, one female. But they met only when she was five years past menopause' (how *did* he know?), and continues through a series of anecdotes that he constructs for his doctor grandfather. These are stories of a dead nun stretched out on a bed whose autopsy reveals a foetus; a nun in a taxi who goes into convulsive displays of sexual fever because of the proximity of the driver; and a nun with a prolapsed uterus who resists medical examination but finally, as the grandfather cum Windsor says, 'submitted herself to me'. Of the condition Windsor writes: 'A degree of incontinence is only one of the manifestations. Female tissue of the area is of course rich in secretions; they are best kept internal' (26). The taint of strange religio-sexual perversion that hangs around this goes hand in hand with the sexual murkiness of an instance when he looks at photos of his grandmother:

she had a distinct appeal. I use the word deliberately. I hesitate about looking hard at my grandmother as a young woman—to say nothing of my mother—and asking

would I—no, do I—find her attractive? Do I fancy her? But viewed thus my grandmother will assume proper status as a woman, and not be just a sentimental connection. (15)

Perhaps it has become a cliché to talk of women as objectified by the male sexual gaze, so I might put it another way: the 'proper' woman (who gave her name to Mary Poovey's book about women writers in the nineteenth century) is still hale and hearty in the twentieth century. Then to have 'proper status' she had to be endowed with domestic virtues; now she is accorded a space by Windsor if she fits the male prescription for sexual attractiveness.

I want to make a few brief comparisons between several incidents in *Family Lore* and *Tiger Country* that centre on the female body. Perhaps the most disturbing example of the erotics of forbidden sexuality in *Family Lore* is the description of the harvest of organs for transplant from a young girl. Gerard has been invited by his grandfather to view the operation, but, significantly, his sister has been told to stand 'outside' and watch through the glass because she 'didn't know' if she minded blood. She is barred from the masculine space within, where the girl lies as a kind of sacrificial victim: 'Not for years have I seen such a young woman naked. The breasts sit steady with the natural uprightness of youth, not even tempted into a weary, deflated slide. The belly is unwrinkled and flat, almost concave, above the proud pubic bone' (74). The prurience of this description is more disturbing because of that image of the excluded sister watching through the glass; the young girl who is eviscerated stands in, it can be argued, for the sister whose writing, according to his father, is better than Gerard's. In Rowe's *Tiger Country* the young protagonist, Matti, is forced by her father to view female bodies in another setting. He shows her pictures of Holocaust atrocities, to which she reacts in horror:

Naked women, in the act of running. Bald-headed. Obscene patches of black hair between their legs. Panic starts to rise in her....

'The doctors were among the worst of them'. His voice is quiet and bland, silky almost. (127)

The control of the observing surgeon/writer in Windsor's family history—'I had not been sick. I had not even felt like being sick' (74)—finds a context in Rowe's novel, and is discovered to be obscenely misogynistic voyeurism used as an instrument of power. Windsor's clinical representation of the female body as object for masculine inscriptions (both by knife and pen) transforms into a scene that reveals the horror to which this can lead.

The nubile young girl whose heart is harvested is contrasted with the recipient whom Windsor describes as 'lean, even elegant, and her body only a little worn'. Her fitness to live seems predicated on the fact that she is imagined as a mother: 'somewhere there will be a man and small children in an agony of hope' (78). Woman as mother and bearer of children has 'status as a woman', too, even if as a kind of vessel, as when, six months after his marriage, the grandfather takes to sea and leaves behind 'a child of his in the womb' (17). There is no mention of the grandmother at all here, or of what she might be up to whilst this womb is getting on with the job.

Another comparison: the body of the young girl on the operating table is also a vessel—containing a heart rather than a child. This heart, when lifted from the body, becomes a metaphor for the craft of the writer: 'At a certain point you realize the material you have is a goer.... You make a grab for it, pluck it out. It is ragged, still smarting. It looks lumpy. It has to be trimmed, all sorts of now-extraneous pendules snipped off' (76-77). Those now-extraneous pendules may be scrag ends of this and that attached to the heart, but they seem to me suspiciously like the body of the girl, too: away from the body the heart can enter the conceptual, symbolic order, free from all that messy female corporeality. Hearts appear in *Tiger Country*, too, when Matti's surgeon father asks her to copy a diagram of one to

illustrate an article that he has written for a medical journal. This turns into a marathon of torment, a day-long ordeal of drawing after drawing being denounced by the father and discarded:

Amid the welter of paper, the blots and smudges, the fat, thin, bulging, bursting, bleeding vena cava, she puts her head on the desk and waits for the storm to pass over.

For three days she is confined to her room and left alone, except to appear at meals. (112)

There a reversal of the process enacted in the Windsor, here: Matti, unable to comply with the power play of the patriarch who perversely transforms the heart into an object of diagrams, is plunged into the painful and daunting world of embodiment and feeling, where hearts can't be trimmed down and labelled.

A final comparison. Windsor describes the line the grandfather's scalpel cuts during an operation—a description that emphasises his control over the instrument and the blood that may well up (it is 'untidy, not chaotic'). The grandfather can still remember castrating a bull, and he and his father being spattered by the fall of blood—a kind of pagan ceremony of blessing upon this line of males who 'have not lost touch with the letting of blood' (73). Cutting of the body and the removal of corrupted parts is for Windsor 'the clean excision of the superfluous, the extrusion, the untoward growth'. Rowe, on the other hand, describes Matti lacerating her arms with a pin:

She takes her bottom lip between her teeth and rakes the pin harshly against her skin. The burn of the pain assails her and she pulls away. Angrily now, she bites her lip harder and rakes again. Through the hot sear she feels a warmth on her arm. With her finger she touches the flesh. Heavy, viscous, sticky. For a moment her heart stops its terrible painful thumping. For a moment her stomach stops its nauseating churning. 143)

Cutting of the arms is apparently a phenomenon mainly restricted to women, and can be interpreted as an attempt to create some sense of the boundaries of the body and of the space that the body inhabits—to recover the body and make the self feel real and in control, as opposed to being an intrusion that can be '[cleanly excised]', elided, as in Windsor—and in Tim Winton.

PS: Winton's recent novel *The Riders* could be read as an object lesson in how to assimilate what might be called a masculinist lesson from feminism. How can men finish up looking like the real victims in the gender war? How can they take the position of the oppressed? How can they be new men and old men at the same time? Well, take Scully as an example. It isn't so much the fact that he has been abandoned by his wife Jennifer and left in charge of their child, although that does effectively make him the victim, just as it totally depoliticises any of the issues associated with his situation, because we never really know why Jennifer behaves the way she does—indeed, we never really know Jennifer at all, although we are aware of her as a professional woman. We are told that Scully is the best mother: 'It shamed him in front of Jennifer, the way Billie ran to him first' (58). By the end of the novel, this is confirmed. Indeed, the only acceptable woman in the novel is the significantly named child, Billie. The other female characters are a rogues' gallery of clichés, ranging from the snooty Marianne to the predatory Irma. Irma especially, the most prominent female character, is a misogynistic portrait of a woman who provokes and desires the very male violence that Scully supposedly worries about elsewhere in the novel. I can't see how you can read the following passage as in any way ironically directed at Scully (though I admit that he is certainly treated ironically elsewhere in the narrative), as Irma typifies all those portraits of women who 'ask for it':

Scully felt his foot go back. His leg. Felt himself adjusting his balance to kick her, the way you might kick down a toadstool in a winter paddock, turning it into a noxious cloud of shit in a second, and then he saw the look of fear and exultant expectation on the woman's face and felt sick to his bladder. He staggered, bringing himself short, and almost fell on her.

'Gutless, gutless!' she hissed. (227)

Elsewhere, when Scully finally does have sex with Irma, his disgust is palpable: 'She was soft to touch, too soft, like something overripe' (312). Too soft? Not 'hard' enough? Too...female?

How much safer to be back in the masculine setting of rural Ireland (at least masculine as depicted by Winton), with Scully part of the riders, the warriors of the past, ghostly male figures who seem to be straight out of *Iron John*, as does Scully himself when caught in Billie's admiring eyes: 'He looked like one of them, she saw it now....With his wild hair and arms, his big eyes streaming in the firelight' (377). Actually, I say that Ireland is a reassuringly masculine setting. It is, as far as the people are concerned, principally exemplified in the unreconstructed figure of Peter Keneally who wonderingly admires Scully for being 'able to cook and do all these womanly things' (255). Women, on the other hand, are confined to their traditional figurative role, embodied in the landscape: 'the big hipped line of mountains' (354).

At this level, it is possible to see *The Riders* as offering a wonderful double dip into gender: the women are all aggressors; the men are both more sensitive/caring/nurturing and tougher/wiser. You might object that Billie is the true source of wisdom in the novel, but I want to argue that Billie is never allowed to be a real female presence at all; and that indeed there is no woman in *The Riders*. Rather, the novel enacts a staving off of homosexual panic on Scully's part. The most interesting example of this, for me, is the constant focus on Scully's genitals, especially his balls. From a number of possible examples of Scully's ball-centred identity, this is my favourite: 'The cold had reached his balls now, they felt brittle as Christmas baubles between his thighs' (79). On another occasion Scully's 'nuts felt like snapper sinkers' (166). There is also a strange moment when Billie's view of her father also centres on his testicles: 'His bum wobbled and his nuts rattled stupidly' (244). It seems strange to me that Billie should share Scully's self-conscious focus on those all-important balls, and for me this moment reveals just how much the novel collapses the threat of sexual difference by masculinising everything. Another curious example is Billie's vision of phallic posts, 'with rolls on the end like men's dicks' (333). This literalising phallocentrism is even true of Scully's quest for Jennifer. In a sex shop (of course) in Amsterdam, the figure of Jennifer whom Scully has been pursuing turns out to be a man after all: 'Scully squinted as he lunged toward her, but already the wig was shifting beneath his hands and the startled bloke with the powdered face was falling off his heels and Scully was bellowing in fright' (344). What sort of a fright is this, exactly? Perhaps it is the fear that a fantasy of a world without women is being enacted; it is also a desire for such a world, and another scene involving Billie seems to me to make this clear. She has just been to the toilet:

'I looked for Femmes'.

'Yeah?'

'But they were all homos'.

'Hommes'.

'No, it was Homos on both doors. There was a man in one'.

Scully paused, coffee halfway to his mouth. 'Oh?'

'He was asleep on the floor. Too tired to pull his pants up, I spose. He had a flower sticking out his bum'. (264)

Billie is incorporated into Scully's world of balls and bums as a figure of the pre-sexual female body who offers the pubescent view of sexuality that is itself so characteristic of Winton's fiction. But in *The Riders* she also confirms a view of the world as all *hommes*—no *femmes* at all. Characteristically, this is both liberating and unsettling: bums that grow flowers—perhaps they do these things differently in Western Australia.

CM: It is perhaps rather a relief to get back to the much more straightforward bums in *Family Lore*, which has one description of a thoroughly satisfactory 'hands on' operation—or perhaps I should say 'hands up'. It describes 'the cardiac surgeon' 'grubbing out handfuls of...impacted faeces' from a constipated old codger called Tommy Winterbottom, who, at the successful conclusion of the procedure is described as 'sighing and swearing gently with pleasure. "Fucking Mother of God", says Tommy, "that's better"' (101). The rather bizarre homoerotics of this episode are certainly represented as being much more earthy, much more 'real', much more mutually satisfying than anything that might be gained from a relationship with a woman. Who wants the shifting possibilities of meaning in something like the symbolism of the well in Jolley's fiction when you can get down to the alimentary canal so easily?

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