

## A TOUR THROUGH MY CRITICS

Rae Desmond Jones

When Elaine Lindsay bravely asked me to speak at this Conference, she suggested tentatively that I might like to address the question of why reviewers of my recent novel *Wisdom*<sup>1</sup> had so completely ignored the spiritual references which are smattered frequently throughout the text. The prospect of attempting such a task has many attractions. I am sure any author who has been on the receiving end of a difficult review would agree. It does raise the delightful prospect of being able to review the reviewers, and to re-establish oneself as the author in the place of prime importance.

Despite the undeniable attractions, the question does present substantial obstacles. There are many cases of writers being poor critics of their own work. The task of stating with any certainty what exactly was in the minds of these reviewers could be beyond my empathetic powers. Each of them has his or her own quite distinct interpretation. Certainly it would be hard to find common ground between the reviewer who stated emphatically that I was not a gay writer, with the implication that this justified a few savage remarks, and the reviewer who dismissed the novel with a cavalier comparison between it and 'Priscilla, Queen of the Desert'. I might not have minded if *Wisdom* was a comparable commercial success.

The idea led me to re-read a number of old reviews of my earlier work, and certain relevant insights did present themselves to me as a result. Rather than talk at first about what I may have intended with *Wisdom*, I thought that it might be worthwhile to take a short tour through a few of these old reviews to see what they may have found. Some of them have been far ahead of me in knowing what I was about and the direction I was headed.

This has the advantage for me of being a relatively 'objective' procedure, whereby I am able to see my own work through another's eyes. It may have the advantage for you, I hope, of not hearing an author rabbit on too much about the contents of his creative muse. This leaves me open to the accusation that I will have been selective, and I accept the accusation. I have been kind on myself but I hope that I am also being kind on you.

The realistic and naturalistic tradition is of course the primary one in Australian fiction. The major achievements of Lawson and Furphy defined

it, and later writers like Peter Carey and Frank Moorhouse have arguably written their best work within the broad umbrella of this tradition. Carey's surrealist imagery still works within a narrative and context that is recognisably naturalistic, especially in *Oscar And Lucinda*, which is recognised as his major work to date. The same could be said of Patrick White's *Riders In The Chariot*, which works within realistic contexts while presenting the visionary experience of an elect.

My first novel was greeted as a modest addition to this tradition. Robin Gerster observed: 'The life and times of common men and women form a dominant, even distinguishing, subject in Australian narrative. Could a book like Bert Facey's *A Fortunate Life* have been so popular anywhere but Australia? At the other end of the literary scale, Patrick White's central concern has been to the extraordinary inner lives led by 'ordinary' people ...*The Lemon Tree*,<sup>2</sup> the first novel by the poet Rae Desmond Jones, can be situated in this native tradition.' Of course, he is right. Later in the same review, Gerster remarks: '...there is little evidence that John, despite a belated attempt 'to reverse the drift of years, the abnegation of desire and direction' and to broaden his horizons, discovers anything profound, the attribution of a certain spurious mysticism in his latter life notwithstanding'.<sup>3</sup>

A few reviewers commented on the spurious mysticism, although not all of them agreed that it was completely spurious. Stephen Lake wrote: 'John never achieved much clarity, but remained like a Coptic monk, significant not because he offered a persuasive alternative lifestyle but merely because he did not accept the status quo - however much he wanted to. This reveals others' insecurities and distorted perceptions.'<sup>4</sup>

Nonetheless *The Lemon Tree* does fit into the Naturalistic tradition, and it is arguable that whatever moral legitimacy may be claimed by John Evans' spiritual self-knowledge, the fashion in which it occurs may not fit easily into the genre.

My book of short stories *Walking The Line*<sup>5</sup> also fits into the naturalistic category, although a few stories ('Memoirs Of My Life With Rock n' Roll Idol Alan Kay', 'Using Standard Phrases') shift into the modernist mode which is often contrasted with the naturalistic one.

The poetry has been treated a little differently. Rodney Hall observed of *The Mad Vibe*:<sup>6</sup> 'Sometimes he seeks the key to order in the objective social aspects of personality: identity is always found in decoration / you are the

objective symbols of yourselves... but more often he turns to the felt mystery of self, the subjective intuition of being... so you won't ever no never need to stop & know that / slow painful sweetness deep in the belly / which is you & has nothing to say / or offer to anything or anyone else / except itself & the dumb fact of its being... the true poems in this collection are those in which he allows these two forces, the social and the intuitive, to conflict head-on.'<sup>7</sup>

Adding a little to Hall's review, Thomas Shapcott spoke thus about *Shakti*:<sup>8</sup> '...yet more important is the rhythmically deadpan tone that avoids verbal rhetoric'.<sup>9</sup> In this, Shapcott prefaced some of the observations made about my prose later on.

Also writing about *Shakti*, Christopher Pollnitz placed it in the modernist/mannerist school of poetry, but said: '...when Jones has a parable to unfold or an allegory to unwind, his work tenses and tautens.... The question is posed, how would the Buddha dispense serenity and shantih in our hyped up century. Strapped into a Maserati he takes to the circuits, entering, in a neat parody of Eliot, 'the silence of the whirlpool, the slope of the track'.<sup>10</sup>

I don't feel that I have to labour the similarity between this and the much more recent review by Elaine Lindsay of *Wisdom*: 'Have we lost the language with which to clothe, and thereby bring into being, the divinity?'<sup>11</sup>

However, back to *Shakti*. Carl Harrison-Ford opined: '...Both poets' (John Tranter and myself) terms are strongly social, but Jones works from events, moving narrative towards myth till events seem almost bloated. Fortunately, Jones does this without resorting to the easy option of twisting the implication of some established myth.'<sup>12</sup> I don't know what Carl thinks about me following the easy option in *Wisdom*.

*Wisdom* is therefore not as different as some people who were fond of my other books but did not like *Wisdom* seem to believe. Given this, the resistance to *Wisdom* on the part of perceptive and sincere individuals who did not have difficulty with similar themes in previous books begs an explanation. It might lie in Harrison-Ford's comment. Perhaps there is some problem with the use of established 'myth'. Yet Christopher Pollnitz wrote specifically about a poem in which an established 'myth' was written about.

The question posed by the book is: If some form of divine being manifested himself in Australia at this time, what would happen? It is assumed that the divine being is there with intention, even if the intention

is not conscious. He is not there with a purely decorative purpose. The truths to be communicated take form from the society and culture in which the message is received.

My intention is to present the sequence of events in a series of monologues expressing perceptions as much as points of view. Few characters in *Wisdom* can afford the luxury of a point of view. The book deals with poverty, sexual abuse and corruption, and presents them as they might be experienced in a world in which there are no fair rules. Life is brutal, if not always short. There are literary and symbolic signposts but they aren't easy to read and most ignore them.

I didn't need to introduce revelation to write about these things, and I have written about them without it before. *The Lemon Tree* does without it for most of its length, and when a spiritual element is apparent near the end, it has been argued that such an element is spurious. In *Wisdom*, the permeation of spiritual imagery throughout is the gauge of, and counterpoint to, the despair of the characters. This distinguishes *Wisdom* from 'Grunge Realism', despite some points of similarity.

To place social injustice in the context of imperfectly recognised perfection was to bring out the depth of pain in being unable to be what one is humanly capable of conceiving.

Bernhard is limited by his poverty and his fury. When he speaks in the novel, I give him an immediacy intended to convey the threat of his paranoia.

Jenny is a victim who, as she disintegrates under the impact of extreme abuse alcohol and drugs, is at the end able to go beyond her limitations and comprehend something of what is being offered.

Curlewis is limited by his own power and need for control.

Sophia must convey a message. All messages in this world are hype and advertising. The medium is the message. He becomes a rock star, an instant discardable prophet. His gender is ambiguous, and imposed sexual ambiguity is central to his popular appeal. He becomes human and corrupt, precisely as Jenny rises beyond her limitations.

The media dominates the environment of these people, even though they are outsiders. Through old movies on television Sophia images his divine aspects, as William Holden and Joan Crawford. The divine envelopes them in symbols with a kind of mundane luminescence. Great cats and lions appear as many creatures in cages or idealised in film.

Bernhard and Jenny are brought together firmly by the intervention of a man like a bird, who gives them a jaguar car which he says was theirs anyway. It will not make them happy. Pizzas are objects of great interest to Sophia. They are at once the bread of the eucharist and circular, the wheel of samsara, of rebirth and suffering.

The book is quite different in intention to Jill Paton Walsh's *Knowledge Of Angels*.<sup>13</sup> Her book has central characters who are articulate and are empowered to debate the existence or otherwise of God. They want to understand intellectually. I like the book but no comparison can be made, because *Wisdom* uses different methods and is about different things. The characters of *Wisdom* are suspicious of communication and go to some lengths not to understand.

As a result of my own small journey through some of my critics, I have found evidence that *Wisdom* contains many of the elements of the earlier work. Where the earlier poems and stories tended to mingle the sacred and profane themes with social and sexual comment, *Wisdom* is an attempt to integrate them. The linking of the profane and sexually explicit with religious experience is not new, but the use of the language of those without language to raid the inexpressible is at the heart of the book.

The model for the language, and the use of the dramatic monologue, is William Faulkner's *As I Lay Dying*.<sup>14</sup> Like Faulkner, I have at times taken the liberty of extending the language of the characters to express what they meant but could not say. Judgement on whether the book works effectively is not up to me. It is not 'my' book any longer. I have faith in the book and faith in what it says. Like most difficult children, it must be let free to be tested by the world. I am outside it now, and I hope that I've given it a small push on its way.

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#### REFERENCES

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- <sup>2</sup> Rae Desmond Jones, *The Lemon Tree*, (Sydney: Angus and Robertson, 1990).
- <sup>3</sup> Robin Gerster, 'Loser's heroic struggle', *Melbourne Herald*, 7 April 1990.
- <sup>4</sup> Stephen Lake, 'Close To The Bone', *Australian Book Review*, June 1990.
- <sup>5</sup> Rae Desmond Jones, *Walking the Line*, (North Sydney: Red Press, 1979).
- <sup>6</sup> Rae Desmond Jones, *The Mad Vibe* (Sydney: Saturday Centre Press, 1975).
- <sup>7</sup> Rodney Hall, 'Poetry Uncoiling Like Whips', *The Australian*, 16 August 1975.
- <sup>8</sup> Rae Desmond Jones, *Shakti* (St. Lucia: Makar Press, 1977).
- <sup>9</sup> Thomas Shapcott, 'Trick Endings With a Bit of Mayhem', *The Australian*, 18-19 February 1978.

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- <sup>10</sup> Christopher Pollnitz, 'The New Mannerism', *Southerly*, 1978.  
<sup>11</sup> Elaine Lindsay, 'The Getting of Wisdom', *The Australian*, 10-11 June 1995.  
<sup>12</sup> Carl Harrison Ford, 'The Precision of Dream', *Sydney Morning Herald*, 8 April 1978. See  
Kelth Ward, *Religion & Revelation* (Oxford University Press, 1994).  
<sup>13</sup> Jill Paton Walsh, *Knowledge of Angels* (London: Black Swan Books, 1995).  
<sup>14</sup> William Faulkner, *As I Lay Dying*, (London: Penguin Books).