

## Ordering Chaos: Nature and Identity Formation

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The motivation for this paper began some time ago with a reading of Mary Louise Pratt's *Imperial Eyes* in which she gives an account of the impact of the Swedish naturalist Carl Linne—often referred to by the Latin form of his name, Linnaeus—'on travel and travel writing' (Pratt 24). Two sentences stood out for me. The first was the claim that his work *The System of Nature* changed the way 'European citizens made, and made sense of, their place on the planet' (24). I take this to mean that a classificatory system that identifies, in the first instance, plants, by their reproductive parts effected a change in the way people saw the world around them and, most importantly, their sense of self in relation to that world. It was an identity that was dependent upon a relationship with the natural world, and Linnaeus had provided the language for that.

The second sentence that stood out was the wonderfully allusive statement that, "The Ariadne thread in Botany," said Linnaeus, "is classification, without which there is chaos." (25). The idea of language ordering chaos seemed particularly evocative of the nature and role of Lacan's symbolic order. Here was a way, perhaps, of talking not just about the 'chaos' of random nature, but of Lacan's 'l'hommelette'—the pre-symbolic subject, who overcomes chaos through the order of language. And yet the very image of Ariadne's thread, with its evocation of myth and the realm of the feminine does, at one level, contest the notion of a secure order or pattern. It would seem that the seeds of deconstruction of Linnaeus' system were present from the beginning. Pratt herself seems to suggest something similar when she (twice) states that the naturalist's production of knowledge 'has some decidedly non-phallic aspects, perhaps alluded to by Linnaeus' own image of Ariadne following her thread out of the labyrinth of the Minotaur' (56). The fact that Ariadne's thread provided the means for Theseus to escape from the labyrinth may diminish the force of Pratt's argument, but what she has in mind is the relationship of the 'naturalist-hero' to the world around him (there were very few 'hers'):

Wandering through countrysides, looking, gathering, improvising, reacting to whatever turns out to be there, Linnaeus' disciples do not wholly resemble Dr Franksteins or fire-stealing Prometheuses. (56)

Identity can, of course, be considered more broadly—for example in national, cultural, political or sexual terms. What these discourses tend to have in common is an emphasis on notions of the 'Other'. Geoffrey Stokes in *The Politics of Identity in Australia* has this to say: 'To claim an identity ... is always to construct an 'Other' in more or less pernicious or benign ways' (5).

What I'd like to do now is to sketch in an argument—drawing, rather ambitiously, on literature spanning one hundred and fifty years—which suggests that the significant shifts in the way nature is represented as 'Other' or 'Not-Other', signal profound differences in identity formation. And the drive is to make nature 'Not-Other'. There

seem to be three distinct phases in how nature is represented—and responded to—in the literature. In the early writing there is strong evidence of a desire to classify, to adopt the position of the observing outsider who is struggling to find a place in the new world. This shifts to detailed descriptions in which nature represents symbolically some aspect of the self. And finally there is evidence of self-inscription where the self/other distinction begins to collapse.

In the first of these stages the Linnaeus disciple, with a simple classificatory system in hand, could take possession of the new in all corners of the world; the exotic flora, fauna and human inhabitants could be made familiar. To quote Pratt:

The (lettered, male, European) eye that held the system could familiarise ('naturalise') new sites/sights immediately upon contact, by incorporating them into the language of the system. (31)

The texts I have chosen to discuss include fiction and non-fiction and the focus is on the ways in which an unstable self is represented in the different narratives. The instability suggests a self in the process of change. In an 1847 publication about the Swan River settlement entitled *The Bushman; or Life in a New Country*, by E.W. Landor, there is an entire chapter devoted to the botany of the area and its classification by genus and species. Consistent with Landor's attitudes throughout his work, his interest in classifying the botany of the region is to do with its 'usefulness'—as building material, fodder or food. In this section he establishes himself as the practical man, the down-to-earth colonist with a functional approach to the natural world. There is also a 'scientific' chapter on the 'Physical organisation of the Natives' which concludes that the European was superior in every way. This was consistent with Linnaeus' views contained in his descriptions of the six varieties of *Homo sapiens*.

But one of the most remarkable passages is the description of Perth water from the slopes of Mount Eliza. The narrator muses whether the scene had been 'designed for thousands of years to be viewed only by savages, mindless as the birds and fishes that frequented its waters' and, additionally,

Had it always existed thus, or been growing during centuries under the hand of Nature, until it should be adapted to the habitation of civilised man? And was that period now arrived, or were we premature in seizing upon our inheritance before it was thoroughly prepared for our reception? ... This singular country appears to represent the ancient character of the earth in one of the earlier stages of formation. It represents that epoch when animal life was first developed in the lowest order of quadrupeds (Landor 154).

There is a curious unease present in this passage, which arises from the capacity to classify. As European man the narrator is certain of his rights. Easily dismissed is the possibility of Aboriginal possession, but more troubling is the proposition that 'seizing upon our inheritance' may be premature. If the 'lowest order of quadrupeds' still prevails, what sort of inheritance is this for the 'highest order' of men? Nature represents a primitive Other, the self-that-I-am-not. To inherit this, to possess this, is to incorporate that lack into oneself and to be presented with a crisis in identity. For 'civilised man' nature here represents the threat of the primitive, the unsophisticated, the uncultured, the wild.

Forty years later, Ethel Hassell kept a diary of her life in the Great Southern district of Western Australia. This was eventually published as *My Dusky Friends*, which is more informatively subtitled 'Aboriginal life, customs and legends and glimpses of station

life at Jarramungup (*sic*) in the 1880's'. Hassell, like many others in the period, 'took up natural history and botany as a study' (8).

What is interesting about Hassell's account is that there is very little evidence of an ego that needs to possess or dominate—either nature or the Aborigines. Gender may well be the key to this. She tells stories against herself in which the Aboriginal women laugh at her inability to see detail in the landscape. In contrast to Landor, Hassell positions herself throughout her narrative as someone who needs to learn, to be taught. She uses Aboriginal words for birds, animals and places and these are italicised—indicating, I think, their authority but also that Hassell is not claiming them as her own. She is employing someone else's language, acknowledging her position as an outsider, or at very best as someone whose language has no *greater* claim to name the world. The following passage is typical:

When the seeds of the wattle tree were ripe, they were collected by the women and ground into meal. The *wuenga* or black wattle flowers were followed by those of the *munert* or rasperry jam—a species of *Acacia*, also a beautiful tree in shape and colour ... (19)

Here we have the common name, wattle, alongside the botanical name, *Acacia*, and the more specific Aboriginal names, all in the one paragraph—and it is the latter that achieve a certain authority because of their specificity: by going beyond the generic names the particular properties of plants are invoked. And this is important in an Aboriginal culture where attention to detail, the specific, is so highly valued. To some extent Hassell can only mimic this knowledge through employing Aboriginal names. At best she can achieve a hybrid identity through employing both European and Aboriginal language systems to describe and classify her environment. For her, nature is both familiar *and* other.

A paradigmatic shift occurs in the 1920s with writers like Katharine Susannah Prichard and E.L. Grant Watson. In this phase nature is still regarded as separate from the self, but able to represent an aspect of self. It begins to shift away from representing that-which-I-am-not. The first work I wish to discuss to illustrate this phase is the 1937 novel of Seaforth Mackenzie, *The Young Desire It*. It is a semi-autobiographical work about growing up in the late 1920s. Its representations of landscape encompass what Charles Taylor calls a 'modern feeling for nature' which begins in the late eighteenth-century. In this 'culture of modernity,'

the meaning that the natural phenomena bear is no longer defined by the order of nature itself or by the Ideas which they embody. It is defined through the effect of the phenomena on us, in the reactions they awaken ... Nature has become a vast reservoir of what T.S. Eliot called 'objective correlatives' to human sentiments and moods. (Taylor 299)

While one may well want to query the notion of the (apparently unmediated) 'order of nature itself', the concept of a relationship, and one that is largely affective rather than rational, is important because in this formulation the emphasis is on an identity in which interiority plays a crucial role.

Throughout *The Young Desire It* MacKenzie represents the interior life of the adolescent Charles Fox in terms of his registering of the natural world:

The problem of self came on him again ... The brilliance of his own dawn had gone like the day's, clouded over by a high wind from the north-west and distressed by a queuing breeze of doubt ... He believed it was the day's sudden change that dulled his mind; he felt his flesh aching as though for rain; and rain would come. (Mackenzie 76)

Mackenzie goes beyond the 'pathetic fallacy' and sees nature as a shaping force separate from, and beyond the control of, the imagination or language.

The use of nature to talk explicitly about the self is taken further by Peter Cowan in *The Colour of the Sky* (1986) where the links between identity and landscape are self-consciously explored. Lee Jacobson, the main character, has returned from a holiday in England and goes to a very isolated station in the North-West to try to find out something about his past—to 'find himself'. Throughout the novel there is an insistence on Lee's inability to name what he can see. He cannot distinguish between wattles or mulga; in a gully he comes across 'trees and shrubs I could never have named' (Cowan 29). The same is true of the bird life: 'There were birds I saw briefly and could not have named' (112). This inability to name the flora and fauna is symptomatic of his lack of identity within a family history. He cannot name relations in photographs. He does not know whether or not the woman at the station, Annette, is his cousin. The lack of the 'real' extends to how Lee sees the landscape; although a powerful presence within the narrative, for him it is simulacra, 'I could hardly feel any of this was real, more like some of the backgrounds for television advertising. It was tv country' (106). Jacobson is not connected to people or place. This lack of relationship signifies a lack of identity. My point is that Cowan is drawing on a set of literary conventions, a literary history of identity and landscape, and thus he can effectively talk about the unformed self—the chaos, if you like—through Lee's inability to name, or relate to his surroundings.

Kim Scott employs similar conventions to Cowan in his novel *True Country* (1993) where his part-Aboriginal character Billy heads to the Kimberleys to discover his past, his identity. In this case his quest is successful. He is told by a member of the Aboriginal community, Sebastian:

Young men ... come into a circle of old ones, after they been in the bush a long time, and they know the true names of things ... And they say the word, touch that carved stick in the proper places, eat the food ... Give him the power, see. (Scott 246-7)

By the end of the novel, through acquiring the ability to name and relate, Billy achieves what he set out to do, '... he knew who he was, he recognised the land below him (254).'

Finally, and necessarily very briefly, I would like to suggest there is a further and significant development in the narration of nature and identity which is evident in the works of writers like Winton and Carey, to name but two. Nature is no longer represented as an Other—that-which-I am-not and nor is it an 'objective correlative' of a true-self—but it becomes 'that-which-I-am.' So in *Cloudstreet*, Fish Lamb whose element is water, finally becomes his 'true self' by returning to the river. It was an earlier 'drowning' that had caused Fish to be split between two worlds. At the end he becomes whole again.

I'm Fish Lamb for those seconds it takes to die, as long as it takes to drink the river ... and I burst into the moon sun and stars of who I really am. Being Fish Lamb (Winton 424).

A similar impulse is at work in Peter Carey's *Bliss* where Harry Joy's final death is as a result of being hit by a falling branch of the tree that he had planted himself. The wonderfully poetic conclusion, free, I think, of irony sees Harry rising into the trees:

trees he could name, and touch. Their leaves stroked him like feathers, eucalypt

graced him with mint ... He was in a place he had been in before ... he spread himself thinner, and thinner, as thin as a gas, and when he had made himself thin enough he sighed, and the trees, those tough-barked giants exchanging one gas for another, pumping water, making food, were not too busy to take this sigh back in through their leaves ... so that in time it became part of their tough old heart wood (Carey 282).

Harry Joy, like David Foster's characters in *The Glade Within the Grove*, metamorphoses into a tree. His apotheosis is discernible in the fine blue line on the thirty-fifth ring of a tree. Carey's description provides an account of what Harry could see, and smell, and touch and feel. It notes that he has returned to a place where he had been before, and in doing so suggests both an end and a beginning. There is a merging of past and present, the material and spiritual, self and nature.

In summary this paper has argued that the relationship between nature and identity within Australian narrative begins with an observing, classificatory self with nature as Other, moves to description in which nature may be seen as constituting an objective correlative, especially of the emotional self and, the final phase, self-inscription within nature, where the gap between self and Other is closed, and hence the very category 'identity' dissolves; if there is no 'other', then the concept of self collapses, at least within a modernist self/other binary. What is produced in the most recent texts is a postmodern fluidity of self. Contemporary novels do contain writing which is classificatory and descriptive, so these 'phases' have not disappeared. But I have found no evidence of self-inscription in the early writing.

This account of the final phase poses some interesting questions within the psychoanalytic realm, especially for Object Relations theory, which would argue that symbiotic relationships are indicative of a self that has not reached maturity in autonomy. However, contemporary literary representations of nature would suggest that autonomy is illusory and that symbiotic relationships signify a previously unrealised maturity, not the reverse. This view of self, and the links with the natural world, bear comparison with Aboriginal cosmology. Through identifying with the order of nature the 'chaos' of self is at least ameliorated. Identification with nature evokes more strongly the second of my two starting points, the image of Ariadne's thread, rather than the first, classificatory language. Ariadne's thread could ensure escape from the labyrinth through recognition of the importance of the tactile, the visual, the relational, and the understanding that the way out of chaos is to return to the place where one began, a place that is already known.

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