WAYS OF BEING AUSTRALIAN: EXPLORING ISSUES OF IDENTITY THROUGH FOUR CONTEMPORARY AUSTRALIAN LITERARY TEXTS

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CONTEXT

In the process of rehabilitation following bypass surgery in May 1966, one constant and enduring thread in my life has been reading. My reading has ranged over a wide span, largely of fiction, from Chaim Potok's *Davita's Harp* through Marina Warner's *Indigo* to Isabel Allende's *The House of Spirits* and her autobiographical *Paula*.

I am exploring whether and how, if that were so, the reading of books might have contributed to the process of healing following bypass surgery. Such a dramatic intervention into the lives of our bodies is traumatic. The process of reclaiming our spirits and some sense of meaning after the sudden shock of major surgery proves quite daunting. Clinging to the familiar raft of reading books in the turbulence of such treacherous waters was a consolation. It gave me some sense of continuity and meaning, despite a severe shift in the quality of my eyesight, and in memory and concentration in the weeks following surgery.

Since the roots of my identity lie embedded in Australian soil, I intend to focus on four texts by Australian writers to explore issues about being Australian, to throw some light on what may have been their contribution to the process of my recovery of identity, following that traumatic intervention into my existence as an Australian man in his sixties. The texts I chose were: Richard Flanagan (1994) *Death of a River Guide;* Christopher Koch (1996) *Highways to a War;* Drusilla Modjeska (1994) *The Orchard;* and Sally Morrison (1994) *Mad Meg.* For the purposes of this paper, I will make brief notes on *Highways to a War* and *Mad Meg,* while considering the remaining two texts more fully.

HIGHWAYS TO A WAR

First, Christopher Koch's *Highways to a War,* an adventure story about a fabulous Australian war photographer. The novel begins with his disappearance in Cambodia, as the Khmer Rouge under Pol Pot are gaining

the upper hand. The hero of this epic war tale is a Tasmanian, Michael Longford, who before his disappearance and probable execution at the hands of the Khmer Rouge had already assumed the mantle, among his fellow journalists and photographers, of a legendary figure; a person of singular bravery in battle, a risk-taker, silent, almost taciturn, of prodigious and gentle generosity, who had become passionately attached to Vietnam and then to Cambodia and to the cause of freedom in imperialist struggles. The writer creates a sense of danger, allure, in these exotic Asian contexts, by assembling fragments of events and images which encircle the protagonists. We begin with the disappearance and move with his searcher, another Tasmanian, a lawyer with whom Langford grew up, seeking out what pathways may have led to his disappearance and almost certain death. While the resolution of the mystery moves chronologically through the Vietnam and Cambodian conflicts, there are several narrative voices: that of the lawyer boyhood companion, through to those of one of his key journalist friends, interspersed with the autobiographical voice of Michael Langford, whose 'audio diaries' and photographs arrived in the lawyer's hands from Asia. Other journalists in the inner circle of his friends add their narrative voices on the way.

Koch has said that one model for Langford's portrait and story was a fellow Tasmanian, Neil Davidson, who was a combat photographer in Indochina and was killed in a small-scale military coup in Bangkok. Another model could well have been Sean Flynn (son of Errol), a stylish and flamboyant war photographer who disappeared in Cambodia in 1970.

One reviewer, Robin Gerster, finds some flaws in Koch's portrayal of Asia.

> One of Koch's great strengths is his ability to write 'serious' fiction in a popular mode ... Sometimes Koch resorts to travelogue, notably in his portrait of sensual Singapore *circa* 1965, before it became 'a sanitised metropolis of the late twentieth century.' The novel is suffused by a nostalgia for a picturesque colonial East that has passed into history...[1]

My sense of the entrapments, fears, pain and ambivalences of war in Vietnam, and especially in Cambodia, has been deepened by Koch's writing. So, while the otherness of Asians may have escaped him in this novel, he has captured powerfully the otherness and horrors of war.

This book is a conservatively written 'boys' book', focusing on the heroic journeys to 'the Orient' by its legendary hero who is fascinated and entrapped by the exotic other, and who is last seen hung to a cross by Khmer Rouge soldiers, along with other hated foreigners. Michael Langford, the

farmer's son from Tasmania, is a contradictory and paradoxical mixing of a resourceful and sensitive country boy who remains an enigma. Is Christopher Koch proposing that a backwoods, rural Australian boy, to become a heroic Australian man, must undergo transformation by the blood sacrifice of war in an exotic oriental landscape away from home?

To be authentically an Australian male, according to the heroic images created in this large book, one needs to suppress gentler qualities, perhaps even generosity, in the bitter struggle of keeping alive. I would need to think about such an invitation, though those qualities of generosity, commitment to marginalised others, do complicate the heroic image, and do have their particular appeal.

MAD MEG

In a review of this book, Helen Daniel writes:

> Midway through Sally Morrison's new novel, *Mad Meg*, I began to develop the scissor twitch, an almost overwhelming urge to cut it up and reassemble it into a new structure...[2]

My own response to this rambling family history, covering a number of generations of the Motte and Coretti families, and moving between Melbourne, Italy and Paris, was also a 'scissor twitch', but one to prune and cut back on its length, to sharpen and refine. It is demanding, with its shifts in focus, location, theme and character. At its heart are three women and a man: Isobel Coretti (with her child), her mother Stella, *nee* Motte, Isobel's vivacious, anorexic, drug-ridden and suicidal sister Allegra (her child and her unstable, violent partner) and their Italian-born artist father, Henry Coretti. With her shifts in narrative, time and place, we explore the influence of their mother's and father's particular and different family histories on the two sisters and their life choices. Both sisters, with close friends, are involved in founding and managing an artists' co-operative and gallery named 'Mad Meg', after the Breugel painting of the same name, a picture and image which is a central icon in the sprawling plot (which reflects Meg's apocalyptic journey depicted in the painting).

Helen Daniel speaks of Mad Meg being 'on the rampage, gathering the future into her basket as she charges through history in mad furore'. And Isobel, the narrator, muses:

> Eggs are cracking all around Mad Meg. The housewives, who have followed her to hell, flay the monsters around her with sticks and swats, but the monsters are our imperfections and failures and they are perpetual; they swarm up the walls and out of water never-endingly. They occupy the sky and burn our horizons.[3]

The book does finally reach some resolution and peace in its ending. Meg's fantastic journey through a nightmare landscape of cracked eggs and marauding, misshapen monsters is an embodiment of Isobel's struggle to uncover contradictory roots of her awakening self, overshadowed by a famous, if erratic, father, a domineering mother and a highly talented, jealous sister. Her monsters are not only these significant others, but they are, too, 'our imperfections and failures made flesh and they are perpetual'.

Despite all its sprawling narratives, perhaps because of them, this book grows on the reader. Sally Morrison, through the gentle, talented, ambiguous Isobel, is proposing that to recover our Australian roots, ourselves, we need to mine deep into our own and our earlier generations, and their living historical contexts, to come home to ourselves. Growing up an artist and an authentic person is a struggle for Isobel; so many marauding monsters with which to grapple; so many levels to uncover and peel off; so many entangled stories and histories to confront and untangle. This is Sally Morrison's invitation to us, her fellow Australians, her fellow human beings. She has given me much food for thought, about my cultural, historical, familial and genetic roots.

DEATH OF A RIVER GUIDE

The Franklin River in southwest Tasmania, particularly in those breath-taking images caught in photographs taken by the late Peter Dombrovskis, is an icon, a magnet which draws me to ponder wild, untamed places, full of life, promise and danger. That savage country, with its wild rivers, lives in the pages of Richard Flanagan's remarkable *Death of a River Guide*. We are introduced to the tough lives of the river guides and their customers, (whom the guides dub 'punters'), as they trek and are tossed in the boiling river rapids. Rivers dominate this narrative like devouring and uncontrollable monsters. So do stories, as they flash by the river guide Aljaz Cosini, who is recalling his fatal trek with frightened and naive punters and another seasoned river guide. We are present at the dying of Aljaz, who has plunged into the river and is entrapped in a deadly rock cleft, remembering and recreating stories as he drowns. As Liam Davison writes in his review:

> It seems his whole life from his miraculous birth... [in Southern Europe] to his final humiliation on the river, has been leading inevitably to this moment. And now the river carries not only his own past but the pasts of all those who have gone before him like a great tide of stories washing over him, pushing him down, forcing more and more water into his lungs. *Stories, stories, stories. A world and a land and even a river full of the damn slippery things.* [4]

If the central, vibrant icon which enlivens the narrative in *Highways to a War* is both war and the exotic East, and Breughel's painting in *Mad Meg*, then the dangerous, death-dealing river swirls through *Death of a River Guide*, bearing history, memory and threads of story. This is a haunting, powerful book, not easy to read; in fact quite demanding, because of its fractured, many-layered, multivocal narrative, its shift in time from the present drowning and its contexts to Aljaz's early life, ancestry and painful growing up and to that early enigmatic history of convictism and Black wars.

Davison reminds us,

> Aljaz Cosini, in his dying moments, confronts the truth that underlies Tasmania's history. *If you leave you can never be free.* The past, the brutality, the wrongs and injustices must be faced rather than avoided.[5]

That graced storyteller, Arnold Zable reminds us of the power of story telling:

> Ultimately we tell stories because we must. Stories can draw us together. Stories can reveal the forgotten past. Stories can soar over oceans and continents [and raging rivers too?] And stories link us to the wisdom [and the failures?] of our collective past.[6]

Those additions/amendments to Arnold Zable's meditation remind us of the undertows of frailty and ambiguity coursing through Richard Flanagan's narrative. Being authentically Australian as viewed through these three texts is being a child of history, culture and story and a living tapestry full of many strong and contradictory threads. No simple thing. No one, linear story, but rich in contradiction and of many levels and voices.

THE ORCHARD

At first, the narrative landscape into which Drusilla Modjeska invites us seems removed from violent wars, riven family relations and turbulent rivers and history. It is at once more peaceful, meditative and quieter. But we could be deceiving ourselves. In an interview with Rosemary Sorensen,

Drusilla Modjeska reminds us that the climax of her work is a retelling of that powerful fairytale 'The handless maiden'. But that particular icon reverberates back from the end through all parts of the text. Modjeska muses:

> 'The Winterbourne' story is about the girl having her hands cut off, the way this culture, clearly does cut off the hands of our young girls. The adultery story seemed to me a silver hands story, the way we cope with culture, having our hands cut off, with the hands given us by men, basically and the enormous importance we put on being loved, being desired, being seen, being the wife of, the mistress of... the way we live through that set of experiences, and what I finish up saying there is, whether you're wife or whether you're mistress, you've got silver hands. And the question is to be seen as a woman.[7]

Earlier in the same interview the writer proposes why she was strongly attracted to the essay/reflective form of writing.

> The essay, when it's reclaimed from the academy, is a form which is very horizontal, and allows very philosophical aspects... [at] the same time as anecdotal or fictional or narrative aspects. And this suits me and my kind of temperament very well. So I can move between the historical, with people such as [the artists] Artemesia Gentileschi and Stella Bowen, who are real, and you can go back and read the records yourself, to the fictional characters, and to historical and theoretical questions, discursive writing to anecdotal. I find it attractive to read and fabulous to write. And it seems to form naturally for me...[8]

Drusilla Modjeska is very much at home in this beautifully wrought book. Though its form is predominantly that of the pensive essay, the whole pace of the work is enlivened by finely written narratives. If the three other texts have their central life-giving icons (war, a painting, rivers and landscapes of history and memory), *The Orchard* has a number that course through its pages. These include the verandah of the mountain cottage where narrator is both hidden and observing life; the mistress entangled with desire, in the eyes and arms of an adulterous husband; the limitations and sensitive awareness of the narrator becoming blind; the contradictions between the seasonal floods of fruition in the winterbourne and the girls and women, stifled and handicapped by an elitist and competitive schooling system for the privileged daughters of the well-to-do; and the frightening juxtaposition of the Italian Renaissance artist Artemesia Gentileschi, raped and abused, who has her sensitive hands 'subjected to thumbscrews as a test of her veracity,' whose drawing hand, with paintbrush, appears as a backdrop on the cover design; and the handless maiden in her father's orchard; as well as the garden/orchard in the mountain retreat, the girl-narrator's garden in 'The Winterbourne' - dazzling with blooms and then

uprooted on the orders of a repressive and jealous head-mistress, and the apple orchard in the maiden's tale.[9]

That fable of the handmaid, passed from generation to generation of women, is crystallised by Helen Elliott:

> ... it is the tale of a woman's way in the world and tells of a 'maiden' who finds her true self, her true spirit only after years of solitude and pain.
>
> In the process the girl loses her hands, has silver hands fashioned by the prince who loves her, but only comes into being as herself through solitude, reflection and the company of her daughter. The notion of her 'self' is conveyed through the miraculous regrowth of her hands. What Modjeska is after, in her life, and what she addresses in *The Orchard*, is the possibility of women re-finding their 'own' hands and not using their 'silver' hands. Some versions of this fairytale are called, marvellously, 'The orchard'.[10]

This overcrowded list of icons points up the rich imagery of this text. Running like a throbbing blood-red artery through its tapestry and reflecting subtly its centrality, is that issue of being woman in Australia: '... And the question is to be seen as woman.' A final word from Drusilla Modjeska, now just fifty years old:

> The older I get the more I think it's a great achievement of femininity to be many things - the woman who writes is also the woman who keeps house, cooks, has friends, lovers... Friendship is the centre. Central to my life is a very long and complex conversation held with other people who have an affinity with me - all my friends who have read *The Orchard* say they recall the conversations in it as very much conversations we've had over the last few years... the sort of things women in mid-life are thinking.[11]

I recall the early 1980s, when I was engaged on a project in 'conversational narratives' where a small number of Australians recorded with me their life histories as a way of musing on their changing searches for meaning. One of the subjects reflected, as a male, that white Australian middle-class Catholic males (he was one) find it particularly difficult to engage in exploring and telling to others their inner life histories. They confront all kinds of blocks and hindrances. As one of these males, now in his mid-sixties, who has recently undergone the trauma of bypass surgery, I am invited, encouraged, perhaps even liberated by the conversation of reading Drusilla Modjeska's *The Orchard*. It seems now to be time for not only women to grow their 'own hands', rather than 'silver hands', to open their hearts and to speak their inner lives.

CONVERGENCES AND DISCONTINUITIES

If I were to rank these books, I would choose *The Orchard* as the most complex, subtle and beautifully wrought of the four. The 'boys' books', in quite different ways and with differing styles, propose ways in which it may be possible to be an Australian male in the late twentieth century. Both are heroic in form - is that a way of being open only to males? - but Richard Flanagan's Aljaz Cosini is an anti-hero, a rebel-hero, a non-hero, while Michael Langford is both cast as hero by his narrator and his close journalist colleagues, and undermines and transcends the heroic mould by his innate bush generosity and commitment to others and their lost causes. Maybe Homer's Odysseus was not so simply heroic, but more complex, riven with contradictions and ambiguities, both victim and victor, both child and man.

What then of Isobel Coretti, her mother, sister and father? Is she a hero? She, too, is full of Homeric contradictions and ambiguities. Their roots lie partly in diversity of culture and history, but the other deep source of contradiction lies in mother and daughters being women, with all those limitations and barriers created in Australia and its artistic communities, and in Henry Coretti being of Italian ancestry, European origin and a painter, but principally in his being a male Australian artist. And Drusilla Modjeska's protagonists, whether they be Ettie and her 'daughter'; the woman caught in an adulterous relationship with a man; the narrator, entangled in blindness and solitude; the girls locked into the repressions and brutalities of the young women's academy; or indeed, Artemesia Gentileschi or the handless maiden? In what senses are these heroes? If Michael Langford and Isobel Coretti become heroic through travelling in Australian and foreign landscapes, Aljaz Cosini, and the narrator/protagonist of *The Orchard* move in inner landscapes, landscapes of the spirit and the heart, on inner journeys of transformation. While I find the former two inhabiting fascinating, sometimes even enthralling stories, I am fed and satisfied more by the latter two, particularly at this stage of my life's inner journey.

CONCLUSION

I began by hinting that the leisure found for reading these contemporary Australian texts was created by my recovery from recent heart surgery. Each text challenged me to ponder ways in which I and others could be Australian. And what the insights gained from encountering these four

writers have contributed to my process of healing and recovery? Perhaps that belongs to another paper on the experience of heart bypass surgery, (which I have now written). Here it is too easy to say blandly that each has enriched me through the intimate and enlivening process of conversation with writers and the worlds and people they have brought to birth. Such diversity of narrative and of worlds has meant that I can measure my own self-understanding and identity with and against those identities created by the four writers. Both they, their worlds and I are all Australian; we all inhabit this landscape and its Dreaming. Their narratives and their characters have now been absorbed into my own Dreaming and tensions. Unresolved questions about being Australian and male in the 1990s have become my food. It will no longer, in seeking a harbour in which I might shelter for my recovery, be easy to feel that there is one single shore. Our landscape is inhabited with many ghosts, spirits, a company of strangers and friends, altogether.

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