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QUEENSLAND LITERATURE:

IS IT DIFFERENT?

The question of a literary representation of a distinctive Queensland identity invites discussion in several areas: to what extent does Queensland have a distinctive identity, and what evidence may be gleaned from literary texts to support the notion that this identity exists; what does it mean to be a Queenslander in the wider Australian context? This article will discuss Thea Astley, Jessica Anderson and David Malouf.

The concept of a Queensland identity in state or regional terms seems most useful when considered in the wider context of Australian national identity. On the national level Russel Ward's *The Australian Legend* and in more recent years, Richard White's *Inventing Australia* have acknowledged and reinforced the notion that much of what it means to be Australian is located in a powerful bush myth. As Gillian Whitlock notes, "the thrust of this myth was very much a centrist impulse and it was . . . a dream of the bush generated by an urban intelligentsia in the southern cities" (1984: p. 87).

Whitlock argues that much of what is myth at the national level — certainly in Sydney and Melbourne — is much more deeply anchored in the reality of Queensland's "social, economic and political underpinnings". She observes that

> Queensland's political economy is grounded in primary industry, the percentage of population living in rural areas is the highest for all mainland states and our resources policy has meant that Queensland has continued to be a frontier for overseas investors.
>
> (Whitlock, 1984: p. 88)

Other factors of difference such as Queensland's decentralised development, "the peculiar character of governance in Queensland, with its pronounced tradition of authoritarianism and anti-intellectualism" (Fitzgerald, 1984: p. 632) and Queensland's refusal "to acknowledge the legitimacy of dissent and pluralism" (Fitzgerald, 1984: pp. 632-3) also seem to support the notion that the nationalist myth has had special meaning at the level of Queensland state consciousness.

Perhaps it is precisely in these terms, because Queensland has historically often tended to "fit" the bush ethos myth of Australianness so demonstrably well, that certain oppositions and reactions have been constructed to serve vested interests at a more parochial level. Hence,

"Queenslanders are different" becomes an important distinction. More specifically, it is suggested that an intelligentsia operating at the level of Queensland regional interests must contend with "the monolithic, continental perspective" of the "core" states — New South Wales and Victoria. Writers and commentators such as journalists, critics and historians, do in fact strive to construct through literary representation a distinctive regional identity. Whitlock expresses similar ideas in these terms:

> . . . the nationalist myth cast a role for Queensland as the Big Country via the city/bush opposition and Queensland writers and critics have tended to receive and reproduce this sense of being a fringe-dweller, the "other" defined as outsider by powers located elsewhere.
>
> (1984: p. 88)

Evidence that a Queensland regional identity has stemmed largely from this centrist impulse is suggested by other factors. From a southern perspective Queensland may be seen to be on the fringe, not only geographically and economically but politically and perhaps even culturally. In contrast to Sydney and Melbourne, Brisbane has for a great many years been seen as "a big country town"; certainly not a "real city." Queensland exhibits extremes in other respects: climatically it is tropical as compared with the more temperate southern states. In other capitals — even wider afield than Sydney and Melbourne — Queensland politics and Joh Bjelke-Petersen in particular have earned for the state derision and ridicule.

The taint of cultural backwardness and unsophisticated dogmatism goes hand in hand with this generally unfavourable image of Queensland. To whatever extent this image may be inaccurate — deserving of the label "myth" — it nevertheless seems quite firmly established as part of the Queensland identity.

Although Whitlock acknowledges the existence of many of the differences outlined above, she holds back from the assertion that a culturalist regionalism exists, preferring to temper her argument in terms of "a particular identity within the Australian framework . . . which I will label as "different" rather than "regional", for it is not "made in Queensland" (1984: p. 86). Such a distinction is perhaps fastidious, and detracts from the part played by a group of writers who are self-consciously Queensland-orientated. Frank Moorhouse, on the other hand, realistically suggests there is "an economic consideration too, whether a person working in the arts could find a living" in an area such as Queensland (1978: p. 63). However, he also supports the notion that regional culture "is a formation in *reaction* to the centre" (his italics) with the following qualification:

> I would use regional as a positive growing out of special conditions surrounding or forming the imagination — geography, historical accident, distance, climate.
>
> (1978: p. 63)

But how might these special conditions be seen to be represented in actual literary texts? Do the fictions of Queensland writers — Astley Anderson and Malouf — provide cultural representations of these regional "differences"?

It could certainly be argued that Thea Astley, a readily identified Queensland writer, provides some consummate examples of the "Queensland is different" mentality. In *Hunting the Wild Pineapple*, a collection of short stories set mainly in North Queensland, she takes up the fringe-dweller image and uses it in a number of different ways. This particular image — like that of the "banana-bender" — is rooted not so much in Queenslanders' perceptions of themselves, as in the derisive images constructed by metropolitan critics. It is Astley's art to transmute these images which have largely negative connotations, into positive fictional representations. Thus Astley actually celebrates the "oddball", "the misfit" and the idiosyncratic behaviour of "old-established Queenslanders".

These ideas may be developed further in specific examples from *Hunting the Wild Pineapple*. The narrator in most of the stories is a one-legged man called Leverson. Despite his disability, Leverson confronts society with a good-humoured acceptance of his oddness. Indeed Astley accentuates his difference with ironic lightheartedness: he refers to himself as a monopod who readily admits to admiring the agility of Crusader Rabbit on television. His character displays a highly developed intellect and appreciation of high culture often quite incongruous with the social context in which he finds himself. Thus Leverson describes Cook's exploration of the Queensland coast in these terms:

> It was up here . . . that that great sailor waltzed insolently north in his undersized barque. The same year Beethoven was born . . .
>
> (1981: p. 41)

In no uncertain terms Astley treats difference in a celebratory fashion, juxtaposing this positive image with a casual but nonetheless pervasive theme of cultural appreciation. Indeed it may be argued that Astley's affirmation of a Queensland difference is quite self-consciously constructed to transcend any notions of cultural inferiority. There is a "as different as we are we sure aren't stupid" tone to her writing. This, I believe, may be interpreted as a reaction to southern cultural dominance and a manifestation of regional identity.

Rather ironically, Astley herself backs away from the notion that there is a distinctive quality in the literature of Queensland. In a paper which suggests "difference" by its very title — "Being a Queenslander: A form of Literary and Geographical Conceit" (1976) — she speaks of the nub of her work in these terms: "that literary truth is derived from the parish and if it is truth it will be universal" (1976: p. 255). There seems to be the implication that universal values transcend social realities. This implication is accompanied by her claim that "it is the especial quality of the Queensland oddball — that and the space — that give the state its overblown flavour" (1976: p. 262). Taken in conjunction with her suggestion that any regionally derived truth will be universal, certain contradictory oppositions emerge. Speaking of Queensland's special flavour in her "Conceit" article Astley claims it is

> as if the very distance itself had rendered time static; as if the passage from claypan to coast, from the ugly to the beautiful so essential and complementary to each other in this place that they become one and the same, were no passage at all.
> (1976: p. 264)

Thus features which contrast or may be experienced as disunifying in the physical world, may also be unified imaginatively. These contradictory oppositions of experienced disunity and imagined unity may be seen to represent a tradition in Queensland literature (Buckridge, 1986).

Tirra Lirra by the River (1978) by Jessica Anderson provides a further example of how Queensland regional identity may be understood in terms of "periphery" versus "core" mythology. More specifically, in this novel the opposition becomes the philistinism of the bush versus the cultural refinement of the metropolis. Interestingly, like Astley, Anderson eventually manages to resolve this opposition though in a somewhat different manner.

The narrator and protagonist in *Tirra Lirra* is Nora Porteous, who suffers an unhappy growing up in Brisbane during and after the first world war. Her father's death in the war becomes the key element by which much of her character's psychological trauma is explained, but on a broader plane the Porteous character may be seen as the victim of a constricting "small-town family life, a sanctimonious and mean-hearted husband, the torpor of suburbia". Anderson's character becomes a person living on the periphery of life. A creative temperament and frustrated artistic ambitions become the impulses of her character which lead to Nora's move to Sydney early in the narrative. Similar impulses take her on to London where she spends a good deal of her life before finally returning to home-town Brisbane as an elderly lady. It is in Brisbane, after a life rendered sterile, that she finally "comes to terms with herself".

By locating much of her central character's life experience and achievement of independence in the great metropolis of London, Anderson seems to affirm certain limitations of the Queensland identity. However, also important in the construction of the novel is the notion that the exploration of life may be "blighted by imagination or imaginativeness" (Gallagher, 1981: p. 104). Thus the notion of the opposites previously mentioned — imagined unity and experienced disunity — may once again be seen to emerge. Gallagher's comments on the novel also demonstrate this point:

> Nora's private visionary world was one "where infinite expansion was possible". It was thus the very antithesis of the "raw ugly sprawling suburb" of Brisbane in which she grew up.
>
> (1981: p. 105)

and:

> Nothing in Nora's constricted existence gave even the momentary illusion of being a "match" for that "region of the mind" where "infinite expansion" was possible.
>
> (1981: p. 106)

The ultimate and somewhat pathetic resolution of this novel — an isolated old lady finally "finding herself" in suburban Brisbane in the midst of "fences and fancy letter-boxes, carports and garages, paved terraces and blue swimming pools" (1978: p. 138) is perhaps a less aggressive manifestation of the Queensland outlook in literature than that presented by Astley. Nevertheless, certain aspects of this novel are equally contradictory to the view of human happiness which it pursues, particularly in terms of the imagination/reality opposition and the final outcome for the central character.

The third Queensland writer to be considered in terms of regional identification is David Malouf. In both his novels, *Johnno* and *Fly Away Peter*, powerful evocations of a "frontier" Queensland occur. In much the same way that Astley uses this image of North Queensland — transmuting "taming the wilderness" into the portrayal of paradisical existence in the tropical north — Malouf constructs an arcadian Brisbane.

The southern "slickness" versus northern "frontier" theme is also represented. When Dante's father — a successful entrepreneur who deplores his son's artistic tendencies — acquires a new house Dante finds it "stuffily and pretentiously over-furnished and depressingly modern" (1975: p. 4). Yet outside this symbol of Queensland opportunity and progress, the "real" Queensland imposes itself particularly in the father's absence. Dante explains:

> Deserted for just a fortnight, my father's garden was already half wild. The darkness under the thickening boughs was alive with midges and heavy with the smell of rotting vegetation, jungle-damp and sickeningly sweet.
>
> (1975: pp. 7-8.)

Malouf's depiction of Queensland as a tropical "frontier" represents only part of the picture. As the narrator grows up and gains a more sophisticated outlook fostered by his university education, he starts to see Brisbane in a different light:

> Brisbane is so sleepy, so slatternly, so sprawlingly unlovely! I have taken to looking for one simple object in it that might be romantic, or appalling even, but there is nothing. It is simply the most ordinary place in the world.
>
> (1975: pp. 51-52)

What was once a tropical frontier — in the eyes of the narrator at least — now becomes nondescript. This perception of home-town Brisbane suddenly becomes a limitation of self-discovery, for Dante and also for the novel's other central character, Johnno himself. Needless to say, like Nora Porteous, they both seek escape overseas. Thus Queensland — more specifically Brisbane — serves an important function in the novel to provide a setting for realisation of the self or a search for creative identity.

Malouf's *Fly Away Peter* (1982) introduces the notion that escapism and a perceived inferiority may be elements in the literary representation of a Queensland identity. Not unlike Dickens in *Hard Times*, Malouf tends to move to the periphery of society to engage a resolution to the social tensions raised in the novel. Thus Jim Saddler's grotesque war death is grieved acceptingly by the novel's very insubstantial character, Imogen: standing on the edge of society as a middle-aged photographer of wildlife, with no family, her response simply becomes acceptance — an acknowledgement that "the past cannot be held" and a vision of a better future. Perhaps in these terms it may be argued that *Fly Away Peter* acknowledges a Queensland difference in the acceptance of contradictory social realities. Like the other novels discussed here, *Fly Away Peter* contains an element of experienced disunity whilst offering the somewhat peripheral solution of acceptance by way of imagined unity.

There are many examples in Queensland literature to suggest a regional identity is evident: some of the features of this identity have been explained in terms of the centrist myth of national identity underpinned by the bush ethos. Largely as a result of this centrist impulse and furthered by a Queensland orientated intelligentsia of writers, critics

and journalists, a number of regional elements come to light in fictional texts. Indeed, Queensland is often portrayed as a State of difference: seemingly unsophisticated yet culturally aware, many fictional characters are constructed in a manner which affirms a deep appreciation of traditional European cultural values. The depiction of Queensland in terms of climate and geography is very often as a last frontier or a tropical wilderness, and indeed in Thea Astley's own words this element seems to have become almost a "tropical cliché" in the fictional writing of this State (Warana Talk, 1986). Beneath these more obvious features is the underlying notion that the literary representation of Queensland contains a strong element of contradiction. Above all, the disunified tendencies of social reality are depicted and resolved through fiction by the evocation of universal ideals or imagined unity.

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