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Reading Women's Writing: The Critical Reception of Miles Franklin

In a comparison of the critical reception of David Ireland's The Glass Canoe and Helen Garner's *Monkey Grip*, Paul Salzman has demonstrated that women writers are often subject to a "vitriolic reception", due to what may be termed masculinist reading practices. In Salzman's survey the representations of the two authors also differed markedly; Ireland was represented as a "Joycean craftsman" while Garner found herself "pigeonholed along with her work" (Salzman 544). This model of the reception of women's writing is equally applicable to the reception and later critical stature of Miles Franklin. Franklin, like Garner, was found to be an author whose works lacked an overriding sense of structure and was read as a primarily autobiographical novelist. Franklin's novels were quickly disparaged after her death in 1954, and it is arguable that revisionist criticism of Franklin has revived and appropriated the pejoratives of an earlier generation of reading. What may be necessary then is a new or alternative model/frame of reading where previously privileged ideas are displaced, and instead texts are read for aspects of difference from what is perceived as dominant.

In the spate of histories of Australian literature that were published in the 1960s, Franklin was regarded as "overpraised" (Hadgraft 166), lacking in depth and sophistication, as well as "immature", "slight", "odd" and "artless" (Hadgraft 164). In 1961 H.M. Green read the Franklin *oeuvre* as characterised by "perversities and clumsiness of presentation"; these are novels which are "seldom deep" and written in a style which is "guilty of a jargon that is excruciating" (Green 638). The style is also clichéd and loose, containing "mistakes in English" and often "heavy, clumsy and pretentious" (638). Harry Heseltine, in 1964, refers to Franklin's plots as "clumsy" as well as unsophisticated (189). Later, Ken Goodwin (1986) continues in this vein, once again using the term "clums[y]" in his evaluation of Franklin's style. This form of criticism is also evident in the Eden-Angus and Robertson reprint of *Up the Country* (1987) where the unsigned Publisher's Note justifies the editorial changes made to the text on the grounds that the creation of a book with "a strong narrative and considerable vitality" required the deletion of the "long

anti-climactic ending." The editors also chose to correct the "floridity and syntactical eccentricity that are the hallmarks of Miles Franklin at her worst." The editors concede that what they have done may be seen by some as a "literary impertinence" but justify it on the implied basis that without severe use of the blue pencil no-one would want to read (or indeed perhaps even be capable of reading) the novel.

More recent criticism of Franklin has echoed many of the judgements made earlier. Delys Bird regards *My Brilliant Career* as a "hastily written first work" which is "technically crude" (175). This novel reveals a "lack of aesthetic control" and an "awkwardness" (Bird 175); the narrative is characterised by "awkwardness and ambiguity" (177) and thus seen to be less coherent than the other novel Bird analyses, *The Getting of Wisdom* (178). Bird's analysis concludes with the judgement that the final pages of *My Brilliant Career* are written in an "uncertain, whining tone" (178). Cassandra Pybus makes similar evaluations, using terms such as "confusion" in conjunction with descriptions of "very bad novels" which are "simply awful" (463). Franklin's *Prelude to Waking* contains characters who are "snobbish, sterile and posturing" (Pybus 465); the novel itself is "confused nonsense" which is "turgid, illogical and awkward" (465).

Pybus sees these faults as stemming from the psyche of the author herself. She argues that Franklin "never matured emotionally" and that "her attitude to emotional relationships did not substantially alter after she was sixteen" (476). This argument is very similar to one made sixteen years before, when John Barnes suggested that Franklin

> never resolved the emotional confusion which is present in *My Brilliant Career*. There is a curious immaturity and period flavour about all her work; she never seemed to master her experience as a girl and remained fixed emotionally in the period of her youth. (Barnes 168)

The later criticism thus does not substantially alter the judgements of the past. The dominant values of the critical establishment are in this fashion upheld and the canon unchallenged.

Criticism of Franklin also tends to stress the realism (or lack of it) of the characters and novels. Pybus for example argues that the male characters in *Prelude to Waking* are "no more than posturing caricatures" and that it is doubtful that "Franklin would have met either of these characters in her travels" (467). The emphasis is therefore upon the author's ability to construct characters and narratives which have their place in "real life"; ideally they should be based upon situations which have their correlates in the "real" world beyond the novel. That Franklin's novels are judged as externalisations of the author's consciousness is exemplified in Francis McInherny's reading of *My Brilliant Career* as the depiction of a "deeply damaged psyche, a self-hatred and total lack of confidence." In such a reading the novel becomes autobiography.

From this (albeit brief) survey of criticism it is possible to draw the following conclusions as to what constitutes a "good" novel: the novel should be a realist one; it should be coherent; a linear narrative is required, with a beginning, a middle and an end (with a climax between the middle and the end); and finally, the novel should be written in a clear, unambiguous style. Central to all of the above readings is the construction of Miles Franklin the author who fails to meet the implicit critical criteria. Any problems with the text(s) are ascribed to the inability of the author to write clearly and/or well; if the characters do not seem "real" enough they must, therefore, be dismissed as lacklustre fictional creations. Franklin thus functions as the author-function described by Foucault, whereby reading the texts through the author becomes an attempt to totalise the text and impose a point of origin or terminus upon the writing. "The author is ... the principle of a certain unity of writing — all differences have to be resolved, at least in part, by the principles of evolution, maturation and influence" (Foucault 151). The author becomes "a final signified ... [which] suits criticism very well, the latter then allotting itself the important task of discovering the Author ... beneath the work: when the author has been found, the text is "explained" — victory to the critic" (Barthes 147). The focus upon the author in criticism of Franklin fits this model, as the identified problems within the texts eventually are related back to Franklin's personality/psyche/ability. Once Franklin is discovered in the work, the text is then explained as the creation of a "lesser" author.

Such a critical model is based upon the tenets of a masculinist humanism. In such a model, the author presides, paternally, over the production of the text and guarantees coherence, unity and wholeness for the reader. A stress on realist representations constructs an implicit hierarchy of reality-author-text-reader. Edward Said suggests that

> the unity or integrity of the text is maintained by a series of genealogical connections: author-text, beginning-middle-end, text-meaning, reader-interpretation and so on. Underneath all these is the imagery of succession, of paternity, of hierarchy. (162)

A judgement which values unity and wholeness is, however, inherently patriarchal. As Toril Moi (67) points out, the Phallus has been valued as the symbol of unity and all that is good: "The Phallus is often conceived of as a whole, unitary and simple form as opposed to the terrifying chaos of the female genitals." In a masculinist system, the male is perceived as superior to the female (wherever they differ). Because of this, unitariness is seen as superior to division and pluralism. In terms of this phallocentric logic, if there is a fault with the work, such as a "confused" or "clumsy" plot, it must lie with the (female) author. It must be remembered, however, that criticism is always contained within an ideological framework and will thus work to affirm or deny certain values. Criticism may therefore often attempt to re-install the same dominant values which the texts attempt to contest. Criticism becomes a process of re-colonisation of the text, often disparaging the author or the novel for failing to comply with a set of dominant practices. It may be possible,

however, to seek to read Franklin not for unity but for the very aspects which have been found unpalatable. Such a critical manoeuvre would seek to displace the author as the locus of textual meaning and would no longer privilege a search for an authorial consciousness or coherence. This would be a different frame of reading, one which looks for contradictions and disjunctions rather than unity. It would constitute an alternative to the masculinist, humanist, frame which has been applied to the novels thus far. Claudine Hermann argues that women, in their writing,

> must provide another division of time and space, refusing their continuity, fragmenting them into moments and places that are not linked together. (172)

This would be a form of "feminist time", releasing the concealed narratives of women from patriarchal oppression/silence. Similarly, in "Women's Time" Julia Kristeva argues that Western humanism and its attendant concepts are based upon linearity and coherence; one aspect of Kristeva's project is the suggestion of moving into a space where ideas such as sexual difference and even identity itself are challenged and dismantled (35). Heather Murray has also argued that colonial texts be read for contradiction rather than unity (78). She bases this framework upon Terry Eagleton's suggestion in *Marxism and Literary Criticism* that

> [i]t is in the significant silences of a text, its gaps and absences, that the presence of ideology can most positively be felt. It is these silences which the critic must make "speak". The text is, as it were, ideologically forbidden to say certain things.... the significance of the work lies in the difference rather than the unity between these meanings. (34-35)

Up the Country (so grandly rewritten by the editors at Angus and Robertson) asks that the novel itself be read in a similar fashion. The introduction states that the novel is not written in a straightforward manner, but instead is constructed in terms of "possuming." According to the Introduction, when disturbed, possums will run "will run up and down every branch in turn before returning to the main trunk" (5). The novel thus follows this procedure. Rather than remaining upon the linear trunk of the "cohesive" narrative, the novel will resist this model and leap about, refusing, in effect, to remain still or static. This suggests that the text is not to be read for a single line of development but instead that the reader should look for its fractures and disjunctions. In disregarding this, the 1987 re-presentation of the novel seeks to incorporate it into the dominant structures which the novel itself sets out to undermine. Textual resistance to these structures is silenced by the editor's pencil and the final presentation and packaging of the novel as a colonial romance, complete with a rather fey cover depicting a young woman against a corn-yellow background accompanied by the description: "An enthralling saga of pioneering days." In this format, the novel is presented simply as an uncomplicated romance. The fact that the novel subverts the generic

expectations inherent in the romance packaging (Emily, the central female character, drowns before her wedding day) is completely ignored.

What I have attempted to suggest, then, is that a case may be made for women's writing to be read against the dominant values of realist/hierarchical criticism. By using Franklin as a case study, it is arguable that women's novels have been subject to a reception which often attempts to reassert the values of a masculinist culture. What may be needed is a different frame of reading which does not concentrate upon the unity and coherence of the texts, but instead moves toward a theoretical space where difference and disjunction become the focus of investigation. This shift may be characterised as one which privileges dialogism over monistic readings, seeking provisionality rather than absolutes.