

and contrived, and the emotions too imposed and assumed, rather than being embodied or enacted. However, *First Language* is full of many finely executed poems that show Michelle Taylor certainly has earned her commission to deliver poems of power and illumination. Her book shows that she has the skill to take the narrative and lyrical elements of language a long way, and through its use of the image to reveal and enact, reminds us of poetry's enabling and transformative principles.



Mervyn F. Bendle

AUSTRALIA AS LOST CHILD

Peter Pierce, *The Country of Lost Children*. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1999.
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Pierce leaves readers in no doubt about the import of his inquiry. It is not of mere academic or literary interest, rather it is an analysis of an anxiety that runs so deep in Australian culture that "the next generation is set at hazard." Indeed, "Australia, 'the country of lost children,' may become the place where the post-medieval Western notion of childhood dies first." (xviii)

Pierce focusses on the second halves of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, which were, incidentally, the two great (post Gold Rush and Post-War) baby-boom periods in Australian history. There, Pierce detects two moments in Australian history when a widespread sense that the nation's children were at risk existed. A century ago the danger lay in the bush, the vast wilderness that could so easily swallow up the wandering innocent. At present, the danger lies elsewhere, in the cities, our institutions, the playgrounds and the programmes of social engineering that governments have unleashed, with all their allegedly "good intentions." For Pierce, "a nihilistic wish to deny them a future seems to have inspired the actions of many who held responsibility for the young." (xvii) Indeed, there is "a will to thwart the chances, or the very being, of the next generation." (xvii)

These are profound fears indeed: what *can* Pierce's book be about? What can he *possibly* have detected lurking beneath the veneer of Australian civilization?

The answer is complex and can only partially be provided from Pierce's text as it presently stands (indeed, the present edition can be seen as a powerful first foray into this territory). To begin with, an essential distinction must be made between the reality of the threat(s) and their representations. The book describes many actual events but doesn't seek to offer evidence that the actual loss

of children in Australia was or is anomalous in either absolute or comparative terms. Even a passing acquaintance with modern history alerts us to the brutal and often murderous power of the state, exercised on a global scale against populations of people in the interests of various ideals of races, classes, nations, religions and scientific and social ideals. While we can point to the "Stolen Generation," the Forde Inquiry and to other tragic and indeed criminal episodes, a specifically Australian pathology in this area?

The quotations above indicate that Pierce thinks there is such a pathology. However, taken as a whole, his book is not really about this. That is, it is not primarily about any inordinate loss or gross maltreatment of Australian children. Rather it is about representations of such events and of the underlying anxieties, paranoia and phantasies that both energize and are nourished by those representations.

In the first part of his book, Pierce recounts the various tales of lost children from last century, moving, for example, from Henry Kingsley's *The Recollections of Geoffrey Hamlyn*, through Frederick McCubbin's images of the lost child, to Lawson's "The Babies in the Bush." Although he doesn't stress the issue, Pierce's study is of colonialist discourse—of the symbolism, textual codes, conventions and meanings that

Europeans deployed in an imperialist era to understand the lands of otherness into which they had transgressed: it was a discourse characterized by bravado and a sense of mission, but also by wonder, bewilderment, fear and bewitchment.

The topos that most concerns Pierce in this discourse is of the journey into the woods—a theme that has been important in literature and culture at least since Dante opened *The Divine Comedy* with the lines: "Midway upon the journey of our life / I found that I had strayed into a wood." Such woods are places of transformation and rites-of-passage, usually entered through quest or inadvertence: monsters may await but so do knowledge, deliverance and reconciliation. Pierce recalls Kingsley's famous tale of the rite-of-passage of the shepherd's son who finds irresistible the call of the "land across the river ... that merry land of shifting lights and shadows," (15) where lie those adventures with which he can impress his father. Stripping naked—shedding civilization—the bold son crosses the watery threshold and enters a magic land of strange animals but ultimately of terror. When he is later found dead, Kingsley remarks ominously that the child "had found out at last what lay beyond the shining river he watched so long." (16) Pierce also repeatedly invokes the theme of reconciliation, recounting the tales of the Aboriginal men who had been dispossessed of their land but who

nevertheless were able to save the lost children of the invaders. They appeared as "secular agents of salvation" (10) and Pierce laments that this "most potent image of reconciliation" was "all too soon ... forgotten." (xii-xiii)

In Part II of the book the threat itself is transformed. Theatre, fiction, film and the historical record are explored to reveal the present situation. The topos is no longer of the journey into the woods, but of the human predator that lurks in the shadows. It is a representational shift from the external to the internal that recalls Robert Louis Stevenson's prescient shift in the 1880s from *Treasure Island* to *Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde*. The threat is no longer external and linked tragically to natural forces; now it is internal, lying in the human soul and the inadequate power of civilization to protect the innocent. Indeed, civilization is shown to be not merely an inadequate guardian of innocence, but to be itself a source of malevolence—through the corruption of its institutions and the misuses of power that produce the "orphans of empire" and the "stolen generation." Here the theme becomes almost Kafkaesque and recalls Arendt's notion of the banality of evil.

As noted, Pierce's account operates at two levels: as an evocation and moral commentary on actual tragedies from Australia's history; and as an account of the cultural

representations relating to these tragedies and to the underlying anxieties expressed through them. Central to both are the twin concepts of innocence and the child. Represented as innocent, lost children function socially and imaginatively to unite communities: in Durkheimian terms they invoke the sacred. Of course, the very notion of childhood innocence is a cultural artifact, dating back to the early modern era, but achieving prominence in the Enlightenment and again in the later twentieth century, representing promise and optimism. This ideal clashed last century with the concern that Australian children were growing up unruly and excessively independent, and this related in turn to the manner in which Australia herself was conceived as a child of empire, with civilizing responsibilities that future generations would be obliged to meet. In the popular imagination Australia was the "land of the young," the Celtic "Tir-Nan-Og" to which the older races repaired in times of "the thinning"—the cultural impoverishment, despair and degeneration that obsessed the last *fin de siècle* and concerns this one also. In this topos there is a going out, a leaving, a period of danger followed by recovery, return, and restoration. Indeed, Pierce notes Kingsley's recounting of the myth "of Australia as a source of material replenishment for the world" (12).

But here we are now, and such foundational notions seem merely

quaint. The world is a vast place in which Australia has but a small role, despite her great expanses. A distant outpost of the European diaspora, Australia is one of the last great frontier societies at a moment where the limits have been reached and the very notion of frontier has been revealed to be about violation and transgression. Founded on the myth of the bush, Australia is the most urbanized society on earth. While we are the most remote Western society on the planet we are totally integrated into a globalized consumer culture driven by trivial and transient wants and desires. A product of modernity, we approach the centenary of Federation in a postmodern age in which the very idea of a fixed identity is regarded as absurd. For Pierce, the country of lost children is itself a lost child, its anxiety about childhood innocence is anxiety for itself and the deep-seated sense that it can never know itself and never be at home.

Zsusanna Soboslay

GOING ON

Richard James Allen and Karen Pearlman, eds, *Performing the Unnameable: An Anthology of Australian Performance Texts*. Sydney: Currency Press, in association with Real Time, 1999. ISBN 0 86819 4204, 224pp. R.R.P. \$35.00

"I must go on. I can't go on. Go on."
(Samuel Beckett).

Stage Fright. Voice frozen in its box. A Beckettian figure—raincoated, carrot in pocket—finds it impossible to speak. There is too much unspeakable going on.

Fright of the stage. Analysts unable to speak the horrifically multitudinous aspects of performance. Unnameables fly about the space—slippages of meaning, multiple motivations, unrepeatable incidences. ... Not only (in traditional theatre) are there directors directing, actors interpreting, audiences imagining, lighting illusioning, sets and sounds designing meaning (who makes this bloody thing?), but in contemporary performance you also have a frightful dissolving of boundaries between these roles, everybody involved in everything, with images weighted equally to words (if there are words at all) and sometimes, not even a performer (or an audience) in sight.