

## ***Literature in North Queensland – Some Thoughts on Regionalism***

The following is not literary criticism. Criticism is directed at someone's discourse, is a meta-language about a primary language which itself is concerned to bring order, meaning, formal properties into an extra-linguistic world, even if imagined – which is the language of literature, is literature. Or, as Arnold put it – criticism of life. The following is polemic.

Literature in North Queensland – the regional concept; parochialism, chauvinism, hymns to the Barrier Reef, defensiveness – or perhaps the way of the Fugitive writers in Nashville, Tennessee: purification, selective tradition, agrarianism, elegant reaction? Allen Tate, John Crowe Ransom, Robert Penn-Warren – all champions of regionalism – spread a powerful influence throughout American letters, by creative example, by the New Criticism. Today, in the United States, Olsen, Creeley, and their followers are regionalists; but they have no region, are rootless. Thus the concept can be arrived at in different ways, though the underlying motive appears the same – reaction to change, spiritual, physical homelessness.

In the beginning were the adventurers, Kennedy, Leichhardt, et al., originally aimless, not forcing any dream upon reality, devoid of imagination, modestly endowed with self-expression, delighting us if they should write passable letters in copperplate, hungering for the absolutely unknown, for uncertainties and dangers, to feel alive, to discover their own existence, even like Heideggerian man lured to the brink of self-annihilation to experience authenticity, as remarkable as climbers of Everest, prodigious, but blind. And after them, the mixed spirits, more fearful, in whom predominates the desire for security assured by possession of property.

Also, solitude, the aversion to it, fundamental and ever productive of strange bed-fellows. A few hours after He produced Adam, God saw it was not good for Adam to be alone so fashioned him a second person out of his own flesh. The resultant tensions are history. One seeks for the group, the collective; in the first instance, for one's own kind – and that as much like oneself as possible; not Italians, Spaniards, Chinese, and certainly not coloureds – ideally, it should be the closed blood-community, the Anglo-Saxon clan, uncles, cousins, sons, generations spread out in possession of land and key positions, breeding to advantage, consolidating, handing on.

But at the heart of it, solitude, fear, remain: the never-stilled premonition that one day the wider world will enter and weaken one's hold – whence an ambivalence; on the one hand, the extension of group-consciousness to those nearest one's own clan-interests, then wider to party, religion, race, the region, and, on the other hand, a reactionary defensiveness against every influence that would weaken and shift the locus of authority, be it moral, cultural, political, economic, to any point beyond the region. One has only to compare the editorials of Australia's national newspaper, the 'Australian', with those of the Townsville Daily Bulletin to

see evidence of the point. The T.D.B., in contrast to the national paper, has attacked almost every modern reform, proposed or actual, that emanates from the outside world and that would increase the autonomy of the citizen - some of these reforms being clearly anathema to it, viz. abortion, homosexuality, women's rights, freedom of literature.

The North, it seems, has no place for the untrammelled intellect, especially the cosmopolitan intellect, travelled, objective, with a penchant for the universal truth distilled from comparison. Its spirit is parochial, sectional, feudal - Willie Stark country. One is reminded that Australia's most fascistic Blut-und-Boden poet, William Baylebridge, was a Queenslander, though from the southern part of the state. In such a region, the writer, any artist, will be like a martyr without Church or congregation. No wonder some of them become cranky.

The owl of Minerva flies only at dusk. The "spirit of the North" is not a certain brand of much-advertised rum but that of an eventide home for old folks: much lentor, memory, imperviousness - telluric, catachthonian. And the appropriate literature is evensong, retrospect, swan-song of a "culture" in the late-phase. One gets the impression that the tone is set by old men, reluctantly coping with the proddings of progress from an outside, younger world. Perhaps they should recall the words of that Dale Carnegie, who spoke to so many of them in their youth, and "cooperate with the inevitable" - but as the Russian behaviourists assure us, such a change in the primary nerve-system is not something easy for the old to do, and is a reason why so many of them wish to return to childhood scenes before they die - it's easier on the nerves.

Miles Franklin turned to the golden age of western Australian squattocracy when it was virtually dead. The Southern States of the U.S.A., their plutocracy of the plantations, found adequate literary expression only in decline. Probably, a similar service could be rendered the homestead dynasties of the North - literature as golden antique, letters of credit for the parvenu, bulwark against change, diplomacy of a moribund class, etc. Of course, there are more ideal ways of putting it. But, operatively, it appears that the shifting, uncertain community looks for roots, looks backwards, and for the most part identifies with the masters, the transfigured villains of yesteryear. The parallel is perhaps defective, but one cannot help thinking of the historical novels following on Scott, the rural romances of Hardy, the village stories; and on the continent, of Gotthelf, Keller, Stifter, Storm, Tolstoy, Bjornsen, Flaubert - all in the face of industrialism, technology, science. How does "Blue Hills" cope with synthetic fibres? We have the spectacle of historical writing sought in a region which is hardly at the start of its history, whose spirit is ahistorical, security-bent against change, against the new. It is all really 'literarisches Neuland', all raw material for an imaginative spirit to do with as it will; but there is no guarantee that if such a spirit were here it would take on a local colouring at all.

It is the old debate of what characterises a period: its cultural achieve-

ment or its money and murders - and, in the long run, the former wins out. Of South American Art, which geographically might be expected to have some affinity with us, it has been written: "It might be supposed that the originality of the art of South America today is derived from the relationship to the natural environment in which the people live, to the patterns of action that circumstances impose on them, or to the ideas, feelings and desires that arise in the community; but there is nothing to justify such a supposition, at least in categorical terms."\* The artist, perverse creature, is sui generis, cannot be explained by his environment; if anything, the converse; he gives it its character and patent of worthiness. How fortunate for the tourist-bureaux that Beethoven wandered from town to town, stayed here, stayed there, that Franz Kafka used a certain cafe, that it pays to run a bus from London to Stratford-on-Avon, that it pays to run trips to the Lake District, the Left Bank or the land of thinkers and poets. Not that any of this means much to the culture-hero himself: the lord mayor will not hurry to him with a bunch of flowers on his birthday - in any case, they would probably go to a pretender, since the halls of culture are perennially thronged with the sick and clamorous, trying to get relief on a myth, and with middle-men out for a profit.

Theories of the determining influence of place on culture are perennial. In the high sense, culture is said to have originated between certain latitudes, to be restricted by climatic factors. People in valleys, it is said, tend to personal religion; those on plains and deserts, to impersonal gods, and so on. Attempts have been made to account for variations of emphasis in Christian doctrine by geographical factors. Personality is said to vary with re-settlement from one environment to another. Man is extremely variable and clearly adapts himself to his surroundings, is shaped by them. Sensations, feelings, arise from experience, from transactions with the environment, in association with customs, usages, habits, and these become emotions associated with environmental features, develop by mutual action according to the kind of life-process; and out of this conjunction emerges the more or less stable, more or less shared 'landscape of the soul' or, by projection, 'soul of the landscape', the spirit of place, strong, pervasive, yet elusive of description. Spengler thought that all culture was ultimately rooted in landscape. But we observe a succession of cultures in the same landscape, a fact that leads certain writers such as Donald Davie to regard geography as having determining significance for historical events, rather than vice-versa. But the essential factor of human life is that which is not adapted to the environment but is inward and independent of the outer world, for by this factor new and progressive adaptations are possible - imagination, creativity reshapes the world, objectively, subjectively.

It is true that the 'gnostic script' of Nature exists here in North Queensland, as elsewhere, and may be read indefinitely, though with the peculiar fascination of tropical nuance. European writers have put the tropics on a

\* Jorge Romero Brest: South American Art Today. In Will Grohmann: Art of Our Time, London, 1966.

par with the diffuse, the primitive, participation mystique, the hyperaemic regions of experience, betel, hashish, mescaline, full moon over palms, rhythms, regression, etc. A French literary theorist, seeking to define literature and decadence, includes 'flight into the tropics' in his list of symptoms. Not so long ago, European artists turned to the tropics, to primitive peoples in hot zones; Matisse, Picasso, to Africa; Gauguin to Tahiti; Nolde to Rabaul; Dauthendey to Java, Bali, and so on. The more artificial and invented, the more changeful our existence, the more attractive is identification with an abiding order, a pre-given order of sun and rain, organic growth and decay - de recuperatione terrae sanctae.

But the North is not populated simply by people who have lived and worked in the face of Nature for generations - transience and technology enter as well. Despite the interest in ecology, in environment, there is in fact a general movement away from the earth. The popular ecological interest seems more likely to be expressive of this fact, that is, a longing for relative stability in the face of change - Desmond Morris suggests that a heightened interest in animal preservation and conservation characterises the later years of life and those people insecure in the face of potential nuclear destruction. Today, we are wired into the system, the closed feedback loop via the customer's purse. Cybernetics. From hill-top to hill-top the signal is repeated - not a message from Garcia but comfort, collectivity, in exchange for conformity. All kinds of material, nonsense, come this way, to the North, but in the reverse direction it's basically figures. Even the signals to return to Nature, our present-day Rousseauism, come from the collective - obliging us to stay tuned, keep reading, while weeping at the loss of forests, the demise of the double-titted shrike. Nature, of course, has had it. Nobody lingers much in it, not even the ecologists. But it has its uses: return to oneself, relief from the others, who, we are told, are Hell. The Bindaboo, however, are anthropology, paleontology.

For us, the state of Nature no longer exists. Additionally, collectively, we do not believe that the material, historical process has any ultimate meaning. A la Brennan, man has broken up the primeval unity and is on the way to something else - to Nature processed, formed, stylised, at his own responsibility. The essence of our life, as of our art, is structure, systems, self-consistent formations. If this sounds cold, it is only because we forget that these have emotional properties, must have, since we engage with them. One thinks of Levi-Strauss, of his views on the variety of permutations, combinations of the elements of collective life, and of how hard it is, in his view, to assess these alternative systems clearly, because we are conditioned already to the values of our own system. Northern regionalism is the inertial property of a system.

We are not in 'nature'. We shop at Woolworths instead of scratching for yams. And our literature is the same; intended to suit our needs; to sell, enjoy, gain sympathy, love, to triumph in whatever direction we will, though for the artist himself all this is secondary to the will to form. It is a second reality beyond nature, like the supermarket, the filling-station. It

has no necessary connection with the North. It can come here, be commented upon, for us or for others, be created here, for us or for others. Its subject matter and formal properties are unpredictable. It is naive to think that giving a prize for a novel set in the sugar industry will produce something to raise that industry into enduring value. If the novel is any good, it will be a work of art. Its use as a PR-brochure is irrelevant. It is a confusion of orders. What the sugar-industry is really on about can be seen from its annual report to shareholders. At this level, it is hardly different from the soap industry.

The abduction of matter into form, the transfiguration of the literal into the imaginative, issues in art-works - all sorts of contradictions are brought under a unity. As to how this takes place, God alone knows. Et factus in agonia, prolixius orabat. Keats spoke of negative capability, of being able to put up with uncertainty, doubt, mystery, without an "irritable reaching after fact and reason", of keeping true to a direct intuitive certainty, despite the difficulties. Art-works strive for significance and being, wedded indissolubly. This antinomian identity is the ideal, the absolute to which the art-work strives; it rests in itself, not representative of something else, nor yet a mere object, but signifying to us something beyond these; a life-determining sacrament for some people, a load of indistinct garbage to others, an endless source of enquiry and high-flown waffle.

For whom then does one write in North Queensland? Does one carry one's work to the old men for approval; to the typical reader of the T.D.B., to Tom Aikens and his electorate? The T.D.B., by wider standards, is at best a parish-pump curiosity, Mr. Aikens likewise. Or, is the whole idea of a locally contained literature absurd? Concord, a village of 3000 people, had its Emerson and Thoreau - both had trouble with the locals but eventually reached the world. Shakespeare, in a London of 150,000 souls, managed to pass quite favourably with the locals but it took nearly a century before he was seen at his true stature. Edgar Lee Masters based his Spoon River Anthology on the little towns of Petersburg and Lewistown, was sneered at by the locals and acclaimed elsewhere as a permanent part of U.S. literature. Who would have heard of Tilbury Town if Edward Arlington Robinson had not disclosed it to us? - does it really exist? Does William Carlos Williams's town of Paterson exist as other than a literary phenomenon? And so on. And, of course, oblivion is crowded with Lords mayor and local dignitaries of letters. Not that anything is impossible - in literature, as in life, one learns to keep an open mind. Provinces do produce good writers, but it is a greater miracle when these same provinces acknowledge them forthwith.

There is nothing new in this; it is almost a law. The State, whether in large or in miniature, has rarely had any discernment or genuine interest in the arts, only a secondary, derivative interest, tourism, self-consciousness of its own crudity, the desire to wear a gentleman's mask. Literary regionalism in primitive form appears in "local colour" writers. There is no doubt of the wealth of local setting here and that the local emphasis should be a

counter to national conformity. Relatively, the nation is an abstraction, the region a reality. There is also the prospect of identifying and strengthening intimate knowledge of the region, of one's part of it, a sense of exhaustive biographical or historical acquaintance with every object, such as Thomas Hardy speaks of in The Woodlanders, if one is not to be other than ignorant and destructive in one's relation to it. And this, of course, implies not the exploitative regionalism of a tawdry tourism or any kind of jobbery but faithfulness to life and locality.

It needs little thought to realise that the increasingly nomadic character of people in the North, as of modern life generally, is prone to misconceptions of the region, lacking long associations of rootedness in the area; but it also appears, perhaps paradoxically, that the specific qualities of the North are not likely to be realised by the "locals" themselves so much as by "outsiders", who demonstrate interest and choice in regional quality, who are in a position to make comparisons. What the locals left to themselves are likely to emphasise is the sort of parochialism common to other places.

Literature in North Queensland, if it is to have any significance other than that of a house-journal, must relate to the wider world, must engage the interest of that world, must reveal as always the universal in the particular.

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