

THE BINDABOO RECONSIDERED: SOME THOUGHTS ON REGIONALISM

Regionalism cannot be an absolute quality. We cannot simply be a part, we must be a part of. Townsville is part of Australia/the tropics/the American Empire/the twentieth century. In none of these things is it fortunate. Seldom can the home of a literary magazine have fallen in the intersection of more sterile areas.

And thus we are doomed, surely, to scabble in the leavings of our polyglot heritage for neglected gems which we may wave, suitably decked in banana leaves, for the approbation of our tropical fellows. Only to see them wither in the fierce heat of the critical eye of Out There, the South, the World.

Perhaps not. Perhaps there is a second regionalism, not this relative regionalism of emulation, but an absolute regionalism of identity. This innate regionalism rarely manifests itself, so must be qualified with sly perhapses. But let us assume it to be latent.

Barbara Tuchman wrote of the burning of the Louvain library by the German army in 1914, and commented that the Bibliotheque de Louvain was founded in 1462, "when Berlin was a clump of wooden huts." What savage triumph! To casually pick a fact from the dry groan of history and in eight words reduce an Empire to a motor bike gang! But the point has wider significance. Our history is an odd beast. Cultural centres are transient. London was two sheds and a coracle when Alexandria was the artistic cross-roads of the world. In 1955, was there a painter anywhere who knew what L.A. stood for?

So Townsville may have its day? But what of centres of commerce and communications nodes and cultural stimulus and patronage and creative lifestyles?

I defy them. Two reasons. We inhabit a cultural tautology. There are artists who create works of art which create critics who create standards which create artists. There are no revolutions in art. There are successful predictions of what will be approved next. For every van Gogh condemned to miserable anonymity and posthumous beatification, there are five hundred Fred Bloggses condemned to miserable anonymity and posthumous miserable anonymity. Standards, criteria, determine who is what in our culture. But the setters of standards can never be more than parasites, retrospective by definition, able to catalogue, but never command.

So art is anything you think it is? Of course not. But we have made it anything you can get away with. The opportunity exists to create standards rather than conform to them, to write poetry rather than read critics. The agony of regionalism lies not in any attribute of the region, but in the filtered and distorted criteria that ooze from the capital cities, whence they oozed from someone else's capital cities. Being a poet (or a truckdriver, or a salesgirl) in Townsville is an intolerable burden, a cancerous consuming punish-

ment, to one who aspires to the standards of the half-felt sophistication from beyond. Ultimately every man is a region. What have real breathing people from Out There to say to real breathing people from Townsville? Surely nothing different, except those things imposed by geography and history? Why should a contributor to LING accept the imposition of the manifestations of an alien landscape? Live, act and create as an organic growth from your environment, and your creativity is a valid thing. Establish your origins vicariously in some exotic milieu and people will giggle.

The Bindaboo had forgotten things about the universe that we will never learn. Probably this is why we found it necessary to shoot the real Australians. Realizing their superiority as manifestations of the environment, we demonstrated ours in terms of arbitrary alien criteria: the Snider carbine and the Colt revolver. There may be an absolute quality called superiority, but it need not affect poets, except those poets who want to win prizes. Superiority's ugly daughter, condescension, is the poet killer. But condescension is not an absolute. It exists only when it is accepted by both parties to it.

Second reason. The filtering process, its basis in economics, brings us what it wants us to know. It is tempting to assume the superiority of Out There, because Out There has conditioned us to do so. Gunfights on airliners, mercury in baby food and corpses behind steering wheels pad out the more boring sections of the daily news. Out There stinks. The industrial revolution's monstrous children are sprayed by Telsat throughout the world's living rooms, there to proliferate. Our art, you protest, is a reaction against this vileness? Some of it is. But most of its values are indistinguishable from those of General Dynamics. Our culture, and that means our art, is material from the core. The slim phallic brutality of a Detroit motor car is a far stronger cultural force than any number of dead fish in Lake Erie. The dollar transcends all other values. Our aspirations are voiced by the bulldozer. Trees have become obsolete, like the Bindaboo.

A morally inconsistent lifestyle makes aesthetic abominations easy enough to accept. Our art derives from our attitudes. Some of our attitudes are not very nice. Some of our art is no better. Out There's claim to aesthetic preeminence is invalidated.

Townsville the saviour of it all? Renascence in the tropics? The bush triumphant? Hardly probable. And an undesirable way to think, symptomatic of the disease of regionalism. Too often the very concept of place involves subconscious comparison, competition and defensiveness. Regionalism is destructive when it turns its attention outwards. The innate, the indigenous, the Here, must be the only guide.

The let's-be-like-Out-There North Queensland can never be more than a plastic souvenir. But suppose there were another North Queensland within this one, composed of North Queensland people thinking North Queensland thoughts. Its discovery could mean a regionalism of identity supplanting the regionalism of emulation. It may be there.

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