

DONAT GALLAGHER

TIRRA LIRRA BY THE BRISBANE RIVER

Jessica Anderson. *Tirra Lirra by the River*. Melbourne: Macmillan, 1978. Cloth \$9.95. 141pp.

Jessica Anderson became widely known to Australians for the first time when *Tirra Lirra by the River* won the 1979 Miles Franklin Award. Previously Mrs Anderson had enjoyed a high reputation in theatrical circles and the ABC for distinguished radio dramas.¹ Her earliest novels, *An Ordinary Lunacy* (1963) and *The Last Man's Head* (1970), had been published in London and New York and favourably noticed by English and American reviewers. But in Australia both books had been virtually ignored, a particularly distressing example of fine Australian novels being neglected locally. Mrs Anderson's third novel, *The Commandant* (1973), also published overseas, had been ignored everywhere.² A sensitive exploration of Captain Logan's enigmatic personality and mysterious death, its unlucky failure was probably caused by nothing more substantial than a dust-jacket of the kind once used exclusively for juvenile romance. *Tirra Lirra by the River* (1979) was handsomely produced by Macmillan in Australia. This time the local literary pages were more appreciative than they had been before, and some reviewers — notably Hope Hewitt in the *Canberra Times*³ — showed themselves alive to Mrs Anderson's unobtrusive artistry. But the Miles Franklin judges must be congratulated for honouring a novel that most reviewers and some academic critics have dismally failed to comprehend.

In fairness it should be said that *Tirra Lirra by the River* poses a challenge to literary taste. Mrs Anderson, an accomplished dramatist, writes with unusual skill, but her style and joinery are apparently effortless and can be overlooked. Furthermore Mrs Anderson's novels are absorbing and, when not suspenseful, are at least shaped towards a final point of revelation. Strict objectivity is maintained. A reader may therefore be seduced into hurrying past clues vital to a novel's significance.

At its most immediate, *Tirra Lirra by the River* is about homecoming and memories. After an adult life spent in Sydney and London, Nora Porteus returns to the Brisbane house in which she grew up. There she falls into a prolonged illness. While recovering she re-lives her life in memory. The atmosphere of pre-war Brisbane, suburban Sydney and shabby-genteel London, in which most of her time was spent, is economically suggested; while the vignette of life in sub-Bohemian Pott's Point is irresistibly charming. So much so that some critics have dismissed *Tirra Lirra* as "nostalgia".⁴ But this is nonsense. *Tirra Lirra* is no pot-boiler attempting to cash in on "lost simplicities". Nor, to mention a very fine novel, is it like *Johnno*, in which descriptions of Brisbane occasionally cease to be functional. Mrs Anderson has an old-fashioned Jamesian conscience and admits into her novels only what a character registers.

Tirra Lirra by the River is not essentially a collection of memories, let alone a collection of memories about vanished styles of life. It is a novel about a woman remembering. By achieving (relatively) true memory, by facing the (relatively) true past, she finds for the first time in her life health of soul. When the novel opens, Nora is in her mid-seventies, childless, divorced, disappointed in life. She is also a frustrated artist. In reliving her life in memory, she identifies incidents and aspects of her personality which have distorted and stultified her development and talent. Sir Lancelot's song from "The Lady of Shalott" provides the title "Tirra Lirra by the River", and points to numerous parallels between Tennyson's heroine and Mrs Anderson's. Two themes linking poem and novel emerge: the fate of the introvert, and particularly of the introvert artist, seduced into the gay and busy world; and the relationship between imagination and reality.

The operations of memory play a subsidiary but vital role in the novel. Mrs Anderson perceptively describes such phenomena as the speed and vividness with which one experience can flood back into consciousness, and the stubborn resistance offered by another. But her chief concern is with selectivity, suppression and distortion. In a brilliant metaphor, memory is pictured as a suspended glove covered with images.

The globe will spin, either in response to a deliberate turn or accidentally. Nora has learned to keep directed towards the light only that face of the globe which holds agreeable memories while avoiding accidental movements which might bring its dark unpleasant side into view.

Now, in the crisis created by homecoming and grave illness, facing the unwelcome alternatives of death or of making a completely new lonely life, Nora allows the globe to turn, shyly and tentatively at first, but with increasing freedom as self-knowledge grows. Incidents long seemingly "forgotten", but in reality either deliberately shut out of consciousness or involuntarily suppressed, episodes consciously or unconsciously distorted, are brought into the light and seen as they "really" happened. I write "really" because Mrs Anderson is far too intelligent to believe in the possibility of achieving absolute truth about human experience.

Nora's regaining a more or less accurate recollection of her odious ex-husband Colin Porteus is a key episode in the novel and a good illustration of Mrs Anderson's methods. "Colin" for a good many years has been a selectively "edited" fiction, formed out of the less embarrassing actions and traits of personality that Nora has found suitable for presenting in conversation for the laughter of friends. As Nora allows various painful and shaming aspects of her life with Colin to come back into consciousness, the "edited" fiction is replaced by a more accurate and more honest memory. But — and the qualification indicates the strength of Mrs Anderson's mind — the "real" version itself, though obtained at the cost of humiliating self-confrontation, may still be just "another substitute" for the truth. Colin is laid to rest only after a summing-up reminiscent of George Eliot's even-handedness:

Have I given an accurate account of Colin Porteus or have I merely provided another substitute? . . . Perhaps the real man has been so overscored by laughter that he will never be retrieved. As a rule when we can't find even one good quality in a person, we are prejudiced, and by that rule I must admit my prejudiced. Pearl [Colin's second wife] may have been able to mine seams in him disregarded by me, or may

have been practical enough to disregard the ones I mined (p.73).

More fundamentally important to Nora than distortion of her husband's memory has been total loss of recall of her father. He died when she was six, when she was old enough to have remembered him. But all recollection of the man, of his death and of the grief accompanying death have been obliterated (p.35). In this case emotional shock, not conscious editing, has "swallowed the man" (p.103). The climax of the novel is the point at which the father's embrace, her own shriek, and the father's funeral return to Nora (pp.140-41). Total suppression of the father's memory, the result of massive emotional trauma, is finally revealed as the root cause of Nora's inhibited affections and stunted life.

In passing it could be noticed that revelation of this crucial matter only at the conclusion of the novel, and as a surprise, is typical of Mrs Anderson's highly developed dramatic sense. In *The Commandant*, which among other things is a superb piece of historical detection, Mrs Anderson ingeniously builds up a plausible explanation of why Captain Logan rode off alone into mortal danger, and of why the official record of his end came to take the form it did. Her treatment of Nora shows something of the same fascination with teasing out a mystery.

Recall of her father significantly comes to Nora in connection with an obscure image that has dogged her all her life: "The step of a horse, the nod of a plume" (pp.16, 103). This has always been associated with inexplicable grief and with Sir Lancelot (p.16). Thus the disappointing course of Nora's life, partly attributable to loss of her father, is also linked with Nora's imaginativeness, the theme to which the title of the novel refers. "Tirra lirra" is the siren song that Sir Lancelot, darkly handsome soldier and man of action, sings as he rides beside the river towards Camelot, enticing the Lady of Shalott to the doom reserved for the introspective artist drawn into worldly society.

Tirra Lirra by the River is in large part an exploration of a life blighted by imagination or imaginativeness. On re-entering her Brisbane home, the first memory Nora recalls is of gazing, as a very young child, through a thick distorting window pane which could transform her suburban garden into a Tennysonian

landscape of mountains and ruined castles. This vision of Beauty, so real that it provided the setting for the earliest books she read – soon these included *Idylls of the King* and “The Lady of Shalott” – later became a “region of [her] mind, where infinite expansion was possible” and where nothing “could prevent the emergence of Sir Lancelot”. Like the Lady of Shalott, Nora became more interested in the “shadows of the world” and “the mirror’s magic sights” than in the world about her. Like Tennyson’s heroine, she lived near a river. But so preoccupied was she with her own private visionary world that “she hardly saw it [the river], and never used it as a location for her dreams” (p.9).

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. When sixteen-year-old Nora, bodice unbuttoned, lay out under the moon “entranced”, she was, of course, manifesting repressed sexuality; but as Mrs Anderson is at pains to explain the incident, her heroine was also attempting “to match the region of [her] mind” (p.11). Constantly, Nora was to be accused of being dissatisfied with “things as they are” and of “reaching for the moon”. A “curse” came upon Tennyson’s Lady of Shalott when Sir Lancelot lured her away from her mirror and her loom. Mrs Anderson’s heroine was never happy in her private half-real world. From an early age she was “cursed” with an extreme consciousness of the disparity between her vision of Beauty and the dreary world of reality, with an inability to find anything to “match” the impossible standard set by her self-created world.

Not surprisingly, Nora growing up found herself at odds with companions, with employers, with her mother, but above all with her sister Grace. She was difficult, awkward, unhappy, nervous. Her one youthful talent was embroidery, drawing her own designs, sitting over her wall hangings until two in the morning (pp.16-17). Subsequently adult life was equally unsatisfactory. Marriage to a charmless blond lawyer, the reverse of Sir Lancelot, brought Nora to her Camelot, Sydney. Soon, like her poetic counterpart, she saw “the low sky raining”. Reality was sadly disillusioning. Lost among philistine extro-

verts, Nora felt she must "die". Instead she divorced. Then a brief affair, a near-fatal abortion, an unsuccessful facelift, and, subsequently a sexless life of muted contentment in London, working as a theatrical costume maker, sharing a house with compatible friends. 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. And when the little household in "number six" was forced to disband, Nora, flippant and self-mocking and quite without faith or hope, returned to her family home in a Brisbane suburb.

The dénouement of the novel draws together all major threads of significance. It returns to the globe of memory, to the river, to Grace, to the embroideries, and, as has been earlier remarked, to Sir Lancelot and Nora's father. The globe of memory is now in "free spin", with no obscure side (p.140), the freedom having been won, I should think Mrs Anderson wishes us to understand, first by Nora's having exorcised her past by facing it, and then by her having outgrown solipsistic romanticism.

Imaginativeness and Nora's self-centred isolation have been major themes of the novel. Nora's tempering of these qualities – concretely symbolized by her "finding" of the river, by her becoming satisfied with the small stone lying in the grass, and by her new respect for Grace – is an important aspect of their resolution. In youth Nora scarcely noticed the river by which she so often walked. On her return to Brisbane she discovers the river, literally after some exploration, but also metaphorically:

I believe I have found the river – the real river I disregarded on my first walks . . . because never before have I seen its scoured-out creeks nor known that the shadows of its brown water are lavender at evening (p.140).

Absorption in an imaginary self-created world has determined the course of Nora's life. Learning to appreciate the river for itself, she manifests for the first time, an awareness of fact. A similar point is made when the novelty of a freely moving memory prompts in Nora "the queer suggestion" that although

imagination is only memory at one, or two, or twenty

removes, my interest now is in repudiating, or in trying to repudiate, those removes, even if it ends by my finding something only as small as a stone lying on the pale grass (p.140).

The "stone lying on the pale grass" returns to the child's Tennysonian vision of "mountains, valleys, and a castle" which, when dispelled, left Nora gazing at nothing more than a stone on "a block of land as flat as a raft" (p.17). That she is now prepared to accept the stone rather than cherish the vision, to prefer memory dealing with fact to visionary imagination, that she is less concerned to "concoct" and prefers to "find" things, is a measure of her independence of the fictional distortions which have rendered her life sterile.

Nora's coming to (qualified) terms with her dead sister, Grace, is another important conversion, the consequence, I think, of an introspective mind having expanded to embrace reality more fully. Devout, busy, morally strenuous, Grace has always irritated her more sensitive sister. Evidence of taste and imagination in Grace's remodelling of the family house softens Nora's prejudice, but her "heart was touched" only by the revelation that Grace had not been happy, because, "for the whole of her life she had tried to have faith, but for the whole of her life, she had only opinions" (p.135). Of course Grace had altered, becoming less smug and less intense, more free and imaginative, more a creature of the moon like Nora – the symbolic significance of her sleeping in her "glass room" (p.137). But Nora's newly acquired capacity to accept her sister is more significant.

It is entirely characteristic of Mrs Anderson's art that while creating winning sympathy for a disappointed romantic heroine, she neither glamorizes romanticism nor entirely endorses the romantic's aversion from commonplace life. *Tirra Lirra by the River* is neither a "Nora-*contra-mundum*" manifesto nor an elegy bemoaning the sad lot of an artist fallen along philistines. Submission to the facts of life is one of Mrs Anderson's most attractive features. Even so it is surprising to find her raising the question whether her suburban heroine's talents might not have flourished better had she never left the confines of suburbia. Shown embroideries she had done as a girl

in Brisbane, and that she therefore instinctively depreciates, Nora reluctantly admits that they are "very good", better than anything she has achieved since (p.128) – a "disturbing" realization for it suggests that a confined life might have produced artistic achievement by its very confinement. In writing of sexual repression, Mrs Anderson had remarked that while it produced much that was ugly and cruel, it

let loose for some natures, briefly, a luminosity, a glow, that I expect is unimaginable, now, and that for those natures, it was possible to love and value that glow far beyond the fire that was its origin (p.11).

I take it that what Mrs Anderson believes true of sexual repression and the "glow" of "love" that can arise from it, she also believes true of a restricted life and artistic expression. Hence Nora's speculation:

who knows what else I may have drawn . . . out of the compression of a secret life? (p.128)

The Tennysonian parallel calls for brief comment, if only because some reviewers have not liked it. One's attitude to the allusion probably reflects one's understanding of the poem. Anyone who reads "The Lady of Shalott" as a seriously intended comment on the gulf between romance and reality will be likely to welcome Mrs Anderson's use of it. Conversely, anyone who thinks the poem "schoolgirl stuff" will resent its being intruded into a mature work of fiction. Thus Peter Pierce, who believes the poem a "romance", understandably calls the title of the novel "kitsch". My only worry is that Mrs Anderson might have been a trifle over-elaborate. Nora's distorting window pane for Tennyson's mirrors, embroidery for weaving, the Brisbane River for that other flanked by barley and rye, the helmet and the plume – these and several other parallels are economically informative. But did Mrs Anderson have in mind Tennyson's "the first house by the water-side" when she set Nora in her first flat by the harbour? Does Grace's name come from "God in her mercy lend her Grace"? Perhaps these and several similar details are mere coincidences. Perhaps they are a little playful.

Despite any impression I might unintentionally have given to the contrary, *Tirra Lirra by the River* is not a treatise but a

fully realized novel, very much richer in character and incident than could be suggested in this brief exploration of its themes. What Mrs Anderson has to say is embodied in action, speech, image, and symbol. Technically her novel is a minor *tour de force*, an unbroken first-person narrative in which memory, conversation and incident merge almost imperceptibly. Every incident of importance is carefully prepared for and reinforced with parallels. Dorothy Irey, for example, like Nora in her restless years, walked incessantly (p.13), but having no means of escape became a tragic victim. In Dorothy we see Nora writ large. The "twinning" of various characters – of Una Porteus and Lyn Wilmot, of Arch and the stranger with whom Nora had a brief affair – lends a sense of unusually tight structure, of a novel very completely worked out. Symbols – particularly the river, the moon, the horse, the house and its furnishings – are used systematically. They also occur quite naturally and create a sense of slightly heightened reality appropriate to a novel dealing with an imaginative heroine. Mrs Anderson's prose is as good, I think, as David Malouf's or Peter Carey's, but not so sensuous and evocative. Her normal style is ideally suited for conveying the nuances of social and moral discrimination. Mrs Anderson's emphasis on primary symbols in *Tirra Lirra* enables her to present convincingly the less tangible and less definable aspects of consciousness.

In *Tirra Lirra by the River* Mrs Anderson set herself the difficult task of writing about a heroine whose life had been almost entirely disappointing, and whose recovery took place in mind and memory. From this intractable material she has shaped a glowing work of imagination, in which each detail contributes towards a complex but brilliantly clear design. A criticism that could reasonably be levelled against Mrs Anderson – not by me, for I find her irresistibly readable – is that her work is almost too consciously planned and too scrupulously executed to engage readers other than those interested in the art of the novel. By contrast, the one charge that cannot be intelligently laid against her is that her work is unstructured and merely narratory. It is therefore unspeakably disappointing to find a respected scholar referring to *Tirra Lirra by the River* as an "unadventurous" "loose chronicle".⁵ The only answer I can

make to such an assertion is to hope out loud that Australian critics dealing with non-canonical Australian authors will come to show a little more enterprise in taste.

NOTES

¹ See Leslie Rees, *A History of Australian Drama, Vol.1: The Making of Australian Drama* (Sydney: Angus and Robertson, 1978), p.381: "Those who shone about this time [middle sixties; in radio drama] ... included ... Jessica Anderson (adaptation from Henry James)..."

² A splendid exception to this neglect was Olaf Ruhen's tribute, "Drama in the Shadow of Disaster", *Australian*, 6 October 1975, p.6.

³ "Recollections Richly Woven", 11 November, 1978, p.15.

⁴ Peter Pierce, "Exploring the Territory: Some Recent Australian Novels", *Meanjin*, 38, No.2 (July 1979), p.225: "At last the fashion for nostalgia in Australian fiction may be expiring. The 1920s and 1930s still fascinate some authors . . . In their most recent novels, Jessica Anderson, Barbara Hanrahan and Ronald Mckie all return to those decades. . . If the nostalgic pall is beginning to lift, it is because some authors have acknowledged that there are different terrains for Australian authors to explore besides a narrow segment of the Australian past."

⁵ Peter Pierce, "Exploring the Territory", p.230.