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Critical Absences

This paper began with an invitation to speak about literary journalism. When I asked whether this meant journalism about literature or journalism which might be counted as literature, the response was that I could take the term as I wanted. There was also an invitation to speak about public responses to the speaker's own work. Since transgressive books need all the help they can get, I have taken advantage of this for two recent books of my own.

The term 'literary journalism' can mean at least two things. One, the journalistic output which mediates literary writing for a general middleclass public with book reviews, reportage (on literary festivals and prizes, short lists and winners), writer profiles, news from publishers and the like. Two, quite differently, the journalistic essay, which has a central position in the intellectual field, whether this is acknowledged or not.

When we think of public culture, it's probably more important to focus on the first area, the mediation of books and writing through journalistic writing and broadcasting about them; a strange, complex space in which different kinds of writing tangle together. Reviews matter not only to the circulation of books, but also in the continuing building and maintenance of a critical climate, and in extending understandings of the time and place we're in. While reviewers are often castigated for shallowness or inadequate attention to the books they have in hand, it should be said too that many writers who do the odd review to help the cash flow really can and do read, with open eyes and without prejudice. With all that, reviewing is still an underprivileged journalistic genre; it needs more space and scope than it gets.

That's a matter for managements more than editors. Most section editors try very hard to do justice to a fair range of books, and they'll always tell you that they have much less space than they'd like. In consequence, there are, perennially, significant books and writing which are too little known. Then the news of books and writing should also be news about publishing itself; an often under-rated profession, but one full of its own kinds of initiative and creativity, where agents and commissioning editors are also entrepreneurs, working with designers, printers, publicists, managers. Too often, when journalistic comment is focussed on the author, it's forgotten that nobody makes a book alone; and while the writer must work in partnership with her publisher and agent in the circulation of the book, it wouldn't travel far if it was left to the writer alone.

Publishers can intervene decisively in public debate; think of Currency Press' Platform Papers on the performing arts, and the Briefings Series from the Institute for Social Research at Swinburne University, working with UNSW Press. The review pages give too little attention generally to these kinds of work, but sometimes there's a breakthrough. A few days before the Deakin

seminar, Spectrum in the *Sydney Morning Herald* ran a welcome discussion by Natasha Cica of the Briefings series. The titles include Jock Given's *America's Pie*, Spencer Zifcak's *Mr Ruddock Goes to Geneva*, Geoffrey Barker's *Sexing it Up*, Klaus Neumann's *Refuge Australia*, Ann Capling's excellent *All the Way with the USA* - all mapping critical paths through current national and international politics, economics and media. That series needed to be opened up and made known, and in doing it, Natasha Cica practised fine literary journalism, bringing in to the centre (the mainstream press) news of important work being carried out in a comparatively marginal domain.

The Briefings series, and Currency's Platform Papers, are both made of literary journalism in the other sense, extended journalistic essays. In other genres, I want to mention several wonderful books which should be better known, and you may not have heard much about them. Some are novels: Miriam Zolin's amazing operatic *Tristessa and Lucido* (UQP), Dorothy Johnston's highly intelligent Canberra-based thrillers, *The Trojan Dog* and *The White Tower*, from Wakefield; Melissa Lucashenko's tough, take-no-prisoners novels set among black and white lives in the hellish outer suburban flatlands of Logan City - *Steam Pigs*, *Hard Yards* (both from UQP Black Writers series).

Then, in a very different genre, Ross Gibson's *Seven Versions of an Australian Badland* (UQP), which I think is one of the richest and most truly searching Australian books of the past few years. Gibson grasps and follows something essential and very deep down in our occupation of this country; he explores one of the most awful, uninviting, literally murderous stretches of the landscape, and connects geography with history and psychology, identifying major lies and evasions, and giving some materials for a diagnosis of the present.

That's a sample list from recent times; of course it could be much longer. All those named got some attention on their initial appearance; some of them made it into the short lists, but they haven't yet attained familiarity. There are questions about what's needed to sustain the life of a book which really deserves to stay alive, part of a general frame of reference. Some novels can only be non-durable entertainment artefacts; the ones I've mentioned have more life in them than that. Some books find their ways slowly, and they need the help of readers who can see their significance and care about them. Reviewing is only part of it; ongoing discussion matters, places on teaching lists, and continuing merited places on the agendas of the gatekeepers, the editors, programme makers, and shapers of literary festivals.

But if the huge public of readers is going to know such books are there, another journalistic mediating element is needed, and that's radio discussion. And here's a sting in my tale. The fact is, with Radio National's two regular book programmes, I wouldn't be without what they do. I love hearing those interviews, hearing Toni Morrison read, or a discussion with Amos Oz or whoever's in line for the next Pulitzer or Nobel; I wouldn't abbreviate the radio time given to such international writers and writing. I know that books and writing are taken up quite vigorously in such generalist programmes as *Life Matters*, *Late Night Live*, on regional radio and the Metro stations. (And there's no personal complaining here; my own recent work has benefited from attention in those channels, and I couldn't say enough for the generosity of the programme makers involved.) But there is very little discussion of Australian writing as writing, its problems and challenges and the way we tackle things. The book seeks the life it can have in dialogue around it; we - we writers -

need people to ask us why did you do things that way and not another way, so that we can answer, whether the answers regale or provoke.

With my collection of stories and essays, *How Simone de Beauvoir died in Australia* (2002), I hoped someone would ask: why do you put fiction and essay together in one set of covers, what do you mean by doing that? And I did mean something; that assemblage wasn't frivolously done. I meant to exercise fictional devices strategically as well as for their own pleasurable sakes, and thus open the relations between fiction and argument. I also meant to provoke some questioning of the false prestige of fiction; should it really be set above the essay in the hierarchy of genres? The book attracted a good deal of very benign comment in academic cultural studies, but no one asked those questions; then, outside that field, and I note it gratefully, there was a review to die for, by Jake Wilson (2001) in the on-line journal *Senses of Cinema*.

That discussion exemplified something important for reviewing at large: it is liveliest when the reviewer is pursuing a strong agenda of their own. Sometimes a commentator is rebuked for having, in the cant phrase, 'an axe to grind'; but it's possible to do justice to a book and still be writing at that crossing-point where your own most serious preoccupations link with those of the book under review. In this case, Jake Wilson attended to my own concern - which was exercised in several essays in the book - with being antipodean; being materially remote from things we can't choose but care about. His generous reading allowed him at the same time to speak from his own perception what it means to be (so often) seeing from a distance, through film or video, and in what sense the viewer, at such a remove, can still be a witness. His title was 'Far from Woomera'.

Such live questions range over the field of our writing in this place; they need to be followed in public talk. But if the attention to writing almost excludes the local, then you've got to say that the cultural cringe is alive and well - again. All this has a lot to do with the pre-eminence of the writer - or perhaps it's the writer's image - over the work : the celebrity machine. Two of last year's big *Good Weekend* cover stories showed Helen Garner looking like Joan of Arc at the stake, and Tim Winton doing his windblown boy's-own number on a West Australian rock shelf. These profiles may have worked well as promotion for their works, even though the magazine stories inside had little to do with writing, and nothing whatever to do with the critical questions around it.

Celebrity is linked to cultural cringing, and that's particularly evident now in the way in which writers' festivals are registered in journalism and promoted. About catching big fish, or more about bagging big game: look, look, we've got Louis de Bernieres, and so on - one thinks of the stag with the antlers over the mantelpiece. This isn't about what really happens at festivals; it's more about what they're made to look like, an imperial/colonial cultural picture in which we, the local writers, are the grateful colonials. That's cultural cringing, as bad as it ever was. When in the event you get a panel discussion in which the local and the visitor share a topic, and where the visitor can't leave the country without knowing more about Australian writers and writing, the cringe is finished, and we're standing upright. A writers' festival is truly successful precisely to the extent that it works as a Trojan horse: the list of big names may be the promotion which draws the crowds and incites the press, but the substance is in the active discussion, the feverish fun of it between sessions, the electric entanglement of writing with the world.

Outside celebrity, the effect of the prominence of the writer is that new book X can't be discussed without reference to how much better - or worse - it is than book Z which came out two years ago, very much as though the principal concern here is with watching that writer's career rather than with attending to the book under review. And then writers, even those of mild and minor notoriety, get pigeonholed, and these pigeonholes are not of the writer's choosing but of the reviewer's; then if you jump out of the pigeonhole in which this particular reviewer believes you belong you're in trouble. As a writer, you might understand the array of literary conventions and devices as your toolshed, in which numerous toolkits are properly available; you might move from essay to historical narrative to fiction and back again - this is legitimate, and after that it's all in the hands of the reader.

This happened with my own recent novel *The Outside Story* (2003). This book has been described as an intellectual mystery, and as a dance around the Opera House. It does not render history as fiction, but rather imagines a main character, a middle-aged woman bound on contemporary historical research, and seeks to explore what it means for such a student to explore such a story. It is a novel about work, about women particularly learning how to think and write; unlikely subject matter perhaps. It has worked well and enjoyably, so far as I can tell, for many readers, and failed to work for others. Most reviews were generous, attentive, positive and responsive.

But some elements in the reviews uncovered the pervasive problem that the writer's name and reputation can key the reviewer's responses to the point where the book isn't allowed to state its own claims. In two cases, one very favourable to the book, one much less so, the reviewer noted that I've written lots of critical essays and some cultural history, and so I might have used the material of this story to make another discursive non-fiction work. A book carries its own credentialling: when it crosses between history and fiction, there should be good reasons why it had to be a novel. With this one there was no other way to situate the material in psychology as well as in history, and no other way to project the psychology of investigation, the being of the detective.

You might like an epigraph I used at the start of *The Outside Story*. It's something Jean-Luc Godard said in the course of an interview: '*L'oeuvre n'est pas pour l'auteur, mais l'auteur pour l'oeuvre.*'

In a succinct free translation, what that means is that writing matters more than writers, artefacts matter more than artisans or artists, messages more than messengers. To the celebrity machine, that's heresy; and for just that reason, it needs reaffirming.

The book, even the short story or essay, is the letter you write to the world; and there's a great hunger for an answer. That's often where the invaluable quarterlies come in, and small as their readerships are they must be sustained in the future. Among much else, like the creation of readerships for short fiction, verse and essays, they permit discussion and debate over time, and that's very important to the life of a book. For an example, I return to my own book and its travels: Martin Thomas' (2004) discussion of *The Outside Story* in *Overland*. I was most grateful for this, even though he did not provide the reading of the book which might have flattered and reassured my own strongest desires: he didn't dwell on my characters and their interactions and on what those mean in the whole picture, the entanglement of success and failure and what it might mean, in a life, either to live with conscious failure or else what it might mean to step outside of the entanglement, to find cures in living for what I'd call the success-failure psychosis.

Those are some of the threads in the fabric of the book. Martin Thomas took from it what he most wanted, a fractured, piecemeal sort of essay on the fractured Opera House, and he took up questions in the building's early history in his discussion. The other issue which concerned him was why I hadn't written the essay rather than the novel; and he posed that question, not condescendingly at all, but in a way that invited my response. *Overland* gave me space for that, and so the book has had some of its ongoing life in that dialogue.

The journalistic essay exists in continuity with critical journalism. It has a very long antecedence in English writing - going back at least to Milton and Bacon - and has a special place in the second half of the 20th century. It is practised in order to disentangle the most painful confusions of the time; it is one form which helps the writer out of paralysis - for example, the kind of paralysis you might have felt at the end of a national election when you want to oppose an incumbent government, preferably to defeat it, and when there's no opposition party you can believe in. The genre is journalistic in that it responds to the here and now; it is an essay in that its reflections are serious, extensive, perhaps scholarly as well, but they are addressed to readers at large rather than any special circle. It sets out a territory, an area of problems to be explored until the writer finds its boundaries. The outcome may not be classifiable as literature, but that question can be left in abeyance. It will at least be significant writing, made to extend the reader's understanding as the process of making has extended the writer's, and no less to give readerly pleasure on the way.

Around 1945, when French socialist intellectuals were faced with their postwar task - finding philosophic and political paths between America and the Soviet Union - Jean-Paul Sartre said that the journalistic essay was the best, the most useable literary form for the times. With Simone de Beauvoir, Camus and others, he moved to make space for it in a viable periodical, *Les Temps Modernes*, and there's nothing we need now, sixty years later, more than channels of that kind. With *Griffith Review* and the Quarterly Essays, the Briefings and Platform Papers series, the *Australian Financial Review's* Friday Review section, and Black Inc's new *Monthly*, we do finally have such channels. Through them, in bad times, we can hope to contribute to intellectual renewal - and let that not rest as a pious cliché; we are fairly blanketed in war and censorship, and there's a lot of work to do.

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Sylvia Lawson writes essays, journalism and fiction. Her work includes The Archibald Paradox: a strange case of authorship (Allen Lane/Penguin, 1983, 1987); How Simone de Beauvoir died in Australia: stories and essays (University of New South Wales Press, 2002); The Outside Story (novel; Hardie Grant, 2003).

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