

**Veronica Brady**

***Australia the Land of Similes: The Feminine Economy.***

**Abstract I:** Mircea Elaide has argued that the crucial task of people newly arrived in a country hitherto unknown is imaginative, even spiritual, "the transformation of chaos into cosmos". The failure to do so may result in what the Chinese call "the dialogue with heaven" and may lead to a loss of humanity. It could be argued that something like this has happened in Australia. Here the culture of colonisation has been essentially "masculine" in the sense in which Helene Cixous uses the term, a culture of domination and control. It has led to a suspicion of the "feminine" which is prepared to give to and receive from the other and thus, I argue, to the problematic relationship of our relations with the land and its First Peoples. This paper looks at the ways in which Gail Jones' novel *Black Mirror* explores ways in which the "feminine" might help transform the chaos which faces us into cosmos.

"To fully express our humanity", Tu Wei-Ming has said, "we must engage in a dialogue with Heaven because human nature, as conferred by Heaven, realizes itself not by departing from its source but by returning to it. Humanity, so conceived, is the public property of the cosmos". (Tu Wei-Ming, 1989, 102). This dialogue with Heaven is not easily achieved in the New World. In the culture of colonisation the desires of the self rather than of Heaven tend to take the central place. But that may mean, as Tu Wei-Ming goes on to say, that we "fail to live up to our humanity ... [and thus] fail cosmologically in our mission as co-creator of Heaven and Earth". There are some signs that this may be so in Australia, notably in our relationship with the land and with its First peoples. One of the reasons for this may be that the culture of colonisation tends to be a culture of conquest and domination, a culture in which, as Drusilla Modjeska puts it, "men tend to assume the universal position, ...[as] the first person active, as if it were theirs alone" (Modjeska, 1994, 52) and women are reduced to mere dependency. But the feminine is not has a crucial part to play in constituting our place in the world. If Mircea Eliade is right when he argued that the primary task of settlement in a new and hitherto unknown place is essentially imaginative

rather than material, "the transformation of chaos into cosmos" (Eliade, 1974, 10), then settlement is not merely a matter of domination. It also involves learning to give to and receive from the land and its Aboriginal inhabitants. I would like therefore to consider what a recent novel Gail Jones' *Black Mirror*, which won an award for the best novel by a woman writer in 2003, has to contribute to this discussion.

It is a story of two women Victoria Morrell, a Surrealist painter, and Anna Griffin, a generation younger, who comes to London where Victoria has lived for many years to write her biography. Both women grew up in Kalgoorlie, a mining town on the edge of the desert in Western Australia but both have become expatriates. The novel's central concerns, however, are with questions of belonging and identity. Implicitly therefore it takes up a question which was dominant in the early days of settlement but which has subsequently been repressed though its effects are still widely apparent, in the anxiety about protecting our borders, the implicit fear of Aboriginal people and the destruction of the environment. This is the question of exile.

The strangeness of this new land, so very different from the British Isles from which they had come generated a peculiar anxiety. In a well known passage Marcus Clarke, for instance, argued that the characteristic note of the Australian landscape was a "Weird Melancholy" (in Turner, 1968, 110), expressing not only the sense of fear. Helene Cixous sees as typical of a masculine economy, the economy of appropriation and domination which underlies the project of colonisation, a "fear of expropriation, of separation, of the loss of an attribute" (Moi, 1991, 111), but also the sense of exile as Tom Chetwynd describes it, as the dominant Ego's rejection of the natural world, which should figure as an aspect of the larger Self and its relegation to a wilderness which lies beyond the bounds of its territory. In this respect it is also worth noting Freud's view that melancholia is the product of anxiety, even self-loathing, and may have to do with the work of detaching the self from its losses by closing off the approach of the other.

Many Australian writers have written about this alienation. Patrick White, for example, describes Australians as people clinging to the fringes of the self as they cling to the fringes of the continent geographically. But *Black Mirror* is one of an increasing number of books exploring an alternative, "feminine" response which challenges this "masculine" sense of exile, finding in it or, more precisely, in being in exile from this kind of exile, a way back into the land and thus into a larger sense of self. Instead of retreating from the wilderness the novel advances into it, first of all into the wilderness of the self.

Where the "masculine" lives within what Cixous calls "the Realm of the Proper", preoccupied with power as domination, property and propriety, and sees the self as unitary (Moi 112), the "feminine" self is polyphonic and open, giving to and receiving from the other, prepared to cross boundaries and move into new territory and to "know from within, where she, the outcast, has never ceased to hear the resonance of fore-language" (Moi, 113). So they listen to the land.

In a defining moment in her story, for example, as a child, Anna is taken on a picnic by her uncle Ernie to a salt lake in the desert not far from the town:

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When they came at last upon the salt lake it was vaster than Anna had expected, but ... it was like shivering glass. And it included a second dimension, a vague and spectral duplication, hanging low in the sky. Anna squinted against the glare and saw the whole world dissolve into a series of pink-coloured reflections: boundaries were indeterminate, surfaces were vitreous, no image stood alone. Tiny trees dangled upside-down beneath the floating lake, and others reached up from the earth in a twinning gesture. The air was crystalline and strange, the light gleaming as mirrors. (73).

The land is the mirror of the self. But both are multiple and dynamic, on their way to some mysterious elsewhere beyond the boundary of the visible and merely rational:

The air vibrated as if waves of sound moved through it. It was nothing Anna could hear. Nothing within her range. But the vibration existed. She felt it trouble the surface of her skin and enter the spaces of her body. Trees were jerking their heads in the easterly wind, smokebush trembled and salt crystals trembled and spun. Somewhere, up high, bird wings were beating and for some reason Anna felt like standing with her arms outstretched. (74)

Anna has no fear of the world. She belongs within it. As Cixous describes it; "If there is a "propriety of woman" it is paradoxically her capacity to deappropriate unselfishly, body without end ... Her libido is cosmic, just as her unconscious is world wide." Anna belongs by being with the land and identifying with its life, not standing over against it as its master and listening to the fore-language, the language of the earth "which knows neither enclosure or death" (Moi, 1991, 112-3).

This means opening out to the land's First Peoples who identify so closely with the land. This becomes clear in Victoria's story. Her putative father is a rich and ruthless mine owner. Typically he considers Aboriginal people as "despicable since they were without markets, commodities and evidence of artistry, and moreover refused all the blandishments of Civilisation", which he associates with money, power and his own pleasure. "Australia would advance, he believed, only when the extirpation of the Aborigine was complete" (158-9). Unconsciously, however, he senses that they are "the custodians of some secret and defining essence, some nocturnal mystery" (179) and rapes the Aboriginal woman, ironically known as Lily White, who looks after his children, either as an attempt to destroy or to gain possession of that mystery.

The child Lily White bears is therefore Victoria's half sister. Though she is unaware of this relationship, she is fascinated by the Aboriginal people she sees in camps on the fringes of the town or "moving down laneways, traversing the town in concealment in their small friendly groups. It was as though the town possessed

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secret passages and a world constituted by margins" (188). Her world thus has "a double cartography" because as well as that of the Aboriginal fringe dwellers she is aware of the mines underground, mines which her father owns but where men suffer and sometimes die.

Even as a child then she senses the swinging horizons, the longing for some secret knowledge accessible only in what Andre Breton called "a vertiginous descent within ourselves, the systematic illumination of hidden places and the progressive darkening of all other places", which lead her to become a Surrealist painter. Significantly the novel has Breton whom she meets - rather improbably - when she first arrives in Paris in the 1930s connect her Surrealism with the fact that she is Australian:

Noir et noir et noir et noir, Breton sang. Black and black and black and black, black is the body continent at which we force frontiers, black the juicy jungle, the tasty convolutions, the monkeys, the monkeys, the razors invading. (20)

She too knows this. Australia is the Black Mirror of the self. But it is there that her possibility lies, the "[m]usic that rises out of abandoned places". Her space is not her father's space, the mining town "rip-roaring and uproarious, a greedy myth made visible ... megaphonic" (168). Her space is "under the earth, inside the earth, inside the stars" (211).

The other theme running through the novel has to do with the problematic of the self and the relationship between art and reality. Anna is engaged with writing Victoria's biography. But "the more [she] knew of her subject the more imprecise she began to seem, the more dispersed in story, the more *disincarnated*" (155). The law of the self, like the law of life here, seems to be impermanence. What appears is never what really exists. The task is always to move elsewhere, go deeper into the mystery following the trajectory Virginia Woolf set out in the passage, which serves as the epigraph to one of the key sections of *Black Mirror*:

"Like" and "like" and "like" - but what is the thing that lies beneath the semblance of the thing? (79)

To conclude this brief note: if mainstream Australian culture has been largely "masculine" and largely destructive in its relationship with the land and with its Aboriginal Peoples, it is arguable that the "feminine" economy may offer an alternative. But that is not to say anything new. The strain of identification with the land and its ancient culture, the sense that, as Joseph Furphy put it, there is in the land a latent meaning, which it is our duty to explore, has long run through our culture, even if it has largely run underground. But that is material for another paper. We conclude, however, with James McAuley's call in his "Terra Australis":

Voyage within you, on the fabled ocean,

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And you will find that Southern Continent,  
Quiros' vision - his hidalgo heart  
And mythical Australia, where reside  
All things in their imagined counterpart.  
It is your land of similes...  
(In Heseltine, 1979, 291)

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**Veronica Brady** was born in Melbourne in 1929. She became one of the first Australian nuns to teach in a university, broadcast on radio or join in socio-political debate. After teaching at Loreto Convent in Kirribilli, NSW, she moved to the University of Western Australia in 1972, becoming an Associate Professor in 1991. She has spoken out publicly against the Vatican stance on abortion, homosexuality and contraception, and has been involved in the Aboriginal rights movement and the anti-uranium mining lobby. She also supports the ordination of female priests in the Catholic Church. Sister Veronica Brady is a member of many organisations including Amnesty International, the Campaign against Nuclear Energy, the Campaign against Racial Exploitation, the Fellowship of Australian Writers and the Association for Study of Australian Literature. She is the author of several books including *The Future People*, *The Mystics and Crucible of Prophets*.