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Borders, identity and the question of Australia

Abstract I: In this article I examine two recent works, *The White Earth* by Andrew Mc Gahan and *The Secret River* by Kate Grenville. The first explores the current preoccupation with borders, both external and internal, and the second is looking to move across them. A border can have both negative and positive connotations; as a mark of separation or, if used as a verb, the action of approaching or verging on another culture or environment. In Australia it has usually been defined negatively as an expression and focus of anxiety about invasion from outside but also of subversion from within. These assumptions can be explored through fiction, to the extent that it provides access to the unconscious, to what is otherwise unspoken and often unspeakable.

Abstract II: In questo articolo intendo esaminare due opere recenti, *The White Earth* di Andrew McGahan e *The Secret River* di Kate Grenville. Il primo esplora la preoccupazione attuale per i confini, sia interni che esterni, e il secondo cerca di oltrepassarli. Un confine può avere sia connotazioni positive che negative, in come segno di separazione oppure, se usato come verbo, come azione di avvicinamento o sconfinamento in un'altra cultura, in un altro ambiente. In Australia viene solitamente definito in modo negativo, come un'espressione una fonte di ansia riguardo all'invasione dall'esterno, ma anche di sovversione dall'interno. Queste considerazioni possono essere esplorate attraverso la narrativa, a patto che essa provveda accesso all'inconscio, a ciò che altrimenti è non detto e spesso indicibile.

Though it may refer to physical features - the fact that Australia is "girt by sea", for example - a border is in fact an imaginative construct, part of the construction of the "imagined community" which is called a "nation". It can have both negative and positive connotations; as a mark of separation or, if

used as a verb, the action of approaching or verging on another culture or environment. As it has been defined in this country since its beginnings as a settler society, however, it has usually been defined negatively as an expression and focus of anxiety about invasion from outside but also of subversion from within: witness the fear of "the Yellow Peril", the White Australia Policy, attempts to destroy Aboriginal cultures, recent events at Cronulla, the treatment of asylum seekers, and so on.

Most settler societies, I suppose, belong to what Walter Benjamin has called the 'tradition of catastrophe', they originated at a crucial moment of cultural disruption, a loss of faith in some of its certainties - by those involved in emigrating at least - and the acceptance of a need for change. This displacement, however, made for the kind of anxiety described in Henry Kingsley's *the Recollections Of Geoffrey Hamlyn*. First comes "the disturbance of household gods, and the rupture of life-old associations" with the realization that, as Hamlyn put it, he was going "to a land where none know me or care for me, [leaving] forever all that I know and love... Few know the feeling... of isolation, almost of terror, at having gone so far out of the bounds of ordinary life; the feeling of self-distrust and cowardice at being alone and friendless in the world, like a child in the dark" (Mellick 1982: 135-5). As one sociologist points out, identity here echoes the story of Ulysses, the hero who left home and travelled through strange and dangerous places, but always with the intention of returning home - as Hamlyn does, having redeemed the family fortunes in Australia - or of transforming these places into the equivalent of home (Susin 2000/2: 78-90), building "a new Britannia in another world" (Wentworth 1968: 12), as one early settler put it. But, as Susin says, this "Odyssey of the West" was "not an authentic adventure... [but] a closed circle around sameness" (Susin 2000/2: 87), in which difference is seen as threatening, to be destroyed or assimilated and good and evil is defined in terms of the imperial self which, seen "as basis and referent of the whole of reality spread out at its feet" (ibid.: 80). If this is seen as the pattern underlying our society the present concern with establishing and defending borders is not surprising.

What we are dealing with, however, largely exists at the unconscious level and is mostly a matter of implicit assumption rather than explicit statement. Fiction can be a useful way of exploring these assumptions, to the extent that it uses symbolic rather than literal description: symbols, as Paul Ricoeur (1969) argues, provide access to the unconscious, to what is otherwise unspoken and often unspeakable since it belongs to the dimension of "the archaic, the nocturnal, the oneiric" (Ricoeur 1969: 348) and can thus function "as surveyor's staff and guide" for understanding (ibid: 13). So I want to examine two recent works, Andrew Mc Gahan's *The White Earth* and Kate Grenville's *The Secret River*, one of which explores the current preoccupation with borders, both external and internal, and the other is looking to move across them.

To consider it first, the central character in Mc Gahan's novel, John Mc Ivor, sees the world as a dark and dangerous place where evil lurks, threatening his security and possessions. This sense permeates the novel. Its opening image, for instance, is catastrophic, a dark cloud which "rolled and boiled as it climbed

into the clear blue day, casting a vast shadow upon the hills beyond" (Mc Gahan 2004: 1) and is compared to the mushroom cloud of a nuclear explosion. In fact its cause, the explosion of a harvester which kills a farmer, and metaphorically at least, it does mark the end of his previous world for the boy who witnesses it, William, Mc Ivor's nephew since his father was that farmer. This melodramatic image sets the tone for the rest of the novel.

Melodrama, the conflict between absolute good and absolute evil, tends to arise within the "closed circle around sameness". *The White Earth's* tone is melodramatic, full of apocalyptic images like this. Mc Ivor, a dark repressive figure who dominates the novel, has overtones of Heathcliff in *Wuthering Heights*, though without his erotic appeal. A self-made, he believes he is beholden to no one. But he is also typical "imperial self", not concerned, as those who belong to traditional societies are to find his place in the world but rather determined to remake that world to his own image. When it seems to be going in a direction he dislikes, when the Government moves to legislate for Aboriginal Land Rights, for instance, he founds a Movement and then organises a rally to oppose it.

Its Charter is about defending Australia's borders and the "White Man's Supremacy", on the one hand rejecting "the United Nations and any other body that seeks to limit Australian sovereignty" and on the other attacking "preferential treatment of elite minorities" (by which Mc Ivor, like Pauline Hanson in real life, largely identifies with Aboriginal Australians). The Charter proclaims his belief in "One Flag, One People, One Nation" (Mc Gahan 2004: 133) - a slogan which echoes Hitler's "One Land, One Law, One People" (ibid.: 133). Underlying this is that the land is ours by right of conquest, in effect that might equals right and that dissent and difference must be suppressed. Seen from the outside, however, this view is the product not only of ethical poverty but also of the historical ignorance. Mere assertion like Mc Ivor's that 'the Aborigines were gone and wouldn't be coming back' (ibid.: 100) is no proof that this is so. Indeed the narrative suggests that it is not, suggesting, as we will see, that Mc Ivor is haunted by their continuing presence as well as by talk of Land Rights. Even his declaration to members of his Movement: "This is my property now. This is all your properties, your farms, your houses, your yards... We must be prepared to defend what we own... Australia - every square inch of it - it is our sacred site" (Mc Gahan: 209) - bespeaks their presence. In fact this assertion sits uneasily with his claim that he is defending "the inherent value of Australian culture and traditions" (ibid.) since that culture and traditions necessarily includes those of the First Peoples who have inhabited this land from time immemorial. But in Mc Ivor's mind history belongs only to the "winners", people like himself, and has no place for "losers".

Yet these assertions, the novel suggests, are the product of personal anxiety, even at the social level where he seems to have succeeded. As the owner of Kuran, the station which originally belonged to a pioneering family, he is a usurper. His father had been the manager but had brought up his son to believe that one day he would take over the station by marrying the daughter of the family, their only child. But when his approaches are contemptuously dismissed,

he sets himself to succeed by his own efforts, working obsessively to earn money and sacrificing everything, including his marriage, in the process. To use a distinction made by Helene Cixous (Moi 1991: 110-113), this obsession with property is essentially “masculine” - in contrast with the culture she calls “feminine”, which is open, ready to give and receive from others, less preoccupied with external than with inner reality, with “the resonance of fore-language”, what is unspoken and often unconscious and is thus prepared to move across borders rather than defend them. Mc Ivor, however, is perpetually on the defensive, determined to rely only on himself. As Cixous observes, in the “masculine” economy, “the moment you receive something you are effectively “open” to the other, [but] if you are a man, you have only one wish, and that is hastily to return the gift, to break the circuit of an exchange that could have no end...to be nobody’s child, to owe no one a thing” (ibid: 112) - and I do not need, I think, to spell out the parallels with the policies of our present Government and the beliefs of its supporters.

Significantly, however, as the novel draws to its end, Mc Ivor’s nephew is beginning to move in the opposite, “feminine”, direction, increasingly open to the “fore-language” of the land first of all as he explores Kuran and sense in it “something powerful in its own right - to hear a voice in it, meant specifically for human ears” (Mc Gahan 2004: 100). But this voice also introduces him to a history different from the one which sustains his uncle which is about heroic explorers and pioneers, shepherds and stockmen, bush rangers and Diggers and so on. It suggests another set of images of “deranged things, wrong things” (ibid: 327) to do with the Aboriginal story. It speaks especially loudly at the spring from which, significantly, the main river system of the country originates, but into which in the past the bodies of the Aboriginal owners of Kuran murdered by settlers had been thrown. The boy senses here smell “of blood and death...something invisible which made the air too potent to breathe...some cold and ancient secret of the land itself” (ibid: 326) and begins to realize that should his uncle make him his heir the ownership of Kuran would prove “no gift...[but] a burden” (ibid: 327).

The contrast between him and his uncle is drawn here and the narrative comes down on Williams’. Not long after the violent collapse of his Movement Mc Ivor dies in the fire which consumes the decaying mansion, the Kuran homestead - a properly melodramatic ending, of course, in which the ‘baddie’ is destroyed. For our present purposes, however, it is worth noting that the lurid description of him as a thing of terror also has him turn his head “slowly, searching, just as it had been searching the first time William had seen it” (ibid: 367). Perhaps this is to suggest that the other side of the frontier he has drawn so firmly cannot be denied.

The other work I want to explore, *The Secret River*, takes us into this country, suggesting a positive definition of “border” not as a place where the other is rejected but where a new exchange may begin. There is also a personal urgency in this novel since its central character is loosely based on the figure of Grenville’s great-great-great-grandfather and had its beginnings at the Walk for Reconciliation across the Harbour Bridge in 2000 when the novelist’s eyes met

those of an Aboriginal woman who smiled at her. "In that instant of putting my own ancestor together with this woman's ancestor", she writes, "everything swivelled: the country, the place, my sense of myself in it" (Grenville 2005: 11).

Walking across the bridge "we were strolling towards reconciliation - what I had to do was across the hard way, through the deep water of our history" (ibid.).

Reimagining the story of her ancestor, whom she calls William Thornhill, Grenville explores the beginnings of division, attempting to understand rather than to blame. Her ancestor, a poor man transported for life for stealing, belongs to the "tradition of catastrophe", a victim of the system but also in the long run its beneficiary since it enables him to take up land, displacing its Aboriginal owners and finally involving him in a massacre to destroy their resistance. Illiterate and at bay before the strangeness of this place, he has inherited the prejudices of his culture. The novel is not interested in Manichean notions of good and evil, however but in the way out of the *cul de sac* in which we find ourselves.

I would like to conclude by looking briefly at two key scenes. The first tries to sum up what really happened when Thornhill went to the native camp to order them to leave, invoking English notions of property, telling them: "*This mine now. Thornhill's place.* But this is not England and English law, like the English language means nothing to his hearers and his words flow past them "as if they mattered as little as a current of air" (Grenville 2005: 13). As for Thornhill "the Aboriginal presence is a hollow...a space of difference" (Grenville 2006: 199). Neither side understands the other and so the encounter foreshadows the violence by which the impasse is resolved. A conversation had taken place. There had been an inquiry and an answer. But what inquiry, which answer? They stared at each other, their words between them like a wall (Grenville 2005: 197). The question then is how the wall might be breached so that we will not be swept along as Thornhill was by the current of violence.

The novel's conclusion suggests a possible answer as Thornhill, now an old man, sits at sunset to watch the light on the cliffs opposite blazing gold even after the dusk had left them glowing secretively with an after-light that came from the rocks themselves (ibid.: 334). The cliffs are a wall. But something glimmers there in them which, it is implied, will lead him through them into the land itself where he senses still the Aboriginal presence. There is no time to spell out what this may signify. But what seems to me to be clear that now he is beginning to be open to the other. What this might mean was suggested by Levinas: "It is in the laying down by the ego of its sovereignty (in its "hateful" modality) that we find ethics and also probably the very spirituality of the soul, but most certainly the meaning of being, that is, its appeal for justification" (Hand 1993: 85).

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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*.

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