

paraphrases at least three times) that the 'text is a tissue of quotations drawn from the innumerable centres of cultures'. In this illuminating work Narogin advances an Aboriginal critical practice which, in its postmodernity, is not so much a criticism as a 'politics' since Aboriginality, the core or centre of the Aboriginal cultural experience, like Feminism, requires for its articulation and 'decoding' a specific sensibility or consciousness. To develop Aboriginality as an 'advanced coherence' in literature Narogin's thesis is based upon a strategic (and extremely functional) reading of Michael Riffaterre's use of the matrix and the hidden intertext. Narogin calls this the hidden metatext which both signifies Aboriginality and is the defining feature of an Aboriginal text. Because an Aboriginal text must trigger this, one's reading explores those moments in the text which lead to the 'experience' of Aboriginality. Working from Riffaterre's theory, this means that an initial minimal reading of a text along purely representational (mimetic) lines must give way to a retroactive reading which uncovers the work's 'significance'. This 'significance' is directly related to a text's Aboriginality, an essence which literature, like the processes of Buddhist nirvana, unfold as it disentangles or lays bare the world of illusion. In the process Narogin uncovers precisely that multiplicity of 'tissues' which constitutes the Aboriginal text.

Writing from the Fringe offers an archaeology of crucial Aboriginal 'moments' such as the history of the publication of the journal *Identity* (1972-1982), the white writing of 'trustories', the 'consumption' by the white community of the 'battler genre' of Sally Morgan and Glenyse Ward, the place of popular music, especially reggae rock in Aboriginal society, and so on. But central to both the thesis and the archaeology is an unresolved contradiction: Aboriginal texts are written in a language (English) for an audience which is predominantly white. This leads to a peculiar schizophrenia (p.125). In exploring this contradiction, or schizophrenia, Narogin points out how the Aboriginal cultural artefact, and certainly the literary text, is trapped in an entire history of Australian assimilationist policy. This policy of assimilation valorized conformity at the expense of difference and led to a form of literary imprisonment. A particular discourse (standard English), a particular ethic

Mudrooroo Narogin, *Writing from the Fringe*.
A Study of Modern Aboriginal Literature
Melbourne, Hyland House, 1990.

Mudrooroo Narogin's *Writing from the Fringe* is the most important piece of literary criticism to have come out of Australia since Frederick Sinnett's 'The Fiction Fields of Australia' (1856). It certainly belongs to a tradition of criticism in Australia 'punctuated' by the writings of Vance Palmer, P.R. Stephensen, A.A. Phillips and Judith Wright. Narogin uses a complex social semiotic approach to develop a fundamental theoretical insight of Roland Barthes (which he quotes or

(Christianity) and a particular genre (the ballad or hymnody) denied Aborigines access to the great and complex texts (and experiences) of the Metropolitan centre as well as of Aboriginal tradition itself. Black Australian writing was trapped in this generic and linguistic continuum since the Black writers were told no other: their own way forcibly suppressed (as primitive, pagan, or whatever) anyway. Oodergoo Noonuccal, Kevin Gilbert, Jack Davis and Narogin himself are all part of a generation 'scarred by assimilation' (p.49), part of a racial 'splinter' who had no 'natural' family (p.79) and who show how 'assimilation has hindered Aboriginal creativity rather than helped it' (p.86). Only those Aborigines least affected by assimilation will be able to write the most exciting forms of literature (p.30).

To say that the Aboriginal writes in a 'whitefella' style, organised along 'whitefella' time is to admit the triumph of white assimilationist ideology. There is no way out of this except through a self-conscious adoption of an Aboriginal discourse as Narogin himself attempts in *Doin Wildcat* (1988) which he considers his 'best work to date' (p.174) written in a 'close proximity to oral styles' (p.111). Here what Riffaterre called ungrammaticalities threaten the easy, mimetic orientation of language as representation (p.58).

Writing from the Fringe defines both an Aboriginal literary dominant at the level of structure (no neat endings, circuitous narratives, repetition, inconclusiveness) and an Aboriginality at the level of content (the text is marked by a 'self-deprecating humour' and 'pessimistic ending' (p.128)). Narogin frames the Aboriginal 'dominant' in an historical periodization strictly along Aboriginal lines with only the year 1788 being common to both white and black Australian histories.

At the ideological level, Narogin's criticism seeks to find texts which emphasise survival and struggle rather than those which search for personal genealogical roots or equal opportunity in a multicultural Australia. For this reason Glenyse Ward and Sally Morgan's works are given tentative, and slightly contradictory, endorsement. 'Battler genres' as he calls them figure slightly better when he returns to Morgan later in the text, though *My Place* with its focus on the individual and not the class as a whole (p.149) is, by implication, not a 'black text'

(p.161) whose ground of existence is, as in Labumore's (Elsie Roughsey) 'life story', the survival of the race at large. The process of tentative endorsement tempered by an afterthought is an interesting feature of Narogin's criticism since it signifies a continuity of thinking on the part of Aboriginal writers working in both the critical and creative modes. Afterthoughts are included within the covers of the same book not as signs of the Aboriginal critic/writer's indecisiveness (or lack of unity) but as a discursive (and political) feature of Aboriginal writing generally.

It is because the Aborigine is a social being who is never isolated from his culture that he is 'a value creator and integrator' (p.24). Unlike Frederick Sinnett's ideal, the Aboriginal writer is a social being for whom the aesthetic coexists with and is locked into the social. Aesthetic value is in fact subordinated to the content, the message of the text. If Aboriginal literature is to be informed by Aboriginality, then it must produce verbal discourses 'in which the message is dominant and the aesthetic function is subordinate' (p.35). The criterion of value is thus the degree of Aboriginality in a given work (this in itself excludes, as inauthentic, the works of Herbert, Keneally or White on Aborigines). This may be deemed an Aboriginal aesthetic (a social aesthetic?) in its own right as it considers the author, his biography, his complete works as part of a total racial experience produced from within the complex culture itself.

Yet Narogin is no simple romantic. He recognises that cultures must never fossilize (as indentured Indian culture with its mimicry of the coloniser's values has done) since this would only confirm its 'museum' status as a 'calcified colonised society' (p.144). Their vibrancy must never be sacrificed and for this they must be self-reflective as well. The theoretical cosmopolitanism of Narogin's criticism with its strong basis in French post-structuralist theory is part of this self-reflexivity and 'de-calcification'. What is needed is a generic freedom as well as a refined sense of the Aboriginal struggle. The defining feature of the Aboriginal text, to which Narogin returns over and over again whether it's Lionel Fogarty or Narogin himself, is the text's Aboriginality. It remains a structural and a thematic dominant because of a fundamental, inalienable fact of history: 'being born in a white world is no joke for a black man or woman'

(p.136). This is a cruel indictment of the majority culture as well as an incisive statement about the Aboriginal historical predicament.

Given the fact of birth — being born in a white world is no joke — compromise, manipulation, abuse and misuse are all part of the processes through which the colonised negotiates with the coloniser. Because the apparatuses of power and knowledge are all European, artistic creativity and help itself might mean colluding with the coloniser and writing on his own terms. The black writer feels like a 'shuffling Beckett character uttering parables into the recording apparatus of white dominance' (p.151). He also exists at the very interface of this ambiguity. He writes, as white critics keep on reminding him, for the invader and in his own language. He is also reminded — such is the cruel irony of it all — by white converts that he is trapped in a discourse from which he can find no escape. 'It is a curious fate', writes Narogin 'to write for a people not one's own, and stranger still to write for the conqueror of one's people' (p.148).

Thus Aboriginal writers must use (white) literary genres as a political weapon with which to challenge white hegemony. They must redefine genre, explode discourses, delegitimize standard English, subvert expectations, challenge assumptions while maintaining their rage and their centrality in an Australia which, after all, ultimately and preeminently, belongs to them. Their literature therefore participates in forms of magic realism as it mixes fantasy and reality, dreamtime and chronology, fact and myth. But reading — our reading — also requires an Aboriginal reading practice, an Aboriginal strategy of unearthing mythic, totemic meanings which Narogin demonstrates as an exercise in radical practical criticism in the final chapter of this challenging, and disturbing, work. Like a taboo, a sacred ritual, Aboriginal literature does not open its secrets readily to the uninitiated.

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