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Foreword: Veronica Brady, academic voices and pending hugs

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We could hardly guess its consequence at the time, but back in November 1988, as White Australia celebrated the bicentenary of settlement and Indigenous Australians mourned two centuries of dispossession and annihilation, the cultural distance between Western Australia and northern Spain began to shrink. Not that flight connections were miraculously improved, or that our old but modest university had struck a magical jack pot of funding to spot us on the map of the already expanding academic networks. No such luck, as so many other exploits of development in this country, the reason was serendipitous and quixotic or, to update it to more fashionable jargon, the feat was made possible by a small group of strong-willed academic entrepreneurs who schemed their best to bring Oz to Asturias. History may have slipped on it, but on November 13th, accompanied by two spirited interlopers from the University of Barcelona, Doireann MacDermott and Susan Ballyn, the first two academic envoys from Australia alighted from the Barcelona express; their names Bruce Bennett and Veronica Brady. Truth to tell we had also had our Cook of sorts, for a few years back Colin Roderick had paid a short visit; he had abstained from ruthlessly renaming any faculty office to suit his mood or exploratory tribulations, nor had he planted his flag in the north wing of the old convent-turned-to-faculty building, but our late Head of Department, Prof. Patricia Shaw, distinctively remembered his “extravagant” hat, and he did leave us a copy of his *Henry Lawson Criticism, 1894-1971* (1972), probably the first Australian critical work to make its way into our library funds.

That first 1988 visit was not long, but in the span of a couple of days guest and local academics formally launched Australian Studies at Oviedo University in our first Seminar on Australian Literature and Culture. We had thus become the discipline’s second outpost across the country after the University of Barcelona. In the sessions students and young postgraduates learnt both about the Great South Land and multicultural Australia, about settlers and indigenous people, about formidable and desperate men and women, about history and autobiography. And yes, there were some gorgeous pictures of exotic fauna too, and we also heard of gum trees, which honouring their colonial nickname were then wreaking havoc in the landscapes of northern Spain —a lesson in ecological colonisation in reverse at a time when postcolonial eco-criticism was yet to be formally introduced.

Eucalyptus plantations have been on the retreat here ever since, not so with Australian Studies, which grew strong and healthy under the shade of the expansion of Postcolonial Studies for more than two decades, not only as a research, but also as a teaching subject, with a specific undergraduate module on offer for thirteen years and several post-graduate courses. Those were the days of the precious and fruitful interval before the brainiacs of global capitalism took again issue with the Humanities and made sure little or no public money —i.e. hardly any money at all— was spent in non-technological or business-oriented disciplines, that is to say before they saw to it that universities across the world were inexorably turned into consumer-targeted competitive “business mongrels”. This label has stuck to my mind since Veronica Brady used it in a long and rather meandering conversation we had the last time we met in her Perth home in 2010; her health visibly deteriorated, her rebellious and outspoken spirit intact.

During that interval, Veronica Brady visited Spain many times, occasionally for several-weeks stays. Not only Barcelona and Oviedo, but also Galicia, León and the Balearic Islands, where she taught on Australian literature and deciphered her country’s myths and reality to us, Antipodean Spaniards. In her lectures and generous tête-à-têtes with academics, young researchers and students there was no misunderstanding she loved her country dearly —“I enjoy travelling, but when the plane descends on my tiny, dear Perth I can’t help the glee to be back home”— yet critically. Much as she often got run away with her enthusiasm for Australian literature, she rarely spared a hefty dose of open criticism at the country’s materialism or failed to acknowledge and denounce its most deadly sin: the atrocities committed against Indigenous Australians and their culture. Introducing us to Judith Wright’s poetry she would tell us of Australia’s “mortal wound” and of the unrelenting psychological anxiety that “oozes” from that wound and “bedevils relations between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal Australia” (Brady 1998: 115). She generously shared her vast knowledge of Australian literature and entertained us with her stories —the odd song included. She transmitted her knowledge with passion and encouraged us to read, from convict to modernist novels, from Barbara Baynton to Brian Castro, from Patrick White to Oodgeroo Noonuccal. Interspersed with thought-provoking background information and challenging critical references, she would offer vital clues to interpret and appreciate Australian literature and give a hint, or a dozen, about what book or author to read next. Her views on the indissoluble bond between ethics and aesthetics, between politics and poetry forever underlying those recommendations: “language is a primary cultural and therefore historical fact” (1998: 116). She often explained this with regard to Aboriginal writers, poets in particular, warning us against the temptation to approach their work as an exotic and fashionable topic, but encouraging us to read them and discover their impressive achievements against the gigantic windmills of colonial and post-colonial Australia —her fondness for Don Quixote was not a secret either.

Those lectures, lessons and conversations not only brought Australia and Australian literature closer to Spain, they also brought Veronica Brady closer and closer to our minds and our hearts. The initiative to dedicate a special number of *Coolabah* to her figure, promoted by Sue Ballyn and the Australian Studies Centre at the University of Barcelona, aims to honour her memory and the stamp she left in our field of studies, but even more so it is intended as a polyphonic expression of remembrance and gratitude to the friend and the mentor, the colleague and the teacher —or rather *la maestra*, for Spanish is much more expressive here, and she would understand that. As guest editors we have been

honoured with the task of inviting contributions and engaging Veronica's friends from both hemispheres into a written conversation either about Veronica, her work or on topics they would have enjoyed discussing with her. Eventually, tight academic schedules or personal circumstances have deprived us of some dearly longed-for and meaningful voices, but paraphrasing Shirley Walker's comment on Judith Wright's *At Cooloola*, they nonetheless *sing* in our minds much as we are sure Veronica's memory *sings* and will remain in theirs.

Unlike more rigid academic journals, *Coolabah* has allowed us beyond the constraints of the conventional essay volume to include also memoir pieces. Veronica being Veronica, we have thought she would have liked to hear/read them for starters and as a final note to keep reverberating in our minds. In fact, Sue Ballyn's sparkling recollections of her encounters and adventures with Veronica in Australia and in Europe close with a brisk non-hug at Budapest airport. As we first read Susan's account of the incident we realised that missing hug was just one among many other pending hugs, trips and drinks with Veronica, so we suggest you read this special number and the papers it includes as a collective thank-you rather than goodbye hug to her. Hurry o no hurry Veronica was not fond of saying goodbye, in Spain she learnt soon to say *hasta la vista* and she would rather leave with a *see-you-my-friend* even when she had just met somebody. For someone who knew the past so well, she always seemed to be looking beyond farewells into the next conversation, looking forward to the next hello hug. In this her concept of time, or rather, of our "being in time" matched her views on the proper way of "being on the earth", as she explained at the EACLALS conference in Oviedo, quoting from Julia Velanquez: "the whole earth is a single cell and we are all simply symbiotic particles, related to one another. There can be no 'us and 'them', we are all part of the whole [...] truly a bios as well as a logos" (1999: 115). No time for farewells then: too much reading and writing to do, too many wrongs to expose and denounce, lots of people to meet, lots of thinking to do, lots of ideas to ponder over and share, a vast world to contemplate and "dwell in", the whole "art of living" to refine.

That art integrates poetry and politics, the combination of which is indispensable to regenerate our existence and our relation with the world. This was one of the pillars of Veronica Brady's thought, as reflected in her own life and in her critical appreciation of literature. Her views on life and literature are perceptively analysed in this volume by Gail Jones, whose intellect and literary work Veronica valued and praised repeatedly. Eliciting a set of crucial questions from a painting by Fra Angelico, she confronts the loss of significance, the impression of emptiness and absence that follow death: is there any sign to "offer consolation", any clue to "secure significance", she prompts. Is there any sense to be made out of "peering down" into the "vastly deep well" of absence? According to Jones' reading of Brady's work, the answer is to be found in "the *trace*, a notion she loved" —not that, as Jones reminds us, Veronica was any fonder of answers, "*the idol of the answer*", than she was of farewells. And Veronica's trace was made manifest in her personal trajectory, her political persona and, indefectibly, in her critical work, which Jones examines with rigour and emotion. On reading her bio-essay in the light of current politics and fascistic revivalism across the world, one cannot help missing Veronica's sharp analysis or instinctively summoning up her memory when you hear Pope Francis disown religious hypocrites, "the pseudo-religious", or the threatening omnipresent drumming of racist and materialistic discourse. That is part of Veronica's *trace*, and so is her example of vital energy and indefatigable struggle for social justice, of humility and

“discomfortable” faith. Against the darkening clouds of today Veronica would be —her *trace* is— at the forefront of resistance and leading the march of environmentalism, for there is no denying that, as Judith Wright said of Australia in 1970, we are both “conquerors and self-prisoners” of a world we are scarring to (self)destruction: “[we are] dying of the venoms that we make / even while you die of us” (cited Brady 1999, p. 114). The choice is there to die the “holy white” death that Gail Jones claims for Veronica in the moving final section of her article or to stick to “the destructive powers of technology” and the venomous forces of patriarchal culture (Brady 1999: p. 117).

The three personal pieces that open and close this volume which, paraphrasing Gail Jones, rehearse Veronica’s memory are complemented with six academic contributions from scholars who knew and appreciated her dearly. As editors we considered the possibility of offering a list of suggested topics, but then decided that would go against Veronica’s larrikin vein, not to mention her boundless range of interests, so we eventually opted for leaving authors complete freedom in their choice of topic. Harvest time left us with a miscellaneous collection that we have listed in alphabetical order. It includes essays on an Australian classic such as Christina Stead, who Veronica studied in her time and whose relevance for the present context Anne Holden Ronning feels the need to vindicate and on whom she focuses “a transcultural lens”, but also on new South-Asian voices, such as Suneeta Peres da Costa and Michelle de Kretser, who Alejandra Moreno Álvarez studies in her paper on planetary conviviality. María Jesús Lorenzo Modia from the *Universidade da Corunna* writes on the transnational narratives between Galicia and Australia that date back to the 16th century and have continued up to the present in the work of several Galician and Australian authors, such as contemporary Galician-Australian writer Félix Calvino. M.S. Suárez Lafuente and Paloma Fresno Calleja venture across the Tasman Sea to analyse Eleanor Catton’s Booker-winning novel *The Luminaries* and Alison Wong’s *As the Earth Turns Silver*. Despite the novels’ overseas setting, both articles have been written with Veronica in mind, for while the former analyses a settler epic through the critical lens of Paul Carter’s *The Road to Botany Bay*, the latter chooses a contemporary writer of Chinese descent in recognition of her well-known attraction to China and Chinese culture. Last in this section, but first in order of appearance, is a dialogical essay by Simone Lazaroo and Isabel Carrera in which writer and critic analyse not only different ways of researching and recreating cities, but also different ways of being and living in the city. Moreover they propose a whole new ethics for post-Global-Financial-Crisis cities that can no longer cater exclusively to the demands of cars, business and tourists, but need to acknowledge the presence of beggars, street-dwellers or refugees. The “larrikin angel” would have sympathised with that!

“Those who knew Veronica hear her voice in her prose”, says Gail Jones in her essay. While preparing and editing this volume we have received emails from quite a few people expressing their respect for her and reporting on anecdotes they had shared with her; Veronica’s voice was distinctively there too. As it was in our own recollections of her visits, which prolonged more than an editing meeting or two. To quote from Jones again, they are all but “exchanges of sorts”, “modest retrievals” which befit the “condition of bereavement”. Much as we agree that words cannot bring the lost ones back, it is comforting to think that their *trace* remains with us, even if only in the darkness of the night. It is the anecdote of waking to Veronica’s voice at midnight that triggers the final appraisal piece which we propose as the coda for the volume. In this short, but exquisite piece, Shirley Walker —another very special friend and mentor; another prominent

critical and narrative voice from Australia— evokes both Veronica and Judith Wright, in her view “a perfect much”. Herself a specialist in Wright’s work, Walker threads a brief but perceptive analysis of *South of My Days*, Veronica Brady’s biography of the poet, with her reading of “At Cooloola”, which she claims as one of her favourite Wright poems and talks about White Australia’s guilt and estrangement from the land. But that estrangement can be lessened by conceding the sin and making reparations, i.e. “by love”, which poet and biographer felt deeply. So that in Shirley Walker’s view their passionate and penetrating voices will not be silenced or forgotten, for their echo has been duly absorbed into the Australian night—with the great owl’s, the possum’s, the tribal snake’s and the Indigenous women’s— and from there they sing to us, to remind us of their vision for their country, and for the human-kind at large. Their combined, nurturing voices will keep giving *meaning* to the *night* and “flowing through us” (Brady 1991, p. 115).

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