

# TRANSNATIONAL LITERATURE

## Antonella Riem, *A Gesture of Reconciliation: Partnership Studies in Australian Literature* (Forum, 2017)

Studying Australian literature, in particular Patrick White's novels, has been Antonella Riem's concern since at least the 1980s while her interest in analytical terms like partnership and the creative word can be traced back to essays published in 2004 and 2014 respectively. Both are placed at the centre of the present study that addresses not only the novelist's *Voss*, *The Aunt's Story* and *Memoirs of Many in One* but also works by Marcus Clark, Randolph Stow, Peter Carey and Blanche d'Alpuget, well-known representatives of the Australian literary canon of the twentieth century.

Riem has adopted a two-pronged approach that is grounded in theoretical considerations of Riane Eisler (whose *Afterword* concludes the book) and Raimon Panikkar, the one an anthropologist and social scholar, the other a philosopher and theologian, both professing scholarly disciplines that do not immediately suggest their interest in literary criticism. Riem however adopts criteria central in their work for her own project to work out a reading of the novels from an ethical and a performative angle.

From the ethical point of view, Riem aims to establish whether the work of these white Australian writers grapples successfully with the problem of reconciliation. Reconciliation would entail creating a partnership between human beings, man and woman, people and land, life and cosmos in the face of a dominating political, social and cultural system that had been established by the European colonisers and determined their relations to the continent and its indigenous people; and also those among them who would deviate from 'values' such as degenerating and exploiting the 'other', perhaps deriving even pleasure from doing so, and quite generally, exerting total control over them. This control is expressed in manifold ways, among them a language that 'articulates aggressiveness and a hierarchical attitude' with 'positivist scientism prevail[ing]'; a language Panikkar calls scientific (16). Partnership, on the other hand, would be grounded in caring for the 'other', in feeling, sympathy, in humanity.

The performative aspect Riem's analyses pursue is linked to the function of language writers employ, the creative word, as opposed to the scientific, that relates to 'the symbolic, poetic, epiphanic and spiritual power of language' and performs, in dialogical dialogue, 'a process of constant transformation and renewal': a 'joint search for the shared and the different', as Panikkar put it (17).

Following her Introduction in which Riem briefly and intelligibly outlines the methodological foundation of her detailed character analyses, the main part of her study is introduced by analysing Clark's *For the Term of His Natural Life* as representing 'the convict system ... as a continual battle between partnership and dominator cultural paradigms' (29). The comprehensive second chapter on White's *Voss* and *The Aunt's Story* and Stow's *To the Islands* is a very-well documented presentation of their individual protagonists' 'Journeying towards partnership', a journey motivated by their search for self, leaving behind their erstwhile lives

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ruled by the dominator system to establish a harmonious relationship between self, land and life and to experience the ‘unity of all things’ (71).

In part two, ‘Shaping Reality in Dialogical Dialogue’, attention is shifted from the hitherto primarily thematic approach to narratological and linguistic aspects – or ‘from Eisler to Panikkar’ – in Stowe’s *The Merry-Go-Round in the Sea* and *Tourmaline*, Carey’s *Bliss*, d’Alpuget’s *Turtle Beach* and White’s *Memoirs of Many in One*: all of them densely argued analyses of their authors’ achievement to have made ‘dialogical dialogue ... shape reality in positive, creative and constructive ways through the creative word’ (117).

While *A Gesture of Reconciliation* presents altogether convincing readings of these Australian novels within the theoretical framework chosen, it invites two comments and raises a few questions. Repeated references to the study’s theoretical underpinnings are not always necessary since their function has been outlined from the beginning. More examples would have served to carry the argument of Carey’s use of the creative word even more convincingly (131-132). And finally, gestures of reconciliation of the novels’ (white) protagonists extended to Aboriginal people are based on their (and their creators’) perception of indigeneity – which can be read as self-conceived; a projection. Would the inclusion of at least one Aboriginal text not have been helpful to avoid such a conclusion, as much as questioning d’Alpuget’s simple confrontation between the western dominator paradigm and Malaysia’s ‘more partnership oriented society’? (163) Nonetheless, Riem’s minute analyses and consistent pursuit of her thesis – including the book’s well-wrought structure – will be of interest to students and scholars of the twentieth-century Australian novel.

**Dieter Riemenschneider**

Goethe University Frankfurt