

Ratbag Writers and Cranky Critics: In Their Praise

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My title for this paper came from reflecting on the two women honoured by the 2004 ASAL conference and this annual lecture, Thea Astley and Dorothy Green, outstanding examples of the Australian ratbag writer and her counterpart, the cranky critic. I want to begin, however, by remembering another critic who published important essays on Thea Astley's fiction and Dorothy Green's criticism. I mean, of course, Elizabeth Perkins who died in February of 2004. Elizabeth was a close and longstanding friend of both Thea Astley and Dorothy Green. In the late 1950s she worked as a junior mistress in the girls' boarding school where Dorothy was co-principal, and her friendship with Thea grew when Thea lived at Kuranda and Elizabeth was teaching at James Cook University in Townsville.

Elizabeth gave the Dorothy Green lecture in Perth in 1993, when she spoke about the life of Katharine Grant Watson, the wife of E. Grant Watson, an author Dorothy admired so much that she planned to write his biography. Elizabeth's lecture revealed that Grant Watson was involved in a network of exploitative relationships with women, including his administration of a drug to his wife in order to procure an abortion. Dorothy admired the spiritualism of Grant Watson, and it was difficult to imagine her response to information about his neglect of his wife while he continued a relationship with another woman. After the lecture, Elizabeth told me she believed Dorothy's discovery of these aspects of Watson's life prevented her from completing the biography. These matters have some relevance to my argument in this paper—in that one of the critical issues I want to address is what happens when an admiring critic finds the beliefs or behaviours of a writer to be distressing or disturbing.

Elizabeth's own approach to criticism provides a further lesson for critics. Her devoted affection for Dorothy never prevented her from disagreeing with the pronouncements Dorothy was inclined to make. In 1990, when Dorothy was becoming frail, Elizabeth took leave from her university position so that she could live with Dorothy in Canberra and help her through her illness. At this time, Elizabeth told me that she and Dorothy usually began to argue as she brought in the morning paper, and they would still be arguing as they brushed their teeth ready for bed at night. When I organised a conference to honour Dorothy in 1989, Elizabeth contributed a paper that grappled with Dorothy's Christian humanism (delivered by Elizabeth Lawson on her behalf). She suggested that Dorothy's commitment to individual responsibility gave insufficient weight to the social and political circumstances that inhibit the individual's journey to fulfilment. Considering the implications of the participation of Sir Thomas Browne, the humanist thinker Dorothy admired so much, in a court that sentenced a woman to death as a witch, Elizabeth imagined that:

had Dorothy Green's work, as a spinster of lowly status in the seventeenth century, been the growing of herbs and inveighing against male medical practices, especially those allegedly founded on references in the Old Testament, she too may have been condemned as a witch in Sir Thomas Browne's court. ("The Work of Dorothy Green" 290)

Dorothy Green was a cranky critic, the kind of widely read argumentative intellectual it is now difficult to find in the academy—and, of course, her relationship with the academy was at times a difficult one. Elizabeth did Dorothy the service of reading her writing closely, and she was able to place Dorothy's humanism, that sometimes appeared innocent of contemporary thinking on a range of issues, into the context of her wide reading and sympathies. I refer to these matters now partly to acknowledge Elizabeth's contribution to our work, but also to emphasise how important it is that we argue with each other about literature and ideas—and how important it is for literary critics to listen sympathetically to voices that sound, at first, as if they were out of the room when we settled the agenda.

It may no longer be possible for an academic to function as a "cranky" critic, developing idiosyncratic approaches to literature from beyond the boundaries of literary and cultural theory, but Australian artists who refuse to abide by, or even notice, accepted contemporary intellectual attitudes continue to produce obstinately challenging texts. Thea Astley may have inspired my title, but she is far from alone in writing opinionated, passionate fictions. My canon of ratbags would include Patrick White, Xavier Herbert, Les Murray, Helen Garner, and David Foster. I have no doubt that each of you could add several more to this list.

While there are no doubt eccentric writers throughout the world, it is possible to speculate about an archetypal Australian ratbag writer: gifted with a superior intelligence (sometimes indicated by prodigious language or musical skills), ratbag writers are likely to have been well educated by the standards of their generation. Though they may work on its fringes, these writers are never institutionalised in the literature departments of the academy and they usually have a scepticism about, or even resentment of, academic literary critics. Despite their relatively high levels of education, these writers usually at some point have digressed from conventional paths of education. Les Murray dropped in and out of degree subjects at university to get what he claimed was “the most mediocre degree Sydney University ever awarded” (Alexander 142); David Foster spent the years of his Chemistry PhD sneaking off to the University Library to read William Hazlitt, Samuel Beckett and William Burroughs; Helen Garner frequently expresses embarrassment about the mediocrity of her English and French honours degree, but thinks an English degree gave her an “over-developed critical intelligence” that sapped her creative confidence (Wachtel 58).

At the age when aspiring literary academics buckle down to get the results needed for a higher degree, these writers had already decided that the institutional road would not satisfy them. They were risk-takers, and spent the rest of their lives picking and choosing what they would learn. Often they choose to live in isolated communities where they will rarely if ever encounter other intellectuals or intellects that might challenge their sense of superiority or, indeed, argue with them (Foster in Bundanoon, Murray in Bunyah, Herbert in Redlynch, Astley in Kuranda and Cambewarra). This isolation, I believe, helps maintain confidence in a singular worldview, and all of these conditions contribute to an autodidactic tendency.

Those of us who are academic teachers are committed to systematic study, enriched by a consciousness of the theoretical underpinnings of what we are doing. The process of education enables us to absorb every new thing we encounter into existing patterns of knowledge. We sometimes adopt theoretical paradigms that seem to express our own belief systems, or we may apply a range of theoretical approaches to uncover the meanings of what we read. All the time, we are aware of where this puts our work in the range of our discipline.

Ratbag writers find such an approach narrow and inhibiting. David Foster’s shift from an academic career in science to literary writing was partly motivated by the desire to work in a field that allowed for an individualised and intuitive approach to knowledge rather than the generalising paradigm of Chemistry. In his novels and his essay “On Being Normal,” Foster has attacked statistical method for its assumption that general patterns can reliably account for any particular case (*Studs*

and *Nogs* 130–44). In his largely autobiographical novel *The Pure Land* (1974), Danny Harris, the postdoc scientist, contradicts the speaker at the plenary session of a Chemistry conference solely on the basis of his intuition but is, of course, humiliated. He subsequently rails against the intellectual confinement of the contemporary scientist:

in the nature of things it means by now that each individual scientist . . . spends his working life fossicking away in one miniscule corner, he can't even understand the man in the ditch next door, can't remember any more why he is described on his diploma as a doctor of philosophy—shouldn't this be more than merely titular? (172)

Danny walks away from science declaring, “Wouldn't you rather build your own clumsy Tower than stick one brick in the Great Wall of China?” (174). Even in a literature department, the structure of knowledge can be so heavy that there is no room for an individual to challenge it purely on the basis of intuition. Yet literature is one area where this must remain possible. It is the main reason that teaching literature can be so much fun; once a text is read, everyone in the room has the right to an opinion on it.

Art makes room for idiosyncrasy. It promotes individual and personal meaning, and its validity as generalisation must be seen after the event. Inside a university, art criticism becomes drawn into the scientific paradigm of generalising from the particular (after all, I'm doing it now) and is inclined to develop pseudoscientific theories. Fortunately, most of us secretly know that literary criticism isn't scientific, and that we need to shift theoretical ground according to the demands of the text at hand and our sympathies. Dorothy Green may have underestimated the importance of race, class and gender in forming subjectivity, but many of us suspect that there is more to a response to literature than these social and historical influences.

Ratbag writers distance themselves from the generalising tendencies of academic disciplines and develop idiosyncratic views of the world, gleaned from an accumulation of quite different reading to that of the academic. In his “A Personal View of Literature and Science, *fin de siècle*,” David Foster recounts the early 1960s argument between C. P. Snow and F. R. Leavis, referring to Leavis as if he's just a literary don from Cambridge (*Studs and Nogs* 56–75). For him Leavis does not carry the weight of the literary education I endured at ANU ten years after the Snow/Leavis debate. When Foster encountered these arguments he was a Chemistry student in no danger of being humiliated in a tutorial where first- and second-class sensibilities were being sorted by Leavisite lecturers. It is this shift in perspective—and not Foster's proclamation that there could be no workable ethic in either Science or the Arts—that stopped me short when I first read his essay.

Ratbag writers are happy to dust off old arguments that academics have long forgotten. They're willing to take their ideas from a range of disciplines or shift from one viewpoint to another. They often disconcert us because our received wisdoms are not theirs.

This disconcertion can take a range of forms. Helen Garner's *The First Stone* shook feminist literary critics, because they had integrated all of her fiction into a particular feminist reading, one that valorised the domestic and private worlds of women and challenged the authority of male institutions. In her account of the Ormond sexual harassment affair, Garner appeared to overturn that interpretation by condemning the feminism of younger women and their refusal to be fobbed off by male authority. Women who work inside institutions that remain patriarchal in their authority were likely to react hostilely to Garner's book because we encounter the Ormond College attitude frequently in our working lives, and we're likely to identify closely with the difficulties of our young women students. Yet from another point of view *The First Stone* challenged the very institutionalisation of feminism, as the complainants in the Ormond case, pushed along by the incompetence of the College administration and the intervention of some feminist extremists, fell back on another male-dominated institution for justice—the Law. Garner shocked us when she asked whether the battle for sexual equality had led to this disproportionate attack on an individual man.

In Garner's essay "The Art of the Dumb Question," she explains that she learnt her ideological lesson during the 1970s when she was part of a range of collective households and group projects, in circles where "a person could offend by being 'too articulate'" (3). Reading about Isaac Babel's difficulties with Soviet authorities made her recognise her own discomfort in this world of collective commitment, and the possibility of living "by means of a question" (3). Now, a lot of us found the question she asked in *The First Stone* out of line; it was a question that Garner wouldn't have, probably *couldn't* have, asked if she had been working as an academic in an English department of an Australian university. But what does it mean for us as intellectuals if there are questions we can't allow ourselves to ask? Garner's writing in the years since *The First Stone* suggests that she has become even more committed to asking uncomfortable questions about the values behind our society. It's possible that this kind of critical challenge, by people who care about language, has become more crucially important in Australia now than at any time since the Vietnam war.

Thea Astley presents a different kind of case. She's a writer who has been publishing fiction steadily since the late 1950s, so that her work emerged in a critical world excited by the verbal brilliance of Patrick White and Hal Porter. Astley

admired these two writers, and admits that she was influenced by them in her early career (Willbanks 33–34). By the mid-1980s, Astley was telling Candida Baker that she had been “neutered” by her upbringing, possibly an apology to the new generation of feminists for her early work (Baker 42). This comment has guided critics in their attempts to integrate Astley’s novels into feminist readings, but the early novels present serious challenges to these readings that have often been evaded rather than addressed.

In 2003, Susan Sheridan published an article placing Astley’s early work alongside the modernist satires of Patrick White, and at last confronting the way that Astley’s early novels represent “through female or feminised figures those values that the world of the novel abhors” (267). Sheridan concludes that Astley is a writer “deeply formed by the misogynist era in which she grew up and that she had no alternative but to ‘write like a man’” (269). We know that Astley’s encounters with younger feminist writers and critics inspired her to reconsider the frequency of her use of a male narrative persona and, at times, her later novels give at least lip service to some feminist sentiments. As Sheridan says, even then it is “a feminism whose business it is to mock the whole elaborate apparatus of gender, not to celebrate the feminine” (269). If Astley’s early novels mocked popular culture as feminised and endorsed a masculine high culture, her last novel *Drylands* invests women with the task of preserving high culture, and indeed civilisation, through a commitment to literacy and art. But there are difficulties here, too, when we consider the implication that literacy offers a key to moral superiority. Isn’t the alignment of one sex with such superior culture at the very least simplistic?

I would like to point to a related aspect of Astley’s writing—her depiction of women’s bodies as lusting, decaying and unreliable. Such a depiction accords with Patrick White’s use of women’s bodies to represent the worthlessness of material existence, and with long traditions in many cultures where the female body serves as a symbol of change, age and mortality. In *The Slow Natives*, the repressed spinsters and nuns of Condamine suffer the humiliations of their own lust; *A Boatload of Homefolk* recoils in disgust at the corpse of Miss Trumper:

her hair had escaped from its shallow bun and trickled like grey streaks of unloving down the soft sad cheeks. Her hands had relinquished their last frenzied clutch and the dentures had dropped onto the blanket and grinned up at him from her stomach. (168)

In the story “Ladies Need Only Apply” from *Hunting the Wild Pineapple* (1979), Sadie Klein, a schoolteacher on extended leave, answers an ad for a companion and finds herself in a tropical rainforest shack with the exclusive company of Leo, a middle-aged composer. In the course of the story, Sadie first rejects Leo’s sexual

advances (she *is* a lady) but is ultimately brought down by the flooding rain that isolates them and leaves her at his mercy. As the rain licks at the floorboards of her shack, Sadie strips naked and struggles through the mud and rain to the safety of Leo's place. Leo does nothing to help her, and the story ends:

She heard the movement of his chair shoved back, heard his bare feet pad across board; and not until she felt the frightful quality of him did she look up, forcing herself into the one word, "Please?" into one smile—the whole body and want of her into one doubtful, querying smile as he looked down at her on all fours, naked, glistening silver with lust and rain.

"That's better," he said. "That's more like it. Come on in." (144)

This is a story about the sexual humiliation of a middle-aged single woman (Sadie is about forty-two), who is only too aware of her ageing body and diminishing sexual allure. Astley insists on the terrible conflict between Sadie's sense of her own declining desirability and her increasingly desperate physical desire, her sense of maintaining herself as a "lady," and her sexual needs.

This is, you may say, a story written before Astley's conversion to feminism, told by Keith Levenson, one of Astley's embittered men, but we can trace similar if more subdued attitudes to women's bodies in the later novels. These fictions cannot be absolved by reference to "before feminism," so that once Astley met younger women novelists and feminist critics she was somehow saved from the circumstances of her historical moment. Elizabeth Jolley and Olga Masters, from the same generation but beginning their publishing careers much later than Astley, present the horrors of the female body with less immediacy and anger than Astley. Isn't it possible that Astley's novels offer a long howl of protest at the indignity of being born into a woman's body?

David Foster discomfits the critic with even more extreme attitudes to the body. His article on "Castration," published in the wake of *The Glade Within the Grove*, advocated that castration offered young men a solution to the depression and despair of our decadent society (*Studs and Nogs* 117–29). I can appreciate this essay as part of Foster's enthusiasm for ideas that address the large and universal problems (overpopulation, the loss of religion and spiritual meaning) but I cringe when I read that, in an attempt to "honour his resolve in an historical context," Foster attempted to visit a young Queanbeyan man who'd castrated himself and shredded his genitals in a blender (126). Foster's opinions distress me more when they come from him as cranky critic and social essayist under his own name than they do in the form of fiction, where I can read them as part of a fictional persona. *The Glade Within the Grove* is a wonderful novel full of some of the most magnificent prose poetry written about the Australian forests, riddled with sharp obser-

variations of what it means to be Australian, witty dialogue and presenting the brilliant comic characters of the MacAnaspie family. Its companion poem *The Ballad of Erinungerah* has moments of exquisite and unnerving beauty. But its author, Timothy Papadamitriou in the guise of “Orion” does say “woman was born to the world of the flesh / As man is born to the spirit” (27), a sexual division that leads the men of the commune to castrate themselves in order to advance their spiritual state—and I don’t think David Foster would be too fussed that Anne Summers and others read this as his opinion. David Matthews’ review of the *Ballad* in the *Australian* was headed “What is Going on Here?” and was accompanied by a wonderful cartoon depiction of Foster as a Neanderthal that encapsulates the problem.

It’s evident that the kind of thinking behind “Castration” was necessary to the creation of the work of art *The Glade Within the Grove*. After the first publication of “Castration” in *Heat* magazine in 1997, Foster began to see the three works—*The Glade*, *The Ballad* and “Castration”—as a trilogy and wanted to reissue them as one volume. We can ponder the relationship of the several personas of D’Arcy D’Oliveres, Timothy Papadimitriou as “Orion,” and David Foster the essayist, but David Matthews is probably right when he says, “D’Arcy is a kind of hyper-Foster. Given some of his public utterances, I suspect Foster is a hyper-Foster himself” (9). In any case, Foster’s determination to position himself against the *Zeitgeist* has proved productive intellectually; his habit of always looking to the larger issues and defending the contrary position is the sign of an energetic critical mind. But the concern of many critics to fix the ideological position of a writer may consign him to the untouchable bin (some feminists have told me that they won’t read the work of such a declared “misogynist” and simply can’t understand my interest in his work).

Trying to find some way to come to terms with this writing has led me to theories and accounts of satire. The standard approach to satire, that sees the satirist as having a stable ideology and a clear program for reform, can’t help here. At any rate, it leads to the dismissal of the satirist as, by definition, a conservative, and so shuts down a sympathetic reading from most self-respecting contemporary literary academics. Nevertheless, two interesting ideas from this reading seem to offer possible strategies.

The first is Robert Elliot’s argument that the origins of satire lie in religion and magic. His *The Power of Satire: Magic, Ritual, Art* traces satire from ancient traditions of cursing. The ancient Greeks believed in the efficacy of abuse in dispelling evil, and in ancient Arabia the satirist would be part of an army going out to curse the enemy before battle—the more brilliant the satire, the more powerful its

effect on the enemy. In pre-Christian Ireland, the poet's command of language represented spiritual powers, and the satire of blame was as powerful as the hymn of praise. This idea invites us to read satire as a remnant of an ancient human cry against the injustices of the universe. We can try to understand it as an aesthetic rather than an ideology: good satire is not on the side of the angels (whatever that side may currently be); its virtue lies in the sheer brilliance and power of its language. Note, too, that Elliott's ideas give the satirist a spiritual and religious role, a role that several of Australia's angry writers seem to seek.

The second idea, proposed in Brian Connery and Kirk Combe's introduction to their book on satire, sees satire not so much as a genre or form of literature as a spirit that inhabits a text for some of its length. In this way, satire becomes the expression of a particular kind of writing persona—though I certainly don't mean that the writing of satire is the expression of some kind of deformed or sadistic personality. Foster himself promotes this idea of the satirist, asserting that far from being a reformer with a high moral agenda, "the satirist could be defined as an angry response looking for something to respond to" (*Studs and Nogs* 85). If we think of this idea in conjunction with Wyndham Lewis's argument that the best satire is non-moral, that it is "not so much bent on pleasing as upon being true" (76), I think we are moving some way towards appreciation of our range of ratbags. And Elliott's placing of satire in a pre-Christian tradition gives due weight to the aesthetics of anger, and its alliance with spirituality. The notion of satire as a kind of spirit that, at times, inhabits the writer and their art allows us to enjoy the performance by an idiosyncratic persona. In this way, ratbaggery itself becomes a literary quality.

Not all of the writers I have mentioned are satirists. All of them, however, have personalities that inhabit and disrupt the texts they write. They blur the distinction between author and text, so that it is possible to hear Thea Astley's distinct voice in every novel she writes, whether she speaks as Keith Levenson, or Kathleen Hackendorf. David Foster is D'Arcy D'Oliveres, and Timothy Papadimitriou who is also the poet Orion, but he is also David Foster. The narrative voices of *Moonlite* and *Mates of Mars* are undeclared personas, but listen to them and guess who's personality they might be expressing. Here's the last line of *Moonlite*: "Climb or Let Go! Thou hast had Time Enough, and the patience of Thy Father is exhausted" (223). And a reflection on fighting from *Mates of Mars*:

Adrenalin gives you all the speed and power of which you are capable and under its influence you can perform small miracles. Hence the need for contests and tournaments, so little understood by feminists, at least until they take them over. But motivation, psyching yourself up to feel fear when there seems no need, becomes

an increasingly onerous chore for the expert. . . . You need fear only in that half second before you fight or flee. At other times, fear is a nuisance and a liability.

Don't worry, be happy. (279)

This is not to say that the voice is stable, any more than the opinions it expresses are unchanging. It's simply that the traditional expectations of form and ideology seem irrelevant to what these writers are doing. I stress, again, that I'm not suggesting that satire is the product of some failure in mental capacity, some psychological tic, more that the writer *performs* the role of satirist as they write. Satire is a performance of anger through a persona that the author adopts, but, from time to time, these authors perform this persona in life, too.

The work of Astley and Foster falls within the range of satire, but consider how useful this idea of a loquacious, rebellious, witty, inventive persona that inhabits a text is for reading Les Murray's *Fredy Neptune*. Murray has described Fredy Neptune in precisely this way, as a character who inhabited him, and through him the verse-novel that Fredy narrates. He tells us that he began *Fredy Neptune* as he emerged from one of his blackest periods of depression, and "the book remained a kind of standing trance which I could leave and re-enter" ("Fred and I" 367). Murray goes so far as to talk about the book as a sentient being as he characteristically pre-empts academic criticism by telling us that, "It isn't wholly fanciful to say that this book doesn't *like* being talked about in the lofty class-terminology of literary studies" ("Fred and I" 364). The verse-novel moves with a driving pace, its energy leaping out from the page. Its author is much too engaged with his narrator to offer the habitual irony of satire, but the work is a medley of languages and stories, recalling the original meaning of satire as a medley (*satūra*).

Now, I have never fully recovered from the portrayal of the feminist Noeline Kampff in *The Boys Who Stole the Funeral*—though I hasten to add that I have never expressed my dismay in public, let alone attacked Les Murray personally. I was disappointed, too, when in 1999 Murray composed the proposed preamble to the constitution for the Liberal government, and I am happy that others have taken on the task of celebration and criticism of Murray's work. Peter Alexander's excellent, sympathetic biography gives some comfort to a critic approaching the work of other difficult writers. Alexander's book explores the relationship between Murray's self-determined position as outsider and his extraordinary poetry. In fact, his research into the circumstances of Murray's mother's death lifted part of the burden of mythology that the poet had created for himself. One of the values of the biography, then, is Alexander's friendship and engagement with Murray's life; he never doubts for a moment that his subject is "the best poet writing in English" (ix). He records the arguments about Murray's views on Aborigines, or

women, or politicians, but never allows that to sway his belief in Murray's poetry. His biography reminds us of the peculiar responsibilities critics have to respond in a human, understanding way to the writers living amongst us—even when they seem blind to the immediate political dangers of what they write.

By now you will be wondering what happened to the “cranky critic” part of my title. In the universities at present, the “cranky critics” probably don't publish their opinions, but save them for the tearoom or the occasional rave in a classroom or at a dinner party. From time to time, we've heard some splendid examples at ASAL conferences. But the mimicking of science has shifted up a gear in the past few years, as we're all being pressed to apply for ARC grants. All our journal articles travel round for review, in the mistaken belief that our findings can be checked and validated by our peers, just as in science. Some of the work that will emerge as a result of this regime will be valuable, but I dare to say that it will be scholarship rather than criticism. Your particular personality, your idiosyncratic voice as a critic, will have to find other outlets, or be silenced for the duration.

When we write criticism we are in a position to find texts that express our own opinions, in a sense ventriloquising through literary texts that make our arguments for us. It's easy for us to celebrate the writers who reflect our own unexceptionable opinions. Indeed, it's often assumed that this is always the case, so that you risk charges of misogyny or racism when you write about the work of a ratbag. Yet the ratbags may offer us the richest intellectual material for our attention.

If we care about the aesthetics of a text we may find ways to put it into a social and political context that also understands the author as a human individual in a particular place and time, performing their passions through their writing. We may be able to act as both critics and supporters, to look out from our positions in the Great Wall of China to the clumsy towers of writers who choose to go it alone. We may even applaud the howl of the critical intelligence facing an institutionalised world too big to know, too great to challenge.

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