The Novels of Alex Miller

A Symposium hosted by Australian Literature at the University of Sydney

ABSTRACTS

BLAIKLOCK MEMORIAL LECTURE
Professor Brenda Walker
'Alex Miller and Leo Tolstoy: Australian Storytelling in a European Tradition'

In *The Ancestor Game* Alex Miller writes of Sidney Nolan's work as 'located deep within the embrasures of a European tradition.' The painter has been stridently identified as Australian. Instead, his work is seen not only as affiliated with Europe, but embedded in an embrasure: an architectural opening from which insiders might expect an open, or even - since the word can mean a space for military surveillance and defense - a strategic view. This is more than a passive inclusion of the Australian painter's art. It is an unavoidable engagement between an Australian painter and European tradition. It prepares us for the novel *Landscape of Farewell*, in which Indigenous massacre is centrally situated in western culture through the inclusion of a savage quotation from Homer. Elements of what Robert Dixon calls the 'new cosmopolitanism' in Australian fiction run deep in Alex Miller's work, addressing urgent questions concerning art, human history and the location of the writer. In this paper I will consider the possibility of a dynamic engagement between the imaginative work of Miller and Tolstoy.

In Alex Miller's *Lovesong* Tolstoy is the name of a series of dogs, borzois owned by a shopkeeper in Paris, in the *rue des Esclaves* where a Tunisian woman, Sabiha and her Australian husband, John Patterner, have a small café. 'Tolstoy' is a 'ghost' with eyes that seem able to see beyond the Parisian streets to a violent Russian past and the slaughter of wolves. He has an affinity with Sabiha, who is, for her own reasons, preoccupied with an ancestral hunting tale that will lead her to conceive a child outside her marriage. She is, after all, hunting a man, simply for his skill at impregnation. Her passion is for her anticipated child. The canine Tolstoys remind us of *Anna Karenina*, that testament to the gravity of passionate impulse and profound misunderstanding. As in *Anna Karenina*, the story of passion ends in self-destruction, in this case, in the death of Bruno, the genetic father of Sabiha's child. This is a conspicuous connection between the work of Miller and Tolstoy.

There is further, deeply significant, common ground. Each novelist considers the meaning of reading. Each writes about the transformative power of music. Reading and music have the ability to consolidate or alternatively to alter the self in the work of each novelist.

Miller and Tolstoy also share a rare ability to imaginatively identify with characters across the immense cultural and temporal divisions and the divisions that have been established by imperial aggression and self-interest.

Miller's novels, *The Ancestor Game*, *Conditions of Faith*, *Journey to the Stone Country*, and *Landscape of Farewell* are clear examples. The stories which Tolstoy wrote about Russian military action in the Caucasus, 'The Prisoner of the Caucasus' and 'Hadji Murat' demonstrate an understanding of the cynicism of Russian military action and the religious, domestic and political imperatives of the local people that continues to attract admiration for Tolstoy in Chechnya today.

In this paper I will offer a writer's appreciation of Alex Miller's novels in order to affirm his imaginative relationship with Tolstoy and establish one substantial dimension of his place in the tradition of the European novel, that citadel of multiple and non-European embrasures.

SYMPOSIUM
David Brooks
'The Species Barrier in *Landscape of Farewell*'
Addressing a lunch-time audience at the University of Sydney over a decade ago, Alex Miller suggested that in his novel *The Ancestor Game* he had been building a cage for his grief. In this case it was grief for a particular friend, but much of Miller's subsequent writing has been about grief more generally. I want to look at *Landscape of Farewell* – a book much concerned with grief and moral complexity – in this regard. More particularly, I want to look at passages concerning Dougald's goat, where the presence and representation of the Animal, in various forms, performs a particular narrative function. I want to examine these presences and representations. I want then to relate them to what has come to be called the species barrier, and in turn relate the species barrier to a broader grief. If time allows I will then relate these passages to what Julia Kristeva has called the *chora* or moral cauldron of a text, and lastly to a perception of my own, that a great many literary texts have a site or sites where they 'confess' – or *scapegoat* – the stories, and *moral/ethical complexities*, they have had to sacrifice or over-ride in bringing themselves to be.

Adrian Caesar
'An Artist in the Family: Reconfigurations of Romantic Paradigms in *Prochownik's Dream.*'
Romantic paradigms insist on the necessary loneliness and suffering of the artist. Writing about Beethoven and identifying himself with that composer, D.H. Lawrence wrote of 'the crucifixion into isolate individuality.' Rilke, perhaps a more pertinent example with respect to Alex Miller's work, advises a young poet to 'love . . .solitude and sing out with the pain it causes . . .' Furthermore, Rilke urges his protege to perceive the world from the 'vastness' of his own solitude, 'which is itself work and status and vocation.'

Though there are moments in *Prochownik's Dream* when one might detect the influence of Rilke, the novel's distinction, I believe, resides in its portrait of the artist as embedded and enmeshed in family. Not only is Toni Powlett and his work seen in relation to his father, wife and daughter, but also in relation to his friends, who constitute another 'family'. My paper seeks to tease out the creative connections and tensions between families and art as they are represented in the novel and to demonstrate the way *Prochownik's Dream*

subverts the Romantic idea of creative genius and insists on the often unacknowledged collaborations necessary to the making of art.

Raimond Gaita
'On *Landscape of Farewell* and the Holocaust'

I'm not a literary critic so I won't comment in any detail on what strikes me as very fine writing - some of Miller's best, perhaps. I will discuss instead what I believe to be his great moral achievement in *Landscape*: to have brought together in the one book dramatic, fictional, meditation on an aboriginal massacre of whites and aspects of the Holocaust, each illuminating the other, but without doing anything that could properly be called 'comparing' them, or 'weighing the gravity' of one against the other. To do that requires, of course, great moral tact, but also much more.

Elizabeth McMahon
'Continental Heartlands and Alex Miller's Geosophical Imaginary'

By his own admission Alex Miller 'operate[s] in an international context'; his world is the 'fractured modern one' that refuses the coherence of a centre. Yet overlaying the global, decentred terrain of Miller's fiction is a repeated pattern of inward turns to imagined heartlands: Hangzhou in *The Ancestor Game*, Paris then Tunisia in *Conditions of Faith*, the Jangga homeland in *Journey to the Stone Country*, Mount Nebo in *Landscape of Farewell*. These locations are accorded the status of origin, primacy and homelands. The complexity of these homelands in the 'fractured, modern' world is their intersubjective potential, whereby strangers and foreigners are centred in and by homelands other than their own through friendship.

The closing lines of *The Ancestor Game* explicitly address this paradox with the claim that '[f]or some people exile is the only tolerable condition'. But exile is only one aspect of this relation in Miller's fiction and this paper will examine the operations of a geosophical imaginary in his work, which redraws the map of global and regional interconnections. The paper will argue for the persistence of centres in Miller's work within the decentred understanding of space and identity that shapes his fiction.

Brigitta Olubas
'Like/Unlike: Portraiture, Similitude and the Craft of Words in *The Sitters*'

"Portraiture is the art of misrepresentation. It's the art of unlikeness. That's why it's so difficult," the narrator of *The Sitters* explains early in his fraught and deeply individual account of painting from life (and death). As the work of painting proceeds, he takes the reader into some of the concerns that have come to characterise Miller's fiction: the dense matter of families and origins, the mechanics of desire and the mediations and complications of art. Within this larger frame, this paper will examine the novel's highly specific concern with the labour of writing and painting, the duplicitous and unreliable crafting of words, lines and images, and will focus on its insistence on the unstable doubleness of words, things and selves.

Peter Pierce
'Early Fiction in Middle Age: *Watching the Climbers on the Mountain* and *The Tivington Nott*'

When Alex Miller's first two novels – *Watching the Climbers on the Mountain* (1988) and *The Tivington Nott* (1989) were published, he was already in his mid-fifties, albeit with a career behind him of writing poetry and plays, of teaching creative writing and of helping to found both the Anthill and Melbourne Writers' theatres. Those early novels (there have been seven since) are instinct with what was to come, as well as being in essential ways different from their successors. They are studies of wildness and solitariness. Each has a strong autobiographical burden. *The Tivington Nott* (actually the first of the pair to be written) draws on Miller's youth on a farm on Exmoor, in England. In *Watching the Climbers on the Mountain*, the source is the subsequent period in his life, when he worked on a station near Springsure in Queensland, in country of which he had dreamed since seeing photographs of outback Australia. That novel also refers to the massacre of nineteen Europeans at Cullen-la-Ringo, near Springsure, in October 1861. These were events to which he has returned several times in his fiction, notably in *Journey to the Stone Country* (2002). Yet that later novel, and those that Miller has written since, is in a more deliberate, plain style than the verbal lushness of *The Tivington Nott* in particular. By recourse to well-worn categories of language, themes, settings and contexts, Miller's first two books will be examined in the light of his whole career as a novelist.

Brigid Rooney
'The ruin of time in Alex Miller's *Landscape of Farewell*'

At first glance, *Landscape of Farewell* (2007) appears a simpler, more streamlined story than its predecessor, *Journey to the Stone Country* (2002). In the first person, Max Otto, a widowed German professor specialising in the history of massacres, tells of his journey to Mount Nebo in Central Queensland, a journey precipitated by his encounter with visiting Aboriginal Australian academic Vita McLelland. His journey is conducted in the context of his not-yet-assuaged grief for his wife, and of his haunted suspicions about his father's complicity in the horrors of wartime Germany. Peter Pierce (2004) has identified some of Miller's enduring preoccupations: 'solitariness', 'artful evocations of the visceral', tensions between ancestry, freedom and exile, and the indeterminacy of memory. While many of these recur in *Landscape*, I focus in this paper on how the theme of time is exercised in this novel, with its spare but concentrated prose and apparently straightforward narration. How does *Landscape of Farewell* draw us inwards as well as onwards, into an intricately nested set of temporalities that speak to selfhood, truth and reparation, to cross-cultural translation, to mortality and relinquishment, and to the intractable terrain of moral debate about the past? What does Miller's mode of narration bring to familiar questions, in Australian culture, of place and belonging?

Ronald Sharp
'Character and the Presence of Absence in *The Sitters*'
This paper examines the complex dialectic of presence and absence in Alex Miller's *The Sitters*, which will be considered in relation to George Steiner's theory of "real presences." In many ways Miller's most lyrical novel, *The Sitters* is also perhaps his most ambitious attempt at an *ars poetica* as it explores the parallel mysteries of painting a portrait in the visual arts, developing an identity, and creating a character in fiction.

Elizabeth Webby
'Representing 'the Other' in the Fiction of Alex Miller'
Alex Miller began publishing his novels in 1988 at the end of a period of intense debate in literary circles about the ethics of representation, a debate informed by feminism, multiculturalism and postcolonialism. Put crudely, the debate was about whether white, male writers from first-world countries, the dominant literary players up to this point, should continue to have open slather in writing about their others, i.e. those who were not white or male, now that these others were at last finding their voices and writing back.

In Australia, the debate was particularly focused on the question of white writers' representation of Aboriginals. Indeed, in 1979 I was told, after giving a conference paper on colonial poems about Aboriginals, that I was lucky there were no Aboriginals in the audience. But in feminist circles male appropriation of female voices was also a major issue. Although a total ban on representations of others would clearly have meant the end of fiction as we know it, these debates did draw attention to the stereotyped representations of women, Aboriginals, Chinese and other 'others' found in much earlier Australian writing.

When I first read Alex Miller, soon after *The Ancestor Game* was published in 1992, I was struck by the unusual empathy shown here for his female characters and their predicaments, as well as by his insightful depictions of people from other cultures. These have continued to be hallmarks of his fiction, with representations of 'otherness' also extending to animals, especially in *The Tivington Nott* and *Landscape of Farewell*. My paper, however, will have as its focus *The Ancestor Game*, *Conditions of Faith* and *Lovesong*.

Geordie Williamson
'Alex Miller's Elemental Fictions'
The novels of Alex Miller are, to a degree rare in contemporary Australian fiction, shaped by an elemental vision of nature and our place in it. This paper examines how Miller's attentiveness to the material, physical and literal grounds of human existence sets his fiction apart, and makes it resistant to certain kinds of reading.

Liliana Zavaglia
'Old Testament Prophets and New Testament Saviours: Reading Retribution and Forgiveness towards Whiteness in Alex Miller's Journey *to the Stone Country*'

Journey to the Stone Country maps the contours of reconciliation through the most intimate of relations between an Aboriginal man and a white woman in the years following the landmark Mabo decision of 1992. The Black/white union as a physic to the violent history of the nation repeats across several generations of the unusually integrated Rennie family, with which the novel is concerned. In exploring these contours within this relation, the novel reveals certain cultural ambivalences, which become visible in the tensions between the reconciliatory and defensive impulses of the texts. This produces a twinned register of white desires - a register where one can detect the "double movement of apology and apologia" for the violent excesses of the colonial past. Using the tropes of biblical prophets and saviours, *Journey to the Stone Country* dislocates the self assurance of the white characters in the novel by taking us into the heart of the hatred Aboriginal people feel towards whites for the past, lingering momentarily before it's terrors - before moving away from its threats to offer an ultimately salvific resolution for whiteness. This journey is taken by employing the imagery, language and rhetoric of both old and new testaments. In this way, in the novel, white forgiveness is performed by Aboriginality in a Christian fall and redemption narrative, subsuming the historical specificity of the past into the familiar contours of the western foundational myth. Its resolution is not found in the gothic grotesquery of the old testament anger and condemnation of the Aboriginal rights platform leaders and old people of the novel - but in the forgiveness and tolerance – and indeed in the silences of its central character - the quintessential bushman ringer, Bo Rennie. For the critical reader, the nature of the forgiveness on offer is also problematised when probed and interrogated further. For the Aboriginal saviour of White Australia also brings with him a deeply conservative discourse of self-reliance and hard work versus government assistance and compensation – an essentially neoliberal discourse as the answer to liberation for Aboriginal peoples. In this, Bo Rennie's discourse can be situated within the conservative politics and rhetoric of controversial Aboriginal leader Noel Pearson. When read this way, the forgiveness and new beginning offered to whiteness in the text operates instead in its interests in the novel to exempt it from the costs of its own violent past. The kind of forgiveness offered by Bo Rennie ultimately asks very little of white people and becomes the way by which whiteness can escape the ethical dimensions of responding to a violent history with appropriate acknowledgement and reparations.