

Veronica Brady, *Caught in the Draught: On Contemporary Australian Culture and Society*, Sydney: Angus & Robertson, 1994, \$24.95, 310pp.

European academics who have known Veronica Brady for many years see her as an energetic, untiring, enthusiastic scholar travelling lightly through Europe with only one small bag, working hard on the train all the way from Barcelona, Rome or Bologna to Liège and ready the next morning, dapper as ever, to instil into students her own enthusiasm for Australian literature. For all her erudition and knowledgeableness in fields other than literature, there is a sense in which intellectually too she has always travelled light, equipped with her sharp intellect and judgement but otherwise unencumbered by institutional conventions, prejudices, fashionable trends or orthodox positions, whether in academia or, in so far as I can judge, the Catholic Church. In a traditionally Catholic country like Belgium, where emancipation from Church authority is a fairly recent and limited phenomenon, a radical Catholic nun was something of a novelty (highly appreciated), particularly to those unfamiliar with the anti-authoritarian slant (at least outside its own organ-

ization) of Australian Catholicism.

This freedom of thought, allied to intellectual assurance and a sense of discrimination based on Christian humanistic values rather than a general consensus of opinion, runs through all her essays whether literary, social, political or religious. The book is divided into five sections: Aboriginal Australia, Justice, Patrick White, Australian Poetry and the Poetic (notably in David Malouf's *An Imaginary Life*) and theology, though, as David Brooks suggests in his foreword, none of these is compartmentalized, each subject discussed reflecting the variety of her interests and what Brooks calls a "[blurring of] the edges of the writing and the living" (v). Indeed, Brady insists in her own introduction that the two are inseparable, and in this respect her essays are sometimes reminiscent of Orwell's for whom clear thought and above all clear language had an immediate influence on the quality of life. Her sympathy for "the loser rather than the winners" (9) also recalls Orwell's unconditional defence of the "underdog". It may be in the essays on Aboriginal Australia that the blurring of writing and living is most obvious, partly because with uncompromising honesty Brady exposes the pitfalls and self-deceptions even in policies of

reconciliation and atonement, partly also by showing how an imaginative perception of Aborigines in Australian fiction (David Malouf's, Patrick White's or the Aboriginal writer Bill Neidjie's) throws light on the social, political and metaphysical significance of the Aboriginal presence in Australia.

Veronica Brady's language is clear and utterly free of fashionable jargon even when she resorts to Foucault, Barthes, Baudrillard or Homi Bhabha to sustain her argument. It may seem that her repeated emphasis on the importance of value contradicts the authority she grants to recent theorists. But one should note that since her essays were first written, "value" is returning in strength on the critical scene and is now itself the object of theorization. Veronica Brady sees the role of theory in her own writing as one of the relativisation, a way of questioning certainties taken for granted, of acknowledging the multiplicity of world and self and the many possible ways in which they can be interpreted and realised. Her approach is eclectic throughout, as are her philosophical references. Again, one is led to wonder whether this might clash with her religious essentialism. Her religious faith, however, is clearly not dogmatised by any kind of institutional or

philosophical absolute even if, in the last resort and understandably, Catholicism is her referential ideology (as, for instance, when she watches with approval Anglicans moving closer to the "frontier" of her Church). Through her essays, however, the matter discussed and her own open-minded individual thinking rather than any pre-conceived ideology determine her approach. This method of analysis is particularly appropriate in the literary essays, especially in her perceptive comments on Rosemary Dobson's poetry.

In the title essay she defines art as essentially dialectical, intent on expressing the unseen, the numinous, "what is other" and can never be put fully into words. Her preference then clearly goes to writers who do not belong to the Australian realistic tradition, Patrick White among them, whose criticism of society she subscribes to, objecting like him to a prevailing rationalism and materialism. 'Caught in the draught' (rather than "draft") implies, she writes, that "we are all ... drawn into the process of culture, mass-media culture, which flows around us and through us, persuading us to consume, compete and console ourselves with mostly mindless pleasures" (221). Of course, this criticism applies to the Western world

generally, as does her disapproval of a secular culture in her essays on 'Questions of belief.' The basic issue which informs this last section is in fact the confrontation between a secular belief in man's capacity for progress and moral improvement and the conviction that such improvement, as well as the way out of present crises both in Australia and the Western World, lies in faith in the Judaeo-Christian God, again not an institutional absolute but a God accessible through the human experience of love, terror and, importantly, creativity. Religious faith commands respect and is not a debatable issue, though one can note that in the history of humanity, religious belief does not seem to have made people much better than does secular humanism and that there is such a thing as a secular spirituality. Though Brady herself may not agree, the Christ figure who represents suffering in White's fiction and in her own essays can be seen as essentially human, and I would suggest that the compassion, urge to reconciliation and love that runs through her essays are common to both ideologies.

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