

“Taming Distance”: Cross-Cultural Connections in the Work of Nicholas Jose

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Australia has a tradition of imaginative engagement with Asia which is both tentative and complex. Perhaps the complexity can be seen to resolve itself in terms of a magnetic alternation between attraction and repulsion, depending on the kind of fantasy currently swaying the collective mind. In the words of Alison Broinowski, “it has been characteristic of Australian responses to Asia since the last century to oscillate between wide extremes”, a pattern made possible “fundamentally by ignorance”.¹ Arguably this sort of ignorance derives in part from Australia’s centripetal impetus, at a time when it is still attempting to consolidate its own sense of national identity. Indeed, Alan Lawson has pointed out that “social, literary and political commentators in Australia and Canada have, perhaps, shown an even greater obsession with the problem of national identity than those of other emergent colonial or post-colonial nations”.² If, in the case of Australia, one agrees to see this as a side-effect of a problematic “tyranny of distance” from a European “home”, then the mixed response to Asia can be clarified in the light of the struggle for national self-definition.³ Clearly, as an epitome of the inscrutable which pulls at the tide of national consciousness, “Asia” in its haunting proximity only enhances Australians’ sense of disconnection from familiar (European) points of cultural reference. Conversely, though, if approached as a more attractive matrix of identity, “Asia” can also be found to provide ready-made configurations of sensibility, easily recuperable for the purpose of post-colonial emancipation from Europe. However, the point is that this duality is only apparent, as it can be shown that in any case the concern with Asia is part and parcel of a self-centred exploration of the distinctive nature of Australian experience.

In literature, the two extremes of perception are equally illustrated. The first pattern in Australian thinking about Asia, in which the place is depicted as mostly hostile, is memorably represented by C.J. Koch’s *The Year of Living Dangerously* (1978), which typically takes as a setting Jakarta in 1965 when Indonesia was going to descend into the spiral of political unrest and violence that would precipitate the fall of Sukarno. In this pattern, the Australian interloper is usually quite unable to apprehend all the political and cultural forces underlying the violence, in a way which makes him/her not only irredeemably alien, but also dangerously vulnerable. This is again the case in Robert Drewe’s *A Cry in the Jungle Bar* (1979), in which the protagonist is an apolitical Australian touring the continent on a scientific mission. Although he desperately tries to maintain his disinterested stance throughout the experience (which proves to be harrowing), his non-commitment is eventually exposed as a form of innocence which is both untenable and fatal - while the myth of Asia’s inscrutability is reinforced in the process. As Drewe himself commented, “the discomfited, innocent white man in Asia is hardly a new idea”,⁴ but it takes on renewed significance in post-colonial times when the foreign scene, far from being susceptible of inclusion within the colonial order, instead emerges as an intractable

locus of "savage and blackly comic general disorder",⁵ on which imported certainties tend to founder. The confrontation with Asia is then valued primarily for the insight it offers into the "fundamental kind of psychic limitation"⁶ from which Australia suffers by comparison. Drewe goes on to cite quite a number of Australian novels similarly preoccupied with the exhaustion of "the resources of liberal and humane feeling on which our culture depends"⁷ - among which Blanche d'Alpuget's second novel, *Turtle Beach* (1981), is perhaps the most memorable.

The second approach to Asia is coextensive with the first even though the place is here no longer experienced as uncongenial. This is a more positive view which posits the possibility of penetrating the mystery, and further, of appropriating oriental codes which are then opportunistically subordinated to Australia's effort of national self-definition. The first example which comes to mind is Randolph Stow's *Tourmaline* (1963), where the author pits, against the colonialist sensibility of those who wish to transform the Australian desert into a lush garden, the philosophy of the Tao, together with its valorization of forbear-worship. In this book, a character like Tom Spring embodies virtues of stoic equanimity which stray directly from the *Tao-te-Ching*. Interestingly, this places him on a par with some of the book's Aboriginal protagonists, such as Dave Speed, who similarly talks of "becoming a stream, to carve out canyons without ceasing always to yield; of being a tree to grow without thinking; of being a rock to be shaped by winds and tides".⁸ Clearly, there is something stereotypically oriental about this reconciliation of being and yielding; while at the same time the vision intersects with the Aboriginal tradition of identification with the land. *Tourmaline* thus emerges as a post-colonial manifesto, urging the necessity of looking for new cultural configurations, quite distinct from the received (European) heritage. However, it may be regretted that the concern with Asian spirituality is again harnessed to Australia's obsessive and perhaps self-indulgent search for roots, rather than being pursued for the sake of a truly cross-cultural (mutually beneficial) exchange.

In like manner, David Malouf has offered his own imaginative investment of Australia's involvement in Asia, with *The Great World* (1990), the novel in which he rehearses the historical experience of the ANZAC troops held prisoners, first in Singapore and then on the continent, during the Second World War. Although the Malaysian campaign provides little heroic material, it is in keeping with Malouf's grandiose scheme (to mythologize the events which fashioned the national character) that he manages to instil epic dimensions into his narrative of POWs in the jungle. In fact, the kind of individual resilience which is required of the protagonists, if they are to survive their predicament, can be likened to the humble fate suffered daily by millions in Asia. Malouf himself has said that the POWs about whom he writes "were forced to live the way Asians have been made to live always".⁹ Thus, as Peter Knox-Shaw has shown, "in choosing to treat an experience of war that has less to do with conflict than with subjugation, Malouf in *The Great World* rids the digger myth of its triumphalist associations".¹⁰ But in this respect it seems significant that, among his protagonists, the one called "Digger" displays a brand of contemplativeness testifying to an "oriental" cast of mind. As in Stow, this yields a mystical insight into the oneness of things, valued especially, at a later stage, for allowing him a sense of relatedness to the Australian landscape. Once again, then, the genuflexion to Asia is

only peripheral, within a world view ultimately centering upon the matter of Australia - to the exclusion of other concerns.

Although Nicholas Jose subscribes at times both to the myth of Asia's mystery and to clichés of oriental mysticism, his work is like that of Brian Castro (*After China*, 1992) and Alex Miller (*The Ancestor Game*, 1993) in that it strives to achieve true familiarity with China, of a kind that would sidestep the pitfalls of navel-gazing identity politics. Jose spent five years in China, teaching English literature and Australian studies at Peking Foreign Studies University in 1986 and at East China Normal University, Shanghai, in 1987; then working as cultural counsellor at the Australian Embassy, Peking, from 1987 to 1990. This first-hand knowledge is charted in *Chinese Whispers* (1995), Jose's book of *Cultural Essays* (its sub-title) about cross-cultural relations between China and Australia. On the author's own admission, these essays "keep returning to Tiananmen Square 1989 as an epicenter",¹¹ as part of an attempt to tease meaning from the tangle of contending readings offered about this spectacular political event.¹² Throughout the book Jose insists on the vagaries of perception that characterize each country's imagination of its counterpart, thus delineating a sense of mystification of the Other which works both ways; but then this is counterpointed by a corresponding impulse of exploration and discovery towards bridging the gaps of ignorance.

Clearly, Jose's immersion in Chinese culture and traditions is one that presupposes an ingrained capacity for partial evolution, however uncongenial the response to connections between the cultures. It is consistent with this paradoxical approach to cross-cultural recognition - a paradox that Wilson Harris describes as an "immersion in, conversion of, limits"¹³ - that the two novels in which Jose concerns himself with breaking down the rigidities of tradition should be built on a pattern of concealed symmetry between apparently discrete narratives. In *Avenue of Eternal Peace* (1989) this unstable parallelism is apparent in the course of certain individual destinies, which reveal unsuspected intersections and proximities between characters with a different cultural ascendancy. But this principle of parallel development becomes structurally even more central in *The Rose Crossing* (1994), a historical novel set in the seventeenth century which, by dint of its diptych-like form, sets out to explore similitudes of political circumstance across the continents.

At first sight, *Avenue of Eternal Peace* fits into the familiar category of the novel of alienation in Asia. Emotionally bereft after the recent death of his wife Bets (from whom he had become estranged anyway), Wally Frith seeks distraction and recovery in a trip to Peking that gradually turns into a quest for romance. Wally's situation and status are thus very much like those of Cullen, the protagonist in Drewe's *A Cry in the Jungle Bar*, all the more so since his overt motivation for travelling in Asia is linked to his disinterested devotion to the pursuit of pure, impersonal scientific data. As a specialist in cancer research, Wally believes in the need for positive action, in the importance of "a single man's direct participation in the unboundedly complex fate of the planet",¹⁴ which is why he tries to establish contact with Professor Hsu Chien Lung, from Peking Union Medical College, who has written a trail-blazing paper on cancer years before. Unfortunately, it turns out that Hsu is no longer working at the College, so that, partly due to the disorganization of the place but also because of the inexplicably uncooperative attitude of the authorities, meeting the distinguished

Professor appears as more of a challenge than Wally had initially bargained for. In this context, China itself acquires symbolic significance by virtue of seeming to be “a formless, fluid mess”, an obstacle to overcome as part of the human endeavour to defeat entropy and to elaborate sense-making constructs. Conversely, though, China as a mind-boggling mystery is also seen to supply the key to its own riddle:

Somewhere in this stir-fry was genius, Wally was convinced. Somewhere was a spirit of knowledge and understanding, hidden certainly, dormant or suffocated perhaps, un-self-advertizing, imperceptible to the foreigner's gaze; yet it existed, and for Wally, with his particular expertise, the genius had come to reside in Professor Hsu Chien Lung. (p. 78)

Perhaps such a quest for the “imperceptible” is bound to result in disappointment - a conclusion which is largely borne out by the book's denouement - even though it can be shown that the novel also makes provision for a sense of deferred utopianism: not yet, not there.

Tracking down Professor Hsu proves literally difficult, then, as the Medical College authorities spare no effort to make his whereabouts enigmatic, to the point of deliberately sending Wally on a wild goose chase, when necessary, as a way of maintaining their pretence of goodwill. Eventually Wally must rely on his own resources and on those provided by Jin Juan, the young linguist for whom he develops an emotional attachment. If it is true that fiction normally turns up its nose at coincidence (even though life insists on it), this book must form an exception, for it appears that Jin Juan is in fact Hsu's granddaughter, so that Wally finally gets to meet her through her mediation. On the other hand this sort of resolution is only coincidental in appearance, since Wally's profession of interest in Hsu is of course the reason why she materialized at his side in the first place. The point, then, is that even the closest (and the most attractive) of Wally's acquaintances in China turn out to have a hidden agenda, so that the foreigner experiences the country as a world of make-believe, in which he can only progress through a series of mystifications followed by revelations/disillusions.

The further point is possibly that the unravelling of illusion only leads to frustration, while the promise of encounter proves finally elusive. As Wally exclaims at one point: “They slide past us, round us, through us, but afterwards you feel there's been no contact at all” (p. 108). This perception tragically anticipates the moment when, Jin Juan having refused his offer of marriage, he understands that, because she is Chinese, the young woman will forever remain “outside his personal equation” (p. 264). On a more political level, his feeling of empty-handedness at this stage parallels the scene on Tiananmen Square, during the popular uprising,¹⁵ when Wally “was running with arms open to grasp something that he knew must be there because its absence hurt so much” (p. 260). This can be seen as a bid to embrace the fate of the Chinese people as well as their hope for a more egalitarian future; but this putative belonging is ironically exposed when the Australian, once intercepted by the police, is immediately released on sight of his “long nose and tear-filled round eyes”, on the grounds that this was “an internal matter only” which “did not concern foreigners” (p. 261). The partition of experience outlined here is further confirmed,

soon afterwards, when Wally is confronted with Chinese xenophobia in a restaurant scene which concludes the journey only too aptly, some hours before he leaves the country.

Moreover the sense of futility on which the novel ends is given additional resonance, through amplification and echo, thanks to the excerpts from Retta's diary which are scattered in the narrative. Retta is Wally's grandmother, who had followed her husband Waldemar on a medical mission to China in the nineteenth century, but was expelled from the country, at the time of the Boxer Rebellion, as a consequence of the Boxers' "vow of exterminating all foreign influence" (p. 179). All through his stay in China, Wally keeps perusing Retta's diary as an attempt to discover clues about the meaning of his own endeavours; but her bitter realization, especially after her adopted daughter Peg is forcibly taken from her, that she will retain from her passage "absences only" (p. 217), finally reinforces Wally's sense of defeat, his "despair in China's history", which appears as an infinite rehearsal of negative experience one generation after another, "an evolution so slow and chancy as scarcely to deserve the name of progress" (p. 205). It is in keeping with this perception of stasis that Jose should apparently conceive of relationships with China as caught within a spiral of regress - rather than progress - in which the various lures and deceptions which entrap the foreigner's gaze are lifted, one after another, only to reveal a vision of impossibility.

Yet it can be argued that the novel also authorizes a more positive interpretation, suggested by the mysteries which remain unsolved at the end of Wally's confrontation with Professor Hsu. The meeting proves disappointing at first since the Professor refuses to discuss his own papers on traditional Chinese herbal medicine, which had so curiously anticipated the directions later taken by Western oncology, and which had therefore prompted Wally's interest. Nonetheless, the conversation opens up unfathomable complexities, revolving around the source of the Professor's traditional knowledge, when it appears that he himself was initiated into the mysteries of Chinese medicine by "a young woman with Western education" (p. 210) who was sceptical but impressed by the miraculous cures effected by a shaman operating in the area where she had grown up. The fact that this young woman is more than likely to have been Peg, Retta's adopted Chinese daughter, sheds entirely new light on the matter of cross-cultural relations between China and Australia; indeed, instead of "absences only", Retta left behind the mystery of an active presence, of a mind energized by a mixed education and actually responsible for bringing together two discrete traditions. It turns out that Hsu's work, undertaken under her inspiration, only consisted of re-expressing Peg's drafts in the light of modern attitudes learnt at Harvard. In this context the novel's infinite rehearsal of eclipsed experience appears more fruitful, especially if one considers that Wally, having inherited Hsu's (and his grandmother's) papers now feels invested with the duty of continuing the research in the hope-that "a quantum leap of understanding" (p. 210) may occur.

The novel can thus be seen to include a Utopian dimension, encapsulated as it is in the idea of medicine as a metaphor of cross-cultural progress. Hsu's cryptic remark, that East and West "meet on the common ground [...] where all doctors meet, in the impossibility of their task" (p. 209), can then be reversed, by acknowledging

that there are "materials, ideas and hypotheses to be investigated" in the wake of a reconciliation of Eastern and Western practice. The fact that, for all his sense of bereavement, Wally's intellectual energies should be recharged, at the end of the novel, "not by the prospect of answers but by new nagging questions" (p. 257), suggests that the mystery of China, far from being exhausted, may continue to impregnate the Western mind through the operation of unslaked curiosity. That most Westerners should keep on behaving as "dragon fanatic[s]" (p. 82), in view of their disposition to endorse preconceptions about China, may not even matter so much since there is a sense in which the cross-cultural encounter also yields inventive distortions or misunderstandings that contain creative potential. In the last analysis, Jose's novel sustains a dialectical movement, oscillating between mystification and ethnographic study, which is not meant to end.

While *Avenue of Eternal Peace* takes the field of medicine as its Utopian space, figuring forth the ideal prospect of cultural cross-pollination, *The Rose Crossing* pursues a similar project, possibly even more explicitly, through the literal exploration of the metaphor of botanical cross-fertilization. Edward Popple is a seventeenth-century naturalist with a keen interest in "the emergence of new possibilities",¹⁶ and more particularly in the creation of new strains of roses. He agrees to board ship for the East Indies in search of novelties, as an attempt to have his work recognized by the Society of Fellows but partly also because the prestige accruing to rarities and natural wonders is thought fit to "bedeck the king's claim to restoration" (p. 30). Thus, although his own allegiance is neither to Absolute Rule nor Anarchy, but rather to what he calls "the motor of change" (p. 37) at work in the natural world, Popple is manoeuvred by the chairman of the Society into accepting the dangerous mission of secretly working for "the living king, Charles son of Charles, in exile in France" (p. 30), under the very flag of the Commonwealth.

Jose makes the most of his historical setting, and the novel appropriately opens with a "Prologue" recounting the public execution of Charles I, as a way of indicating the advent of a new order, an age of transition perhaps, quite released from traditional rules and conceptions. As Popple lingers in London to ponder the consequences of the execution, he receives from a friendly seaman, as a memento of these spinning times, a smooth jadestone brought from Tartary and especially chosen for "a jet-black flaw, from which the artist had carved a tiny multifoliate black rose" (p. 25). Popple will later describe the jade curio, aptly placed on his writing desk at home, in terms of self-evident symbolic significance:

The rose appear[ed] to rest on the green surface to which it was inseparably joined. The jet and jade, opposed in colour and substance, grew one from the other, part of one stone, one entity.

Running his fingers over it, Popple felt the possibilities of union and division suggested in the stone, its promise of a black rose to be found in the East, of new kinds to be uncovered, and mixed kinds, once the underlying principles and polarities were understood. (pp. 25-6)

The black rose emerges as an emblem of ultimate perfection, of the harmonious complementarity of opposites, such as only "a deviser of possibilities" (p. 151), or a mind freed from the bounds of self-obsessed convention, might discover or invent. It is therefore fitting that the sailors of the *Cedar* should mutiny in the course of their journey eastwards, thus openly advertizing their rejection of accepted authority, and that they should immediately "hoist a flag of their own devising", a black rose embroidered on a green ground, which will henceforth allow them to "sail under a new sign of liberty" (p. 50).

Although Popple and his daughter Rosamund (who has accompanied him as a stowaway traveller) eventually find themselves stranded on a desert island in the Indian Ocean, an anticlimatic resolution of their high expectations of the journey, some sort of fulfilment may still be within reach. As Jose indicates in an essay, the setting for the third part of the book (entitled "Place Uncertain") is in fact the island of Rodrigues, "a little-known adjunct of Mauritius",¹⁷ which must lie approximately half-way between England and China. By some strange trick of destiny the European castaways are met on the island by a delegation of Chinese travellers on their way to Rome where they plan to parley with the Pope, in order to seek his political support of their cause.

The political circumstances of the Chinese party are worth reporting in full, in view of the astonishing mirror-image which then looms into sight. Captain Huang and his crew-members were all chosen for their unfailing loyalty to Taizao, Prince of Yong, who is thought to rank "prime among rightful claimants to the throne" (p. 61) left unoccupied by the last Ming emperor to rule over China, found dead in Peking in 1644. In the meantime the Manchu invaders have become the new rulers, inaugurating the Ch'ing dynasty; but a rump of resistance has remained in the southern province of Zayton, where the Ming loyalists enjoy the support of the local sea merchants who wish to continue their international trading activities despite Peking's imperial command to the contrary. Consequently Lou Lu, the old eunuch commissioner who has been in charge of Taizao ever since the collapse of the Ming dynasty, has sought secret communication with the Dominican mission at Macao, where the priests seem "convinced that the pope would see the wisdom, at the cost of a few muskets and men, of restoring the sincerely Christianized Ming to lawful control" (p. 59), especially since the new Manchu ascendancy has been detrimental to their influence in China. It is therefore decided that an emissary must be sent to Rome, to request military support for the Ming to reclaim the throne. Lou Lu himself will be that messenger, and for the sake of safety he opts to travel with the prince himself, so as to protect him from the inquisitiveness of Manchu spies.

Thus, with *The Rose Crossing* Jose provides, beyond the factual document, a novel of historical speculation, shimmering with the possibilities that might derive from an art of subtle symmetries. Quite irrespective of actual historical developments, the book points to the accident of simultaneity between the Ming conspiracy (in the early 1650s) and royalist resistance during the British interregnum, and so suggests theoretical correspondences susceptible of exploitation within a fiction that aspires to share in processes of "continuous creation" (p. 105). The point is not just that both factions live in a comparable state of political suspension as they await the restoration of their sovereign; perhaps more importantly, Jose places the

two parties in a situation of mutual and creative dependency, hence of evolutionary possibility, since the achievement of their respective aims is made subordinate to the reality of cross-cultural interaction. Even on a very pedestrian level, the necessity of collaboration is all the more clear since Popple and his daughter lack a sailing vessel in which to return to Europe with the new botanical specimens discovered on the island, while the Chinese need the European's knowledge of the night sky to guide their course after they have been abandoned by their Arab tiller.

The desirability of interaction is further underlined by the novel's images of sterile self-confinement. It is certainly relevant, for example, that Taizao should suffer from impotency, for ever since his adolescence he has been "unmoved by woman therapeutically applied" (p. 242), so that no heir can be conceived for the putative kingdom. This inability to mix his blood finds a counterpart in Popple's sublimated incestuous love for his daughter, since he feels "replete emotionally with Rosamund as the only partner in his world." His propensity for self-sufficiency is further manifested in Popple's conduct of his scientific research, which he envisages as a quest for "perfect harmony [...] the key to the orb," and which he sees as ideally illustrated in his own purified parental affection. His dealings in "the alchemy of nature's rarest creativity" (p. 166) thus paradoxically involve cauterizing his unlawful desire for his daughter, or translating his body's frustrated energies, in ironic parody of the dry puritanism that has become a model of morality in England under the commonwealth. Clearly, though, the novel sets up a contest of theories, in which Popple's tendency towards (repressed) incest/cultural confinement is schematically contrasted with the richer alternative of cross-cultural alliance.

This alternative apparently prevails as Taizao and Rosamund finally give way to their youthful desire for each other, in a sexual encounter described as "the execution of the work of centuries" (p. 231). Their coupling appears as a climax of achievement, all the more remarkable since Taizao's discovery of desire, under the ministrations of one whom he regards as a female creature of fabulous description, suggests the possibility of cultural rejuvenation and renewal, of redemption from exhaustion, as a reward of opening up to the "Other." A more literal product of miscegenation then emerges into the world in the guise of a baby girl with black hair and green eyes, to whom they give birth as an effect of their participation in "the larger processes of procreation" (p. 238). Significantly, Rosamund refers to her daughter as her "own rose" (p. 236), thus establishing a symbolic connection with Popple's botanical experiments, in which he utilizes Chinese graftings in order to create a new kind of rose as "the summation of the species" (p. 240). As Lou Lu in his eunuch's wisdom recognizes, the young people's mystic marriage is only one avatar of the "unique conjunction" of possibilities realized on the island, which is felt to form a favourable terrain for undertaking action "to rectify the order of ages" (p. 227) and start looking for new epistemological configurations.

Yet *The Rose Crossing* is like its predecessor in Jose's corpus in that its utopianism falters as the cross-cultural option, symbolized in the project of intellectual collaboration between Lou Lu and Popple, is only evoked as a missed opportunity, a path eventually not taken in subsequent "true" history. As in *Avenue of Eternal Peace*, the protagonists ultimately embark on a course of "mutual destruction for the sake of falsehoods of imagination" (p. 265), in a late disavowal of

the glimpsed meaning and purpose of their cosmic journey. In the event, Lou Lu gets his henchmen to excavate Pople's rose garden, on the false assumption that it is built on a reef of gold; then, prompted by his uncomprehending suspicion of the botanist's motives, he sails away during the night, thus abandoning the European to a life of solitude on the island. In the end, then, the tangled destinies of the protagonists are brutally wrenched apart as the Chinese party return to where they came from, substituting for their planned diplomatic mission in Rome the somewhat superstitious belief that the dynastic birth of an imperial heir will suffice to rally support for the Ming cause. Even so, the novel's tragic conclusion, a vision of worlds revolving in separate orbits, ironically testifies to the pathos of denied hope, of a kind that symbolically survives in Pople's Eurasian rose, hailed as "the new rose of the world" (p. 228).

Perhaps Jose's paradoxical reticence about China, which is represented as an ultimately slippery mental construct, can be ascribed to the diplomat's caution about policies of rapprochement that might seem menacing or assimilationist. Robin Gerster has pointed to the danger of approaching nationalizations of Asia as "a territory of the Australian psyche",¹⁸ as if "the Australian imaginative encounter with Asia" finally attested "to one thing - continuing national insularity".¹⁹ This would only be in line with a longstanding fictional practice in Australia, which I have begun to document; or else, with an ongoing approach to Orientalism which, in Q. S. Tong's paraphrase of Edward W. Said, remains "largely static, presupposing no meaningful or productive dialogical interactions between self and other", so that "its operation is primarily confined to the cultural topography in which it was produced".²⁰

On the other hand it may be argued that Jose, perhaps like Brian Castro and Alex Miller, differs from previous generations of Australian novelists in that he looks to the possibility of "Sino-Australian symbiosis"²¹ as part of a desirable, if Utopian, aim. His work testifies to a shift in emphasis, perceptible in the fact that his protagonists, rather than being alienated or culturally overwhelmed in Asia, engage in a genuine dialogue with Chinese ontological models, which is made possible and convincing thanks to the author's formidable familiarity with historical and contemporary aspects of China. Initiating this dialogue results in a dismantling of "Eurocentric cartographies", as "the north-south discursive mappings from which Australia has long suffered as a 'down under' continent are replaced by east-west dualities".²² This sort of strategic repositioning has far-reaching consequences in respect of the post-colonial stance which then becomes possible in Australia, perhaps for the first time. Once the proximity to Asia has been acknowledged, it is no longer possible to consider Australia as "an outrider of the northern hemisphere" (Blainey's terms); but nor will it do, in view of the blatant differences in economic status between the participants in this particular cross-cultural dialogue, to ignore Australia's complicity in neo-imperialist attitudes. In this respect, it is worth pinpointing a curious scene in *The Custodians* (1997), Jose's latest novel to date, in which a delegation of Chinese diplomats and businessmen visit empty stretches of territory in Central Australia, with a view to buying land. Jose thus interestingly conflates the theme of ownership with the issue of cross-culturalism, one effect of which is to place the white settlers in Australia, by virtue of their fated affinity with Asians, in a rather analogous condition - that of improbable visitors on alien soil.

More generally, it may be argued that Jose's and others' cross-cultural pursuits, if only because they subvert the notion of a unitary national identity, are likely to bear relevance to whatever "post-colonizing" position will become available, within Australian literary studies, in the era of reconciliation.

- 1 Alison Broinowski, "Asianization and its Discontents", *Meanjin* 57, 3 (1998), 440.
- 2 Alan Lawson, "Patterns, Preferences and Preoccupations: The Discovery of Nationality in Australian and Canadian Literatures", in *Theory and Practice in Comparative Studies: Canada, Australia and New Zealand*, Sydney: ANZAC, 1983, p. 67.
- 3 *The Tyranny of Distance* is, of course, the title of Geoffrey Blainey's celebrated book on Australia, in which distance (from Britain) is consistently highlighted as "a central and unifying factor" in the country's history. See Geoffrey Blainey, *The Tyranny of Distance: How Distance Shaped Australia's History*, Melbourne: Macmillan, 1968, p. viii.
Interestingly for my purpose, the second section of the book, entitled "The Taming of Distance", includes a chapter, "Antipodes Adrift", which documents the breakdown of Australia's sense of isolation after World War II, when the resurgence of a vigorous nationalism in the new Asian nations forced Australians to become aware of their dangerous proximity to South East Asia. However, Blainey notes that this situation only led to a defensive increase of assisted migration from Europe to Australia: "Australia's nearness to a reviving Asia had led indirectly to a heavy inflow of European migrants and European and North American money. In a sense Australia had become even more an outrider of the northern hemisphere, of European civilization" (p. 335).
- 4 Robert Drewe, "A Cry in the Jungle Bar: Australians in Asia", *Meridian* 5, 2 (1986), 135.
- 5 *ibid.*, 139.
- 6 John Thieme, "Robert Drewe's Australias - with Particular Reference to *The Bodysurfers*", in *The Making of a Pluralist Australia 1950-1990*, eds. Werner Senn and Giovanna Capone, Bern and New York: Peter Lang, 1992, p. 50.
- 7 Drewe, "A Cry in the Jungle Bar", pp. 133-4.
- 8 Randolph Stow, *Tourmaline*, Ringwood, Victoria: Penguin, 1984, p. 148.
- 9 Jill Neville, *Independent*, 14 April 1990.
- 10 Peter Knox-Shaw, "Malouf's Epic and the Unravelling of a National Stereotype", *Journal of Commonwealth Literature*, 26,1 (1991), 94.
- 11 Nicholas Jose, *Chinese Whispers: Cultural Essays*, Kent Town, S.A.: Wakefield Press, 1995, p. x.
- 12 Incidentally, the focus on the Tiananmen massacre is relevant to Jose's cross-cultural theme, because the 1989 demonstrations occurred in the context of the seventieth anniversary of the "May 4th Movement for democracy, science and the revitalization of Chinese culture", which was critical of China's traditions and concerned with the spreading of western ideas. See Nicholas Jose, "Afterword: the Peking Massacre", in *Avenue of Eternal Peace*, New York: Penguin, 1991, p. 268.
- 13 Wilson Harris, *The Womb of Space: The Cross-Cultural Imagination*, Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1983, p. 72.

14 Nicholas Jose, *Avenue of Eternal Peace*, New York: Penguin, 1991, p. 78. Subsequent references are to this edition and will be cited in the text.

15 It is worth pointing to Jose's extraordinary prescience since the student demonstrations about which he is writing here had only been "fictional possibilities", as he himself says, at the time when he completed his manuscript in 1987 - i.e., two years before the actual events. See Jose, "Afterword: the Peking Massacre", p. 267.

16 Nicholas Jose, *The Rose Crossing*, London: Hamish Hamilton, 1995, p. 62. Subsequent references are to this edition and will be cited in the text.

17 Jose, *Chinese Whispers*, p. 166.

18 A phrase proposed by Helen Tiffin, "Asia and the Contemporary Australian Novel", *Australian Literary Studies*, 11, 4 (1984), 468; see Robin Gerster, "Covering Australia: Foreign Correspondents in Asia", in Wenche Ommundsen and Hazel Rowley, eds., *From a Distance: Australian Writers and Cultural Displacement*, Geelong: Deakin UP, 1996, p. 126.

19 Gerster, "Covering Australia", p. 117.

20 Q. S. Tong, "Inventing China: the Use of Orientalist Views on the Chinese Language", *Interventions: International Journal of Postcolonial Studies*, 2, 1 (2000), 18.

21 Gerster, "Covering Australia", p. 117.

22 These are the words used by John Thieme with respect to C. J. Koch's *The Year of Living Dangerously*, but my point has been, of course, that Koch is more susceptible than Jose to reproducing clichés about Asia; this is also suggested by Gerster, "Covering Australia", p. 125. See John Thieme, "After Greenwich: Crossing Meridians in Post-Colonial Literature", in Marc Delrez and Bénédicte Ledent, eds., *The Contact and the Culmination: Essays in Honour of Hena Maes-Jelinek*, Liège: Liège Language and Literature, 1996, p. 356.