

The Mything Link

The Feminine Voice in the Shifting Australian National Myth

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An Introduction to the Context and Causation

It is generally recognized by social commentators that Australia is currently in the grip of an identity crisis. While the general populace is well aware of the growing recognition of a new emerging Australian spirit, so too the national mythic narrative is still caught in a hazy tacit knowledge that revolves around the supposed collective heroism of the “bloody” Gallipoli impasse that began at dawn April 25, 1915. At the heart of this male-centered war narrative is the concept of “the Anzac digger,” the “pioneer and bushman-soldier” (Day 76) whose sheer determination, fighting spirit and the “digging of trenches” engendered the Australian concept of “mateship.” Such was the socio-political need for a national story and a national heroic figurehead at that time the Anzac myth was born, and “by the first anniversary it glowed with holiness” (Inglis 84). While seen in the ensuing national narrative as the laconic outback male “cattle drover,” who is able to survive in the desert landscape of the outback through sheer determination, subduing the environment and native inhabitants, so too the resolute “diggers” survived the horrors of the Gallipoli campaign in the First World War. The eventual failure of the campaign and subsequent historical research revealing the glaring errors in the narrative has done nothing to dim its mythic extent, as the story has been converted into a heroic struggle “whose failure was appropriated to outside forces” (Beaumont 52).

However, as revealed in the current literary output there is a schizophrenic shift occurring in national psyche in which this “male landscape desert myth” is moving to one associated with the sea, and back again to

some kind of liminal zone. As reflected in its more recent literary canon, the Australian sea and its beaches were recently seen as “deliverance to many, from the inland and from an imperial otherworld” (Scutter 53). Still, as Scutter continues:

... living by the sea is to indulge in hedonism and escapism, to dwell in Neverland, to refuse to grow up. The concluding movement away from the coast parallels the movement away from childhood and towards what is perceived as grown-up engagement with the imperatives of culture and civilization [54].

Is it any wonder then that Hywood contends, “We are a nation undecided—or at least lacking a consensus—? about some fundamental values.” Although clinging to the old male-dominated narrative, there are obviously gaps appearing in the new symbolic codes. It would appear that there is recognition that the nostalgia of the primary narrative is not providing direction or a genuine familiarity in a changing world or sense of cultural fulfillment.

For many researchers it is generally accepted that mythic analysis provides the facets for a genuine understanding of national myth and that its literary “construction as deferred narrative and repetition” (Bhabha 101) does not always code the public psyche or the development of “national identity” as complete image or metaphors. In literary narrative, more often than not are actually “inversions” of the popular image, where the metaphoric element has “turned the image inside out” so as to provide a more complete understanding (Warner 137). However, it is in poetry that this meta-narrative focus and its “inside out image” are more completely reframed. If narrative tells the clearest truth about the conscious layers of humanity and the truth a culture holds at a particular time, then it is poetry that provides the clearest revelation of the “unconscious lies” that a culture clings to as it changes.

This is especially true in the poetry of Chris Mansell, who tells the feminine aspect of the Australian myth through the eyes of what can only be called the “transformative feminine.” The lesser half of the Australian male motif, the subordinate wife of the “laconic, pioneer bushman-soldier” has often taken on the role of a quiet, intelligent, bored and subjugated partner in Australian narrative, something akin to the “monstrous feminine” in zombie mode. Mansell repudiates this trope completely, casting the feminine aspect as an act of “communal recovery” (Doty 120). Either consciously or unconsciously, she attempts to counteract “the all pervasive masculine processes of nationalism” (G. Turner 134) or “masculine lies embedded in the positioning of woman in the Australian national myth.” She achieves through the use of single “nodes of myth,” or critical single “constituent parts that charter, or found social self understanding and hence world view” (Doty 68). While these mythic nodes can be formed in many ways, they are often generated in the “liminal space,” that period of “wilderness,” “othering” or “in between time” in which an individual or group are unaware of who they are. Thus her poetry

represents the current national condition as well revealing a mode of representing and revealing genuine identity. Kristeva contends that this liminal space and the lacunae markers represent the place and naming of the “abject,” that “which disturbs identity, system, order. What does not respect borders, positions, rules” (4). While in a socio-psychological place akin to death or “deep in the belly of the whale” experience, it is also on the other hand a place of opportunity, out of which an individual or collective may begin to build “myths, metaphors, symbols, rituals and philosophic systems” (Dear-dorff 13).

Mansell’s Poetic Map of the Feminine in The Good Soldier

In her poem *The Good Soldier*, Mansell initially links the typical Australian meta-narratives of the “outback soldier” and the “outback” with the national Anzac narrative, which supposedly reflects “the whole social history of Australia” (Ross 21). Through a careful weaving of mythic elements, she maps out the ‘taken for granted’ psyche of the Australian male as being the mythic desert hunter, but lost in a land where “distance is slung out” and “where the dirt is dead.” In this metaphoric space of desolation, the mythic narrative reverts to those forms, which are always coded as a culture where the notion of the hero has become lost and replaced by ritual. Mansell clearly indicates that the substance and historical truth has been replaced by an inferior symbolism. However, Mansell’s male figure wanders through “another’s place,” as “a stranger” and “not being able to remember home.” Through the process of picturing, imagining and revisiting this central frame, this process of poetic delineation adds to the perception of crisis but also reveals that its signification is being carefully managed within the culture by the symbolic forms generated by the ongoing “harsh land and drought” (Hoorn 12) male narrative that still impacts on Australian literature. That is, the polar opposite of the key metaphor has been marginalized while in reality it offers an answer to central tenets of the overall discourse. When viewed through the lens of mythic analysis, this bipolar signification process has several keystone aspects. Firstly, the male motif in Mansell’s poem bears a striking resemblance to the male being swallowed by the “mythic mouth” (O’Flaherty 268) or the “monstrous leviathan” (Campbell 83). Both of these monstrous symbols in narrative represent the total transformation and dissolution of self and culture. As Schildrick contends, this process signifies the “collapse of boundaries between self and other,” which “constitutes an undecidable absent presence at the heart of human beings” (81). Thus, the poetic narrative exophorically speaks of the need for the feminine narrative of genuine care and empathy to enter and

supersede the Australian narrative to provide the counterbalance “to the male passing itself off as nature” (Millett, ch. 2), or pretending to be linked to the natural setting.

The second aspect speaking as both explicit motif and subtext in Mansell’s poem is the notion of the hunter male being totally “outside” of the sense of place and self but still possessing an echo of what should have been his clearest memory: “putting his hand on the ground / he’ll feel it beating.” Nonetheless, he can’t remember home.

As Deardorff believes, this separation is the perhaps the “ultimate wound,” “the soul gap where we are split, where we are broken ... the cross roads of identity” (112, 216). While this marker has distinctly dystropic terms for the Australian context, it once again speaks of the need for wholeness. However, the shades of meaning bought forth in this mythic modality is one of choice and one of revisiting which fork of the crossroads tells the purest form of this national epistemological-ontological connection. While the “soldier-digger” lies at the heart of the Australian myth, there are social commentators who have begun to challenge the veracity of this narrative. Lake for example clearly labels these war heroes as carrying forward the racist and imperial ideals of “Mother England.” Her socio-historical analysis came to the conclusion that in reality Gallipoli “had come to serve as White Australia’s creation myth” (Lake 18). It seems that the feminine academic voice needs to be sounded much clearer and much louder.

Thirdly, embedded in *The Good Soldier* the unnamed and homeless male briefly “sees the luscious curl of intimacy, the uncommon life.” This brief sexual reference reflects the “other” of woman’s bodies as found in the majority of narrative texts. This particular poem represents a clear example of Steward’s contention that this ongoing narrative “discourse by and about men, is a discourse that is articulated masculinity as and through its own marginalizations” (Steward 2). It would appear that Mansell is suggesting that retaining power in a culture is ultimately through fantasy whereby male anxieties are represented and inscribed onto woman’s bodies. While in narrative this typically represent the exclusion of woman from the upper echelons of mythic and symbolic order, Mansell uses this notion as an inverted allegorization suggesting that the feminine cannot be suppressed. In this poem this single reference also appears in the very center of the poem, separating a chiasmic framework in which the very mythic essence of the feminine, again framed as birth and rebirth, is at the heart of this poem and the heart of the Australian consciousness. The concept of fertility within the male gaze of this poem reveals for the “lone hunter” a visual context that in narrative “is both a desirous and fearful” (Aguirre 195). In this instance though, its positioning and context in the flow of the poem views the feminine and reproduction as a solution, a reunification to the sterility of the entire Australian milieu. The

womb is often representative of the need of cosmic or ideological change (Oliver), which this poem suggests is to be longed for, but also dreaded as it reveals an uneasy but necessary solution for this ambivalent feeling of being lost within the uncontrollable.

Mansell's Poetic Topography of the Feminine in Where Edges Are

Unlike the poem discussed in the first section, in which the feminine is embedded as exophoric points of reference, the notion of the feminine in *Where Edges Are* is expressed as explicit and nested topographical contours. Set mostly in the same Australian “desert pastophilia” (Hoorn 195) where “[h]er skin is blistering,” and there is “crick of grass underfoot” this poem utilizes the second person feminine pronoun “she” in tandem with a series of liminal-mythic frames of “nature and spirit as shaping tools” (V. Turner 581).

The first of these “shaping tools” is the reference to the “dark halls of town” marking the ongoing decline of Australian rural towns. In Eliade’s mythic concept within *The Two and the One*, these are the places that used to form a distinct threshold between the essence of being alive, and in the Australian context, the ever-encroaching desert: Once ordinary places where the “pioneer spirited” bush dwellers undertook the elements of everyday life that became socio-emotionally fused into important stages of existence and meaning. As with all humanity, in inscribing these sites with the rituals of everyday life, the home and community worldview become imbued with emotional awe and a sense of identity. Thus these ordinary places become sacred. However, as stated, changing economics have forced a decline in out-back and rural towns, which in many ways has also caused a shift and questioning of what makes up the Australian narrative. Mansell shifts this question to the feminine, describing this mythic designation as “effulgent.” Thus the feminine shines in the darkness, relocating the national sensibility to one of compassion and emotional engagement. In turn Mansell sets up the possible relinquishing of the post-colonial sense of ownership and domination of the land, and according to this poet, the nation as a whole is “hearing.” As revisited several times in this poem the unnamed and unknown populace are “hearing” the “heavy paces” of change, which is a possible allusion to the process of reconciliation process with the indigenous population. With the former prime minister only recently making a public apology for the wrongs done to these peoples the process of abandoning the former myth of dominating the land to one of living with land as is indeed laden with “heavy paces,” and slow paces.

Related to this concept of the indigenous view of the land is Mansell's use of the warrigal metaphor within the "hearing breathing process." A wild dog, commonly called in the Anglicized version the dingo, the mythic qualities of this beast are seen by many indigenous communities as being at once of a free-ranging creature who is a protector of the people and on the other hand a trickster. It is a trans-textual essence of bloodshed and destruction as well as peace and safety. The British colonial attitude or colonization view was that it was a pest, another form of fauna that needed to be eradicated, as were the indigenous people. Both are symbolic of that which is unwanted and unloved by the dominant culture (Woodward 91), simply property to be euthanized for the greater good of the colonies or the wealth of the pastoral paradigm. In this model there was no concept of identity with the land beyond the ability to consecrate it by measuring and dividing it up.

In an interesting shift, Mansell ends this poem with reference to the soldier learning down and connecting physically with the land, and through language use that is clearly a "whisper in the mind and shy hope in the heart" (Thornhill 173). 'Whispering and hoping' represents the first call to change in regard to the need to shift dominant and domineering paradigms. As Botting explains, this whispering call represents the "disturbing return of pasts upon present" (1). Mansell then shifts the readers gaze to a focus on water as a place of growth within a metaphorical context of dryness and death, this image also mythically represents the actual issue when crossing the boundaries between time, space, ideology and culture. While water has always represented chaos and the disorder social re-birth brings, Eliade (*Patterns* 212) suggests that understanding and defining borders through the mythic symbolism of water is related more to the concept of eternity, potentiality of all things or the primordial source of creation. That is, it gives birth to all things but can never be re-created. Eliade further continues that water also metaphorically links the chaos of birth, life and death, in that at death the body is dissolved becoming the potential seedbed for new life. In this instance Mansell uses this mythic reference to water through two allegorical images to reinforce the pain that change causes. Each of these is symbolic reference to the rupture, blood and boundaries. The woman returns to that which gives birth and rebirth but must break through the surface of the water. The skin of her "naked feet" then has the potential to be also ruptured through the "sharp edges" of the oyster beds. Mansell appears to be reinforcing the physical and emotional pain that arises from shifts in understanding, as well as poetically sketching the "double bounded" isolation of liminality that the male-dominated myth has generated in the Australian narrative. All of these facets in this last line also "tell the more to the story" regarding the social distance created by "stories" that won't work and continue to blind a national worldview to the realities of their jaundiced and confining frameworks.

Reframing the National Narrative: An Imperative of Mythic Proportions

The brief mythic analysis of two of Chris Mansell's poems clearly suggests that the current Australian national narrative is one riddled with fault lines. As has apparently been the case since time immemorial, a culture's national mythic narrative and "the process of nationalism at its most definitive is unsurprisingly masculine" (G. Turner 193). Arising out of a false set of historical narratives in tandem with political expectations of the time, and the socio-cultural need for a national narrative celebrating heroism, an airbrushing away of the actuality of the nature of the Anzac heroes has simply created a narrative with no definitive grounding. The symbols and metaphors on which the Anzac narrative rests need revisiting so that a genuine cultural pathway and understanding can be recalibrated. However, Mansell's poems indicate the reinscribing of the temporal, spatial and narrative place for women within the Australian story.

With the Anzac legend celebrating its centenary in less than five years and the story underpinning its identity in transition, redefining the symbols on which the notion of what it means to be Australian is an imperative. "As a story, transition becomes a narration of impermanence and decline, but also of transformation and rebirth, being ultimately about a search, an open Odyssean story" (Capone 172).

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