South Seas and Fabled Oceans: Australian Voyager Literature for Young People.

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> *Voyage within you, on the fabled ocean,*
> *And you will find that Southern continent*
> *Quiros' vision –his hidalgo heart*
> *And mythical Australia where reside*
> *All things in their imagined counterpart.*
>
> *It is your land of similes: the wattle*
> *Scatters its pollen on the doubting heart*
> *The flowers are wide awake; the air gives ease.*
> *There you come home; the magpies call you Jack*
> *And whistle like larrikins at you from the trees.*
> From 'Terra Australis' by James McAuley

Postmodernism, that challenger of master narratives, is itself a master narrative. Its powerful impact has pervaded every aspect of society, opening new ways of thinking, giving voice to the previously voice-less, rewriting personal, corporate, aesthetic and national agendas. It has promoted new equities and collapsed hierarchies across the literary continuum, among other things releasing the study of children's literature into the Academy. Children's literature is thus in one obvious sense an Emergent Literature. It also deals with precisely the same issues as emergent literatures – with ideas related to finding oneself, owning oneself and claiming one's own. This paper however begins with the premise of the *ongoingness of emergence* in the dynamic genres of literature and language, both of which are always emerging, always changing, always adapting to new times and new conditions. It notes that Australia in the twentieth century was an emerging nation, and that children's books, and their *petits recits*, play a profound role in the making of a nation and of a national imagination. Books read and reinforced in community – first family, then school, then that of peers – become part of the images and symbols we think with, part of a literate schemata, as well as part of a shared folk culture. In words and pictures they present images of how a country sees itself – as an island, as seascape, as a desert fringed with beaches, as exile, as utopia, as distant, as different, as home, as away. Children's books are also surprisingly proactive – that is, they adopt emerging national themes and advocacies, often more quickly than other books, often taking strong political stances on contemporary social and cultural issues.

And at the heart of the most enduring of children's books, as indeed of most books on the literary continuum, is a notion of personal emergence that implicates more than character, more than subjectivity.

This is the idea of spiritual identity and soul: soul as connection to the infinite, as connection to community, as the representation of eternities of the present, as intimate space and as the space of mystical encounter. Such concepts have long been an intrinsic part of most traditional indigenous narratives, where they are wrapped in symbols of landscape, flora and fauna. My focus relates to all of the above, and explores the place of sea and ocean in Australian national landscapes, its representation as space for the discovery of identity, and the related development of a type of activist voyager literature in recent Australian children's books.

Seas and oceans have a long symbolical artistic lineage. Herman Melville wrote in *Moby Dick*, 'You must have plenty of sea-room to tell the truth in.' Australia is surrounded by plenty of sea room; indeed, it has responsibility for more area of ocean than any other nation. The symmetrically pleasing mass of the Great South Land (*Terra Australis*) is set on its sunrise side among handfuls of islands in the magical deep blueness of the fabled South Pacific. But oceans/seas are ambiguous; they both construct and arbitrate distance; they disunite, but also unite; they separate but also offer barriers of safety and protection. This dichotomy is very real for those who voyaged to Australia, crossing waters sometimes to seek a new world, sometimes to escape an old world, sometimes voluntarily, sometimes through the decisions of others. Nonetheless, and however its inhabitants got there, the controversial big island, or small continent, has plenty of sea-room, plenty of space to seek out truths, and plenty of space for soul quest.

As the fledgling white colony on the edge of the world began to find its national voice – and a national voice is always a literary voice, because it is writers who in the permanence of print absorb, recreate and articulate overt and covert cultural community – it began what was to become an enduring enchantment with landscape and its potential for a symbolism that has, at its nexus, ideas of space and distance. What one historian calls the 'the tyranny of distance' (Blainey 1966) in the beginning inspired two sorts of narrative: on the one hand, those stories in which the colony is represented as a place of exile, a place to be feared, a place that is 'not home', far away from 'home', and on the other hand, those stories in which the colony is represented as a place not only of escape, but of rebirth, resurrection and redemption. Where many of the early settlers, feeling alien, desperately searched for signs of the familiar and failed, others discovered a new hope and a different aesthetic. It is this latter world that is reflected in, for example, Dickens' *Great Expectations* (1860-62); Magwitch the felon can help Pip because he made his fortune in a rich and fertile distant place that has enabled him not only to start again and make good, but also to make good spectacularly.

This new aesthetic rapidly developed into a complex Australian poetics of space and distance: dualities and binaries of nature (such as droughts/floods), ambiguities of form and structure (beach/desert/bush), different perspectives and ontologies (here/there, inside/outside, home/away, belonging/not belonging), and new iconic cosmic markings such as the Southern Cross. A distinctive outer landscape lent itself to a mythopoeic construction of inner mindscapes: Hodge and Mishra note that Australian landscape has become a dominant presence in art and literature not only as the 'context for human actions' but also as an expression and metaphor of 'transformations of people' (1991:143-4). 'Voyage within you', proclaimed mid twentieth century poet James McAuley ('Terra Australis'). 'Hard to say whether the subtle sky-rim of our tenure/or the home paddock heart is more unexplored,' writes the contemporary poet Les Murray ('A Helicopter View of Terrestrial Stars'). A critic discussing the work of Randolph Stow notes that he 'confronts the inner landscape of Australia, and reflects on the disturbing experience of exploring it' (Hassall 1986). In Patrick White's *Voss,* an exploratory journey into the interior, inspired by the real life experiences of the explorers Edward Eyre and Ludwig Leichhardt, becomes a journey

into the metaphysical 'country of the mind', an allegory of self-discovery: 'Each member of the party explores his own imagination. Each is forced to recognise his own delusions and to face the truth about his personality' (Gibson 1984:211); White writes, 'His [Voss's] soul must experience first …the excruciating passage into its interior' (136-137). This truth emerges – and this is surely what Melville meant – in soul-struggle, in solitude, in physical apartness.

The coastline of modern Australia was mapped via mariners, and seabeds bear witness to many voyages that ended in disaster. The first children's book published in what was then known as the colony of New South Wales *A Mother's Offering to Her Children* (1841), gives several accounts of shipwrecks as well as descriptions of natural habitat and seashores. (Note that the name 'Australia' was first used in Alexander Dalrymple's Collection *Voyages of the South Seas* (1770); Governor Lachlan Macquarie began using the name in official correspondence after 1817, following charts named in 1814 by Matthew Flinders. By 1824, when Captain King's maritime survey charts were published, it was in common use). In a country without, for the early white settlers, any elongated sense of history or cultural coding, landscape – topography, the configuration of landforms, flora and fauna, cliffs and coastlines, – assumed pivotal importance; thus geography (the horizontal conception of being) not history (the linear conception of being), imbricated person/place relationships. Clearly, it has overwhelmingly been bush and desert, rather than ocean, which has most inspired Australian literary imaginations. Obliquely, however, bush and desert are characterised, in an appropriately postmodern way, by water – that is, by lack of it (absence, trace). The children's picture book *Rain Dance* (Applegate and Huxley 2000) begins:

> Everything is quiet and still.
> It hasn't rained for two whole years.

And of course in the early days the white explorers were positive that at the heart of the continent and beyond the huge stretches of desert there was an inland sea.

So a mythology emphasizing difference and distinctiveness, space and distance started to grow up around ideas of national character. Current theories of *performativity* provide one way of describing how a new country talks itself into constructions of nation. For Judith Butler, performativity describes the production, through constant repetition, reference and citation, of subjects or selves as effects (1990, 1993). In Gayatri Spivak's words, this identity – 'subject-effect' – is 'the effect of an effect' (1988: 204). Words and images that are artistically presented to us, of us and about us, and the ways in which we are referred to and represented in those words and images, construct who and what we are, generating identity, community and belonging. It is an interactive symbiotic cycle; in fact, sometimes we appear willingly to write ourselves into national stereotypes, taking pride in those areas in which we are most distinctively different (see Johnston 2003, 2004). Derrida's notion of 'citational doubling' (1991:103) claims that the essence of the performative is repetition and iteration, saying something over and over again, doing something over and over again, being said about in all sorts of different ways. In my words, rather than performance being the effect of identity, identity is the effect of performance.

Thus in the poem 'Terra Australis' (quoted above) the poet James McAuley returns home and perceives not only the flowers as 'wide awake' and the air as giving ease, but the sounds of the birds, which call him 'Jack' (by implication, not 'James' or 'Mr McCauley'), as an expression of Australian informality, easygoing friendliness, and mateship. The magpies' whistles are even *read* by him, and then *written* by him, as being like those of larrikins (in this context, connoting more 'rascal' than 'ruffian'). In interpreting the

landscape in this way, he compounds the image and confirms the stereotype; he is both reading, writing and *citing* a particular attribution (informality, mateship). It is a citation, almost a ritualisation, of one idea of Australianness.

However, as Australia soul-searches its twenty-first century truth as a nation, traditional constructs of identities and histories are increasingly interrogated. Captain Cook is no longer an explorer-hero to all Australians; the nineteenth century image of Cook as 'an icon of Empire and Australia' is very different to the twentieth century Indigenous perspective of Cook as 'a harbinger of dispossession and death, a sign of white amnesia' (Healy 1997:12). Early Anglo-Western constructions of 'Australian' history too often erased the fact that indigenous peoples of over two hundred language groups had inhabited the continent for more than forty thousand years. Thus a different image and a different history starts to emerge. Children's books such as *The Rabbits* (John Marsden and Shaun Tan 1998) are performing for today's children a different sense of nation; the white colonisers, who came in tall ships, wearing naval tricorns, are not only disruptive of the natural environment but are an introduced species that is as dangerous to it and destructive of it as rabbits, who were also an introduced species. In another way, histories and geographies are being reframed and re-mapped, as in the *Papunya School Book of Country and History* (2001).

Applying the term 'voyager' to literature became popular around the middle of the twentieth century, but not in relation to children's books, where the exploration of identity and subjectivity are such fierce issues. I suggest that the term has achieved a new pertinence in recent years, as another sort of voyage regenerates sea and ocean imageries. As noted previously, children's books have an activist agenda and have vigorously engaged in contemporary political issues – multiculturalism, changing shape of families, gender roles, the environment, postcolonial guilt, and so on. The newest voyagers, and the most controversial, are Boat people – illegal immigrants. Immigration has long been a fraught political and social issue in Australia. Nineteenth century European racial attitudes led to the Immigration Restriction Bill of 1907. After the Second World War, the steadily increasing influx of European migrants signalled the beginning of new ideas about immigration and population, and policies first of assimilation and then of multiculturalism. Australia has struggled with defining itself in terms of region ('Australasia', 'Pacific Rim', 'Oceania'), and as a sparsely populated country set in a densely populated area it also struggles with political and moral issues concerning refugees.

This new wave of voyager literature represents ocean with all its ambivalences and elegiac edge, as in Tennyson's famous 'Break, Break, Break', and Kenneth Slessor's poem 'Five Bells' (which mourns a drowning death in Sydney Harbour: ' … Night and water/Pour to one rip of darkness, the Harbour floats/In air, the Cross hangs upside down in water.' While the idea of *beach* is increasingly celebrated as carnival, playground and time-out (as in Alison Lester's *Magic Beach*, Elizabeth Honey's *Not a Nibble*, and Bob Graham's *Greetings from Sandy Beach*), ocean and ocean rim, horizon, cliff, rocks, cove, bay, harbour – the places where land and ocean meet, and where voyages both begin and (at least sometimes) finish – are loaded with a freight of mythopoeia which taps into a pervasive sense of sadness and loss. Colin Thiele's *Storm Boy* (1963) is one example. Tim Winton's *The Deep*, a picture book example of the voyage within, captures both the fun and fear of beach and ocean. The symbolism of water as a crucial element of life, death, renewal and transformation is very much part of Winton's surreal *Cloudstreet*, and David Malouf's *Remembering Babylon* (1994):

> Out beyond the flatlands the line of light pulses and swell. The sea, in sight now, ruffles, accelerates. Quickly now it is rising towards us, it approaches.

As we approach prayer. As we approach knowledge. As we approach one another.
It glows in fullness till the tide is high and the light almost, but not quite, unbearable, as the moon plucks at our world and all the waters of the earth ache towards it ….
(David Malouf, *Remembering Babylon* 1994)

The picture book *The Fisherman and the Theefyspray* (Jennings and Tanner 1994) celebrates the sea as a rich and sensitive environment, and plays with ideas about the inexplicable tangle of life's beauty and sadness in a way reminiscent of Katherine Mansfield's short story, 'The Garden Party.' Jeannie Baker, in *Where the Forest Meets the Sea* (1987) uses collage and drifts in time between present and future to plead for the environment. In *Stradbroke Dreamtime* (1972), the indigenous writer and poet Oodgeroo (Kath Walker) uses sea as archive and symbol to retrieve childhood past, combining landscapes and seascapes and aetiological stories in a wonderful mix of personal and community memories. *The Whalers* (Roland Robinson, Percy Mumbulla and Bronwyn Bancroft 1996) is another indigenous story of maritime adventure. *Sailing Home* (Colin Thompson and Matt Ottley 1996) plays with ideas of the sea as imaginary space, and *Spirit of Hope* (Bob Graham 1993) uses the sea as a symbol of escape. *The Magic Pudding*, written and illustrated by writer and artist Norman Lindsay (1919), is a rollicking carnivalesque that celebrates sea as a means of reaching landfall, reaching home:

Home, home, home,
That's the song of them that roam,
The song of the roaring, rolling sea
Is all about rolling home. (171)

Alan Baillie's *Songman*, set in Northern Australia fifty six years before the time of Captain Cook, portrays the sea as the place of journey, challenge, danger and hope:

Sitting down in the shade
Pulling the canoe into the water
Looking for dugong
Clouds standing on the sea
The shadow stays with them.

Lucy's Bay by Gary Crew and Gregory Rogers (1992) enlarges on sea as elegiac presence, something that takes away as well as gives – it has taken away the protagonist's little sister:

Far up from the edge of the sea, in a pool beyond the sandhills, the water reeds rustled. Stem against stem, leaf against leaf, they sighed and whispered. And the sea-wind, hearing the sorrow of their tale, carried their gossamer seeds far, far away.
(Gary Crew and Gregory Rogers, *Lucy's Bay* 1992)

First Light by Gary Crew and Peter Gouldthorpe (1993) depicts sea as a place of fear but also as a place of renewal, restoration and unity, interiorisation and exteriorisation, written with some of the poignancy of Albert Wendt, as father and son struggle to understand each other:

'This is the life', the father said. 'This is what you need. Adventure.'

But the boy hated it. He hated having to follow, as boys do, to be taught the things their fathers like. He longed for his room at home, for his designs and models. For the smooth, bright surface of silver instruments; the sharp, spiced scent of freshly trimmed wood.
(Gary Crew and Peter Gouldthorpe, *First Light* 1993)

But it is the story of the boat people that has most resurrected sea as profound voyager symbol in Australian children's literature. One of the first of these books was *Onion Tears* by Diana Kidd (1989), which tells the story of the Vietnamese child, Nam-Huong.

It was just a little boat with hundreds of people in it with scared eyes and sad eyes and eyes drowned in tears – and Grandpa and me. Grandpa was squashed up close to me and he held my hand and put his arm around me when the waves leapt at us across the deck like snarling tigers.
Sometimes, when we were too wet and cold to sleep, Grandpa told me stories for hours and hours until his voice got lost in the wind and the waves …
…[O]ne day I opened my eyes, there was only the sea screaming around us.
And Grandpa's hand was limp in mine.

Later, she remembers:

And for a moment I was on the boat again, and the water was gold around the silent bodies I saw floating there – floating on the saffron sea, staring at the saffron sun – and I saw my Grandpa there, silently floating away.
'GRANDPA! GRANDPA!' I screamed …
And all the world was crying – even the wind and the waves and the gulls that circled above him.
(Diana Kidd, *Onion Tears* 1989)

Boy Overboard, by Morris Gleitzman (2002), tells of a family fleeing Iran to the promise of Australia, but because of the so-called Pacific solution, never quite reaching it:

'Down on the beach I can see Mum and Dad and Bibi walking together at the water's edge. Even though they're picking their way through plastic bags and rotting seaweed, they look so happy my chest fills with love and I feel so happy.
I know this isn't really Australia, but it feels like Australia to me.
(Morris Gleitzman, *Boy Overboard* 2002).

Brian Caswell and David Phu An Chiem's *Only the Heart* was named as the Children's Book Council of Australia Notable Book in 1998. It is dedicated 'For all those who lived the Nightmare, in search of the Dream', and deals with the plight of Vietnamese boat people, in a circular narrative moving in and out of time and space, with child and adult characters (both of whom at various times are given narrative voice). When pirates board the already suffering and crowded boat, the pirate captain tries to abduct a thirteen-year old girl, but her mother, Mai, convinces him to take her instead, as a 'fair exchange.' He agrees, and takes her away from her daughter and other children. The next morning, as the pirate sleeps, Mai leaves evidence that she could have killed him, but has kept her bargain:

Then she lays the open knife on the bed next to him and moves across to the mirror, smearing a last message in blood across the glass, and without looking back she walks from the cabin.

At the railing she pauses for just a moment to look out across the sea. It is calm. Green-blue and patient. And welcoming, as she opens her arms to it, and plunges from the deck in a graceful arching dive …

The sea is calm – as calm as such a creature can ever be – and she rides on its back, lulled by the movement of the swell, unaware of the exact moment when the waves close over her. Aware only of the silence and the way the sky looks green and suddenly far away. She is weightless. She is free.

She is smiling as she opens herself to the waters and breathes in eternity.

(Brian Caswell and David Phu an Chiem, *Only the Heart* 1997)

We talk comfortably about character and subjectivity, less comfortably about soul and spirituality. Yet Melville's words ('you must have plenty of sea-room … ') remind us of the connection between soul and solitude, and of the significance of voyaging within. They also remind us of the powerful imageries and symbologies of sea and ocean. Ideas of spiritual identity incur engagement with that which is most private, most personal, and most deeply 'I', and at the same time with ideas of cosmos and creation, of finitude and infinitude, and of death and eternity. It is this that Bakhtin refers to as the '*Not-I* in me, that is, existence in me: Something greater than me in me' (1986:146). It is this 'Not-I' that connects us with most integrity to recognition and respect for others who are equal 'I's – that helps 'us' and 'them' to become a 'we'. Jacques Derrida uses the idea of giving as another revelation of this 'Not-I'; he writes that a gift is an event, characterised by what he calls 'the madness of the giving.' For Derrida, uncalculated giving is a letting go of the 'I' and 'an affirmation of the other' (Caputo 1997:177).

An emerging reality is that Boat people are the *other* of our community; they are arguably the *other* of the world. The privilege of living in a fabled ocean, as Australia does, invokes certain responsibilities. Children's books such as *Onion Tears, Boy Overboard* and *Only the Heart* bring the stories of boat people to national consciousness, and hopefully to national conscience**.**

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