Fear of Drowning

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Martin Flanagan

In Sunshine or in Shadow

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In THIS ‘memoir about going home’, home is where the heart is. The book’s principal locale is the Tasmania of Martin Flanagan’s Irish Catholic small-town childhood. But ‘home’, in this narrative, isn’t just a place: it’s a state of the self. It’s what one gets back to when life’s useless accretions, confusions and hesitations are peeled away, leaving a self that is pristine — attuned to its true origins, its deepest intimations about the world, and to the values that the unadulterated self lives by. Flanagan’s journey is a quest for the authentic self. A ‘romantic’, he wants to embrace the ‘wild green joy of living’ — a phrase that typifies the passionate intensity of his search.

The distinction between ‘memoir’ and ‘autobiography’ is often hazy, but Flanagan is right to characterise his narrative as ‘memoir’. Memoir tends to be less fixated on the writing self, less introspective, than full-blown autobiography. Memoir is apt to be more about bearing witness than about bearing the soul. Flanagan’s belief that ‘identity is what emerges through what you do’ is a fair reflection of the ethos of memoir, and of this one in particular. He’s not comfortable as a navel-gazer. In structural terms, memoir can be episodic, a succession of loosely connected vignettes and reflections. In Sunshine or in Shadow is memoir in this sense, too.

The book contains some fine passages. Flanagan is at his best when evoking his beloved Tasmanian countryside, as in this description of Oyster Cove: ‘Here, on the river’s eastern shore, the ground is hard, a thin spread of grey soil on a shale base topped with yellow grass and low spreading gums flushed pink on their northern side, the one that meets the sun.’ Sometimes intimate, often sublime, Flanagan’s landscapes are the authentic self’s natural habitat. Yet here the horrors that haunt him have also taken place: above all, the destruction of the indigenous population, but also the staggering cruelty of the convict era, a time to which Flanagan is linked by his convict ancestor, Thomas Flanagan. More recently, there have been environmental outrages and the throttling impost of Howard’s ideology: ‘a glib brew of postmodern capitalism and social Darwinism that has no meaningful notion of culture and no respect for the local except as a marketplace.’

Flanagan is a compelling chronicler of Tasmanian history and culture. The book includes some moving biographical portraits: the legendary Aboriginal woman Truganini, ‘so-called Last of Her Race’; George Augustus Robinson, ‘Pacificator of the Tasmanian Aborigines’, who apparently took Truganini as his mistress; Banjo Clark, storyteller, descendant of Truganini and a man of extraordinary moral authority; Martin’s father, a survivor of the Burma railway, whom Martin calls a ‘bush Buddhist’; Martin’s siblings; John Embling, Flanagan’s beloved intellectual friend and a champion of the underprivileged. Flanagan defines himself not just by what he does, but by his passionate connections to stories, people and causes. His is what is sometimes called a ‘relational’ life-narrative.

His sense of identification with indigenous Australia is perhaps the most powerful connection of all. He quotes the former AFL coach Terry Wheeler: ‘Wheeler said there was an Aboriginal dimension in everything I wrote.’ Quite why Wheeler is cited to this effect isn’t clear: so far as I know, Wheeler is not Aboriginal, and, though one of the more complex and interesting of recent AFL coaches, he doesn’t speak with any particular authority on indigenous matters.

Here, as in other places, there’s an edge of anxiety about Flanagan’s identification with Aboriginal Australia: as if someone — the reader? himself? — might doubt its sincerity; as if the identification is doing complex, sometimes occluded, psychological work. The extent to which indigeneity structures Flanagan’s sense of self is striking. The pristine self predates white settlement. It’s back to this, above all, that he’s journeying. The book is as much about white salvation as it is about indigenous emancipation. One of its successes is to show how far these two things are intertwined.

There’s a touching rawness about some of Flanagan’s admissions of cultural need. He writes of sitting with two Aboriginal friends beside the sacred tree at the Melbourne Cricket Ground: ‘Eventually, what happens if you sit long enough with people like Hecktor and Paddy is that the compulsive haste in your body dissipates and you sense this other time, one that is flat and unending and totally attuned to the place but in a way that is different to your previous experience of it.’ The phrasing — ‘compulsive haste in your body dissipates’ — is lovely, but for the most part the book lacks the inner leisure these words celebrate. In fact, the narrative is often frenetic, flipping the reader from place to place, character to character, theme to theme, with unseemly, sometimes disorienting haste. Even by the elastic standards of memoir, this narrative can seem miscellaneous, flung together, its impatience pulling against its protestations of reverent attentiveness.

This apparent hurry hurts the book in several ways. The prose is one casualty. Given how well Flanagan can write, some of the prose is very disappointing. Even the title seems oddly approximate, a bathetic banner for what is a full-blooded narrative enterprise. But the most pervasive problem is Flanagan’s tendency to under-write, as in this passage about his wife: ‘The album she played most often was Van Morrison’s “Bright Side of the Road”. She no longer read books. We had words about that, then one day I watched her with a pot plant...’
and saw the joy she got, although the argument would recur, the nature of the relationship was decided.’ It could be a superb moment, but it needs to be written with the loving attentiveness Flanagan claims to have felt at the time and to feel now as he recalls it. I wanted an image of his wife, a sense of what he felt as he beheld her; but here, as in so many places, encapsulation is asked to do the work of layered, nuanced narrative description. Sometimes it’s as if Flanagan writes with a quasi-heroic narrative of self in his head, and feels that he need only gesture at bits of the story in order to put the reader in the picture. But the gesture isn’t enough; the reader needs the picture. Something precious gets lost between head and page.

The narrative of self can be moving and appealing, as in Flanagan’s love of the grassroots world he came from, especially the football culture he writes so well about elsewhere. But there’s also a kind of callowness about the way this quasi-heroic self is written, particularly in moments, so pivotal in this kind of autobiographical writing, of spiritual transformation:

Finally, one afternoon as I was crossing the paddock beside the house, a sort of shadow appeared before me. What was the shadow? All those doubts and fears acquired before the age of adult knowing that can assume the force of habit and block out the sun for a lifetime. I had previously resolved to endure whatever came my way for the sake of my wife and child. I now went one glorious step further and told the shadow to fuck off, crying out that I had a right to be.

The problem is not the ‘fuck off’ — if that’s what he said, good luck to him — but the failure to compose the moment adequately as narrative. It’s too compacted. It also lacks the ironic or reflective distance that the incident, with its bemusing amalgam of ockerism and romantic sublimity, calls for.

Memoir’s lack of fixation on the writing self can be a virtue. But not necessarily. Australian men’s memoir has often been shadowed by a larrikin diffidence that runs deep in the culture. It says: be colourful in deed, but don’t delve into the inner spaces. To do that would be suspect. Late in the book, Flanagan writes: ‘A good dog can save you from drowning in yourself.’ One often senses that fear of drowning in the self, of getting hopelessly ensnared in life’s complexities, in these pages. The book is as much about flight as it is about returning home.

If ever a book’s heart was in the right place, this one’s is; and in Howard’s Australia the heart matters enormously. But when it comes to memoir, heart alone won’t carry the day. Towards the end of In Sunshine or in Shadow, the writing becomes more expansive, more concertedly rich, more befitting of the book’s profound preoccupations. You sense that the published work is but a few drafts shy of what it might have been.