
At some point it became difficult to urge people to *live in the moment* without inviting disdain. With the exception of a few Buddhists reading the Dhammapada by candlelight in rural Tasmania, no-one holds to that sort of thing anymore, do they?

Richard Flanagan does. And he is sufficient of spirit, he has the art, to restore believability to those pieces of wisdom we’d reduced by easy apothegm.

Flanagan is not guilty of underestimating the enemy. He goes at it by the well-shaped paragraph with the controlled passion of a master surgeon carving concisely away at excrescences. The following is typical:

> A taint was upon Dickens. For, having dispensed with Dr Rae and the cannibals, he could not himself escape the growing sense that some greater authority seemed to have turned the whole world into a gaol yard. No matter what accolade or geegaw of success or standing came his way, whatever compliment, congratulation, ovation or award was granted him, all iron was rusty and all stone slimy, all air stank and all light was fading. Still, there was for him only one way, and that way was forward, ever forward, never stopping. (72)

The Dickens chapters, which are brilliant – but much of this *is* – run up and down the terrible scale of self-doubt and loathing by which civilisation as shown here prompts even its most illustrious products to prepare for self consumption, and then, in due course, to devour themselves. And there is the nub of the problem: each of the mortifying worthies in *Wanting* thinks of him or herself, and of the society to whose good opinion they are devoted, as a product.

This process is very particular. Sir John Franklin, Governor of Van Dieman’s land and Arctic explorer, and his wife, Lady Franklin, watchdog to his reputation, each holds before them an icon of ruin as specifically reflective as a looking glass, towards which they march as it draws the heart out of them, like an egg sucked from its shell. (In some ways, this is the most alarming section of the novel, since it suggests that English culture, which we perhaps still tend to think of as having a classical éclat, is a thing of parts cobbled together the day before yesterday, a quilted monster of mandatory mythologizing with a tiny idea of proper behaviour sewn between its brows.)

And the relevance of this to us, as we stand?

If on some idle evening you were to spend twenty minutes dial-twiddling your radio, you might notice that presenters of all sorts, on a variety of programs, whatever the occasion for their conversation, are joined in a kind of monologue: they are selling an idea, a rather narrow idea, of the culture which sanctions their speaking. They are packaging that life which flows outside the walls of their studios as though it were a thing; trying to stamp thingness on a process.

The broadcasting of data as from a player piano roll set to repeat provides our measure of the real. *Faux de mieux* or first choice, numbers are always near at hand and...
as easily extendable as the body politic stretched on a rack: road traffic reports; temperature numbers; stock exchange figures; cricket scores; the price of copper at close of ‘play’ on the stock exchange (is anyone very much delighted by this game, lately?); the relation of the viscosity of the oil produced in the Niger Delta to that hoiked up from the depths of a Saudi desert; GNP; GDP; GPS – even geographies may now be acronymically objectified. But the data itself, though it provides the raw material for this reduction of reality, hardly matters. The thingness is all.

Richard Flanagan’s characters in Wanting are mostly trying to make a similar magic – to achieve the status of objects which will authenticate themselves by their mere, insistent, location. This, Flanagan suggests, is a deathly pursuit, since each of these sophisticated naifs must sacrifice spontaneity to self-objectification, and each of them is undone by a great forgetfulness of how to live, so to speak, ‘off the plan’.

All, that is to say, except for the Aboriginal girl, Mathinna, upon whom compulsory foundlingness is conferred by the Franklins so they can save her from the lack of those complexities stifling the life out of them. Wanting only – for instance – to dance, Mathinna does that and nothing more (nor less). With the girl, expression in the act, whatever that may be, naturally reaches a level of celebration not available to Dickens, who can only write about such moments impressively, or the Franklins’ society, which dismisses such dancing as primitive. Because she makes no further demand upon it beyond the delight inherent in participation, Mathinna knows how to dance. The Franklin quadrille, in contrast, like our strings of numbers broadcast in a type of obsessive-compulsive gargling, is part of a clod-hopping attempt to recall how dancing happens.

Mathinna’s wanting is no stranger to the disappointment which accompanies loss. Flanagan does not romanticise her. When a pet possum is devoured by one of Franklin’s hounds, her petulance is the equal of anyone of her age, at any time, cruelly torn from a thing she loves. But the next moment, the next delight, beckons her immediately away from present sorrow: Mathinna, Flanagan is showing us, has a power to live happily, from which the Europeans of accomplishment who surround her are barred, by reason of certain deficiencies of character which they embrace as evidence of civilization.

Richard Flanagan has from one point of view written a psychoanalytic history of the white settlement of Australia, and, as well, offered a synchronic ‘cut’ through our current corporate state of mind, and done it in a novel of precision and power. He has the strength not only to face, but to describe, some terrible ghouls; but his book offers an opening into something finer than eternal confinement in our Regency stews. For although, in the moving and harrowing dénouement, Mathinna is degraded and destroyed by the ‘interest’ which attempts to improve her, she has gifted the Franklins before that with a vision each of them clings to as the most significant of their lives, as their physical death – not a moment too soon – approaches:

He completed his tasks, but his once implacable attention to detail was gone.
He was beginning to live in two worlds, and only one mattered to him.

With Mathinna, Sir John played Aunt Sally, he rolled the walnut with the cockatoo and joined in the songs she had been taught by Francis Lazaretto. With her was possible all that wasn’t as Governor, things that were common and simple and fun, in which he could say something foolish or innocent – or, as he frequently did, both – and suffer no consequence. With the Aboriginal child he felt he could be himself. (136)

Robert Lumsden