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Criticism in the Optative Mood: Antonella Riem's *A Gesture of Reconciliation*

Antonella Riem. 2017. A Gesture of Reconciliation: Partnership Studies in Australian Literature. Udine: Forum, 212 pp., € 24,00, ISBN 978-88-8420-995-5



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*Only a transformation in the narratives told
can bring a real change to our world life*
Riem (142).

In her Afterword to Antonella Riem's magisterial *A Gesture of Reconciliation*, Riane Eisler – whose ideas provide much of the theoretical framework for Riem's analyses – calls the book “a paean to the power of the creative word as a path to understanding and transformation” (212). In literary criticism we are used to seeing testaments to “the power of the creative word” (though perhaps less so now than in the past), and there is always the assumption, if not the outright declaration, that this leads to increased understanding. Knowledge and understanding, after all, are the coins of our particular realm. But except for manifestly po-

lemical works, we don't usually regard criticism as a path to *transformation*. And yet that is exactly what motivates Riem's work, and has for over twenty years now, since she founded the Partnership Studies Group in Udine in 1998. As she says in her Introduction, "poetry, narration, music, and all other forms of art have a relevant role, because they influence our world-view and therefore our present and our future, and can even reconfigure our past beliefs and transform our lives" (12). Moreover, "if we consciously choose to focus our attention on peace, beauty, love, harmony, and art, this is what we creatively activate in our lives" (12). Literature, therefore, can help remake our world by changing us.

These are not small claims, nor are they mere platitudes. Riem looks at four Australian novelists, Patrick White, Randolph Stow, Peter Carey, and Blanche d'Alpuget in detail (along with Marcus Clarke, more cursorily) and shows how their work serves to "denounce the dangers of colonial dominator imperialism, while indicating another possibility, a different cultural configuration that can result from what Eisler defines as a partnership paradigm" (15). In other words, these works coincide with Riem's own beliefs and aims and, if read in the way she proposes and demonstrates, can guide the reader along the "path to understanding and transformation". This is not some version of Horace's "delight and instruct"; this is more akin to Nietzsche's philosophizing with a hammer.

The theoretical framework, derived from Eisler and reiterated throughout the study – whereby the cultural paradigm of the *dominator* is exposed and critiqued in contrast to the equalitarian *partnership* model – also draws on Raimon Panikkar's wholistic notions of *inter-in-dependence* and *dialogical dialogue* which are intended to counter the atomistic tendencies of modern *scientific* thought. In Panikkar's view the *creative* word (*Mythos*) is a necessary corrective to the exclusivity of analytical scientism (*Logos*). Riem, accordingly, draws upon myths, archetypes and symbols in her readings of texts, which adds an additional layer of meaning and implication. This is to cast a very wide net, but in her hands – given the depth and breadth of her learning – the haul is impressive.

One might worry that such a formulaic and fully articulated theory could distort the works to fit the template, but far from being a Procrustean bed upon which the authors are stretched, it is remarkable how readily and convincingly their novels fall into place, corroborating the theory. Although all the works examined are well known and have been written about by previous scholars, the light into which Riem casts the novels illumines important features overlooked or underemphasized by others. We come away with a deeper understanding of the books and a clear idea of how instrumental they can be in the process of creating a paradigm shift, in the Kuhnian sense of displacing a dominant model of thought (and behavior). While that may seem to be an epistemological project, the real force of Riem's study is ontological: she is advocating a new mode of being in the world. 'Reconciliation', here, is less a matter of making conflicting views compatible and more like harmonizing books in the financial sense: our accounts with the world are balanced or reconciled and we profit accordingly.

When we turn to the contents of *A Gesture of Reconciliation*, we find it is split into two parts: in the first, chapter one considers Marcus Clarke and chapter two Patrick White and Randolph Stow together, mainly bringing Eisler's theories to bear on the texts; while part

two adds Panikkar's ideas to the mix in offering readings of Carey, Stow, d'Alpuget and White. The books discussed are: Clarke: *For the Term of His Natural Life*; White: *Voss, The Aunt's Story, Memoirs of Many in One*; Stow: *To the Islands, The Merry-Go-Round in the Sea, Tourmaline*; Carey: *The Unusual Life of Tristan Smith, Bliss*; and d'Alpuget's *Turtle Beach*. Both White and Stow get three chapters; Carey two; and d'Alpuget one, and there is a good deal of cross-referencing throughout (though, again, mainly with reference to White and Stow). Riem indicates that David Malouf would have been part of this book were she not writing a separate monograph on him. The overall focus might strike some as narrow, especially as there are many Australian novelists whose work would readily fall under the rubrics Riem establishes (Alex Miller, Alexis Wright, Tim Winton, Michelle de Kretser, Thomas Keneally, Kim Scott, Kate Grenville come to mind, as well as many poets and other writers in other genres). But the advantage of Riem's choice of five authors is the depth of analysis it allows, offering exemplary readings that are both detailed and wide-ranging.

For instance, in comparing Stow's *To the Islands* with White's *Voss* and *The Aunt's Story*, Riem brings out not only interesting instances of similarities (premonitions, telepathy, Aboriginal presences, personal illuminations) but also shows how the designs of the novels correspond to an archetypal model of three stages in psychological individuation: Preparation, Journey, Return. As different comparative patterns emerge, we have a sense of how the imagination is structured by the ancient and elemental desire for transformative experience. But what is most impressive is the texture of Riem's writing, the way she draws out narrative threads from the novels and interweaves them in rich detail. Her focus is clear, sharp and sustained throughout; her expositions careful and cogent; her style limpid and engaging. At the level of literary theory, Riem incorporates feminist, narratological and postcolonial methods of analysis, especially in her forceful critiques of *dominator* values, but she also goes beyond these methods – or perhaps through them – to an all-encompassing vision of partnership in “world change” (142). There's an almost fractal quality to her close readings, whereby the microcosm yields a macrocosmic perspective.

One of the pleasures of reading Riem's work is the way it expands one's understanding of the “canonical” texts she has chosen (or which, she says, have chosen her), defamiliarizing and making them new by placing each in a wider – indeed, a worldwide – context. This is criticism in the optative mood, looking to a future where the “human potential for harmony, beauty and peace” can be realized through the agency of the imagination when it is turned toward re-imagining “our relationships with ourselves and others” (198). In showing this path, and taking us down it, Riem's work is more than a gesture, it is itself transformative.

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