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tears are the ones you had forgotten last night when the ache was too hard, nothing could release, it was clamped in with cold. Blue is the colour we come to alone, it will not be shared. Of course you do not see what I see, we cannot share the identical spot, the shadows are so much different for that. Open your eyes now. Look, we are both smiling. We are both aware of walking in the dark night, the tears that could not flow were the same blue string as ice. In the sunlight now it is transformed, it is melting.

There is clearly not the conventional curve of action to these—no Aristotelian beginnings, middles, ends. Rather it's all flowing like the smoke of dry ice; like the wash of a water colour; like a woman whose mind doesn't cut her feeling off from her yesterday.

Although they are "inventions", they retain their contact with human emotional reality. They're not tinny; they're hearty.

JIM LEGASSE

Veronica Brady, *A Crucible of Prophets: Australians and the Question of God*, Theological Explorations, Sydney, 1981, 113 pp., \$8.20.

Despite the naturalist school of criticism which created the "Lawson-Furphy" tradition, and which concentrated its attention on the physical surface and material structures of Australian society, the defining features of Australian literature must eventually be traced through the patterns of meaning which underly these physical forms and material structures. This assumption, while hardly radical, is not one that we see widely reflected in Australian literary criticism. Admittedly, the possibility has been raised in the work of Kiernan, Heseltine, and Buckley; but much of Australian literary criticism still contents itself with detailing the objective world of our fiction, the decorations of existence in Australia rather than what those decorations might mean. We are not like the Americans, who are fortunate enough to have a distinguished body of criticism which examines convincingly and exhaustively the links between the central myths of that culture and the particularisation of those myths in its literature. Australia's failure to generate or recognise this kind of criticism denies us the

opportunity of seeing, through the most intense and self-conscious response to our national life, the defining possibilities of meaning within Australian experience.

These, or something like them, are the premises behind Veronica Brady's approach to Australian literature in *A Crucible of Prophets*; and such premises alone would make the book a welcome contribution to what one hopes is a growing critical debate. *A Crucible of Prophets* is a richly perceptive book engaged in the attempt to define a peculiarly Australian search for meaning, what the author calls "the question of God", through an examination of Australian fiction. In reaction to a tradition of criticism that is doggedly realist, that projects Australia as simply a geographic concentration of material forms, Dr Brady's discussion assumes that "the challenge offered by Australia to its new inhabitants is not merely physical but metaphysical" (p.3). This metaphysical challenge, she argues, involves the writer of fiction in the "question of God", as the specificity of Australian experience demands, and evokes, the articulation of a distinctive answer to that question. The discussion of this "answer" is complicated by the generosity of Dr Brady's approach, salting away provocative but tangential insights; however, her method is designed to reveal, through the individual writer's patterns of imagery and meaning, a sense of acceptance of God and of spirituality developing chronologically in Australian writing.

A Crucible of Prophets argues that our beginnings in convictism imposes a link between the metaphysical and physical predicament of the first settlers that postulates isolation and exile as definitive dilemmas: from this flows the Australian problem of existence which is predicated upon the certainty of isolation and of suffering—which is not relieved by an ameliorating society. In Clarke's *For The Term of His Natural Life*, Dr Brady finds evidence both of the novelist's nihilism in the face of the convict experience, and his baulking at the full implications of such a view of existence. In consequence, we see hints of a resolution through "redemption" at the end of *His Natural Life*. Since, however, such a sense of the possibility of redemption is at best residual in Clarke it is not easily discovered in other nineteenth century writers. At this point there

is little disagreement between Dr Brady and the proponents of the Lawson-Furphy tradition; however, there is a change in emphasis in Dr Brady's insistence that Clarke's admission of the relevance of God reveals that the problem of metaphysics does have an important function in our early fiction. And if it is difficult to trace this in other nineteenth century writers, Dr Brady argues, this is because these writers deliberately deny and expunge from their fiction Clarke's sense of the spiritual. In her discussion of J. B. O'Reilly, Boldrewood, and of Furphy later on, the writer uncovers the attempt to keep metaphysics at bay: it is presented as a deliberate posture adopted in order to dismiss the despair created by a nihilistic response to Australian experience; to ignore the questions which might undermine a romantic version of such experience; and to evade the need to articulate a redeeming but demanding sense of spirituality in order to deal with experience. The "Great Refusal" (and the equestrian metaphor is appropriate), as Dr Brady calls it, is a conscious resistance to the question of God, and to the consideration of any ultimate meaning, in deference to a perverse but determined focus on the opportunities offered by the objective, secular world. The "Great Refusal" dominates our fiction and our culture, in Brady's description, until the mediation of the work of Patrick White, where the acceptance of man's isolation and inevitable suffering is seen as emerging from a commitment to spirituality and an openness to the possibility of God.

This, crudely, is the thesis of *A Crucible of Prophets*, and it is persuasively argued. However, this thesis does not represent the book's only benefit, since the methodology Dr Brady adopts is probably the most important feature of her work—the choice of perspective on our literary tradition illuminates it in new ways, and at least rearranges the patterns of light and shadow we have become accustomed to seeing. The notion of the great refusal, for example, offers itself as a new idea, and a rich vein to mine, tempting the reader to apply it more widely than Dr Brady does. If we accept, for instance, a certain stereotype for our national character that includes a basic hedonism, a deliberate pragmatism, and the sentimental affection for the working man that tends to surface in our use of egalitarianism as a means

of levelling and domesticating individualism, we do so out of a certain empiricism; with hindsight, we can deduce the enabling conditions for such features but not the reasons why they become so dominant. We do not, that is, make the connection between such features and their roots within the central myths or ideology of the culture. Dr Brady's discussion implies that such details of the Australian self may well emerge from a specific response to the "metaphysical challenge"—the motivated and dogged embrace of secularity; if we have focussed on the objective world we have done so only in order to protect ourselves against the "intuition that our lives stand out into an emptiness" (p. 22). And, as Dr Brady points out, the success of such a metaphysical strategy for survival can be seen in the extent to which we have made Australian culture "one which professes itself secular and is profoundly suspicious of intensity of experience in general" (p. 22). Observations such as these provide insight beneath the surface forms of our social structure and behaviour, and suggest what structures and behaviour might mean; from these perceptions it would be interesting, for instance, to enquire afresh into the phenomenon of mateship as the concrete result of a metaphysical position rather than simply a social code or a simplistic response to the loneliness of the bush.

The determined secularity of our society, and of our literature, is not dealt with in *A Crucible of Prophets* as it is in, say, Inglis Moore's *Social Patterns in Australian Literature*. For Dr Brady, social pattern is the form which proceeds from a metaphysical position. So, Australia's secularity is seen as explaining the deliberate focus on the objective world that typifies Australian literary style in the Lawson-Furphy tradition, as well as the typical interest of our literary critics, one imagines. Dr Brady investigates the nature of this secularity through Furphy; her inquiry into his metaphysics discloses a combination of utopianism and humanitarianism which results in the recommendation of a practical, egalitarian Christianity that contrives to excise all spiritual content from its beliefs. For Tom Collins, even the Sermon on the Mount can be domesticated and de-mystified by his rugged practicality:

It is no fanciful conception of an intangible order of things, but a practical workable

code of daily life, adapted to any stage of civilisation and delivered to men and women who were in most respects like ourselves.

This discussion of Christianity is filtered through a self-conscious pragmatism and so ingeniously manages to avoid mentioning God at all. Instead of an "intangible order" we have the focus on people "like ourselves" facing up the world as it is here and now. Here we find another fabled Australian characteristic—egalitarianism—depicted as evolving, not as a principle in itself, but as a strategy of evasion of the spiritual, the "intangible". By seeing the concept as a strategy of evasion we see also the cause of its weakness; as Dr Brady points out, this vision is so pragmatic and world-centred that the "feeling for the individual remains at the level of sentiment and tends to give way under the pressure of economic, political or social necessity" (p. 52). Democracy becomes populism. The metaphysical weakness is even more apparent: Furphy's reliance on his social solutions to metaphysical doubts never fully excises the hints of absurdity and despair from his fiction, while his faith in the social codes of the bush never succeeds in drawing the teeth of that environment.

What is operating in *A Crucible of Prophets* is a critical tool that causes the individual perceptions and insights to reverberate satisfyingly. While the connections between Australian writing and belief that support the book's thesis are convincingly drawn, they do not exhaust the possible connections the reader is tempted to make. Further, there is an attractive sense of a debate being opened, not closed, that is created by the reader's impression of Dr Brady's genuine curiosity. However, there are limitations to the persuasiveness of the work, points at which the author's approach leads her to claim more for her evidence than can freely be given. The treatment of the ending of Marcus Clarke's novel, for instance, as an ending that seriously implies redemption, thus quashing the nihilistic implications of the preceding chapters, is not convincing. The ending of *For The Term of His Natural Life* is marked with the hoary conventionality of a melodramatic Victorian novel; this means that the reference to a redeeming God could be weary cliché as easily as an indicator to a troubled mind seeking a formal solution to a

metaphysical problem. Here one feels the author's reading is too willed, dominated rather than aided by the thematic approach.

In such instances, and to some extent in general, this analysis of the search for God in Australian writing enacts its own subject, as the writer covers a wide range of material in order to extract the outline of a particular argument about the existence of a God relevant to Australian experience. While the method is rigorous and challenging, it is clear that the work is not a wholly disinterested work of literary criticism; it is also a work of theology, and this fact particularises the discussion and some of the conclusions in ways that occasionally render it unconvincing. The concentration on a theistic search for meaning is often bothersome; where Dr Brady argues for the Australian crisis of belief being resolved by a sense of acceptance, that sense of acceptance is seen almost arbitrarily in religious terms:

The task of Australians, as of every individual and of every culture, is to come to terms with their memories, their bodies and their environment and then to situate themselves as creatures within a mysterious, often painful but always worshipful cosmos. (p. 112)

While I find myself agreeing with most of the argument which leads me to this point—the sense of acceptance Dr Brady finds in White does suggest a resolution of the sense of despair and the suspicion of spirituality we see in the early novelists—I am not prepared to see this modern sense of acceptance as self-evidently Christian in nature. In spite of Dr Brady's excellent account of Patrick White, I am left with the opinion that our literature is definitively agnostic, and accepting *that* seems to be the task for the Australian. From the evidence provided by Dr Brady I would be confident of proposing a view that Australian fiction pushed, in fact, towards the acceptance of nothingness, the failure of transcendence—as we accept the gamble taken by Camus' Algerians (whom we strongly resemble) and "risk everything on the body".

Nevertheless, the real value of *A Crucible of Prophets* is that it provides us with an argument one would like to worry at more. Dr Brady's book is admirably open-ended without being inconclusive, and it is an important work in that it opens up central areas of

discussion in new ways, and does so through a method that manages to be both unassuming and challenging at the same time.

GRAEME TURNER

Margaret Atwood, *Bodily Harm*. McClelland & Stewart, Toronto: 1981, 301 pp.

In each of her novels, Margaret Atwood has explored a popular form to make it yield new meanings, taking in turn social comedy (*The Edible Woman*, 1969), the ghost or mystery story (*Surfacing*, 1972), the gothic romance (*Lady Oracle*, 1976), the soap opera (*Life Before Man*, 1979), and now, in her most recent publication, *Bodily Harm* (1981), the political adventure story of gun-running and revolution in a fictitious third world country. Atwood believes that "popular" art is a collection of rigid patterns: "sophisticated" art varies the patterns. But popular art is material for serious art in the way that dreams are".¹ *Bodily Harm* takes the rigid patterns of the political adventure story and varies them in order to disturb rather than drug its readers.

Instead of "ugly Americans", Atwood provides "sweet Canadians". This devastatingly appropriate phrase, applied by Dr Minnow, the Caribbean island's reform candidate, disturbs the novel's Canadian heroine, Rennie, because she is unsure whether it's meant earnestly or ironically. Whatever Dr Minnow's intentions, the reader is in no doubt about Atwood's. The "sweet Canadians" emerge as no better than their partners and masters, the traditionally ugly Americans.

Instead of producing a straightforward narrative of adventure, Atwood fragments her narrative, jumping backward and forward in time and place. She focusses attention on character rather than on plot. She plays with point of view, shifting between two speakers, Rennie and her prison-mate Lora, and the implied author, who limits herself to describing what happens or has happened to Rennie. This fragmentation is disorienting. It forces the reader to share Rennie's alienation and to make sense of her disrupted world.

The plot is simple: Rennie, a Toronto jour-

nalist who specializes in "lifestyle" pieces, has concentrated on escaping her solidly middle class upbringing in small town Griswold (grey world?), partly through a modern relationship with Jake, until a routine medical examination discovers cancer. She has a mastectomy, "imprints" (her own word) on the surgeon responsible, Daniel, and is devastated by both experiences. Jake leaves her. A mysterious stranger enters her apartment while she's out, leaving a heavy coil of rope on her bed. The police imply that it is somehow her fault and tell her she's been lucky this time. In an attempt to escape all of this, she accepts an assignment to do a travel piece on a small and little known Caribbean island, only to stumble into the middle of an election, political intrigue, a failed attempt at revolution, and a prison cell, before she is allowed to return to Canada and her "normal" life.

The island setting puts Canada in sharper focus. It is used less for its own sake than for the perspective it provides on contemporary North American life, particularly the self-righteous Canadian variety. Deceptive surfaces and treacherous depths dominate this novel, recurring in each of its three worlds. In Griswold a respectable surface covers unhappy realities, marriage as an ideal is betrayed in fact by separated parents, the grandmother's discipline—exemplified in the command "don't touch!"—breaks down in the recurrent nightmare of losing control as the grandmother searches helplessly for her lost hands. In Toronto the trendy surface of sexual gamesmanship masks the alternately empty or violent realities of boredom or pornography; men can't afford to tell their dreams but they surface anyhow, usually as aggression against women. On the island, these contrasts are magnified: the postcard pretty surface barely covers the poverty and prison-cell reality. To dream becomes a political act. Dr Minnow is dangerous precisely because he insists on imagining that things could be different.

Rennie moves back and forth between her conscious and her dream lives, sinking and surfacing, clinging to trivia in her effort to remain superficial—a tourist—until a gun-running American named Paul gives her back her body and a fellow Canadian named Lora gives her back her soul. Her witnessing of Lora's beating forces her out of her self-absorption

¹ Linda Sandler, "Interview with Margaret Atwood", *The Malahat Review*, 41 (January 1977), 10.