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Review: Anderson, Jessica, An Ordinary Lunacy

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Abstract

It is good to see Jessica Anderson's first novel, *An Ordinary Lunacy*, initially published in 1963, now reissued by Penguin, for it is important that work by a writer of Anderson's stature should be readily available and remain in print.

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voice which establishes a subject position from which the poet is able to engage dominant discourses in a dialogue. For many of the addressees to whom the first-person persona 'speaks' represent dominant discourses which marginalize that persona. This persona variously occupies the position of an Indian (i.e. a representative of a minority ethnic group within the dominantly Chinese community of Singapore); a sojourner, racially and ethnically differentiated once again, in a foreign country; a member of a 'developing' country whose economic position requires it to play 'host' to 'first world' tourists; and a citizen interrogating constructions of nationalism.

In each of these cases the persona speaks from a position outside or marginal to the dominant discourse he addresses. In 'Walking Down the Streets', for example, the persona acknowledges that he has often remained silent about racism; he has 'pretended it doesn't exist - / this dislocation.' Racism thus 'dislocates' its victim, depriving him of a speaking position. In the poem, 'This Man', an immigration official of a foreign country is similarly racist; 'immaculate' and 'eloquent' he patronizingly speaks at and for the persona who is rendered speechless, deprived of the 'eloquence' to state his own position. On the other hand, in a poem 'For B.R., Aboriginal', he celebrates the minority discourse of the Aboriginal singer, a discourse which bears witness to a 'history vengefully alive'.

As well as finding a speaking position within minority discourses, Singh has a number of poems which work along another axis of difference - gender. His love poems and other poems about women recognize the 'otherness' of women without necessarily reducing it to an oppositional position. 'To be honest?' suggests that the persona has entered into a conspiracy of sorts. It remains tantalizingly ambiguous as to whether the female addressee participates in it too.

The readings of character in *Palm Readings* are thus often tinged with ambiguity and irony giving dimension to the speaking subject. The colloquialism and sureness of the first-person persona attests to a new maturity and ease in Singh's writing and consolidates his position as a major Singaporean poet.

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Anderson, Jessica, *An Ordinary Lunacy*. Melbourne: Penguin Books Australia Ltd., 1988. Pp. A\$8.95.

It is good to see Jessica Anderson's first novel, *An Ordinary Lunacy*, initially published in 1963, now reissued by Penguin, for it is important that work by a writer of Anderson's stature should be readily available and remain in print.

Like so much of Anderson's other fiction, this novel is highly charged in its evocation of place. Sydney in the early 1960s is brought before us with its 'new, bold, immediately intelligible skyline . . . so rapidly imposing itself upon the haphazard scrawl of the old,' and summer streets filled with young girls, 'their legs snipping and flickering beneath short tight skirts.' Weather, often corresponding to the personal situations of characters in all its changeable variety, is also used to reinforce our sense of location: 'beyond the columned veranda, the rain was crashing unrelentingly down on broken paving and rankly growing roses.' But it is through descriptions of houses, particularly, that Anderson defines her characters' social position or suggests their emotional condition. Isobel Purdy's indifference to social convention and disregard of material considerations are reflected in the grubby, slovenly interior of her Double Bay flat. Daisy Byfield's progress up the social ladder from her poverty-stricken origins in a ramshackle outer Sydney suburb is signified by her beautiful harbourside house which, with its grace and calculated proportions, serves as a reproach to the 'massive, dark, thick-set bungalows' skulking alongside it. The precariousness of this painfully acquired social standing is indicated, however, by the run-down condition of the convict-built Swinnerton house - 'Leaking roof, great fissures in the walls, rheumatic miasmas floating all around it' - which Daisy hopes the new owner, Max Dobie, will commission her to decorate once he has restored it.

Daisy's son, David, confirms his reputation as a brilliantly successful young barrister by winning a test case enabling the entrepreneur, Horace Dangerfield, to build a block of home units right on the harbour, obscuring the view for those living in the houses behind. His client's name is significant, for David, despite all his success, finds himself confronting a challenge which endangers the professional and social reputation he has so carefully been building. *An Ordinary Lunacy* appears to follow the mode of a detective story only to disrupt the

expectations which the genre normally creates. Like Lord Peter Wimsey who falls in love with Harriet Vane as he applies his detective skills to discovering evidence to free her from a murder charge, David finds himself briefed to defend Isobel Purdy, whose beauty has haunted him ever since he had glimpsed her at a party some months earlier, against a charge of murdering her husband. But, although David succeeds in getting a verdict of suicide brought in at the coroner's inquest, the novel deliberately leaves the issue of Isobel's guilt or innocence unresolved.

Her importance in the narrative is as an embodiment of emotional intensity and self-abandonment totally at odds with the careful calculation and social circumspection with which both David and his mother conduct their lives and pursue their respective careers. Daisy's failure to obtain the decorating commission she so desperately wants corresponds to David's failure in his relationship with Isobel. Meanness and excessive prudence inhibit Daisy's imagination so that ultimately she is displaced in her client's favour by a rank outsider, a young man whose hunger for wealth and recognition exceeds even hers. Isobel's remarkable beauty - 'This light struck full on Isobel, moving in her ashen hair and exposing the blue and rose that lay under her skin like the imagined colours in a pearl' - moves David profoundly, just as his mother's passions are stirred by fine architecture and antique furniture. Yet for Isobel beauty is a burden because men pursue her for that alone unable to see her as offering anything beyond it: 'I've always wanted something more than that.'

Anderson draws our attention to female vulnerability in this novel. David is prevented from yielding to his love for Isobel, not so much by concern for social position, as by an innate streak of male brutality which he will not own to himself, but which finds overt expression in Theo Cass, the solicitor who originally briefed him on her behalf. For Theo, Isobel is a 'dirty bitch' whose slatternly housekeeping indicates her loose sexual morals. She is simultaneously the object of his lust and his contempt, and during one of his periodic bouts of drunkenness he compromises her in a way which allows David to believe himself justified in abandoning his proposed marriage to her. In his heart of hearts he too regards Isobel with contempt, though in the end he is forced to realize that in judging her he has also judged himself.

It is a relatively minor character, Myra Magaskell, who focusses our view of David's love affair. She has herself, with much public scandal,

abandoned a former marriage and her two children to live with her present husband Hughie. She subtly prompts David's passion for Isobel, hoping its successful outcome will confirm the decision she has made in her own life to dare almost everything for love. Although her distress at David's abandonment of Isobel is intense, the narrative also leaves unresolved whether Myra feels vindicated or not in the choice she has made in her own life. David and Daisy are portrayed with compassion, but Anderson directs our sympathies far more strongly to women like Myra and Isobel who yield to their own passionate impulses despite the cost.

An Ordinary Lunacy presents a sharply penetrating analysis of a certain elite group within Sydney society and those who aspire to join it. While satirizing this world for its limitations, the author also reveals the risk of self destruction lying in wait for those who seek to shatter its boundaries either to enter it or to escape.

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Curnow, Allen, *Look Back Harder: Critical Writings 1935-1984*. Ed. with an Introduction by Peter Simpson. Auckland: Auckland University Press, 1987. Pp. xxv, 337. NZ\$32.50.

In an enthusiastic review of A.R.D. Fairburn's *Dominion*, Allen Curnow speaks of the 'sustained utterance' of that poet. This is poetry, he writes, which is 'everywhere vehement, alive; yet rarely are two words carelessly juxtaposed.' He might have been talking about his own writing in verse or prose; talking of the integrity of his language and the unity of a life's work. Rarely are words carelessly juxtaposed. Such a concern for language and craft, of course, has implications for the reader: this is a sustained utterance but there are no concessions to the reader.

Look Back Harder - 'Look back at nature. It is in the nature / of things to look, and look back, harder' ('There is a Pleasure in the Pathless Woods') - brings together a comprehensive selection of Allen Curnow's prose writing, ranging from his gnomic *Poetry and Language* first published in an edition of 150 copies by Caxton Club in 1935, to 'the cantankerous piece' "'Dichtung and Wahrheit": A letter to Landfall',