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Nicholas Birns, *Contemporary Australian Literature: A World Not Yet Dead.*
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In the introduction to *Contemporary Australian Literature*, Nicholas Birns recounts how he first came to the field as a young student studying at Columbia in the mid 1980s, his enthusiasm sparked by immersion in the work of Patrick White and Les Murray. From here Birns branched out voraciously, seeking in Australian literature an ideal he thought had been lost to the States: 'a horizon of hope, a milieu of greater generosity and charity, tolerance and flexibility'.[1] While he quickly realised what any more seasoned or cynical Australian critic would have told him, that this was largely 'an illusion', it is safe to say that Birns has not entirely lost his sense of hope when it comes to Australia and its literature (7). Throughout an eclectic research career – he has published on subjects as diverse as Early Modern literature, the history of literary theory, and the Spanish-American novel – Australian writing has remained an abiding academic interest, and he has served as the editor of *Antipodes* since 2001.

Having recently moved from the New School after almost twenty years, Birns is now a professor at New York University. But he does not intend his study as 'an American take on Australian literature' (23). I certainly agree with him that 'it is possible to write about Australian literature from anywhere in the world', however, I think it is important not to understate the relevance of Birns' American perspective. The guiding theme of his book – the rise of neoliberalism – is one that seems to have a much greater presence in the American critical consciousness than it does in the Australian. This is not to suggest that it is not applicable here – like most wealthy modern nations Australia is reaping the spoils (and the ills) of a largely free-market economy. And yet it would be fair to say that capitalism has not played quite as significant a role in our national imaginary as in the States, for we have always been less inclined to make heroes of our bootstrap-pulling capitalist success stories. When the GFC brought the wrongs of neoliberalism to the fore in 2007-8, it must have represented a more imminent threat to the American ideal; it would presumably be disconcerting for a nation so prepossessed with its liberties to realise that the destructions wrought by the freedoms of the market are only exceeded by those arising through the freedoms of the Second Amendment.

So it is perhaps thanks to Birns' American perspective that he thought to bring this subject to his study of Australian literature, and in the course of his book he traces the transition from the late-modernity of a 1950s-80s Australia, to the neoliberal era of the 1980s to the present. According to Birns, this transition has seen a 'financialisation of reality' (18), giving birth to a 'hypermeritocratic society' in which there are increasingly

deep divisions between its winners and its losers. Drawing on the work of theorist Rob Nixon, Birns explains that although neoliberalism ostensibly champions 'merit, transparency and technology', it actually tends to commit diffuse and often imperceptible acts of 'slow violence' (17).[2] Moreover, by increasing the power of private corporations and eroding that of nation states, it turns answerability for these acts into 'a bewildering transnational maze' (17).[3] Neoliberalism can be a vague and unruly subject to deal with, but Birns is very good at tying it down to specific historical situations. Thus, for the uninitiated reader, his book offers a succinct and useful introduction, which provides directions to useful theoretical material and commentary on the subject, perhaps the most entertaining of which is *Guardian* writer Tom Whyman's article on the rise of 'cupcake fascism'.[4]

In Birns' early chapters on Christina Stead and Elizabeth Harrower, he discusses them as late-modern authors whose commercial achievement was more or less inversely correlated to their literary merit, arguing that at the time it was possible to attain a form of success outside of the market, or in other words, to be 'a loser who wins' (45). But given the increasing omnipresence of commodification under neoliberalism, he argues that this kind of success is no longer attainable. Suggesting that literature is now unable to evade or argue its way out, it must instead deal with the system by taking up certain affective stances: 'I am proposing that, rather than any sort of polemical antidote to neoliberalism, the solutions to the problem of the contemporary lie in affect: in conditions of feeling that can fight back, albeit indirectly, against contemporary inequalities' (89). Birns proceeds to explore rancour, concern and idealism as examples of these conditions of feeling in the second part of his book.

I would venture that there are few scholars who are as well versed in current Australian fiction as Birns, and this comes through in his style of uniquely encyclopedic analysis. While not exhaustive, the range of novelists and poets he covers is extensive, rendering the study a very useful and up-to-date survey of contemporary Australian writing. Although the argument I sketched above serves as a scaffold for the book, he does not hesitate to diverge from its line in order to discuss writers on their own terms. Along with his tendency to draw on an incredibly wide range of sources, this can render his book quite digressive, which will undoubtedly bother some readers. But for others, following Birns in his intellectual excursions will be one of the pleasures of the book, as will be his overtly personalised approach to analysis. By detailing his encounters with works, literatures, and living authors, Birns provides a compelling sub-plot to his text, setting the scene of Australian literary studies in North America, and telling the story of one critic's career in the field.

Amongst the long list of writers Birns examines, his theme of neoliberalism does lend itself to the work of some better than others. It is, for instance, very well suited to an analysis of ad-man turned Man Booker winner, Peter Carey. And in one of the most insightful chapters of *Contemporary Australian Literature*, Birns considers how Carey critiques the economic system from the inside, culminating in a discussion of the neoliberal dystopia he constructs in the novel *Amnesia* (2014).[5] Equally interesting – although further removed from Birns' central argument – is his chapter on the length of Australian novels. It goes some way towards answering the call from Caroline Levine in her celebrated 2014 book *Forms*, where she questions why length is so infrequently theorised in studies of the novel.[6] Birns compares the vacillating popularity of two

different forms: the 'total novel' and the '*récit*', where the former attempts to offer lengthy 'synecdoches of all of Australia', and the latter provides a shorter, 'ostensibly simple' and 'inherently open-ended' snapshot. This chapter would perhaps only have been improved if Birns' observations were supported (a la Moretti) by a rudimentary quantitative analysis of word or page number.

Throughout *Contemporary Australian Literature,* Birns returns repeatedly to the dichotomy of winners and losers, discussing it both in terms of an author's success or failure, and in terms of the world they depict in their novels. He considers, for instance, how the designation 'loser', directed against the protagonist of Christos Tsiolkas' *Barracuda* (2013)*,* might serve as the ultimate insult under neoliberalism. However, one demographic that does seem to be overlooked by this winner/loser dichotomy is the Australian middleclass, the sheer size of which seems to demand a more explicit attention that it is afforded in the study. While this group has not lost as substantively under neoliberalism as their counterparts in America, neither are they the systems' winners in the manner of its investment bankers or tech-giants. Given that Birns is very well versed in deconstruction (as demonstrated in his earlier monograph *Theory After Theory*) it is surprising that the methodology did not enter into his approach to the dichotomy, provoking a discussion of those who fall somewhere between the winners and losers.

In light of Birns' preoccupation with the social disparities exacerbated by neoliberalism, his chapter on race, land and concern is central to *Contemporary Australian Literature*. He pointedly observes that 'Neoliberalism may pay lip-service to diversity, but it often deepens the social inequality that is racism's legacy' (15). Exploring these issues through affect, he offers sympathetic readings of two writers that demonstrate concern for racial inequality: Thomas Keneally and Kate Grenville. He suggests that concern requires a position of sovereignty or power, acknowledging that it is thus often associated with white liberal guilt (147). With this stipulation of sovereignty in mind, Birns contemplates whether Indigenous writers have been able to show concern in their fiction, noting that because they 'have been in the direct path of racism and oppression', much of their writing 'has of necessity been protest writing' rather than writing of concern (147). He argues, however, that the affect is apparent in Alexis Wright's speculative novel *The Swan Book* (2013), which imagines a future Australia in which an environmental crisis brought on by global warming has prompted a mass immigration from the Northern Hemisphere. One of Wright's indigenous characters leads a 'countercultural community' or 'swamp commonwealth' that accommodates people with shared values, and shows concern for 'the distressed and itinerant of the world' (155). Although Birns' is clearly seeking to celebrate Wright's special achievement, it seems that in the process he does risk making his definition of concern too esoteric and exclusive; one has to question how useful it could be in fostering diversity under neoliberalism if it is only available to select groups who wield a special kind of sovereignty.

Nonetheless, Birns' point about neoliberalism's fraught relationship to diversity is worth keeping in mind, especially at a time when important issues like indigenous land rights and refugee policy are not immune to forces of commodification, as testified by the recent popular advertisements for Australian lamb. In Australia we are probably not talking about neoliberalism as much as we should be, which according to Birns actually makes us complicit in its ideology; he quotes French theorist Vivian Forrester who says

that 'achieving general indifference is more a victory for the system than gaining partial support' (20).[7] This also means that Birns' book is much more than a survey of contemporary literature, or an analysis of neoliberalism in Australia; it is also a concerned and deliberate stand, an attempt to feel and to speak against the kind of 'general indifference' that the system relies on.

Notes

[1] Nicholas Birns, *Contemporary Australian Literature*, 3. All subsequent references are to this edition and will be incorporated into the text.
[2] Rob Nixon, "Neoliberalism, Slow violence, and the Environmental Picaresque," *Modern Fiction Studies*, vol. 55, no. 3 (2009): 444.
[3] Ibid. 444.
[4] Tom Whyman, "Beware of Cupcake Fascism," *Guardian* online, 8 April 2014. http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2014/apr/08/bewar-of-cupcake-fascism.
[5] In his analysis of Carey, Birns is on the defensive, painting a picture of an author who has not received the critical attention he deserves, and though this is probably a fair assessment, I imagine that his occasional effusive defense of Carey's 'integrity and honour' is still likely to make some Australian readers squirm, 211.
[6] Caroline Levine, *Forms: Whole, Rhythm, Hierarchy, Network* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2015), 127.
[7] Vivian Forrester, *The Economic Horror* (London: Polity Press, 1999).