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26 Jan 1989

Dear John,

I'm sorry to say that Overland cannot have 'Parenthesis', for the silliest of reasons -- meaning that I outsmarted myself. Like this:

Many months ago, Bruce Gillespie asked me for an overview of Australian fiction for 1988, based on my reading of the Premier's Award entries. As a friend of twenty years standing I said, 'yes', thinking to knock off 1000 words or so for his occasional publication, Metaphysical Review. (MR is a spasmodically compiled in-group magazine issued or occasionally even sold to his friends. The 200 or so copies comprise mainly letters from friends around the world and his answers to them, plus an occasional article to stir controversy and more letters. He snares some quite noted correspondents, such as Brian Aldiss and Tom Disch.)

At about the same time John Bangsund, an even older friend, became Asst. Ed. of Meanjin and promptly dunned me for a contribution. I said, 'Yes', (I always do, and repent at leisure) and studied a few copies of the magazine with much dismay. The stuff was so intrinsically interesting and so pedantically, pedestrianly written (the articles, not the fiction) that I doubted my ability to reproduce the house style.

Then my article sprouted new ideas and became longer and longer (I don't observe limits when writing for friends) and the Meanjin idea less attractive. Besides, I was finishing a novel to take to England with me and planning another and feeling squeezed for time. So I sent the finished job to Bruce and a copy to Bangsund, telling him Meanjin could have it if the editor didn't object to Bruce publishing it for a limited audience at the same time. That, plus the very loose, unMeanjinlike form and style, should have ensured rejection while fulfilling, after a fashion, the promise to John.

Meanjin, as you now know, accepted it. I don't know whether to feel pleased, furious or bemused. Otherwise, Overland would have been my first choice, though the copy I sent to Barry was only a polite gesture marking the fact that he is referred to in one section. So, there's the silly tale.

Your comments about content and literary merit reflect what I must perforce agree with, with little comfort; there can be no such animal as 'best' or 'most important'.

Among the lot we read for the Award, the most worth study in terms of literary art was Murnane's Inland (which I thought more 'experimental', whatever that means, than successful), the novel most penetrating in purely human terms was Nancy Phelan's Home Is the Sailor and the most satisfactory as an expression of the Australian consciousness and conscience was Pemulwuy. None of these reached the short list and, except in the case of Bloodfather, I had no clear idea of what was held to distinguish the other two

beyond a masterful technical expertise -- which, in my view, is not so much a virtue as a quality to be expected of any really competent fiction. In the long run our judgments came down to polite haggling and some gameplaying to calculate the relative voting power of each, and Helen was alone in being satisfied that her man won on a recount.

As I wrote in the article, it's at least a judging method that prevents the money from falling all into one pocket.

Your mention of In the Line of Fire points up the problem of judgment very aptly. I am not as condemnatory as Barry and I agree with your summation of its content and meaning, but I finished it in a foul temper over the unnecessary artiness (rococco?) of the method. For instance there is, half way through the book, a two-page passage in German. I took a deep breath and did a translation, at the end of which I merely wondered why it hadn't been left in English. Then, a few pages later, the whole damned thing was repeated in English, giving me the sour reward of seeing that my rendition had been pretty accurate. As to why Henshaw included this pointless flourish I shall no doubt die wondering.

The trouble, I suppose, is that I was raised too long ago in a different school of technique and appreciation and simply resent literary acrobatics unless they increase my understanding of what is being said. Joyce, of course, cries out for study from the first paragraphs but Henshaw and Murnane and a few others are not modern Joyces and have not the deep perceptions to offer that made Ulysses worth the wrestling. If the reader is expected to work at understanding, the eventual understanding must be worth the intellectual sweat; otherwise all we get is a technical exercise in style, which is simply not enough.

Best wishes,

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "George". The signature is written in a cursive style with a long, sweeping underline that extends to the right.