

Review of *Gail Jones: Word, Image, Ethics*, by Tanya Dalziell

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OVER the last decade, when I am moved to write an article I regularly am told by referees that my tone is not scholarly enough and I am insufficiently theorised. Well, having got past the time when I need to do some academic showing off, I think that it is more important to point readers to things of interest in new writing than to bury it under jargon and erudite philosophising. So I am pleased to report that Tanya Dalziell has produced an accessible set of readings of Gail Jones's work that remind me of important themes, demonstrate how the writing works to express them, and reveal details I had forgotten or not noticed at all (snowdomes, to pick just one).

This is not to say that the study is simplistic. Dalziell mentions at least twenty-five of the usual suspects in theorising time, trauma, ethics, photography, narrative, etcetera, but she does so in footnotes, leaving her prose to elaborate smoothly close readings of the central motifs in Jones's fiction. Jones's opus is like a strip of millefiori glass: colours can swirl to the surface in different formations along its length, but if you slice the strip you will find the same set of rods all the way through. During a succinct set of introductions to each work, Dalziell notes: 'Many stories . . . rest on the transformative, creative power of idiosyncratic reading' (9). This is typical of many acute summations that can be connected to nearly all of Jones's books: the regular turning of bits of Shakespeare to strange purposes, for example.

Tanya Dalziell begins her survey of Jones's fiction with commentary on the first story in her first book. It is, she says, 'premised on an intelligent, exceptional female protagonist who is given to serious and passionate inner excursion;

conditions of estrangement; and a fascination with technologies of modernity' (1). The description holds good for subsequent books. Dalziell goes on to tease out the variations of theme and motif within this framework: weather, time, reading and writing, image and modernity. She sensibly examines different groups of the novels in each chapter, avoiding undue repetition but still covering the entire output up to *The Death of Noah Glass*. Drawing on the writer's essays and talks, she frames analysis of the craft with attention to the nature of underlying ethical concern manifest as 'radical attention to the world' and a 'condition of hope, rather than of certainty' (2).

Uncertainty is presented as a basis for ethical practice. Dreams of speaking (to use one novel's title) suggest desire for union with another, but the regular silences in Jones's stories indicate not just human failings of understanding and echoing distances that communication technologies cannot fully do away with: the dreams need to be just that at times – unfulfilled completion, a reticence that leaves the other as other. Dalziell relates this to something lying behind the lyrical metaphors of Jones's prose: 'Allegory, Jones suggests, allows for the making of new meanings and insights without laying claim to the experiences of others' (10). If the desire for union with another always carries with it the realisation of gaps and silences and 'the enigma of experience' (11), then allegory, which sets up parallels that may never meet, is an appropriate form by which to convey such a vision of existential incompleteness, Lacanian lack, or whichever concept one might favour.

A salient feature of Jones's style is the shuttling between past and present, in which the 'future past' becomes a recurrent device – what Dalziell refers to as 'a telling before time' (11). We are often given a phrase like this: 'In years to come, Laura will remember' and bumped from some action in the narrative present to a passage giving the historical background to a character or circumstance. Proleptic retrospect keeps memory and anticipation oscillating in both character and reader: 'Affirmation and hope are made possible . . . not by exorcising ghosts of the dead, of the lost, but by entertaining them' (104). Objects are at once thrillingly new and curiously antiquated, thereby being invested with wonder. Dalziell can turn her own catchy phrase: 'an untimely story, a story about time's untimeliness, a story about narrative and time, and a tale about the frozen time of grief' (about *The Death of Noah Glass*, 49) and she felicitously uses images of loop and lace to describe the elusive, knotty and open-work textures of Jones's fiction.

The patterning of our experience of time and of narrative is read as a sign of the relations among things and between people, and thus suggests an ethical load. Our connection to the past brings responsibilities; writing sets us up to

see or not see links to the world and others. Writing can only do so much, but it can do something, and Jones sets forth both writers and readers to explore the ‘entanglements of possibility and influence’ as well as the limitations of her chosen medium in creating ‘a literary community’ that is part of a cultural dialogue (82), ‘an ethical testimony to being in the world’ (98). She shows the tentative nature of fiction, the selective and strange ways in which we value books. She uses words that invoke sensory appeal, emotion, as well as ideas, words that are always multiform and indeterminate, meaning relying on patterning (music, colour) as much as denotation. Reading (from a book or a film to someone else) can be an act of charity, forgiveness, reconciliation, but there is no special virtue attached to it.

As with any study, there are alternative ways of approaching the subject and other aspects of it that could be highlighted. We might expect at some point a psychoanalytic reading of the roots of Jones’s imagination. Dalziell mentions the importance of childhood and personal memory as a basis for Jones’s engagement as adult novelist in matters of social and cultural value (4-6). She quotes a childhood encounter with a ‘cabinet of curiosities’ exhibit in Kalgoorlie that readers familiar with Jones’s books will recognise as setting in place a habit of listing odd things and unusual gadgets as personalised apprehensions of history as haloed in wonder. There is more to be said, however, about where the deep current of melancholy stems from, about the number of orphan and isolated children driven by the loss of mothers. There is more to be said, too, about Jones’s mostly international settings and how they reposition Australian Literature and help underpin a ‘transnational turn’ in its scholarship. Within the reading of key patterns that Dalziell provides, there could be more attention to repetition/replication (it is mentioned from time to time as part of photography and the systems of modernity, but has its own thematic import as a means of generating banal fixity as well as signifying the gaps in memory and art and language that keep us repeating – and gels with Dalziell’s comments about allegory and theorists’ notions of working through trauma). The author also mentions ‘bodily experience’ (130), and someone else might have concentrated on this (various woundings, deaf, dumb and blind characters). The appraisal of Jones’s writing keeps at bay criticism of it: its surface magic often betrays some pre-existing interest in abstract ideas that creates an air of contrivance – I am reminded of reviewers who described *Dreams of Speaking* as ‘Communications 101’ in novel form. We might step back from the texts themselves to look at Jones as part of a generation of literary and creative writing teachers who also write (Nick Jose, Brian Castro, Sue Woolfe and many more). Does this institutionalising of the writer produce a self-consciousness, a freedom to experiment, a stronger infusion of literary-cultural theory, an almost genre of its own? None

of these comments, however, detract from the elegant and cogent readings in Dalziell's book.

Gail Jones: Word, Image, Ethics cleverly begins with a reading of a trope not usually identified as important – the weather – and shows how it can orchestrate mood and action. Possibly it under-reports the role of heat in Broome and other locations. It also defers until last the most obvious trope running through Jones's work: modernity. This ending to the book is the only weakness I find: it seems to be part of a 'fade' rather than a conclusion with impact on the reader. The actual conclusion appropriately invokes Jones's unfinished career and her favouring of indeterminate endings: often endings that occur at beginnings and vice versa. However, it leaves the reader of this commentary with a sense of let-down that there is no summing up of Dalziell's apparent central interest, which is to delineate the nature of Jones's literary ethics. With than one reservation, I can enthusiastically commend the book to readers, whether they be students, scholars, or the legendary 'general reader' most of us hope to draw in.