

Unfortunate affairs

A discussion of Henry Handel Richardson's *Maurice Guest* (Heinemann, London, 1908) and Helen Garner's *Monkey Grip* (McPhee Gribble, Melbourne, 1977).

Both of these books are first novels, and both are concerned with loves which turn out to be impossible, but the worlds they show are even further apart than the lifetime separating their publication dates would suggest. *Monkey Grip* is set in the inner north of Melbourne and the people in its pages are members of the counter-culture, the drug-taking hippy culture, which flourished – if that's the word – in the decade or so before the book's publication, whereas *Maurice Guest* is set in Leipzig, Germany, at the start of the twentieth century, before the wars that destroyed Europe's claim to cultural superiority (Johann Sebastian Bach was *kapellmeister* in Leipzig for many years, and something of his mighty spirit lingers in the musical activities of his city).

Two books, then, and two sexual passions: Nora and Javo in Carlton, Fitzroy and Collingwood, suburbs of Melbourne, Australia, and in Leipzig, Germany, Maurice Guest, Louise Dufroyer and Eugen Schilsky. Leipzig, in Henry Handel Richardson's book, is as saturated in music as Helen Garner's Carlton is by drugs and other aspects of the counter-cultural lifestyle, such as communal living, getting around on bikes, borrowing, stealing, bed-sharing, and women managing the children of men who may no longer be around. Already a difference opens between the books: most

of Garner's characters are not identifiable by their origins which, by and large, they mostly keep out of their thinking. They are whatever they are doing at the moment. This is not so in Richardson's Leipzig, where the city accommodates outsiders who come to absorb music, to become masters of an instrument, perhaps even, like Schilsky, composers. They come to Leipzig for a brief period, yearning for success. Maurice Guest arrives from England, but as we see at the end of the book, he fails to return. Madeleine, the well-organised young woman whom we meet at the very beginning of the book, before the entry of the other major characters – a nice piece of disclosure by HHR, and perhaps a direction to the reader: we will return to this later – Madeleine also comes from England, though she develops ideas of taking her musical skills to America, and invites Maurice to join her in this venture, an offer he doesn't take up. Fate has other things in store. There are numerous Americans to be found in the book, amusingly presented via their way of speaking, but the surprise is Louise Dufroyer, who reveals on page 101 her unexpected origins.

Louise smiled, and he saw her strong white teeth. "It's not quite as bad as that," she said; and then, although herself not quite clear why she should have answered those searching eyes, she added, looking at Maurice: "I come from Australia."

If she had said she was a visitant from another world, Maurice would not, at the moment, have felt much surprise;

but on hearing the name of this distant land, on which he would probably never set foot, a sense of desolation overcame him. He realised anew, with a pang, what an utter stranger he was to her; of her past life, her home, her country, he knew and could know nothing.

“That is very far away,” he said, speaking out of this feeling, and then was vexed with himself for having done so.

Australia. The word, the information, come as a shock, but Richardson is a disciplined writer and no more is heard on the matter for over two hundred pages, when Louise tells Maurice:

“You judge harshly and unfairly because you don’t know the facts. I am almost quite alone in the world. I have no relatives that I care for, except one brother. I lived with him, on his station in Queensland, until I came here. But now, he’s married, and there would be no room for me in the house – figuratively speaking. If I go back now, I must share his home with his wife, whom I knew and disliked.”

Louise goes on to say that she is looking for a new life in a new world, and this divides her from Madeleine, who is in Leipzig to prepare for a teaching career. Most of the foreign students are away from family and other support systems, they are tolerated by the city of Leipzig so long as they stay within the bounds it imposes, and they can be as outgoing or as withdrawn as it suits them to be – so long as they pay their board. One of the last thing that happens to Maurice before his death is that his parents shut off his allowance. In his unhappiness – Louise despises him by now – he gets drunk, is taken home by a prostitute, and loses all his money. He pawns

his watch – nobody thought to take it – buys a revolver, goes into the woods where he has often been with Louise, and puts an end to his life. The whole book seems to resonate as he falls, while the reader, who has long foreseen what must happen, can do no more than flinch, and there is a feeling that his every action, his endlessly foolish preoccupation, intrusive beyond control and riddled by jealousy, has brought him to this condemnation. Maurice knows that he has reached the end of his path. The gun in his hand is his judgement.

The moral world of *Monkey Grip* is different. In fact, public morality, or the statement of it, if it exists in the time and locale of the book, is hardly presented at all. Yet morality, or a personal version of it, is very much present in the voice of the author. Here are two examples:

‘Oh, I will fuck you till I die.’

That was the terrible trick of the dope: one more step into its kingdom and Javo would be lost to me. But now we swayed dizzily on its borders, each in our own ecstasy.

and:

He gives me nothing, and yet at the same time everything. The way I usually talk has no purchase on the surface of his life, or on its surfacelessness. At the point where I realise this, the point at which frustration or annoyance would normally push me past such a situation, my mind quietly slips a cog and I float away.

Monkey Grip is composed of hundreds of short passages, anything from five or six lines to perhaps four pages. Many, perhaps

most, contain, usually towards the end, some such observation from the author, and it is these centralising observations which are the most distinctive part of her voice, or presence in the book. The morality which is social, and overwhelmingly strong, in *Maurice Guest* has shrunk to an inner whispering in *Monkey Grip*. How strange! Yet it is still there. Something of the European tradition, so powerful in the civilisation which began to tear itself to pieces in 1914, lingers on in the later book, and reasserts itself, as we will see in another essay, in *The Children's Bach* (1984). What I am raising here is the way an older generation will declare their successors to be immoral, something which happens whenever morality makes the latest of its never-ending moves. It seems that every generation, having grown used to the constraints of whatever morality they have accepted, becomes confused when a later generation moves the lines so that what was once forbidden or disgraceful is allowed. Drugs! Multiple partners! The rules, only just enforceable, of households whose inhabitants are changing all the time!

One of the questions raised in my mind by Helen Garner's *Monkey Grip* is the effect of the lifestyles it portrays on the children who are on every second page. Meals are forever being cooked and children taken here and there. Much of the parenting is shared among the women. Some of the men lend a hand from time to time. Another, newer, normality is being established so that a successor to *Monkey Grip*, if written, thirty years later, by one of the children in its pages, would begin, perhaps, by taking that new normality as its base. Time can never be turned back, and a tradition, once discarded, can scarcely be revived. This may seem like an intrusion

into my argument, but I have subtitled these essays 'some thoughts about a nation's literature'. Australian literature? Can *Maurice Guest* and *Monkey Grip* both be categorised under the same heading? I have said that they are alike in considering passions which cannot provide the basis for a continuing and successful life; that said, are they alike in any other way? Is it fitting that they be considered together? Is there any point in doing so?

I cannot answer those questions at this point. Perversely, perhaps, I will continue to compare the two books to see if, in building a better understanding of them, we can reach a point where these and other difficult questions can be answered.

Comparisons. *Maurice Guest* runs for 562 densely-written pages; *Monkey Grip* for 245 pages with a larger font and widely spaced lines. It is composed, as stated before, of small sections, each of them a story, meditation, or observation in itself, and each well separated from the next. There are no chapters, but the innumerable sections are given some suggestion of being managed by the placement of 34 headings, their words borrowed from nearby text, which give the narrative at least the appearance of having some authorial guidance. This, I would say, is almost certainly an editorial decision of the publisher, and is extremely effective. The reader does not get lost. This observation may appear patronising but is not intended to be. Every book has to find its own methods, the method of one is not prescriptive for others, and anyone who wishes to make it so is wrong. (Imagine being invited to 'edit' the poems of e e cummings or Emily Dickinson!)

Comparisons. *Maurice Guest* is divided into three roughly

equal parts, each of them ending at a suitable marker-point of the story, and subdivided into chapters. The passions of the main characters are presented within a framework which can be likened to some extent to the feeling of fate surrounding the narrative. If the framework of the novel is to have meaning, if it is not to contradict the story it has been constructed to display, then it somehow has a power over the characters, who must submit to it, must lend the structure their own emotional force so that it is their lifeblood, their passions, which create the novel. The novel is made out of the characters and in that sense the characters must give it their lives, while in *Monkey Grip* the narrative tracks after the people whose lives drift in and out of the various households. Society has loosened up considerably in the seventy years separating the books.

Fiction, like the symphony in music, is social. Critics and other readers who focus on the writer as a solitary creator are diverting our eyes from the ways in which a society and a period create the stories they need. For instance, we may notice how often Nora, the lover of Javo in *Monkey Grip*, relates her dreams. They are not given specific meanings, but they are nonetheless seen as meaningful. She consults the *I Ching*, and its bland pronouncements are taken seriously by Nora. She is not without guidance, for all the shambles of the Carlton households' lifestyles. Styles? The period, not the characters, gives permission to choose. Indeed it almost compels a choice: anyone not choosing should be living in the vast, still-controlled suburbs further east and further out. The people in *Monkey Grip* are an elite, a chosen few, who may be imitated by

others elsewhere, but are leading a new sort of life, and are proud of it, sure that they are at the cutting edge of their period. They are the defining agents of their generation, and they are a doctrinaire group, forever laying down rules for themselves and each other, forever criticising the shortcomings of those around them, forever exploring. Drugs take them to the edges of their minds, or beyond. They are not searching for the wisdom that earlier generations may have achieved, but something new, more advanced ... or so they say.

This is the point at which the book demands, needs, but does not from itself provide, a frame of reference by which those lives and lifestyles may be considered. I have already suggested that the immediately available framework would be the stories told, today or in the future, by the children who hop, scramble, swim and sleep through *Monkey Grip's* pages. In a way, they are its only true framework of judgement.

The discussion thus far might suggest that Henry Handel Richardson's book, in being heavier, longer, more carefully controlled, et cetera, is both stronger and more conservative than *Monkey Grip*. This is partly true and partly not. Towards the end of Part 1 of the book, there is a gathering at which Schilsky plays (on the piano) his recently composed work, and compels Krafft to sing the words of the last section, called, in the book, *Das trunkene Lied*. The drunken song. The words of the new composition are from Nietzsche's *Also sprach Zarathustra*, mocked by an American lady at the soiree as *Also schrie Zenophobia!* The reader may be surprised to learn that the words chosen and set by Schilsky are some of the

words chosen by Fritz Cassirer and set by Frederick Delius in his *Mass of Life (Ein Messe des Lebens)* in 1904 and 1905, almost certainly the years when Richardson was writing her Leipzig novel. How strange, once again! In giving Schilsky the insight to seize on and set these ideas of Nietzsche, Richardson has made him, rather than Maurice or Louise, the means, the conduit, between the times, the movements of thought surrounding the characters, and the reader. Maurice despises Schilsky, and hopes to replace him in the heart of Louise. Louise, in the hearing of Maurice though she doesn't know it, tells Schilsky that he has never made her happy. The way is open for the reader to scorn the egotistical young musician, but ...

Why do we remember *Maurice Guest*? Is it for Richardson's power of construction, her insights, her command of setting? Her willingness to record the steps by which fate rewards, over-rules, an obsession? For saying that love, so often revered, can be the most destructive of forces, if left to itself and not controlled? I remind the reader of Richardson's stroke in introducing Madeleine before Louise. Madeleine's time of study at Leipzig runs a well-managed course. She's prudent and hard-working. She succeeds, qualifies and leaves. Maurice might have done as much, but doesn't. He uses his last remaining money to buy himself the gun that ends his life. He could have had Madeleine's experience of Leipzig, but didn't. An understanding of the fate, the grimness, determination, unrelenting certainty that rules the novel – is that why we read *Maurice Guest* today? Yes, yes, to all the above. What redeems the book, and softens it a little, is that it opens itself, towards the end of Part 1, via the mind of Schilsky, whom the reader has no other

opportunity to admire, to a major, massive change going on in the thinking of what has been Christian Europe. God, although still to be respected, and listened to, is being transformed into a different type of abstraction called Life. A new theory of evolution (though this is well outside the framework of the novel) has undercut earlier ideas of creation. Henri Bergson has proposed a 'life force' which is, I suppose, something that resembles the old divinity but is neither all-knowing nor all-judging, merely a force that keeps things moving forward but neither approves of nor condemns the human race. Indeed, humans are now the leading edge of this life force. This is, I think, the sense in which, in Nietzsche's terms, mankind needs to lift its game and transform itself into the 'ubermensch' now required. Frederick Delius, after a cycling trip through France with Fritz Cassirer, set poetic ideas from Zarathustra in his mass. The great poles of human life are no longer heaven and hell, but midday and midnight. Action and reflection. 'Oh Mensch! Gieb acht! Was spricht die tiefe Mitternacht!' Delius set these words at the height of his most creative period, they were the central statement of his life, and they are the very, climactic, words that Schilsky asked Krafft to sing.

When, at last, he crashed to a close and wiped his face in exhaustion, there was a deafening uproar of applause. Loud cries were uttered and exclamations of enthusiasm; people rose from their seats and crowded round the piano to congratulate the player.

Well might Schilsky's listeners applaud, and well might we join them. The novel, using Schilsky, has made the transition which

many thinkers and artists were effecting in the years immediately before its publication. In that sense Richardson's book is as much about social change as Garner's. Once the changes implicit in their novels have been accepted by the reader, the world can never be the same. Garner certainly understood the changes she was celebrating, although I think it can be said that she understood them from the inside; Richardson's position in regard to social, or is it intellectual, change is less certain. The music she was imagining at the end of Part 1 of her novel was in fact being written at much the same time as she was imagining it. Truly, truly strange, and strange again! In the post-Nietzschian world, writers are the voices of the universe, and we do well to listen.

Those of us who are writers also do well to listen for those inner and outer voices – the passions of others, and the voices of our time – which wish to speak through us. We may or may not identify ourselves by using Nietzsche's word 'ubermensch', but we carry a responsibility to every living creature surrounding us.

There is one more thing I want to say about *Maurice Guest*, and that is that it is dedicated 'To Louise'. I assume that this is the character Louise, Louise Dufreyer, who, if you recall, once lived on a station in Queensland. If I am correct, then the dedication, a sign of approval, surely, balances the naming of the book after the young man who loved her not wisely but too well. Maurice shoots himself. Louise causes Schilsky to marry her, in the end, and out of sight of the reader. Schilsky, for his part, expresses the change in the world's condition already referred to. A god made by religion is replaced by a secularly understood force which can't be affected

by prayer. Redemption retreats to the edge of the European mind. I can only imagine that HHR, in giving the book this dedication, was trying to ensure that the reader's mind was brought into some degree of balance: failure (Maurice), success after debilitating struggle (Louise), and for Schilsky, a supreme achievement (*Das trunkene Lied*, with its overtones of Gustav Mahler in the name, and Frederick Delius in its repercussions) balanced by the breaking down of the ideas of male superiority and scorn of women expressed in the drunken scene near the end of Part 1. I think we must assume that if Schilsky has married Louise then he has outgrown, not only the novel which contained him, but the defects in his character and in the surrounding ethos which allowed him to speak so scornfully of women at that earlier stage. Why are we not shown this development? Because Richardson wants to maintain a balance. Her book has been structured to contain certain forces and it can't deal with others. Or so I see it.

Certain aspects of *Monkey Grip* not discussed so far, and the second and third books of Richardson and Garner, will be considered elsewhere in this series.