

## Thea Astley's Poetry: A Prequel to Her Fiction

I met Thea Astley over a coffee on the Townsville Strand during one of her visits to James Cook University in the 1980s. In the past year excursions through her archive in Fryer and a rereading of her fiction have helped me to know her better, and I've come to conclusions about her writing that I'd like to begin by sharing with you. Fiercely though intermittently mentored early in her career by Patrick White, who like herself was a literary idealist and a close scrutiniser of motives, Thea didn't write to win recognition as an author. Instead, the easy flow of words in her hand-written first drafts testify that she wrote in response to a strong creative urge; secondly, she wrote to give pleasure to readers through her characters and the imaginative texture of her prose; thirdly, I believe that she wrote above all to communicate hard-won emotional and ethical insights, to present readers with a fraction of her complex world view, which many would see as wisdom.

An item in Thea's archive that I find especially moving is her copy of *The Oxford Book of French Verse*, kept from when she was an undergraduate at the University of Queensland between 1944 and 1947. She wrote on the flyleaf: "Kindness is better than cleverness," and signed her name. This assertion is a torch for illuminating Thea's forty-year writing life. Her fiction explores "kindness" in its deepest sense, derived from the Middle English word "kynde," meaning "nature." So to practise *kyndenesse* is to act with recognition of shared nature, that is, shared humanity, our common participation in pain, fear and joy. One of Thea's most accomplished novels, *The Acolyte*, first published in 1972, embodies the admonition that she wrote as a young woman in the *Oxford French Verse*. Holberg, the musician composer, is clever, in fact a genius, but his adherence to the status and privileges of that role harms his coterie of admirers and finally scatters it. Holberg's blindness is pathetic, but also a symbol of his unkindness—his lack of awareness and care for others. It's worth recording that Thea demonstrated to me an opposite mode of relationship, when she was so honestly herself over our coffees in the cafe on the Strand.

Despite her Catholic upbringing, and the many depictions of the institutional Church and Church people in her stories and novels, Thea struggled with agnosticism. While her fiction sometimes trembles on the brink of mystical experience, it rarely makes the leap, though I intend to show that it does so sometimes. A poem preserved in Fryer, written when Thea was twenty, perfectly captures what I believe was her usual spiritual perspective [slide].

*Altar Piece*

Sleekly the marble holds them  
In a future made the present,  
Pasts that never are—  
Shallow carvings brinked upon fruition  
Of an act of adoration;  
Puzzled Peter, hands upraised,  
And John upon his breast.  
He. And cunning midst the carven faces,  
A carven scorn upon his beard,  
Judas, in the sea of faces  
Frozen into marble wonder,  
Simulating wonder like the rest,  
Around the sacrificial table,  
Watches the uplifted bread...  
All whitely silent through the year,  
Each stone figure brinked on action,  
Christ about to breathe a prayer,  
And James about to bow his head.

The sacred figures carved on the altar freeze into stillness on the edge of adoration. Whatever Thea's reservations about religious belief, however, kindness as defined was a faith to which she straightforwardly adhered throughout her life and writing.

In the multifarious worlds of Thea Astley's fiction, acts of kindness seldom produce the hoped for results, but their intrinsic and exemplary value stands like a rock. On the other hand, unkindness, with its logical extensions into cruelty and violence, is a prime target of her satire, which is "deadly" in more senses than one. As the deeply flawed Father Lake, in *A Boatload of Home Folk*, tells his class, "unkindness—this fella hurt that one fella— is the worst sin of all" (15). Thea's fiction exposes unkindness in sexual and family relationships, in government and business, and in racial, gender and ageist politics. It revels in penetrating moral obtuseness, the benighted indifference and selfishness that produce unkindness. This orientation of her fiction has made it a searing path to self-knowledge for some readers, including myself.

Despite Thea's devaluing of cleverness in relation to kindness, aged twenty-one or twenty-two, she pencilled in the margins of her *Oxford French Verse* some clever verse translations of Victor Hugo's "Nuits de Juin," and Paul Verlaine's "Chanson d'Automne." She wrote her translation of Théophile Gautier's "Chinoiserie," quirkily titled "Chinary," on a thin leaf which she stuck into the Oxford volume beside the French original [slide]:

Théophile Gautier: *Chinoiserie*

Ce n'est pas vous, non, madame, que j'aime,  
Ni vous non plus, Juliette ni vous,  
Ophélie, ni Béatrix, ni même  
Laure la blonde, avec ses grands yeux doux.

Celle qui j'aime, à présent, est en Chine;  
Elle demeure avec ses vieux parents,  
Dans une tour de porcelaine fine,  
Au fleuve Jaune, où sont les cormorans.

Elle a des yeux retroussés vers les temps,  
Un pied petit à tenir dans la main,  
Le teint plus clair que le cuivre des lampes,  
Les ongles longs et rougis de carmin.

Par son treillis elle passe sa tête,  
Que l'hirondelle, en volant, vient toucher;  
Et, chaque soir, aussi bien qu'un poète,  
Chante le saule et la fleur du pêcher.

Thea Astley: *Chinary*

It is not you, fair lady, whom I love,  
No longer you, nor you my Juliet,  
Ophelia, nor Beatrice; nor golden  
Laura's large sweet eyes with vows beset.

The maiden whom I love now, has her bower  
In China, by the Yellow River's tide  
And dwells with her aged parents in a tower  
Of porcelain; with cormorants beside.

She has her eyes upturned; a foot so small  
It fits within the hand; and to this weds  
Skin clearer than the brass of lamps; and all  
Her nails are long and deeply flushed with red.

Her head the swallow brushes with his wings,  
She sways before the lattice in her room;  
And every night, like any poet sings  
Of the willow, and the peach-tree's bloom.

I think you'll agree that the translation is both felicitous and faithful to Gautier's conception.

Twenty-three translated poems, including, in addition to those mentioned, fifteen by Alfred de Musset, two by Baudelaire, two by Horace, and one by Catullus, in fact survive in Thea's archive. Her preference for translating poems by Roman love lyricists and young French nineteenth-century poets was appropriate, since she later associated her own poetry-writing

with youth. In 1990 she said in an interview: “Poetry in the adolescent years, which is like a form of acne. ‘I think I’m having a poem.’” Apart from a few occasional poems written into the 1960s, her poetry-writing ended in 1957, when, as she further confided to Amanda Smith, her addiction to prose began:

I started writing my first book, *Girl with a Monkey*, when I was about twenty-eight, and then you get sort of print fever. Your publishers say, “Make it a thick one, dear.” You feel you’ve got to get a second one out or you’re just a one-off job. So you write another one, and by that time you’re hooked. (Smith 43)

In her lifetime Thea published some twenty-five poems, or about ten per cent of the more than two hundred preserved in her archive. Appropriately for someone destined to become a major Australian author, her first poem, published in the *Courier Mail* when she was eight, deals with fun on the beach [slide].

*At the Seaside*

Christopher Robin hand in hand  
Ran with his sister along the sand  
As on they ran, from close behind,  
There came a bark  
From big dog Spark.  
With big brown eyes and jolly face  
He chased them up and down the place  
Good dog Spark gave up the chase  
And went home after his happy race.

(*Courier Mail* January 4 1934, p. 8)

A dozen dreamy poems survive from 1940 to 1943, when Thea was a student at All Hallows Convent. Of these, “Picture,” published in the school magazine, draws inspiration from a moonlit landscape [slide]:

A lombardy is etched out on a hill,  
A quivering lace against the sombre sky  
Of night. And its leaves, dark and ragged,  
Bend to the small wind’s sigh.  
The moon, a lone cold gem, encrusted deep  
In a setting of velvet black,  
Has trailed behind a string of pallid pearls,  
And in the murmuring quiet of fields  
Where hedges and the fields merge soft and deep  
Into one with the sky; and every steep  
Looms up, I stand. And not a rustling tree  
Nor stray bird’s call breaks through the quiet  
About me.  
My heart is rapt, uplifted in the still,  
To where a lombardy stands on a hill.

Other school poems develop themes of death, fading, loss, parting and eternity, in sky, dawn, sunset and seasonal imagery. Their distant models are Shakespeare's and Blake's lyrics and traditional ballads; their forms are experimental and their rhymes are random. However, "Absent," the last poem in this sequence, and Thea's earliest surviving love poem, demonstrates a growing mastery of the Petrarchan sonnet form [slide]:

You are not here today so I must find  
Pictured upon that page, your smile, your eyes.  
And seeing, feel a thousand sorrows rise  
To mourn you fled. Can I not capture, bind  
Your soul unto this leaf? Or shall I, blind,  
Seek in the shadowy semblance, all that lies  
Of fair within reality?—Whilst sighs  
Like white-winged birds flock through my mind.

Then from the phantom seas of swirling thought  
You come, and all the mists are flung apart.  
My hands stretch out to welcome you long sought!  
I soar on wings of star-bound ecstasy.  
And feel a sudden singing in my heart—  
Far from the page your eyes smile back at me.

Thea's writing blossomed when she joined the poets gathered around Laurie Collinson and Barrie Reid, founding editors of *Barjai*. In 1986 Shelton Lea and Robert Harris compiled *A Flash of Life*, an illustrated booklet limited to an edition of 120 copies, and printed as a tribute to Barrie Reid on his sixtieth birthday. Thea's copy is fortunately preserved in Fryer. It contains a reminiscence of her first meeting with Laurie and Barrie, which was partially reprinted ten years later in *Overland*. I'm quoting a longish selection, because it's typical Thea, and because it captures the spirit of her poetry-writing in the later War years [slide].

*Hello Barrie, Hello Laurie*

We're meeting for the first time. You're sixteen and seventeen. I'm eighteen. It's Saturday morning, Brisbane time, and there we are outside Barker's Bookstore in Adelaide Street with the trams clanking at our backs. You're both wearing shorts, I remember, and my convent school background is not quite up to assessing bare male legs. I'm shy. We're all shy. Hello.

Clem Christensen has organised this meeting. He's a sub on the *Courier Mail* with my dad and thinks I might be interested in meeting a group of young people who are publishing a magazine for young writers under twenty-one. The very name of the magazine is *Barjai*, an aboriginal word meaning 'a meeting place for youth'. I'm under twenty-one. I'm eligible. So hello.

My life changes. I live through the teaching week for those Sunday afternoon meetings at the Lyceum Club where we talk books and poetry and drink tea and eat

sao biscuits topped with tomato and cheese. Barrie reads his own poems. He reads Rimbaud. He *is* the young Rimbaud. I bring a friend, Vida Horn, and hello. We sit in the upstairs Astoria Café in George Street and drink coffee until it's nearly time for the last tram. We go for hikes into the hills near Mt. Coot-tha. We go down the bay to Shorncliffe. We're young and we talk and talk and talk.

Writers are invited to our meetings. Judith Wright attends. Paul Grano. We eat at each other's homes. Laurie plays a Debussy record, Clair de Lune, at his Kangaroo Point flat. The music floats across Brisbane River and the rest of my life. We run an exhibition for Sid Nolan at the South Brisbane Library Basement....

My parents worry. 'Are they left-wing?' they ask anxiously.  
Poetry readings might lead to communism.  
Worse, communism might lead to poetry readings!

Hello all of you. You never bored me. Not once. And when I read of today's youth agonising with ennui, I can only wish they had what we had. We had no trannies, no telly, no cars. We had our eyes and minds and hearts and the good-will of knowing each other.

Hello Barrie. Hello Laurie. Hello Vida.  
I wish we could go back in time and have it all again.

**[Pause]**I find it touching and humble that Thea first drafted all of her novels, most of her poems, and many of her stories in school exercise books. This choice reflects both her vocation as a teacher, which she took seriously, and the practical demands of her life: exercise books were transportable and she could write in them in bed. Two such books contain most of Thea's poems. In the chronological list circulated I have named them A and B (catalogued respectively as folders 97/42 and 97/41 in Fryer). Book A contains 151 poems dated by Thea to between 1940 and 1946. Book B preserves one poem dated to 1945, and forty-three written between 1946 and 1957. My list is a work in progress. Dates are confirmed, but I haven't yet traced all the poems' publications. Thea indicates finished poems by a tick and publication by a capital "P"; sometimes she names the publisher but rarely the date.

The stimulus provided by the *Barjai* group manifests in Exercise Book A in an increased concern with poetic techniques and traditional forms. Thea was especially attracted to the sonnet, but also attempted a triolet, ballad, vignette, epitaphs, and epigrams. Most of the Book A poems are love poems that revisit in a personal way traditional themes of loneliness, rejection, submission, transience, time, joy, conflict, and pain. Thea was here learning how to express the hard emotional truths that later formed the bedrock of her fiction. A surety of voice sometimes takes charge, as in the sonnet headed "June" [slide]:

*June*

This love has more of spirit than of flesh,  
For we have met on peaks of imagery  
Watching clouds whorl upwards from the sea  
To tangle all the blue within their mesh.  
See how the beating winds that coldly thresh  
The wool against the air, snatch fiercely  
Our hearts from matter's clue, as if there be  
More loving in the soul when form is ash.

And we shall go on meeting where the heights  
Of unmade dreams mount upwards to the moon.  
Follow dear. My hands are full of lights  
Star-drawn. Bend your head. This is the hour  
When mind with heart may move; for very soon  
All the flesh will wither like a flower.

and the intimate poem that begins, "You are my quiet music..."

You are my quiet music, you  
My house roof under rain,  
And my door opening or window,  
Light letting in, light out.  
Ever dear, you are those little paths  
Winding in to one veracity  
Like sudden glimpses of a sea  
So loved it breaks the heart,  
So ultimate, the journey meant  
Nothing in pain.  
Those sudden lamp-pools touching back  
Fears and the dark, are you,  
These books, these fires in the evening  
Warmth-eating into the heart  
Through dazzled eyes sleep-closing,  
Till you are sleep, sleep, and somehow thresholds.

By contrast, the remarkable poem, "Idiot," is a chilling parody of the lover as traditionally represented [slide].

He picked a rose  
And cupping thin young hands,  
Crooned over it with little laughing cries;  
Pressed with hyperbolic gesture  
The bright thing to his mouth  
And brushed its softness slowly on closed eyes.  
The great ones laughed.  
Red anger coiled his heart.  
He tore the petals, stripped the green stalk bare—

And crushed them red beneath his heel...  
Then stricken raised his head,  
And smiled a vacant smile to the soft air.

Other poems in Exercise Book A broaden the subject matter to include poetry, music, and Thea's young fellow poets. They refer also to famous poets like Francis Thompson, and composers such as Ravel, Debussy and Delius. Many associate poetry with human song, bird song, or bells, or recreate musical effects in words ("Sonites," "Four fiddlers by the shaded lamp...").

Yet other successful poems in Book A deal piercingly with real-life situations. They include: "The Card Players," "Returned Man," "Culture, 1945" (a satire of abstract painting), and "The Sailor." The poem that begins "A woman sat beside me in the train..." demonstrates the narrative drive and capacity for empathy that later empowered portraits of victimised or resisting women in Thea's prose—characters such as Sadie Klein in "Ladies Need Only Apply," and Lannie Cunneen in *Drylands*.

A woman sat beside me in the train,  
July the seventeenth of forty-four  
And strange remarks fell from us like soft rain.  
"Oh once I saw,"  
She said, though we had never met before,  
Swaying her plaited head towards the door,  
"Fields of daffodils,  
"And forests autumn-painted, angry hills,  
"Slopes blue with flowers, white with snow."

I do not know  
If she were dreaming swaying by the door,  
But her words were subtle sorrows.  
"Life has tried me; now the cold days gnaw  
"My heart, my heart.  
"What magic part of earth's philosophy may yet remain  
"For me?"—questioningly swaying as before,  
She who sat beside me in the train.

"Even sunlight borrows  
Shadows from the night." But no replies  
Bloomed in me. I was lost within her eyes  
Though we had never met before.  
And O the pain  
That flooded as I parted from the train  
And sharply saw  
Her plaited head bent backwards from the door,  
Swaying, swaying, as it had before.

Thea wrote the best of her surviving poems, mostly preserved in Exercise Book B, when aged between twenty and thirty-two. You will see from the chronological list that a good proportion achieved publication. Predictably, perhaps, in view of its title, “Droving Man” is Thea’s most frequently published poem [slide]. It defeats nationalist expectations, however, by sidetracking the conventional elements of the inland, droving, cattle and wattle into the story of a marriage. Metaphors in stanza two implicitly compare the marital relations of white and Indigenous women:

She might have chosen cities, but the man  
Compelled to see the pastures of his soul  
Stocked with dream cattle,  
Moved north and west and sunwards to his goal  
Under the freckled lightning of the wattle.

Over the years the piccaninny thoughts  
And timid lubra words became so shy  
Of their own thunder,  
They never spoke together but his eye  
Would find in hers a startled twin of wonder.

The fact that many of the hand-written poems in Exercise Book B were published, and that Thea pasted in typed versions of others, suggests that she intended to make this book into a publishable collection that probably included a sonnet sequence. I’ll present further selections from it shortly. Considered as a whole, however, Thea’s poetry in Fryer is a neglected, in fact an unknown, body of work which in itself has much to offer. Many of her novels and short stories are linked. For example, Keith Levenson, a teenager in *The Slow Natives*, reappears as the mature narrator of *Hunting the Wild Pineapple*. Similarly, many strands in Thea’s poetry run through her major literary achievement in her fiction.

Included in Exercise Book A is a hand-written three-page letter signed, “From a grateful and deeply inspired student.” I think that Thea cherished this letter because it sets out her literary and pedagogic goals. The anonymous student wrote [slide]:

To me, the arts are the only things which have beauty and which have been created by human beings—we can escape from the cruelty and selfishness in this world. I hope, like you I will be able to contribute to the only beauty in life—the arts. When I look at a Rembrandt or a Michelangelo, my disappointment in man disappears; when I hear a Tchaikovsky I can sense a heavenly peace; when I read the poems of Keats, I am oblivious of man’s destructiveness, and the purity of its beauty brings tears to my eyes.

The writer goes on to quote from Douglas Stewart's "Rock Carving"—"I know as you how the work goes naked to the weather,...Maybe it's all for nothing, for the sky to look at,/ Or maybe for us the distant candles dance."

Thea seems indeed to have regarded poetry and music as both refuges from life's uncertainties and goals verging on the infinite. Her fiction often measures characters by their relationship with music. Those who sing out of tune, like Leo Stringer in "Ladies Need Only Apply," others like Holberg who commodify music as a path to power, and yet others who promote ear-splitting contemporary music, like the developer Clifford Truscott in *The Genteel Poverty Bus Company*, are judged or satirised. On the other hand, maverick defenders of musical beauty, such as Truscott's rival, Mackintosh Hope, and Bernard Levenson, the music examiner in *The Slow Natives*, invite our approval. Poets, poetry-writing and poetry function similarly to music in Thea's fiction, and are nearly as pervasive.

I'll begin with two examples. The poet in *A Boatload of Home Folk*, first published in 1968, is the adulterous island agent, Stevenson. Thea hand-wrote Stevenson's poems on torn-off half foolscap sheets preserved in Exercise Book B. She later used red biro to record: "Written while at Correspondence School 67 ~~or 66~~." Stevenson's poems are among the few that Thea composed for a predetermined narrative context. Her description in *Boatload* of his [quote] "secret vice"—"the accumulated impulses and resentments of twenty years of marriage spilling over into verbal protest that he concealed like dirty postcards in a little note-book" (73)—contains an element of self-parody, recognisable following a consideration of Thea's poetry-writing. Stevenson's poems, which are not particularly good (though he himself sometimes finds them exhilarating), brutally dissect his wife Holly: "After all this I don't like you much my dear, /Neither your face nor your mind..." (74); but rise to lyricism about his mistress, Marie: "Out of the shore you came naked into the water. /Everything white: sand, flesh, sky-cloud and the blaze /of my mind" (76). Stevenson's mediocre verse makes concrete his moral mediocrity as a family man and lover, though his guilt, self-knowledge and attempt to save Miss Trumper from the hurricane earn the reader's forgiveness.

Poetic self-parody is funnier and more obvious in Fixer, a retired road worker, fletcher, shearers' cook, boundary-rider and fossicker in "North: Some Compass Readings: Eden" in *Hunting the Wild Pineapple*. Fixer is also:

...a bit of a versifier—doggerel stuff that he dragged out of old exercise books or crammed into his pockets on the off-chance of finding an ear. They grew to dread him

in the pubs.... ‘It’s like,’ Bosie Hackendorf would whisper, ‘listening to a hundred Chrissy card verses straight.’ (21)

Like the young Thea, Fixer is especially in love with the sonnet. He recites an octave comparing a storm “along the northern *coast*” with “A smile, a girl, a glance that made me *roast*,” and concludes a reading that is excruciatingly funny and sad by saying: “‘Well, that’s half of it. There’s a few bits need fixing up but I’ve only got six lines to go and she’s jake’” (25). Fixer’s “roasting” by a girl is the subject of the tragicomic story that Keith Levenson goes on to tell.

If music and poetry are fluidly shifting ideals in Thea’s fiction, the same is true of the islands that pervade her work as settings. One of her best sonnets, preserved in Exercise Book B, explores a Christian significance in the Whitsunday islands [slide].

This is true Pentecost, this downward heat  
Of sun in sharp angle, sun on reef waters. Why,  
The broad illumination of the sky,  
Curved brightness, fire, and sea reflection meet  
In fine furious fathoms of air, and beat  
The yellow beach like brass deep-dented, dry  
With divers tongues of fescue grass that cry  
Sand-hill gospels for beach-combers’ feet.  
    No pentecostal dove, but here a gull  
    Above the passage islands coastwards tunes  
    Along the trade wind following the hull  
    Of some fish-hungry craft to where blue bay  
    Dozes between the paws of sleepy dunes—  
    The tired silver lions of Whitsunday.

“Whitsunday” prefigures the island of yet another would-be poet, Macintosh Hope, and his final transition into the mystical void of the Pacific Ocean.

In Thea’s fiction, islands ideally are benign places where people find a protected space both to be, and to learn about, themselves. When left uncolonised, islands of confident selfhood become grounds for fostering creativity and kindly relationships with others. Such islands are the opposite of “drylands.” However, when islands are perverted from their primary use into places of isolation, imprisonment and exile, as happens with Doebin (Palm Island) in *The Multiple Effects of Rainshadow*, impacts on the individual psyche and on society as a whole are catastrophic. Poetry and an island come together again in another of Thea’s sonnets. Two novels, one at the beginning and the other late in her writing life further develop their interaction.

“Magnetic” is the first of the typed poems pasted into Exercise Book B [slide].

Thoughts pointed to the pole-star of the mind  
Move into light from outer dark like ships  
Unhurried. O what captained words these lips  
May now loose from their harbourage to find  
The self’s bright centre, timorous, inclined  
Before my own heart’s tempest. Moonlight strips  
Shadow from sail and sail moon-painted dips,  
Tacking towards that centre foam defined.  
    Reached up with tenderness the rocky arms  
    Lave water down the sideways leaning sky  
    Cloud-curdled and star-moist. Upon my brow  
    Winds patterned with palmetto find the calms  
    Beyond great longing. Young I magnify  
    The island moving in across the prow.

Thea, who attributes it to the *Herald*, hand-printed “Magnetic” in old greenish school ink over an earlier title, “The Island.” She probably wrote both “Whitsunday” and “Magnetic” while teaching in Townsville in the late 1940s. “Magnetic” sums up her view of islands as places where thoughts move from the darkness of conception into the light of words. She presents the island too as safe harbourage for finding “the self’s bright centre” and even for voyaging further in, to “find the calms/ Beyond great longing.” “Magnify” in line 13 plays on “Magnetic” and recalls the only other common use of this word in the sense of “glorify,” in the English translation of the *Magnificat*; “My soul doth magnify the Lord.”

Thea’s passion for islands in general and for Magnetic Island in particular first crossed from poetry to prose in *Girl with a Monkey*, in which flashbacks narrate the post-war experience in Townsville of a twenty-two-year-old teacher, Elsie Ford. In August Elsie is caught “static in a complete island of twenty-four hours” (1), waiting for the train that will take her to her new job in the state’s south. Chapter IX, “May,” recalls diverse formative happenings on Magnetic Island. Here Elsie met her first love, Harry, in the Arcadia Hotel, and they deepen their acquaintance while swimming in Alma Bay. For the first time in her life, Elsie gets drunk, and is “very, very sick” (113) over the hotel veranda at 2am, but after sunrise a purificatory attendance at Mass chimes with the island’s natural beauty to create an epiphany [slide]:

The clanging of parakeets came through the open doorway contrapuntally to this ancient language that flowed peacefully, rhythmically, and logically above the movement of wrist and chalice, sunlight on wine, chill morning wind on wheaten bread. The server bent knobbled fingers above the bell and seven heads bowed, knees

ceased their restless search for comfort on wood, and in this tiny and silent corner of the world the miracle was complete. (116)

Such passages confirm that Thea's poetry went with her when she switched to prose fiction, and that it is the key to what the *O.C.A.L.* calls "her idiosyncratic, image-encrusted style." In a review of *An Item from the Late News* (1982) Helen Garner referred to Thea's prose less kindly as "heavy-handed, layered-on, inorganic, self-conscious, hectic and distracting" (22), but knowledge of Thea's arduous poetic apprenticeship allows us to reject this view. Her fiction's textured prose is in fact an organic extension of her poetry.

The same sense of the island as a refuge for recreating the self is evident in *Coda*, a short novel published in 1994. An Italian musical term derived from the Latin for "tail," *coda* is strictly "a passage added after the natural completion of a movement, so as to form a *more definite and satisfactory conclusion*" (*O.E.D.*). Its title may suggest that Thea expected *Coda* to be her last novel, but since she went on to publish *The Multiple Effects of Rainshadow* in 1996, *Collected Stories* in 1997, and the magnificent *Drylands* in 1999, we should probably dismiss this idea. What does make sense is that the novel narrates a *coda* in the sense of the "*more definite and satisfactory conclusion*" that the protagonist, Kathleen, succeeds in making for her life. I suggest that this novel is also a *coda* because it completes a theme, in the musical sense, that Thea introduced in *Girl with a Monkey*. It therefore further exemplifies the intertextual referencing that distinguishes her whole *oeuvre*.

Abandoned by her son Brain (Brian), and consigned by her daughter Sham to the Passing Downs Old People's Home in Brisbane, Kathleen "cuts and runs" to Townsville (10). Day-dreaming over multiple coffees in the Mall, she remembers her wartime love affair on the island with her future husband Ronald, in a narrative that has much in common with Elsie's romance [slide]:

They hiked through the scrub away from the old hotel and the jetty, climbing down the granite boulders of Rocky Bay. Isolation was complete. Gulls screamed across the dipping waves that were so clean in their shocking blue, there might be no memory of flesh mangle and stink of dying and already dead on those other lyric islands. They swam in the rubbery tide of the inlet, splashing like kids, to stagger back to the beach-line gasping and spluttering with draughts of sea. (13)

Kathleen's marriage to Ronald, like Elsie's romance with Harry, ended in disappointment, but for both women their Magnetic Island interludes stand as reference points for new beginnings and for life's varied and ongoing possibilities. Kathleen's embarkation for the island at the end of *Coda* accordingly reactivates her joy.

In the course of my Fryer research, it was a thrill when I discovered that the poem from her youth that **Kathleen** gradually brings to mind is the same “Magnetic Island” that **Thea** wrote in her young days. Lines from the poem interweave through prose passages near the end of *Coda*, which closes with Kathleen’s secular epiphany:

There was more poetry if she could simply catch hold of it. More. *Upon my brow*, she struggled to remember, *winds patterned*—was it patterned?—*with palmetto find the calms beyond great longing*. Ah, there! *The calms!* She was scrabbling and rooting about for words in that old handbag of her years. *Young, I magnify*—that was it, *magnify!*—*the island moving in across the prow!*

Young!

‘God!’ she said aloud to the world at large, to anyone who would listen. ‘What a marvellous day!’ (188).

### Works Cited

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