
THE DROVER'S WIFE

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Memo Editor:

Chief, I picked this paper up while hanging out at the Conference on Commonwealth Writing in Milan. This Italian student, Franco Casamaggiore, seems to be onto something. As far as I know it's a scoop, me being the only press around. I'd go with it as the cover story if I were you. This study of Australian culture is a big deal here in Europe — twenty-six universities have courses on Australian writing. I'm hanging out angling for a professorship or something like that. This Casamaggiore has got a few of his facts wrong, but the subs can pick those up. Great stuff, eh! He could do for the Merino what Blainey did for Asians. (The inspired Suzanne Kiernan helped me with the translation.)

CONFERENCE PAPER BY FRANCO CASAMAGGIORE

The writing of a story called *The Drover's Wife* by Henry Lawson in 1893, the painting of a picture called *The Drover's Wife* by Russell Drysdale in 1945, and the writing of another story by the same name in 1975, by Murray Bail, draws our attention to what I will argue in this paper, is an elaborate example of a national culture joke, an 'insider joke' for those who live in that country — in this example, the country of Australia. Each of these works has the status of an Australian classic and each of these works, I will show, contains a joking wink in the direction of the Australian people which they understand but which non-Australians do not. The joke draws on the colloquial Australian humour surrounding the idea of a drover's 'wife'.

First, a few notations of background for those who are unfamiliar with Australian folklore and the occupation of a drover, which is corruption of the word 'driver'. The drover or driver of sheep literally drove the sheep to market. The sheep, because of health regulations governing strictly the towns and cities of Australia, were kept many kilometres inland from the sea-market towns. The sheep had then to be 'driven' by the driver or drover from inland to the towns, often many thousands of kilometres, taking many months. I am told that this practice has ceased and the sheep are now housed in the cities in high-rise pens.

The method of driving the sheep was that each sheep individually was placed in a wicker basket on the backs of bullock-drawn wagons known as the woollen wagons. This preserved the sheep in good condition for the market. These bullocks, it is said, could pull the sheep to the coast without human guidance, if needed, being able, of course, to smell the sea. But the sheep had to be fed and the drover or driver would give water and seed to the sheep during the journey. The wagon in the Drysdale painting is horse-drawn, denoting a poorer peasant-class of drover. The wagon in the painting would probably hold a thousand sheep in wicker baskets.

Now the length of the journey and the harshness of conditions precluded the presence of women and the historical fact is that for a century or more there were no women in this pioneering country. This, understandably, led men to seek other solace in this strange new country. Australian historians acknowledge the closeness of men under this conditions of pioneering and have described it as mateship, or a pledging of unspoken alliance between two men, a marriage with vows unspoken.

Quite naturally too, with the drover or driver, a close and special relationship grew between him and his charges who became an object for emotional and physical drives, but this remains unacknowledged by historians for reasons of national shame, but is widely acknowledged by the folk culture of Australia. And now acknowledged by art. Interspecies reciprocity. Hence the joke implicit in the use of two writers and a painter of the title *The Drover's Wife* and the entry of this unacceptable historical truth from the oral culture to high culture via coded humour and until this paper (which I modestly consider a breakthrough study) absent from academic purview.

I elicited the first inkling of this from answers received to questions asked of Australian visitors to Italia about the sheep

droving. First, I should explain. Unfortunately, I am a poor student living in a humble two-room *tugurio*. It is a necessity for me to work in the bar of the Hotel Principe e Savoia in Milano and for a time before that, in the Gritti Palace Hotel Venezia. If the authorities would provide more funds for education in this country maybe Italia would regain its rightful place at the forefront of world culture. But I wander from my point. This experience in the bar work gave me the opportunity on many occasions to talk and question visiting Australians, although almost always men.

There is an Australian humour of the coarse peasant type not unknown in Italia. Without becoming involved in these details it is necessary for me to document some of the information harvested from contact with the Australian, not having been to the country at first hand — thanks to the insufficiency of funds from the educational authorities in Italia — however, my brother Giovanni is living there in Adelaide, but is not any help in such matters, knowing nothing of the droving or culture and knowing only of the price of things and the Holden automobile. Knowing nothing of things of the spirit. You are wrong, Giovanni.

Yes, but to continue. A rubber shoe or boot used when hunting in wet weather called the gun boot was used by the drovers or drivers and found to be a natural love aid while at the same time a symbol used in a gesture of voluntary submission by the drover before his charge.

The boots were placed on the hind legs of the favoured sheep. The drover would be shoeless like the sheep and the sheep would 'wear the boots' (cf. 'wearing pants' in marriage). The toe of the boots would be turned towards the drover who would stand on the toes of the boot thus holding the loved sheep close to him in embrace. These details suffice.

According to my Australian informants the sheep often formed an emotional attachment to the drover who reciprocated. But the journey to the coast had its inherent romantic tragedy. The long journey and shared hardship, shared shelter, and kilometres of companionship, daily took them closer to the tragic conclusion with the inevitable death of the loved one through the workings of capitalist market forces. But also the return of the drover's natural drives to his own species as he re-entered the world of people. And the limited vision of the anti-life Church.

'Why not dogs?' comes the question. Close questioning of my Australian sources suggests that dogs as bed companions

was characteristic of the Aboriginal and thus for reasons of racial prejudice considered beneath the Australian white man. The sheep from Europe was a link with the homelands from whence he had migrated and further, I speculate, that the maternal bulk of the merino sheep, with its woolly coat and large soft eyes, its comforting bleat, offered more feminine solace than the lean dog with fleas. Again, on this and other matters, Giovanni is of no assistance being concerned only with his Holden automobile and the soccer football. The unimaginative reaction of the educational authorities for research funding for this project indicts our whole system of education in this country.

Returning now to the art works under study. In Henry Lawson's story the woman character lives out her life *as if she were a sheep*. She is not given a name — in English animal husbandry it is customary to give cows names (from botany) and domestic pets are named, but not sheep. The scholar Keith Thomas says that a shepherd however, could recognise his sheep by their faces. She is penned up in her outback fold, unable to go anywhere. Her routines of the day resemble closely the life of a sheep and it can be taken that this is a literary transformation for the sake of propriety. She tells in the story how she was taken to the city a few times in a 'compartment', as is the sheep. In the absence of her drover husband she is looked after by a dog, as is a sheep. The climax of the Henry Lawson story is the 'killing of the snake' which needs no Doctor Freud, being the expression of a savage and guilt-ridden male detumescence (in Australia the male genitalia is referred to in folklore, as the 'one-eyed trouser snake'. The Australian folk language is much richer than its European counterpart, which is in state of decay). I am told that to this day, Australian men are forever killing the snake. The drover is absent from the story, a point to be taken up later.

In the Drysdale painting (1945) oddly and fascinatingly, there are no sheep. Then we realise uneasily that it is as if they have been swept up into a single image overwhelming the foreground — the second drover's 'wife'. This unusually shaped woman is, on second glance, in the form of a sheep, a merino sheep, the painter having given her the same maternal physical bulk as the merino. Her shadow forms the shape of a sheep. Again, the drover is all but absent. He is a background smudge. The snake, you ask? In the trees we find the serpents. They writhe before our eyes.

Murray Bail is a modern Australian long removed from the days of pioneering and droving. However, his biography reveals

that his father was a drover, but our discipline requires us to disregard this fact when considering his work of art. In his contemporary story he pays homage both to the Drysdale painting and the Lawson story. In the Bail story the woman is referred to as having one defining characteristic, what author Bail calls a 'silly streak'. This is a characteristic traditionally ascribed to sheep (cf. 'woolly minded'). The woman figure in this Bail story, or precisely the 'sheep figure', wanders in a motiveless way; strays, as it were; away from the city and her dentist husband. Curious it is to note that she flees the man whose work it is to care for the teeth which are the instruments used to eat the sheep, and for the sheep, symbol of death. Recall: the journey from the inland paradise in the protection of a loving drover to the destination of death: the city and the slaughterhouse and finally the teeth of the hungry city. In the Bail story the woman goes from the arms of her natural predator, the one who cares for the predator's teeth — the dentist — into the arms of the natural protector, the drover or driver. The Bail story reverses the tragedy and turns it to romantic comedy. Again, the drover himself is absent from the story. The Bail story also has a 'killing of the snake'.

So, in all three works of High Art under discussion we have three women clearly substituting (for reasons of propriety) for sheep, but coded in such a way as to lead us, through the term 'drover's wife' back into the folk culture and its joke. And we note that in the three works there is *no drover*. This is a reversal of situation, an inside-out-truth, for we know historically that *there was a drover* but there was historically *no wife*, not in any acceptable conventional sense.

The question comes, given that the drover has a thousand sheep in his care, how did the drover choose, from that thousand, just one mate? This question, intriguing and bizarre at the same time, was put to my Australian sources. Repeatedly I also ask Giovanni to ask the other men at GMH factory, but he has a head that is too full of materialism to concern himself with exploration of the mythology of this new culture.

How was the sheep chosen? But as in all matters of the human emotion the answer comes blindingly plain. It was explained to me that it is very much like being in a crowded lift, or in a prison, or on board a ship. In a situation of confinement it is instinctive for people to single out one another from the herd. There is communication by eye, an eye-mating, the search for firstly, mate, and then community. The same it is with sheep,

my Australian sources tell me (thanks to educational authorities in Italia I have no chance to research this first hand). In the absence of human contact the eyes wander across species, the eyes meet, the eyes and ewes (that is English language pun).

Yes, and the question comes, was I being fooled about by these Australian visitors and their peasant humour after they had drunk perhaps too much? Was I being 'taken in' as they, the Australians, say. I ask in return — were the Australian visitors telling more than they knew or wanted to tell? The joking is a form of truth telling, a way of confession. They were also, by joking with my questions, trying to make me look away from my enquiry. To joke away something that was too painfully serious. But they were also telling me what they did not wish me to know as outsider, for the confession is precisely this, and brings relief. They experience an undefined relief from their joking about such matters — that is, the relief of confession. I let them joke at me for it was a joke to which I listened not them. This is the manoeuvre of the national joke, the telling and the not telling at the same time. So yes, I was being 'taken in' by my Australian sources — 'taken in' to the secret. Taken in to their confidence.

We are told that humour has within it the three dialogues. The dialogue between the teller and the listener, where the teller is seeking approval and giving a gift at the same time. The dialogue between the teller's unconscious mind and his voice, to which the teller cannot always listen. The dialogue between the joker, teller, and the racial memory which is embodied in the language and the type of joke the teller chooses to tell, the well of humour from which the joker must draw his bucket of laughter. Humour is the underground route that taboo material — or material of national shame — must travel, and it is the costume it must wear.

Today such relations between sheep and men are, of course, rare in Australia. However, the racial memory of those stranger and more primitive days — days closer, can we say, to nature and a state of grace — still lingers. It is present in a number of ways. As illustrated, it is present in the elaborate cultural joke of High Art. The art which winks. It is there in the peasant humour of the male Australian, the joke which confesses. It is present, I would argue (here I work from photographs and cinema) in the weekly ritual called 'mowing the lawn'. On one afternoon of the weekend the Australian male takes off grass from his suburban garden which in earlier times would have

been fodder for the sheep — this is an urban 'hay-making ritual', Australian city man's last connection with agriculture. But, alas, his sheep is gone, and the grass, the hay, is burned, to a memory of an association all but forgotten. Finally, I am told that there is an Australian national artefact — the sheepskin with wool attached. It is used often as a seat cover in the automobile. That today the driver or drover of a car sits (or lies) with sheep, as it were, under him while driving not a flock of sheep but a family in a modern auto. It gives comfort through racial memory far exceeding the need for warmth in that temperate land. The car sheepskin covering is an emotional trophy from the sexual underworld of the Australian past. The artefact which remembers.

Naturally, all this is still not an open subject for academic explicitness in Australia and it is only here in Italia where such candour can be enjoyed with our perspective of centuries — and our knowledge of such things. But I say, Australia — be not ashamed of that which is bizarre, seek not always the genteel. Remember that we, the older cultures, have myths which also acknowledge such happenings of interspecies reciprocity (cf Jason and Search for Golden Fleece). See in these happenings the beginnings of your own mythology. See it as an affirmation of the beautiful truth — that we share the planet with animals and we are partners, therefore in its destiny.

So, in Lawson, Drysdale and Bail, we see how High Art in this new culture, admits a message of unspeakable truth (albeit, in a coded and guilty way), this being the ploy of all great national cultures.

Thus is the magic of the imagination.