

Thea Astley Makes Something Out of Nothing

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Kerryn Goldsworthy, writing in an article about Thea Astley, noted that:

Many writers wear an invisible charm bracelet, dangling special words which have become for them the repositories of meanings far beyond their value in ordinary verbal currency—words that emit, from within the context of each writer’s work, a kind of semiotic radiance. (Goldsworthy)

The word that Goldsworthy had in mind was “acolyte”, a word that certainly does feature in Astley’s fiction, most notably in her novel *The Acolyte*. There is, however, another word—“nothing”—that is used with even greater frequency and distinctiveness by Astley, and which apparently did carry for her a “semiotic radiance”, serving her fiction with the carriage of quite particular meaning.

In seeking to understand the source of that “semiotic radiance” we can refer to Eduardo Cadava’s observation that “there is no word or image that is not haunted by history.” (xvi) I believe that for Astley “nothing” is indeed a word haunted by history, and that in turn the word haunts her fiction with our knowledge of that history.

The history that haunts Astley’s use of “nothing” is the colonial and postcolonial experience of Australian space. That the concept of “nothing(ness)” is deeply embedded in the Australian imaginary hardly requires stressing. It is grounded in the void at the heart of the continent, a theme that is reiterated time-and-again in those great ur-texts of our understanding of Australian space, the explorers’ journals. Charles Sturt, John McDouall Stuart, Ernest Giles and many others, set off in search of something, and returned to tell the world that they had, in effect, found nothing. Whereas they dreamed of discovering empire-expanding geography in the form of an inland sea and land suited to agricultural abundance, they encountered instead a void. In his journal Stuart employed an appropriate refrain to express the nature of the landscape:

... there is nothing visible but the dark blue line of the horizon. (89)
... to the eastward I can see nothing but horizon. (112)
... Between the island and the point I can see nothing but horizon. (113)
... I could see ... nothing but a line of dark-green wood on the horizon. (270)¹

Certainly the idea of the physical void, the nothing, took hold and became manifest in many representations of the continent. Christina Stead, in the prologue to *For Love Alone*, wrote of, “...the salt-crust bed of a prehistoric sea, and leafless mountain ranges. There is nothing in the interior” (1); and in *Tourmaline* Randolph Stow describes a space where, “There was no town, no hill, no landscape. There was nothing.” (220)

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And you didn't need long exposure to Australia, or to travel to the heart of the continent, to encounter and recognise the threat of nothing. In D. H. Lawrence's *Kangaroo*, Somers, alone at night, experiences the nothingness of the West Australian bush.

He looked at the weird, white, dead trees, and into the hollow distances...
Nothing! Nothing at all. He turned to go home. And then immediately the hair on his scalp stirred and went icy cold with terror. What of? He knew quite well it was nothing.... (9)

Nothingness is embedded in the helmeted and eye-less gaze of Sidney Nolan's Ned Kelly paintings; in the barren and withholding heart of Henry Lawson's stories; it is at the core of the novel and film of Joan Lindsay's *Picnic at Hanging Rock*. The presence of nothing is also palpable in Ross Gibson's *Seven Versions of an Australian Badland*, in the book's harrowing scrutiny of the same central Queensland hinterland that features in so much of Astley's fiction. As Gibson writes, "you could close your eyes and breath minutes of nothing. Or nothing that I'd give name to." (26)

Nothingness is not, however, *necessarily* a dystopian experience, for although it is frequently internalised in ways that are unsettling or alienating, it is also capable of being embraced for its redemptive quality. Philosopher Richard Campbell's observation made in the course of his contemplation of Australian space that, "the absence of God is not nothing; it is the particular mode of his presence" (188), comfortably retains its meaning if inverted; nothing is not the absence of God, it is the particular mode of his presence.

It is because of its capacity to be internalised, however, that nothingness manifests itself as more than just geographic space, and has come to represent something intrinsic about the *way* in which that space is occupied. As a consequence, the characteristic of nothingness has frequently been used metaphorically to express the manner in which Australians relate to their world and to each other. When Ernestine Hill writes of "the great Australian loneliness"; Patrick White "the great Australian emptiness" (15); W.E.H. Stanner "the great Australian silence" (18), and Manning Clark "the kingdom of nothingness" (271), they *are* making oblique comment on the country's unique physical geography, but transforming it into a potent metaphor for gaps in the national psyche or experience, particularly the failure of the settler-society to fully inhabit Australian space.

Thea Astley was apparently troubled by a complex relationship with the daunting aspects of Australian space. I have traced elsewhere the love that Astley's characters express for vast, open and unmarked landscapes, but this is frequently coupled by a troubled relationship with these spaces that, by their very scale, resist knowing and psychological occupation. Characters frequently respond by retreating to more comforting and contained spaces, such as islands (Genoni, 2001), or gardens (Genoni, 2006), where they attempt to create the "something" that might protect against the "nothing". Inevitably, however, they fail to find or create a sanctuary that can protect them from the wider Australian space, and they live—and frequently die—fully exposed to the nothingness.

The Slow Natives (1965)

Astley's frequent use of the term "nothing", and the concept of "nothingness", were ingrained as early as her fourth novel *The Slow Natives* (1965). This novel portrays a group of mainly middleclass Brisbanites, including priests and nuns, who are united by their disillusionment and loneliness. The words "nothing"—and the closely associated "empty"—echo throughout the text, frequently applied in describing characters or aspects of their lives.

Of Bernard Levenson we are told that "His nothingness brimmed over" (31), and Bernard says of his marriage that, "There's nothing positive like hatred. There's simply—nothing." (71) Bernard's wife Iris contemplates a life where, "There's nothing now—husband, lover, son." (204)

Father Lingard declares to God that he is "a nothing-man" (69), and in describing his dissatisfaction with his spiritual life declares that, "I can't say relaxed is the exact word...empty rather. Or nothingness." (70)

Sister Matthew declares that "I'm fit for nothing" (83), and is described as one of "the strangest of postulants...withholding nothing. Nothing that seemed of importance anyway." (144)

The word is also used repeatedly by characters as a description of their own lack of agency or volition. When questioned on things they have said or done, they issue denials such as;

- "It's nothing, Doug." (67)
- "I don't want nothin' thanks." (133)
- "nothin' doin'." (133)
- "Nothing", Tommy said, "nothing." (138)
- "Nothing", she said, "it's nothing." (140)
- "Nothin'." Chookie shut his lips tight. (166)
- "I didn't do nothin' he whined ... "Nothin'!" (169)

Or as Monsignor Connolly says; "Put your trust in God... and there's nothing we can do about it after that". (68)

Several of these examples highlight what has been a feature of the use of the word by Astley throughout her fiction. That is, that it frequently occurs two, three or even more times in rapid succession. This repetition serves not only to highlight the significance of the word, but also enables it to act as a sort of mantra. By relying on its onomatopoeic resonance when repeated in this way, Astley uses the word to echo the empty lives she describes.

Although *The Slow Natives* is set in Brisbane's coastal suburbs, it features a complex and deeply-embedded metaphoric connection between the "nothing" that infests the lives of characters and the barren inland spaces of Australia. The lives of almost all the characters are related using images derived from desert landscapes—images which highlight the corresponding aridity of their spiritual lives. Bernard Levenson spends his life "standing on his own bland desert" (46) and he sees his joyless marriage as a barren partnership where the "joy could trickle away like an inland river, the water holes, the

sand patches, the lost artesian seas where his marriage pumped a weak current” (22). Sister Celestine discovers that “sanctity is more arid than she had supposed” (141), and the disappointed spinsters Miss Trumper and Miss Paradise are “dry as sticks,” with “the lipstick hooking on to the wrinkled corners of their mouths, the sad runnels, but exposing the dry lips. Or the dry souls” (93-94). Sister Matthew is described as having “a desert within that must be explored” (45), and Father Lingard’s vocation has become “a detailless desert whose wells of prayer had all dried up” (67). Lingard is also described as doing battle with his “prayer-dry soul” (178) and suffering from a “spiritual aridity where all the springs dry up”.

Even the names used by Astley for her characters—Lake, Seabrook and Paradise—ridicule their hopes for a fertile and well-watered life; as does the street where the Leversons live, River Terrace, which is nothing more than “a dried-up strip of sticky tar-paper.” (1)

And just as imagery derived from deserts and drought serve in *The Slow Natives* as symbols of unfulfilled lives, so too Astley uses images associated with drought-breaking rain to express the sudden and unexpected appearance of love, compassion or redemption. One such moment occurs when Father Lingard is required to counsel Sister Matthew about her crisis of faith;

“You do nothing,” he said. “You endure and sit on the tip of each day ... watching the hours tick over the west and come up in the east and eventually the drought breaks. That is what they tell me, anyway.” (147)

As Lingard hears the confession of Miss Trumper, Astley records that, “The rain of this particular charity felt warm” (179), and when Bernard feels a fleeting connection to his son Keith, “Love fell, just for a few seconds, a wild and unexpected rain” (109). Most telling is the moment when Bernard and Keith finally reach a hesitant reconciliation.

(Bernard) was yet aware that in this particularly secret and tantalizing acre the drought had broken and he could see Keith clearly ... He began to smile, a smile that overpowered him, brought him back from the lost country to definite decisions in his own well-charted landscape. (195-196)

It is through the use of such imagery that Astley represents of the power of the empty inland spaces over the lives of even those who cling to the continental margins, and she finds in the vast, dry inland an effective metaphor for arid lives. The almost simpleton Chookie Mumberson is the one character who does know the inland well—well enough to realise that open, unmarked spaces can devastate the soul. Chookie shares his first experience of a beach with Keith Leverson;

‘I’ve never seen the beach before,’ Chookie confided ...
Keith was silenced and then he began to laugh.
‘Sorry,’ he said after a bit. ‘Sorry. It just seems strange, that’s all. I’ve never met anyone before who ... I mean ... I can’t imagine. How did it strike you?’
‘You ever been inland?’ Chookie demanded angrily. ‘Right in, I mean?’
‘Well, no.’
‘Same thing,’ Chookie said. ‘Guess it is funny never havin’ seen the sea. But I dunno why everybody thinks you gotter see it. You haven’t been inside and I

don't think that's funny. I have. Same thing, really. Just the same thing—only dry. Rollin' oceans of earth, see? Waves-a hills and no end to it. Just like this. Only brown instead of blue. And still. Terrible still except for the heat shimmer. And just as dangerous.' (134)

An Item From the Late News (1982)

If the presence of the nothing space of the inland is largely metaphoric in *The Slow Natives*, it had become quite literal by the time Astley wrote *An Item From the Late News*. The novel features a landscape that is described as being, “measureless, had no horizons” (165), and this nothingness is powerfully manifested from the outset. On the opening page Astley describes the inland town of Allbut;

There was nothing outside that town.
Is nothing.
Can nothing be walled by nothing? (1)

The question is immediately repeated.

How can nothing be walled by nothing? (2)

And we are informed that Allbut is a town that exists outside time, where; “Sixty seconds to the minute equals nothing.” (2)

Indeed Allbut is a town that has meaning *because* of its nothingness. It is a magnet for misfits and outsiders who are on the run from various fears and phantoms, and the bare-as-bones landscape offers the promise of a place where they can annihilate their own identity. As the novel's central character Wafer discovers it is a place where, “...the nothingness of the landscape became delight.” (15)

Allbut is a dying town. Astley is frequently intrigued by the way in which settlement becomes undone and by which the fragile markers of occupation are reduced to nothing. At such times her use of the word is particularly intense. In reaching Allbut Wafer drives through a number of abandoned towns and ponders their fate:

How could all this hugger-mugger living be nothing now?
As this now was to be nothing.
Moving from nothing to nothing as far as the world counts... (166)

The nothingness, however, is not confined to the landscape. It is once again embedded deep within the lives of the inhabitants of Allbut. Teenager Emmeline writes a poem beginning with the words:

I hold the lake up to my face
I see nothing... (55)

When Wafer is questioned about his relationship with the underage Emmeline by the brutal policeman Cropper, he replies that:

'There was nothing there. Nothing. Nothing you could lay a charge about. Simply – nothing'.

To which Cropper retorts:

...It doesn't matter there was nothing. There might have been nothing, and then again there mightn't.' (155)

Emmeline is subjected to an attempted rape at the hands of the trouble-maker Moon. She reports in the aftermath that: "It was the nothing on his face The nothing." (67) And at one point Moon takes to humming a menacing song in Spanish: "No me queda nada nada."

I can translate that (declares narrator Gabby). Don't have a thing. Nothing at all. Nothing. Nothing. Does he mean himself? Wafer? The lot of us? (195)

It turns out to be true of all of them. At the climax of the story Wafer leads the men of Allbut into the bland landscape in search of gems of which he supposedly knows the whereabouts. Predictably the search leads nowhere, until Cropper calls it off with the words, "There's nothing here. Nothing except mud and gravel". (189)

This "nothing" which is inherent in the landscape is the final element needed to construct the novel's climactic tragedy. The fossickers are driven to anger by the refusal of the land to reveal its riches, and Wafer's disillusionment and self-destructive urge are goaded by the impassive landscape. The spark which ignites the final calamity is provided by the equally disillusioned Gabby. She has joined the desert journey as a final chance of succeeding in her love for Wafer. As they press on into the desert, however, Gabby realises that she will never win his affection, and she confronts the depth of her own discontent.

She declares that, 'the only gentleness I ever found was in people who could do nothing for me...Wafer ... the briefest look will do...(185) The response to Gabby's plea for recognition comes in the devastating form of a one-word paragraph.

Nothing. (185)

Astley frequently uses "nothing" as a single word sentence, or even as here, a single word paragraph. Used in this manner it becomes a form of physical and emotional punctuation, investing the moment with the disappointment of various forms of failure or loss or hopelessness that permeate characters' lives. It is not the only word that Astley uses in this way. Other words that occur in this one-word paragraph form are frequently synonymous with "nothing", or carry a similar emotional impact born of their connotations of erasure; Void. Enough. Divest. Less. Eclipse. Desolation. Gone. Never.

In this case the "nothing" moment serves to shatter Gabby's dreams and seal Wafer's fate. Gabby is the one person who might have saved Wafer from the violence of the other men. Threatened by Cropper, Wafer attempts to flee, he is described as, "...racing into the nothingness he knew was ahead." (197) He is shot and killed.

The novel's brief postscript is overwhelmed by the word "nothing". As Gabby returns to Allbut ten years later she finds the town emptied and Wafer's house abandoned and decaying. Another settlement is being undone. She declares that:

Nothing has changed except the resurging waves of grass... (199)
... nothing is left. (200)
Nothing matters. (200)
There's nothing more to do. (200)

At the novel's opening the question had been posed as to how nothing could be walled by nothing. It is not clear that the question is answered, but Astley does emphasise how varied and deep are the forms of nothingness that are inherent in this tenuously settled space. A space where eventually everybody, and the marks they make upon the landscape, are reduced to nothing.

***Vanishing Point* (1992)**

In 1992 Astley published *Vanishing Points*—a title which is itself an evocation of nothingness. In the two interrelated novellas that comprise *Vanishing Points* we reach Astley's most complex expression of the nexus between self, space, and nothingness.

Disillusioned academic Mac Hope is the protagonist of "The Genteel Poverty Bus Company", the first of the two novellas. Mac craves the nothingness of the wide inland expanses. Astley writes that;

From ... the very marrow, he longed for the untouched space, the silence...He understood well that craving for arid lunar landscapes picked clean as bones...(83)

Mac's desire for unmarked, featureless landscape is mirrored by a desire to divest himself, almost to the point of obliteration. Astley writes:

A vagrant line from a story of Chesterton's kept coming into his mind. *I want nothing*, the man in the story said. *I want nothing I want nothing*. Variants created by different emphasis each time. *I want nothing*, he had stated ... Was it nihilism they craved, a melting into the void? ... Nothingness could fall from the air. (63)

At first Mac seeks what he is looking for by conducting bus tours through the vast expanse of Cape York, but this proves unsatisfactory. The landscape is powerful and affecting, and Mac is both compelled by, and repelled by, the featureless space. Eventually, however, he comes to understand that such spaces are deceptive, resulting in "a journey from nowhere to nowhere" (63).

Another component of Mac's disaffection with the world is his inability to sustain relationships; a problem he had hoped might also be resolved by his bus tours. Surrounded by selfishness, bad music and witless conversation, he does reach a brief moment of expiation in the arms of one of his passengers, the equally lonely Estelle Pellatier. It is through the currency of their shared experience of nothingness that they transact their relationship.

“I have nothing,” she whispered. “Nothing.”
“Neither have I,” he replied. “Nothing I can give.”
“But you want nothing’. That’s the way you want it.”
... “Just hold me,” she pleaded. “Please. Nothing else.” (75)

When Estelle is in turn challenged by another woman about what transpired between herself and Mac she is at a loss:

How (to) answer “nothing”? “Nothing, and much.”...In the dark of his tent he had asked nothing. (85-86)

Mac eventually realises that he needs a space that offers not only the promise of isolation, but also the prospect of being known and occupied in a way that was impossible with the Cape. He settles on a small island where he isolates himself in the rainforest. His quest for solitude is, however, fruitless. For although he finds a landscape he can love, it can’t protect him. When both the island and Mac are violated by the thugs hired by the developers of a nearby island, he chooses the ultimate form of nothingness. Taking a boat, he simply, sets out to sea. As he does so he takes one last look at the island. Astley writes that;

It gave nothing back. Nothing. It remained floating above the sea, perfect and unknowable, indifferent to the tearing he felt in the heart of him. (121)

The second novella of *Vanishing Points* is “Inventing the Weather”, in which Astley explores other forms of landscape, other forms of divestment, and other versions of nothingness. Julie Truscott has in common with Mac a discomfort, in her case a fear, of the expanses of inland space. In describing such landscapes Astley recycles the image from *An Item From the Late News*.

That is ... the feeling conveyed by larger inland towns—walled. Walled by nothing. Nothing is plain and claypan and dried river beds and thousands of square miles of starving sheep...(204)

As Julie explains:

This was terror Australis, the fear of those unending spaces, the wild unenclosures. (210)

Through this fear of “unending spaces” Julie enacts her own dissatisfaction with her relationships and herself. The nothingness of the landscape has been part of creating another, and wholly personal unfilled space, within herself.

Julie begins divesting. She leaves her marriage, her children and her home, and eventually she is drawn to a tiny mission of Bukki Bay on the Cape York coast. The mission is occupied by a small group of nuns who have achieved the form of nothingness Julie craves. As she concludes, “They simply are” (180), and it is a state of being to which she aspires. When Julie arrives on one of her visits she explains that, “I have nothing to unpack. Nothing of importance.” (178) And later she declares her satisfaction with her transformed life.

There is nothing more drab, I suppose, than having a privileged middle-class background. We wanted for nothing. Now I have it. Nothing. (219)

But as attractive as the mission is to Julie, she discovers it is a place shaped by colonial trauma. One reminder is apparent in the disease ravaged indigenous people cared for at the mission, another is found in her chilling experience of the rain-forest landscape which bears witness to a previous, failed attempt at occupation. Julie ventures into the forest and encounters a decaying school-house that she later learns was the site of a suicide. Astley writes:

How does one describe the panic of stillness?...
I came to a stop, examining possibilities... Nothing. No wingflap. No insect scrape. Not even the papery scratch of lizard or snake...
There were suggestions of windows, doors, a roof shape, but nothing else...
The din of silence.
I fled ... pursued by the horror of nothing. (192-194)

Astley reminds us here, as elsewhere—most powerfully in novels such as *A Kindness Cup* and *The Multiple Effects of Rainshadow*—that settlement in Australia, with its history of violence and forced occupation, has created multiple forms of silence, forgetting, and erasure. Not only has Aboriginal Australia been forced to live out a version of nothingness, but the settler society has consciously erased aspects of the act of settlement. *Terra Nullius* was nothing if not an ultimate manifestation of nothingness, a doctrine that simultaneously denied the history of the occupied and the occupier.

Julie's former husband Clifford eventually arrives at the mission, eyeing her haven as a site for development and profit. He wanders into the same forest that has spooked Julie with its stillness and quiet air of foreboding, but he doesn't re-emerge. Julie goes in search;

The silence is thick, is palpable. The air is heavy with aphony, rotten, putrescent with nothing. It is the thundering emptiness of the void. (232)

Clifford has simply gone, disappeared, become nothing. A search is launched;

...a chopper low-scanned the southern headland and the national park beyond. Nothing ... The only trace of human intrusion was a half-smoked cigar...and nothing else.
Nothing.
... Searching persists sporadically. Nothing. Weeks, months trickle away. Still nothing. (232-233)

Conclusion

In defining what is unique about Australia and the way it is manifested in its literature, Dorothy Hewett wrote that:

I would have to say that Australia is for me an emptiness... both physical and emotional... in other words a space. It is hard to identify with a space, it is hard to write about a space. (71)

But that is exactly the task that Astley so often set herself. To write about “space”—the physical and emotional voids described by Hewett. Astley certainly knew the difficulty of the task of creating stories from space that is seemingly without limits, without words, and which doesn’t surrender its meaning. As Gabby proclaims in *An Item From the Late News*,

I know it is not nature that abhors a vacuum but man, the little bitzer who doesn’t harmonise with space. It’s the space. It grinds us all down till we’re crumbs on the floor, terrified little messes that have to be swept away or burnt right out of existence. (99)

It is that disharmony between mankind and Australian space that Astley finds the impetus for many of her narratives. Astley had a phrase for this disharmony—she writes in several of her novels of the “tension between landscape and flesh”, and in *An Item From the Late News* she declared, “in the end, landscape wins.” (97) And this triumph of landscape, born of the nothingness of Australian space, is the end point of many of Astley’s narratives. It is also the end for many of her characters, whether it be Wafer running towards his death in the desert nothingness; Mac Hope sailing into the watery void, or Clifford Truscott dissolving into the rainforest.

For a number of Astley’s characters, death is an active choice. It is in the ultimate nothingness, their own demise, that they glimpse the promise of something. As Julie Truscott realises:

At that ultimate vanishing point I will find the meaning, the nub. I will be reduced from the awful loneliness of space by the inevitable merging of those distant lines. (166)

For Astley, it is only death that wins release from the tyranny of space and the awful pall of nothingness. The demise of so many of her characters, and indeed the prevalence and nature of suicides in her fiction, serve as a reminder of Lawrence’s observation in *Kangaroo* about the mortal threat of the Australian nothingness;

“Go into the middle of Australia and see how empty it is. You can’t face emptiness long. You have to come back and do something to keep from being frightened at your own emptiness and everything else’s emptiness. It may be empty. But it’s wicked, and it’ll kill you if it can. Something comes out of the emptiness to kill you.” (228-229)

One can sense—quite powerfully—the spectre of the uncanny in Astley’s struggle to come to terms with the danger inherent in Australian space. The uncanny experience, evoking as it does both home and exile, both reality and nightmare, is simultaneously an expression of the sublime and an invitation to terror. Indeed it may well be that ‘space’, devoid or stripped of the usual markers of human occupation, is the essential experience of the Australian uncanny, the clearest representation of the nothingness that indwells our shared experience.

The desire to articulate a response to nothingness remained with Astley until the end. In the remarkable closing pages of her final novel, *Drylands*, it is evoked for a last time. These pages are remarkable because they are so quintessentially Astley, and because they have about them an air of conscious closure.

Janet Deakin is leaving the inland town of Drylands. It is another town in decline, where even “the empty pub seemed to have stopped breathing.” (292) Janet revisits the newsagency she previously ran, and encounters a space at once both familiar and terrifying. Pushing open the door she calls out to whoever may be within. The response is again that familiar single word paragraph.

Nothing. (292)

Janet enters. The building is abandoned and trashed. Astley writes that, “She could feel the emptiness. The nothing space.” (293)

“The nothing space”—it is perhaps a sentence Astley had longed to write, and her final word on the matter. Almost. A page later she signs off with a metafictional flourish. The novel’s final sentence reads, “There were no endings no endings no

And there is no ending, in that this, Astley’s last published sentence, does not have a full stop. She might have indefinitely deferred even the semblance of an ending by continuing to write “no endings” endlessly. Instead she simply gave up, maybe even in the middle of forming the word “nothing”, and walked away from her typewriter. Perhaps like so many of her characters, lost in space.

Notes

1. Readers may note some intersections here—and elsewhere in this paper—with Bill Ashcroft’s discussion of the “The horizontal sublime”, *Antipodes* 19.2 (2005): 141-151.

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